

Mike Jarvis would be home soon. It had been a wonderful two years – almost three – and now it was time to return to his home town of Wellington to establish himself as the top lawyer he knew he could be. He glanced again at the rather silly New Zealand movie he was watching. He hadn't followed the plot but it seemed to rely on a pretty female lead and her capacity for wriggling in and out of rather scanty clothes and men's beds. Mike found her rather alluring. He laughed at himself. Of course he found her alluring. He was supposed to find her alluring. That's why they made the film. She probably had a husband and six kids by now. They were nearly home. They would land in Auckland inside half an hour. A few days there to catch up with friends and then Mike would go home. As the credits began to roll he flicked off the screen. Outside the window, land began to pass under the wings.

Monday

Above the ruckus of twenty-two ten year olds beginning the clearing up, Abby called, "That's it for today. All the clothes back in the clothes box. Furniture back against the wall. Remember that no matter how good the performance, if the props aren't where you expect them to be you look real dumb. Now we are going to sit on the mat and be mice. Really quiet mice. Even quieter mice. There is a cat over there and as soon as it hears us we are lunch." A blissful silence descended.

"May I be in your next film with you Miss Lake?" one of the mice asked.

"Not if you think that is how to act a very quiet mouse," Abby said, grinning at the culprit. She turned to greet Pamela Roberts, returning to her class. With just a hint of resentment Pamela admired Abby's control. Abby had the little devils eating out of her hand. Pamela said, "The children get so much fun and learning from these sessions."

"So do I", Abby replied, "I love my time here."

Watching her leave, Pamela reflected that Abigail Lake left a room full of ten year olds with the same aplomb that she had walked the red carpet on the opening night of *Maria Grenville*. If there had been anyone in the corridor they would have received a regal smile and toss of the head and yet there seemed to be nothing affected about it. Abby's presence was such a perfect combination of guile and friendliness that everyone on the staff felt that they were on intimate terms with her and yet none knew her beyond a nodding acquaintance.

Abby waved cheerily to the office staff. She felt a little light headed. It was so refreshing to work with children after the different stresses and demands of professional theatre. It was too easy to lose sight of basic acting when the ultimate goal was always commissions, ticket sales and bums on seats

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Harry Jarvis settled into the airport waiting chair and opened his book. He enjoyed the anticipation of welcoming home his son. He didn't have long to wait. They embraced warmly and started out to the car park. The conversation rushed over the casual things of life and returning home until it got to the two important things that Harry wanted to know.

"You'll stay with me for a while, until you get settled somewhere?"

"If you don't mind, Dad. I haven't anywhere at present."

"No job lined up yet? We need you back at Jarvis and Keen"

Mike laughed. "Hardly need me, but I enjoyed your place, Dad. If you offer a job I'll take it."

Harry hid his relief. Harry respected Mike as a valuable lawyer who would improve with the years, and the two men had worked well together in the past. But mostly he just felt that he was getting older and lonelier. He was happy to have Mike back and close again.

During the drive they chatted of life in London and Wellington and Harry's new home. While Mike had been away, Harry had replaced the family home.

"Wait until you see where we live now, Mike."

But he had even bigger news. As they passed through the centre of Merriton, Harry pulled up in front of the small set of offices.

"Our new suburban branch office, Mike. I'm hoping you will agree to manage it."

"Oh no Dad, I'm not ready for that and the Head Office staff will quite rightly say that it's nepotism. How will it be for you if you have your son managing his own branch office close to home while everyone else slaves away in downtown Wellington. There'll be revolution."

Harry had expected this, but he wanted a bright young manager in the suburbs while he kept the senior staff close to him. Having the branch manager living in his house would be a bonus. He said, "No, Mike. You are ready for it and it is not nepotism. If there was anyone better they would get the job. Our most senior staff are specialists and needed elsewhere. Of the older ones, they are either close to retirement or not up to it. You're the best of the younger staff. You are trained, go-ahead and with ideas you need to use before us old guys corrupt you. I need an intelligent, customer oriented person up here and you are it. Having you in the house to confer is a bonus."

Mike laughed. "OK, it sounds like a good job, but we both better watch out for knives in our backs."

The conversation paused as an attractive redhead crossed the street. She glanced briefly towards them and looked away.

"I think she fancied me," Harry said.

Mike snorted. "We scored somewhere between the toffee wrapper and the dog poo that she was stepping over."

Harry eyed his son. "Speak for yourself. I saw desire."

Mike felt uncomfortable. He was aware of something he couldn't quite understand. Some disturbingly sexual memory taunted him. But where had it come from? There were no beautiful redheads in his life. He shook off the feeling. "Take me home you old fool."

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Abby glanced at the two men in the blue Audi convertible. There was wealth and power in the image. But they were looking back. If they had been walking she would have stared them down. In a car it was awkward. With a toss of her head she looked away.

At home Abby kissed her mother and threw herself into an armchair.

"I am glad I don't have a fulltime career in primary teaching. Two hours with a handful of kids and I need a lie down and valium. Satisfying and fun though. What's the note by the phone?"

The older woman smiled in sympathy. "Chris rang. Excited and with great news and you must ring back soon."

Abby enjoyed the stimulation of Chris and his exuberance. She went to the phone. The conversation was short. Abby would have Chris over for a chat, especially as he said he wanted to talk business. Abby and Chris had been friends throughout their drama training. Chris was now the manager of the local theatre group and dance and drama school. He would want Abby to do some menial unpaid task which he would assure her was the opportunity of a lifetime. He was not a very practical person. Nor was he far away. There was a knock on the door.

Abby opened it to the usual rush of nonsense from Chris.

“Oh gracious, how is it possible for the absolutely fabulously beautiful Abigail Lake to get more lovely every day,” he said squeezing her around the waist and kissing both cheeks. “Mrs Lake, is this not a magnificent sight?”

“Looks like me bloody daughter to me,” Lucy said.

Abby laughed. “Damn, knocked off my pedestal again. What do you want?”

“If you are having as much trouble getting work at present as the rest of us, then you may be interested in an offer I have to make to you,” Chris said.

“Hell no. There are twenty ten-year-olds all needing to learn how to be the goblins and fairies in the school play, and a cereal company is waiting to hear their cornflake packet speak. Don't tell me the work is not flooding in,” Abby said.

“Exactly. And into this maelstrom of activity I am going to offer a job of producer, director and lead actor in a top locality with top people and a particularly top play and with only one small snag. Will you take it?”

“No, because it is another of your harebrained schemes. And if even *you* have to admit to a small snag then it is a fiasco of unimaginable proportions.”

Chris raised his voice to nearly a falsetto. “Ooh she is cruel. Isn't she cruel Mrs Lake. How could a creature of such perfection and loveliness as yourself produce such a monster?”

Abby was keen to move this along a bit. Despite the raillery her interest was piqued and she wanted to know what Chris was on about. “I may be cruel, but I'm not stupid. What ridiculous idea have you dreamed up with its small snag?” Abby asked.

Chris was an actor, he could slip in and out of parts, although he preferred the part that most nearly suited his natural style. But now he wanted to be convincing. And he could play that as well.

“Abby, you are the most talented organiser and actor in the city. Everything you touch turns to gold and it is time that you took full charge of something that will be indisputably yours. We at Princess Players need you to survive and you can do it for us and win fame and fortune at the same time.”

Abby hooted and playfully slapped Chris's arm. “Chris, the Princess Players is a handful of bankrupt amateurs. Their hall is too big for them. They've no following or finance. They are facing death from slow decline. You want me to produce their funeral?”

Because Chris respected Abby and loved her for her humanity as well as her intellect, he was hurt much more than he should have been. His facetious comments about her cruelty came back to him.

Abby saw the pain and relented at once. “Oh, I didn't mean that. The Princess Players do wonderful work. They have put on great community entertainment and their coaching classes are some of the best.” Abby was startled to realise that this was true. “What I meant is that they can't compete at the top level of general entertainment.”

This was the opening Chris wanted. “Why? We have several top actors. We have set design and construction. We have wardrobe. We have a hall. We have catering. What we lack is top class direction and a female lead.”

Chris took hold of Abby's arms. His eyes shone. “And up until now we have lacked a first class crowd pulling play. Abby you have vision and you work like a mule. You can do this. It would make you a hero and give you a CV to set you up for life. In the unlikely event of failure you could write us off as small time no-hopers who were never going to make it anyway.”

Chris's voice had dropped from its usual siren wail. The flow of superlatives had ceased. Abby was seeing the rare sight of a Chris intense and serious.

“Up until now no crowd pulling play?” she asked.

Chris went straight back to loud and high. “You won't believe it. You won't. We have '*Potent Performance*' by John Ashcroft. In his own words to do as we will. Can you imagine it? '*Potent Performance*' by the Princess Players. We can fill the hall night after night and you will be there to lead us.”

Abigail was careful not to hurt Chris again. But this didn't make sense. “This is a very exciting fantasy, but you do not have '*Potent Performance*'. It's barely started on London's Westend. Broadway doesn't have it yet and you can't afford it.”

“But we do. I worked with John at Oxford where he trialled it and he said I could use it for Princess Players. When it went big I told him he could rescind the offer. He said he'd promised it and it would be good publicity to have us do it on the other side of the world. He wished us luck.”

Abby fought her rising enthusiasm. “Chris, I'm flattered and almost tempted but you are talking of a large suburban hall and a small suburban company and too many amateurs for a major production. This is pretty loony even for you.”

Chris released her arms and pulled her into a bear hug. “Oh my angel Abigail. You're going to say yes. I can see it in your eyes. When did you ever turn down a challenge? When did you ever fail in anything? I love you I love you. Mrs Lake isn't she adorable?”

Abby landed a rather hard punch on Chris's arm. “I said no. I have declined. N. – O. What is the snag?”

“Well you are aware that under our last production team we put on an ill considered, lavish and long season of '*The Three Sisters*' to which no one came. We are not flush with funds.”

Abby asked, “How much money do we have to stage the internationally acclaimed play '*Potent Performance*', which has a large cast, and will require enough advertising and effort to drag in an audience of thousands?”

Chris's falsetto went up a note or two. “We. She said we. Mrs Lake is she not the most excellent female to ever grace the earth?”

Lucy kept a straight face. “Abigail's fine. It's the company she keeps that concerns me.”

Chris clasped his forehead. “Insults have no sting. She will say yes. The world is a happy place again.”

Abby tried again, “How much is there in the kitty?”

“About minus \$20,000”

“Fuck it all Chris, you nearly had me. You don't want a director, you want a banker.”

Chris pretended shock. “Please Abigail, remember the women and children and gay men. A little decorum. There are bankers. There are art benefactors. There are supporters. But most of all there is our lovely seductive Abigail Lake and her money winning ways. When the investors hear that we have '*Potent Performance*' directed and acted by Abigail Lake they will come to the party. Some may even come to the show. The Lake name alone will fill the hall a hundred times over. Your name will be enough to get the first night in and your talent will keep them there.”

Abby felt herself weakening. Chris was getting to her. She was feeling anticipation and excitement mixed with fear and foreboding for where this might lead. She wanted to say no. She couldn't. Instead she said, “Leave the script and material you brought. I'll tell you tomorrow.”

She saw Chris to the door, accepting the hugs and flattery that expressed Chris's exuberant nature and that simply meant that they were good friends. She wanted to direct. She wanted to act. She wanted to be part of a best selling play, but she did not want to be part of an embarrassing debacle. A bankrupt group of casuals pretending to be the big time. And she had to think of her mother.

As Abby walked out to the front door, chatting to Chris, Lucy crossed to the pile of papers on the table. There were two copies of the script. That was all right, Abby would encourage her to read one so they could discuss it together. There was a cast list. A male and female lead, and several young people apparently living together in a chaotic house. Her finger lingered over the next character. A slender middle aged woman who can be confused with her daughter. The finger refused to move on. Some of the other characters had pencilled suggestions for who should fill the part from the permanent members of Princess Players. This one didn't. Unwanted and unwarranted excitement began to consume Lucy. Somewhere inside her head distant shouts of laughter and pleasure began. The sound became cheering and rose to a crescendo. The house shook with cheers and laughter. The heat of stage lights baked her. The other actors moved to the front, facing the tumult. Lucy would wait until they had formed a line and then sweep between them, honouring the two who's grip she broke to take her position. She'd bow low as the applause thundered to new heights. This was living. This was what she was born to do. This was what she did better than anyone else. At least this was what she *had* done better than anyone else when she could still remember her lines, and remember to get on stage at the right time. And on that one last awful occasion remember to stand up again after falling over. It hadn't mattered. She couldn't have been heard above the howls of laughter from the audience.

"Mum, mum. Are you ok? Are you crying?" An arm went around Lucy. "Sit down. You don't have to worry. I'm not going to do it. It's too much work and would take me out of the house too much. Mum relax."

"Abigail. I've often considered suicide so that you can get on with your life, but I've never had the courage. But if you turn this down just to stay home to see what I'm drinking then I think that I can do it. If you deny yourself this for me then I will drink and drug myself to death just to spite you."

Abby had no answer. Lucy was often sober for weeks at a time now, and could dry herself out within days of each collapse. Something had changed and they had to move on eventually. Perhaps this was it. Abby picked up the second copy and tossed it down on the coffee table. "Help me decide on the merits of the play then," she said.

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Harry stopped the car at the beginning of the drive. "My new home, and yours for as long as you want to share," he said proudly.

"Jees dad, are you planning to start another family, or run an orphanage? It's nice though, and rather handy."

Harry nodded. "It's an indulgence, but both ends can be treated as separate units. Who knows, I might find someone someday. And you might ....." Harry ran out of courage but he had made the point.

Mike heard the loneliness. "I'll be here for a time," he said.

"Sally was in asking about you."

"I'll manage my own romantic arrangements, Dad. Sally is just a friend, but I'm looking forward to seeing her again."

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Abby's brain churned restlessly over. Although this was life changing, the issue was simple black and white. She could risk her mother's health and possibly her life on a bizarre venture that just might succeed, or she could give Lucy more time and expect other opportunities. Simple. She put her head on her pillow and willed sleep to come. Another cycle of the same useless thoughts. She could risk everything and win or lose or she could wait. Simple. She'd decide in the morning. She

closed her eyes and the thoughts were still there. In exasperation she jumped out of bed. A glass of water and a pee and sleep would come.

“Mum, what are you doing here in the dark?”

“The same as you. Agonising over the future. Abby, remember what I said. If you turn this down for me I will love you more than ever but I will never be able to forgive you.”

Abby nodded mutely. Who was she kidding? This was it. This was her. This was better than being offered another major part in a major theatre. It was going to be her from start to finish. She would stand or fall on this. She'd sacrificed over two years of her career to her mother. But this was a job that had come to her. She would direct, act and mother-mind. She wouldn't be Abigail Lake if she didn't do this.

They both needed sleep and they would sleep better knowing the decision.

“I'm going to say yes, Mum. You know what I need from you don't you?”

Lucy ducked the question. “You'll do it and make me very proud.”

Abby felt the joy of a difficult decision made. She hugged her mother and went back to bed. But sleep still didn't come. Her troubled mind now worked through casting, props, finance and contracts and how it might end. At last, some time after 3am, too exhausted to care any more, she plunged into a deep sleep.

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Abby lingered over dialling. There would be no way back.

“Chris, there are some things to negotiate but if I have control and you can supply the facilities and most of the actors, I want to do it.”

Abby waited patiently while squeals of delight and thanks washed down the line. Then Chris said, “Abby, come to the committee meeting at 7pm. Announce it then. They'll be so thrilled.”

“Chris, be realistic. We might make this work but there is no surplus talent or money. This is suburban theatre.”

“This is suburban theatre with you, me and *Potent Performance*. Abby, we will do it.”

Abby hung up smiling.

Conscious that despite the need to protect her mother from being overtired, excited or stressed, or even hungry or thirsty, Abby knew that Lucy needed stimulation and a life. They worked together through the scripts, accounts and the myriad details that make a theatre group what it is. Lucy thrived on it, but Abby became aware of a rising feeling of manic excitement that preceded a major role. She fancied a drink. She was after all her mother's daughter. But there would be no drink. The only alcohol in the house was the bottle of vodka that they both pretended Abby didn't know about. It was hidden behind the cleaning gear in the passage cupboard. Abby had long ago learned that removing that last lifeline resulted in several more cunningly concealed bottles turning up elsewhere. Better the devil they both knew about than the endless game of search and destroy that had marked her younger and more naïve years.

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Mike renewed his acquaintance with the long serving staff at Jarvis and Keen and met the newer appointees. There didn't seem to be resentment that he was to get his own branch up the hill. Perhaps the employees were grateful that the boss's son wouldn't be in the office with them. He kept himself busy catching up with essentials until lunchtime and then went to meet Sally.

Mike had met Sally in law school and had found her a valuable friend. Apart from one somewhat drunken fumble after a student party, Mike and Sally had kept their relationship platonic. When Sally joined a law company in Wellington shortly after Mike had begun as a junior in his father's firm, they had been glad to renew the acquaintance. Then a scholarship in England took him away again and both he and Sally had been sorry to lose contact.

Now there was a lot to catch up on. Sally, who had a good footing at her work and was well respected was delighted to hear that Mike had his own branch to manage. She was tempted to tell him about her friend in Merriton, but this was Mike's day and it was only a short time that they had together.

When lunch was over Mike returned to Merriton to familiarise himself with his new workplace.

At the office he went through the jobs to be dealt with before Jim Potter left for retirement. Jim had been holding down the branch until a replacement was found and it was soon clear to Mike that no one had tried very hard to find anyone other than himself. Well OK, if his father wanted him here in this small office being groomed for grander things in the central city then that was what he would do.

Many of the jobs would be completed by Jim before he left. Some that were in their early stages would be left to Mike. The rest they had to share.

Jim lifted a few notes from the pile. "Here's an interesting one. We have had a number of small-business people approach us for advice on how to recover money from a local group, 'The Princess Players'. Their idea of being princely is to spend other people's money and not pay it back. They had some huge flop recently and owe a heap of money. I left it because someone young and energetic – that's you in case I'm being obtuse – has to get around town and find out how many creditors there are and who they are and then close down this group and share the cash. They may have \$5 in the tea fund if we're lucky. It will be a lot of work for bugger-all return but they appear to be a menace. And they are an incorporated society so there will be a hassle to un-incorporate them."

Mike shrugged. "Welcome to suburban small time law."

"It's not small to a jobbing carpenter on a budget of a few thousand who spends time and money building sets for a group that can't pay."

Mike nodded. "In the circumstances it won't be too difficult to get rid of them but that won't help our clients."

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Abby confronted eight expectant faces. This was going to be critical. She had to take over and be the manager for several critical months, but she had to respect the skills and experience of these people who had kept Princess Players afloat. Some of them had been at it for over a decade and here she was to tell them how to behave.

"I think you know me," Abby began

There were chuckles around the table.

Her part in the TV series "Highway to Let" had been a sensation, as had her portrayal of the eponymous *Maria Grenville*. The occasional guest appearances she had made for Princess Players as a favour to the local community had drawn public interest out of all proportion to the size of her contribution.

"I understand you are offering me the direction of '*Potent Performance*' and the role of *Miranda*, and that I can expect to be consulted on financial and management issues related to the Players. Obviously I can't do all this alone. We'll be working as a team."

Eight heads nodded.

Abby said, "I accept that most major parts are automatically filled by the actors closest in age and physical appearance to what is needed but that the lead male who plays the suspected killer and some other significant roles are vacant. We will audition for those two parts and significant other roles and then fill minor parts from inside or outside the Players as appropriate. That's a priority. I'll advertise in the Wellington papers and the arts newspapers and on the internet immediately for auditions inside two weeks. I'm afraid that means more expense, but we have to get on and it will have the benefit of advertising the production, and raising enthusiasm."

Abby paused as an awkward silence descended. God what was the matter now? She had not really begun yet and didn't want discomfort and doubt.

Mary Cooper spoke up. "We understand that your mother is recovered and out of work. She would be....." She trailed off as she watched in horror the change in Abby.

Abby felt sick rage pour into her. God what a mindless dupe she was. She clutched at the edge of the table to hold herself in check against the tide that rushed through her. When she trusted herself to speak she said. "Have I been brought here under false pretences as a sop so that you can get your hands on Lucy Lake?" Tears muddled the scene of horrified and embarrassed faces in front of her.

She turned to Chris, who sat helpless beside her. "You told them that my mother could act again and that for the sake of pretending to have me you could have the biggest draw card in the country didn't you, you bastard? I thought you were my friend. This is just a huge have isn't it? Well you do not know. You just do not know what you are asking either of her or me. Ladies and gentlemen, the shortest directorship in repertory ends here. I resign."

Chris and Mary moved with a speed that amazed her. By the time she reached the door it was blocked by two firm bodies.

"No, Abby. We want you and we are damn glad to have you. You are the best and yet you have offered to come knowing we have no money. You have no idea how we appreciate that. But it is still a huge job. If your mother can do it under your management then we will almost certainly pull it off. Without her there is still a difficult acting role to fill that may bring us grief."

Abby made an ineffectual effort to get past them and subsided a little. "Ok I'm still here, but my mother is most definitely not. My first instruction to the committee is to forget about Lucy Lake. My second instruction is that you prepare the adverts for auditions and arrange for the actors already chosen to be at the hall Thursday evening with scripts and enthusiasm. I will organise begging letters – I mean I will contact prospective advertisers and sponsors. We have a major play to prepare. And I am going home. I have a production to think about and a mother to care for."

Into the silence behind the slamming door, Mary said, "That could have gone better, but we have Ms Lake junior and that is a great deal better than nothing. We have a show to prepare."

Struggling to resume his usual high spirits, Chris added, "And don't be late on Thursday."

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WEDNESDAY

Abby and Lucy had a fortnightly ritual of meeting Sally for lunch. It was something the three women looked forward to. Sally had been Abby's schoolgirl friend and had stuck grimly by her as other friends deserted her when they discovered that time at Abby's home meant doing their own cooking and cleaning and sometimes carrying a comatose adult to bed. Sally had accepted that it was not Abby's fault and mucked in. When on one hideous occasion the tasks had included holding Lucy down until the ambulance arrived while she screamed and fought off invisible monsters, Sally had described it to her school mates as Lucy was a bit ill and that Abby had come to stay with them until her mother felt better. Although the relationship had matured with the years Sally was the first person that Abby turned to when triumphs or disasters beset her.

As soon as Sally had herself seated Abby had to babble out her news. "I'm out of retirement, I have



a job directing and lead acting in an international smash hit.”

Sally let out a shriek and jumped up to high five Abby over the table.

“Wow, go girl. I knew you'd be back.” But then reality struck and she looked doubtfully at Lucy. “Is this going to work?”

Abby was ready for this. “Mum is going to be involved with the administration – not the acting of course – and I will be working from home as much as possible and it's only just up the road at Princess Theatre.”

Abby's happy smile paled as it met Sally's blank look.

“Abby, Princess Theatre is in Merriton and is run by the Princess Players. They couldn't organise a warm day in January. What are you talking about?”

“Sally I love you to bits but don't apply for any jobs as motivation coach. We have the play. We have the hall. We have the acting and administration talent. We have support staff. We have me, and I am sick of not being adored by the masses.” Abby was painfully aware that she was giving Sally the spiel that Chris had used to suck her in. It sounded ominously hollow suddenly and Sally was looking doubtful if not outright horrified.

Sally realised that her obvious shock was hurting Abby badly. And after all Abby knew the entertainment business. If Abby thought this was a good idea then perhaps it was, but Sally worried how much the need to be adored by the masses had marred Abby's judgement. “Gee sorry, you took me by surprise. I'd got used to you being a drama teacher and voice-over queen. Go for it Abby girl and wow them.” It didn't sound very convincing but Sally saw Abby relax a little. “I can help a little in a lawyerly sort of way. I have a friend who has just taken over the office of Jarvis and Keen in Merriton. He has a brain and will give some advice on business and law in the area. He may even give you some sponsorship.”

Actually Sally was hoping he would talk her out of it.

Abby's enthusiasm was back. “I wrote to them this morning asking for an appointment for just those reasons. What's his name?”

“Umm, Mike Jarvis, he's old Harry Jarvis the boss's son,” Sally replied a little uneasily.

She had watched during the last two years as Abby and Lucy crept back to some sort of stability in their lives. This did not sound like more stability. Sally wondered if either of them was ready for this.

To distract Abby from further horrifying revelations about her future career, Sally leant forward and said, “potential incoming at 10 o'clock.”

The other two women obediently turned to their left.

“Woops. Facing the opposite way to you two. Try 2 o'clock.” They turned back to their right.

Abby laughed and played the old game they all knew so well. “I'll give them another minute.” “No, at least two. They're uncertain,”

“Any second now,” said Lucy. “They've become confident.” As she spoke she was proved right. One of the men rose and came over too them.

“I'm sorry to intrude. I expect you get sick to death of strangers interrupting your lunch, but it is Lucy Lake isn't it? I never missed any of 'A Woman Like Me', and I was at the opening night of 'Absolute Strangers.' A triumph. An absolute triumph.” Both the stranger and Lucy had adopted a slightly glazed look as they relived shows past. Abby grinned at Sally. This was an increasingly rare ritual. Some years ago it had been a nuisance to be accosted at every shop and restaurant they visited. Now it was an unusual treat. The viewing public is very fickle.

Lucy was preening and smiling. "Very kind. Very kind. Actors need an audience more than the audience needs the actors." She turned her most radiant screen smile on the poor man who lost himself in it for a while.

"I do hope you will return to the stage Ms Lake. I do so hope you will." His eyes involuntarily dropped to the coffee she had in front of her. The point was not lost on any of them. Lucy Lake was sober and this stranger read the gossip sheets and art magazines.

He turned to Abby. "And you too Miss Lake. I saw you in Melbourne in ... in... god what was it? It was brilliant. If there is anyone in the world who will break more hearts than your mother has it will be you. 'Happy Circumstance'. Yes that's what it was. When you gave the speech about your brother dying there wasn't a dry eye in the theatre. And when he turned up alive and you tore strips off of him we all laughed fit to bust. Brilliant. Just brilliant. I saw the same play in Europe and it was just a pleasant bit of mush compared to your portrayal."

Abby followed her mother's lead and put on a fine screen smile and thanked him for the compliments. She was tempted to ask if he had heard her recently being *Slosh the Washing Machine* on the children's hour or *Whizzo the Carpet Cleaner* in the TV ad, but left him with his happy faith in her.

A woman left the next table to join her husband at theirs. "Is this silly old man bothering you ladies?"

Lucy chuckled. "Actors thrive on applause. We can listen to him all day."

"Well you won't be doing that because I've heard quite enough adoration of the Lakes across the years without the old goat getting any encouragement. So I'm taking him home. But I do hope we all see a lot more of you in future. We've had too much pleasure from both of you to give it up now." As the group at the next table prepared to leave Abby grinned at her mother. "How's the ego Mum?"

"Much improved, dear," Lucy replied.

Abby gave her mother a playful squeeze.

Sally said, "If you two superstars want to return to planet Earth where humble people dwell I will say farewell. I have work to do. Abby, go see Mike and I will give you a ring in a day or two and you can keep me up to date with your new career." She lent across the table and puckered her lips. "Damn can't reach. You'll have to kiss each other goodbye for me."

As Sally waved her way out of the café, Abby said, "I hope the rest of the world is more enthusiastic than that."

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Mike did what he could to get established in his new office. He was impressed with Elizabeth Banks. A remarkably efficient receptionist and legal assistant who gave good advice readily, listened to how Mike wanted things done and then did them in the way she preferred. Since she was very capable and had been doing this sort of work for years, within an hour Mike had given up, and was letting her have her way. He was unaware that Elizabeth had been considering resigning now that the office was in different and young hands, but had decided her new boss was a decent bloke who could both learn and teach and that she would give him the loyalty she had given the company for two decades.

Mike got started on a divorce, a blocked drain dispute with the city council, and began to write to the Princess Players asking for a representative to meet him as soon as possible. He then glanced through the incoming mail and realised that he had a letter, received that morning, asking the same thing of him. Thank goodness. They had seen the error of their ways and would be seeking legal advice on how to close down their society and share out what money they had left. He felt relief at

how well his first case had gone even if it hadn't required any effort.

Since they were in agreement on what needed to be done he decided to ring them to speed things along. The phone rang only briefly until a rather high pitched male voice answered.

"Cresswell"

"Ah, Mr Cresswell, it's Mike Jarvis here of Jarvis and Keen, your local law office. I have your request to meet with a representative of *Princess Players*. I wonder if we could make it as soon as possible?" There was no need to add that he had not yet organised himself into a full day's work and needed something to do.

An irritatingly enthusiastic voice came back down the line at Mike. "You are a treasure getting back to us so soon. I'll tell Abby to get over there. She's doing the fund raising. Say 10am tomorrow?"

Treasure? Fundraising? Those were damn silly words to use. But this was a theatrical person. He was being theatrical. Mike was a professional lawyer in charge of an office, he must deal with people from all walks of life. Paying back an insignificant part of dishonoured money was not called fund raising. He kept his irritation in check "Please tell her to bring a list of creditors. We need to see about settling as much outstanding debt as we can as soon as possible."

There was a stunned pause on the other end of the phone. "You're doing that?"

Good. This Cresswell fellow understood that the golden days were over and this was serious. "It has to be done Mr Cresswell."

"You realise it's as much as \$20,000, Mike?"

"In the circumstances the amount is immaterial. We have to find as much as we can."

"Wow, thank you so much, I don't understand how you know about this yet, but Abby will be so pleased."

Mike mentally shrugged. Unless Abby was a masochist she had no reason to be pleased. And why would the community lawyer not know that the Princess Players owed money everywhere? "It's no secret. It affects many people Mr Cresswell."

"That's the spirit. We'll capture the whole community. Let's make it 10am then."

Mike put the phone down, hoping that this Abby person made more sense than her associate. Drugs were still a problem in theatre apparently.

Jim Potter and Elizabeth Banks between them were still coping with most of the work so Mike decided to leave early and meet the locals. With many shops and trades in the main street it was an ideal time to get to know them and drum up business. Mike knew he could do this well and his people skills were why his father had wanted him in this small branch. As he strolled about, he put shopkeepers and tradespeople at their ease, queried them about their legal representation and assured them that they had chosen well, at the same time reminding them that he was close at hand if they needed anything extra or quick. As casually as possible he dropped into the conversation the question of whether they were having any problems with the Princess Players. A little to his chagrin, he found that although almost all of the shops and other trades were owed money by Princess Players, they were generally happy with them. Many had children in dance and drama lessons and often they and their family acted in amateur rep. If Mike had hoped to find an undercurrent of resentment to help him deal with the Players he was disappointed. But the evening was a great success. By 6:30pm Mike had met many of his potential customers and spread good cheer about the presence of Jarvis and Keen in Merriton.

Looking back down the street Mike saw the pretty young woman that he and his father had passed two days earlier. She must live close. There was something about her. Something familiar yet remote about and the way her auburn curls seemed to float beside her head. Damn it. If he had met

her, he couldn't think where. He'd see her again. He tried to put her out of his mind.

At home Harry asked, "How was the first day, solo?" Mike laughed. "I've had a golden run so far. It can only get worse. Jim passed on three cases. The Council went to check a drain and cleared it while they were there at no cost to my client. The divorce became a polite separation. They agreed to sell the house and split the contents amicably. And Princess Players of their own accord offered to meet me to pay back what they can. I feel like a fraud."

Harry smiled indulgently, "It will indeed get worse, but I know I picked the right man."

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#### THURSDAY

Mike's office door flew open shaking the slender partition wall that supported it. Mike was about to tell Elizabeth that he preferred to have a gentle knock first. There was no telling where he might be scratching. But he had no chance. She was too excited.

"Do you know who is out the front? You just can't guess. You won't guess. It's just so wonderful she looks just like in the movies. She's here. Here in our office."

Mike had not seen this aspect of Elizabeth and was rather amused and fascinated. "If someone is out there she has indeed come to our office. Unless perhaps she just materialised there. Who is outside in the office?"

"Abigail Lake. Would you believe it. Ms Lake is there by my desk. She wants to see you." Elizabeth's awed expression met Mike's blank one.

"*Maria Grenville* for goodness sake. Abigail Lake is Maria Grenville" Memories of a lithesome auburn haired beauty wearing black lacy underclothes flitted through Mike's memory. Yes, that silly film had been called that. Mike glanced at the clock. Damn, just on 10am. Not yet up to a full workload and he had two appointments at the same time. It wasn't lost on Mike that he was expecting an Abby from Princess Players and here was someone called Abigail Lake, an actor, but an established entertainer would not be doing the footwork for a bunch of thespians up the road. It must be a coincidence.

"I have an appointment. Liz. Ask her what she wants."

"I can't ask Ms Lake what she wants. It's not what you do to people like that."

Mike grinned at her. "We might have to or it will be tricky doing business with her. Oh what the hell. Ask her to come in." It will do Princess Players no harm to sit outside for half an hour. They were late now anyway.

Liz, led Abby into the small room holding her wrist as if she was a young child in danger of losing her way. Abby, with long practice of this sort of adulation allowed herself to be led. She smiled happily across Elizabeth's shoulder to acknowledge Sally's generous friend and saw admiration of a different sort. Abby was used to that too and handled it with the same easy manner. Many women would have looked demurely away, signalling the man to keep his distance. Abby's approach was to look directly back. Make eye contact and challenge the stare. And there was something to stare at. Sally hadn't said anything about what her friend looked like.

But she was distracted by Elizabeth putting her arms around her. Good grief, was she going to kiss her? But no she was attempting to lower Abby into the chair. Abby gently disentangled herself and sat down.

"I'll get you your coffee Ms Lake. Milk and sugar?" Abby had had tea before she left home barely ten minutes earlier and had twice refused coffee in the outer office. But this was a battle she was doomed to lose. She smiled graciously up at Elizabeth and asked for a little milk and no sugar.

Mike was grateful to Elizabeth for the sitting-down debacle to get a few seconds to gather himself. Abigail Lake gave new meaning to the expression stunning appearance. He felt that his brain had stopped. For a few moments he had been transfixed by a sea of auburn curls and huge green eyes. On a small screen on the back of the seat in front it had been powerful but manageable. Now placed across the desk in real life, Mike was not coping well.

Get on with it he thought to himself. Abigail Lake would make a very valuable client. He must focus on business and not those eyes.

“What can I do for you Ms Lake?”

Abby took a moment to study Sally's friend. Sally had a been a bit coy about him. Had she taken the plunge? Was this a lover she refused to speak openly about? Abby was ashamed of herself. She resented that Sally had found him first. Mike was not lead-man handsome but he had a solid appearance. He had an aura to him that he would not be a man to cross in either physical or mental combat. And yet he had a calm attractive look and wore a formal business suit with ease. Abby saw him looking appreciatively into her face. That would do no harm, but she had to get back to business.

“I have papers for the next Princess Players show.” Abby opened her bag in preparation to hand over projected costs and the expected value of third-party advertising during the season.

Mike reluctantly dropped his eyes to the desktop where Abby had put the papers. Damn, the glorious Abigail Lake was just another Players' creditor. And he wouldn't be able to help very much. It would not be a good start. Still every client had to be treated to the best he could deliver. He scanned briefly. A sense of unease came over him, he was not looking at a list of receipts but at the promotion for a play. Abigail Lake was not a creditor. He had pictured himself berating a few scruffy kids and ordering them to hand over their bank accounts. This was very different.

There was still a forlorn hope. “They owe you money?” he asked.

Abby faltered. This was a strange way to begin. “No, I've agreed to take a share of the profits. I won't be owed money until there is some.”

“Profits? I understood Princess Players were broke.”

Abby sighed to herself. Shit shit shit. All Chris had to do was to confirm a meeting and suggest it was worth investing in a future play. Instead he had proudly proclaimed that Mr Mike bloody Jarvis knew all about the Players and was busting to give them money. Actually he appeared to know nothing except their financial status.

Abby's long experience of filling the gaps when fellow actors wandered off the script came to her rescue. She changed tack.

“We appear to be at cross-purposes Mr Jarvis. The Players have the rights to an internationally acclaimed play. We have the resources to make this a great success and we will meet outstanding debts without any difficulty. Mr Cresswell thought that you knew that, and that you had agreed to contribute to the staging of the play. There is huge advantage to you to be involved. A large part of our audience will be local. They will come from the wealthier sections of society. The part that uses lawyers. They will be community minded people who are proud to support a business such as yours, that supports community organisations such as ours.”

Abby sped on. She was on a roll and while Mr business suit sat there a little thunderstruck she would get the promotion done. She could flirt and do the social stuff and mention their mutual friend, Sally, when she was done with this.

“We have put together a package for you that will be very powerful to get you better known in this area. For \$10000 plus \$40000 loan, we will put your business name on every programme and we can write the name of your company into the play itself. You will appear on billboards and in national advertising as a supporter.”

Abby watched Mike closely. This was not going well. His expression had become something between bafflement and amusement. She played what she hoped would be a trump card.

“We could write in a walk-on part for a lawyer and have you come onto the stage yourself.” Abby leant forward so that she could look up beguilingly into his face, and he could contemplate the top of her bra. She could see temptation flickering in the eyes. Lawyer Mike Jarvis was having romantic fantasies picturing himself on stage with this woman. Damn. Reality began to kick in again, and she saw the faraway look fade.

The fantasy retreated further as the door opened and Elizabeth was back. “Here’s your coffee Ms Lake. And some chocolate biscuits.”

Abby turned on another radiant smile. “Thank you, please call me Abby.”

Elizabeth handed the plate and cup to Abby and put her hands to the sides of her face. “Oh wait till I tell my friends that I gave Maria Grenville a cup of coffee and she told me to call her Abby.”

Abby desperately looked to Mike to find a calming influence, but was betrayed. He was fighting to suppress a grin. There was nothing left but to laugh openly.

“That was a darn odd thing for her to say. Perhaps the coffee was spiked.” Abby softened any hint of ridicule by looking straight up at Liz to share the laughter.

She needn’t have bothered. Elizabeth was still lost in adulation and now was stroking her back. “Oh you young people. You know what I mean.” However she was running out of reasons to occupy the small space between Abby’s chair and the wall and reluctantly started for the door. “Tell me if you need anything else, Ms ..., er, Abby”

In fact Abigail was very pleased to be getting this reaction. She was struggling with the suspicion that Mr suit and tie in front of her didn’t actually know who she was. That was not so uncommon. Not everyone goes to plays and she had spent a lot of time overseas. The two films she had made in New Zealand had limited appeal to the sort of stuffed shirt in front of her. If he didn’t read entertainment gossip then he might be uninformed. At least now he knew that to some people she was important.

Mike was indeed now glumly aware of what he was dealing with. He had spent a large part of a crossing of the Pacific watching this magnificent woman dragging a tight red skirt off and on over brief black lace panties as a prelude to bouncing apparently naked on a bed with a man. It was not going to be easy to tell her she was being ridiculous.

“So there we have it, Mr Jarvis. We can offer you focussed local advertising to assist this branch office and we will have advertising and press coverage nationally for the company as a whole. It is money very well spent.”

“You have me bewildered Miss Lake. The Princess Players is a small bankrupt group who do some amateur rep and run drama and dance school for children. They are very well respected locally but I don’t understand what a professional such as yourself is doing there at all. Or how you can expect business to invest this sort of money in a suburban play.”

Abby had come thinking the first \$20000 was agreed to and she was to negotiate a further loan. She reverted to the basic spiel. “I have the figures on paper here. We expect to run two five day seasons Thursday to Monday with matinees in the weekend. We have a top cast and a top play. Fourteen shows. We have a 580 seat hall. Say we only sell 500 seats fourteen times at \$30 a seat. About \$200,000. Costs will be high but after the first \$150,000 it’s all clear profit. We can clear debts and set up the Players to continue to provide valuable community work for a long time. Please read the material. I’m sure that you will see it as an opportunity too good to miss.”

Mike put the offered papers to one side of his desk. He was brutally aware that in his first week in the branch office he was out of depth with this. He was supposed to be getting the tea fund off of this woman so that he could distribute its minuscule contents amongst thirty struggling creditors.

And here he was gazing into huge green eyes fantasising about giving her \$50,000 so that she would think he was the good guy. He would duck the issue. He would share this with his father, who would laugh it out of existence and he would be safe again. "Could you return at this time tomorrow? I will read what you have and speak to some people about entertainment and business activity in this area."

Abby was being dismissed. Despite the admiring gaze and reluctance to refuse her outright. She was being dismissed so she could be rejected tomorrow. She would fight harder. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Mike was momentarily startled that such a graceful woman could forget herself sufficiently to swing her legs one at a time across in front of a man while wearing a short skirt. Mike tried to cover the distraction of the flash of orange he had received by apologising for the chair. He had to get a better one. He did not want possible lucrative clients annoyed because the chair was bad. He received a dazzling smile.

Abby tried her next weapon. It was time to make this more personal. "We have a common friend in Sally Nairn," she said. This didn't achieve the a warm response Abby expected. Mike froze for a moment looking... what? Puzzled? Distressed?

Across the years Mike was recalling the stories of Sally's close friend who had had a dreadful childhood. Never expecting to meet a childhood friend of Sally's Mike had merely expressed concern. The friend had gone on to stardom in the acting industry. How many stars would Sally know? Mike was sitting opposite her. He could not share what he had heard of that anonymous child with the lady herself. He would talk to Sally about her later.

He said, "I met Sally at university. You've know her most of her life haven't you.?"

Abby relaxed at the safer ground she was now on and chatted over childhood memories and how Sally was doing as a successful business woman of Wellington. But if Mr Jarvis didn't know Abby's achievements, how was it possible that he now knew her life history as a friend of Sally? Annoyed Abby suddenly understood the moment of horrified recognition. To be fair to Sally, the Lake family disasters were all over the shoddier newspapers and magazines. Sally was not breaching any trust by talking to a friend. And she must have been discreet or Jarvis would have known her name. Abby tried not to feel like an exhibit in a freak show.

Mike had to bring this to a close. Getting Abigail Lake out his office would be the first step to finding ways not to be beguiled into parting with \$50, 000.

He stood up and walked around his desk to escort Ms Lake out. She began to rise. The strap on her bag went tight and her chair began to topple.

Mike grabbed the chair and gently pressed Abby's shoulder back. "Sit down a moment and I'll free the strap," he said.

With Mike holding the strap of her handbag, Abby stood back up. They were nearly touching noses. Mike knew that it would be quite clear to her that he was breathing quickly and unevenly. He abruptly turned away and led her out. Suddenly he was angry. The damn woman wasn't going to get any \$50000 out of him. And he had just remembered that she spent most of *Maria Grenville* gazing seductively up at the cameras. But as they stood nose to nose he had learned that she was as tall as he. She must have gone through the bloody film on her knees. In the foyer Mike tried hard to ignore her while Abby stood in front of him holding his arms and asking again for him to see the advantage in the offer. Mike returned hastily to his office and left Abigail signing pieces of paper and cards for an ecstatic Elizabeth to give to her many friends and relatives.

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Sally's office phone beeped. It was a new number unknown to her system. She looked through the glass partition and gave a querying look to the young woman at the desk. Her intercom beeped on.

"Mike Jarvis, managing the Merriton office of Jarvis and Keen." Sally nodded and picked the phone up. "Hi," she said.

"Hi yourself. Jeez Sally you could have warned me."

"Innocent until proved guilty, Mike. What did I do?"

"I just had Genghis Khan and all his hordes in here in the form of your mate Ms Lake."

"Thought it might be that. What went wrong?"

"She didn't want to be a regular client, or even to pay back money owed by Princess Players. She wants more money. A great deal more. And if I didn't think better of her, I'd swear she did everything in her power to seduce me into funding her damn play."

"Ignore that, she can't help herself. But it's a big deal to her Mike. She needs sponsorship and support to pull this off. I tried to talk her out of it and failed and I was hoping you would be able to kill it. But if anyone can do it, it will be Abby."

"If she wants to act in a play that I sponsor, she's going to have to learn to stand up without knocking the furniture over."

Mike really wasn't clear why he was so bothered. He should simply say 'no' and all this would go away. His anger was not diminished by the hoot of laughter from Sally. "Oh no. She didn't pull the snagged shoulder strap did she?"

"It was deliberate?"

Sally remembered that Abby on a mission could take a rather dim view of people who got in her way. "Probably not. Watch the film '*Consequences*' some time, Mike. It was Abby's first film when she was nineteen. It's dreadful, although she did OK. It put her off film work until she couldn't be on the road any more. It taught her to do her own directing. She directs herself and anyone else she can get her hands on. The regulars just hate it."

"I can imagine the people she works with get annoyed. Twenty minutes in an office with her had me on edge. You might drop a gentle female word in her ear to remember to keep her knees together sitting opposite a man at a desk too. Although it did remind me I need to replace that chair."

Sally was too horrified to follow up on this. Abby was truly desperate if she had pulled the uncomfortable chair routine. It only worked on decent men who had control over the seating arrangements. Abby had described it years ago. She shuffled uncomfortably and then gave the guy a flash of panties. He ended up embarrassed and compliant because he had put her in an uncomfortable seat and then looked up her skirt when she couldn't sit still any more. If Abby had used both the shoulder strap and uncomfortable chair routines Mike was in trouble.

Sally wasn't sure what had really upset Mike. She would wait to talk to Abby. Meanwhile she reassured Mike that he had to make his own decision but that Abby was a fighter. If Abby said she could make this work, there was a good chance it *would* work.

As soon as she put the phone down on Mike, Abby's number showed up. Another tirade began. "He didn't know any of my work. He sat there salivating all over the office. His bloody receptionist wanted to take me home as a pet. He thought I should be giving him money instead of him financing my show. Jeepers Sally, where did you get that one from?"

But by now Sally was disappointed enough in Abby to give as good as she got. "Abby, he is not obliged to give you money. It's voluntary. Nor is he obliged to have seen your shows or read the scandal mags. And Abby go easy on Mikey. He's not in your league. He once put a hand on my thigh at a university dance and spent the rest of the night apologising. I wasn't sure whether I was more mad at him for groping or for not continuing to grope or for all the bloody apologising. He expects honesty and mutual consent". Sally hadn't meant to let on that she knew what Abby had done but it spilled out. "You don't need bag and chair routines to manipulate Mike. He manipulates



himself.”

Abby had the grace to sound a little chastened. “I didn't realise he picked it. I thought he was too naïve.”

He *didn't* pick it. He *is* too naïve. He thought you were a little too clumsy to be acting on stage if you can't stand up unaided and I'm to have a gentle word with you about decorum when sitting in a short skirt. The spat was over. Both women hooted with laughter until Sally remembered where she was and that she had work to do. But Abby hadn't quite finished.

“Sally, will I get my money?”

“I don't know Abby. I don't think this is a good idea but I won't interfere either way. I have told him that if anyone can do it you can.”

Something else was bugging Abby but she couldn't think why it mattered. She asked as calmly as she could, “Have you really never got past the thigh grope and apologise stage with him?”

Sally froze uncertainly over the phone. She had her suspicions and she wasn't sure this was where she thought this should go. Reluctantly she said, “Yes, that's as erotic as we've been.”

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Mike diverted himself with other work before he returned to the problem of Princess Players. He knew that there was sense in what the Lake woman had said. The way to recover money is to earn it and she was trying to do that. He tried to concentrate on the facts. But really it didn't matter. This much money would have to be cleared with his father and his father would laugh outright at the idea. Anyway, there would be no harm in doing further research.

Mike had a friend in the acting business. Some years ago Mike Krantz, a stand-up comedian and actor, had got himself into strife over a charge of libel. Mike had used his diplomatic skills and calmed the whole matter away. Sam had been genuinely grateful and rather in awe of Mike's knowledge of both the law and human nature. The two men had remained friends despite very different attitudes to life. Now Mike tapped out the number of Sam's cell.

Sam was staying in a boarding house in Hamilton and working the local hotel, but only until the weekend. Mike transferred the call to the land line for a long chat.

After a rush of catchup talk and news of England and the comedy circuit, Mike at last got down to asking advice about the theatre in general. “I've been asked to put up some money for *Princess Players* and want your advice on their likelihood of success.”

Sam chuckled. “If it's a pantomime for or by eight-year-olds, success is guaranteed but for anything else it will be catastrophe. There are precedents for both.”

“Yes that's been true in the past but they have something called 'Potent Performance' which is quite big overseas apparently and they have several actors including....”

Mike had to stop and wait as Sam laughed.

“Oh Mikey, Mikey. The *Princess Players* do not have 'Potent Performance' except in their dreams. No one has it except the top London theatres and soon New York.”

“Well they assure me they do. Some effeminate fellow called Cresswell whom I spoke to recently brought the rights back here. He knows the author John aah...”

Mike scrabbled for the material that Abby had left for him.

Sam said, “John Ashcroft. Chris Cresswell runs *Princess Players*. In a rather interesting way as it happens. I suppose it is possible that he has snuggled up to Ashcroft enough to get the rights off of him. But even though he is a quite brilliant comedian himself, it's going to take a lot more than Cresswell and 'Potent Performance' to bring success to an outfit like *Princess Players*.

“That's where I come in. They are fundraising around Merriton to make this big and they have a cast list that includes Mary Cooper and Abigail Lake who will also direct. Ms Lake despite cultivating a tiresome bimbo image seems to have a business brain and quite a following.”

Mike waited uncertainly. “Sam are you there?”

Suddenly gales of laughter came down the line. “You slimy little piece of lawyer poo. When did you learn to deliver straight lines like that? You've been up all night learning theatrical words that I would know. You really had me going then. I was just about to ask if the auditions were booked. Well done Mike. I'm proud of you. Even if that was damn cruel.”

“No Sam. This is real. Check their website. They are preparing auditions for the cast they don't yet have.”

There was another pause and Mike could hear the click of computer keys.

“Oh Mikey, do you know what this means to a disciple like me. The gods have descended to walk the earth in Merriton. Mike have you seen her? Do you know what any of these people can do?. I flew to Melbourne to see Abigail Lake in 'Happy Circumstance.' They had to take three people out because they were overcome with emotion. We laughed and cried all night. I stood in front of a mirror for three hours after I got home trying to recreate what she had done. Have you seen *Maria Grenville*? Tosh for the masses turned into major theatre by Abigail Lake. You just wait till you meet her. You'll never be the same again. And the others aren't far out her class either. Mikey, I love you. You must finance this just to please me. They can't possibly make it work in Merriton, but you don't care. Give them money and then drop my name and then drop it some more. Use your influence to tell lies about me. I'm on my way to audition. Abigail Lake came to see me in a comedy in Auckland a few years back. Afterwards she shook my hand and said she enjoyed it and told me I was good. Mike I didn't wash that hand for weeks. She may remember me. She may consider me. Tell her I love her. No, don't say that because everyone else does too.”

Mike struggled with this flow of enthusiasm. He hadn't seen Abigail Lake on stage, but he had seen Sam and had been in awe himself. If Sam felt like this then he wanted to see Ms Lake perform. Damn this was not getting any easier. At last he said a little lamely. “You don't wash your hands for weeks anyway, Sam.”

“Leave the comedy to me, Mike. I'm on my way.”

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On the way home Mike got '*Consequences*' and '*Maria Grenville*' from the video shop. *Consequences*, ten years old and not very popular, was hard to find. *Maria Grenville* was still prominently displayed.

Mike hurriedly peeled some vegetables and put the dinner on. If he kept leaving the office early and had time to watch videos he had to be seen to be doing something else. But his heart wasn't in dinner. He wanted to see Abigail Lake again, and properly this time. It was after all a professional interest.

In *Consequences*, a younger Abby looked out at him from the screen as she set about her various romantic and sexual adventures. Mike wondered if it had been written by the same author as *Maria Grenville*. The plot didn't get in the way of any opportunity to have Abby undress or squirm seductively. Now she was at a job interview that wasn't going well. She was about to be dismissed despite her best efforts to seduce the interviewer when Mike was brought back to reality by the door opening behind him and his father arriving home. “Something burning?”

“Oh hell, oh hell. Forgot.” Mike paused the DVD and jumped up. He lifted the saucepan of the hob and turned the hotplate off.

Back in the lounge Harry had sat down in front of the screen. “That woman with the red curls looks

like the one in the street the other day,” he said.

“Yes, it is. Abigail Lake. I had her in the office today. I need to talk to you about her. You have to stop me from making a fool of myself by giving her a great deal of money.”

Harry laughed. “She can always ask me. I’ll give it to her. But I had thought for a moment there that you had actually learned to relax in front of a mindless video at the end of the day. Silly me.”

“It’s sort of work dad, but I do rather enjoy looking at her and god help us I nearly kissed her in the office today. Third day in and we would have had a professional misconduct suit on our hands.”

Harry looked puzzled. “Everyone would want to kiss her Mike, but that doesn’t sound like you. What were you doing mauling a client?”

Embarrassed, Mike looked back at the screen and for the first time noticed what was happening.

Mike remembered Sally laughingly telling him to watch ‘*Consequences*’ after he described the chair incident. “God, the callous little brat,” Mike said. “I can’t believe that woman.” He flicked the remote. On the screen, Abby continued to rise out her chair. The chair, came up with her. The harassed interviewer rushed over and grabbed it. Abby cooed into his neck and they kissed.

“That is exactly what I was doing, only without the kissing,” Mike said.

Harry slapped his son playfully. “Did she stand in front of you with the chair hanging off of her like that?”

“More or less, yes.”

“The professional misconduct was that you *didn’t* kiss her. A person with a chair hanging off of them doesn’t stand up straight looking into someone’s face. They either sit down again or turn around. Half of New Zealand has seen this film. She was expecting you to laugh and behave like the guy in the film.”

Mike doubted that Abigail Lake meant him to kiss her. If she knocked over any furniture tomorrow she could pick it up herself.

The men scraped the crust off the worst affected of the dinner, cooked the rest and settled down to watch ‘*Maria Grenville*’ while they ate.

In the Lake household Abby, was also settling down to dinner with her parent. Lucy enthused over her successes. She had contacted some organisations for advertising. Written up some price lists and budgets. Made a long to-do list and managed to track down some theatre and business folk that they hoped would help.

“How was it after the lawyer fellow?”, Lucy asked. Lucy was a bit puzzled by what had happened in the law office. Her usually rational daughter had come back for lunch raging at Sally’s stupid friend who was both ungenerous and unchivalrous. Closer questioning revealed that he might come up with all of the \$50,000 that the women had thought was the absolute maximum they dare ask for. It also seemed that he had been the model of propriety despite a good deal of provocation to be otherwise. Years of dependence on Abby had left Lucy with an unhealthy lack of confidence. She knew that Abby could not take much more and that any challenge from her in areas where Abby was sensitive could result in Abby walking out. And that would be the death of Lucy. Lucy moved on to safer and less puzzling subjects.

The afternoon hadn’t been much better. Abby had tried her charm on the local business people but without much success. Many were prepared to buy seats ahead of time but very few had large sums to put into a play. An afternoon of foot slog had resulted in a few hundred seats sold and a few thousand dollars promised. It helped, but it wasn’t enough to get the show safely up and running.

She needed Jarvis.

Back in the Jarvis household *Maria Grenville* scrambled out of a stranger's bed for the last time and resolved to be faithful to the hero who had been faithful to her. The credits rolled and this time Mike watched to see the name 'Abigail Lake' roll past. He felt a foolish pride. He had people in his office who got their name up in movie credits. But he felt embarrassment and anger at Abby for having acted in what was little more than a strip show. When he expressed that to his father, he was startled at the vehemence of the reaction.

"That was an intelligent film about a modern young woman in a city and the decisions she has to make. She made some good ones and some bad ones and learned from them. It may not have been high culture but it was good fun and a lot of people would have enjoyed it and be better because of it. They had to use a beautiful body to sell the film, but that was a skilled portrayal as well." Seeing Mike's sullen look he realised too late that he was trampling on tender feelings and added, "If you have an interest you need to do more than get angry because other men look at her." That had been no help at all. Realising he had made things worse he went on another tack completely. "I recognise her now. She was Ophelia. I saw her years ago when I was in Auckland overnight. She was still in drama school then. Brilliant. I remember now that I went to see a play of hers a few years back, but her mother was ill and we got her understudy. I enjoyed the play, but the regular playgoers were very disappointed that Ms Lake was absent."

Harry suddenly sat forward animated. "Good god, Lake. Of course. There is a family resemblance. Her mother was a TV idol through the 70s and into the 80s. Oh how I loved that woman. When your mother was dying, and you were young I kept my sanity by watching '*A Woman Like Me*'. Lucy Lake. Of course. If anyone could ever have replaced your mum once she died it would have been Lucy Lake. Only in my dreams of course. She was an alcoholic. I suppose she's dead now."

"No Dad. Abigail retired from big time entertainment to care for her. She lives locally. That's the reason Abigail is in the Wellington suburbs and not on stage or in Hollywood."

"What do they want from you?"

Mike went in to an explanation of what they had to offer and how much they wanted from Jarvis and Keen. He expected his father to just laugh it off but although Harry muttered a bit at the \$50,000 he didn't dismiss it out of hand. Unknown to Mike he was calculating the effect on his son and not just the business aspects of it. His rather dour son had had something happen to him this morning. It was absurd to think that a beautiful actress would be interested in Mike Jarvis, but Mike needed a preoccupation and a silly unobtainable dream even if it was terribly expensive might be good for him. Harry hoped he wouldn't be hurt

Harry eyed his son. "It's your decision, Mike. I'll back you either way. On the plus side you could use it as an excuse to pay back the local community and win kudos that way. It will be valuable well placed advertising as Ms Lake says and it should be fun. Make it a condition that the Lake family have to come to tea with us, one evening. I fancy my chances with both of them. Seriously though, we can't put up this much company money. Offer say \$30,000 to cover advertising of \$10000 and the rest to pay back the locals. Then I'll put up another \$20000 myself. No recriminations if it all turns to ashes."

"I thought it was my decision, Dad. And if you are putting up a \$20000 dowry to get me married off to Ms Abigail Lake I'm going to have to do something unpleasant to you."

Harry laughed easily. "I've never seen you take a risky decision, but you've already made this one yourself. I'm just reassuring you that when you've lost \$50000 to a pretty little thing with a chair hanging off of her, I'll still love you."

Mike knew that this was a kindly tease, but he had to bite back an unkind reply. He hadn't yet made any such decision. He said goodnight to his father and went off to write up a contract to give to

Abigail Lake tomorrow.

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FRIDAY

Mike enjoyed getting busier. Jim had discovered that passing work across to his replacement was a pleasure and that he could trust the younger man to do it well and ask for advice when he needed it. Ten o'clock came quickly and Mike was disturbed by Elizabeth twittering at the door. The great coffee debate had already taken place. Abby had correctly judged that she would have another cup forced onto her and so she had left home a little thirsty. She managed to get into the room and seated without help although she had to move quickly and the coffee slopped a little. Abby and Mike exchanged a furtive grin at the undignified entry.

Suppressing her disappointment at the escape of her distinguished guest, Elizabeth instead announced pointlessly. "Abby has returned to discuss the Princess Players."

The fun was quickly over. Mike intended to offer a great deal of money to this woman and he would do it in his usual business manner. "I've sought advice about your venture Ms Lake and I'm advised by several competent people including Sally Nairn that it is a reasonable risk." Mike paused and looked pointedly at Abby. In case there was any doubt that he was wise to the ways of theatrical women he added, "I watched '*Consequences*' and '*Maria Grenville*' yesterday evening too."

Abby kept both rising excitement and anger in check. This felt a bit like a public humiliation as revenge for yesterday. Sally was right that Mike Jarvis was not that sort of man. Although he had been obviously fascinated by her, she had only succeeded in irritating him. Now before she got any money from him he would find wounds to rub salt in, and if she made the wrong move again she could still blow it.

Mike continued. "Ms Lake there is a lot of enthusiasm for this project and I intend to offer support if you wish to go ahead, but for your sake I have to advise against what is really a foolhardy venture that has a high expectation of financial and artistic failure."

"Thank you for your advice Mr Jarvis. If you give your support it becomes my job to make sure your trust is not misplaced. We will not only pay all bills and repay all loans, but we intend to put Princess Players back at the top."

"Still, I advise you not to proceed."

Abby just nodded. She read this correctly. Mr Mike Jarvis was covering himself. If it failed he had made it clear who he considered had failed. Abby wanted to resent this as cowardice, but she knew he would not be fair to her or his backers if he didn't point out the risks. Mike waited a moment for a reply but realising that she would not defend herself any further, and knowing that he also was committed, Mike returned to business.

"My offer is that we will go with the \$50000 you asked for under the following circumstances and conditions."

"The first \$10000 is donated in exchange for generous advertising in all literature and on the stage."

Abby cringed inwardly. She still had to clear the stage reference with Chris and the copyright holder. But it should add to local colour and humour.

"We will lend another \$20,000 on condition that all outstanding debt is cleared immediately, and that creditors are told that we have supplied the money, even though we will be repaid by you when you have it."

That was OK. Antagonising the local community was not good. This was a priority and perhaps the business people would be so relieved they would reinvest.

“And we will lend the remaining \$20000 to help with start-up expenses, on a further demand and a request for two favours.”

Abby fought to control her rising excitement. They would have enough to keep them going until the seat sales began, but what were these demands and favours?

“First, the two informal favours which will mean a lot to the people asking and may be advantageous to you if you choose to accept. My father was a fan of your mother when she was on TV and he has seen her on stage, as he has you. If you could spare an evening he would like to entertain you both.” Mike made it seem that he was excluded but he would be there to meet Mrs Lake and see Abigail Lake outside a business setting.

Abby was puzzled at the thrill this sent through her. She wanted to see this lawyerly family in their own setting. Sally seemed to have a high opinion of them and that carried weight with Abby. “I think we will enjoy that thank-you. We are both vegetarian.” The next bit was always hard to say but years of repetition were making it easier. “I think that you are aware that my mother cannot go anywhere where someone may attempt to force alcohol onto her.”

Mike nodded. “We will keep it teetotal.”

“That's not necessary. But there mustn't be pressure. The other thing?” Abby asked.

“I have a friend who acts,” he began. Abby had wondered if this was it. Everyone has a friend who acts. Every little kindness or gift was accompanied with the request to consider an uncoordinated, mumbling relative for promotion in the entertainment industry. Now that Abby was in charge of a whole production she could expect a lot more of this. But this man was funding the show. She had to appear to defer to him. She smiled.

Mike felt uncomfortable. It wasn't his job to do the casting and he felt Abby had gone a little cold on him. Damn the woman. He was offering a lot of money and if they had someone better they would not take Sam anyway. He pressed ahead. “My friend Sam Krantz is coming to the auditions. He is keen to try out. I'd appreciate it if you would consider him.”

This time Abby failed to keep her face under control. She had spent yesterday evening trying to locate Sam Krantz to invite him to Wellington at the show's expense. Sam had just the right appearance and nonsensical comic manner for '*Potent Performance*'. He was an automatic choice for the difficult role of *Alan* in the play. It had been too much to hope that he would be available and enthusiastic. And yet it seemed he was so keen that he was getting his lawyer friend to hustle for him. God knows how Mr conservative suit knew someone like Sam Krantz, but right now she just wanted Sam at the auditions.

She nodded condescending. “We'll make a priority to audition him for you when he shows up. And what is it we have to negotiate now?”

“Ms Lake, our family business cannot risk this amount of money so some of the funds I am offering are my own. My father has offered but I will carry the risk myself.” Mike was gratified to see her eyes widen a little. So the lawyer daddy's boy was quite flush with funds. “Because of this I feel I can make a personal request.”

Abby forced another smile. There was still a lot hanging on a thread here, but what horror did her tormentor think he could ask for \$20 thousand dollars that had to be paid back again anyway?

Mike watched the reluctance come and go. This really was a struggle. Why couldn't he just make his claims as if this was an ordinary negotiation and expect to talk his way through. Too late now. He had to press on.

“I belong to an animal rights group. They are planning some TV advertisements.” He failed to keep his voice steady as yet another change came over Abigail. What a roller coaster of emotion it was to deal with Abigail Lake.

“Which one?” she asked abruptly.

“Pardon?”

“Which group?”

“ANIMUS. Animals and us,” Mike said a little uneasily. “They are preparing some TV propaganda and are planning to shoot over two days. They have something coming up in a few weeks. I realise it's an imposition but I would like to be able to tell them you would do it. It would also be publicity for the show if we can get the ads on air quite soon.” He couldn't read Abby's thoughts at all. She was gazing at him amazed. Perhaps the thought that she would lower herself to do animal ads was so shocking to her that she would walk out on him. She had said she was a vegetarian, that might mean something, but you do not ask a film actress to do TV ads, damn he had gone too far and made a fool of himself. Mike knew nothing of her work as *Splosh the Washing Machine*.

In fact, Abby belonged to ANIMUS herself and had already done promotional work for them. It was the idea that this stuffed shirt was also involved in something so public spirited and caring that she struggled with.

“OK, we'll find two days in the schedule,” she said.

Abby wanted something of her own. “You've been generous, Mr Jarvis and have agreed to pretty much all of what we asked but I have a further request.”

Mike waited in what he hoped was a discouraging posture, in case what was coming was unreasonable. “There are legal contracts with the players, and there will be some other paper work that requires a lawyer. You are close by and have already been very helpful. I wonder if you would donate some of your time as well as the money you have already offered, to help us through?”

Now it was Abby who worried she had pushed too far too fast. She had to reduce costs as much as possible, especially before seat sales began. But Mike Jarvis had offered her \$50,000, hospitality at his home, an opportunity to support an organisation she believed in anyway and also a meeting with Sam Krantz. It was true that most of this suited Mr Jarvis's interests as well, but there had to be an end to what she could get away with. She still hadn't signed and sealed the deal. Please don't let her have ruined it.

Mike was quietly thrilled. Abigail Lake was asking him to represent the Players. Sure, she just wanted free legal aid. But there might be future legal work here both for her and for the Players. And there was a chance that both might rise again from the ashes they seemed to be in at present. They might be worth representing.

“I'll write in six hours of free legal aid, Ms Lake. If the demands are kept moderate enough we'll not charge after that either.”

It was over. Whatever the future held for them now, they had both taken what felt like a big step in their lives.

Abby would need to work out why this had all gone so well. If it was something she had done she would use it in future. She had money and support and now a contact for an actor she really wanted, and all this from a man who didn't follow the entertainment industry and who didn't seem the type to take this sort of decision lightly. Sex had played a part of course. She had seen the appraising looks, but there was more. Mike Jarvis would not give away large amounts of unsecured money for a pretty face and short skirt. Perhaps he really believed in her or the show. Or both. It felt good.

But now there was the matter of Sam Krantz. Abby wanted Sam as soon as she could get him. But an actor who knows that he is considered invaluable to a play can quickly become a liability. Abby would make it seem like a favour. “You've been generous and helpful thanks Mr Jarvis. If you would like to bring Mr Krantz to the Princess Hall on Tuesday evening, I'm willing to work him into an early walk-through and see how he feels.”

Mike stood up. He had resolved that he would wait until Abby was on her way to the door before moving but here he was walking to her. He would stand beside Abigail Lake again before she could escape the small office. Mike ruefully thought of Elizabeth arranging the same situation for herself. It must be irritating to be Abigail Lake sometimes. He walked around the desk. Abigail waited until he was nearly beside her before she rose. Surely she wouldn't play the same stupid stunt again. The chair stayed on the floor.

Abby had no idea why she waited. She wasn't prepared to admit to herself that there was a thrill to having this rather unworldly yet solid man stand awkwardly over her. But she was waiting for it to happen as surely as she used the chair performance to bring him to her. It was a gentle tease she told herself. She studied people. She wanted to know how Mike Jarvis would react a second time to being forced close to her.

But as she stood and faced him she was not prepared for him to put a gentle hand on her arm and say. "Why did you do it?"

Abby was about to ask what he was referring to but that would just be stupid. "A silly game. I think I should be sorry, but you handled it rather well. I lost that round."

Abigail calmly regarded Mike's face. She was waiting for Mike's next move. Mike was now convinced that she expected to be kissed. But why? Beautiful woman did not usually stand in front of Mike Jarvis waiting for sexual advances. This one was different but perhaps it was only a cold blooded attempt to get him at a disadvantage. Perhaps it was simple gratitude. After all he had given in to everything she wanted. Perhaps she just fancied being kissed. Mike felt a hot flush run through him. He did. It was quite possible that Abigail Lake was feeling some of the emotions he felt.

Self possession returned. Mike turned away. "I'm bound by a code of conduct in here Ms Lake. We will be meeting elsewhere." It was a challenge, almost a threat. To her dismay Abby felt a thrill go through her. But Mike bloody Jarvis had won the same game two days running. Well stuff him. The sexual innuendo was to be on her terms. As always.

But Abby had much bigger things to contemplate. She left the office in a whirl. She had to get herself back in control. She had to think straight. She had money, she probably had a needed actor. There was exciting work to do. There was no doubt now that she would be in charge of a large production. And having foolishly misjudged how to handle Mr Jarvis, she now had to figure out ways to keep him in line. That was exciting too. She recovered herself enough to reply kindly to Elizabeth, but she couldn't be bothered with her now. She told her that she would be seeing more of her in the coming weeks and would sign cards for her then. But since Elizabeth had asked how to buy advance seats for the show, that wasn't very helpful.

## SATURDAY

As soon as Sam reached Wellington he was on the phone and busting to meet up with Mike and hear how to handle Abigail Lake. Mike tried to explain that his influence with the rather alarming Abby was near zero but Sam would have none of it.

In exasperation Mike said, "Sam, she thinks I'm a joke. She was standing in my office pretending she wanted to neck with me, just so that she could embarrass me. A ruse that worked very well. But there *is* something. When I mentioned your name I'm pretty sure she froze. She knows about you and you matter to her. Tell you what Sam - I'm taking a mutual friend out to tea this evening. Come and play gooseberry with us and as long as the jokes don't get too rude and you don't overdo the grilling you can ask Sally how to cope with her."

Sam whooped with delight. "You have a friend who is also a friend of the gorgeous Abigail Lake, and you are prepared to share? You know I love you don't you Mike?"

"What is more important is that you show up on time on Tuesday at Princess Theatre and be as



good as you are.”

“Of course Mike. Tuesday. This is where Chris Cresswell, Mary Cooper and Abigail Lake are keen to meet me. Sam's voice trailed away. God what if I stuff up? I want this Mike. I mustn't stuff up.”

“You probably will if you go in with that attitude, Sam. You know you are good. Abby probably has a part for you in mind. You can do it. Just do it.”

“I want to be *Alan*, Mike. That part is made for me. A knock around funny guy who might be a murderer but ends up being the nice guy. That sounds like me doesn't it Mike?”

“Some of it Sam.”

“I'm coming tonight. I'm going to put my best gear on, I have to impress Ms Lake's friend.”

Mike was busy shouting not to bother with the impressing stuff when the phone went dead.

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Mike remembered why he so enjoyed Sam's company. Sam loved to entertain and Mike was a good listener. The evening flowed along. The fairly humble restaurant and dance bar that Mike had taken them to was clearly beyond Sam's means. After ordering the cheapest of the drinks and entrées Sam pretended not to need any more. Sally took him in hand and said she was paying. On the third demand that he eat whatever he liked, Sam swallowed his pride and ordered dinner.

“Abby told me to take you to dinner and find out lots about you,” Sally lied. “So you are on the job really and can eat something.”

Mike was glad that Sam hadn't heeded his advice not to dress for dinner. If this was Sam's best, Mike was grateful he hadn't come in second best. But Mike watched with a mixture of amusement and amazement at Sally's reaction to their poor and rather scruffy dinner guest. She leaned forward, eyes wide, laughing a little too soon and readily at the jokes and egging on Sam with the anecdotes and nonsense. Mike knew Sally could enjoy a laugh with the best of them. But surely the usually rather demur Sally Nairn could not be smitten? Probably just being polite.

At last Sam plucked up the courage to say what he had been building up to all evening and asked how he should deal with Abigail Lake at his audition on Tuesday.

“It's just that I've only seen her from a distance on stage in major theatres and the once when she came and spoke to me after my show. She's a god to me. She's the adored lead. I'm the rough and tumble comic.”

Sally chuckled. “If you are asking me how to cope at an audition we have a problem. I wanted to be Mrs Goody in the year 5 play and missed by a mile. But as for Abby, she's no god, Sam. None of us is. But she's good. She expects a lot of herself and the people who work with her. But also her judgement is good. If she wants you it will be because you are the best for the job. And if you're not she won't have you anyway.”

In fact Sally had been sworn to secrecy. Sam was ideal. A weak Alan in the play would simply be ridiculous. Abby had to find a man of the right age and build who could carry absurd situations and make them seem part of a serious story. Abby had seen him do that, and watching him this evening Sally could see why she wanted him. Sam had an insecure streak that he hid in absurdity. Once Sam had lost himself in a story, the story told itself. Sam's body and soul were part of that story.

But also, Sally could understand why a spontaneous and uneasy artist would be awed by a formal smart professional like Abby. But a god, no. Abigail Lake was no god. Abby could muddle and make mistakes like everyone else. But that was nothing to the fragile shell that kept Abigail from facing what her life had really been. In her mind, Sally relived the horror night of the fourth form prize giving, after which a fourteen year old Abigail cried herself to sleep in Sally's arms. Could any child face their classmates with courage and strength after that? And surely no one could go on loving the woman that caused the grief. But Abby had. That was her strength. If Abigail Lake was

godlike it was not just her ability to rise to the top that made her so. It was also her ability not to sink to the bottom.

Sally shook herself back to the present. Sam had latched on to the phrase “won't have you anyway” and was doing impressions of various terrible fates that would ensue. The evening passed very pleasantly.

As they parted Sally took the opportunity to give Sam a kiss for luck. After all he was justifiably nervous and the contact with a close friend of the director's was a kindness. Sally expected Sam to pull away quickly but the kiss lingered. It was Sally who had to call a slightly breathless halt. Sam looked a bit glazed too. Damn, probably sent the wrong message. Sally was not sure how much she wanted to share with this rather neurotic impecunious comic. And Mike was watching with a slightly puzzled smirk. Sally wasn't sure what signals she wanted to send in that direction. What the hell. She would just enjoy being noticed by two attractive men.

Tuesday

On Tuesday Sam was early. Irritatingly early. It was bad enough that Mike was leaving the office again long before 5pm. Once he settled in he would expect to be there until 7pm or later. But Sam was there to take him off to the Princess Theatre. Mike reminded him where it was but Sam stayed loitering in the outer office. This was the man who bared his soul to a hundred or more drunk pub patrons and risked ridicule or applause. Now he wouldn't walk up the street to meet half-a-dozen local fellow actors. Mike delayed as long as he could and left the office to Elizabeth and Jim. Mike wasn't even sure he would be welcome, but who cared. He was major financier.

The large Edwardian Hall called Princess Theatre was ugly. There was no other way to think of it. Mike's spirits sank. He was risking a great deal on this. Five hundred seats in a tomb like ugly hall must take a lot of filling night after night. It was too late now. Mike must not allow himself to believe he had made a mistake. But here in this alien environment his confidence flagged. His first major decision as a branch manager had been a \$50,000 joke. Instead of recovering the money owed to Princess Players he would be encouraging them back into bigger blunders than they had made last time. He felt unreasonably angry at his father. He had forty years of experience of putting the Abigail Lakes of the world in their place. But his father had said he'd stand by the decision. Sally was in awe of her. Sam was in awe of her. And Mike had been sucked in. But he had to put this behind him and go with the decision he had made. At some level every action was a guess and a risk. He consciously took himself in hand and forced himself to believe again. He entered the hall in a better frame of mind.

There was no one here yet except for someone shifting furniture on stage.

Sam moved towards him. “Mr Cresswell. Is that you? I think we met some time ago.”

The man on the stage peered out across the gloom of the unlit body of the hall. He then sprang from the stage and came towards Sam arms outstretched. “Sam, Oh Sammy, Sammy, I not allowed to tell you how much we want you, but oh how good to see you. You may have met me only once but I have crept into your shows a hundred times. I adore you.”

Mike was relieved that Sam was hearing this.

Sam said, “Please Chris, a manly shake. No hugs or kisses.”

“What! And have to reject you for your standoffishness and use someone far less gorgeous?”

The two men embraced. Mike breathed a sigh of relief. Sam was back in his element. The ice was broken. Behind him was movement at the door. Several people came in together. Mike tried to think of Abigail Lake as just another committee member and actor entering a hall. He failed. Abigail had come in and his life was different because of it. Abby took in the scene of the two men embracing near the stage. She smiled.

Sam, although he seldom commanded a high price and had not been a star in anything, was

probably the most marketable actor in the country. He could get a job easily in any comedy or hotel entertainment. He was raw talent and highly commercial. Abby had to handle him carefully. She wanted Sam for her Alan and even if there had been someone better, at the rates she could pay she would not be able to afford them. She herself could be replaced as Miranda more easily than she could find another Alan. And that oddball Jarvis somehow knew him as a close friend. She turned her attention to Mike. "So glad you could find the time to join us, Mr Jarvis. And thank you for bringing Mr Krantz in this evening." She touched Mike's arm as she passed, but it was just a public relations job. Even though the closeness they had shared in the office was on both their minds, Abby's priority was to sign and seal Sam without him knowing how valuable he was.

She moved on towards the stage.

An attractive older woman, part of Abigail's entourage, separated herself from the group and went to Mike. She held out a hand. "You've been most generous to us Mr Jarvis. We won't let you down. Abigail has so much on her mind at present, but I know I can speak for her of her gratitude." Lucy Lake had detected undercurrents and wanted to use Abby's name to this man. She got the response she expected. Abby stirred emotions.

At first Mike was puzzled. What authority had this person to speak for Abby? Surely the only other important female was Mary Cooper and she was younger and he had already identified her. Then the red curls and large eyes gave her away. Mike wasn't sure what he was expecting of Lucy Lake. A dishevelled wreck perhaps, but not this. The delightful woman in front of him was simply an older Abby. Perhaps even more upright and proud.

"A delight to meet you, Mrs Lake. My father is a huge fan of yours. Abigail assures me you are doing a good deal of the work to put the show together." Until he had met Lucy Lake, Mike had assumed that this was just a piece of promotion for his benefit.

Lucy laughed easily. "Abby is a flatterer, and very loyal to her old mum. And actually Lake is my maiden name. Call me Lucy if you wish." Lucy suddenly realised what she was saying to a conservative lawyer who had either taken a fancy or a dislike to her daughter. She finished hurriedly. "Of course it's appropriate at my age to be Mrs Lake and for Abby to be Ms."

This speech didn't make much sense to either of them, but Mike resolved to ask Sally more about Abby's past and who her father was.

Mike was pleased when Lucy Lake sat down beside him to watch the action. He couldn't be on the stage or part of the artistic preparation but he felt involved while sitting by Lucy. That really shouldn't matter and he probably shouldn't be here anyway. He wondered if Lucy's job was to keep him out of mischief and entertained. At least he had a story to tell his father.

He found the action on the stage fascinating. It was very early in the development of the play, and organisation was the main part of the walk through. But it was obvious that although many of the cast hadn't even been chosen yet, the key Princess Players on the stage knew clearly what they were doing. Mike was afraid that Sam could be humiliated in this company. But then he saw how Sam handled it. At first Sam simply read. But what reading. Every word clear and every inflection with meaning. Single words became full of humour or doubt or horror. Once or twice the others glanced at each other, exchanging looks. Mike basked in reflected glory. They were impressed.

Suddenly Abby said, "We'll do scene four from line 80. Miranda catches Alan at the trunk". There was no trunk but it made no difference. Sam glanced over the script in his hand, stood and moved slowly away from them. Something had upset him. He was looking anxiously around. Mike resisted the desire to turn around to see what was at the back of the empty hall. These people were actors. There was no one near and nothing to fear except the imaginary characters they played. Sam slid along the wall and peered out in to the hall then retreated slowly to an imaginary trunk which he opened. Mike could hear the hinges creak. Just as the imaginary thing that Sam held was dropping into the trunk Abby suddenly said "Ah there you are Alan. I've looked everywhere for you." Sam

spun around horrified and Abby advanced on Sam.

In the play Sam would have sat on the trunk. In its absence he had locked himself into a weird bent backwards position. A look of horror on his face and eyebrows arched up to his hairline. Mike and Lucy both chuckled. So did a number of waiting players on the stage. Abby stayed in character. Moving slowly towards Sam, she said, "You know why I've been looking for you, don't you, Alan?"

"No letter. I don't have one. No point. No letter."

Even with her back to her audience Abby's puzzlement was obvious. "Letter? What letter." Her voice and posture changed back again. "I want my kiss Alan."

Sam did relief, confusion and back to horror. Mike had no idea really what was going on but he had forgotten that this was Abigail Lake and Sam Krantz. He was immersed in the emotion of a nonsense play and he was laughing and being shocked on demand. No wonder this play was wanted around the world if it caused reactions like this.

Sam was saying. "Think of my wife."

Abby's shoulders sank with dismay. Her voice became a plaintive whine. "But you're not married Alan."

"I might be one day." Lucy and Mike laughed freely.

"And who would you like to marry?" Abby said in such a sultry voice that it sent tingles through Mike.

Sam froze. Something was wrong. The dramatic tension in the room rose to unbearable pitch as Abby reached Sam. Suddenly his face broke into a huge smile. "I have no idea. You have taken me onto the next page"

Abby, whose character had approached to within a few centimetres of his lips laughed with him and completed the kiss. "That's a punishment for not knowing how you are supposed to escape."

Mike felt sick. He was an outsider. And not only an outsider, but a boring conservative outsider in a society of extroverts. These people would spend several hours each day for the next few months laughing crying touching and kissing each other. He would be extra baggage, a waste figure wanting to be part of the fun. Surplus to requirements. But then he was distracted again by a nothingness. It was as if the hall had been pumped empty of some invisible essence. People became calm. Laughter died. Bodies relaxed back to their normal size and shape. The magic of imagination slipped away. Abby called to Chris to carry on through another scene and led Sam off the stage.

The two people who arrived back at Mike and Lucy were just that. People. The murderers and seducers were gone. Sam was a delighted kid who had just done well and been kissed by the director for it. And Abby was a business woman.

"Sam and Mike, I won't dissemble. Alan is an unusual comic role that is difficult to fill. Sam, you have a range of comic and serious acting ability and experience of major productions and our sponsor and your friend has asked for you. I can't confirm the role until auditions close, but you are our first choice at present. Can I leave that to you Mike? Even if Sam is not chosen to be Alan he will be understudy and dogsbody. We can only afford minimum rates until there is money for bonuses and so it will make no difference where Sam ends up in that respect."

Abby felt elated but a little ashamed. Sam had not been chosen because he was cheap or that Mike had asked for him. He was there because he was brilliant. She could be more honest when she knew him better. She had the actor she wanted. She admonished Sam to learn the play and especially the role of Alan and to be there again on Thursday. There was more to do. She returned to the stage.

Sam was ecstatic. "Oh Mikey, what did you say to that her? Oh Mike I love you. I love her. I shall name the first five children we have together after you. I am on a payroll. I am in a play. I am acting with Abigail Lake. How did you pull it off?"

Mike was amused but also a little bitter. Sam had been kissed by Abby in public. In front of him. And was now talking of being in love with her. Lucy Lake, was sitting back between them, drinking this in. A smile on her face but her eyes watchfully travelling between the two men. "Sam, I have tried to explain that I have no influence beyond the money she has talked me in to giving. You did that on merit Sam. That was good. I don't even know what the play is about and I laughed and felt chills at what you were doing. Now go and take part in figuring out where the props should go, which is what they are doing now. Tomorrow you sign a contract to go on the payroll to consume some of the money I have given to this."

For the first time since leaving the stage, Sam calmed down enough to notice the woman he had been leaning across. "Good God, Lucy Lake. Ahh Mrs Lake." An awkward pause was followed by the awkward offering of a hand. Lucy took it grinning impishly.

"I look forward to having five grandchildren all called Mike, Mr Krantz. I hope some of them are boys."

Mike didn't know that Sam could blush, but he managed quite spectacularly. Sam could also think fast and recover faster. "I'm just so proud to be working with the two of you," he said. "To act with Abigail Lake is a dream I didn't even dare to have. And now it's happening."

Sam returned to the stage.

Lucy looked directly at Mike. "A nice boy, but not for Abby," she said.

Suddenly it was over. These were busy people with other things going on in their lives. Mike thanked Lucy for her company through the evening and quietly left. He was not one of these people. He must go home to do preparation so he could be in the office early tomorrow morning. He was proud of his job. But tonight it was tiresome.

At home, Mike sought out his father. He was hurting and a little afraid. He wanted to lash out at something and tried not to make it Harry. So he tried to joke his way through it. "I blame it all on you. You should not have encouraged me. I know I'm a big boy now and have to take responsibility, but I was in the hall tonight. It's huge. It's boring. It's uncomfortable. I let a bunch of known losers take \$50000 off of us. They won't get a quarter of the sales they reckon on."

Harry Jarvis suppressed a sigh. "I hope I'm not going to get this every time you make a decision worth more than a few hundred dollars, Mike. We discussed it and agreed it was a one off effort. We repay money outstanding, get some valuable focused advertising and give a local group a chance at the big time. So if we end up looking silly. Let's look silly with dignity. What's really bothering you, Mike?"

"I don't like to think I encouraged something to fail." Both men knew that this was only a very small part of the answer. But Harry knew nothing of Sam's success both on the stage and with his director so he couldn't fathom the full depth of Mike's irritation.

Mike had talked himself into a corner and was keen to change the subject. "I spent a couple of hours sitting with Lucy Lake this evening." Mike turned a mischievous look towards the older man. "She said she hadn't had a wink of sleep since she heard that she was going to get a chance to meet you."

That distracted Harry from taking any further interest in his son's other activities and began an enthusiastic question and answer session that amused Mike enormously.

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The next few days were a joy to Mike. Jim Potter now had his sights firmly set on retirement and a long holiday away. He passed his work across to Mike as fast as he could. The work load was not excessive however. The branch was still too new to have a wide customer base.

What really appealed to Mike was that far from being a remote outsider he had become a

communications centre for the fascinating world of Princess Players. Because he was close at hand with a receptionist and phone, the Players had decided that he was endlessly available to take messages and give advice. Mike had to keep making up reasons to justify giving up company time to his new unpaid role but he couldn't even fool himself. He was having fun. And not just fun. What was wrong with harmless erotic fantasy? Miss Lake's ruthless manipulation of the world included identifying besotted lawyers and working them to the maximum. So what if Mike was a helpless dupe? He already knew that. The feeling would go away soon and she could do her own paper work. Meanwhile, Mike kept taking phone calls on behalf of Princess Players.

Mike told himself often that the Players needed a man of his steady judgement and intellect to guide them. Actually that was true. There were two reasons. One was that they were just too damn busy themselves. While planning and organising a major production, all of the major protagonists had teaching and performing commitments across the Greater Wellington area. The second was what Sam had told him. Under the guidance of the rather vague and flighty Chris Cresswell, the Players suffered from a rather interesting management style. Chris could organise a hundred kids to dress perfectly and perform with precision. But once they were off the stage, messages got lost or changed, major decisions went unmade and tempers often frayed. Mike and Abby had to pick up the slack, and Abby was often unreachable in a classroom or studio. Mike told himself that this was quite unsatisfactory. He would take the matter up with Miss Abigail Lake and put a stop to the frequent demands on his time and thoughts. But then he reminded himself it would be all over in a few months. Perhaps he would just be a temporary martyr until then. Anyway, Elizabeth was staying late every evening to make sure that anything for the Players got done. It would sort itself out eventually.

Mike rang the number on the ANIMUS promotional leaflet and found he was speaking to Evan. Mike put on his official voice. He tried not to be a snob but he still found it hard not to want to sound important when he spoke from his own office.

"Hi Evan, Mike Jarvis, here of the legal firm Jarvis and Keen. I'm also a member of ANIMUS as is Abigail Lake. I'm Abigail Lake's agent and I am responding to the newsletter article asking for help with a planned promotional shoot. I'm in a position to offer Miss Lake if your producer wishes to use her."

God, what a pompous prat you are Mike, he thought to himself. He would have to work on that sort of approach.

Mike waited and then said, "Hello. Are you there?"

"Who's Abigail Lake?" the voice said at last.

Too late to retreat with dignity now. Might as well go in deeper. "My client has extensive experience in film, TV, radio and stage. She starred in *Maria Grenville*. I thought she might be useful to you in the upcoming advertisements. But if you have someone that's fine. She's very busy."

The previously sleepy voice on the other end of the line was now awake and frantic. "God, you do mean her. You're her agent? But we can't afford her. God, don't go, I need to get Jane."

This was more like it. Mike spoke quickly and loudly to prevent Evan getting a chance to escape. "Miss Lake is prepared to donate her time for two days. If you wish to use her please ring back on this number." Mike gave his number and hung up. He nearly laughed out loud at himself. Why was he so pathetically proud to be doing this? Oh what the hell. Enjoy it. He had just negotiated a two million dollar divorce settlement and remained calm and objective. A two day TV shoot and he had to act like some weird fascist dictator. And Mike had to stop calling himself her agent before Abby or her real agent set about suing him. Mike got on with other work.

Elizabeth put through a call from Sam. Mike now had mixed feelings about these calls. Sam was a friend, open and honest and a good source of information on the goings-on at Princess Players. On

the other hand, Mike had to listen to how much fun and excitement he was having and how he was impressing his director who had turned out to be quite human after all. She could be friendly and nice to be around. Well there's a surprise. Abigail Lake could be decent and friendly to a cheap good actor that she needed. He wondered how she would feel about a dour tedious lawyer once she no longer needed him.

Mike focussed back on what Sam was saying. He was being invited out to a foursome. "Sally and Abby are really close, Mike. It would be great to get out for an evening together before the play takes over completely. We have the weekend. The cast will be finalised early next week and then it's all go until we open, so give us some time on Saturday."

Mike was being asked to pave the way for a romance between Sam and Abby. The boring friend who couldn't be a threat but who could ensure that Sally was there to make things more relaxed. Sam had swept back into Mike's life, beguiled Sally, whom he perceived to be Mike's lover and swept the lovely Abigail Lake out of any dreams that Mike might have had. But who was Mike kidding anyway. These people were his friends. Sam and Abigail already spent a lot of their working time pretending to be lovers and would soon be spending the rest of their time being the real thing. The thought hit Mike like a physical blow. The image of Abigail Lake making love to anyone was intolerable. Mike focussed again. At least he was being asked to join in. He wanted to be part of the fun.

He replied, "How would you like to bring them to our place. Dad wants to meet the main players including yourself. Bring the Lakes, Sally, and Chris for a meal on Saturday. It can be a house-warming for us as well."

Mike hoped his father was free in the weekend.

Sam greeted this with mixed emotions. It sounded a much cheaper way to entertain Sally and Abby, but it meant facing Mike's rather imposing father on his home ground.

"It sounds like fun Mike, but will your father fancy having all of us there?"

"If you bring Lucy and Abby, I think you could bring Genghis Khan and his hordes as well. Dad is dying to see what I get up to for far too much of my day."

Sam chuckled happily. This might work out well. "I'll get on to Chris and see if he can turn up."

Unfortunately involving Chris Cresswell was not as uncomplicated as Sam had hoped.

Chris was at his sparkling best. "Sam, that's brilliant. We can have a cast party and launch ourselves with a bit of a splash. You are a darling to think of it and involve the Jarvis's. I'll tell some of the press so that we can get some exposure early in the preparation. That will put us in their good books for when we are ready to open."

Sam realised too late that he had created a monster

"I don't think that is what Mike had in mind Chris. We need to clear it with him."

"Of course you do. Thanks so much for setting this up Sam. It's a brilliant idea and Abby will be so pleased."

By the time that Mike heard from a shamefaced Sam, things had got thoroughly out of hand, Elizabeth was taking a steady stream of phone calls from interested party goers. Mike put through an emergency call to his father to apologise for the muddle he had created and to see if there was any chance it could go ahead.

As always Harry Jarvis rose to the occasion with gentle grace and humour. "It sounds wonderful Mike. I haven't done any real entertaining in the new house at all. The company can get a bit of spin off publicity and so can the play. Buy in some catering, hang a few party lights and lets have fun. We'll call it a triple party – house warming, home coming for you, and show launch for the Players." Mike smiled down the phone. His father never let him down. He was probably cursing his

son under his breath for mucking up something as simple as a meeting between two middle aged people. But he had turned it into a triumph.

Mike got a call from Abby. "Mike what's going on? I keep getting calls from people wanting to come to the cast party and some fool has told the world that you are my agent."

Mike cringed. A tough man of the world approach wouldn't get him out of this. He would have to apologise his way through it. But he didn't have the opportunity.

Abby said, "Look Mike, I'm really sorry about this. I detect Chris's work here. You've done so much for us and now we have all these excited people setting up the play and thinking you owe them a party. The press is on to it and they want to be there with their mates. If they try to get in touch with us they get Chris and he doesn't always make sense. I've been ignoring the phone and you've become my de facto agent. It will be really good publicity though. If you go ahead, all I can suggest is that the Players help you with the funding. But that really just means giving back some of the money you have already given us."

Mike could afford to be magnanimous. "No Abby, we're looking forward to it. We can socialise and advertise, before the pressure gets any worse. Dad is dying to meet you and your mother and he hasn't had a party in his big new home. It should be fun and we can afford."

Mike nearly slammed his head on the desk when he heard himself say that. The smarmy lawyer son boasting about the family wealth to a woman who hadn't worked seriously for two years because she had to care for her mother. "At least we're happy to do it," he finished a little lamely.

If Abby was offended it didn't show. It wasn't what she was now worried about. "Mike, someone would have to be with my mother the whole time. But we will have to circulate. It's too risky."

Although Abby tried to conceal it, Mike heard the frightened uncertainty in her voice and had an epiphany. Suddenly he understood why Sally was so important to Abby. He saw her weaknesses and strengths as a product of a lifetime of these fears. He felt an emotion of love and caring that brought a lump to his throat. It would make no difference of course. She was still a sex siren with no interest in him. But he knew about her now. Actually he had known for a long time. What was different now was that he understood. He empathised. She needed to be absolutely clear on this point or everything else was as nothing. Mike rose to the occasion perfectly. In a quiet, strong, confiding tone that his father would have applauded he said, "We have no intention of abandoning your mother to a crowd like this. We will employ caterers and at least one will be there solely to deal with anyone who offers Lucy Lake anything more than compliments."

Abby put the phone down and spent several minutes just contemplating it. Her eyes kept clouding with tears that she blinked away. She had a soft pleasant feeling that the thirty year tunnel that constituted her life had a light at the end of it. Or perhaps she wasn't getting enough sleep. She would get more sleep. And now she had a damn afternoon party and publicity stunt to add to the load. Curse the man. Why didn't he just stick to writing up contracts for her, like he was supposed to?

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On Saturday Sam arrived early. This had started off as his idea and he wasn't sure that either Mike or Abby were pleased with him about it. But he needn't have worried. Guest lists had appeared from nowhere. Party food and drink was dotted about. Fun and casual but tasteful party decorations had appeared. Seats and furniture were suitably located. Gentle music filled the house, except at the far end where drunks and youngsters were expected to gather. There the music pounded.

Sam's strength was that he knew *people*. He made them laugh and cry. Relaxed them or excited them. But even there he met his match in this house. With a naturalness of something bred into them, Harry and Mike put everyone at ease and made them part of the household. At first they only



had the paid staff and Sam and Sally to work with. But then the guests arrived. Chris Cresswell's exuberance ruffled no feathers. Mary Cooper's children were offered a box of toys and the use of the pool. And shortly after, the Lake's arrived.

Harry Jarvis couldn't have explained to anyone how much fun he was having. He had reached a time in his life when there was no one left to impress. Nowhere left to go. He was the elder statesman with the resources to make this work and no expectations on him. He could show off his son and his house and bask in a lifetime of achievement in front of a crowd of people that he could enjoy. In fact he was a guest. This was his son's show. Let Mike do the anxious bits. The last couple of weeks had taught Harry that although Mike got anxious readily enough, he also worked effectively through his problems and came out on top.

And here at last were the two tall redheads that he was hovering by the entrance to intercept. His manners deteriorated. Stepping past several people who would have been delighted to stop him to chat, he took Lucy Lake's hand and said the things that a gracious host says to an honoured guest. Then transferring her hand to his left one with a deftness that would have thrilled a magician, he reached out for Abigail's hand. The welcome was still gracious and the smile warm but there was a difference. Harry was in no doubt that the younger woman was getting whatever she wished for from his son and would almost certainly become invisible once the play was taken care of. Harry knew that may not be fair, but he treated her with a little more reserve. No one toyed with Mike.

Nevertheless Harry would not antagonise her. The other evening Mike had been complaining about some paperwork she had passed on to him and Harry had told him to think of her as an upmarket stripper. Mike had simply picked up the papers he was working on and left the room. Harry would not make that mistake again. While he thought these thoughts Harry struggled to extricate himself from those two huge green pools in which he was now floundering.

Harry was delighted that neither woman attempted to get her hand back as he led them across the room. This was his moment. He had Lucy Lake in his luxury home. He would bask in it. So he was being childish. He was enjoying himself.

Harry took a risk of overdoing things and hugged both women. Neither showed any sign of objecting. He released Abby but kept a grip on her mother. Abby bit back a laugh. The crafty old fart. He hugged mother and daughter which could only be considered a friendly welcoming gesture and then got rid of the one he didn't want while the other arm was still locked around the prize. But if there was no booze involved her mother was more than able to take care of herself. Abby excused herself and set off to work the room. No, not the room. The house. She wanted to see how lawyer boy lived.

The party was a spectacular success. The weather was good enough. The food and drink was adequate. The pool was too small for so many people, but that just added to the hilarity of getting in or falling in and struggling with the crowd. But most of all, theatrical people are theatrical. Song and dance and tall tales filled the Jarvis home in a way they had never expected. By 7pm Mike and Harry had given up wondering when people would start to leave and broke open more supplies. Some of the caterers were happy to continue working, but by now most of the guests felt sufficiently at home to have found the kitchen and were fending for themselves. This was not a standard Jarvis at home party, but there was too much fun going on to stop. It wasn't obvious how to stop it anyway.

Harry returned at every opportunity to entertain Lucy. He had to agree with Mike that he had expected a dissolute wreck, but discovered instead a remarkably refined woman. He had an uncomfortable moment when Lucy said, "Harry I'd like you to meet my minder. He's here to see I behave myself." It was clearly a challenge to see if he knew why one of the caterers had nothing better to do all afternoon than chat to her and make sure her wishes were met. The man gave him an apologetic grimace. "Sorry Mr Jarvis, but I couldn't go far away and I was just too obvious. And she asked me for a glass of wine."

Lucy smiled. "I had no intention of having a glass of wine, but I had worked out by then that nor had he any intention of getting me one."

Harry took her hand. "It was an act of love from Abby and Mike. They wanted you here and would never have forgiven themselves if you had been given alcohol."

As Harry left to talk to the other guests, Lucy was distressed to see him take her minder aside. She assumed he would give the poor man a bollocking for giving the game away. In fact Harry said in an undertone. "Don't worry about her knowing, but don't let up. Lucy Lake has spent most of the last twenty years nearly unconscious and it is still your job to keep her safe."

Harry had hoped that eventually before it got too late, the other guests would be gone and they would settle down to a meal with the Lakes. He wanted to understand the grip that they had on Mike. But by 9pm a large group of people were learning an old Russian folk dance from Chris Cresswell to the beat of a rock-and-roll tune. At one point Mike and Abby formed the centre couple spinning furiously, hair flying and roaring with laughter. Harry said to Lucy. "They are a good looking pair. Do you think they may become a couple?"

Lucy nodded. "Yes. When they stop being frightened of each other." Sally and Sam were not in sight. Close to midnight, Mike and Harry broke with a lifetime of courtesy to guests and went to bed to leave the last of them to find their way out as best they could. But not before the remaining guests had been admonished not to drive. And a taxi-van had been organised to stop at the door at half-hour intervals.

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The next day Sally opened the door to a smiling Abby.

Abby said, "Hey girl, those stuffy Jarvis's may be stuffy but they sure know how to throw a party. I had to go home at 11pm in case mum started to crack up but you were still going strong."

"Yes, Abby it was quite good."

Abby gave her a doubtful look. "Quite good? I can't see how it could have been much better."

"You have no idea do you Abby?"

"Idea? What idea. I thought it was rather fun."

Sally was trying so hard to be kind to her rather thick-skinned friend but the desire to hurt the way she was hurting was getting stronger.

"Abby, I went home alone last night. I had a great time occasionally until you came and relieved me of my male friends. I went home at midnight alone because everyone was too embarrassed by the time you had finished slobbering over them to dare to ask to be with me. I'm sick of it Abby. I want a man that I don't have to share. I can't compete with Marilyn Monroe, 2015. I don't have what it takes. Now piss off."

Abby stood at the door, too stunned and hurt to move. "Sally, you were right about me having no idea. I just don't know why I deserve this. But I do know that you are the only person in the world that I care about enough to be as hurt as I am at present. And I know I love you ten times more than any of the men at that party. Tell me who I have to leave alone and it's going to happen."

Sally softened a little. She knew where and how Abby had learned her sexual morality. "Oh, Abby, it doesn't work like that. We can't hand out those guys amongst ourselves. They are all going to fall over themselves for you anyway."

Abby was getting desperate. Sally had been her prop and guide for too long to lose her now. "I keep my hands off of Mike right? You two are a great couple. No more flirting, or dirty dancing in Daddy's lounge. Anyway, Sam is fun and clever and in the industry and great for me and the show. Who knows, we may make it as an item. Friends?"

Sally smiled bleakly, she'd have to fight this battle carefully with a friend who could have any man she chose. Anyway she wasn't ready to admit to feelings that she wasn't sure were real. But she knew Abby wouldn't deliberately hurt her. She'd try later. Abby usually tired of her lovers fairly quickly anyway. "Friends," she said.

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The legal work at the Merriton office continued to grow. Jim was hardly there now and although Mike was settled in enough to be grateful the old man didn't interfere any more, he was missing the help. Tension around *Potent Performance* also grew. The cast had been chosen and rehearsals were going well. Ticket sales were disappointing, but it was too early to judge. Publicity was good and both the show and Jarvis and Keen's contribution had been acknowledged in the media.

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Harry Jarvis took Lucy to the pictures and then to dinner and a show. Mike however was not doing so well. Mike had never thought of himself as a success with women. But lately, with Sally and Abby both as regular contacts it had begun to fill a void. Now something was wrong. Sally was still friendly but not warm to him. And Abby who had a knack for making every contact with every person an adventure, was suddenly business like and remote.

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Abby tossed herself down in a chair and ran her fingers through her already ragged curls. "Wow, I'm not sure what's more demanding. Getting a dozen supposedly professional adult thespians to perform at the local hall or getting twenty ten years to be a variety of pixies and fairies for the school play.

Lucy grimaced. "Just make sure you resign the school at least two weeks before you open *Potent Performance*. Having a nervous breakdown now is not what you need."

The phone rang. Abby began wearily to get up to go to it. But she was much too slow. Grinning to herself she watched her mother snatch it up. But Lucy's face fell and she held the phone towards her daughter. "It's Mike."

Eying her mother across the phone, Abby said, "I'm glad you rang, Mike. I need to make an appointment with your father to discuss the matter of his intentions."

Ignoring Mike's happy chuckle and her mother's frantic hand flapping she went on. "I see. An abduction this evening and a forced trip in a cabin trunk to.... where? Oh. Transylvania. OK. That sounds satisfactory. I won't interfere as long as he doesn't bring her back."

Abby hoped the banter didn't contravene Sally's view of what she was allowed to say to someone else's boyfriend. But in truth she was delighted that her mother had found someone. And that someone was reliable and understood her problem. Nonetheless, Abby had forebodings of what would happen when the rich man-of-the-world decided he had had enough fun and dropped the rather flighty unemployable former actor. Abby wasn't sure how much longer she could continue to pick up the pieces.

Mike was back to more serious matters. "ANIMUS, want to shoot at a farm in the Horowhenua next Thursday and do some studio work on Friday. Abby, I know you are very busy and it's sooner than we thought, but we can get it over with."

Abby struggled for a moment. She was busy and this was too important to her to rush, but she had agreed to do it. "Thursday it is," she said. "How do I get there?"

"I've covered my work for the day and borrowed Dad's car, I'll drive."

Hell, another complication. Abby felt a bit awkward with Mike after what Sally had said. "See you Thursday".

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Sally picked up her phone. "Hi Sam. Did you have a good time at the party? No need to mention the bit about jamming her against the fridge door and licking her tonsils. He seemed to be enjoying himself then but his real woman had come to fetch him. He probably didn't remember.

Sam knew he had some damage control to do. Experience told him that being a bit rough in the passion stakes was acceptable but disappearing without a damn good reason was not. And being ordered home by the boss, especially when the boss was an attractive woman, was not a good reason. "Sally, I did have a good time. But I think I... you know... I think perhaps you know. I behaved badly."

Damn, he did remember. "It was a party, Sam. It had got a bit wild by then. I didn't mind."

"Wow, I was afraid I had upset you. Are you free on Friday?"

Shit. She forgave him for mauling his lover's best friend in the kitchen, so he took it as an invitation to ask for more. Abby had frequently reminded her these people had different standards to what she was used to. She hadn't believed it was quite as blatant as this. "I don't think so Sam. I'm a one person, person."

Sam paused a moment. She hadn't been a one person, person in the kitchen in the weekend. Actually he had thought she was. He didn't really believe that Mike still figured very high with her. Anyway Mike had been in the lounge taking far too much interest in the vision of Abby doing the limbo in her party gear. What a pity that it hadn't been Mike Jarvis she had ordered to take her home. But what could he do. She was the boss, an associate and now a good friend as well. It had been time to go anyway. He had had to go. "OK Sally. Mike's a very lucky guy. See you." And biting back the desire to add a pathetic hurtful remark. He put the phone down rather hard.

Sally listened to the no-connection sound for a while. "Damn the man. He had Abigail bloody Lake. Abby must be busy on Friday night. And how embarrassing was it that Abby had told him that she was casting off Mike so that Sally could have someone to be going on with?" But there had been something wrong with that conversation. Who cared. She wasn't going to ask either Abby or her bloody boyfriend for clarification. She had done the right thing. And she had to get on with some work.

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Mike was at Abby's house at daybreak. They had over an hour of travel, some preparation and a heavy shooting schedule to try to get through. Mike hadn't bothered to buy his own car yet. He could walk to work and generally a taxi or bus served him better during the day. But people expect a wealthy lawyer to have an expensive car and he would get one soon. Mike tapped quietly on the door in case Lucy was still in bed. He needn't have bothered. The Lake household rose to the challenge of a performance. Lucy was up helping Abby to prepare. Abby had breakfasted well and now asked Mike to help her to the car with a large case.

"Abby, it's a few minutes of commercial. What can you need to fill this?"

Abby had no time or inclination to be diverted. "Stick to the law, Mike. This is my area. Every shoot is under time pressure and the end product lasts a long time. I'll be ready."

As Abby got to the car she paused. "Oh wow. This is your dad's isn't it?"

Mike was aware that Abby thought his dependence on his father was rather amusing and this was a sore point. What the hell. They needed a car. "I don't have a car yet. Dad is using the bus." As Mike watched Abby's fascination with the Audi soft-top he saw an opportunity to recover a little lost

ground. "Want to drive?"

"Shit, would you let me? But no. I'm an awful driver. I'd dent daddy's baby."

The comment about daddy rankled with Mike so much that he wanted to throw Abby in the car and howl off down the street to show what he could do. But the far stronger belief that safe driving was essential changed the angry reaction into something quite different. He lobbed the keys towards Abby and started to get into the passengers seat. He would not let this crazy woman see him drive sedately down the road at the legal limit because DADDY said he had to be a model to society.

Abby felt that she had made another error with this tiresome man, but wasn't sure what. But she had been challenged to drive the car. She would do that, even if she was frightened. Shit the damn thing had a manual gear change.

Mike settled back into the passenger seat. It didn't even occur to him to confirm that Abby had a licence. Mike had never seen anything that Abby was not competent to do. Everything from negotiating with him in a legal office, dealing with awkward business deals, performing, calming a room full of excitable actors. Abby did things well. She even dealt with an alcoholic mother well. He had been told she was brilliant with a room full of children. She would drive a car well. Probably dangerously and fast. But she would not get the opportunity to laugh at Mike's cautiously legal driving.

What Mike did not know and Abby would not yet dream of telling him, was that by the time she was old enough to get a licence herself - which she did as soon as she was legally allowed - was that she had been in seventeen road accidents. Sleeping in dressing rooms until her mother's performance and late-night tipple had finished, she would be aroused to suffer the terror of being taken home. Six times they came via the hospital. On another four occasions they came via the police station. And on many more occasions that didn't even count as accident nights, their car was brought back via the repair shop.

The day she turned fifteen - already experienced from illegally getting her mother home on the worst of her nights - white with fear and shaking throughout the test. - Abby gained her licence. She was not a confident driver. But she was not going to let lawyer boy chuck keys at her and smugly settle into the passenger seat. It surprised her that Sally had been so indiscreet about something like this. It also surprised her that Mike could be so callous as to take advantage of that knowledge. He was wimpy, but not cruel. But the car was nice. She would try to enjoy it.

The scenery was good. Mike now knew that Abby's behaviour was only wanton when she chose it to be. Usually she was a model of propriety. But even she had to put a knee either side of the steering column and she had lovely legs. Mike's amusement began to turn to alarm when they stalled for the third time at the end of the street having only got to 20km/hr in second gear on the way.

"I'm sorry Abby. I didn't realise you don't drive. I'll take over."

That was a bit rich coming from lawyer baby when he had deliberately set her up. "It's Ok. This clutch is knackered. I'll get the hang of it."

Mike was glad that his father was not there to hear that analysis of his immaculately maintained car. He was also glad that Harry couldn't see the way it was being driven.

Although Abby didn't quite get the hang of it, things improved a lot. Before they reached the motorway out of Wellington the driving was nearly acceptable and once on the motorway with only light traffic in the opposite direction it was almost good. On the approach to Foxton, with Abby humming loudly and declaring that they would put the top down for the return journey, Mike had to point out to her that there would be speed cameras around here and she must slow down.

When they reached the farm where the shoot was to be, Mike found another reason to be cautious about letting Abby drive. Abby had focussed on other things. They turned into the drive still in top

gear while Abby pointed out where the camera crew were setting up. As the motor began to clatter in protest, Abby shoved it into a lower gear. Mike had a suspicion that she didn't know which. Abby was pointing out some scenery that could do for incidental shots. She parked beside the film crew's van, but by now she had forgotten she was driving a manual or that she was driving on loose gravel. The motor stalled as the car slid gently to a stop. But Abby no longer cared. She was already getting out to get the bag and meet the crew. She was back in the world she knew.

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Lucy jumped up to get the ringing phone. She would have to get over this. She was damn near 60, not 16. She couldn't moon over the phone waiting for *that* phone call. "Oh hello Harry, I wasn't expecting you to call. I thought you would be too busy at work. Yes, Abby is off with Mike. Yes I'd love to come into town for some coffee. No, just pottering with some accounts for the Players. They can wait. Two o'clock at the Phoebe? Lovely"

Although there was still two hours before she need leave. Lucy enjoyed getting ready.

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Mike watched fascinated. Cameras and lighting are perhaps even more exciting to the uninitiated than the experienced. But also Mike enjoyed beauty and competence – and Abigail Lake. And he was seeing all three at their best. Abby quickly identified each of the crew and their role. Fortunately the majority were men and that made it easier. They were already in awe of her anyway. She then glanced over the shooting plan they had ready for her, praised it enthusiastically and ignored the three-quarters of it that she disagreed with. She showed the cameraman the background scenery she wanted him to shoot while she got ready and then the positions he was to go to for the opening remarks.

"Then we'll open the pen and I'll film with some grain in my hand."

The rest of the crew looked anxiously at each other. Only the junior cameraman had the courage to comment. "But they're pigs Miss Lake."

"Good God. Then what are those things that stand in the ice wearing tuxedos?" Abby smiled at the young man's confusion, put two firm hands on his shoulders and pulled him close to kiss his cheek. "I love pigs. The whole point of this is that we are all fellow species taking up space on the Earth. If I don't hurt the pigs. They don't hurt me."

Mike watched fascinated. That was a cheek that wouldn't be washed for weeks.

Abby reminded the cameraman what he was to do by the time she got back and rushed in to the house to change and prepare. She was gone less than 5 minutes. A lifetime of acting made quick change second nature.

Abby pointed to a spot close to where she was standing. "John, bring the reflector in close. And shine up from below. I've never had a beard and with this bright light from above I don't want to look as though I have one now."

John looked helplessly at the director who shrugged and abdicated. John moved the reflector closer.

Abby had the camera move in and slightly off centre and then coquettishly angled her head for the introductory remarks. Things were moving about four times faster than at a standard shoot.

By now the small army of crew, well wishers, fans and hangers-on knew that the rumours that Abigail Lake had refused to be directed by anyone other than herself during the filming of *Maria Grenville* were true. And they suspected the result was much better for it. Fortunately the man chosen to direct knew when he was in the presence of competence and wanted to learn. He also knew he was going to get credit for this, although maybe not from the people watching today.

“We'll get the barnyard scene done while we're here and before the sun gets any higher” Abby called. “Bring the camera as low as you can to get the animals. Never mind me. If you can't see me the whole time they'll hear my voice even if the animals steal the show. Bring that sheep in closer and try to keep the geese from wandering off. Excuse me. I'll become a farm girl and I'm not going to run back to the house all the time.”

And to everyone's amazement and a great deal of male pleasure Abby stepped over to her bag that a pig was trying to get open, took out cut-off jean-shorts and an old shirt and changed into them. Then with grain and grass in her hands and the cameras running Abby squatted amongst a range of animals as they nibbled at her and she explained to the world that these creatures are not food. That they love life just as humans do. That they bear their young and love them to the limits of the opportunity given to them, and that sunshine and open spaces mean just as much – or more - to other species as they do to the human one. A duck walked up Abby's back and settled on Abby's shoulder and a piglet gazed up into her face. With her hand stroking the piglet Abby turned and laughed up to the duck. It was a moment that would live forever with everyone who saw it. And fortunately it held long enough for the photographer to get an image that would appear all over the world. It encouraged a lot of people to think of farm creatures with more compassion. It also puzzled a lot of people who assumed that film sex symbols were remote stand-offish people.

Many non-film people imagine that filming is done continuously as if a stage play has a camera in front of it. Mike knew that was seldom true but he had not seen it done properly. Abby said her lines to a camera straight in front of her and then, for the purpose of future mixing, said the same lines to a camera to one side. Sometimes she said just a fraction of a sentence and then changed to another angle or position. When she talked to a doctor on the dangers of excessive fat in the diet and the ease of getting a proper diet through vegetables there was a constant interplay of cameras and positions. She led him effortlessly into the same sentences several times over. Reminding him of what he had already said if necessary. And all the while conscious of possible changes to light and sound and voice as the reshooting was done.

The veterinarian chosen to describe the horrendous conditions in battery farms was an experienced presenter. Mike expected Abby to be resentful and reshoot for more emphasis on herself. Instead she did nothing. During a break as they swallowed a quick cup of tea and the next scenes were prepared Mike queried if she resented losing the limelight.

“It's the message that matters Mike. That man is brilliant and I'll use him again. I've already told him not to go home. My contribution will be some shots of me looking horrified and some added shots from inside those places. Juxtaposed with how animals really live if they have the chance. It will be some of our strongest material.”

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Lucy and Harry settled into the Phoebe. Despite very different lives, they found a lot to talk about. They were interesting to each other because they were so different. Harry risked asking, “You never married, did you?”

Lucy shrugged. You're a very tolerant man Harry but I think even you would be shocked at how I lived my life until quite recently. If you are asking me who Abby's father is. I don't know. I told Abby he was a wonderful actor who left for the States to make some extra money to come back and look after us but he died in an accident with a falling spotlight on stage. A lovely story that Abby repeated to her friends until she was a teenager and then I think she saw through it, or perhaps they did. I'm proud that I didn't drink through my pregnancy or while I breastfed Abby. But then I thought I had everything. I could control the addiction, I had a baby, I had fame. I was my own master so I could do what I liked. But I couldn't.”

“ As soon as I went back to the bottle I lost control. It went on for twenty-five lost years until they carried me off the stage from my last performance. By then I was drinking to get onto the stage as well as to get off of it. Abby had just finished *Maria Grenville*. She hated the film but it was work

and a stepping stone to good films and directorships. She was getting offers from around the world, but she came home to be with me. Can you think how that makes me feel? She owes me nothing. This is the girl who was preparing many of her own meals by the time she was six years old because no one else did it for her. One of the hardest things about being sober is that I can clearly imagine what Abigail must really think of me.”

The same thought had gone through Harry's mind but expressing that would not do. “You have given her a world class talent. She has confidence, beauty, grace, and intelligence. Not all of that is just genes. Your daughter is a testimonial to you. You have a great gift to give her now”

“It's no good she just won't let me. She associates my drinking with the stage. Any suggestion I go back she gets angry. She has a much stronger personality than I. Don't tell me to put my foot down. Anyway she'd just walk out on the show and on me. It would kill me.”

Harry looked at her uncomfortably puzzled until Lucy realised she had said something wrong. Harry said, “I meant your continued sobriety. Abigail is moving on to new projects. If you keep control she will carry on with her life. What were you referring to?”

“Oh silly me. Of course I'll try to convince her to get on with her life once *Potent Performance* is done. I'm scared witless about that but she has to forget me eventually. But I thought she must have told Mike and you that although she is putting a brave face on it, *Potent Performance* is not going well. Seat sales are bad and so she needs to sell tickets based on the opening weekend but she has too many weak actors. There's not enough money and it's too late to buy talent now anyway. By a wonderful irony one of the badly cast roles is Miranda's mother. Miranda is played by Abby. I can't even offer although I'd love to do it and honestly the knowledge that I am helping out would make it easier to stay sober than the knowledge that I have let her down again.”

Harry looked thoughtful. Visions of Lucy Lake, nearly forty years younger flashed through his head. How absolutely wonderful if she returned to the stage in Merriton. But it wasn't going to happen. Abigail Lake, Director, would not allow it, and Harry suspected she was right. Fourteen shows over a span of twelve days, directed by a daughter you held in awe was a hell of a lot of pressure for a fragile personality with a history of chronic alcoholism. He let the matter drop.

There was a pause as they thought their own troubled thoughts. At last Lucy said, “Are those two in love.? What does Mike say about her. I can't quite make them out.”

Harry chuckled. “I'm glad you said that. Usually Mike is tolerant and polite to everyone regardless of lifestyle or nature. Abby -I hope you understand he doesn't actually believe this – is a stripper, pushy, just an actor, a lousy businesswoman, and a number of other epithets I'd rather not share with her mother. I suspect there are a few more not suitable for his father either. But nonetheless he does exactly as she tells him and praises all her achievements and what she is doing. If I make the smallest adverse comment about her he stops speaking to me and if I praise her then I am trying to marry him off to a shallow entertainer. I have learned to become very quiet when your daughter is the subject of conversation.” Harry mused for a moment. “Actually she usually is the subject of conversation. I don't know how Mike is getting so much other work done.”

Lucy laughed gleefully. “Oh, that was very eloquent. Abby calls Mike 'Daddy's boy '. Unless she is really annoyed, when he becomes 'baby lawyer'. But every time something comes up, she rings him up or goes over saying that he's her agent and lawyer.”

Lucy broke off to give Harry an enquiring look. “Is he either of those things? I tried to get it from her once and she snapped something about what possible use was he if he didn't represent her. She was annoyed and I was no wiser.”

“I fear that it may be love. But we will both have to watch our sanity if they stick it out together.”

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The outside shooting was finished. Abby stood in front of board pointing out and reciting various



appalling facts and figures from them. She had organised things so that she stood in low light suggesting the sadness of what she had to say. Behind her, in the sun the animals of the show were being fed so that they could be seen running happily to-and-fro. The watchers were fascinated to see how she built the image. She had a clear idea of the product she was making.

Abby was saying, "New Zealand is effectively covered from end to end with 1080 poison. This indiscriminate poison kills slowly and with hideous pain. If its victims knew how to cry out for friends or family they would. But they can't act as you or I would when we suspect that we are dying or frightened or alone. They get no help. There are no ambulances to call. They die slowly and horribly and alone, unless perhaps a human or a human's dog arrives to batter and tear the last of a terrified, pain soaked life out of them." Behind her in the sunlight the animals snuffed happily at the food on the ground. A few more shots of charts and crowds and background and they were done.

It was getting late. Mike gathered up Abby's belongings while Abby circulated amongst the crew and spectators. She thanked everyone for the effort and skill they had shown and spent some time signing autographs and chatting to well wishers. It was something Abby enjoyed but it was also part of the job. The message would be lost if it was reported that the messenger was aloof and unpleasant. Abby had a public and they had to like her. As calm began to settle Abby asked her displaced director, "Where will the editing be?"

He tried to save something for himself. "We won't need help with that Ms Lake. You gave us so much good material we will have no trouble."

Abby put on a delighted smile. "Great. I'm glad you like it. I bet you guys know editing inside out but my manager will have to look it over. It won't be a problem but there are minor copyright issues I must make sure I haven't transgressed." To Mike's horror she waved absent mindedly towards him as she said manager. He tried to look like one.

Abby got an address and they started back to the car. "Shit, if they think that I did all that so that they can put it together however they like they have a problem."

As Abby reached for the driver's door handle. Mike's voice became rather high and desperate "Are you going to drive?"

Abby grinned across the car. "I think I've done the car and your nerves enough damage. You drive."

They set off south for home. Abby said, "Why did you make me do it? Why tease me into driving when you knew I only do it as a last resort?"

Mike said, "I didn't know I could tease you into doing anything you didn't want to do. Nor did I know you prefer not to drive. I just didn't want you being bored by my driving."

Abby mulled this over a moment. She had come the whole way here furious at Sally for telling Mike her weakness, and even angrier at Mike for taking advantage. And he hadn't even know. For all Mike knew, Abby, had raced Ferraris during her working years. She said, "If I understand correctly what we just did to each other - you refused to drive me because you drive so well and I refused not to drive because I drive so badly. Human nature is a weird and frightening thing, Mike."

Mike grinned at her. "OK, I won't offer you a job as chauffeur, but we'll keep you on as presenter. From what I saw during that filming today I understand how you got to the top of the industry."

Abby gave Mike a quick nod of thanks. She had heard similar things said by princes of the industry. Why did she feel such a soaring of her spirits? Must be that she didn't have to drive home.

They drove in silence for a while and then Mike risked the question that was troubling him. "You don't really want your manager, who really isn't me, looking at the editing tomorrow do you?"

Abby looked serious. "Actually Mike, you and I are working close together, anyway, and this is really your project. It would do no harm for you to be there. You do the severe lawyer look very

well when you have to.” She gave him a quick grin. “I was scared of you in your office until I realised you're a pussy-cat. It would do no harm to have my scary lawyer looking over my shoulder if those boy editors start cutting up today's work willy-nilly. I'm sure together we can find reasons to do it my way. I didn't even sign a release form today. That work is mine.”

“It doesn't sound as though you need a lawyer Abby.”

“No, perhaps, I just want scary, standing in the background.”

Mike laughed out loud. He felt good about being scary for this woman. Abigail Lake, the one for whom everyone did as they were told. But he could be scary for her. “I'll be there and loving it. Jim can have another day in the office,” Mike said.

Abigail sat back. She felt happily content. Anyway, she had better relax. They were barely doing 90km/hr and Mike slowed down whenever a car came up behind. It would take a while to get home.

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At home, Mike got out of the car and walked around it. Abby moved quickly. Partly because it was rather low and difficult to exit with dignity, and Abby didn't want to make an exhibition of herself. But also because she knew that Mike's old-world manners would require him to hand her out of it and up to the front door. She had to avoid that because it would feel ridiculous. But then she caught herself with a rush of honesty. No. The problem would be that it wouldn't be ridiculous coming from Mike. It would feel good. And that was not good. She had made a promise.

But she couldn't prevent Mike following her to her door and being there in front of her. He put a hand on each hip. “Abby there is something I want to say.”

“Mike, if it requires you to stand 10cm away and hold my waist, I think it is better if you don't say it. As you told me once in your office. There are some things it is not right for us to do.” Abby could already feel her own pain but the body language told her that Mike was feeling something similar.

Mike released his hold. “Perhaps our relationship would allow me to tell you that you went well beyond the call of duty today. I'm truly grateful that you agreed to do the ANIMUS promotion and gave it what you did.”

Abby gave a brief smile. “It was truly a privilege to be involved. I'll see you at the studio tomorrow.”

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The next morning, Abby was early. She assessed the pecking order quickly. There were two senior men; the director she had displaced the day before and the chief cameraman. There were also two technicians. To her dismay the two techies were women. That made it harder to get her way with bright smiles and arm-touches. But worse still, Abigail knew enough of the glass ceiling in the film industry to suspect that the two women would be highly skilled. Abby would treat them cautiously. The men she already had under control. The director realised his mistake too late. He had stood up to welcome Abby and left the editor's chair vacant. Abby sat down.

She said, “This gear is very similar to what we had on *Maria Grenville*.” Credentials had been established. Abby had worked in full length film and on its editing. The two men looked ruefully at each other and gave up. The women looked doubtfully at their boss and saw that they had been abandoned. They didn't care. They had already invited two sisters, a brother and an aunt to come to the studio for lunch and they were looking forward to telling everyone else that they had worked on a series of TV ads featuring Abigail Lake and that the lady herself had been there asking their advice. Which was what Abby was now doing. She soon sorted out differences in the software from what she had seen before and began mixing and adjusting. The answers to her questions about what she should do next and whether things were going as they should were only heeded when they fitted with what Abby had already decided to do. Once the first mock-up was done and run through there were no further challenges to her authority. All four of the regular staff knew the difference between

a TV ad and quality theatre. What they were seeing was something out of the ordinary.

They settled in to learn. Mid-morning Miss Lake's lawyer-agent arrived to make sure her rights were being protected. But since Abigail was in sole command by then he was content with the process. But not with his client. There was a strange tension between them.

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EDIT SOCIAL EVENT? And show ads on TV

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The final weeks leading in to the opening of *Potent Performance* were predictably busy but ran smoothly. Abby had her hands full getting the rehearsals complete and Mike at last got his office up and running and busy. Jim Potter left with a promise he would return to fill in when needed. The most difficult thing was that Harry frequently invited Lucy Lake over to the Jarvis household, and so Abby was often there also. The younger couple learned to live with their parents puzzled looks as they gamely tried to keep up a friendly conversation. Harry and Lucy entertained each other.

*Potent Performance* would run from Thursday to Monday on two consecutive weeks. On the Tuesday before they opened Abby visited Mike in his office. She dropped down into the chair that Mike had bought to replace the uncomfortable one. How different he felt about her now. And yet not so different. A few months ago he had watched the beautiful confident young film star and fantasized about being able to touch her and woo her. Now she was Abigail Lake. A human being with doubts and fears and loves and hates. But still Mike longed to be able to touch and adore. But it didn't happen. Abby had Sam. And Sam was an exciting man of the entertainment industry. Sam was Abby's choice. Lawyers are only visited when you need work done or problems ironed out.

Mike forced a bright smile. There was something good to share, the animal welfare advertisements had been released to widespread acclaim. "Congratulations on the ads, Abby, it seems likely they will be nominated for awards in the industry. You did us proud."

Abby had her mind on other things but she forced herself back to what Mike was saying. "I'm pleased for ANIMUS. I wish I could have done more. They deserve that sort of success. And it comes at a good time for me and the show. But it's too little too late for 'Potent Performance'. I'm not here to bask in past successes. I need to talk of future failures."

Mike waited uneasily to hear what was to come.

Abby said, "Mike, in another day the preparation is over and I have to forget any doubts I have and commit 24 hours a day to believing that this is the best show to hit the boards. I need to hear you say 'I told you so,' so please say it now and then I'll expect you to support me unconditionally until we close."

Mike was startled. Abby was not prone to public self-doubt. He asked, "Why would I say that?"

"Don't mess me about Mike. You told me this would fail. You made me mad and more determined to take the challenge. I've failed and you deserve to have your moment, but I don't want to hear about it during the run. It's too late now to pull out. Please give me your support."

"If you are referring to lack of seat sales Abby, you've done all you could. I put the money up. I may have had doubts. We all did. But this is a standard business risk. The time to do something was when I agreed to fund you. By agreeing, I became the person most responsible for the show going ahead. If it comes to that I consulted Dad and he agreed. You've not let us down Abby. If anything went wrong it was the advice you received from Dad and me. We have no grounds to start whining now."

Abby felt a surge of warmth for a man who did have very good grounds for whining. Abby had been going to do the show regardless of Jarvis and Keen funding. Abby had wanted to direct and get back on the stage so much that it had clouded her judgement. Mike had stepped in to prevent her

losing any more of other people's money. And she knew what she had seen in his eyes in those first few meetings. She hadn't played fair and they both knew it. He had been led on and was now taking responsibility for being unable to resist her duplicity. "You're a nice guy Mike. I don't deserve this. Ticket sales are little more than half of what's necessary to break even. Of course they will go much higher but we are going to lose most of your money. And we won't make it on the quality of the show. We are good but we don't have the depth of talent we need and the hall sucks. It's a great hall for a children's dance class, but it's not good for hearing and seeing a major comedy with subtle lines and expressions."

Abby didn't add that Mary Cooper had been a grave disappointment to both her director and herself. Mary had been shoehorned into a role that needed a slender, middle-aged comic actor. Mary was too young, too large and too serious. Both Abby and Mary hated to see her failing.

Mike knew that Abby was under too much pressure to be allowed to wallow in self-doubt. He got up and went to her. "Abby, you are being close to insulting. I'm new to this business and this is valuable learning. If I made mistakes, those are not your concern. The money is my responsibility. You only have to worry about putting on the best show you can. Forget the rest. Jarvis and Keen have you covered."

To Mike's surprise Abby gave him hug and said, "Sally is so, so lucky."

Mike wondered if she meant that Sally had done well to distance herself from the shambles that *Potent Performance* was fast becoming. Sally would never take such a callous attitude. But he could see the point.

Despite their fears, opening night went off well. There were problems of course. Although they had given away many complementary tickets, a block of seats remained empty. Some nervous actors muffed their lines. Some of the lines were lost in dead spots around the hall. And not all the actors could be seen all the time. But the audience was forgiving. They ignored the irregularities in quality because they worshipped Abby, Sam and Chris. They found it harder to ignore the long queues at the toilets during the interval and the fact that they had to go without refreshments because it was time to be back in their seats. However, they laughed and they clapped and they kept the cast on stage and backstage long after the stars would have preferred to be back home and resting for the big weekend performances they had coming up.

Mike attended. He ignored the fact that he ended the evening over-heated, hungry and with a sore backside. It was a very funny play, very well acted. He hadn't heard all of it but it was a very good evening's entertainment. He went home very proud to be associated with Abigail Lake.

Chris picked Abby up to take her to the Princess Hall at 5pm the next evening. He knew there wasn't much that they could do before 7pm, but Abby would want to be there. EDIT Their first night had gone well. The critics were complimentary and Friday evening would be better. Abby was not so easily pleased. "Chris, we are playing to a hundred empty seats. The critics say we are doing a great job for a suburban theatre. We can't afford to think like a suburban theatre. We have to get huge ecstatic crowds. Crowds who tell their friends and bring in an audience of two thousand. The message people are getting is not to bother. To wait until the show is done properly in a comfortable theatre in town. We are failing."

Chris was not to be put off by financial or organisational failure. To him the show was everything. "Abigail my darling. We are good. The crowds adore us. If too many of them choose to stay home that is their loss. Did not your lovely backer Mr Jarvis tell you not to worry and just put on the show." Chris looked around. "Where is your delightful mother? She needs to be here to reassure you?"

Abby laughed. "You make no sense even if you are good for my ego. Mum is at the Jarvis's. There at least we have support. She came with Mike yesterday and is coming with Harry tonight. Mike is going to stay home and count what little is left of his money after I have finished ruining him."

Chris gave her a hug. "Abby, you will recover it all for him with your next fabulous success. You are unstoppable and brilliant. If at first you don't succeed, don't go skydiving but stick to the theatre. But you have succeeded. Mike loves you and will support you forever. The audience love us. Be happy."

"OK, I shall," Abby said rather bleakly.

Friday night played to a very enthusiastic crowd of 400. That was not enough. If they couldn't fill the hall on a Friday then probably Saturday would not be much better and she was in trouble. But she had a more immediate problem. Mary Cooper collapsed in tears as soon as she was off stage. "Oh Abby, I have failed you in so many ways. I talked Chris into getting you involved in this. I so wanted to act in a play of this quality. But it's the wrong play in the wrong place and I am very much the wrong actor for this. I'm letting the rest of you down. Making myself look ridiculous and doing my career no good at all."

Abby had the difficult job of motivating Mary when she knew that what she was saying was true. Abby could hear echos of Mike reassuring her as she said, "Mary, you are giving your best. That's what we ask for. We are very lucky to have a very fine actor. The writing and casting of the play were not your job. I wanted you and I still want you."

Mary squeezed her arm. "I know you are being kind and I can't get out of it now, but this is my fault. I aimed too high, got too greedy and dragged the rest of you in with me."

Abby felt that she had played that role herself but all she could do was to reassure Mary that she was the best for the job and she would be supported to the hilt.

Chris was waiting for her as excited and hysterical as ever. If the hall had burnt down, Chris would have found a reason to be enthusiastic about it. But this was good news. "They have confirmed. The Lake fan-club will buy 150 seats for tomorrow's matinee." Abby whooped and gave Chris a high five. There was still a following out there for both her, and her mother. Most of the members of the fan clubs would probably have come anyway but it would be good to have a big block booking and to play to a sympathetic audience. Even with them though, there was going to be over 50 empty seats and there shouldn't have been 150 seats available for them to buy. Abby got the cast and staff off home as quickly as she could. The weekend with its matinees was going to be a huge workload. Abby lingered on but there was little else she could do about lack of sales. She had already asked Mike to look into too many complaints about the condition and services in Princess Hall.

On Saturday morning Mike went to the hall to discuss what could be done about catering and to deal with the heating which was too cold early in the show and fearsomely hot later on. Catering was easy. They needed more staff and space. Mike offered to pay extra staff, and since the back of the hall was unused they could bring some of the serving into it. He arranged for preheating of the hall and for the windows to be opened as the show started. Mike was being unpaid dogsbody, but he was enjoying it. He was finding that helping to manage an unprofitable show in a sad old hall was fun. Together they would make things as good as they could be. Perhaps he would get involved in amateur rep when this was over.

Lucy Lake came in. Mike guessed that Abby had found jobs for her as well. But it was something else. Lucy wanted a quiet word with him.

"Mike, how brave are you when it comes to dealing with Abby?"

Mike laughed out loud. "Not very actually. I do as I'm told like everyone else."

"Mike, this is serious. You are the only one who can stand up to her and we need you to deal with her when she finds out she's been thwarted."

Mike looked at Lucy enquiringly. "Has she been thwarted?"

"Not yet. That's the point. It won't be easy for Abby but I'm going on stage this afternoon as Miranda's mother. Mary can't take it any more, and nor should she have to. The press are saying that

she is fat and rigid in a part she is not right for. It's destroying her and her career. If I don't do this for the play and for Abby I will have failed all of us again. But I need someone strong to stand between me and the bottle. And between me and Abby. Will you do it Mike?"

Mike had been under this sort of pressure before. Lucy on a mission had the same steady look and determination as her daughter. But he was horrified.

"She will cancel the play rather than do this Lucy. You know how she feels."

"You can prevent her doing that. At first she won't know. She is on stage ten minutes before her mother enters. I will get ready at home and you will deliver me here wearing a coat over stage clothes. At the end of the play she will be furious but you will tell her you are not going to let me out of your sight until I'm home safe. She's reasonable at heart. We'll get through. You know she's mad about you don't you Mike?"

The answer to that was 'no' and mad about him was not what she would be after this. "Are you determined to do this? And will you be safe if you do?"

"Yes to the first, and probably to the second."

Mike asked, "What does Dad say?"

"Your father is a darling, but he thinks I'm made of something softer than marshmallow. He would veto it immediately and tell Abby and probably demand that she cancel the show. If I'm to have a future with your father then I must prove this to myself and to him. I'm relying on you Mike."

"And what happens after the matinee today?"

"That depends on whether we still have a director and a show and on how well I do and how good an advocate you are to keep it all together for us."

Mike realised that the second member of the Lake duo had manoeuvred him into a no-win position as expertly as her daughter could. But he knew he would do it. He had lost Abby anyway and the show probably wouldn't open for its second week as things were. He nodded dumbly. "I'll pick you up at 1:30," he said.

The lead in to showtime for the Saturday matinee was the usual muddle of last minute changes and preparation. Abby saw that Mike had done good things with the catering. There was food and drink and more people to serve it. She didn't want to think about how Mike had achieved that. The hall was more airy and pleasant. Mary Cooper, seemed far more positive than Abby thought was justified. The audience was fairly large and friendly and happy, but there were still many empty seats. Chris Cresswell was uncharacteristically anxious about something. He kept reassuring Abby that even if things went very wrong everyone had to stay calm and the show had to go on. Who did he think he was talking to? They were all experienced performers. They were hardly likely to get upset and all go home in the middle. Abby assumed that the small audiences had finally unsettled him. She spent some time reassuring him, but didn't succeed. He kept giving her more pep talks. Daft idiot.

Like so many top performers Abby was hyped up and nervous before the show but relaxed and happy once she was in to it. It was good. The audience, egged on by the Lake fan-club were eating out of her hand. Chris's pre-session stress had been turned to good account and he was even sillier and more sparkling than usual. And Sam as always could make the drabest line into a show stopper. Now things would slow down. Damn the woman. She was good. Why couldn't Mary just lift her comic act a little. Abby adopted her position facing the audience leaning on the chest that she had to pretend she believed contained a dead body. Chris had everyone laughing with his line about the love letter he believed Miranda had hidden in the chest. Clutching her hands to her hair Abby wailed, "What an afternoon, I'm just thankful my mother is not here to see me like this."

Behind her a voice said. 'Helloo darhling, just dropped in to say helloo.' The audience erupted into hoots of laughter. At last. Mary bloody Cooper had learned comic timing and inflection. Perhaps

there was hope for the show after all. But as Abby waited for the laughter to subside she saw that something was awry. Many of the audience had started talking or clapping. Gradually the block of seats from row 10 to 20 where most of the Lake fan-club had been seated dissolved into a near riot. Many were on their feet clapping with hands above their heads. Elsewhere in the hall a hundred puzzled heads turned to ask another 100 puzzled heads what was happening. Abby found Chris was out of position at her shoulder. "The show is getting a standing ovation in the first scene Abby. Enjoy it."

"You knew about this didn't you, you bastard."

"It's OK. Lucy asked Mike to bring her. Mike will catch her when she comes off. She's safe. She'll drop out again if you insist."

Abby turned abruptly and with the merest angry glare as she passed her mother, she left the stage. Gradually the quiet returned. By now even the youngest and least knowledgeable of the audience were aware that they were having a rare treat. Someone famous from the past called Lucy Lake had returned to the stage. Sober.

Fortunately the enraged departure of her daughter fitted the storyline tolerably well. Despite forebodings of what would happen next, Lucy was invigorated as she hadn't been for ten years. She threw open her arms and adopted a bright, doubtful smile. 'What a welcome,' she said. It was a brilliant double entendre. The hall erupted into laughs and cheers again.

In the wings Mike stood irresolute while a string of expletives were hurled at him. "You have no idea, do you. You just don't understand. You are a meddling fuckwit. You've killed her. Ten years to get her sober for more than a week at a time and you've thrown it away because you think you know best. Do you know what happens to that woman at the end of a show? Oh course you don't and you don't fucking care. There's a cheap way to get your money back. Sell Lucy fucking Lake for 50000 pieces of silver. She's fine now. She's on top of the world. There's no booze out there. She's adored. But no matter how long the show is, it has to stop. She has to go flat. She has to replace that high with something. When she comes off that stage she won't be Lucy Lake she will be 50 billion frantic nerves all shouting that the only thing that can make life worthwhile is booze. Lots of it. And the more she takes the more those nerves shout for more and that will go on until she can't lift a bottle to her lips and then she will start to sober up until the next show."

On stage the clamour dyed down. Lucy was not a veteran of a thousand shows, some of them very bad, for nothing. She could improvise. Inspiration took her. Still in character she said, 'My goodness young man you look just like someone I saw on stage the other day. He could tell a joke like no one else. Something about a walk in the park I think. Then adopting a sultry voice she said. 'You wanna walk in the park with me?' and taking Sam's arm she led him to the front of the stage.

Sam, who had also learned to think on his feet, was nevertheless feeling a little traumatised. Lucy Lake, despite everyone's absolute assurance that she could never act again was on stage beside him doing it very well, while his terrifyingly correct director and lead lady who always maintained a very high standard was gone. At last he realised what being asked of him. "Oh I know him. He plays the saxophone you know. The other day he was walking home and the violets in the park were so lovely he stopped to play." Sam turned away with a dismissive shake of his arm. "But you don't want to hear a pointless tale of gratuitous sax and violets." A gratifying chuckle went around the hall. The stand up comic duo of Lucy Lake and Sam Krantz was on its way.

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In the wings Abby wiped tears of anguish from her eyes.

"Abby, she is not going to get the chance. I am going to be with her. She has asked for that. We have a roster. She wants this, she is going to work for it. And we are going to get her there. This means too much to her to throw it away again."

“Do you think her career never mattered to her before? Do you think she does this deliberately? That she has any control over it.?” Abby paused, puzzled as a howl of laughter came from the hall. What were they doing up there. Here mother would die. Why didn't they give up and come off the stage as she had? Who cares. Everything Abby had worked for had gone. She went back on attack. “Do you know what a promise means to a woman as badly addicted as she is? I've watched her promising never to drink again while her hand was groping in her pocket for the bottle, and she knew I could see it. That is what promises and truth and honour mean to someone that addicted. Has Sally told you about the prize-giving, Mike? Do you know about my prize-giving?”

Tears were now streaming down Abby's face. An interested group of off-stage actors and support crew had gathered. This had become very public. There was nothing Mike could do to stem the flood. He suspected that they could be heard in the auditorium but he knew that Abby was past caring. She could only focus on her target which was the unfortunate Mike Jarvis who stood rooted to the spot. Another howl of laughter came in from the hall. Whatever was going on out there was more fun than what was going on in the wings.

“I'll tell you about the fourth form prize-giving and why I'll never trust that woman again. She was still big, very big. I had a famous mother. She didn't feed me or dress me or do much for me at all. Sally and her folks did that. But my mum was famous. She was on TV and the stage and she was coming to school to hand out prizes. That was good, wasn't it Mike? That was really good for the little girl with no reliable family to support her. I told everyone that my mum was going to hand them their prize. Their fucking useless mothers didn't hand out prizes, they just fed their kids and clothed them. Well everyone wanted to jeer at me and ridicule my boasting but they couldn't because my mum was too important. They had to treat the little brat with no proper clothes or food with respect. And so my mother in front of one thousand kids who all knew I was so fucking important because my mum gave out prizes at prize-giving, walked out onto the stage, fell over the podium and fell into the front row of students who were helped by the headmaster and head of domestic science to carry her out. The science teacher did the prizes while they tried to bring her round. Do you know how that makes an insecure ill-fed ill-dressed fourteen year old feel? Do you have any idea what that is like Mr snooty well dressed well fed complacent lawyer Jarvis. Fuck you. Do you?”

“No, Abby, nothing in my experience tells me what that would have been like. My father gave out the prizes one year. He came impeccably dressed and said all the right things and patted my mates on the head. He didn't fall off the stage Abby. But none of that reflects on you. You are a tower of strength despite it all and I love you for it.” Mike hadn't meant to say that, but it seemed right now to pull Abby gently into his arms.

Against his shirt front he heard Abby's muffled voice say. “Do you know why I'm so good at being other people?”

Mike thought he knew the answer but remained silent.

“Because it was too fucking hard being me.”

“It's all over now Abby. I may not be what you want but I can't ever desert you. I'm going to make sure you don't deal with Lucy Lake alone again. Perhaps I did a very bad thing, but she is not going to drink when she comes off stage. I will physically stop her if necessary. You are not alone any more. Go on stage and be brilliant and dad and I will take care of Lucy.

Abby drew herself upright and wiped her eyes. “You will have to be with her all the time. You'll have to follow in to the toilet, check behind the bowl and in the cistern and those are the simplest of her tricks.”

“She won't get to any booze Abby.”

“And that other thing. Is that true?”

“Other thing?”



"You don't seem to be the sort of guy who says he loves someone just so that she will try to earn back his \$50000."

"That's true too, Abby."

"I'm going to have to speak to Sally." And with that rather cryptic remark, Abby wiped her eyes, took several deep breathes, waited for a pause in the jokes and rejoined the show. It was entirely appropriate for her to give her mother the evil-eye as she went back to defend the body in the trunk, and it raised a laugh. The way Abby gathered and put herself back into role was an earth shattering moment in the history of New Zealand acting, but it went largely unmarked. The newspapers just commented on the clever rewrite that allowed the new star, Sam Krantz to be paired with the older but even more brilliant star, Lucy Lake, at the moment that she rejoined the world of acting.

At last the trunk was opened. There was a letter to the plumber, a stuffed toy and a pair of jeans. No loveletter, dead body or negligee. The actors each grabbed their own possessions and showed their relief in a variety of ways while the audience hooted with laughter.

Then the actors joined hands and bowed to another wave of applause. Lucy was pushed forward. She reached out a hand towards Abby. Abby shook her head. "This is your moment, mum. It's you they want."

"I'm not going without you." Lucy reached out a hand again to Abby.

The two of them walked to the front of the stage. The hall erupted again. When the noise finally died Lucy said "Did you notice we did most of the show standing? The seats on stage were bought by the same guy who bought the ones in the auditorium." The racket got louder.

"You've been a lovely audience, and it's great to be back." Lucy was drowned by another roar. "But I wouldn't be back – I wouldn't even be alive without my Abigail" Lucy held Abby's hand high and Abby had no option but to wave expansively and smile at the audience.

Lucy wanted to give credit where it was due. Lucy couldn't bring Mike onto the stage although she wished she could. He would probably just turn beetroot red and try to hide behind her anyway. But there was someone else who had made her return a spectacular success. She reached back at the same time announcing. "Mr Sam Krantz. Isn't he just wonderful?" Another surge of cheering and noise. As Sam came forward to take her hand and bow. He too silently thanked Mike for paving the way to this. Sam Krantz, knock-about comic was standing in front of several hundred people holding hands with two of the most revered actors in New Zealand, taking part in one of the best plays in the world in the most talked about production in the country. Things would not get better than this.

A few more bows and a lot more noise and it was over. Abby escorted Lucy off the stage and handed her to Mike. "You two don't take your eyes off of each other." She took a grip on her mother's sleeve a little roughly. "Mum, since the director is the last to know I have to ask. Are you going to perform tonight?"

"May I?"

"Will you be sober?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll trial you." It was a peace offering which was gratefully received.

Abby hurried off to tell the media that Lucy Lake was back and performing at Princess Players. If her mother was going to destroy herself, she might as well sell some tickets while it was happening.

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Mike sat with Lucy while she ate a sandwich and sipped a cup of tea. They chatted about this and that and eventually fell silent when he saw that Lucy was thinking of other things. Mike's phone

rang. It was his father. "Mike there's a report on the radio that Lucy has returned to the stage. Where is she?"

"Sitting beside me Dad, but it's probably best not to disturb her. She needs peace. They only have three hours between performances and it's rough."

"How did it happen? I thought Abby wouldn't countenance it and that Lucy won't survive it."

Oh shit. This could get ugly. Harry was tolerant of most things but he didn't like being crossed when loved ones were involved. "Lucy insisted Dad. It's tougher for her to sit at home being a drag on Abby than to be here. The play demanded it. She is determined to see out the season. We'll get her through."

"I'm on my way there. She is going to need support."

"No, Dad, I'm with her now and Abby will take her home. There is another week of this. We are going to need you later on when she is getting tired and the novelty is wearing off. Stay home for now."

Harry seldom let anger show. He did now. His son seemed to be too deeply involved in this. "I'll be there in a few minutes," he said. "Don't leave her until I get there."

That evening, for the first time, the hall was full. For a Saturday night that should have been no surprise but it only happened because of a lot of late door sales. A queue of curious patrons were lured into Merriton by the radio reports they were hearing. The night was a sensation. Nothing much could be done about the acoustics, or the seats or obstacles and the caterers had to retire outside again, but the show was sparkling brilliance.

The difference of having an actor of Lucy's ability and the excitement of a large Saturday night crowd lifted everyone's performance. Mary was back in a supporting straight role for which she was overqualified but at which she shone. An exhausted cast were clapped off the stage at 10:30pm. Mike was waiting in the wings. With another double performance the next day they were keen to get away.

At nearly midnight, the Jarvis phone rang. It was Sally. Mike described the scenes of the day and repeated some of what Abby had said when she left the stage.

Sally said, "She's quite right Mike. It was like that and it will be like that again. Lucy can cope with pressure, but not the return to normal afterwards. Even if you all get her through this by watching her and keeping pressure on, the risk will still be there for the future."

Mike grimly acknowledged that the three people who knew the situation best; Abby, Sally and Lucy were all pessimistic about long term success. There were battles still to be fought.

For the remaining two days of the first block, Mike took the Lakes to the theatre and waited to the end. It was exhausting but thrilling. The door sales had increased but they were still barely running at break even. The serious play-goers were waiting for what they thought of as the real thing in a major theatre. However the news had spread and Lucy's personal following were booking. Also word had got out that this was now a very good play.

On Tuesday night Harry was there after the show to pick-up Lucy and take her to the Jarvis's house. Abigail protested that she and Mike could look after her. But for once Abby had met her match. She sometimes had difficulty bending Mike to her will, but now she was truly trounced.

Harry said, "You are exhausted Miss Lake. You need to be ready to start again on Thursday and I will not have you damaging yourself or the show and certainly not your mother by overreaching. Mike has promised that we will make sure that Lucy is cared for. I have taken the next two days off to be at home and entertain her. Lucy Lake will be with me." Harry heard pomposity in his voice and knew he was bullying a woman half his age. He also knew that Abigail Lake was no push-over. If she didn't want this to happen then only a supreme effort would get her to be reasonable. He kept

in reserve the argument that Lucy was quite old enough to make her own decisions. If she wanted a few nights as a guest somewhere else she need not consult her daughter.

Mike and Lucy wisely saw this as a battle of giants in which their opinion didn't count. Abby saw the sense of it and was relieved to think that she could rely on the Jarvis hospitality at a time when she was really drained. She knew she was being childish and ungracious but she surrendered with a challenge. "If you take mum then you must take me. I am not leaving her for two days at this time." This sounded pretty silly. Abby knew damn well that Harry and Mike wouldn't let her down. The truth was that she was empty and tired and a little frightened and wanted to be there with them all.

And so with only a brief stop at the Lake's home to pick up night-clothes and toiletries, the Lakes were transported home to a very pleasant supper and a good night's sleep in prepared bedrooms.

Mike was up early. He was relieved to be spared the job of minding Lucy over these two days. He was tempted to find an excuse to visit Abby but she would be sleeping like the dead and a visit would not only be unchivalrous, but unkind. He went to the office.

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Sam started dialling for the third time. The phone rang once and he hung up again. He must not mess this up. What could he really say? What did he really have to offer? He wasn't getting anywhere by doing nothing, but at least while he didn't confront the issue he could pretend to himself that he had a chance. If he was rejected again how would he feel then? He only had these two days. Then he would be too busy doing the second session of the show and after that? He would be off on tour again. If he hadn't said what needed to be said by then, why would Sally care after that?

Who was he to ask a classy city business woman to take an interest in him anyway? And she'd already rightly told him to get lost. But she had been his for a while at the party. And Sam was pretty sure now that Mike was not pursuing her with any ardour. Mike seemed to find the idea funny if anything. Sam dialled the number again and this time held on long enough to get the receptionist.

"Bright and Carter, a voice said."

Sam came very close to banging the phone down yet again.

"Hello, are you there? Sorry we are having problems with our phones this afternoon. They are ringing but we can't hear the caller."

Sam cringed. That was because the caller kept hanging up or refused to speak.

"Sally Nairn, please" Sam said at last.

"May I say who's calling?"

Damn. Was 'No' an acceptable answer to that question? "Sam Krantz"

Sally came on the line. "Hi Sam, what's up."

"I need to talk to you, Sally." Sam had promised himself not to use this excuse. "About Abby and the show and Lucy," he blurted out. "No, nothing wrong. Quite good really, but I'd like to talk."

Sally's unfaithful heart beat harder. Oh what the hell. He might really have something to say although it sounded like an excuse. She was having a quiet night at home. Get him over there, have it out with him and tell him to stick to one woman. Sam wouldn't expect haute cuisine. Probably bangers and mash. Sally invited him to a meal at her house.

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Mike was late home. He had a lot of work to catch up on and since his father had appointed himself

in charge, Mike would take advantage. It took only moments to discover that things were going very well at home. The Harry Jarvis charm was working wonders. All three were in the kitchen competing with their culinary skills and ridiculing each others' attempts. Harry was clearly keeping them both amused and safely entertained.

His father had a way of making people relaxed. In the Jarvis orbit people were carefree. Abby had had too many cares through her life and in one day his father had made her forget at least some of them. Mike joined in the banter, but the cooking smelt good. He wanted to put away his brief case, have a quick shower and change and join the others for the meal they were holding for him.

To his surprise, Abby followed him to his room still laughing over the things they had done and said during the day. Once inside she pushed the door closed behind her. "Those two are really serious, Mike. They're like a couple of teenagers. I think they'll sleep together tonight."

Mike smiled at the laughing face. "They're old enough to know their own minds. But Lucy is the most fragile. I hope that she can cope if it falls apart again. That will be a risk but I'm very happy for them."

Abby threw her arms around Mike's neck. "That's how I feel. But today mum is very happy and not thinking of booze for the first time in thirty years. You two were right. We might get through this."

Suddenly Abby was lost to her surroundings and doubts and fears. His lips moulded around hers. His tongue traced circles around her tongue and in her mouth. His hands lifted her skirt and he pushed down on her panties. Abby made faint protesting sounds that were lost in his mouth. She had no will to resist as Mike raised a foot and pressed her pants to the floor and then lowered her to the carpet. There was a brief grappling with zips and in a moment they were sobbing desperately in each others arms. It was over in a minute.

Mike pressed his face into Abby's shoulder, too ashamed to face her. "Oh, god Abby I'm so sorry. That was little more than an assault."

Abby pulled her arms closer around him. "Don't you dare apologise again. It shouldn't have happened, but it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't let it. Put another notch in your bedpost and let's forget about it. I do have a criticism though."

Mike still couldn't look at her. He had not had many sex partners and always he had been kind and considerate, used protection and taken time. He had had this ridiculous two minute wrestle with his most experienced partner. A woman that he loved. She would certainly have a criticism.

"You are quite a heavy man and your carpet was designed by a sadist who had some leftover razor blades. My bum is not attractive just now."

Mike jumped up and got dressed.

Abby calmly put her panties back on and kissed him. "Don't agonise over it Mike but we can't go on like this. I have to sort things out for myself. Give me a little time."

Mike had no idea what she was talking about. But she hadn't stormed out of the house or threatened to call the police. There was hope.

The evening meal was a riot. If Mike had ever been in disgrace he was forgiven now. They teased each other mercilessly and laughed all the while. The show had taken its toll however and they were ready for bed early. Mike and Abby parted company at their doors. They weren't sure whether Lucy and Harry had done the same.

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Sam arrived with a bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates. God the man was shameless. Sally was tempted to make a show of dropping them in the rubbish bag. She could always get them out

later. Instead she spent some time putting the flowers in a vase and saying how nice they were. It was a provocative gesture by Sam but it did help Sally to get to the point she wanted to make.

“Sam you can't make love to Abby when she's with you and use me for the off days. Even if I was that sort of person, it just hurts too much.” 'Do not cry, do not cry,' she said to herself. “I said I'd feed you, but you don't have anything to say to me really do you? Have dinner then go back to Abby and stay there.”

This was not going the way Sam had expected at all. He was really here to stake a claim over Sally's other boyfriend. And if it wasn't Mike, then he wanted to know who it was. Why would he go back to Abby? He wanted a lover, not a boss.

He said, “Sally, I know you will say it's not my business but I don't believe Mike cares for you the way I do. And if it's not Mike, then I need a name. I have a little doll at home that I stick pins in but I need to know what to chant.” Sam laughed at his own joke, but Sally just looked puzzled.

“Sam. Are you, or are you not having an affair with Abby?”

“Not. She keeps kissing me, but that's in public and is what my grandmother used to do when I was a good boy. Frankly she frightens me to death. I do adore her though. She is getting the best out of me and the show.” Suddenly Sam understood. “Shit, Sally, she doesn't care for me, like that. She's in love with Mike. He can have her. Ooh, sorry, you like them both.”

Sally wrapped her arms around him. “Mike's a sweetie, but sooo boring. Have I been stupid?”

“Yes,” Sam said.

Are you hungry?

Sam didn't go home that night.

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The Lake family was invited to stay on through the next weekend. Lucy had no intention of leaving anyway, so Abby accepted for herself. Having the Jarvis's support always on hand was just too valuable. And it was nice here.

Mike went very gently with Abby's feelings. He was a sensitive man and he knew Abby was uneasy about the outrage on his bedroom floor. But he also knew that no woman of Abby's nature would still be treating him with affection if his behaviour was completely out-of-order. And so bewildered, he waited.

**\*\*EDIT / final run and into final night\*\***

The second leg of the show began. Thursday opened well. It was always going to be a quiet night but the crowd although small was enthusiastic. Hopes for the weekend were high. There would be bigger crowds and the matinees on Saturday and Sunday. No one would have time to spare for Mike and the administration. And so Mike was surprised when Elizabeth tapped on his door and said, “Can you see Mr Cresswell, Mr Jarvis?” Mike nodded.

Although Chris's hysterical way of delivering a message was rather disruptive, he had a knack for saying his piece and being gone quickly. Mike waited for the outburst. It didn't come. Mike had often wondered how a hyper-active squealer like Chris would behave if he had something deep and serious to say. Now he had his answer. He became calm.

He was tense and his eyes were bright, but Chris kept himself in check. He put some papers on Mike's desk. “Mike, this is big. We have made it. *Upstaged* wants to take us on for an extra two week season, all expenses paid and a cut of the profits to the Players. I've had the offer two days but I had to clear it with John Ashcroft before I could offer it to you. He says we can do it.” By the end of this speech Chris's voice level was creeping up. “We are fully professional Mike, we will take

away a bundle from *Upstaged* with no further cost to ourselves. We've made it. You've made it. And the lovely Abigail Lake has written her name in the directorships in heaven."

While Mike struggled to assimilate the paper in front of him, Chris went on with rising enthusiasm. "We are already close to break even and with ten more shows in a proper theatre with the cast paid and a generous payment to us still to come, we win. I need our lovely manager to look over the offer and agree to it today so we can announce it on closing night before the cast begins to disperse.

The old Chris Cresswell was back.

Mike had been around theatre folk too long to let it pass. He stood up, walked around his desk and put his arms around Chris. "You did it Chris. You got the play for us and made it happen. Abby has a lot to thank you for."

Chris was on a roll now but had gone quaintly coy. "There is something else Mike, but I have to swear you to secrecy. Can you keep it from the cast that there are further plans for them? We don't want to interfere with their natural performance until decisions are made."

Mike agreed to be discreet.

"John has heard so much of what we do here that if we agree to the extended season he will send a representative to view the show. Keep this quiet too but I'm going to go back with him."

Mike had heard rumours about the writing of *Potent Performance* and the author's relationship with an unknown co-writer. "I take it that John's representative is John himself?"

Chris nodded.

"Are congratulations in order?"

Chris nodded again. "I had to get back home, so we agreed to try some time apart. It's not what we want and since John will come here to check the play, we will go back together. There was an awkward moment while Chris mulled over what he wanted to say next. "I'm very happy," he managed at last.

Mike reflected briefly how little we know or even care about each other. What trials and sadnesses had a man like Chris had through his younger years as he tried to find a place in society where he would be safe and respected. Mike's own reaction to him was that he was an irritation and a muddler and yet he had done much to get them where they now were. He deserved happiness, and now that he had success and a loving partner ahead of him Mike was glad he would have it.

Mike had listened to Abby enthuse over how well Chris knew the play and how adept he was at tinkering with it. The line he added that introduced the name of the friendly neighbourhood lawyer at Jarvis and Keen always raised a cheer.

Mike asked, "Chris, who really wrote *Potent Performance*?"

Chris laughed easily. "Not me. I'm too scatterbrained for that. John wrote it despite what some of the rags are saying. But the best bits are all mine." Chris laughed again to show that that wasn't quite true but that some of it was his. "I gave all of the rights to John and he insisted I try it in New Zealand. That's why we have it and why I was desperate to get a person capable of directing it for the Princess Players." Chris mulled over the events of the last few months and said happily. "Actually we have done alright."

Chris became serious again. "Mike, there is something else that I didn't want to raise just now but I think you should know. It may be difficult for all of us while we are in the middle of this and not sure where future allegiances will be. Chris paused awkwardly.

"I'm listening."

Chris said, "*Potent Performance* is going world-wide. John wants any good actors experienced with it that he can get. And of course he can use actor-directors."

Chris watched to see how that would go down with Mike. He wasn't surprised to see Mike freeze. His suspicions were confirmed. The news was not going down well.

Mike had to keep up a front for the man in front of him. He forced himself to think of the Players and not himself. This was great. His money was safe, there would be more good publicity and a wonderful experience for the actors.

"I see," Mike managed at last.

That had been a mistake. They had another month of this to get through. Chris had to rebuild the camaraderie of a few minutes ago. "It probably won't happen," he said. "Keep your mind on the positives. We took a small group and a big hall and a huge debt and we struck gold. You did that for us Mike. You're our hero."

Mike grunted.

Mike was not sure what he had expected of Abby once the show finished, but she did commercials and teaching locally. She would not expect to go away. She stayed with her mother. Or did she? Her mother was back working and coping very well. Her mother had a lover. Just as Mike's world had shown signs of direction and stability it was turning upside down. He could probably live with Abigail Lake rejecting him, even laughing at him. He suspected that she already did that. But forgetting him to go off in pursuit of her career?

Mike went through the offer. It was good. As manager of Princess Players, Chris had to be given credit for it. It was he who had got the play. It was he who had coerced Abby into the lead role and now it was he who had cleared the extension of it with the author and copyright holder. But Mike was not in the mood to give Chris credit when he had just announced Abby's imminent departure and so he bitterly reflected that it was he who had risked the money and Abigail Lake who had done most of the work.

Abby was too busy to be bothered with anything outside the actual performance of the play during its run and so Mike kept the information to a minimum. His promise to Chris and indirectly to John Ashcroft required that anyway. But he had to tell the director that the cast would be required for the next few weeks. She was excited at the prospect, but unsurprised. She had been in successes before that required extensions. Mike received a hug and a promise that the cast would be told not to make future plans until they heard what was happening to *Potent Performance's* Wellington season.

On Monday, the men went to work early. They couldn't ignore they had plenty to do and Abby and Lucy were happy to be in each other's company at the Jarvis house. There would be a social to end the show. It would be a long night for Abby, but one of the men would have to be there to bring Lucy home. There would be alcohol and Lucy would be on a long slide back towards the tedium that had marked her recent life.

With final night party to look forward to, the players lifted themselves to new heights for the Monday performance and so did the audience. A three-quarter full house – a triumph for a Monday night – shouted and clapped for ten minutes after the final curtain. Finally the cast retired backstage for a debrief. And there they heard the news. They had made it. They had been taken up by professional theatre and had a job for the next month. They could expect their efforts to be noticed around the country and probably internationally. Princess Players had arrived.

Mike took Abby and Lucy home. It seemed both very right and natural that they should be living in

the Jarvis household while there was so much to do together, but also very odd. His father already had a son boarding with him and had now taken in another family.

At her bedroom door, Mike turned Abby towards him and held her. "We're both exhausted Abby. It would be a comfort to both of us to sleep together. Come with me." Mike held the beauty to him and recalled that first meeting when he lost himself in the green eyes and marvelled at the strong character. That hadn't changed. He still loved the image and strength, but now he loved the woman. She had also become Abby the deprived child. Abby the sometimes tired and crabby business woman. Abby the fighter. And briefly Abby the lover. Perhaps she was still Abby the unattainable sex symbol. Mike was not confident enough of his romantic prowess to make any assumptions in that area. But at least for a while he had the advantage of having her here in the room next to his.

Abby pressed him gently away. "I'm sorry Mike. Not now. I've played with sex all my life and it's been fun, but no more. I know better now how I want to live the rest of my life. I've seen you and your Dad and I want to be something better than what I have been. I've made a stupid promise. If I'm going to break it I at least need to be honest about it. Give me time."

And leaving Mike bemused in the passage, she slipped away.

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Back in the office Mike continued to attempt to catchup the work that had been left when *Potent Performance* had stolen his time. To both his pleasure and dismay he found that because his father was spending a little less time in the main office, he was being asked for advice on his behalf. He did what he could.

Hinemoa was offering them its standard contract for a touring group. Since Princess Players were not touring and had no accommodation costs to worry about the contract was generous. A few minor actors were no longer available and their roles were filled from the *Hinemoa Players*, but Sam, Abby, Lucy, Chris and Mary were keen to rehearse and perform in a quality venue.

## SATURDAY

By Saturday Abby could put it off no longer. Soon Potent Performance would claim all her attention again. She had to confront Sally. Again and again she relived that horror morning when Sally had shouted at her to leave her men alone and go. Sally had been her saviour and strength for as long as she could remember. She could not betray Sally again.

And yet now she meant to. She hadn't meant to do it in the past. But of course Sally was right. The men flocked to her and she had taken what she thought of as her right. And now she only wanted one man and it was the very one she had promised to Sally. But the cost of not being with Mike – perhaps forever – was too great.

For one last time she would disappoint Sally. Mike and Sally hadn't hit it off anyway. She could do this and they would still be friends. God, she hoped they could still be friends.

She had learned love from Sally. She had learned to rely on someone. To give unquestioning support to a friend. And now she was learning love from another person. To wake up in the morning thinking of someone and to know that person was thinking of you. To know that person would be there when you got home. Would support you even in the mistakes you made. And wanted to go to bed with you. For the rest of your life.

She would tell Sally that for one last time she was going to take her lover. She felt like shit. She should have rung, but by dropping in unexpectedly she could pretend she wasn't going to do it. Perhaps she wouldn't. Perhaps Sally wouldn't be home. She brightened at the prospect.

Sally's house was very quiet. That was odd. Sally was an early riser. It seemed a shame to wake her if she had had a late night. Abby wouldn't wake her. She'd check the house out first. They had a game when they were young. It would be alright to just check to see if Sally was there.



Sally heard the doorbell ring again. Someone was persistent. Still they were finished now and she had to put the breakfast on soon. It could be documents from work. She better go.

Sally opened the door to Abby. Why would Abby turn up unannounced early on a Saturday morning? Sally gazed at her in consternation. "What are you doing here?"

"Well gee, I love you to. Am I as welcome as that?" Abby was grinning at her in an odd way.

"Oh, of course you are welcome. It's just that this is not a good time."

Abby's bright grin remained. "Nine o'clock on Saturday and you are already working? Gosh Sally learn to relax some. I need a cup of tea. Put the jug on."

"No, Abby, truly this is not a good time," Sally made an ineffectual effort to stop her getting past.

"Sally Nairn, you have a man here don't you? You tramp." Abby's teasing grin had reached heroic proportions.

"Please Abby. You have to go. I'll talk to you about it later today, but you must leave now."

"Sally, I'll go if I have to but I think I deserve a cup of tea, and I just want to remind you of something. Do you remember how we used to find it hilarious as kids to be able to sneak around the back of each other's houses and climb in the back window and then surprise each other's mothers by being there?"

Sally gazed at Abby in horror. "Abby, please tell be you didn't go around to my bedroom window."

"OK, I didn't go around to your bedroom window. But just reassure me of something Sally. You wouldn't care for Mike and bonk Sam on the side would you? You're not that sort of girl. It just never occurred to me that my kind and gentle Sally would be attracted to Sam. But you were attracted to me weren't you? You do recovery crusades. And I love you for it."

Sally gave up and shared Abby's silly grin. "You are shameless Abby but just the one man. Sam made me realise that although I think Mike is a wonderful friend and business associate, I just don't think of him romantically and it never occurred to me that my peeping-tom thick skinned fiery brat of a friend would look at him twice."

Abby wrapped Sally in her arms. "I love you so much."

As Sally put the tea on she said, "If you are going to peep in my bedroom window I'm allowed to know all the details. What do you two get up to?"

Abby flinched. "Nothing of that sort. I thought I had promised him to you. I came here to ask for a reprieve. I was pretty upset Sally. I got that wrong didn't I?"

Sally was tempted to point out that Abby had just jumped to the first conclusion she could think of regardless of what Sally might have wanted. But this was not the time. Sally was already observing an Abigail Lake very different to the one she was used to.

"No sex yet, then?"

Abby still couldn't quite look Sally in the eye. "Well one little lapse from both of us. He chucked me on the bedroom floor and I let him finish."

Sally guffawed. "Mikey chucked you on the floor and lived to tell the tale. Abby, I know you. Who chucked who on the floor?"

Abby was strangely hurt. It had surprised her too, but she didn't want it laughed about and Mike Jarvis was not to be called Mikey in that way.

"He cares for me Sally. We were in the room together. He would have stopped if I'd asked."

Sally realised she had blundered. "He's a really great guy Abby. I'm just surprised he suits you."

"Those two cook for each other and now for us, Sally. They do the cleaning. Both Harry and Mike

are making sure mum gets home safely. You know my fluffy bear I have by my bed at home?" Of course Sally did. She had seen it and talked about it a thousand times. "I was too embarrassed to bring it to my bedroom in the Jarvis's, but it's there. Mike realised it must matter to me and got it for my room. He cares Sally and it goes on and on. I'm someone to Mike. All the time and without question."

And then Sally understood. The little girl without a past who had found a past in the characters she played had found a stable safe environment with the man she loved. And his father. There were much worse ways to find happiness and Abby was happy.

Sally shouted down the hall. "Sam, come and congratulate the boss. She's making Mike a happy man."

To his credit Sam had the courage to leave the bedroom to see what was going on.

When Abby left she was laughing happily. At the door she whispered in Sally's ear. "No sex next week. I'll be kissing Sam on stage and I'm sick of getting your leftovers."

Sally told her to piss off, but she was laughing when she said it.

Back at the Jarvis household Abby was disappointed to find that Mike had gone to work. There was still a lot to catch up on. She and Lucy continued to work through the changes in the play that were forced on them now that they had a sunken all-around stage instead of a raised single view stage.

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Harry and Mike were busy catching up on work in their office so it had been natural for that first week at least, that Abby and Lucy had taken over the day to day running of the Jarvis household. The result was a very pleasant domestic feeling of a family living together. That Saturday afternoon it was particularly true. The men were home early and they were all aware that very soon the next season of *Potent Performance* would begin and after that they just didn't know. Would they go their separate ways? The future was both promising and bleak.

As they had a late lunch together Abby eyed Mike speculatively. She had resisted this man throughout their relationship. Sometimes for her own sake and for the show. Sometimes for Sally's sake. If Sally was too dim to see what he had to offer, that was her problem.

Sometimes she had pretended to herself he was too weak for her. What a fool. When was he ever weak? When she needed a quiet strong presence or sound judgement, she had gone straight to him. The reason she had held him at arms length was not his weakness but hers. She was afraid to deal with someone as strong as herself.

When he chose to, Mike would stand up to her and she would lose. She didn't like losing, but she was ready to do it occasionally now. That actually showed that she was stronger, not weaker. She had been wrong about Lucy. Now with the right sort of support and motivation, Lucy was back on her feet.

But no, now she was being too harsh on herself. She hadn't been wrong. She had guided Lucy back to strength and other people had taken over. That wasn't failure.

When Mike went back to his room Abby followed. Mike blocked his door. "Abby, last time we were in a room together, I disgraced myself. I can't live like that. If you come in here it must be as my sole and long-term lover."

Abby, smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "OK, she whispered"

This time she wasn't thrown down on an uncomfortable carpet. She was carried – he was stronger than she expected- to the bed and laid down. The two minute wrestle was replaced with a three hour caress, mixed with prolonged wrestles. They were eventually broken up by Harry calling shyly through the door that they should come and have something to eat as he and Lucy were going out for the evening.

Once the older couple had gone, Abby and Mike went to bed. It was 7pm.

Sunday morning Lucy asked Mike to take her to her house to pick up some things she needed. Abby protested that Mike was busy and tired and they could do it together. Lucy and Mike closed ranks on her. She was to stay home and keep Harry company. Whatever was going on, Abby was not going to be allowed out. She made herself a cup of coffee and worked quietly in the lounge. Sure enough Harry came and joined her. The conspiracy had matured.

Harry settled down in his slow gentle style.

“Abigail, I wonder if I might have a chat with you.”

Abby was tempted to point out that short of running away it was going to happen anyway. Instead she smiled brightly and acquiesced.

“I want to say some things that might seem impertinent and even offensive Abby, but I hope that I can make you understand we are in this together. We appear to be a family and I don't want to drift into that with misunderstandings.”

Shit, what was coming. Abby had pretty much run her own family throughout her life. They had drifted everywhere, always with misunderstandings. She wasn't sure she wanted this. She put a brave face on it.

“I'm sure you are aware that Mike and I have an unusually close relationship.”

There'd be no demurring here. Taunts of daddy's-boy came back to haunt Abby.

Harry looked at the carpet for a moment. “When my wife died, Mike was barely old enough to understand. We were a unit. We never stopped being like that.”

Abby saw Harry wipe a furtive tear and felt ashamed of how she had ignored what this man might feel for his faithful son.

“Mike is a sensitive person and genuinely interested and sympathetic to what I offered him. He has been close to me throughout his life. He is also independent and strong. He just doesn't need to flaunt it.”

Abby nodded. She had come to that same conclusion.

“It seems very likely that either you or Lucy or both of you will marry into this family. That will make me very proud. But I will warn you that Mike is precious to me. You have made him very happy and I believe you will forever, but you are not to deliberately hurt him in any way.”

The threat was obvious. Abby was dealing with a strong man who could be ruthless if his son was treated badly. Abby fought outrage.

“Things can go wrong in any situation through no fault of anyone, Mr Jarvis.”

“Yes, of course they can. And people can deal with difficulties and if necessary separate in a civilised fashion even where there is pain and anger. If things go wrong, as a member of this family you would receive all the care and protection that I expect for Mike”

Even in her anger at receiving this stern talking to, Abby was aware that it would feel good to have the care and protection of these men if things got rough. She went to stand up. “Thank you Mr Jarvis. We understand each other.”

“Not yet please Abigail. That was the introduction that I wanted to get out of the way. I want to welcome you into our lives and give you a gift.”

Abby wanted to say that this was premature. But she didn't believe it and she thought that Harry didn't either.

“I want to touch on another delicate subject that you will resent. But I think we will be better for talking it over.”

Harry eyed her nervously. He believed in clear communication and understanding as protection for the future, but this would not be easy for him.

“When Mike was young he was quite comfortable with girls as friends. That's unusual in a boy over about seven years. When he reached puberty he seemed to have mostly male friends.” Harry had the grace to blush. “Frankly I wondered if he was gay. I have asked, but I'm not sure I fully believe what he tells me, and I'm not sure I understand his attitude to you.”

Abby wanted to laugh. Partly at Harry's discomfort and partly from the knowledge of what had gone on in Mike's bedroom for most of yesterday afternoon and a large part of the night.

Damn it, the man wanted to know. Abby wasn't coy. If Harry needed to be reassured that his son wasn't out of his depth then she could tell him. “He fucked me silly,” she said.

Abby's laughing eyes looked into Harry's puzzled one.

“Pardon?”

For a moment Abby wondered if she had gone too far. She had to remember where she was and who this was. How would Mike react if she was thrown out of the house? She was confident about who he would side with, but the rift would hurt them all. Too late now.

“You heard me correctly. He is by far the best lover I've ever had. No man with gay tendencies could do what he did. I think he probably got his technique from a book. But it was a very good book, and he didn't get his enthusiasm that way.” It suddenly occurred to Abby that perhaps she was chatting a little too freely about their sex life to Mike's father. This man had a gentle firm way of getting where he wanted to go. But Mike had been a party to getting Lucy out of the house. He could damn well take some responsibility.

She didn't need to worry about offending Harry. He smiled happily. I'm very pleased to hear it. One of my worries is that he wouldn't keep up with you.”

Abby had a vague feeling she should find this offensive, but actually she felt quite proud of both Mike and herself and so she didn't bother to look into it too deeply.

The pace changed. Harry looked quietly down and paused to gather himself. He got out a jewel box. “I want to give you this. The last time I saw these worn they were on a beautiful, feisty young woman whom I respected and loved. I'd like that to happen again.”

To Abby's consternation, Harry wiped away another tear and gave an audible sob. She went to him and put her arms around him.

Abby knew she was unconditionally accepted when Harry made no further effort to hide his tears.

Harry said, “They are probably old fashioned and your colouring is quite different, but it is the principle of the giving that matters. Put them safely in a bottom draw and forget them but I will have passed the past on to the future and you do me a great honour if you take it.

Abby gazed down on a set of discreet, exquisite and expensive diamond earrings and pendent and burst into tears. She had never had a proper family before. Or any past. Oh the cunning of the man. He had given Mike the gift of the approval of both of his parent's and at the same time made it clear to them all that Abigail Lake was accepted as a partner to his son. She was theirs forever.

Abby put the jewellery on even though she was dressed in jeans and casual blouse.

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When Mike and Lucy returned Abby and Harry were preparing a meal together. Mike was unsure of what had gone on while he was out but he knew his father was not one to accept a major change in his family life without a touch of formality. Mike also knew that in his own way, Harry adored Abby and it was no surprise to find them being domestic together.

Abby paused from chopping lettuce and gave Mike a warm loving smile that sent shivers through him. She was different. There was a glow to her. And she was wearing jewellery. Diamonds with jeans while she chopped lettuce. Mike looked closer and understood. He had not often seen the jewels Abby wore but just as Abby had done, he understood the significance at once. He swallowed a lump in his throat as he hugged his father before he went to Abby. The knowledge that Abby had been given and accepted his mother's jewellery was a profound commitment.

As they sat down to eat, Abby brushed the pendent lightly with her fingers and turned to Mike. Smiling she said, "My present came at a price you know. I had a talking to. Did you know that bees make honey by flying around with pollen? Birds do something too, but I didn't understand that bit. So then I explained what we do and I got my present."

Mike looked uncomfortably at his father who was smiling in an exasperated way at Abby. Abby unashamedly grinned back. There was something going on here. Mike hoped that this was not a real quarrel. Then Harry burst out laughing. "Mike, can you keep your woman under control?"

Mike shrugged. "No, not really."

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This time around the show was booked to capacity. The few weekday seats that stayed unbooked were filled by casual sales. Financial success was guaranteed. That didn't reduce the pressures on the actors though. There would be no excuses for patrons getting less than a great experience. Chris had even written a superb extension to the part Mary Cooper was playing so that now she was back to a position of prominence. They were being noticed worldwide.

The applause and laughter were less thunderous in the smaller space but no less warm. The show was slightly less exhausting to the actors. It was easier to be heard in the better designed space and the dressing and waiting areas were more comfortable. *Potent Performance* at the *Hinemoa Theatre* got rave reviews.

As the final night drew closer and the actors and support grew more relaxed, Mike got more and more anxious. It was all very well to pretend that he was a part of this and that he had won the woman of his dreams, but what if it had been nothing more than a happy episode in a dull life? Abby and Lucy were back at the top of the tree. Chris Cresswell was convinced that they would all be whisked off to Europe or the States. Abby had settled into a loving domesticity, but what would that mean to her once she had job offers from all over the world?

Soon she would accept that Lucy never mentioned alcohol and no one was keeping her from it any more. She may be tempted, but she had so much invested in her new life that she was fighting successfully by herself. Mike tried not to contemplate the future but it was getting harder to think that it would be like the present.

By the last night the cast were beginning to feel betrayed. There had been no formal critique as they had been promised. The show was a success with the public and critics and would look good on their CVs but it seemed a bit of an anti-climax to just finish and disband. Chris was secretive and unhelpful. But he had a new man in his life. He had probably lost interest.

On the last evening they were cheered off the stage. It was a Monday evening, yet the theatre was full. *Potent Performance* had had a run of twenty-four shows, most of them in a huge hall. It had played to thousands and been talked about everywhere. It had established an exciting new major actor in Sam Krantz and it had re-established an old star in Lucy Lake. Abby moved through the crowd and the performers hugging and being hugged. Thanking and being thanked. It had been an experience none of them would forget.

Chris brought his lover into the backstage area. The man was comically unlike Chris. Diffident and shy, he circulated congratulating the players. But Abby had seen pictures. Now she knew why Chris

was so excited about this moment.

Using his authority as manager of Princess Players Chris called them to order. Since they were currently employees of Hinemoa Theatre and since Abby and Mike had been doing most of the managing anyway this claim was a bit tenuous. But this was Chris's moment. He introduced them to John Ashcroft, author and admirer.

Mr Ashcroft may be quiet and shy but he could speak in public when he had to. He congratulated the people there and went on, "I thought I was working with the best the world could offer but we haven't done any better than the Princess Players. *Potent Performance* has been a success wherever it has been staged and we need talent to perform it worldwide. We want it in mainland Europe, the States and of course touring in Australasia. I'm here to head hunt. I need your lead players and director in London. I would like contact details for the rest of you. I am able to offer jobs to most of you."

Mike moved up beside Abby. Perhaps this would be the last time he would have the privilege. Abigail Lake was no longer just the star of a rather silly New Zealand film, or even the director of a successful New Zealand play. She was now the star of a top international performance that art lovers around the world were begging for. What was a comfortable family home and some fancy old jewellery going to mean to her now. He had felt out of his depth with her before. Now he wouldn't rate a mention. He sadly remembered his comment to his father that she would consider him with the toffee papers she stepped over. He wouldn't go that high now. Even so, she was worth taking a risk for.

He said, "I'll come with you if you like."

Abby gave him a brief look. She was busy fending off wellwishers. "Oh no, you go on. I can't leave now. Find Mum. She may need support when this begins to die down." Abby went back to her real friends.

Mike established that Lucy was with people who would not tempt her and exchanged a knowing glance with them. They nodded. He returned to Abby.

Mike saw that Abby was wearing his mother's jewellery. She couldn't do it on stage because Miranda was poor and without taste. She put on the jewellery as soon as she came off. Mike wondered if she wore it under her stage clothes. He felt a resentment. If she was to go away on an international career, perhaps she would have the grace to return his mother's jewellery.

"I meant London. If you want me to come I'll go with you."

There was a change in her. The jolly back slapping of a moment ago stopped. Abby turned to him snapped something under her breath, excused herself to her admirers and took his arm. She led him to her dressing room and slammed the door.

For god's sake what was wrong with her. There were tears in her eyes and anger. He was offering to go with her. Was he that unwelcome?

"Am I dismissed? Was that it. You got to play at being a play manager, and now I can piss off. Is that what you think?"

"Abby calm down. I'll come if you'll have me. I thought you wanted to go. Why would you stay here?"

"If you don't know the answer to that then perhaps I ought to go."

"You'd stay for me? Shit Abby, you have the world at your feet. Are you going to stay?"

"Mike, what's this? Your way of getting rid of me. Or your way of getting a love declaration. You want to know why I expect to stay? Alright I'm not just staying for you. For the first time in my life I have a proper family. For that matter for the first time I have my mother. Chris is going. Princess Players needs a manager. I'd love that and Princess Players deserves to survive. There will be an

Australasian tour of *Potent Performance*. I want to be involved with that. And for the first time in my life I'm in love with something other than me, my school friend and the theatre. I live in Wellington where I want to support my future husband, who apart from trying to get me to emigrate has always supported *me*." Abby saw the expression on Mike's face and stopped to grin at him and receive a hug.

"Ok if I get back to my duties out there, now?"

"I love you Abby."

Abby searched for some way to respond. She looked back and saw this rock solid man who would stand by her for the rest of her life if she let him. "I love you too Mike."

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It was a weary and slightly subdued group at the dinner table on Tuesday night. Mike and Harry were back to the ordinary grind. Mike had spent some time with Chris Cresswell and Dave Drench securing the now generous financial reserves of Princess Players. The Players were to advertise for a teacher and manager to replace Chris as soon as possible. Chris was keen to be on his way. Mike reflected that he had once been horrified at taking a decision to support a suspect play. He now had all the loan money back, and the most amazing advertising for Jarvis and Keen. They were known nationally as supporters of the arts. And very good arts at that. And he was engaged. Mike wasn't sure when that had happened, but Abby was telling people about her fiance. And he didn't contradict Abigail Lake.

At work another of his clients had a blocked drain and one wanted to know what to do about their neighbours goat that kept wandering on to their section. They were a different sort of challenge, but they paid bills.

Harry was getting too old for this. Not too old to run the business. He'd do that for a few years yet, but he was glad the show was over. Harry put a proprietorial hand on Lucy's shoulder and looked across the table at the younger two. "I have some bad news." Abby and Mike looked up startled, and waited. "We are going to become both your parents and your parents-in-law."

Abby laughed and returned to her meal. "Oh, we know that." But then she glanced up again. "Mum, marriage isn't a fulltime occupation. What are you going to do with yourself?"

Lucy laughed. "I'm going to behave. There are caring people who got me as happy as I am now and I want to repay a little. For a job, there are things that a competent actor who doesn't fall off stages can do. Anything from advertisements to bit parts in repertory. I'm on fairly good terms with the prospective manager of the local Players group. I hope she can find me something. And this is something I promise to all of you. If it is getting too much for me I'm going to run home to you, not anywhere else."

Anywhere else was the bottle store. They accepted that silently.

Abby said, "We are having a farewell at the hall on Wednesday. Chris, John, Mary and her entire family and Sally and Sam are all flying out in the weekend. This is major. It's a farewell and an end to any top-end plays by Princess Players. Mum and I owe Sally more than we can ever repay.

Harry said uncertainly, "Why is Sally going? She doesn't act."

Abby laughed. "Don't let her hear that. I said something similar. The claw marks should heal before too long. She's in love, and she wants to live the high life. The ironic thing is that I think she will really flourish. There are plenty of legal jobs in London and she's good at that. She also has a derelict wastrel actor to care for. She's good at that too." Realising what she was saying, Abby added quickly. "I meant me."

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Above the ruckus of twenty-two ten year olds Abby turned to their teacher Pamela. "Whatever is wrong with them today?"

"They're excited that you're back, Abby. Most of them saw the play and they want to be in the next one." Pamela glanced at the shining ring and jewellery that Abby wore. "And the press says you are engaged to your business manager. They want to know more. Well, actually I do."

Abby grinned happily, "OK. I give up.". She sat down and called. "First a story, but only ten minutes and then we have to start. There is only two weeks to end of term and the Christmas play." The class fell silent. They had heard Miss Lake tell stories before.

"Once there was a beautiful princess who had fame and fortune and everyone thought that she had everything that anyone could want."

But she was really very lonely and a wicked witch had poisoned her mother the queen, and that made her very sad."

Pamela watched fascinated. God, this woman had control. And she could tell a story. Even a kids' fairytale like this and she told it with such feeling that she had tears in her eyes.