



Author photo by Taupo Photography.

Lee Murray started running between lamp-posts and has since run 18 marathons, an ultra-marathon and countless half-marathons. An award-winning writer of short fiction, *A Dash of Reality* is Lee's second novel, her first title for adults. Lee lives in Tauranga, New Zealand with her husband, two gorgeous children and a Cavalier King Charles spaniel named Maxi. When she's not writing, Lee likes to read, run, and eat muffins.

Lee Murray

A Dash
of
Reality

Regis

A Dash of Reality

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‘If you have to tell them who you are, you aren’t anybody.’

Gregory Peck said it first and it isn’t any less true now. Take me, for example. For years I’ve been the face of Sportzgirl, the franchised chain of sexy sports apparel for the modern Kiwi girl. To tell the truth, I’ve not only been the face of Sportzgirl, but also the boobs, the bum, and the legs. There’s been a photo of me, or some part of me, on every glossy full-colour page of the catalogue for the past seven years. Winter catalogues are thinner, but the summer ones can be up to sixteen pages, and they’re delivered to 620,000 households monthly.

That’s a lot of pictures of yours truly!

I’m also the girl in those flat-out thirty-second commercials telling you to get down to your Sportzgirl outlet this weekend for great autumn specials, or letting you know your nearest Sportzgirl outlet (and free parking) will be open for your shopping convenience until midnight, every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night from anywhere around mid-October right up until Christmas Eve.

And on top of that, any garment sold in a Sportzgirl store carries a label listing its range, designer, size, price (astronomical), and the particular item’s washing instructions, and on the flip side of the label is a photo of *me*. When you take home your new sports bra, wrapped in two layers of foamy tissue, even the plastic bag you carry it home in will be digitally imprinted with a picture of my face (fully made-up and air-brushed, thank goodness.)

There was talk of putting my image, posing as if I were running up a flight of stairs, on the side of Wellington’s historic cable car (the one that carries tourists on its forty-five degree trajectory from downtown Lambton Quay to the summit at Kelburn.) At an Auckland store – Albany I think – there’s a colossal colour-sublimated canvas billboard above the automatic doors of me doing a bent-over-row. It stands four

metres off the ground, is a further eight metres high and is visible to city-bound Auckland commuters from up to a kilometre away. That is, providing it's not foggy.

On the billboard, I'm wearing a Lycra sports crop and matching boy shorts in neon-orange. The orange is intended to contrast with the funky grey corrugated-iron cladding of the warehouse. Our stylist, Annalise was insistent.

'Orange is an impact colour, darling.' It's no secret Annalise fancies herself as a latter-day version of Joanna Lumley, aka Patsy. Staying true to character, Annalise dyes her hair blonde and hasn't been known to eat anything since 2004. Anyway, as Sportzgirl's style guru, she selects the items I model. She's had me clad in crop-tops, bra-tops, bike-tops, dry-fit tops, and vented tops, all usually a size too small. When it comes to pants, Annalise usually goes for Lycra or spandex in varying lengths; full-length, ³/₄-length, knee-length, boy-short, and the tiny triathlon-pants I call scanty-panties. Annalise can eulogise on their amphibious water-to-land qualities 'til she's blue in the face, they still look like regular underpants to me. The Pouty One doesn't bother much with warmer weather gear. She believes 'less is more' and 'skin is in' so jackets and sweats tend to get pushed to the back of the catalogue.

When it comes to the photo set-ups, Annalise has me posing in the gym with Swiss balls, on exercise benches, on courts playing, out in the stadium doing lunges, or stretching; any set up which shows the garment at its most appealing. Some of the poses are intended to be provocative and titillating – Sportzgirl gear is supposed to be sexy – and sometimes we attract too much media attention. To be fair, only one complaint was actually upheld by the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and Sportzgirl withdrew the offensive ad. But by then the extra publicity meant stocks of the extra-low-rise Daisy Duke work-out pants were almost exhausted.

The point I'm trying to make here is that excepting possibly inhabitants of the odd South Island sheep station stuck outside television coverage somewhere near Geraldine, pretty much everyone in New Zealand has seen a picture of me.

Everyone.

Every. Single. One.

And yet no one has a clue who I am.

2

Late Friday afternoon I'm in my basement office at Sportzgirl HQ when I get a call from Derek Lissombe, Personal Assistant to my boss, Winston Chin. Derek started at Sportzgirl shortly before me, but unlike me, his rise in the company has been as fast as the proverbial pimple popping up on prom night. That could have something to do with the fact he wears navy blue pinstripe suits, reads the business pages, and has been wooing Winston's daughter for a little over three years.

'Come up immediately for a conference with Mr. Chin,' Derek says.

'Okay, give me two secs. I'll get changed.'

'Immediately, Melanie,' says Derek.

Right at this moment I'm dressed in the retro candy-pink yoga pants, shelf-bra tank and matching head band that were the feature of this afternoon's photo-shoot. Still, it can't be helped. It doesn't do to keep Winston waiting.

Sportzgirl's CEO reminds me of a fat squat toad I once caught, although, to be fair, the toad probably had better skin. Winston is not one of those Chinese people about whom people are prone to coo, 'Oh, he has a beautiful olive complexion!' Inflicted with a severe case of acne at an early age, nor was Winston one of those good Chinese boys who respected the advice of his mother. I suspect it satisfied him deeply to pick, squeeze and dig at those pus-filled vesicles, so much so that now, at fifty-eight, Winston's face resembles a piece of raw, tenderised meat. Don't be fooled. There's nothing tender about Winston Chin. He's about as warm and welcoming as morning linoleum.

I duck out of my 2x2 metre cubicle and into the lift. Tony from Accounts slips in just before the doors close.

'Going to Accounts?'

‘Yeah, thanks Melanie.’ I push the button for the Accounting Department on level 3, and the button for level 5, where Winston presides in the Big Corner Office.

‘Top floor, huh?’

I nod. ‘Winston asked for me.’ Tony shakes his head, sucks air in over his teeth, and screws up his face the way people do when entering public toilets.

‘Bugger,’ he says softly. He falls silent. The lift stops on level 3 and Tony hurries out without looking back. Shoot, I wonder what Winston wants? My gut reaction is not good, which would explain why my face looks tight and anxious in this lift mirror.

Get a grip, Melanie.

A summons to the Big Corner Office isn’t necessarily bad. It could be a good sign. It could be something positive, like a bonus, although I can’t quite work out what I might’ve done to earn a bonus lately. Better yet, it could mean a pay rise. A pay rise would be terrific. But that’s not likely either. Other than Derek, no Sportzgirl employee has ever had a pay rise as far as I’m aware. Still, I’m the public face of the company and I’ve been here ages: since I was 21 and I’m 28 now.

Then it strikes me. What if Winston has finally nabbed some coverage in New Zealand Fashion Week? Marketing has been trying to secure a spot for ages. Aeons even. If it’s true the timing couldn’t be better given the scary drop-off in consumer spending. Some high-level exposure would be a huge boost. And from my perspective it would be a chance to saunter up a storm on the catwalk. If only I could break into catwalk modelling. Those catwalk models are so incredibly fabulous.

And famous.

Elle MacPherson, Tyra Banks, Gisele Bündchen, Ashton Kutchner. All expanding their own personal brands out into other projects, like fashion and television and film. I’d do anything for a chance like that.

It does help to think positively. I’ve managed to talk myself round from severe panic attack to mild anticipation. I definitely feel more buoyant as the lift reaches the top floor. The doors open and I swivel sharp right. Winston’s receptionist, Edna, is stationed in the corridor outside Winston’s office. A square-shouldered woman, Edna bellows like a high school deputy principal as she announces me, and glowers

disapprovingly at my skimpy attire as I pass through the double doors of solid recycled rimu.

As soon as I enter I feel a chill, in spite of the sunlight streaming through the slick and smudge-less ceiling-to-floor windows that make up the entire northern corner. I notice there are no sparkling dust motes floating aimlessly through the air. Maybe the dust motes are scared rigid too.

Whoops! My neon-clad nipples are sticking out at 90 degrees. I suddenly feel at a distinct disadvantage for whatever is about to take place.

‘Melanie,’ says Derek, ‘Sit down.’

I take the only available seat, a cold leather upright. On the other side of the expansive cherry veneer desktop, Winston comes straight to the matter in hand.

‘Sales are down,’ he croaks.

The room cools another degree and any residual trace of my buoyant mood disappears. So, probably not a pay rise then.

‘And projected quarterly profits show a significant drop, sir,’ says Derek.

‘Oh.’ My stomach lifts and plunges, the way it does when I drive too quickly over a hump in the road. ‘Perhaps it’s the recession,’ I say hopefully. ‘I guess everyone is feeling the pinch.’

‘Not Stade. Their numbers are up.’ Winston rises up from his chair, ‘and lately gameOn has been muscling in on the market too.’ He leans over the desk and clenches his fist, flexing his arm in a bodybuilder’s pose and pushing his point home.

‘I believe gameOn now has 14 per cent of our market share, now that they have the Tracey Pearce endorsement,’ says Derek.

It’s true. gameOn’s new spokesperson is Tracey Pearce. Miss Sports Personality for the last two years and dating Craig Hunter, the rower who took two bronzes and silver at the last World Championships. In brief, he’s an Adonis with abs like a step ladder. You have to hand it to gameOn, it’s hard to top New Zealand sports royalty for exposure.

‘gameOn and Pearce. She’s only a bloody Olympic gold medallist!’ Winston begins pacing the room. He resembles an aluminium can whose contents are under pressure.

I try not to panic. Let's face it, the Pearce/Hunter endorsement would have come at a right royal cost too. And if there's one thing Winston loves it's holding on to his money, a fact three bitter ex-wives could verify if any of them were allowed through the revolving front doors.

'And, meanwhile who have we got?' Winston levels a hard stare in my direction.

I feel my heart drop into my shoes. I gulp involuntarily.

'And let's take a look at Stade, shall we? Our number one competitor has sucked up to the Rugby Union and bagged the All Blacks' sponsorship for the next two years. Two years! Any time their sales numbers look sad they haul out a player and have him sign kids' balls on the footpath. Last week they had Thomson at their Auckland branch. *In a cast*. Signed eighty-four balls in an hour and a half.'

The AB's flanker is not expected to take the field for another eight weeks. An x-ray of Thomson's Achilles tear together with a full medical prognosis was printed in last weekend's sports' section. I saw it when my boyfriend Jack spread the newspaper on his living room floor and changed the tube in his bike tyre.

Abruptly, Winston stops his pacing and faces me. His toady eyes narrow.

'It's not only the kids they're winning either. Who cares about them? It's not like they've got any real money. Remember when Stade engineered that Real Blokes underwear campaign? They filmed the All Blacks in the locker rooms at Eden Park. Rugby players in their undies. Almost entirely obscured by steam. And it was a coup! An absolute fucking coup! Thousands of women rushed in to buy their flabby husbands underpants they hadn't even seen! There wasn't a hope in hell those middle-aged fat-arsed husbands were going to look like All Blacks in those daks. But here's the thing, Melanie.' He looks me dead in the eye. 'They sold close to two million pairs.'

'Two million,' Derek breathes.

'Really, two million?' For goodness sake. I sound like Derek.

'It's the bottom line that counts in this business.'

Bottom line. Underpants. I stifle an hysterical giggle. This isn't the moment.

'Sportzgirl can do better.'

‘Right,’ I say brightly, although I feel anything but bright. My knees are trembly. ‘I agree totally, Mr. Chin. And I have some ideas to meet our competitors head on. I’m talking about television. What about Sportzgirl advertisements with characters telling a story? Entertaining, not just informing. Remember those historic ads about Spot the Telecom dog? Little Spot ran all over the country, digging holes and dragging cables to demonstrate the incredible network they were offering. People loved it. Now they’ve got another dog, Seymour, spreading the news about digital TV...’

Winston cuts across my prattle. ‘Actually, when I said we can do better, what I meant, Melanie, was that we can do better than *you*.’

Did Winston fire me? My knees are banging together so hard now, I’m sure Edna can hear them from the corridor. I think he may have fired me. No pay rise. No catwalk opportunity.

‘Sir...?’

‘What now, Derek?’ It’s okay. There’s been some kind of mistake.

‘Human Resources say we’ve got to give her a month’s notice. If we’re to be strictly legal.’

‘Fine.’ Winston’s eyes narrow. ‘This is her notice, then. Melanie, your contract will terminate at the end of February. It’ll give us time to interview some real celebrities.’

And suddenly, I’m like a whoopee cushion.

One with the whoosh sucked out.

3

Hot tears sting my eyes. They blur the text I send to my best friend, Janeen. Scrubbing my eyes with the back of my hand, I sling the phone on the passenger seat, slam my Mazda into reverse and narrowly avoid Annalise's shiny white Beamer as I zoom out of the company car park.

I can't believe Winston dismissed me, just like that. Like a piece of lint flicked off his Hugo Boss suit. Like dried-up gum on the sole of his Gucci shoe. And after I've worked so hard! Seven years of grunt work building a credible marketing image for Sportzgirl. No other company will touch me now. I'm completely tied to Sportzgirl in people's minds. Hell, I may as well be a brawling heifer with a Sportzgirl logo emblazoned on my right buttock.

I pump the accelerator as I hit the straight on Totara Street and fly through the light industrial sector. I don't even take in the bait shops, tyre stands, car dealerships and pool manufacturing outlets.

Damn Winston!

This is how those three ex-wives must've felt when passed over for younger, curvier models. Cheated, betrayed and thoroughly pissed off. I turn into Hewletts Road on an orange light and overtake a purple-rinsed lady in a Mitsubishi in the inside lane.

I'm so furious.

Imagine a steaming Rotorua mud hole.

I'm more steamed.

Heading for town over the harbour bridge, I slip in front of a Coromandel-bound truck farting fumes, duck down the city off-ramp, zoom along the waterfront and park in the first available space on The Strand. There's nothing else for it. This kind of crisis requires some serious retail therapy. And it's a fact universally acknowledged that a woman who has just lost her job must be in want of an entire wardrobe

of co-ordinated undergarments. I gather up my phone, grab my handbag and dash across the road into Seduction.

Janeen, thank God, is already waiting outside the store.

‘Serious emergency,’ I say in answer to her querying look. I sweep into the boutique with Janeen hard on my heels. Inside, I suck in the sensuous spritz of expensive perfume that permeates the aisles of lingerie. The sales lady is a mousier version of the French chanteuse with the squeaky voice who married Johnny Depp. Her name tag says Charlotte.

‘Good afternoon ladies. I must inform you your Seduction store will be closing in fifteen minutes,’ says Charlotte.

‘Thank you. That’ll be fine,’ I reply, all poise and politeness.

Fuck. Fifteen minutes! This is an emergency! I start rifling furiously through the racks, yanking out bras and thrusting them back.

‘Mel! Slow down. What’s going on?’

‘Winston fired me!’ Yank and thrust.

‘No!’

‘Yes!’ Yank and thrust.

‘But you’ve been there forever!’ Instinctively, Janeen hands me a dazzling Valisère bra in inky purple. Old-gold filigree piping edges the cups. ‘You are Sportzgirl, Mel. He can’t just fire you!’

‘I know. I am. He did!’ I wail, taking the bra and throwing it over my arm. ‘What I need is one of those squishy foam boss-dolls. God, I’d love to pummel a squishy foam Winston.’ I stop rummaging for a second. ‘No, no! Better yet, a game of Whack-a-Mole with Winston’s face darting from the mole holes!’ I let out a tiny snort and shove another hanger back in place.

‘Whack-a-Winston. Whump! Whump! Whump!’ I say, pushing knickers back and forth across a rack in time with the whumps.

Janeen joins in. ‘Yeah! Here, let me pass you a bigger hammer.’

‘Why, thank you. That’d be perfect!’ I reply.

‘I beg your pardon, madam? Can I help you ladies with anything?’ says Charlotte, putting paid to the pantomime.

‘Er...do you have panties to match this bra please?’ I hold up Janeen’s selection. The silky fabric caresses my fingertips. It’s positively delectable. Charlotte produces two versions in the same inky purple.

‘She’ll try both,’ says Janeen, who can always be counted on to say the right thing in a crisis. I hold up another whimsy, this time in creamy froth.

‘Can I try this too, please?’

‘The new season Orotton? Yes, of course. We still have both the boy short and the thong in the Chantilly there, or perhaps you would prefer Dangerous Black?’

‘Definitely Dangerous Black,’ Janeen tells Charlotte, before I can open my mouth. ‘She’s a 10DD. And the panties, please.’

‘Janeen, this is the one. I have to have this one.’ It’s a diamante-encrusted Elle MacPherson masterpiece in sumptuous scarlet. I hold it in front of my cleavage, one elbow still stuffed full of try-on items, and admire my image in the mirror.

‘Panties for this one too please,’ I call to Charlotte’s retreating back.

‘Which style?’ says Charlotte.

‘All of them,’ says Janeen, her tone definitive. Charlotte, bless her, finally cottons on to the urgency of the situation and hurries off to the storeroom. I take a final swish through the racks and then nip into the fitting room where I undress and start trying on bras.

‘How much time left?’ I call through the curtains to Janeen. There’s a pause.

‘Eight minutes.’

‘Bugger!’ Bras are so hard to get off the hangers when you’re in a hurry. Ribbons get caught in the sticky-out bits and straps tighten into a tangled mess whenever you attempt to adjust them. The strap has detached on this pink and yellow one and I can’t get the little fish-hook back into its crochet. For goodness sake, I’m under acute time pressure here!

‘Did you tell Jack yet?’

‘Janeen! I have less than eight minutes. I don’t have time to call Jack.’

Rejected garments are heaped on the fitting room floor. I stand sideways, trampling an already-tried-on bra, and check out my pointy silhouette in pink and yellow. Janeen pokes her head through the gap in the curtains.

‘Too Annette Funicello,’ she says. She’s right. I whip it off and drop it on the floor with the other rejects. A wave of anger engulfs me.

‘How can they do it to me, Janeen? Chuck me on the scrap-heap, like this?’

‘I know, Mel. It’s that Winston. He’s a toad!’

‘Yeah.’ If only Winston were a real toad. I’d take great pleasure in popping him in a fly-free Agee jar, screwing the lid off from time to time and poking him hard with a stick. I smile a little as I conjure up this delightfully satisfying image of a bottled-up Winston. You see? Already I’m feeling better.

‘Pardon me, madam,’ interrupts Charlotte from outside the fitting room, ‘Your Seduction store will be closing in five minutes.’

‘Righty-o,’ I huff, peeling off the Victorian push-up and passing it through the brocade to Janeen.

‘She’s going to want the panties to go with this,’ I hear her say to Charlotte.

Electing to wear the Elle MacPherson scarlet home, I get dressed, gather up my pile of keepers, and bring them to the counter. Then Janeen and I rummage about in the pile making sure I have at least a couple of pairs of briefs to match each bra because eventually the elastic will give in one pair, that goes without saying. Charlotte reappears with the last pair of Victorian panties in hand. I toss them on my pile because a body-skimming corset panty is a must in any woman’s repertoire. Ask Trinny and Susannah.

‘Mel, sorry, I have to go,’ says Janeen. ‘I’ll be late picking up Caro.’ Caro is Janeen’s 10-year-old daughter, and my goddaughter.

‘It’s okay. You go. The initial crisis is over. I’m not about to do anything stupid.’ Janeen looks doubtful. ‘Honestly, I’m fine. Give Caro a kiss for me.’

‘I will. Call you later, okay?’ Janeen leaves.

Charlotte tallies my items, and slides them into a floral carry-all. I hand her my credit card. She swipes it and smiles as she waits for my signature. The number on the chit is equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product of a small island nation.

Excellent.

4

Oh thank heavens! I'm home now. Back in my sanctuary from the world, in my serene two-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of Cityscape Towers, the quintessential home of a person going places. A clear statement of elegance, taste and making the cut. I first saw it advertised in a real estate brochure that described the Towers as a luxury, award-winning complex, superbly located in the heart of the CBD. For discerning buyers (me), a must to view. The skinny agent who showed me through the apartment gushed about its open-plan contemporary living area, spacious entertainment deck, and its dazzling view across Tauranga Harbour to the Papamoa Hills. Not that I have ever been out on the spacious entertainment deck. Not with my fear of heights. But in spite of its being on the sixth floor, this truly is a great place to live. It's conveniently close to some fabulous restaurants and shops, with a pool, gym, sauna and free parking on site. Admittedly, this convenience comes with a cost, but I'm happy to pay because it frees up my time to focus on my career.

Ha! A fat lot of use that turned out to be.

Throwing my Seduction treat-bag on the white sofa, I cross the lounge to the kitchen, open my sleek double-door ice-making fridge and grab myself a can of Diet Coke.

Technically, the apartment is still more than half owned by my building society, but it's still a thrill to see my name, Melanie Short, typed on the title. When I handed over my first offer, at significantly lower than the registered valuation, the skinny agent sucked in her breath, pulled her thin lips taut over her teeth, and frowned. Well, it was a very low offer. In the end, Skinny was as stunned as I was when it was accepted that same day. The owner reasoned that the less it went for, the less his estranged wife was going to get of his money. But even with the lower price, it's a stretch.

Now it's going to be more than a stretch to make the mortgage repayments.

Ohmigod! What if I can't make the payments? My fingers go numb around the cold can. I suddenly feel like I've been hit with the flat of a cricket bat. How could I be so stupid not to realise? I could lose my apartment!

I do some quick mental arithmetic in my head and reel with dizziness. The thing is, after my little splurge at Seduction, I can only make two more payments.

Two.

Coke sloshes over my wrist. I put the can down on the low-line table and quickly cross the lounge, momentarily running my fingers along the upright pillars and clutching at the soft folds of beige taffeta curtaining. Already my apartment feels ephemeral. Less solid. Two payments from foreclosure and a mortgagee sale. The tears well up. It's unthinkable. My hands quiver on the drapes. I lay my palms on the mantel above the gas fireplace. The fire is out and the apartment is suddenly cold and draughty. In my dreams the people from *Belle* magazine would have photographed me right here on this spot, wineglass in hand, dressed in casual weekend linen. The headline would have read:

Not Short on Style: Inside Melanie's Designer Home. Or something equally catchy.

In my dreams! But I never thought it was simply an old dream I'd get out in my old age and reminisce about. I thought I could make it happen. I believed it. Now it looks like I might never be famous.

Just homeless.

A fat tear rolls down my cheek. That's when the front door swings open.

It's Jack.

'Janeen called me.' He crosses the apartment in two long strides. 'Baby, I'm so sorry. They're crazy. Winston's crazy.' Strong arms envelop me. I bury my face in the folds of Jack's t-shirt, smudging my tears in the fabric. He smells faintly of Diesel cologne and washing powder. 'So what excuse did Whingie give?'

'Takings are down. It's all my fault,' I snuffle.

‘That’s bullshit! He’s the CEO. He makes the strategy. He’s the one at fault. Not you. You’ve worked hard for that company, Mel. Takings are down. Huh! I’d like to take him down,’ Jack says into the top of my head. I knew Jack would want leap on his white charger and rush into the fray to rescue me. I picture him slashing his way into the Sportzgirl office to slay the evil Winston. The image comforts me briefly, but I glimpse the Seduction bag, remember the two payments, and the horror hits me again.

‘Jack!’ I pull away. ‘My apartment. I won’t be able to afford it. Imagine someone else living here in my beautiful apartment. I can’t bear it!’ Jack draws me back into his embrace and rocks me gently.

‘Shhh. Mel, it’s okay. We’ll work something out. You’ll get another job. You might be able to hold on to the apartment, and if not, there’s always my place.’

I was expecting this. Some might say I’m delaying the inevitable, but I can’t move in with Jack. He’s lovely. I love him. But he’ll see my moving to his place as a step up in our relationship, and I’m not ready for that yet. I place my fingers on his lips.

‘Can we not go through my options tonight, Jack? Please?’ Kissing my fingers, Jack says nothing. Instead, he slips his hands under my top and rubs my back in long velvet strokes. Sighing, I lean into him, letting him support my weight, dissolving beneath his touch. We stand there for a time. Then Jack lifts my hair and kisses the silky skin at my nape. I shiver. Surrender my neck to his caress.

‘There are other options,’ he murmurs. He runs his hands down my body, clasps the hem of my top and slips it gently over my head, exposing the Elle MacPherson bra. His eyes widen as he takes in the swell of my scarlet-clad breasts. When he drags his eyes away, the irises are a limpid blue. Jack cups my face in his hands and tenderly kisses away salty tears. I feel like crying again, but it’s another kind of anguish.

He pulls away and looks at me intently. ‘There’s this.’ His kiss is less tender now, his lips more insistent. I wrap my arms around his neck and press myself against his mouth, savouring the taste of him, taking comfort from his strength.

Slipping both hands under my bottom, Jack sets me on the table. I let him push me backwards, raising my hips for him to slide off my jeans. Under my buttocks the concrete is solid, cool. I gasp.

Jack's voice is low and muted. 'And this.' He presses me back and dips his head and I abandon myself to his option, to the pleasure of his touch, releasing me from the burdens of employment contracts, mortgage payments and deeds of sale.

'Oh yes, I love this option,' I breathe before I lose all coherent thought.

5

A couple of hours later, the phone rings.

'It'll be Janeen,' Jack and I say in unison.

'I'll go.'

Jack mumbles something unintelligible which I take to mean, 'Would you? Okay, Mel, that'd be great.' Leaning over, I kiss him lightly on the forehead. I don't want to leave him, he's so deliciously tousled. He looks like a mattress ad guaranteeing restful slumber.

'Oh, yeah. I was supposed to tell you she has some hokey pokey in her freezer,' Jack says as he burrows under my duvet. The hokey pokey reference is Janeen's way of telling me she commiserates. Ice cream always makes things better, however dire or dismal the situation... In an instant, the day's events come rushing back. I'm suddenly wide awake.

Slipping into my dressing gown, I close the bedroom door on Jack and make my way to the lounge to take the phone there, but by the time I pick up the answer-phone has switched on and Cushla's voice comes down the line. My heart sinks. Could today get any worse?

'Hello, Melanie. This is your mother speaking.' In her heyday, my mother was on the radio panel of a weekday morning Agony Aunt show, and she's been careful to maintain the cultured Remuera diction she perfected during that period.

'I want to remind you your stepfather and I will be holding a small garden party for your sister to celebrate her new beauty franchise.' Yes, things can get worse. I'd forgotten about my step-sister's party. Okay, I hadn't forgotten. I didn't want to remember.

'Please try to resist spoiling Cherry's day, dear. I know how you girls like to play pranks on each other, but one can go too far.' I suspect she's referring to the time Cherry 'hid' my personal diary on the top dive board of the local swimming pool, where the local teenagers, including my secret crush Bradley Stuart-Forbes, congregated to devour its

contents. Naturally, I retaliated by ‘painting’ her breakfast avocado with wasabi sauce.

‘We’ll expect you at 2:00pm tomorrow afternoon. Good-bye, dear.’ There’s a muffled thump as the phone is replaced on its cradle. I erase the message.

I try not to think about how Cushla and Marcus will take the news of my redundancy. Maybe something will come up before I have to tell them. Hopefully, before the mortgage repayments swamp me, before I’m a bedraggled homeless person wandering about Tauranga aimlessly pushing my worldly belongings before me in a pensioners’ shopping trolley.

Damn!

I march into the kitchen and rummage around in the freezer, desperately searching for a big tub of ice cream to fill the despair in the pit of my stomach. But then I remember Janeen and I ate the last of the lemon ripple when she broke up with Ants. I close the freezer and open the fridge instead.

Yoghurt?

No.

Smoked chicken?

No.

Aha! Here you go. Right at the back.

Mince pies. A pack of four. There are three left.

Lovely.

Jack says that after his weekend endurance cycles of 100km, a pie is just the thing. There’s no doubt today has been an exercise in endurance. I get a pie out of the package and read the label: For a crispy flaky crust heat the pie for twenty minutes in a conventional oven. Twenty minutes! Way too long. I stick the pie on a plate, thrust it in the microwave, program in two minutes, then stand beside the appliance watching it circle round and round on the glass platform.

PING.

Whoops, that was loud. I hope Jack didn’t hear it.

I take the pie out and, still standing by the microwave, I pick it up with both hands. It’s slightly soggy and sags in the middle. I don’t care. I take a ravenous wolf-sized bite and instantly burn the top of my mouth.

Oow!

I reverse the bite, suck in a few quick breaths to fan my singed membranes, and then bite down through the pastry into the hot casserole at the pie's centre. A waft of steam escapes from the bite hole. It's fabulous.

Jack's right. A pie is just the thing. [Bite.]

Hot and hearty and fat. [Bite.]

Great chunks of gristle in gray gelatinous gravy. [Bite.]

I take a couple more fast mouthfuls, switch the pie to my left hand and use my right to put the second pie into the microwave. I punch in another two minutes.

The first pie is almost history. I inhale another huge mouthful and cram the remaining edge of pie-crust into a space in my right cheek. I can barely get my lips closed as I chew.

PING.

Yes! The second pie is ready. I take it out and repeat my 'eat and heat' manoeuvre with the third. A dribble of pie filling oozes out of the casing, rolls off my palm slides down my wrist. I barely pause before licking it off. Whoever knew a pie could be so good? Why would anyone stop at one?

PING.

I polish off the second pie and begin on the third. I should enter a pie-eating contest. They must exist. The medicinal effects of my pie prescription are beginning to kick in; the triple dose of yellow pastry infusing my veins with stodgy sluggish comfort. I'm saturated in fat and chemical-sounding things that don't get a supermarket heart tick, the blessed lard-laden mixture filling the terrified hollow in my stomach.

6

Bloated and exhausted, I plonk myself down in front of the telly with my half can of now-flat Coke. I pick up the remote and flick through to Karen Ropati reading the ten o'clock news.

....an amendment to the bill was thrown out this morning in a vote which saw...

Karen Ropati is exquisite. I so want to hate her. I bet she's never eaten a meat pie in her life. Tonight her black hair is pulled back off her face and secured in a pony-tail. A pair of retro red glasses cover most of her face, which on anyone else would make you think Elton John, but on Karen Ropati they're perfect, both standing out and fitting in at the same time. I look across the room at my own reflection in the glass sliding door. I think maybe I need a haircut. One of those symbolic life-changing cuts, like Brittany Spears (but without the derailment.) The sort of haircut you get after a break-up with a cheating boyfriend; a bold and sassy style that shouts, 'You walked away from this?!' I sigh and take another look at my reflection. I like my nose though. I turn my head sideways to take a look at my profile. Yep, my nose is okay. And my boobs are okay, too. I like them. But jeepers, my stomach is totally distended, as if I were pregnant. I rub my hand over my over-inflated belly. I guess that's what comes from consuming a couple of thousand comfort calories of pie.

...crossed the floor.

The last item of news is controversial. I know this because Karen Ropati has flashed us her signature expression, raising her left eyebrow to cause a lopsided crinkling of the forehead. It's a quizzical look which seems to say 'So what are they going to do about this one? Even her eyebrows have something to say. I check the sliding doors again to see if mine want to contribute anything other than 'Pluck me.' I try to replicate Ropati's quizzical look. Best not.

...In an innovative move the Government announced plans today to reduce the nation's incidence of obesity and the associated risk of Type II diabetes and heart disease...

Ropati's face is as ubiquitous as mine. She's everywhere. She appears on every other cover of *Belle*, whenever there's no scandalous news to report of Tomkat, Brangelina, Posh and Becks, or anyone who has ever had a role on Coronation Street. Last week *Belle* showed Ropati relaxing in her restored-to-its-original-state Wellington Victorian villa. Here she is in her favourite distressed blue rattan garden chair reading a Matthew Reilly thriller while dressed in a Trelise Cooper gown and a pair of gumboots. And here's her grandmother's recipe for café-style tuna avocado stack, which she invites readers to share with friends and family. A couple of months back there was a four-page article on her winter holidays in Thailand, with photos of her touring in a long-tail boat, riding a water buffalo, and frolicking about feeding an elephant.

...joint initiatives with the private sector intended to stimulate greater levels of physical activity amongst...

There's a chance if you surveyed a sample of ten New Zealanders, an equal number would recognise our faces (I estimate a ratio of say 9:7 for Karen to me.) The difference is Karen Ropati is truly Someone. In the Who's Who of New Zealand Celebrity she's the first entry.

An über-celeb.

Sales of her tell-all book about her mother's struggle with an aggressive breast cancer were phenomenal, the first ever publication (other than the bible) to outsell the Edmonds cook-book. And that was in spite of the fact the publishers issued it in August, instead of December, in time for Christmas. She's in demand for book signings, documentaries, public speaking engagements, and women's group meetings. The Tauranga Branch of Zonta waited a full year for her to come and deliver her talk 'Screen-Sista' about the role of women in television.

...opposition leaders, while not rejecting the proposal outright, have serious doubts about the Government's ability to make good on the subsidies. And in sport, the Black Ferns recorded a win...

I switch channels. They're rerunning the thirteenth series of *The Bill*. I switch again and up comes an episode of *It's Me or the Dog*. That pretty well sums up my chances of ever becoming the next Karen

Ropati. Even Seymour the Telecom dog is better known than me. At least he has his own moniker. I'm just the Sportzgirl girl, and soon I won't even be that. I'll be nobody.

Disgusted, I turn off the television. I won't worry about it now. I'll think of something tomorrow. Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll think about it tomorrow.

It always worked for Scarlett O'Hara.

7

As a compromise, Jack and I arrive ten minutes late to Marcus and Cushla's event. The delay means I'm not submissively early, and nor am I defiantly late. Mind you, it's a miracle I'm not late because I dithered for ages over what to wear. After my Seduction deduction I couldn't afford to buy something perfect so I was forced to try on everything in my wardrobe, with the exception of pyjamas and hand-knits. I decided on a pair of dark dress jeans, pink strappy sandals, and a layered lime green chiffon top sprigged with tiny antique pink flowers. My hair I swept into a loose updo, an unstudied look that took me an hour to achieve.

Parked on the verge outside my parents' house, I'm still not sure I've got it right. I flick down the sun-visor and examine myself in the mirror. I turn my head left and right. Perhaps I should have chosen some danglier bling? Something expensive and flashy. Instead, I'm wearing a silver chain carrying the ring my Dad sent me for my fourteenth birthday, a rose quartz chip set in a simple gold band. It arrived after my actual birthday and has always been too small, but I love it because Colin chose it for me. Cherry had smirked. She says it's likely to be a pink glass chip set in simple gold-plate, but I notice Marcus never gave her a ring on her fourteenth birthday.

My cheeks already need a touch up so I delve around in my bag for my Softly Sensational pink blusher. There are still a few minutes left before my timing passes from subtle statement into the category of defiantly late. Jack opens my door. He takes my hand and diverts my attention from the mirror.

'You look beautiful,' he assures me. I look into his eyes and can see he means it. I stop fussing and step out of the car.

Cushla and Marcus' Omokoroa townhouse is a two-storey 1980s establishment, recently refurbished. The new designer latte stucco is nice,

an understated backdrop for the line of white standard roses Cushla has planted on either side of the path, marshalling visitors toward the entranceway. The blooms are past their best, their fluffy petals littering the path and one or two already bruised and browning. The white, painted wooden window frames have been removed in favour of sleek black aluminium joinery and the wrought iron zig-zag balustrades of the upstairs balcony have been replaced with reinforced polished glass. Marcus and Cushla will probably want to hurl me from that balcony when they learn I'm to be unemployed in less than the gestation period of a hamster. Which is why I've decided not to tell them yet.

Jack rings the doorbell. The muffled chimes of Big Ben can be heard through the new fake cedar door. My step-father Marcus opens the door. He's a stocky man, shaped like a wine-barrel and equally solid. His face is pale gerwürtz with cheeks the colour of a newly opened bottle of Beaujolais Nouveau.

'Hello there, Flakey. Good of you to come.' Flakey is Marcus' personal nickname for me, probably because I'm about as welcome as psoriasis.

'Thank you Marcus, it's always lovely to be home.'

Jack steps forward. 'Very kind of you to invite us, sir,' he says, firmly shaking Marcus' hand.

'Your mother is in the kitchen, Melanie. I'm sure she'd be grateful for your help.' *Into the kitchen with you, Cinders!*

'Jack, come through to the garden and have a glass of champagne. I don't expect you teachers get much opportunity to imbibe – that'd be flouting the rules.' Jack slings me a bemused backward glance as he dutifully follows Marcus through to the terrace and the garden.

In the kitchen, every black Italian granite surface is covered in white platters, each smothered with bite-sized morsels. I catch sight of an expanse of profiteroles, golden, puffed up, crammed with cream and splashed with dark chocolate.

Yum. There's an upside to everything if you look hard enough.

A couple of waitresses in black skirts and crisp white shirts dart about carrying glasses and trays from the kitchen to the patio. Cushla has hired a few of the local teenagers, judging from their school lace-ups. My mother breezes into the kitchen as I'm making a beeline for the profiteroles. Heading me off, she plants a dry kiss on my cheek. She's

wearing a diaphanous mother-of-the-bride creation and smells of Nina Ricci.

‘Melanie. Hello, dear. Please don’t touch the profiteroles. They’re for the guests.’

Rats.

‘Would you mind putting the first tray of dim sum in the steamer, sweetheart? And you won’t forget the slice of lemon in the bottom tier, will you? I absolutely must phone the florist. She’s sent gladioli instead of irises, for heaven’s sake. I’ll have to sort it out.’ She floats out of the kitchen again wafting l’Air du Temps in her wake.

I find the pre-prepared dim sum in the refrigerator and set about cutting off the plastic wrap and arranging them so they don’t touch each other in the top tier of the steamer. There are shrimp in rice flour pastry, miniature pork buns, parcels of pickled cabbage and mushroom, squares of taro dumpling, and sweet custard tarts. *Tiny pieces of heart.* I pop a cold parcel into my mouth and savour the salty taste.

Marcus and Cushla married when I was twelve. They met across the reception desk in the solicitors’ office where Cushla worked. I still don’t know if Cushla truly loves Marcus. I think you only get one searing, passionate, no-holds-barred love in your life, someone for whom you would throw caution to the wind, no matter how improbable that person might be, because you simply can’t help it. In Cushla’s case, that person was my dad, but by then Colin was long gone.

When Marcus, a widower of two years, came along he seemed to me dependably boring. If he told the babysitter they would be back by 10:00pm, 10:00pm it was. Cushla and Marcus’ courtship wasn’t the Cary Grant silk-scarf-billowing-behind-a-convertible kind. I don’t recall Cushla waltzing about our two-bedroom weatherboard house singing about how she could’ve danced all night. Their seven months of dating involved dinners and movies, window shopping, occasional walks and some local theatre performances. And then, one evening, Cushla announced that she and Marcus were going to be married and she hoped I was okay with that. It was as if she was asking me to remind her to put out the rubbish.

While my mother came to the relationship with a carry-on (me), Marcus came with excess baggage (Charles and Cherry.) We became a blended family. Unfortunately, apart from Cherry’s ringlets, we did not

resemble *The Brady Bunch* in any way. Charlie wasn't too bad. Four years younger than me, he was too busy tearing up trees and practising on his skateboard to give me any real bother. On the other hand, Cherry and I blended like oil and water.

'Is there any more cassis?' Speak of the devil. The shrill voice is followed up by my step-sister who bounces into the kitchen, her blonde locks bobbing.

'Hello there, Melanie. I thought you were the kitchen help.' She giggles.

Briefly, I turn away from the steamer and a fat egg tart drops down the front of my blouse. It rolls over my breasts, bounces off my thigh and lands with a greasy plop on the floor.

'Whoops! Butterfingers,' says Cherry rolling her eyes. 'You'd better leave that to the professionals, Melanie. Where is everyone, anyway? We need some more cassis for the kirs royales.'

'Cushla's gone to phone the florist,' I reply, stooping to mop up the spilled tart. 'Something about gladioli and irises...'

Cherry isn't listening. She's rummaging about in Marcus' liquor cupboard, her pale blue satin-clad bottom pointing skywards as she pulls out bottle after bottle, reading the labels and dumping the rejects on the floor.

Calvados...Cointreau...Pastis...Kir! Cherry straightens up. 'Excellent. Champagne on its own is dull. Bubbles should be fruity. Ooh, I wonder if we have any strawberries like they do at Roland Garros.' She begins a cursory poke around on the shelves of the fridge, but it's packed full of food for today's celebration. She gives up and shuts the refrigerator door. 'Never mind,' she says. She looks me up and down in an obvious manner. 'Melanie, my guests will be arriving soon. You need to get changed. You look a mess. You know what? There are some free samples in the upstairs bathroom. I've been testing them for the salon. One of them should totally sort out that frizz for you. Green bottle, swirly, on the left of the cabinet,' she says, holding the kir bottle away from her dress with right hand, twirling a curl of hair with the other, and smirking openly.

I suppress a frisson of rage as Big Ben chimes again.

‘That’ll be my first guest. I’LL GET IT!’ she trills, setting my teeth on edge. She rushes out, abandoning, half a dozen liqueur bottles on the floor.

8

My top is not too bad. I could probably sponge the custard off. But there's a greasy blob on my thigh near my crotch and sponging will only make it look like I've wet my pants. I'm going to have to change. I stomp my way upstairs to the bedroom that used to be mine and throw open the wardrobe. Please let there be something in here I can wear.

Oh my gosh! Look at this. It's the *I Dream of Jeannie* costume I wore to the Y13 fancy dress social. I forgot it was here. And here's the red leather skirt I had Janeen make me when I was completely infatuated with Elisabeth Shue in *Leaving Las Vegas*. I used to wear it with a Coff's Coast Rally promotional t-shirt Colin once sent me. I finger the soft leather. I saved for a whole term to buy this leather. I had to do Janeen's hostel duties for a month too, but it was worth it. It'll probably be back in fashion again soon.

I push the skirt aside and keep looking. There must be something else. Here you go! These gorgeous chocolate brown Thai silk pants. I bought these in Auckland's Victoria Park when the market was still quirky and bohemian. I only wore them a couple of times because they're difficult to get in and out of. I peel off my grease-stained clothes and try them on. They're made from a single piece of fabric with a pair of ties at each end. I tie the first set of ties around my waist at the back like an apron. The fabric cascades down my front to my ankles. I hoop it between my legs and bring the second pair of ties around my waist, this time tying at the front. It takes me a while, but I finally get them on. They have a soft, glossy feel to them. Floaty.

I fumble around in the wardrobe and find a pale pink t-shirt. Whipping across the hall, I take a peek at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Not bad. I swish the fabric about, feeling exotic. But now my hair isn't quite right. Taking a comb from the cabinet I scrape my hair into a tight pony tail and tie it low at the back of my head. Where is that

product Cherry was talking about? I find it where she said it would be, on the left. Cherry is right. This stuff is nice. My hair is smooth and elegant. Perfect! I hurry downstairs because now I can hear that quite a number of the guests have arrived and Jack must be wondering where on earth I've got to.

At the bottom of the stairs, I run in to Charlie.

'Hey, Mel. What's up?' *Attack of a custard tart.*

'Oh, I had to change,' I say absently, looking past my step-brother for a glimpse of Jack.

'Looking for Jack? I saw him on the terrace talking to one of the brothers from Evermore.'

'Evermore? The Band? Really?'

'Yep. Apparently. Cherry was in same class as one of his cousins.'

'Cool! Which brother is it? Peter, Jon or Dann?'

'I don't know. One of them. The cute one, I guess,' his voice trails off.

I look up sharply.

'Charlie?' While things between me and Charlie started out frosty, they changed abruptly one weekend when I was on a rare visit home. Marcus and Cushla had been to brunch in town and when they returned Marcus detected the smell of marijuana in the upstairs bathroom. It wasn't too hard for Marcus to pinpoint Charlie as the likely guilty party. Charlie didn't admit to anything, but it didn't stop Marcus storming about threatening to revoke permission for Charlie's trip to Australia for a cook school. Poor Charlie. He was sixteen, skinny, and he looked so green and miserable hunched over on the couch staring at the pattern on the carpet that I felt sorry for him. So, I told Marcus the joint was mine. I was twenty and had left home anyway, and Cushla certainly wasn't about to let him call the police. Marcus blustered about, mumbling through clenched teeth about 'life lessons' and 'putting the wind up me.' Then there was a long-winded-rant about setting a better example for one's younger siblings and how I was not welcome under his roof unless I was prepared to abide by his rules; rules which did *not* at any time involve the smoking of illegal substances. I didn't come home for four months after that, which took the heat off Charlie. So Charlie and I are friends.

'Everything okay? What're you doing lurking about in the hallway?'

‘Avoiding the kitchen. Cushla’s looking for my professional advice. I’m hiding out here to avoid getting stuck in a pinny all afternoon. I’m pushed enough already at the restaurant.’

‘Busy?’

‘Frantic. And Ben’s asked me to re-invent our entire menu by next Wednesday.’ Ben, Charlie’s business partner, is a brilliant entrepreneur, but Charlie is the culinary genius. One of Charlie’s signature dishes is a dessert made from celeriac and mascarpone. Imagine. Celeriac and mascarpone! I can’t think of anything worse, and it’s divine.

‘Hang on a minute. Redesigning the entire menu? That’s a big ask, isn’t it?’

‘Yep. It’s this war on obesity, Mel. It’s now to be played out in our top restaurants. Who can produce the leanest menu, ladies and gentlemen, without sacrificing an iota of taste? Three course meals with fewer than 300 calories. And nothing less than sublime will do either. Let them try making authentic New York Cheesecake without cream cheese! It’s not possible, Mel,’ he sighs.

‘What about dishing up less?’

‘Hah! We tried that, but consumers don’t like it. Even the foodies like to see value for money. Sure, I could put a tiny stack of scallops in the centre of a plate, drizzle it with a dash of plum sauce and name it something snazzy like ‘Stacques de St Jacques,’ but Kiwi blokes won’t buy it. To them stacks means stacks, preferably haystack size.’

I immediately think of Jack’s preference for chunky meat pies and dinner platefuls of cheese toasties.

‘Poor you. Why the big rush, though?’

‘It’s the lure of free government money. Ben thinks he can get us funding for a menu development proposal. He has this grandiose plan to franchise and push it in the direction of the polytechnic hospitality courses.’

‘Sounds like it could work.’

‘Yeah, probably. Ben’s ideas usually fly. It’s just me who has trouble seeing the future of fine dining as oversized piles of shredded lettuce leaf and a tuft of grated beetroot.’

I rest my hand on Charlie’s shoulder. ‘Imagine if you pull it off though, Charlie.’

‘Huh!’ he snorts. Do I tell Charlie about toady Winston firing me? I know he can keep a secret. I decide against it because he’s already feeling wretched.

‘Hey. What say we take a stroll out to the terrace and get our photo taken with the cute bloke from Evermore?’

‘Nah. Thanks, but I’ll stay put for now. I think I saw Cushla taking a tour of the garden with the mayor.’

Leaving Charlie, I plough my way toward the terrace, but I’m stalled by a squeeze of guests at the buffet. In the corner, Marcus is sequestered with his accountant and an executive type in pinstripe. I catch a riff of their conversation.

‘Marcus here is Vice President in Charge of Operations of a Doggie Chow company. Big-Chief-Doggie-Chow. Isn’t that right, Marcus?’ the accountant gushes.

‘That’s right, Neville, although, I wouldn’t use the term Doggie Chow. We supply gourmet pet formulas to New York’s exclusive inner city pet delicatessens.’

‘Inner city pet delicatessens!’ the Pinstripe Type splutters. ‘Whatever next?’

‘I’ll tell you what next,’ the accountant says, leaning in to the Pinstripe Type as if he had some gossip to impart. ‘They diversified into breed-specific formulas! Ever heard of the Labra-doodle Dinner? The King Charles Cavalier Banquet? What about the Superior Schnauzer Supper? That’s them, too.’

‘Really?’ Pinstripe Type seems impressed.

‘Believe me, it’s a lucrative business,’ Neville says. ‘After all, the company is built on a great concept. Guilt! Because everyone knows the city is no place to raise a lively, healthy pet. Is that a great idea or what? Feeling the need to make amends for the lack of trees for their pooches to pee on, those rich city types rush out and buy little Spikey the most expensive formula available? Isn’t that right, Marcus?’

I couldn’t have summed it up better myself. I slip past a coven of Cushla’s floral arrangement friends and have just made it to the terrace doors when Marcus taps his champagne glass with his cake fork. Oh God. Here it comes. The formal speech. I could probably write it myself. Let me tell you how it will go. It’ll start out along the lines of ‘We’re here to celebrate the success of Daddy’s Little Girl, Cherry.’ Then there’ll be

words like ‘monumentally proud’ and namby-pamby stuff about Cherry overcoming the loss of her mother followed by more words like ‘wonderful’ and ‘exquisite’ and ‘ongoing success.’ I take a few steps to the left so I’m beside the French doors and nearer to the drinks table. Picking up a champagne flute, I take a gulp. At least, I’ll be able to pretend I’m drinking heartily to the success of my step-sister. Rather than just drinking heartily.

‘Friends,’ Marcus says as the buzz dies down. ‘I’d like to thank you for helping us celebrate the opening of the best new beauty franchise around: Cherry Fizz.’ There’s a round of polite applause. ‘Firstly, I have to say how proud we are of Cherry.’

So far I’m right on the button. My glass is empty. I’ll need a new glass if I’m to toast the success of Cherry’s new business venture. It’s lucky I’m standing by the drinks table. A few metres from me, behind a group of chiffony matrons, Jack is leaning against the door frame. I see him look over and raise an eyebrow at me. I ignore him. It’s only my second glass and I’m not driving. It’s late afternoon now and I’m feeling a little draughty here by the terrace. I edge in closer to the drinks table. Marcus is still rambling on.

‘Many of you will be aware I lost my first wife, Desirée, to cancer. It was a tragic time for the children, and especially Cherry who was only five. However, we were especially blessed to have my beautiful wife Cushla come into our lives.’ Cushla tilts her head to one side and smiles at her husband. Marcus raises both hands in a mock gesture of protest. ‘Yes, yes, I know, dear. You always say one can never replace a mother, but I know our guests will agree you’ve done wonderfully well, raising Cherry to be the elegant, accomplished young woman she is today.’

Elegant and accomplished. Well, I was close. Now it’s Cherry’s turn to tilt her head to one side and smile. Cherry, coy? Hrmph! Any minute now Marcus will propose the toast so I turn back to the table and swap my empty glass for a fresh one. Behind me Marcus blathers on about how Cherry topped her class at beauty school, how it took flair to recognise the right franchise...

He stops talking. That’s odd. It’s not like Marcus to be lost for words. I swivel about, my glass in my hand, wondering what the delay could be. Marcus is staring right at me, his mouth open.

What?

I look around. Everyone is looking at me.

'Melanie! For goodness sake!' Cherry is livid. Her face has gone a funny pink colour. What are they staring at? I've only had a couple of drinks.

I am *not* drunk.

Behind the crowd, from his vantage point on the hall stairs, Charlie is giggling.

What!?

Maybe I sloshed some drink on my clothes? Or on the carpet? I look down. My eyes skim over my lovely silk pants. The rich brown material flows nicely to the floor where it's puddling around my sandals. That's not right. It shouldn't be pooling near my feet. And instantly, I'm in one of those slow-motion catastrophes as it occurs to me the silky ties of my pants are covering my shoes and trailing on the floor between my legs. Which can mean only one thing.

My pants have come undone.

Oh hell! Quick! I have to pick up those ties. But my hands are full.

Damn! I scabble to put my down my glass, somewhere, anywhere. Pivoting, I plonk it on the drinks table and quickly stoop to retrieve the ties.

Mistake.

Bad mistake!

'MELANIE!' Behind me there's a collective roar from Cushla, Marcus and Cherry.

Ohmigod! I can't believe I'm so stupid. Turned and bent over, my thonged bottom is exposed to the entire guest list! Including Omokoroa's mayor and the cute brother from Evermore. I feel myself go hot. My face is burning. Scrummaging around on the floor, I try to collect up the ties of my pants. Stupid, ridiculous, blasted pants! Why couldn't I have tied a doubly-double granny knot? Tears blur my eyes, making it even harder to get a purchase on the slippery fabric.

I'm hot all over with embarrassment.

Except for my bottom.

Which is *still* draughty!

At last, I have a tie in each of my hands. I take a sharp intake of breath. Force myself to concentrate. Ignore the cackles of laughter. Marcus bellowing. Cherry screeching. Right, so now I loop both the ties

beneath my crotch and carry them up, behind and outside of my legs. Now, bring them around to tie at the front. I can't do it. My hands are shaking too much. I'm trembling with humiliation, my ears full of the screams of my family and the raucous laughter of Cherry's guests.

My bottom, my soul is bared. I'm mortified.

Suddenly, Jack is there behind me, his large body creating an eclipse between my naked bottom and the rest of the room. Gently, he takes the ties from my hands, reaches forward, his arms about me, and ties them firmly at my waist. Finally, they're secure. I sob with relief.

'Mel, come on love. It's time for us to go now.' I nod numbly, grateful he's taking charge. He takes my hand in his and we make our escape over the terrace and across the yard.

Thank you, thank you, Jack.