

ROMANCE WRITERS of NEW ZEALAND



LIAISONS *2024*

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Romance Writers of New Zealand thank **Chapter** for their sponsorship, and also all our members who entered the contest or helped with the preliminary judging.

And a special thanks to Frances Loo and her team at Chapter Book and Tea Shop for the final judging of this year's stories.



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**In the Heart of
Mt Eden Village**

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3rd

Green Sari Girl

Pragati Vasisht

“Another day, another dollar!” his colleague shrugged before sighing loudly and returning to the screen. Alok hesitated a smile in return and hurried his headphones on before any other boomerisms could be lobbed at him. He pinched his brows, then stared out of his ground floor window on to Halsey Street.

And went completely still.

Outside the window, a woman in a green chiffon sari threw down the bags she’d been carrying. She craned her neck and ran her hands through her hair as if still

shaking off the weight. Alok wondered exactly how opaque the glass was as he sat unblinking, taking in her curves, the round face, rosy cheeks...

She paused, peeled off her cardigan, and stuffed it into one of the bags. While surveying the bag situation, she took the drape end of her sari and stuffed it into her waistband. Her bare, exposed midriff now completely paralysed Alok's will to move. The girl continued to shift and shunt things around as Alok followed the mass of colour moving in front of him. The green sari, the purple bangles, the pink *bindi*, the curly black hair waving and crashing about...

Seemingly satisfied with her re-organisation, she adjusted the bags over her shoulders again. Alok felt his heart stop as she flicked herself a quick once-over in the glass and blew her hair off her face, looking him straight in the eye in the process. His heartbeat came back with rapidity though, as she walked slowly and deliberately down the street.

* * *

Three days later

The aqua-blue waters of Auckland's harbour sparkled like diamonds under the spring sun. Alok decided that today, life was too short to be tied to a desk. He meandered through Viaduct Harbour, past the colour and cacophony of eateries, the serenely moored yachts. He smiled to himself as he walked past a girl tented under a stole, shielding herself from the sun. On the way back he saw the same stole sprawled on the seats, with a girl bent over, looking for something on the red brick pavers. As he got closer, she flicked her hair back from her face.

Familiarity dawned and for the second time in as many days, Alok went completely still.

"Is it...?"

Her mercurial appearance at his office window the other day had hijacked his thoughts completely. *"How often do you see hot women in saris gadding about the Viaduct...? Was it an office Diwali function? It is the season..."*

He didn't know what Bollywood plot line he'd walked into, but he was itching to find out.

"Um, have you lost something?" He cleared his throat, more so to hear his own voice over thudding heart.

She jerked her head, startled.

And he saw her again.

The big kohl-rimmed eyes, the olive skin, even more radiant in her sunlight yellow dress and peacock blue cardigan. An apologetic laugh escaped her as she shyly looked up at him again.

"Oh, no... I just dropped a pastel between the slats..." she pointed to the bench seats. Instead, Alok's eyes fell on her phone screen and an open sketchbook. He returned to look at her, his eyes wider than before.

"Don't worry, I'll find it... I'm fine..."

"No, um, I can help...? You need to finish this sketch right?" Alok moved closer to inspect the slats, knitting his eyebrows, earnestly considering an escape plan for the poor, trapped, pastel...

"Oh don't worry... I'm... I'm just a beginner... just dabbling..."

"No, it's fantastic that you even *do* this!"

She dipped her head and smiled back at him again.

"Okay... well ah, I'll leave you to it then..." Alok shrugged a smile and got one in return.

As he walked away, he wondered how something could feel so uplifting *and* deflating at the same time.

* * *

A week later

"So, no name?" Drew spoke between large bites of his burger.

Alok shook his head.

"Let's call her Green Sari Girl. The GSG!"

Alok turned an unamused face to Drew, and then away again.

“Okay so we know that she *must* work in the Viaduct, she’s hot in a sari, and randomly loses drawing supplies in public”.

“It’s called *urban sketching* you heathen” Alok deadpanned. “And, yeah...”

“And we’re sitting in the Viaduct for the third day in a row, like a bunch of pathetic seagulls waiting on scraps, so we can see her again.”

Alok smacked him in the arm. “Yes...”

“Good luck man” Drew said, going back to chomping his burger.

Alok grunted.

“No, wait!”

Drew sputtered out a now-mutilated piece of lettuce.

“I think I saw something on her phone, some event at the temple...? Of course, yes!” Alok’s eyes widened at the sudden realisation, “The *Navratri* dances are on! Maybe she’ll be there!”

The contents of Drew’s burger were now visible in his half-open mouth as he fixed his stare at Alok.

“Well, clearly, it’s not *me* you’re talking to...”

Alok grinned at Drew and then triumphantly into the distance.

* * *

“But Ma, I need to be somewhere that night...”

“Where?” Mrs Kumar’s eyes had narrowed to slits, her lips puckered. “Tell me where you have to be on the *one* night of three hundred and sixty-five that we have guests in the house?”

“Just... somewhere...”

“Somewhere? I’d *promised* a feast once all my prayers were answered, and your father recovered fully! What could be more important than your father!” Mrs Kumar’s voice got louder as she stormed into the kitchen and utensils started being whacked about. “One night! Somewhere! Won’t even say *where*!”

“I’ll be back before 11 Ma... What’s the big deal...”

“Hmph!” Mrs Kumar whacked the pan onto the stove.

“We had a Diwali party last year... they all *know* me. No one’s going to be offended if I’m late”.

“There are *new* guests I’ve invited this year! And you only get to make one first impression!”

“Oh god Ma... don’t tell me... you’re not trying to fix me up with some poor girl are you?”

Mrs Kumar’s eyes widened to discs and her mouth flatlined.

“Let me be very clear Mr Alok Kumar” She deliberated on every word. “If there are any *girls* I invite to this house that you don’t even have the courtesy of meeting, *they* won’t be the poor ones!”

She abruptly turned around and went back to whacking utensils about. “I expect you back in time while all the guests are still here.”

Alok knew better than to argue.

* * *

The next night

Alok walked into literally hundreds of men, women and children milling around, dancing to the tunes blaring from the live band. People seemed to blend into a mass of happy, swirling colours in tune with equally happy beats of the *dhol*, the ornately decorated temple deities overseeing proceedings of the packed hall.

This was the last night of the dancing festival. “*People turn up on the last night right?*” Alok hung out by the sidelines, torn between ducking to avoid recognition, and craning his neck to find the girl he was looking for.

It was almost 11pm, people had started to go home.

She wasn’t here.

He could at least try and keep another promise.

* * *

Alok pulled into the garage, turned the ignition off and tipped his head back on the seat.

“You blew off your own mother, for the party she held in your own house, for your own dad, all for a girl in a green sari for-god’s-sake, whose name you don’t even know, and who doesn’t even know you exist!”

He counted each misdemeanour on his fingers as he chided himself.

“So now, you’ll get your head out of your ass, go back in your own home, charm everyone’s pants off and basically be the grown-ass man you need to be!”

He closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh, pausing a few seconds before opening the car door.

Familiar smells and sounds wafted down the hall and somehow, the edgy unease of the past few days ebbed away. Cumin rice and nutty *daal*, earthy *naan* and minty *raita*, cinnamon-spiced sweets and cardamom tea. The jovial hum of conversation and laughter became louder as he ascended the stairs.

“Oh, he’s here finally” Mrs Kumar said. All heads turned and the room erupted in warm greetings.

But Alok stood speechless, his eyes fixed on his Green Sari Girl who was now seated across the hall, in his living room.

* * *

Three months later

“No, don’t turn... Alok! Stay still! And don’t smile! It’ll tire you...”

Alok obeyed, unable to stop grinning. He loved ribbing her because eventually she would laugh, and he’d fall a little more in love again.

He dove in for a kiss.

“Aalokkk! Let me just finish this!”

“Okay, sorry babe, serious this time” he lied, having no intention of letting her concentrate on anything but himself.

“Did I ever tell you about the first time I saw you?”

Her eyes shot up to his, a curious naughty expression in them, although the pastel in her hands didn’t move from the page.

“You were wearing this green sari. And you had all these bags... you stopped in front of my office window. And you... basically stripped in public... trying to get organised...” Alok laughed as he stared into her eyes.

She tugged his sleeve in response.

“I know... that’s the first time I saw you too.” she replied, laughing into his chest.





Zucchini and Tomatoes Kris Pearson

Kelly hefted the ripe tomatoes, one in each hand. This year her dad had grown the oval Roma variety and they were smooth and warm. If this was a man she was touching, he'd have big ones!

They needed only the slightest pressure to part from the vine. Her lovely dad had encouraged her out into the garden often, assuring her it was good for her soul, but a month ago he'd died of a massive heart attack and nothing felt good for her soul any longer.

She sighed, unhappy and unsettled, then returned to her crouch to check how the zucchini were doing. Bolting! She reached for the knife in her basket and sliced off the largest. She could split that lengthways, scoop it out, stuff it with tomato and herbs and cheese, and bake it. Half for lunch, half for dinner. She pulled a face at the

others. They were such suggestive things. She slid a hand around another one and caressed it briefly. Long and warm.

Yeah, no hunky man in her life for ages now. No-one even on the radar.

The big zucchini reared suggestively above the tomatoes in the basket, just begging for parsley pubes. Well, that was easy enough! She arranged some dark green frizz around her display. And now her naughty brain was making her snigger.

“Your beans are doing well,” a deep voice said from over the fence.

Kelly coughed with surprise and embarrassment. A landscaper was working next door, and she’d appreciated him through the gaps between the planks while she weeded. He wore chino shorts that showed off great legs, a green T-shirt, and a concealing straw sunhat. But she was absolutely *not* looking for gardening advice or conversation or company. She wanted to be left alone to be sad and to somehow plan a future without her father.

Lucky neighbours though, being able to afford someone to help with their garden...

“The beans always do well,” she said, staying in her crouch. “My Dad built that frame ages ago.”

“You can’t beat Scarlet Runners.”

Kelly rolled her eyes at his insistence. “Pick yourself some if you can reach them from there.”

“Hey, thanks.”

He sounded really pleased, so she allowed herself a small smile. After maybe thirty seconds of clipping noises, a boot landed on top of the fence and the wearer vaulted over.

“Oi!” she exclaimed, as he landed on the path. “I said ‘from there.’” She hastily rearranged the display in her basket.

“Can’t get near because of the roses,” he said. “I’ve got them going really well

next door now.” He held an impromptu posy of the fragrant blooms – three half open pinks, some unfurling whites, and lemon-yellow singles. “They told me you lost your Dad suddenly,” he added, nodding sideways to indicate the next house, and proffering the flowers. “I had some good chats with him over the fence.”

“Oh,” was the best Kelly could manage. Followed, too late, by, “Thanks,” as she accepted the roses, raised them for a deep, pleasurable sniff, and then laid them in the basket. “Yes, very sudden. He was barely sixty.” She waved a hand at the runner beans hanging in the sun. “Pick as many as you want. There’s only me now.” She presumed he’d already know that if the neighbours had mentioned her father.

The landscaper pushed his hat off and held it over his crotch like a bashful cowboy. Concealed zucchini and tomatoes invaded her brain.

He had wavy dark brown hair. Bright blue eyes. A lanky, lean, hard-muscled build.

“You need fattening up,” she thought, and then heard herself saying it out loud. She closed her eyes.

“Yeah,” he agreed, not apparently offended. “I work it off, no matter how much I eat.”

Kelly swallowed. “I could... cook you some lunch today,” she said, thinking of the large zucchini. Plenty for two if she added some other goodies to the stuffing and served it with salad.

So much for not wanting to be interrupted! But it would only be fair in return for the thoughtful roses.

“Tyson,” he said, thrusting out a big hand on the end of a long arm. “Mostly Ty.”

“Kelly,” she said, shaking it. They were both wearing gardening gloves. She couldn’t help grinning. “Double condom,” she blurted.

Godfathers – why had she said that!?

He gave a bark of laughter. "You won't get pregnant, then. No little seedlings."

"I'll just... umm... put these in water," she said, looking down at the flowers, and then up at him again, embarrassed and far too attracted.

"Thanks for the lunch offer," he said, pulling his hat on. "Maybe I could counter with dinner sometime? If you're free?"

She swallowed. "Perhaps. We'll see." Why was she always so awkward with nice men? "I'll bring you a bag to put the beans in. Are you by any chance vegetarian or vegan?"

He shook his head. "I'll eat anything."

Oh good, I'll add some bacon...

"Okay," she said, tweaking off some basil leaves, then surveying the big plot with a sigh. "I'll never keep this much garden under control. That's if I stay living here. And I can't even make firm plans yet until probate's granted and the place is legally mine. How much would you charge for maybe a couple of hours a week if I need to keep it tidy for selling?"

He rubbed his chin. In the silence she heard the soft scrape of his thumb and forefinger against bristle.

"You could get someone to share the house," he suggested after a few moments. "And knock the rent down a bit if they're willing to take care of the garden?"

Kelly shrugged. "Fat chance. How would I know if they're useful gardeners?"

"You know *I'm* a useful gardener."

She grabbed a surprised breath as she glared at him. Registered genuine hope in his twinkling blue eyes. "But... umm...?"

"The landlord wants my place empty to move some of his family into. Needs me out."

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I’ll garden if you cook.”

She gnawed on her bottom lip. “No funny business,” she croaked.

“Agreed. Double condoms all the way.”

Cheeky! “No condoms,” she snapped, and then squeezed her eyes shut. “Um – I mean no sex.”

“I was only offering gardening,” he said with a grin.

“Of course you were,” she said, turning away, knowing she’d be blushing. And quite enjoying the way other pieces of her body were heating up, too. “Lunch in half an hour, and I’ll consider things.”

*

“So,” she said as they sat at the table, a glass of juice apiece. She might have been wearing a little more make-up and her better jeans. She was sure he’d never notice. “I take it you were serious about needing to move?”

Ty breathed in deeply and then sighed, which did nice things for his chest under the soft and stretchy T-shirt. “Yep – the sooner the better. I’m currently paying four-sixty a week for a two-bedroomed place. Plus food and so on.”

“That’s a lot for one!”

Nodding, he said, “The mate I was sharing with left recently for Aussie. It was okay with two of us.”

She took a sip of juice. “Well, maybe three hundred here? You can have the garage for your ute once I’ve sold Dad’s car.”

He raised a dark brow. “Three hundred? Are you sure that’s enough? Have you costed in all the utilities?”

Kelly grimaced. “It’s a bit of a guess. Dad always took care of them. I just paid him weekly rent.”

“How much, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She swallowed. “Two hundred.” Her face heated under the intense scrutiny of his very blue eyes. “Daughter’s rates, I’m sure,” she added.

“Probably,” he agreed. “Pretty good deal. Would you like me to check the expenses over, and we’ll work out something fair? I’m used to it, running my own business.”

She flinched as the oven timer beeped. “You don’t mind? I’m a paramedic, so I’d be really useful if you hacked into your leg with hedge trimmers, but money’s not my number one talent.” She pushed her chair back and retrieved the hot baking dish and set it on the table.

“Smells fantastic,” he said, taking a deep breath as she juggled her creation onto their plates.

“Only zucchini and tomatoes.” She couldn’t help a slight smirk as she thought back to how they’d looked in her basket. “And bacon and cheese... and things.”

Would it really be wise to show a stranger the household accounts? And let him share her home? She considered it as she ate. Well, she knew he’d worked next door for months, so she’d have a word with David and Tui there and see what they thought of him.

*

“Honey, I’m home!” Ty yelled a few weeks later.

“Jack Nicholson in ‘The Shining’?” Kelly guessed. “Where’s your axe?”

Ty brandished a bouquet of beribboned flowers instead.

“You didn’t pick those from anyone’s garden,” she observed, moving out from behind the kitchen island.

He fixed her with a stern look as he handed them over. “I’m guessing it’s your birthday. I passed through at lunchtime for a fresh shirt and found a couple of cards in

the mail box. Balloons on the envelope aren't for bereavement. Why the big secret?"

She shrugged. "Dad and I never made much of birthdays with just the two of us."

"I reckon people need to celebrate everything they can," he said. "Life's too short."

"Agree," she said, thinking of her father.

"So – assuming you haven't started cooking yet, can I take you out for a birthday dinner?"

How had she got so lucky when she was least expecting it? "Ty, you're totally spoiling me," she protested, laying the extravagant flowers down. "Thank you. They're beautiful." When she reached up to give him a hug, he pulled her in close and kept her there.

Finally! She relaxed against him, loving his possessive embrace.

"I like spoiling you," he murmured, lowering his head and kissing her, softly at first, and then with increasing passion as she responded. Soon they were both breathless and gasping.

Zucchini and tomatoes, she thought – feeling within seconds how aroused he'd become.

When he loosened his clasp, Kelly took her chances. "Are you sure you want to go out? We could stay in, and..." She raised an eyebrow.

His vivid blue gaze held hers. "Kelly," he whispered. "It's been hell keeping my hands to myself. You've no idea how much I want you."

She nudged her hips against his. Enjoyed his indrawn breath. "You reckon? That's an impressive zucchini you have there, Mister Live-in Landscaper."

He gave a surprised laugh and kissed her again, long and slow this time. "No plant-food needed," he murmured. "Just you."



Her Billionaire Cowboy Fake Fiancé Mollie Mathews

A haunting breeze whispered through the trees, caressing every leaf with a delicate touch. Jack Archer leaned in the saddle, his body swaying in harmony with the gentle rhythm of the wind. He turned his gaze towards the young orphaned filly, her eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. “Easy, girl. Don’t be afraid. I won’t betray your trust.” She reared away, glancing back at him, her huge dark eyes filled with fear.

“I’ll make a deal with you.”

The filly's ears flicked, capturing every word as if entranced by the melody of his voice. "I won't bother you if you don't bother me. You can run wild and free."

She thrust her head back in agreement and ran toward the mountains. Slowly. He'd have to take it slowly to gain her trust, he affirmed, straightening in his saddle and turning toward the ranch. He knew how frightening it was to rely on others for protection when you were too young to fend for yourself.

He would give every dollar to bring his mother and father back from the fatal car crash that killed them when he was four. The ranch, with its strong bones and wild, wide-open landscape, offered constancy, loyalty, and protection. The very things his grandparents provided when they took over the care of Jack and his younger siblings.

Sanctuary.

These were the very things he offered to the 75 wild horses he had saved from death row.

He glanced at his watch. What was so important that his grandfather had summoned him?

"Find a bride or lose your inheritance," his grandfather lobbed at him over lunch. "You're the oldest. I know you'll look after your sister and brothers. But what I need to be sure of is that you'll look after the Archer name." He pitched his fork into his beef sandwich, his eyes spearing Jack with fierce determination. "It's time to settle down, Jack. It's time to take a wife and start a family."

Jack swallowed his protests. His grandfather was frail. Grief at losing his wife of 60 years had swallowed the once giant man. He knew his grandfather better than anyone. For forty years, he'd been the constant in Jack's life, and if there was one thing surer than the sun setting in the west, his grandfather's will was not to be defied.

If it took a bride to keep the ranch, he'd do it. *But marry who?* Jack hadn't met a woman yet who warmed his heart like his mother or grandmother. The qualities they possessed were in short supply, especially in Montana. The few short-lived flings with local beauties Jack had survived bore testimony to that.

Yes, survived, he reaffirmed. Spending time in the company of most women felt like torture.

His grandmother and mother were as rare as blue diamonds. Multifaceted with angles that reflected light. Tough but sensitive, strong but frail, independent but family-loving. Yearning for a man's protection, loyalty, and love rooted in the depths of their heart. And now they were gone.

Jack pressed his palm to his chest, registering the irregular beat of his heart. Love and happiness lay in yesterday's he'd never feel again. Was that why he had given up on love? Because somewhere deep within his wounded heart, he'd vowed never to hurt again?

"Just where do I find this wife?"

"That's not my concern," his grandfather said. "you do what a man's gotta do. Whatever it takes, before I die, you better bring me back your wife—a woman who leaves me satisfied that she is good enough to be an Archer."

A defiant, resolute gleam danced in his grandfather's eyes. If Jack wasn't mistaken, the old man was enjoying his dilemma. It didn't escape him that he had set Jack an impossible task.

"Ok, you win, Gramps. I'll go lasso me a wife. Just don't go expecting me to fall in love."

When Lizzie arrived in Montana, she was immediately struck by the beauty of the landscape. The rugged mountains, the sprawling fields, and the endless azure

blue sky. It was a galaxy from the concrete maze and neon light pollution of New York she'd just fled.

Impulsively, she decided to go for a short hike before the art retreat started. If she timed everything well, she wouldn't miss any of Anna Mae's painting lessons.

She thrust a vintage, flowy dress from the '60s that her mother had once worn over her head. The dress was covered in bold, psychedelic patterns, and it danced around her ankles. She knew it wasn't practical, but she loved it and didn't plan to walk too far.

She felt a sense of wonder and awe as she climbed the dirt path that led through the forest. The landscape was breathtaking, with vast expanses of sky and rugged terrain. But as she neared the summit, she tripped over her hem, lost her footing, and began sliding down the rocky slope.

A strong hand grabbed her and pulled her to safety. A jolt of electricity spiked through her palms as she glanced up, her eyes widening as she savored the towering stranger in fitting blue jeans, worn boots, and a coal-black Stetson hat, a perfect blend of strength and grace. A cowboy! Just like she'd fantasized about meeting.

"Are you okay, Miss?" he asked. His voice was warm and soothing as if he'd frightened a kitten or a sick foal.

Lizzie nodded, her voice locked in her throat.

"I'm Jack. Jack Archer."

"Elizabeth," she replied, instinctively dropping her last name and reverting to the name she'd used throughout her legal career to distance herself from clients.

Her heart skipped in her chest as he pulled her to her feet. He had bronzed skin and wavy hair that streamed to his shoulders—kind eyes, clear blue, and an honest face. Damn! She'd better be vigilant. She'd been suckered in by good looks before.

“That’s some frock,” he shielded his eyes with his hand as though the psychedelic print was blinding him.

He was teasing her. But for some reason, Lizzie didn’t mind. Boy, was she in trouble!

“Are you one of those—?”

“Those what?” she said, injecting layers of fierce indignation into her tone.

“Those time-travelers in those books my sister loves to read. From another century, and you’ve fallen down a hole and come out in the future.”

“This is the future?” Her gaze roamed over the untouched landscape. “Then the answer is yes, I’m a time traveler here to stay. This is a nicer world than the one I just left.”

“So, you’re fixing to stay?” A mischievous glint danced in his eyes.

She shrugged.

”Where’s home?

“New York,” she confided against her better judgment. Hadn’t she left that damned city to flee her disgrace? Retreating the headlines to start over fresh, even if just for one week?

“What’s a city girl from the 60s doing in the mountains alone?”

“I’m an artist,” Lizzie said resolutely. She liked the way the words tumbled from her mouth like rainwater flowing over stone. If she affirmed the new path she wanted to pursue, her dead dreams might spring to life.

Jack cocked his head as his gaze meandered the length of the kaftan twisted around her ankles, then rose to her lips, painted a provocative shade of fuchsia.

“What, no paints?”

“I’m on an art retreat.” She pointed to the rustic lodge in the distance.

“Best get you to class on time. Anna Mae’s a stickler for punctuality.”

As they walked back down the mountain, she couldn’t help but feel drawn to his rugged good looks and easy-going charm. But what if everything she’d heard about cowboys was true? What if they were heartbreakers?

She’d had more heartbreak than heavy snow covering the mountains in winter. From now on she was going to save herself a whole lot of trouble and never fall in love again. Still, a girl can dream without hitching her heart to a cowboy, she can flirt without getting hurt, can’t she? What harm could happen in a week?

Wounded, Jack thought. He had always been drawn to the wounded. She was limping slightly and trying not to show it. He liked her guts. She wasn’t a whiner, and he liked that too. But more than that, he liked the crazy way she dressed in her loud, floating dress and strange cowboy boots. She was a beauty, only an inch or so shorter than five-ten, with blonde hair the sheen of gold curling in soft waves beneath her oversized hat decorated with crazy flowers.

Her mouth was soft and full like an angel’s lips, her skin creamy, the shade of someone who spent a lot of time inside. Pale. But he noticed the faint blush that rouged her face whenever he looked at her. Which he was trying hard not to do, but she was irresistible. Trouble, that’s what she was, he cautioned himself as his heart kicked. The kind of trouble that would satisfy his grandfather’s demand that Jack find a wife.

“I’m a believer that one good turn demands another. How about you, Liz?”

“Sure, anything. What do you need?” she said, her eyes wide with innocence.

“Anything?”

“Absolutely.”

“Will you be my wife?”

Her dark brown eyes, the color of his favorite chocolate, searched his face for evidence he was joking. He stood firm, his face resolute.

She smiled, her eyes sparkling like diamonds, silently affirming that if his proposal was a game, it was one she would play.

She laughed. “Seeing as how I’m time-traveling the answer seems fated.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Seems like marrying a cowboy was always in my future. Yes, Jack. I’ll be your bride.”



Fair Warning

Pamela Swain



I gaze at the key in my hand like it's the Holy Grail, and then slot it into the lock and open the front door. I pause to trace along the swirls in its wood. What a relief. No more days sweltering in tent city during a Queensland summer. No more bush showers hidden behind strategically placed tarps. No more tossing and turning at night, worrying about snakes, spiders and a zip for a lock.

It doesn't take long to move my possessions inside. Swag, bean bag, kettle, esky and two plastic bin liners containing clothes – one clean, the other waiting for a trip to the laundry. I place the esky on the kitchenette's worktop and push it flush against the wall, so there's room to flip the lid and use it as a chopping board. If only I had a knife.

The place is bijou – well, it will be after a trip to the auction on my quest to find equally bijou or, in other words, small furniture items. As the rental is unfurnished, buying a bed is my priority.

The auctioneer has a cute way of flicking a mutinous strand of blonde hair out of his eyes. Blink and you miss it. Not on my watch though, I've not missed a thing about him. The way the fingers of his left hand curl around the gavel when he uses it to hit the podium – not a wedding ring in sight – and his toned body. Although I need to get closer for further assessment, so shuffle towards the front, tread on a few toes along the way, apologise profusely, find a seat and sit down. I look up and realise the room is silent, all eyes are on me.

OMG. I want to hide inside the nearest cabinet. Brown wood preferably, so no one finds me – at least until it's back in fashion and the coast is clear. The auction room's brochure is perfect to fan my blazing cheeks.

The auctioneer's eyes bore into mine. "Comfy?"

I manage a quick head nod and then up the pace with the brochure. He chews at his lower lip, no doubt to prevent breaking into laughter, but his eyes betray him. They sparkle with humour. Forget the cabinet. Just find me a coffin.

I'm the sole focus of his attention now, or so it seems, when I can bear to look up. Like I'm one of the lots for sale and he needs to work out what category to put me in. In this state of discombobulation, I bid on the next lot and find myself the owner of Lot 213, whatever it is.

The queue to pay is slow moving until the auctioneer joins the staff already seated in the office. He beckons me over.

"That's a beautiful set of drawers you've bought yourself."

What set of drawers? I need a bed, not drawers. I decide to fake it. "Thanks. A small set of drawers will fit anywhere."

His eyes widen. "Small?"

I nod. "Yes, bijou."

His eyebrows bounce off into his hairline.

"Bijou?"

"You know. Small. Cute. Just right for my place."

"You live in a mansion, then?"

"Of course not."

"Well it's the only place they'll look small ... sorry, bijou."

He stands beside me while we examine the boot of my Kia Cerato. He shakes his head and an aroma of citrus shampoo clouds the air. I notice the cute way his hair flicks out at the nape of his neck and the perfect shell of his ears. Unlike mine that stick out. Thank goodness for the explosion of chestnut curls I hated so much as a child.

"They won't fit in here."

It takes me a second to realise he's spoken.

"What if we take the spare wheel out?"

He stares at me and strokes his chin, which draws my eyes to his lips. Plump, juicy, kissable lips. OMG. What's wrong with me? I'm thirty, not thirteen. While I daydream, he turns and strides off.

I scratch my head. What now?

They're due to deliver the drawers any minute, so I race around and throw everything into the bedroom. I lean over to catch my breath and hear the auctioneer call out.

"Poppy, we have a problem."

I zoom to open the door and almost crash into him, because he's leaning against the frame, one leg draped nonchalantly in front of the other.

“We certainly do. For starters, how do you know my name?”

“Bidder’s details, invoice and receipt. Is that good enough?”

“Suppose. But what’s yours?”

“Josh.” He points to the door. “We’ll probably have to take it off.”

“Really?”

He nods. “Can I check the rear access first, though?”

I usher him past the bedroom and into the back yard. As he wanders around, I admire his backside clad in fitted, black denim. OMG. Phew. He pauses in front of the bedroom’s sliding glass door and, in the reflection, I see he’s noticed me admiring the view. He laughs out loud and I can’t look at him when he speaks.

“I think this way will be the easiest.”

Famous last words.

Josh and the two auction room porters flop onto the swag and mop their brows with their sleeves. I collapse onto the beanbag. The bijou drawers glare at us – they’ve been pushed, pulled, tipped, jiggled and threatened.

“We’ll have to take them apart if you want them in the lounge, Poppy.”

“Maybe I’ll just resell them at auction.”

“Not my one, hopefully.”

Raucous laughter ensues.

The porters leave after Josh reassures them he doesn’t need a lift, as he can walk to his place in five minutes. I offer him a coffee and we cram into the kitchenette. He leans against the counter while we wait for the kettle to boil. Close enough for me to check out the amazing colours in his eyes. Green flecked with gold and brown.

He points towards the single mug on the counter. “Aren’t you having one?”

I shake my head. "I'll have one later." Truth is, I only have one mug after a tent city newcomer decided they needed my stuff more than me.

He sighs and leans forward. "Poppy, I don't wish to pry ... please tell if I'm overstepping the mark, but you seem to be doing it tough."

I'm not going to cry. Definitely not. No way. Never.

I burst into tears.

Josh looks like he'd rather be rafting down a lava flow than here. He gives my shoulders a quick squeeze and then jumps back like he's on fire. I jump, the mug flies off the counter and shatters into pieces on the tiles.

Once Josh agrees to let me pay, we go to a local cafe. He orders the cheapest meal on the menu.

"You can go wild, you know - order jam to go with your raisin toast, too. I can afford it."

Flushes creep across his cheeks until they meet his ears. They glow red. I swear he's sliding down in his chair in a futile attempt to hide. I erupt into laughter and his face somehow softens. He clears his throat, shuffles his feet beneath the table.

"I'm giving you fair warning, Poppy, you take..."

"Seriously? You're giving me a warning when we're about to enjoy a veritable feast - on me, too."

He holds a hand up, palm facing forward. "It's an auction term - to see if there's any more interest before completing the deal. So I've got to say it, before I lose out. You take my breath away. I don't know how I made it through the auction."

Wow. I did not expect that.

I toss and turn all night because I can't get Josh out of my mind. We're doing the garage sale circuit this morning. With limited clean clothes to choose from, who cares

if my red top and green trousers clash? Or that they're crumpled.

Josh arrives and, before he can say anything, I blurt out, "My iron was nicked."

"Shit. Was there a break-in while we were at the cafe?"

"No. Last week in tent city."

"Tent city?"

"Long story. Mass southern migration to here took out all the housing stock - including my rental property. I joined the many working homeless. It's been hell. Couch surfing, tent living, busy shifts on the ward and hardly any sleep at all. I'm exhausted."

He draws me into a sideways hug. "That's awful."

I nod and allow my head to rest against his shoulder, let my arm rest on his abdomen. He tenses and holds his breath for a moment and then relaxes, exhales slowly. My heart does a sprightly bongo beat.

There's been a subtle shift between us. Unspoken words fizz, sparkle and dance. Backwards. Forwards. Pirouette. We turn and gaze at each other until I manage to pat his arm playfully.

"C'mon, or we'll miss the bargains."

I'm the proud owner of an iron, air fryer, Weber barbeque, bread knife, six Mr Men mugs and an impressive purple art glass bowl - it'll look nice on top of my bijou drawers. All for under \$50.

Josh is out getting fish and chips.

We balance on the bean bag to eat lunch. I nudge his knee with mine. "Is this allowed?"

"What?"

“You being here with me. Is it against some sort of auctioneer’s code?”

“I think it’s probably worse me losing the plot at the auction whenever I looked at you ... or delivering the drawers.”

“Why did you lose the plot?”

“Seriously? Don’t you ever look at yourself in the mirror, Poppy?”

“Not if I can avoid it.”

“Well believe me, the office staff were right when they said I’d be punching well above my weight.”

“Maybe I think the same.”

He places his chip wrapper down. “You agree with them ... you of not-looking-in-mirror fame?”

“No, I mean maybe I’m punching above my weight, too.”

“Good. Glad that’s sorted, then. We cancel each other out, so to speak.”

He reaches over and tucks a stray curl behind my ear, takes hold of my hands and we lace fingers. Sparks sizzle, my toes tingle. He leans in, locks eyes with mine and then steals a chip. I swat his shoulder.

“You only had to ask.”

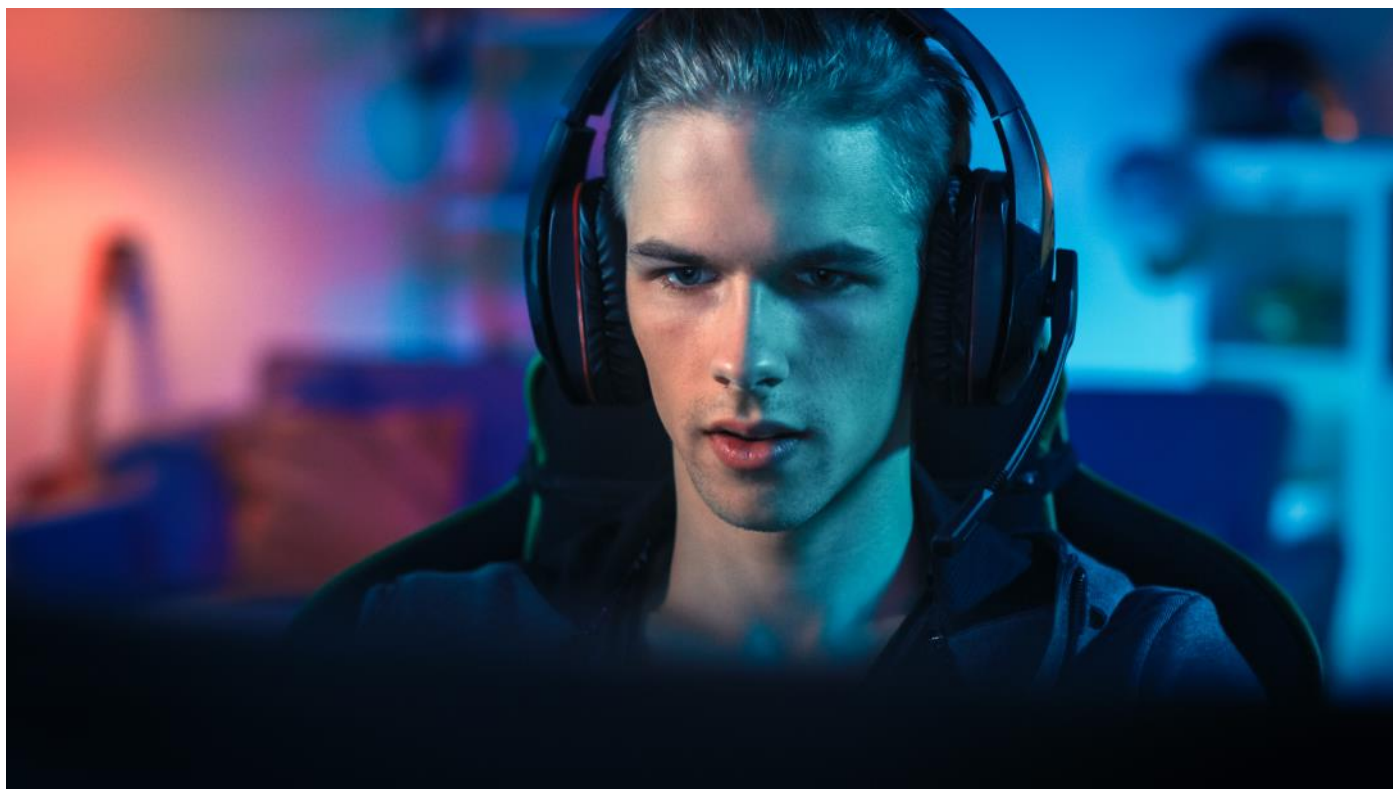
“They taste better this way ... and I’ve already given you fair warning.”

“Not about chip stealing you haven’t. Let me give you fair warning, too. You’ve not seen the last of me at your auctions.”

My heart flutters as he moves closer.

“I look forward to more bijou in my life, Poppy. I have a feeling that small, cute and just right, is for me, too.”

“Ooh, good.” I pop a chip between my lips and wait for him to steal it.



Game On

Natalie Carver



“Miss Porter, my dad wanted me to give you this.”

I glanced down at one of my students and the folded slip of yellow paper in his hand. “What is it, Felix?”

He shrugged. His attention already turned to the heated game of after-school football taking place on the courts.

Like me, he’d rather be somewhere else. Peeling open the note, my stomach sunk. *Call me sometime. Matt.* I looked out to the man standing on the field, recognising him from parent-teacher conferences earlier in the week.

He’s a few years older than me and not the worst looking man I’ve agreed to go on a date with. The problem? I teach his son. Not to mention he didn’t even have the balls to walk over here and give me his number himself. Welcome to the sad reality of my dating life.

Instead of scrunching the note up and tossing it in the bin for him to witness, I smiled and held it up. Felix's dad beamed back and shrugged, the exact same way his son had just before he'd taken off to join the rest of the soccer devotees. *Ick. No thanks.*

"Tell me he didn't just pull that move to give you his phone number?" My best friend and fellow teacher, Lara, asked as she came striding into my classroom.

"He did." With a quick check to see if Matt had disappeared from sight, I handed her the evidence.

"Are you serious?" Lara inspected the note as she perched on my chair. "This has to be more tragic than the guy at the cafe. Do you remember him? The one who wrote his phone number on your coffee cup. Only to have his girlfriend, who was working in the kitchen, throw a bloody scone at his head!"

"Ugh. I'm destined to end up single."

"You just need to meet the right guy." Lara countered, tossing the note into the bin. "It's a big ocean – with plenty of fish. Come to town with me tonight. We'll get dressed up, do our makeup and have some cocktails."

My eyebrows pressed together. It's not that I don't want to go with Lara, it's that weekends are strictly for gaming. "I can't. I have a guild raid this weekend."

Lara scoffs, "You can leave your nerdy empire for one night. Your real friends miss you."

"You know with the time zones..."

"Enough, Flick. Your arse is mine tonight." She leapt off my chair, "I'll be over at five. Be showered and ready for me to do your makeup."

* * *

I crawled through the door around midnight, dodging the discarded scrubs and shoes that belong to my flatmate, Jake. Had I known six months ago, when I'd agreed

to let Jake live with me while he looked for his own house, that I'd be opening my space to serve as his own personal dumping ground – I might have reconsidered.

Leaving the mess, I made my way into the kitchen. The pounding inside my head was too much, and my toes were begging for release from their prison inside my favourite pair of pink, leopard print heels. After downing paracetamol, I retreated to my room.

With the door shut, I finally kicked my feet free and hurried out of my tight, pink dress. Eager to start my game, I haphazardly attempted to juggle turning on my computer, whilst pulling my favourite singlet over my head. Forgoing pants, *because panties counted after midnight*, I wiggled my headset into place and finally entered my game.

“Ah, look who finally decided to show up,” a familiar voice greeted me.

“Shut up, WarHammer.” I hurried to check my inventory as I waited for the raid summary to load in the group chat. “What did I miss?”

“Aside from the pleasure of my top notch company?” WarHammer mused.

“You know, Hammer, I have a mute button and I'm not afraid to use it.”

“TeachGal, save your misuse of power and leave that poor mute button alone.” WarHammer chuckled into his mic and damn if it didn't have my toes curling. “Seriously though, you didn't miss much. We're still at the gate, awaiting entry into the raiding arena.”

“I'll catch up.” I frantically organised my pack and travelled as fast I could to catch up with the rest of the group. Not stopping to question my luck, I managed to re-join my team and participate in the entire raid. Dancing, drinking and gaming in one night – I'd call that the perfect start to the weekend.

“TeachGal, isn't it way past your bedtime?” Warhammers voice had me back in the moment.

“I could say the same to you.” While I didn't know much about WarHammer, I

did know he was from my neck of the woods. Somewhere in Auckland was as close as we'd gotten to exchanging real life details.

"Actually, I'm about to turn in."

A smile crossed my lips at the thought of WarHammer getting into bed. *Why couldn't I find a man like him in the real world?* We'd been in the same guild for the last two years. Somehow WarHammer and I had always ensured we ended up playing alongside one another.

"I'm glad I got to play tonight." I whispered in the headset.

"I'm glad you showed up," WarHammer whispered back. "Night, TeachGal."

"Night WarHammer." With a smile growing across my face, I turned off my PC and headed out to the kitchen to refill my water one last time. Morning Flick would really appreciate the after-care actions of tipsy Flick. Fending off a hangover was the number one objective.

"Hello, stranger," a deep, gravelly voice called from the kitchen as I padded my way across the tiles. My flatmate, Jake, is standing at the kitchen bench, glass of water almost to his mouth.

If he wasn't such a slob, Jake would be a catch. The man's tall, over six foot three, with broad shoulders, and thick arms and thighs from his rugby playing days. He's got a good job, working as a paediatrician in a private clinic, and goes to the gym enough for it to be considered a hobby.

"Shucks. Don't tell me you were waiting up for me, Jakey?"

His tongue darts across his lower lip as he takes in my lack of pants and braless-beneath-my-singlet state. I should be embarrassed – but I'm not. Jake runs a hand through his short dark hair, as a flush of warmth spreads up his neck. "How was your night, Flickity?"

I scrunch my nose at his nickname for me. He knows I hate it. But the more I

fight it, the more he insists it's the only name he'll ever call me. "It was fun." I replied as I hurried to fill my glass and retreat to the safety of my room. "How was yours?"

He took a long sip from his water before replying, "I was gaming for most of it."

"Win your raid?" It's no secret that Jake also played League of Warcraft. We'd just never asked for each other's in-game usernames. It was our unspoken agreement.

Jake smirked. "You know I always win, Flickity."

"And here I am, surprised that your ego actually fits through my front door." I kept from rolling my eyes. It would only encourage him further.

He takes a step towards me. Bending low, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear, "I'll see you for waffles tomorrow morning. Sweet dreams, Flick."

"Dreams – sweet." I replied. Idiot.

A deep chuckle followed his departure towards his room.

Great. I was never going to live this one down.

* * *

"How's the head?"

"Sore." I pressed my cup against the fridge's water dispenser. Despite the grogginess, it wasn't all bad. The house smelt enticingly sweet. If there was one reason to keep Jake around, it was most definitely his cooking skills. Saturday mornings were my favourite part of the week. I'd die a happy person if my house smelt like a patisserie on the regular.

"This is the part where you tell me you're never going to drink again."

I looked over at Jake. Watching as he beats the waffle mixture in slow, even strokes. Each rotation has his bicep flexing. My mouth went dry. Sahara-dry. I greedily gulped the contents of my cup before replying. "We both know that promise would be dead in the water by next weekend. I'll spare us both the disappointment."

"Wise." He pushed a punnet of strawberries my way, "Chop these, Flickity."

We worked in comfortable silence. Jake, focusing on each batch of waffles, while I chopped the strawberries. Task completed, I searched the fridge for the cream we always kept on hand for our weekend ritual.

“Jake, where’s the –”

“Oh shit.” Jake interrupted. His attention still focused on drizzling the waffle mixture into the machine. “Cream is in my room. On the desk.”

“This is the part where I ask you why you have the cream in your room...”

Jake merely smiled. “I got distracted.”

Only after letting out the world’s largest sigh at the extra movement being forced upon me, did I trudge my way into Jake’s room. Trying my best to respect his privacy, I kept my focus solely on finding the bottle of cream.

True to his word, it was beside his keyboard. I hadn’t meant to, but when I looked up the screen of his computer was already on. It was the login page for League of Warcraft. No blood way. My eyes were drawn to a single word: WarHammer.

Disbelief pulsed through my body. Jake was WarHammer? Realisation had my knees wobbling as I staggered back towards the kitchen. Signs were all around me. Even the bloody song playing through the kitchen speakers was in on the gag. Taylor Swift’s lyrics, *‘That what you’re looking for has been here the whole time,’* invaded my space.

“WarHammer?” I asked.

Jake froze. The pile of waffles he’d been holding tumbled onto the kitchen bench. It took all of a nanosecond for his eyes to find mine. Wide and wild. His gaze reflected everything I felt. Shock. Disbelief. Surprise. *Hope*. “TeachGal?”

I nodded. It was all I could manage right now.

Thankfully Jake shed his layer of shock faster than I could. He moved towards me. “Ready to play?” He asked. His caramel coloured eyes held mine.

Home. This, being here with Jake in our own virtual reality, was what home felt like. I never wanted him or his waffles to leave. My tummy rumbled. “Breakfast first.”

A shiver ran the length of my spine as Jake leaned in, his lips brushing against that sweet spot on my neck, right below my ear. “I told you I always win.”

“Oh, it’s game on, Jake!”





5th

Just Desserts

Effie Knight

The fire station doorbell rang. A minute later, our colleague George hollered up the stairs, “Troy, you have a visitor!” I completed my bench-press and put the weight in its cradle, releasing Troy from spotting me.

“Good work, bro,” he said as he walked out of the gym room.

Our small-town station was often quiet, and visitors were a welcome distraction. Out of all of us, Troy easily got the most gratitude food visits. But he was also the only one who’d been featured in a “sexy firefighter” calendar. Twice.

When I heard voices coming from the kitchen, I grabbed my water bottle and went over. In the hallway, I passed George and Colin, who were already heading back

downstairs with pastries. Troy sat at the kitchen table with and a woman we'd cut out of her car two weeks ago. She'd rolled down a gully, and Troy, who was built like a tank, had carried her princess-style to the ambulance waiting at the top. Now she was beaming at him with classic *rescue crush* googly eyes. The cuts and bruises on her pretty face were nearly healed, but her left foot was still in a moon boot. She'd brought a platter with turret-like pastries.

Troy was chewing with bulging cheeks. When he saw me, he quickly swallowed.

"Darren, remember Ella? She says she's recovering well from her downhill adventure, and she has brought us—" He hesitated and pointed at the platter.

"Cronuts," she said. "Like the naughty love child of a croissant and a donut." She blushed, but Troy rescued her from her embarrassment... because that's what he does.

"Exactly! And they're fucking delicious. You *have* to try one!" He shoved the platter my way, a big sugar-dusted smile on his face. I thanked her and took one. It promptly crumbled down my t-shirt as I bit into it. I started grinning, too—this was the *really* good shit!

Troy was a sucker for cake, and right now, he was in pastry heaven. Eyes shining, he said to Ella, "We don't generally encourage people to thank us in person, but for *this*, we'll make an exception!" He took another cronut. "As long as you bring these in, you can get a rescue a week. Just try not to get injured again, OK?"

She laughed and continued checking him out. He had what they call "excellent bone structure", thick wavy hair and an easy smile, so he got that a lot. I turned to refill my water bottle at the filter tap and excused myself to give them space to hash out the date that was hanging thick in the air. "My weights are calling. They say I must work off the cronut."

Ella's voice was husky. "So, Troy, I was wondering if you'd like to have coffee some time." Ha! Called it!

"I'm flattered, but it wouldn't be more than coffee. My heart's taken."

Wait, what?! When did that happen? He hadn't mentioned anything of the sort! I turned back and saw Ella's face fall a little. "Aw, that's a shame... I wish you all the best, but if it doesn't work out..." She slid her card across the table. "I'll even make you a new batch of cronuts."

"You *made* these?!" Troy's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Ella smiled suggestively. "Are you reconsidering coffee now?"

I liked her spunk! He *should* go for coffee with her... but after he told me about his heart-stealer. Troy's eyes flitted to me for a second, then back to her. "Sorry, no. But now it's a close call..."

I shook my head and walked out, leaving them to their banter.

Troy rejoined me in the gym a few minutes later.

"So, spill. Who's got your heart?" I asked between chin-ups.

"No one *you* know." His tone made it clear the subject was closed. "And it's... one-sided." He sighed and put on boxing gloves. Sometimes he needed time before he'd open up, so I didn't push. He first attacked the sandbag methodically, but then he got more and more vicious. When he added kickboxing moves, I stopped my workout—something was off. I reran his conversation with Ella in my mind, looking for what I'd missed, but then the callout alarm bell rang.

We put the kitchen fire out in minutes, but the homeowner, a friend of Troy's from his rainbow rugby team, had gotten burned when he tried to extinguish the fire by himself. Troy was treating and monitoring him until the ambulance arrived. I was putting our gear back on the pump truck when I heard, "Oooh, so *this* is the famous Darren? Choice! Yeah, I'd hit that, too!"

"Shush, man!" Troy hissed, then glanced over to me with a guilty look on his face.

On the way back, Colin and George rode in the front of the truck, and Troy and I in the back, as always. But for the first time since Troy had joined our station a year ago, he and I didn't talk. He studiously looked out the window the entire way. Back at the station, I did the call-out report while the others reset the pump and gear. When I'd finished, Colin and George were swapping grand-baby stories and pictures again, so I left them downstairs and went back up to the kitchen.

Troy sat at the kitchen table looking miserable, even worse than after the messy breakup that had prompted his transfer. Back then, I'd just gotten divorced, and once, we got so drunk we weren't even fit to drive the next day. Our station chief had read us the riot act, sent us home and ordered us to come up with something better to do than "getting drunk and bitching like little girls." We trained for the stair-climb challenge together and did continuing education, and we became friends. I knew he was bi, and I really didn't mind, but now... now it was weird. And I *needed* it to be *not weird*.

When responding to an emergency, it's good to have as much information as possible about a situation before you walk in. This wasn't exactly an emergency, but still... I got myself a coffee and sat down. "What *exactly* did your friend mean with 'the *famous* Darren' and 'I'd hit that, *too*?'"

Troy blushed and looked down. “I *may* have mentioned once or twice that you’re pretty cool.” His knee was bouncing under the table, and he kept rolling his coffee mug between his hands.

“And is this Darren is the person you said I don’t know? The one-sided crush?”

Troy looked at me sideways, one eye squeezed shut. “Maaaaaaybe?”

I needed a moment to digest that, so I got the coffee pot and refilled our mugs. When I sat down again, I asked, “Since when?”

He looked down and gave a little smile, which made him look boyish and vulnerable. I could barely hear his answer. “When you noticed how bad my dyslexia is and just offered to swap paperwork for other duties. And then you read out all the stuff for our studies as if it was the most natural thing in the world.”

“Aw, man! You can’t fall for basic decency! Raise your standards, mate!”

He laughed, and the weirdness between us faded a little. But then he looked at me, his eyes all serious. “My standards are fine! And I know you’re straight... which is why I never meant for you to know.”

“So why’d you mention anything today?”

He half-shrugged. “The cronuts.”

“What?”

“They totally killed my self-control.” He looked so sheepish I burst out laughing. First he was confused, but then he joined in, and soon we were both howling with laughter. The look we shared after that was... different. I felt like I did before entering a structure fire: Heart rate up, every sense on high alert. Remembering I have to keep a level head, because things can go seriously wrong. And somehow, this felt the same.

I slowly shook my head. “I can’t lie, man. I’m *way* out of my depth right now.”

Troy hung his head. "I'm sorry."

We were both quiet for a while. I tried to think through how this might affect our work relationship. Troy and I trusted each other with our lives, every day. And yeah, sure, I cared for him. He was my friend, and I wouldn't let that change.

Seemingly out of nowhere, I remembered my U16 rugby coach. I'd never figured out if I wanted to be him or with him. And my fucked-up marriage and how that ended. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm not."

Troy looked up, confused. "Huh?"

I looked straight at him. "I'm not sorry."

Troy's eyes got big. "You're not... freaking out?" The cautious hope in his voice tugged on my insides.

"Oh, I totally am! But,"—I counted off on my fingers—"you're my best friend, you don't drive me nuts, and we respect each other. That's gotta count for *something*." Then I grinned. "And you're a fireman calendar bunny."

He looked so relieved and embarrassed, I bit my tongue so I wouldn't laugh at him again.

"So... now what?" Troy's voice was uncertain, and that made me realise that, outside of work, he usually followed my lead—and that I liked that. I also noticed I'd had enough excitement for one day. Our shift was nearly over, and I was ready for some normalcy.

"Beer and Dominos at mine. Rugby starts at 8." After a beat, I felt the need to add, "And if you touch my butt, I'll break your fingers!"

Troy grinned. "Noted. No butt touching!" He pulled up the Dominos app on his phone. "Pepperoni, as usual?"

"Yep. And ice cream."

"Vanilla, I assume?" He made that sound *very* suggestive.

I glared at him. "Yes, *vanilla!*"

Troy kept his eyes locked on his phone. "Suit yourself." He was trying to keep a straight face, but the corners of his mouth twitched. "But they *do* have a new flavour on the menu!"

I knew that face... the joke he was planning would be at my expense. I indulged him anyway. "OK, I bite. What's the new flavour?"

"Blow jobs," he snorted, then *actually* giggled.

I rolled my eyes and punched him in the arm. "Idiot."

Troy laughed so hard he had to wipe away tears. "Bro, you should have *seen* your face!"

Two could play *that* game. "Alright then. I'll have two."

Troy blushed all the way to his ears and stared at me, trying to figure out if I'd been joking or not.

I just grinned. And that's when I knew, whatever happened, we'd be alright.



Coming In Hot

Janie Stewart

The plane jolted suddenly, propelling my plastic cup off my tray table and into the aisle. Thank goodness it was empty.

I craned my neck to watch its progress as it rolled towards the galley. Any thoughts of retrieving it fled when the plane lurched again, rattling the cabin. I hastily stowed my tray table and gripped my armrests as we continued bumping through the sky. The plane seemed to drop suddenly, and I let out an involuntary shriek.

I closed my eyes and tried to slow my breathing. I hated flying. Only the lure of my best friend's wedding in Sydney had been enough to get me on a plane. Now I was flying back to Auckland and starting to regret it.

“Hi everyone, this is your captain speaking. We’re heading into some turbulence before we start our descent into Auckland, so please keep your seatbelts fastened. If you moved seats during the flight, please return to your booked seat. Thank you.”

I eyed the seat next to me. There were only two of us in the row, so I’d switched from the middle to the aisle seat to give my fellow passenger in the window seat more space. He was a big guy and even with the extra room, he looked a bit squashed.

He caught my eye and obligingly tried to squeeze himself further into his seat. With his long dark hair, heavy stubble and plaid shirt, he looked a bit like Thor’s lumberjack cousin. I waited for a steady moment, undid my seatbelt, stood up and almost face-dived straight into Lumberthor’s (Thorjack’s?) lap as the plane jolted again. My cheeks blazing, I muttered apologies as he helped me into my seat.

“No worries,” he said with a smile. Once I was securely buckled in, I closed my eyes and resumed my death-grip on the armrests. Our arms were pressed together, but I was too scared to be embarrassed by the contact.

There were screams and groans from around the cabin as the plane seemed to bounce wildly through the air. *It’s going to be ok*, I told myself. *You’re more likely to die from eating a prawn sandwich than a plane crash*. Since I was obviously about to die in a plane crash, I took a moment to think wistfully of all the room-temperature seafood I could have eaten.

The turbulence got worse and the smell of vomit filled the cabin as people lost their in-flight lunch. I tried to breathe through my mouth, but I could feel my whole body seizing up in panic. I struggled to get air.

“Lean forward,” said my neighbour, pushing gently on my upper back. I rested my forehead against the seat in front and tried to relax. I jumped slightly when I felt his hand start to rub circles on my back.

“Is it asthma? Do you have an inhaler?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Panic attack,” I wheezed. Tears and snot were streaming down my face as I tried to regulate my breathing. A square of fabric appeared under my face. Was that...a hanky? I glanced sideways at Lumberthor and he shrugged sheepishly. Was he secretly an amazingly well-preserved 80-year-old? I wiped my face

and tried to sit upright.

The plane dropped, my stomach shot up to my throat and I unthinkingly grabbed his hand. He held on and laced his fingers through mine. It was probably a pity hand-hold, but I didn't care. I thought of all the people who would miss me after I plunged to my doom. My family, my friends, my workmates, my dog Sadie who was waiting to be collected from the boarding kennels.

My best friend, the newlywed Alison, would probably feel horribly guilty for making me fly in the first place. So she should. This was all her fault. This, and the hideous nude-coloured bridesmaid dress she'd made me wear.

The plane shook like a giant maraca and oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling. Even Lumberthor started to look strained as we fumbled to get the masks on. I was relieved that he took my hand again as we tried to breathe normally. I turned my head and found him looking back at me. Our gazes met and held over our silicone face cones as the plane gave one more big shake and leveled out. We stayed that way, our eyes and hands locked, as the plane finally touched down and other passengers applauded. I reluctantly let him go to remove my mask and gave him a shaky smile.

"We're alive," I said.

"We are," he replied. He made an aborted move like he was going to retake my hand, so I grabbed his instead. Suddenly I was bursting with emotion. We weren't just alive, we were gloriously, radiantly alive. We were Greek heroes, surviving the wrath of the gods. The man holding my hand was the most beautiful sight I had ever beheld. We kept sneaking glances at each other as we gathered our belongings and left the plane. We held hands as we walked into the airport on blessedly solid ground and went to find our bags.

My whole body was fizzing, like a shaken bottle of champagne. I could barely stand still. I wanted to do something momentous and spontaneous, and I wanted to do it with him. Could I invite him home with me? Catching a bus to the Park and Ride, collecting my car and driving for 40 minutes through Auckland's traffic didn't exactly qualify as spontaneous, but it was better than nothing. Did I dare suggest it?

As we watched the baggage carousel go around, I gathered my courage and

turned to him.

“I don’t want to let you go,” I blurted out. “Do you want to, maybe, hang out?”

Hang out? Was I twelve instead of twenty-eight? Ugh. Smooth move. How could he resist an invitation to *hang out*?

He cleared his throat and looked at our joined hands.

“I’m flying to Christchurch early tomorrow morning, so I’m only here for the rest of the day.”

“Of course, no problem,” I mumbled. Obviously a near-death experience wasn’t a big deal for Lumberthor. He probably planned to cut down a couple of trees and drink some ale to relax, not get jumped by an emotionally overloaded stranger. I prepared to remove my hand from his before it got awkward.

“But I’m staying at an airport hotel, if you want -”

“Airport hotel” instantly joined my magic words category, alongside “abracadabra” and every spell from Harry Potter.

“I want,” I said. Oh boy, did I want. “Let’s go!”

He laughed, tugging my hand as I tried to walk away.

“I share your enthusiasm, but we might need our bags first.”

“Right! Bags!” I was tempted to grab the nearest suitcase on the carousel if it would get us out of there faster, but I was saved from a short career in larceny when our bags appeared on the conveyor belt.

The hotel shuttle was waiting outside. The tension between us seemed to build on the short ride. While he checked in, I sent a message to my family group to tell them that I’d landed safely, in case they’d seen anything about the rocky flight on social media.

We wheeled our bags to the hotel room and he used the key card to open the door. I wondered fleetingly if reality would set in and ruin the moment, but that fear evaporated as soon as we got through the door. I grabbed handfuls of his shirt and yanked his mouth down to mine and all the urgency I’d felt at the airport came rushing back. Suddenly, we were tearing at each other’s clothes. Buttons flew. I was surprised that the heat we were generating didn’t singe us in interesting places.

Once our energy was sapped and our respective wallet condom stores emptied, we collapsed side by side on the queen-sized, panting slightly. My limbs felt rubbery and I had stubble burn to at least ten per cent of my body.

“I’ve never done this before,” he said.

“Really?” I propped myself up on my elbows to look at him. “You were pretty good at it. I would never have guessed.”

He shot me a look and rolled his eyes at my grin. “Not *this*,” he said, gesturing between us. “I just don’t want you to think I’m some creeper who picks up people on planes for sex in airport hotels.”

“Oh I am,” I deadpanned. “That whole plane thing was an act. I wasn’t even scared.”

He grabbed a pillow from beside the bed and swung it at me. I ducked and rolled away, laughing. A brief wrestling match ensued until I caught sight of the bedside clock.

“Crap!” I jumped up, scrambling to find my clothes that were strewn across the floor. “I need to pick up Sadie!”

“Who’s Sadie?” he asked.

“My Goldendoodle,” I said, hopping on one leg as I tried to put on jeans and my bra at the same time.

“I thought I was your golden doodle.”

I paused my sartorial acrobatics. “Was that a dodgy dad joke?”

He laughed and I shook my head. “She’s my dog and the kennels close in an hour.”

“Hey look,” he said, suddenly serious, “I’m based in Christchurch, but I come up to Auckland quite often for work. Maybe we could...”

“Hang out?” I finished. Why not? Maybe it was just a glorious, one-time hook-up, but with our combustible chemistry, maybe it could be something else. I opened my phone contacts to add him and started laughing.

“I just realised that I don’t even know your name.”

“Gerald,” he said.

Gerald?! I'd just had mind-blowing, life-affirming monkey sex with someone named Gerald?! I made a small choking sound.

"What?" he asked.

"I, uh, wouldn't have picked you for a Gerald," I said. Although it did kind of explain the hanky.

"I get that a lot." He got his phone and looked at me expectantly.

"Jess," I said. We exchanged numbers and social media details and I hurriedly packed my things. After a thankfully non-awkward goodbye kiss, I wheeled my bag to the shuttle. I had a missed call from Alison so I called her back on the ride to the airport.

"Oh my god!" she shrieked. "Are you ok? Your flight was all over social media and you weren't answering your phone! What happened?"

I grinned, feeling a rush of pure joy. "Well, funny story..."



Siren Tide

Caenys Kerr

The baking temperature of the north Queensland spring had no impact on the shivers wracking Lisa's slight frame. Someone wrapped her in a foil emergency blanket. Another thrust a mug of bitter coffee into her hands. Her heart hammered in time with the whirling what-ifs in her brain. Fear pinched her windpipe.

"Get help!" Were they the last words she'd hear from Mase—a desperate plea last evening as a riptide sucked her forever-love out to sea on his paddleboard, leaving his long-handled blade adrift behind him?

Help? Where? She'd dashed to the car. *Wait. Mark the spot.* Dumping 'teacher' paraphernalia from her fluoro pink tote into the footwell of the rear passenger seat, she'd scribbled a note. "Man missing from this beach." She'd added the date, time and her phone number, clipped it to the bag, then slung the lot into a tree by the road.

They'd been travelling north. She'd head in the same direction until she had phone signal. Twenty-three-point-eight kilometres later, a small town came first. The sole police officer was firm. A search party couldn't do anything until sunrise. He'd called the caravan park and arranged a night's accommodation.

Belle, the park's proprietor, showed her to a cabin redolent of daphne flowers in a tiny vegemite jar. "There's pumpkin soup on the stove, love. It's the same as I'm having for my tea. There's nowhere in town to get a bite at this hour," she said.

"I don't..."

"Sweetheart," Belle said, exerting a motherly authority, "if you don't look after yourself, you're no earthly use helping anyone else. Soup, toast, a good kip, you'll be ready for whatever tomorrow brings."

Lisa took her advice, sleeping so soundly she wondered if Belle spiked the soup.

Loud banging on her cabin door the next morning drowned out a magpie's pre-dawn warble.

Senior Constable John Davis introduced himself formally, then sat her at the table. For ten minutes, he bombarded her: full name, address, date of birth, victim same. Who owns the car? Where's your destination? Why did Mason go paddleboarding so late? Was this a regular thing? Who suggested it? Bloody tourists (*sotto voce*). Crocs and sharks play in these waters, especially at dusk. Can you describe where you were? It's a bloody long coastline.

Outside, a posse of volunteers stared from under wide-brimmed hats. A glance at their faces suggested some were sympathetic, others irritated, accusatory. She cringed at the attention.

Belle rode shotgun in Mase's car as Lisa drove the measured distance to the site. Her shiny tote hanging in the branches of a spiky acacia caught the sun's first rays—a beacon of hope in a desperate day.

Davis' organisation presented a masterclass in search and rescue, deploying

small groups along the coastline and through the surrounding bush. He handed her a three-legged stool, ordering her to stay with her vehicle. His silent glare overrode her entreaty to join the search.

Belle strolled over carrying her own stool and a plate of sandwiches from the rescue services food cart. "Here, you go. Gotta keep your strength up," she said, her tone a gung-ho bravado.

"I should be helping," Lisa said, hugging the foil close to her shuddering body.

"See it from John's point of view. If there's a chance of foul play—I'm not saying there is—he can't have you destroying evidence."

Acrid coffee roiled in Lisa's stomach. "That's why the barrage of questions? He thinks I'm to blame? I've done something to Mase?"

"Gotta keep an open mind. You been in touch with his folks?"

"No signal."

"Use the satellite phone. You can't be out here without one." Belle ferreted through her bag on the back seat of the car, producing a blocky instrument.

Fingers of apprehension scratched at Lisa's gut anticipating the discussion with Mase's mother. Gritting her teeth and inhaling sharply through her nose, Lisa dialed the Melbourne number. "Good morning, Mrs. Tuohy. This is Lisa Tucker."

"The teacher?" The imperious tone dismissed Lisa and her profession.

"Um, yes. There's been an incident. Mase is missing. He got caught by the tide when he was paddleboarding last night. Police and volunteers are searching for him."

"I knew you were trouble." The snarling accusation was far from the concern Lisa expected. "Mason was never careless before he met you. He always looked after me. We had opera tickets for last night, which we bought months ago at significant cost. He stood me up to go on this wild goose chase with you. Escaping the cold, my eye. You've well and truly got your hooks into him, haven't you?"

"Mrs. Tuohy..."

“You listen to me...” Lisa lowered the phone, silencing the barrage by disconnecting the call, then burst into tears.

“Hey. You’ve been good so far,” Belle said. “Hold it together. She’s a piece of work, eh? Is your Mason under his mumma’s thumb?”

“She wishes.”

“Is he a teacher, too?”

“Stock market analyst; totally out of my league.”

“Yet he makes you smile. How did you meet?”

“A cancer fun-run. His first. He didn’t seem the type—white legs, couldn’t keep still.”

“And...” Belle prompted, breaking through Lisa’s recurring panic.

“I kept an eye on him. He thought he was looking after me. We hit it off.”

“He sounds like a lovely man.”

“He is. He encourages me to try things. At a restaurant, I’ll order fish, he’ll try emu or escargot. This trip was to get me into the ocean. I love pool swimming but the ocean terrifies me.”

“How come?” Belle threw her coffee dregs onto the grass.

“When I was little, my dad went body surfing. I was scared the ocean would swallow him. When he finally got me into the sea, I loved the feel of it—so different from a pool. In the pool, the water makes way for you; in the ocean, you respond to the water. Then a wave dumped me from behind, face-planting me on the sea-bed. The ocean doesn’t like me.” The muscles of her cheeks tightened. “Mase loves it. He says, when the Sirens call, the only way to quiet their keening is to dive into the tide.”

“Sirens. They’re the ones who lure men to their doom? Even on those stand-up paddle things?”

Davis interrupted them, his face set. “The drone found board remains fifteen k’s south. What colour was Mason’s SUP?”

“Blue with a yellow sun.”

“Sounds right. I’ll take a team. You come with Belle.”

After two hours, Davis returned. “That’s it, mate. We’ve found nothing. Neither has the drone. I’m packing things up.”

“No.” Her heart imploded—a black hole sucking every other part of her being into an abyss. “Keep searching, please!”

Silence. An assessing stare.

Lisa scrambled to her feet. Frantic, she sped away, along the golden sand until she collapsed.

“Mase. Where are you?” She scanned the waves, praying for a simple sign.

Offshore, the tide swirled around a rocky outcrop in an hypnotic ebb-and-flow, slinking in to embrace the stone like a lover, then withdrawing as if reluctantly. One sudden vertical spray offered a blatant single-digit salute, piquing Lisa’s attention.

Barely visible in a small cave near the top of the rock was a flash of red in a puddle of white. Could it be red shorts and white skin? Mase? Her feet hit the water. Her body froze, panic-stricken. She stared across the waterway. The distance was within range for pool swimming, but the ocean?

The blob couldn’t be Mase. The drone would have found him.

What if it was?

The possibility propelled her into the light swell, powering her to the rocks. Her fingers grappled for a hold. Water sucked at her legs, hampering her ascent. “Get off me, bitch,” she swore at the sea. Cresting a ledge, she found Mase’s body misaligned like a discarded rag doll—arms and legs at odd angles.

“Mase.” She knelt on the sharp stone to check him. His eyelids flickered. Lisa glanced to the beach. Belle was at the spot where she’d entered the water.

Lisa whipped off her shirt, waving it in the air. “Here,” she yelled.

The woman threw both her arms upwards and semaphored her intention to get the others. Much of Mase’s body was shielded by the cave’s overhang. Lisa spread her blouse to cover the rest.

“Thank you, thank you.” She whispered the words to whoever had answered her plea for a sign.

Other than a wry glance, the rescue team ignored her bra and shorts combo, focussing their attention on retrieving Mase.

“No broken bones I can see. I reckon he’ll be okay once we get him into hospital,” one rescuer said. “Here climb into the zodiac and hold his head.”

“Geez, Mase. What’ll I tell your mother?” she muttered, settling his skull on her lap.

“Mum,” Mase croaked, “she’ll love you for finding me.”

Two days later, Lisa’s hand rested on the handle of a hospital wheelchair while a nurse completed the patient release documents at a nearby station. Mase gathered Lisa’s hand. “Thank you. Davis said they wouldn’t have found me, even with the drone. How did you?” he asked.

“You haven’t talked about this since it happened,” she said, brushing an errant tear with her finger.

“Processing...” His wry grin sent flutters into her heart. There’d been no smiles lately. “So?” he asked.

“The tide—how it cuddled the rocks. I’d swear I heard the Sirens nya-nya singing, ‘Look what we’ve got.’ I don’t mind you playing around occasionally, but your mistress wasn’t getting to keep you.”

“Mistress?”

“The sea. You love her. I can be broad-minded.”

He chuckled. Her heart sang. “You’ve turned my life into an adventure,” he said, “take me places I’ve never been before.”

“I do?”

“The stuff you think is normal for me? I do them for your reaction,” he said, bringing her hand to his heart. “The abseiling, the puffer fish... You make me a stronger person. I can’t imagine a world without you. I love you. I’ll give up the sea for you.”

“Nah. Too drastic.” She rubbed his hand. “The weird stuff’s fun. I love you—and your challenges. You said the tide brings things back, like driftwood. It did. I only had to liberate you from the Sirens.”

He canted his head. “They shattered your ocean phobia since you were game enough to swim to me.”

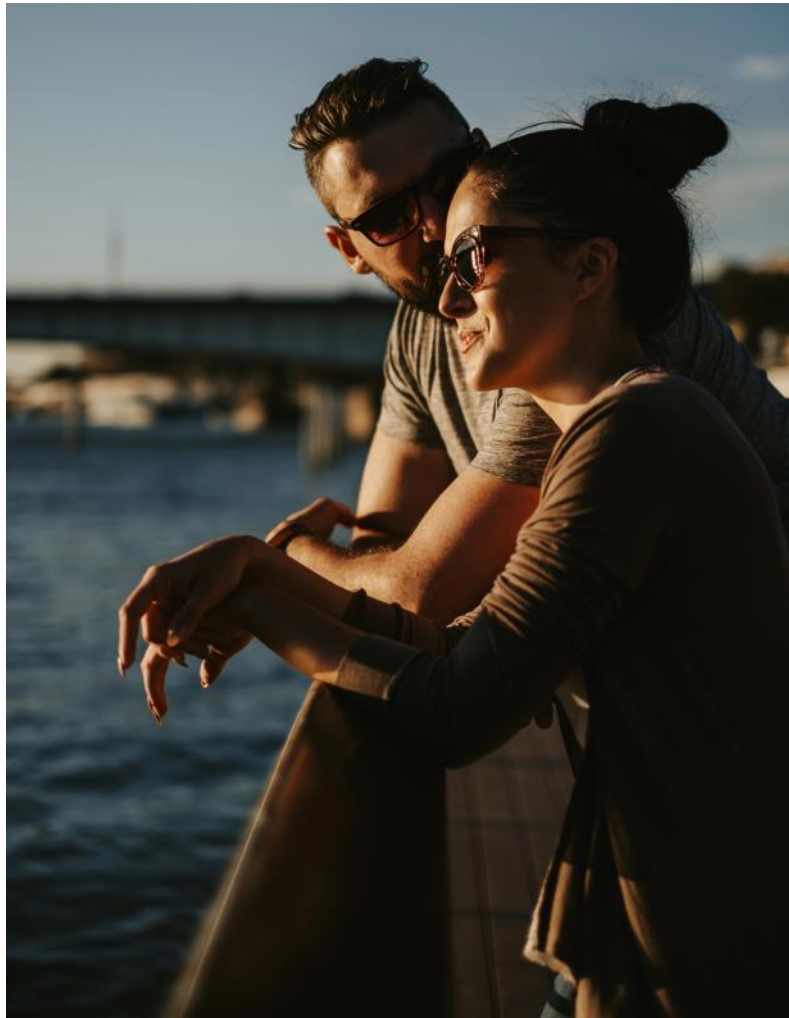
“Dented it.” She shrugged one shoulder and shivered. “God Mase, you’re the core of my world. If anything happened...”

“It won’t so long as you’re with me.”

Butterflies winged through her soul.

“I love you, Lisa. For as long as you want me, I’ll be there.”

“Forever, then,” she said, lowering herself onto one knee to kiss him long and hard under the nurse’s benevolent smile.



2nd

The Swim

Charlotte Jardine

I stare at the foaming waves, memories engulfing me: the full moon's reflection on the sea, Jason's cries for help...

'Time for your first swim. In you get.' I barely register Coach Emily's voice as wetsuit-clad swimmers shuffle past me down Moana Beach. Their footsteps stir the sand, sending fine grains dancing in the breeze.

Shaking, I back up—and collide with warm, solid flesh.

'Are you okay?' asks a deep voice.

I swing around to face a brick wall of a man. 'I hate the water,' I mutter back.

He's broad-shouldered, Māori, with a tattoo of a helmet and two crossed axes on his muscular right forearm. His grey, short-cropped hair and the crow's feet around his eyes suggest he's my age—mid-sixties.

He shrugs. 'Yet here we are. At the beach.'

My cheeks heat. 'I know. Madness, right?'

'Or a chance to conquer your fears.' His eyes have a faraway look. Is he talking about me, or himself?

'I'm Sarah, by the way.'

'Kahu,' he replies. 'You're also signed up for this eight-week intro to open-water swimming?' His fingers tremble against his powerful thigh. 'And also regretting it?'

I chew my lower lip, tasting salt. 'Especially the island swim at the end.'

'Stop yacking and get in the water,' Coach Emily bellows, as she pushes her kayak down the beach. She'll paddle alongside us during our swims.

Kahu's coffee-coloured eyes meet mine. 'I will if you will?'

Something about such a tough guy being nervous lends me strength.

'Okay.'

I'm visibly quaking when we reach the surf, but I wade in.

After the swim, everyone goes to a nearby café. Kahu sits between me and Coach Emily.

'You've got great form,' she tells him.

Too right. Kahu swam like a seal, unlike the rest of us.

'Did swimming used to be a regular thing for you?' Coach Emily asks.

'Used to be,' he agrees.

I'd bet good money on him having a significant reason for having quit, but—whatever it is—he's not sharing.

By weeks two and three, Coach Emily is setting up buoys for us to swim to, at ever increasing distances. Every time it's a mental battle for me to get into the water, but my fear is becoming more manageable, thanks to Kahu. He hangs back with me, making his usual quip, 'I will if you will?'

Kahu approaches our sessions with the same enthusiasm my cat has for his worming tablets, but after each swim we toast our efforts with coffee and a chat at the cafe. His dry wit leaves me chuckling throughout the day.

Week four arrives. Halfway through our course already. I'm almost looking forward to our training sessions—or is that looking forward to seeing Kahu? *I'm attracted to him*. The insight is a shock. There's been no one since Jason.

This morning, as the sun is on the cusp of rising, the full moon is still visible. It glares at me, like a baleful eye. All of Kahu's coaxing and Coach Emily's bellowing are needed to get me into the water.

I swim toward the buoy, counting each stroke—one, two, three—but my mind is yanked back to that night: watching, horrified, from the safety of the shore as Jason goes under once, then again. Then he waves his arms above his head: the universal signal of a swimmer in distress.

I wade into the waves, then swim toward him, but the freezing water soon saps my strength. A rogue wave crashes into me, forcing seawater down my throat. I splutter and cough, expelling brine and the acrid remains of our anniversary champagne.

'I can't do this,' I moan to myself, to him. Panic grips me in its icy fingers, and a terrifying certainty seizes me—if I keep going, I too will drown. Overcome, I thrash my way back to the safety of the beach.

There, alone on the sand, I scream for help until my throat is raw—powerless to do anything more.

Jason had only me, and I was too damn weak to save him.

The same fear twists around my body now, dragging me under. Chill water closes over my head, but I thrash my way back up. As I break the surface, I flail about, my training forgotten.

‘What’s wrong? Cramp?’

Kahu’s at my side, treading water.

I kick wildly, my hands batting at the water.

‘Hold on to me, Sarah.’

I clutch on to his thick forearm with the crossed axes tattoo.

‘Good lass. Take slow, deep breaths.’

‘Help me back to shore,’ I plead.

‘No way. If you give up now, you’ll never come out again.’ A wave slaps us, almost ripping me from his arm.

Coach Emily has spotted my predicament and is paddling towards us in her kayak.

‘No,’ Kahu shouts as she approaches. ‘Sarah’s got this. She just needs a moment.’

Coach Emily frowns. ‘You sure? It doesn’t seem that way to me.’

‘Sarah?’ Kahu gives me a questioning look.

‘I’m okay.’ Thanks to him. Clenching my teeth, I force my face back into the water and resume swimming toward the buoy.

Afterward, at the café, everyone is sympathetic.

‘Panic can strike anyone, anytime,’ Coach Emily reassures me. ‘Open water swimming is a mental game as much as a physical one.’

‘I know what you were thinking?’ A fellow course attendee—an elderly German with skin like leather—gives a visible shudder. ‘What the hell is in the water beneath me? I hear the *Jaws* music every time I do a sea swim.’

We all laugh.

People finish their coffees and drift out, until there's only me and Kahu. From his expression, he wants an explanation.

'Shall I buy you another coffee?' I ask.

'Too right.' He rubs his bruised forearm. 'You owe me.' Then he grins so I know he's kidding.

I fetch a vanilla latte for myself and his usual: an americano, extra hot.

After I've returned with our drinks, he asks, 'You gonna tell me what that was about?'

I stare into my mug's milky depths. 'Thirty years ago, my husband Jason and I had a picnic dinner at Moana Beach to celebrate our wedding anniversary. After we'd eaten, he decided to swim to the island and write our names in the sand. Romantic idiot.' Tears stung my eyes. 'I begged him not to, but he wouldn't listen. He'd always been a strong swimmer and never feared the sea. But, thanks to the champagne we'd been drinking, he was slurring and swaying before he even got in the water. Predictably, Jason got into trouble. I tried to swim to him, to help him... but I couldn't.' My shoulders shake as the familiar fear and guilt envelop me.

Kahu strokes my back, anchoring me to the present. 'Shit, Sarah. I'm so sorry.'

'I've been petrified of the sea ever since. But, when I retired, I decided I didn't want to take my fear to the grave. I started training in the pool. Then, once I was fit enough, I signed up for this course. Jason died because I wasn't a strong enough swimmer to save him. I never want to be in that position again.'

The final session arrives: the island swim. It's perfect conditions. We all gather on the beach, enjoying the warm sun on our backs.

'Get in there and make me proud,' Coach Emily declares.

I eye the island nervously. It still looms large in my mind as the place where my husband drowned.

‘Are you ready?’ Kahu asks. We’re together, at the back, as usual.

We wade into the water and swim out, side by side. I’m counting my strokes, and Kahu matches my pace, even though he can swim far faster than me.

‘Come on, Sarah,’ he calls whenever I slow. ‘You can do this.’

We approach an old fishing buoy bobbing near the spot where Jason died. The waves lap against its rocky shore, and gulls wheel overhead. I pause, treading water as confusion swamps me.

Kahu had pulled ahead, but is back with me in seconds. ‘You okay?’

‘This is where it happened.’ I try to swallow, but my mouth is bone dry. ‘He was so close to the island.’ My words are almost a sob. ‘Why didn’t he make it?’

‘Come with me.’ Kahu swims half a dozen strokes, then his feet are on the bottom. He wades to a nearby rock.

Puzzled, I follow and perch beside him, pushing my goggles into my hair.

‘I wasn’t going to tell you until later, but I’ve been talking to my mates back at the fire service.’ Kahu taps his tattoo.

Ah, so that’s what the symbol means.

‘They went through the records, did some checking, then talked to the medics. No one recognized what’d happened back then, but they suspect your husband had a brain aneurysm. That’s why he got into trouble.’

‘An aneurysm?’

‘Even if he hadn’t gone swimming, he likely would’ve died from it.’

‘There was nothing I could have done?’

Kahu nods.

I throw my arms around him and weep. ‘Thank you. I never would’ve made it through this course without you. And now this...’

He gently wipes the tears from my cheeks, and I smile through my tears.

‘No, Sarah, I should be thanking you.’ His gaze drops to the rocks. ‘I also took this course to conquer my demons. A few years back, my fire service team were dispatched to rescue people trapped in their homes during a flood. My best mate got swept up in it. I tried to catch him, but the current ripped him away. Mattie drowned.’

My throat tightened in sympathy. ‘Oh, Kahu. That’s terrible.’ I knew only too well the all-consuming guilt he was feeling.

His eyes briefly glisten, but, as he looks out over the water, a soft sigh escapes him. ‘Helping you helped me. Made me forget the hurt. Made me remember how much I loved the water. That sometimes instead of ripping everything away, it brings you something—someone—beautiful and precious.’

I gaze at him, wide-eyed. His eyes meet mine, then a bone-melting smile lights his face.

The splash of an oar cuts through the moment, dammit. ‘You okay?’ Coach Emily asks from only ten metres away. We hadn’t noticed her kayak approach.

‘We’re fine, thanks. Just having a quick breather.’ Kahu glances at me. ‘You okay to swim back, lass?’

There’s a camaraderie to his words, and a promise of so much more. Warmth floods my body, from my head right down to my toes. It’s been so long since I’ve had someone at my side. Too long.

I grin back at him. ‘I will if you will?’



4th

Life Finds A Way

Natalie Carver



“Vincent.”

“Margo.”

The air in the green room turned thick with tension. While my own escape was futile, the awaiting floor attendants at least had the decency to look away or scurry off to find something better to occupy their time.

My eyes narrowed on the man who stood opposite me. It had been eight years since we’d last shared a space together. Time had turned him into a stranger. Yet there had been an era, eons ago, when I’d called Vincent a friend — perhaps more.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” Vincent said, running a calloused hand through his uncharacteristically tamed locks. This polished and refined version was a side he seldom showed. Vincent was much more at home, digging through the dirt in search of prehistoric treasures.

While I'd never give him the ammo of announcing aloud how good the years had been to him, it didn't stop my treacherous heart from racing beneath his gaze. For a man who spent so much of his life outdoors, there were limited signs of sun-exposed skin.

His dark, coffee-brown hair held no strands of gray, and his green eyes glistened with the wickedness of youth. Despite all the years and distance, this was still the Vincent I had once known so intimately.

"Tyrannosaurus got your tongue?" Vincent chuckled to himself as he cracked open one of the cans of ale on offer in the room. He held it out to me, head cocked to the side, daring me to accept something from him.

Refusing to be intimidated, I snatched the drink, quickly gulping the chilled contents as Vincent cracked open another. "You expected me to avoid you?"

Vincent's laughter filled the space between us, so at war with the guardedness of his gaze. "Should I have expected anything different, Margo? Avoiding me or any public claim to our find is all you've done for years. It's what you do best."

Shots fired. He had me there. But there was a dinosaur's chance of surviving an asteroid attack that I would acknowledge it out loud. "My career ensures that my calendar is *thoroughly* booked."

Vincent raised a single brow. He might as well have called me a liar. "Timetabling? You let a silly little thing like being double-booked keep you away?"

"Not all of us are glory seekers, Dr. Malcolm." Another truth. Vincent hadn't once stopped the media campaign trail. Every time a new Jurassic Park movie came out, he was willingly dragged back out in front of the cameras to celebrate all things prehistoric.

"We made the discovery of a lifetime, Margo." Vincent's words pinched. His tanned knuckles turned white as the sides of the can creaked under the pressure of his grip. "You walked away from it." *You walked away from me.* The unspoken truth hung between us.

“I didn’t know you felt so strongly about my lack of attendance.” *Liar*. There had been emails, texts, even a letter or two over the years.

Vincent shook his head. “It’s not everyday someone makes a find like we did, Margo.”

He was referring to when we’d been PhD graduates, sent on our first dig to the deepest reaches of Argentina. It was there, under the watchful gaze of the Andes Mountain range, that we’d uncovered a thigh bone of the largest species of sauropod to ever walk the earth.

The findings had catapulted us into the digging limelight. Every museum, university, and journal publication wanted to talk to us. For months, we’d traveled around, giving talks to undergraduate students and sharing our findings with the world. It had been through that exposure that I’d been offered my dream job: lead professor of paleontological studies at Berkeley University.

It was also how Vincent had been able to open his own private company that specialized in locating dig sites on private land. Prospectors had lined up for the chance to work with Dr. Vincent Malcolm.

Where I’d turned to educating the next generation of paleontologists, Vincent had dedicated himself to unearthing prehistoric secrets. His findings trended globally. Every museum, from the Smithsonian Institution through the Natural History Museum in London, showcased his findings. And why wouldn’t they? Vincent was the best.

Despite the notoriety of our find and our individual career contentment, Vincent had never forgiven me for walking away from all of it. On the last day we’d spent together, right after I’d been offered the job I couldn’t say no to, Vincent had asked me to stay and work with him.

“Two-minute call,” one of the floor runners announced, shattering my thoughts. “During the commercial break, we’ll take you both onto the set to get wired up.”

I nodded in silent thanks. Finding words seemed entirely too difficult.

“Thank you, Lara,” came Vincent’s gravelly reply.

My attention snapped back to Vincent.

“It’s polite to know *everyone’s* name, Margo.”

I scoffed. “You’re the last person in Earth’s timeline I’d ask for etiquette lessons.”

Vincent smirked. It was the invitation he needed. Beverage discarded, he strode towards me. Drawing so close, the toes of his scuffed boots bumped against the polished points of my heels. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed that vicious mouth of yours.”

My heart raced. The hunger in his gaze had my toes curling.

“Margo, tell me —”

“Alright folks,” the floor runner darted back into the room, cutting through a very different kind of tension that had heated up between us. “They’ve cut to commercials early. If I could get you both out on set.”

“Welcome, Dr. Malcom and Dr. Harding!” A senior producer called in a way of greeting. “Can I take two seconds to fangirl?! It’s not every day a girl gets to meet her heroes.”

“Thank you —” Vincent started.

“Hope we live up to the hype.” I ended.

“It’s such an honor to have you both here. Together again for the first time in almost a decade!” The producer continued to gush as her minions wired us up and positioned us on the couch across from where the host would sit. “Ever since the Jurassic Park movies, meeting you both has been at the top of my bucket list.”

My brows pressed together, but it was Vincent who replied. “We may share surnames with our fictional counterparts, but you know we aren’t associated with the movies?”

A flush spread across the producer’s cheeks. “Oh, I know,” she replied. “It’s just that dinosaurs are finally cool again, and you guys are experts on the subject. So, in a way, I guess life really did find a way by getting the two of you back together.”

I couldn't help but smile at the movie reference.

The producer turned to me, "Dr. Harding, has anyone ever told you that you look just like Sarah Harding in the Lost World?"

I nodded, my smile growing wider. "I've been told." While my thoughts were still scrambled from Vincent's earlier advance, the producer and her fangirling had allowed me a moment to refocus.

"Test the mics," the producer instructed. It was then that a smartly dressed man strode out across the stage like he owned the place. "Let me introduce you to our host, Jim Stewart."

The host shot his hand out in greeting and said, "Vincent, good to see you again."

"My colleague," Vincent stood and turned back to where I sat beside him, "Dr. Margo Harding."

Jim took my hand and nearly crushed it with the strength of his handshake. "Any friend of Vincent's is a friend of mine."

"The commercial break is over in thirty seconds," the producer reminded, as she scurried out of the camera shot. "Twenty seconds. Ten seconds. Four. Three. Two..."

"Welcome back, America. Joining me now are renowned dinosaur scientists Dr. Vincent Malcolm and Dr. Margo Harding."

"Thanks for having us, Jim." Vincent said as he sat back, his arm resting along the back of the couch. The tips of his fingers brushed against my shoulder, sending a shiver running the length of my spine.

"Dr. Harding," Jim interrupted my moment of silent panic. "Is it correct that this is your first public interview in eight years?"

"It is," I replied.

The host smiled. "Tell us, what brought you out of retirement?"

My smile vanished. "I was never in retirement, Jim."

"No?"

Vincent sat forward, ready to take over with his well-practiced charm, but I shook my head. This was my time to speak. “I turned my focus to running the paleontology department at Berkeley University.”

“But the question America wants to know the answer to,” Jim sat forward, his hand running along his chin, “why did you stop digging? You make a discovery that paleontologists can merely dream about, only to walk away from it all.”

Had Vincent put him up to this? I clenched my teeth, refusing to look like a fish out of water with my mouth hanging open. I’d been sent a sample list of questions. Questions that all related to our findings, our thoughts on the latest Jurassic World film, and what we were working on now. Nothing this personal.

“Dr. Harding —” Vincent started.

“Can answer her own question.” I placed my hand on Vincent’s thigh, swiftly ignoring the bolt of current that shot up through my arm at the contact. The chemistry had always been explosive between us, and time had done little to dull it. “I found my calling, Jim. I got to research the impact of our findings and publish articles highlighting the importance of what we uncovered.”

“You heard it right here, folks. Right from the dinosaur’s mouth.” Jim wiggled his eyebrows at the camera. “Dr. Malcolm, your turn —”

With the interview over, I collected my belongings. There still wasn’t any sign of Vincent. If I was quick and left now, before he made it back to the green room, I could return to my life of pretending I hadn’t spent the last eight years missing him.

“Come for a drink with me, Margo.” Vincent’s voice called from the doorway. Turning to face him, my breath hitched at the sight. Vincent’s arm rested against the door frame, his whole body leant into the room, blocking my escape. “Please.” He made no attempt to hide the desperation in his words.

He wasn’t ready for me to walk out of his life yet again.

The truth? Neither was I.

When I didn't speak, Vincent closed the distance between us. Silently, his hand claimed mine, our fingers entwined. "Just promise me you'll stay this time. I've waited eight years for this second chance."

My gaze flicked between each of his eyes as a smile played on the edges of my lips. "I guess the movies were right."

"How so, Dr. Harding?"

"Life really does find a way."



1st place

Third Wheel

Janie Stewart

“...and at the start of their relationship, Hillary and Jonathan spent a lot of time hanging out with Daphne, their third wheel.”

Wait, what?

Daphne froze in her seat at the back of the small church where the couple she’d considered friends until two seconds ago were vowing to love and cherish one another, and humiliate a guest, apparently.

The celebrant even gestured in her direction and a few heads turned towards her, clearly curious about the person who’d turned the metaphorical bicycle of Hillary and Jon’s relationship into a tricycle.

She gave a jaunty little wave, but she felt numb inside. *Well, at least this explains the invitation.* They'd obviously needed her for show and tell in their romance origin story.

Suddenly, the yellow dress that had seemed so cheerful for an autumn wedding felt like a beacon of shame. *Look at me, the human plot point who thought that at worst, I'd been invited to provide free cake!*

They wouldn't have been the first couple to send her an unexpected wedding invitation since she'd taken a leap of faith and opened her boutique patisserie last year, but she'd considered Hillary and Jonathan genuine friends, even though they'd faded out of her life in the past couple of years.

She caught what looked like a sympathetic glance from a man three rows in front of her. She didn't recognise him - she didn't know any of the other guests, although the bride's family had A Nose that helpfully marked them as related - so maybe he was from Jonathan's side. He had dark hair that flopped over his forehead, dark eyes and stubble that was a day away from being a beard.

Daphne sank down in her seat and focused on the back of his head rather than the traitorous couple as the ceremony continued. They finally finished the I dos, had the obligatory kiss and sat down to sign the papers, while the celebrant directed the guests to head to the reception in the church hall next door, "where we will welcome the happy couple as husband and wife!"

Daphne planned to welcome a large glass of whatever white wine the free bar was serving, then make her escape before the wedding dinner. Making small talk with a table of strangers who now knew her as Daphne, Third Wheel, seemed wildly unappealing.

She was leaning on the polished wooden bar, successfully carrying out Operation Sauvignon Blanc, when the newlyweds entered to the guests' polite applause. The wedding photographer hovered around them, snapping away.

"Shouldn't you be in the photos with them, as a throuple?"

Daphne jumped and managed to tip half her wine down the front of her

dress. She whirled around to find The Sympathiser standing behind her.

“Crap, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He grabbed some napkins from the bar counter and handed them to her.

She sighed as she tried to blot the stain. “Don’t worry about it. I was about to leave anyway. Thank goodness I drink white wine and not red.”

Maybe she was imagining it, but his face seemed to fall.

“Are you really leaving? Sorry about the throuple joke too. I actually thought what they said about you being a third wheel was a bit off and I was planning on offering moral support.”

She gave up blotting and took a proper look at him. He looked around her age, early thirties, and he was cute in an Adrien Brody kind of way, minus the significant nose (definitely not a Hillary relative).

“I’m Finn.” He held out his hand and Daphne dumped the damp napkins on the bar to shake it.

“Well, you already know who I am. Although I wasn’t their third wheel, I was their bloody training wheels,” she muttered.

Finn raised his eyebrows.

“We worked together at an accounting firm,” she explained. “It was obvious from the start that they liked each other, but they both had the emotional maturity of pre-teens and had no idea what to do about it. We used to hang out a lot together and I guess I was their buffer while they got up the courage to start a relationship.”

“So you’re basically the reason they’re together? That makes the third wheel comment even worse.”

Daphne shrugged. “I haven’t seen much of them for a couple of years, so I was quite surprised by the wedding invitation. I thought they probably just wanted a free wedding cake.”

“You’re a baker?” asked Finn.

She nodded. They looked over to where the happy couple were posing with the cake in question, cutting the first piece for a photograph.

“You made that cake? It looks amazing.” Finn sounded genuinely impressed.

Hillary and Jon had opted for a two-tier cake for their small wedding. The top tier was Earl Grey and lemon flavoured and the bottom tier was Daphne's signature chocolate whiskey cake. Both tiers were covered in smooth ivory fondant and topped with fresh peonies to match the bride's bouquet.

"I left the corporate world and opened a patisserie. It's less job stability, but I get to bake all day so I'm happy to make the trade."

"Very cool," he said.

A server stopped next to them with a plate of cake slices. The couple had obviously decided to serve some of it while they had their photographs taken and the guests waited for dinner.

Daphne took a piece of the Earl Grey and lemon, while Finn went for the chocolate whiskey.

"Oh my god," he said after his first mouthful, "this is incredible. Would it be rude to ask you to marry me AND make our wedding cake?"

Daphne laughed, blushing a little. Even though baking was her day job now, it was still a rush when someone loved her work. Especially when that someone was kind and good looking. Those brown eyes and long eyelashes were a killer combo.

"How do you know Hillary and Jon?" she asked.

"I used to work with Jonathan, but I left that company a year ago. I was also surprised to be invited, although I'm starting to think that my new job might be the reason. I work for a company that does liquor wholesale and distribution and I get a decent staff discount on bulk orders."

He nodded towards the glass in her hand.

Daphne shook her head in disbelief.

"I guess you and I are in the same boat," said Finn. "The token friend boat. And by the looks of things, the token friend boat is a double kayak. I think we're the only people not related to anyone else."

Daphne laughed again. "I guess adult relationships are still not their forte. Maybe we should be flattered that we're their most useful friends."

Finn snorted. "They certainly made use of us. Free cake, cheap wine and a bad joke."

His gaze turned serious as he looked down at her. "So you're leaving? Do you have other plans, or just want to ditch this wedding? I saw you before we went into the church and I was hoping we'd be sitting together at dinner."

"Oh, that's..." Daphne felt a little flustered. "I was originally going to stay, but I've served my purpose here. I don't think I could handle it if I featured as a third wheel in the speeches as well as the ceremony."

"Fair call. I'm not keen on sitting at a table of strangers either. This may seem a bit presumptuous, but what do you think about paddling this double kayak out of here? There's a nice Thai place a few blocks away that we could walk to."

Daphne felt a rush of anticipation. His interest in her was certainly helping to reinflate her crushed ego. Maybe this event didn't have to be a complete write-off.

"Why not? Let's go before they come back from doing the photos. I doubt they'll even notice we've gone."

Finn grinned, his teeth flashing white against his stubble. He crooked his arm and Daphne looped hers through it. They turned for the door, but she hesitated for a second.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I was hoping to get my cake board back. The big board it's sitting on is reusable, but maybe I should just leave it."

"No way. We're getting that board." Finn changed direction, tugging her towards the door to the kitchen.

She glanced around furtively before peeking through the glass inset. "The kitchen looks empty. Let's grab it now and go."

The cake board was sitting on the bench - with half of the chocolate cake on it.

"Damn," said Finn. "It's the best cake I've ever tasted in my life, but I don't think I can eat all that in one go."

Daphne giggled. "Don't worry, the cake is sitting on its own cardboard base. I'll pry it loose and lift it up and you take the board out from under it."

She began lifting the cardboard off the layer of fondant covering the cake board. She'd just finished the edges and started to lift it, when Finn tried to whip the board away. The cardboard was more firmly attached than she'd thought and the cake flipped out of her hands and landed upside down on the floor.

They stared at it in silence for a moment. "Shiiiiiiiit," breathed Finn. Daphne bent down and carefully lifted the semicircle of cake off the floor and onto the cardboard base. It was still intact, although slightly flattened and listing to one side.

"Thank goodness they went for fondant instead of buttercream," she said. The peonies from the top tier were on the bench, so she plopped them on top of the remaining cake to hide the icing cracks. "Good as new!"

They looked at the wonky cake and burst out laughing in unison. The kitchen door started to open and Finn grabbed her hand. "Quick, in here!" he whispered, pulling her through a nearby door into a large pantry. They stood pressed together in the low light, trying to muffle their laughter as one of the catering staff puttered around the kitchen.

Daphne realised two things simultaneously - that Finn wasn't laughing anymore and that he smelled amazing. Her gaze locked with his as they moved even closer together. He leaned down slightly and their lips brushed, clinging for a moment before they broke apart. They stood, breathing quietly, before Finn leaned down again and whispered, "This is, without a doubt, the best wedding I've ever been to."

Daphne smiled so widely, her cheeks hurt. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but me too," she whispered back. "Now let's get out of here, before they discover the floor cake."

