

ROMANCE WRITERS of NEW ZEALAND



LIAISONS *2025*



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**In the Heart of
Mt Eden Village**

Our Top Stories

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A Change of Plan

Cerys Lloyd

The din of music and voices hit me as I pass through the side gate and into the backyard. The yard is laced with young people laughing, talking, yelling. And they are cool, this surfing crowd. Not a nerd in sight—more like tanned and toned, beautiful people. There's soft glow from party lights strung up across the backyard.

I try to push away my desperate disappointment. It's only just settling in, this new reality that I'm not going to the Academy next year, and I definitely don't want to be at this party. There's only one reason I came.

Finn Barker.

I see him immediately across the yard and make my way over. Just the sight of him makes me flustered. Tall with broad shoulders and tousled, salty blond hair, his ocean-blue eyes sparkle at me as he smiles in greeting. He introduces me to the people he's standing with, but I don't even register their names.

After a minute, he turns my way and says in a low voice just for me, “How did it go? Did you get in?”

I give the smallest of head shakes and I can’t stop the traitorous, wet drops that well up into my eyes. Shrugging, I arrange a half-smile on my face, like I am maybe not that bothered by this devastating news. “No drama school for me.”

His face pulls in sympathy, but it’s too late—I can’t stop the tears from overflowing now. Oh God, and I’ve only just arrived at this awful party.

“Uhh, do you want to go somewhere quieter?”

I nod and Finn walks us to the shadowy edges of the yard into the recess of a garden shed where we’re barely visible to anyone. He glances at me again, sniffing away, and then pulls me in for a hug. The sharpness of shame and disappointment is an aching pain in the centre of my chest, and I crumple against him, sobbing into his impossibly soft hoodie. I’d banked so much on getting into acting school, made no other plans, depended solely on this. I thought I’d outsmart everyone—show them I could do it. Now, school’s out and I have no idea what I’m going to do.

I cry for a few minutes and he just holds me. He’s tall, but so am I, and I press my face into the space between his shoulder and his neck. God, I’m glad to have him here. It’s crazy we both happened to be in Sydney this week, me for my audition and him to meet with potential surfing sponsors for next year. I’ve spent more quality time with Finn this week than in the entire last year. He’s been relaxed and open, not the withdrawn, silent version of himself that I’ve just come to accept.

Eventually, I push away and drag a breath of the mild night air deep into my lungs to steady myself. We’re still standing close and Finn doesn’t move away like I expect him to.

Instead, he reaches out and ever so gently lifts a lock of my hair and folds it away behind my ear.

“You okay, Lexi?” he asks quietly.

I nod and suck in a shaky sob. “Thanks.”

Finn is the boy who was always too cool to be at our sad little school. We should

be grateful that this god-like figure stepped out of the sea to grace our corridors. He is apparently exceptionally talented at surfing, as evidenced by spending long stretches of time away at surfing camps in exotic places (Hawaii!). Always a little bit quiet, he lives a few streets over from me. We even used to hang out, but that's dropped away in more recent times.

I finally find the courage to look up at him and when I raise my gaze, Finn's face is not the neutral, beautiful mask I am used to seeing. He's still lovely, but there's expression there—his eyes are bright and roving across my face. There's something about him... if I didn't know better, I'd say he's nervous.

I smile at him bleakly through drying eyes. "I feel so stupid, I don't know why I thought I could get in."

"There's nothing stupid about believing in yourself."

"It's so embarrassing. I'm an embarrassment," I snivel.

"You could never be an embarrassment—it's incredible that you even had the balls to try out for it. I... I'm proud of you Lexi, for real." He laughs awkwardly and rubs the back of his neck. "I'm kind of in awe of you actually."

I frown slightly. That comment was out of place.

He still looks uncertain, then he keeps talking. "I missed you, you know? All the time I spent away surfing. I mean, I liked the surfing, but I hated being away from normal life and... I used to always think about you. You're so confident, you do things and don't think twice. You wrote and directed our school production this year! I'm not kidding when I say I'm in awe of you."

Dude.

I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "But you never even *talk* to me anymore! I mean...apart from these last few days here in Sydney." I probably shouldn't place doubt on his grand confession, but Finn's ghosting me has hurt.

He chews his bottom lip and I swear I feel my heart start beating faster.

"I... I like you Lex. More than I've liked any other girl. And longer, like, way longer. I wish we had talked more this year. It's been a weird year, but this week in the

city with you has been unreal. I'm just sorry that it hasn't worked out for you with the Academy next year."

My mind is spinning. Finn Barker *likes* me? Likes *me*?? But I'm loud, make poor decisions and am bossy. I'm obsessed with theatre—a literal drama queen! And, well, I've seen the girls who gather for surfing competitions and I am not beach body material. No way.

"But I'm not... your type." *Good Lexi, don't tell him all that other shit swimming around in there.*

We're still standing close and I realise his hands are now on my waist, neither of us moving away.

He huffs a laugh and I can see his shoulders visibly relax. "I think I only have one type, and you're it." His eyes travel my face again. "You don't believe me?"

Only then do I realise I'm looking at him with my mouth half open, one eyebrow raised sceptically. I flap around for a response that doesn't quite come.

"I liked you from when we first started high school," he contends. "I was just drawn to you—your energy, how you could make anything fun. Then, in Year 10 we came back from summer break and it'd been ages since I last saw you. You'd grown taller and kind of filled out. You were... pretty hot. I was lost."

My heart is definitely pounding now and I feel so awkward and out of place I want to run and stay in equal amounts. But there's another tingly feeling slowly growing through my chest and that's what keeps me grounded.

He keeps going, like he's found his pace.

"And your confidence... it always amazed me. I'd just watch you. Never afraid to say what you think. I couldn't believe it when I saw you at the airport last weekend, it was like I'd magicked you up." He scratches at the stubble on his jaw. "This feels so good to finally tell you. Even if you don't feel the same way, it's okay. I'm just glad I've told you."

And I can see it on him, the relief. His whole face has lit up through this confession. The corners of his eyes crinkle as he grins at me, like he's just done

something terribly crafty and clever. I hardly ever see this side of Finn.

I can't help a little smile. "We used to have fun, you and me. Remember getting the bus home together? You'd help me with math homework and I'd explain to you the themes behind *Glee*? But then, it all faded out at the end of last year... what happened?"

A wave of sadness crosses his perfect face. "I'm sorry Lex. My mum was... not good. I was away all the time and it got harder and harder to just fit back in with school and everything else. I didn't wanna cut back on surfing because it felt like that was my future, but..." he shrugs, "everything else suffered."

"Why didn't you say something?" I whisper. "We could have been there for each other. This year has been..." I trail off. "I could have done with someone like you around, someone with your steadiness."

He leans his head down towards mine and asks softly, "You would have wanted me around?"

"Yeah, I would have wanted you. Like, at... at any point." My voice catches as I say it.

His large, warm hand finds mine and I lace my fingers between his. My heart is pitching into the lower parts of my throat now and I can barely stand it, but I stay still as a statue, like any movement might upset this delicate balance of confession and awkwardness.

"What about now?" he asks. "The year's finished, no more school."

"Maybe this is good timing to have no plans," I admit in a quiet voice.

I feel his head drop and the side of his face brushes against mine. My cheek turns towards him like it's second nature.

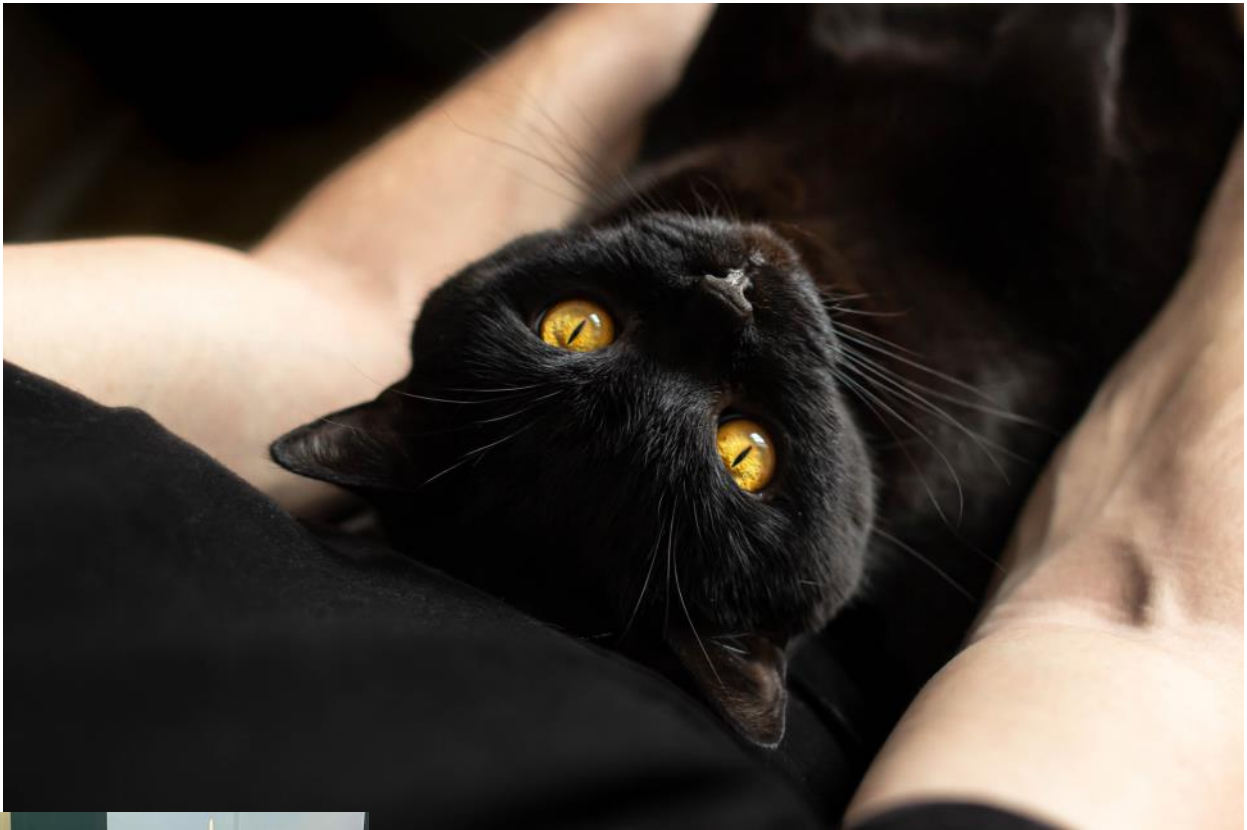
I squeeze his hand and step closer into him, lifting my chin upwards, and our lips gently meet. It's soft velvet and magic, its slow and sensitive exploring and we take our time, still unsure of each other. Have we really danced around each other in silence this entire time? Uncertainty drops away as my tongue can't help its curiosity. My hands move across his chest and slink up and around his neck, searching for more warm skin to touch. Finn walks me backwards, his lips never

leaving mine, until my back gently bumps into the shed wall. This kiss is a slowly building symphony: it might as well be my first, it's the only one worth remembering.

There, pressed between the wall and Finn, I pull him closer until his body is flush with mine; he's strong and hard and soft, all in one. In that moment I know that this is the start of something long and loving.

I must be the luckiest girl alive to get to kiss Finn Barker.

It crosses my mind, brief as a starburst, that Finn Barker might actually be feeling the same way about me.



A Furry Visitor

Lisa Stanbridge

1st place

Zephyr appears in my kitchen like he owns the place.

I find him lounging on the counter, tail wrapped around his feet, licking one paw with the self-satisfaction of an animal who knows they're welcome anywhere. He blinks at me, like *I'm* the one who broke into *his* apartment.

"Right," I say, placing my shopping bags on the counter, "you again."

His shiny tag displays the name *Zephyr* on the front and on the back a message from the owner saying, '*If found, return to apartment 309—Max.*'

I moved in six days ago, and Zephyr has visited my apartment three times. Usually he leaves of his own accord, but today he's content to stay, so I take matters into my own hands.

Max lives next door and I've seen him twice. Once collecting mail in a black hoodie like it was a security blanket. The second time was when he was waiting for the elevator. When I smiled at him in the hallway, he'd looked behind him as though I were talking to someone else.

What a strange man.

Well, looks like we'll finally be getting acquainted today. I scoop Zephyr—a black tom cat—into my arms and he flops against my chest, purring loudly. I go down the hall and knock on the door.

It opens just as I'm about to knock again.

Max is taller than I remember. Barefoot. Wearing a hoodie again, blue this time. He looks at me like I might be here to sell something.

"Hi, I'm Olivia, your neighbour," I greet cheerfully and gesture to my apartment next door. "One cat delivery." I hold Zephyr out to him. "He broke into my apartment. Seemed quite content."

Max releases a long-suffering sigh. "He does that, I'm afraid."

"Is it a hobby of his?"

"We share a balcony, so if you keep a window open he'll find a way in. He likes warm places."

"And I radiate sunshine," I chirp with a grin.

That gets a blink, even a twitch of a smile. He reaches out and takes Zephyr, our fingers brushing. It's a brief contact, warm, but gone too fast. I feel the aftershock all the way to my toes.

Max clears his throat, his cheeks tinging pink. "Thanks," he says, then disappears, his door clicking shut.

I grin all the way back to my apartment.

* * *

Three days later, Zephyr returns. This time he's on my sofa, mid-nap, his face half squished into the throw pillow like it's been a long week. I really should start shutting that window, but being on the third floor, it's safe and I like the fresh air coming into my apartment. Besides, Zephyr is a good boy and I'm growing fond of him.

“You’re making a habit of this,” I say, sitting on the sofa and scratching him under his chin. He stretches, yawns, and rolls onto his back. No remorse whatsoever.

Ten minutes later, I knock on Max’s door again with Zephyr in my arms. Max opens the door quicker this time, like he knew it would be me.

“Your serial trespasser has struck again,” I say. “Honestly, I feel like we should be co-parenting at this point.”

He takes Zephyr from me. This time when our fingers touch, they linger. That same warmth spreads right through me, and I can’t stop grinning.

“He likes you,” Max says, his eyes flicking up to meet mine. Holding.

“He has good taste.”

A pause. “You mean the cat, right?” His brow furrows.

“Maybe,” I say with a wink.

Max mutters something under his breath and starts to close the door, a little slower this time as he watches me ... curious.

* * *

The rain starts when I leave work and by the time I get home, it’s pouring. The aggressive, sideways, soak-through-to-your-undies-in-three-seconds type of rain. Since I don’t have a parking space at the apartment block, I park on a side street and sprint back.

The elevator is out of order, so I take the three flights of stairs, dripping, shoes squelching with every step. I’m half laughing, half freezing when I reach my floor. This time, Zephyr is waiting outside my apartment door.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” I mutter.

He meows like this was always the plan and blinks at me. I scoop him up but don’t hold him too close and knock on Max’s door. The hoodie-wearing hermit himself opens it and when he spots me, soaked through, hair plastered to my forehead, grinning like an idiot while holding Zephyr outstretched, his eyebrows lift high.

“Your cat invited me,” I joke.

He gives an effortless smile, then takes Zephyr and steps back, gesturing for me to come in. This is a *massive* win.

Inside, his apartment smells like coffee, old books, and comfort. It's warm. Dim. The glow from the monitors on his desk flicker across the wall and the only sound is rain drumming on the windows.

Max disappears and returns with a towel—grey, slightly frayed at the edges. I take it and our fingers brush again. This time he wraps his fingers around mine and our gazes meet. I shiver at the intensity in his eyes.

“Thanks,” I say, wrapping the towel around my shoulders.

Max nods once, then walks back to his desk like I haven't just shattered the atmosphere with my existence.

“Sorry if I interrupted anything,” I say, perching on the edge of the sofa.

“Nothing important,” Max says. “Just coding.”

Zephyr hops up beside me and starts grooming himself.

“You always this charming?” I ask light-heartedly. “Or is it just for me?”

Max doesn't look up. “You're the only person I've talked to in three days.”

My heart does a small flutter. “That explains the social skills.”

He smirks and looks up, our gazes holding again. My breath catches this time and something shifts. Like the world tilts on its axis. And that's when the power goes out. We're in near darkness with only the faded light coming in through Max's curtained windows.

“Okay,” I say after a pause. “Did I just break your entire power grid with my personality?”

There's a small chuckle, which sends shivers down my spine, followed by Max's footsteps. A moment later I hear the swipe of a match and a candle flares to life.

“No,” Max says. “This building's just crap.”

He lights another candle and sets it on the coffee table in front of me. The glow flickers across his jaw, his eyes, the tiny scar near his temple I hadn't noticed before. I remain seated, towel still around me, but warmer now.

"You can stay if you want," Max says.

"Wow, I'll have to mark this one on my calendar as a special occasion." I grin at him.

"I like your company," Max says so quietly I nearly miss it.

My heart does that flutter again, and I release a shaky breath. I lean back into the sofa, Zephyr settling beside me, purring. I pat his back while Max sits on the other side and pats Zephyr's head. Soon our hands collide, but neither of us move and Max links his fingers through mine.

* * *

I find the notebook by complete fluke. It's the day after the blackout and I stop to return Max's towel. He's out, but his door is unlocked, so I let myself in. I set the towel on the kitchen counter and turn to go when I spot it.

Black cover. Worn edges. Peeking out from beneath a cushion on the sofa. I shouldn't touch it, so obviously I do.

It's not code or a journal. It's *writing*. As in fiction. I read a few lines and they stop me in my tracks. It's sci-fi—lonely, strange, beautiful. A man stranded on a distant moon, haunted by echoes.

I read some more, only stopping when I realise I'm being invasive. I pull out a sticky note from my bag and scrawl a note.

Still thinking about that character on page six. Just saying.

* * *

The next night Zephyr is missing. Max comes banging on my door asking if he's with me, but I haven't seen him. I've never seen Max so frazzled, and he rushes out again. Apparently, Zephyr is always back for his dinner at seven p.m. and it's already nine. I'm not sure what I can do, so I wait to hear word. While I do, I step out onto our shared balcony, and that's when I hear that familiar meow.

“There you are,” I say to Zephyr, the cat, appearing out of nowhere. “You had us worried.”

I scoop him up as Max appears on his own balcony and looks at me, breathing heavily.

“Found him,” I say, and Max’s shoulders relax.

“You menace,” he says as he takes Zephyr while looking at me.

“Me?” I hold a hand to my chest. “Zephyr chose me. I didn’t catnap him.”

A real smile from Max this time as he buries his face in Zephyr’s fur and whispers something. My heart does a silly little flip at the sight.

“I wrote last night,” he said.

“Oh. Good.”

“I haven’t written in over a year. I thought I’d lost the love of it, but then you—” He works his jaw like he’s mulling over something. “You just ... saw it and liked it and it was the boost I needed.” He looks at me hard. “Thank you, Olivia.”

I step closer and he meets me halfway. A rail fence is the only thing separating us, but I can feel his breath on my lips.

“You scare me,” he murmurs. “In a good way. In a ‘you make me want things again’ kind of way.”

“Like what?” My voice trembles.

He reaches out, brushing his fingers along my jaw. “This. *You*.”

Butterflies swoop and silence stretches. We’re so close I can smell his shampoo, feel the warmth of him in the space between us. I tilt my head and he leans in. Our lips brush when suddenly Zephyr meows. He escapes from Max’s arms and jumps down, dashing into his apartment.

We step back and Max laughs.

“I can’t believe your cat just cockblocked you,” I say, laughing with him.

His gaze meets mine again, and he steps forward with the most purpose I’ve ever seen in him. He uses his finger to tilt my chin and presses his soft, warm lips on mine in the sweetest kiss I’ve ever experienced.

“You’re the best part of my day,” he says.

His words shift something in me, and I grab his shirt, pulling him to me. “I was hoping you’d say that.” Then I kiss him again, slow and certain, like a beginning.





A Surprise in the Oven

Alexandra Gearing

‘Josh, please, I’m begging you, tell me what’s wrong?’ Sarah asks, leaning against the kitchen bench and crossing her arms.

With a huff, Josh finishes cutting the raw chicken and tosses it into the pan. ‘Nothing’s wrong.’

She watches as he grabs her lovingly crafted potato bake—the product of thirty minutes of work—shoves it in the oven and slams the door shut. With a shake of her head, Sarah places her hands on her hips. He’s been behaving this way for days, and she’s had enough of giving him space, hoping he’ll snap out of it.

‘Oh, really? You’re behaving like a jerk. It reminds me of our first year at university. Usually, you shower me with affection, but now you’re distant and moody. It’s as if my fiancée has done a one-eighty. Why won’t you talk to me? What’s wrong?’

Turning from searing the chicken, Josh crosses his arms against his broad chest. 'You know I don't like secrets, Sarah. Particularly when it involves my sister.'

Confused, Sarah raises her eyebrows. 'I don't—'

'Were you planning on telling me? Especially about something so serious and life-changing for her?'

'Josh, what are you—'

'I assume you know about it,' he snarls before flipping off the stove. 'Why else would we be having this fancy family dinner? Geez, Sarah, Lily's only nineteen.'

His harsh attitude causes Sarah's eyes to fill with tears. *Damn it, not again.* She brushes them away with her sleeve, knowing she can't hide her hurt and anger anymore. 'Even though I don't know what you're talking about, thank you for ruining what was supposed to be a special night for all of us!'

She runs down the hall to the bathroom and slams the door shut, unconcerned she's acting like an emotional teenager. Ignoring her reflection, she splashes cold water on her face. She doesn't like this version of Josh; this is not the loving, empathetic and warm man she fell in love with. This is first-year university student Josh, who had a chip on his shoulder and thought the world was against him. The man who disliked her when he learned she came from a wealthy and influential family working in politics. Growing up in poverty, Josh's childhood was filled with him taking on many adult responsibilities while some days going hungry and wearing rags. At eighteen, he was awarded a scholarship to attend the local university, where he met Sarah and had minimal sympathy for the poor, rich girl who wanted to break away from her parents and start somewhere fresh. Two years passed before their relationship evolved from open hostility into understanding, respect, friendship, and finally, love.

Despite everything, she believed he'd overcome this unsavoury behaviour; however, she was wrong. She doesn't know why Josh is so upset or what it has to do with his sister, Lily. She knows only that tonight's special dinner is ruined, delaying her planned announcement.

The front doorbell rings as Sarah pats her face dry with a soft towel. Shortly after, she can hear Lily and her boyfriend, Noah, chatting with Josh in the living room. Realising she can't hide in the bathroom forever, she puts on a fake smile and walks out to join them.

'Sarah!' Lily says, running over and wrapping her in a hug. 'You look beautiful tonight,' she adds, breaking away. 'Really glowing. Don't you agree, Josh?'

'Yeah,' he answers, his gaze cast downwards.

Lily regards them with uncertainty. Sarah widens her smile in reassurance, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Sensing the tension, Lily changes the subject. 'Well, dinner smells delicious, and I've been craving a margarita all day,' she says, heading towards the kitchen. 'Have you still got the bottle of tequila I left here at Christmas?'

'No!' Josh says, putting his arms out, blocking the entrance to the kitchen. 'Do you think that's wise, Lil?'

She laughs. 'I'm not working or have any classes tomorrow, so it's fine,' she says and tries to move around him.

Standing his ground, with nostrils flaring, Josh looks over at Noah. 'Aren't you going to do something?!'

Noah gives him a puzzled look. 'If she wants a margarita, she can have a margarita.'

He snaps, shaking his head. 'I can't believe what I'm hearing.'

Despite her anger at Josh's recent behaviour, Sarah walks over and stands beside him, worried.

'What's up with you, big brother?' Lily asks.

'Don't you mean *Uncle Josh*? How could you have let this happen?'

A stunned silence pierces the air. Lily's blue eyes widen in shock. Noah lets out a choking sound, and Sarah puts her head in her hands and mutters, 'Oh, no.'

'What are you talking about?' Lily asks, looking over at Sarah before returning her attention to Josh.

‘I found your positive pregnancy test in the bin, Lil—don’t deny it.’

Lily and Sarah lock eyes again in apprehension before Sarah gives her a look of resolve.

Josh notices their silent communication. ‘So, you could tell my fiancée you’re pregnant, but not me?’

Lily ignores his question and asks, ‘What were you doing in my apartment?’

Josh lets out a breath. ‘I stopped by to collect the books you borrowed from me, and while I was there, I went to the bathroom—you didn’t even try to hide the test!’

‘Josh—’

‘You’re so young, Lil, and you haven’t finished university yet and....’ He looks at Noah and notices he’s smiling at Sarah.

‘Do you think this is a joke?’ Josh asks and stares back at Lily. ‘You don’t realise how hard it will be with a baby. Mum worked three jobs to keep a roof over our heads. I practically raised you. I know what it’s like.’

‘Josh, I appreciate your concern and the glimpse of how you’ll react when I tell you one day I’m pregnant, but that’s not happening today.’

Josh stares in confusion. ‘But I found a positive test... if it wasn’t yours, then...’

‘It was mine,’ Sarah says. ‘I’m the one who’s pregnant.’

Josh turns to look at her. His shocked gaze meets hers, then travels down her body to rest on her lower belly. His firm stance softens as he rubs a hand through his untamed curls.

‘Lily was working at the pharmacy when I went in for a test,’ she explains. ‘She knew I couldn’t wait until after work, and since she lived nearby, she offered her apartment.’

Hesitantly, Josh takes a few steps towards her. ‘Sarah, I’m sorry—’

‘I was organising this fancy family dinner, as you put it, to tell you. I wanted it to be a surprise.’

‘And I ruined it,’ he says, closing his eyes, the mortification clear in his voice. ‘I’m the biggest jerk.’

‘Yes, you are, and I’m really mad at you.’

Josh hangs his head in shame.

‘But I’ve just told you we’re going to be parents,’ she says, a single tear leaving a watery path down her face. ‘We’ve dreamed of this for so long, and I want us to enjoy the moment.’

Josh rushes over and encircles her into his arms. Looking down, he cups her cheek with one hand, the other resting on her lower abdomen.

‘Am I really going to be a dad?’ he asks in awe.

Eyes brimming with fresh tears, Sarah nods.

‘I’m sorry I was horrible to you,’ Josh says, his voice choked. ‘I know it’s inexcusable, but I was worried about my sister... I started to think about when she was born and how my mum...’

‘Shh, it’s okay. I understand.’

He shakes his head. ‘Please forgive me, sweetheart.’

Linking her hands at the base of his neck, she pulls him closer. ‘You’re lucky I love you so much,’ she smiles. ‘Of course, I forgive you... but please don’t do that again. Remember, we’re a team. Not enemies. If there’s a problem or you’re worried about something, you need to talk to me.’

He brushes away his own stray tear, composing himself. ‘You’re right, as always,’ he says. ‘I’m still going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, though.’

With a laugh, she rises on her toes to meet his lips in a passionate kiss, saying, ‘Well, at least for the next seven months, and then we’ll call it even.’

Behind them, Lily produces a gagging noise. ‘Before witnessing any more of my brother’s grovelling, I need a margarita.’

‘Be prepared to get very drunk tonight then,’ Josh says before leaning in with a smile and retaking Sarah’s lips with his.



Merger

Jennifer Raines

3rd=

"Hello, Matilda."

I jerk upright. Only one person says my name with that intimate growl.

Said.

Past tense. Six years past tense.

"Who let you into my office?"

Stupid thing to say, but shock does that. My heartbeat shifts to staccato. Not a life sustaining beat. I left Sydney six years ago. Dropped everything when I got the call from the cops that my parents were dead. Didn't leave my younger brother Jon's hospital bedside except for bathroom breaks and to deal with the various official parties who apparently own a piece of you after a tragic accident.

"The concierge had my name."

"You're not Edwin Peters!" I sound semi-hysterical, but I'm expecting *PaperiaPlease*'s rep.

I must be hallucinating. Six years ago, I was ready to go anywhere with Ben Masters. Then I blocked him. Looks like anxiety about the merger of the struggling Treacy stationery company with *PaperiaPlease* has triggered my deepest fantasy, that one day Ben will walk back into my life, and it'll be as if we've never been separated. He looks the same. No. I force myself to study him. There are changes, more sophistication, a certain aloofness, a few threads of grey in his thick locks.

"Why are you here?"

"My family bought *PaperiaPlease*. I manage it."

He shrugs, and my stomach clutches in a physical memory so strong it hurts.

"When I heard that you're Ian Treacy's representative for the merger talks, I couldn't resist the temptation to see if it really is you."

Not like this. This isn't how I'm supposed to meet you again.

"I sometimes wondered if you were a figment of my imagination," he adds. "Shall we go?"

I turn, like some AI-generated version of myself, to collect my jacket. You sound the same, all husky drawl soaked in whiskey. You introduced me to fine whiskey. You beat me at chess. You swept me off my feet, gave me ten months of passion infused love and laughter. I'm happy to see you.

And embarrassed. And terrified.

Six years ago, I was too scared to trust you with my future. The stakes are as high now as then. I chose Jon then, because he was helpless. Ian's age and inability to innovate make him vulnerable now. A family friend, he gave me this job. He's trusting me to protect his legacy and the future of his employees. I can't let him down, no matter how much my heart aches with what ifs.

We dine at a small restaurant, the booths providing privacy. *Intimacy?* His familiar cedarwood scent evokes erotic memories which are disorienting me. Ben asks how I am. I ask about his offer. He enquires about my parents. I explain the company's present financial position in concise sentences that emphasise its strengths. He's setting me up for chess annihilation—Fool's Mate. We met at the university chess club, and were never apart from day one.

"Ian's first condition is that all staff are retained." I sound ridiculous in the face of his monumental cool. He *manages PaperiaPlease*. He's calling the shots, and I'm playing catchup.

"Does that include you? Will you work for me?"

Ben's urbane and unreadable, when there was a time I was attuned to his every expression. I'm blindsided by the sense of loss.

"Until tonight, I didn't know you'd be the new boss."

"Think about it now. If you keep your present position you'll be working directly with me." His gaze holds mine, his voice dropping to a silky drawl. "My memory tells me that you run when the pressure gets tough."

I *am not* going to cry. I'm not even going to react. I know nothing about you now. You might be married with ten children. Okay, ten children in six years is unlikely. But you must have a lover, lovers, a girlfriend, a wife. I suck it in. I made the decision all those years ago. Doesn't matter if I have regrets. Have always had regrets.

"Our past history has nothing to do with these negotiations. If, when everything else has been resolved, you don't want me, then that can be arranged. Let's end there tonight."

"And resume tomorrow?"

Resume means restart. *If only*.

"Ian Treacy should take over, now you've replaced Mr. Peters." I want to disappear.

Maybe vaporize.

"Let's see if we can work together?"

Work? I was your friend, lover, dreamed of being more. I want to tell him everything. I want his arms around me. I want his body heat, his tender lovemaking. But, as Ian's representative, I owe it to Ian to handle this professionally. I owe it to myself. I was a coward six years ago. This time, I can get something right.

"I'll meet you here at seven tomorrow night, Ben."

He studies me, his beautiful eyes assessing whether I'm telling the truth. "Okay."

For three nights, I stick to business, loading spreadsheets and product brochures onto my laptop, taking him through the numbers, the areas where we've innovated in recent years.

"Treacy's have copied some of *PaperiaPlease*'s strategies." He glances up from the screen. "Is that your influence?"

Yes.

Studying best practice and applying what I can—and damn him to hell—*PaperiaPlease* is best practice.

"Treacy's is a solid business with good potential."

"Then why the merger?"

"You know why. Ian needs capital to take advantage of new technologies without compromising the brand. And you're here because you're seriously considering investing."

Ben hasn't asked a personal question, hasn't offered me a lift home, hasn't touched me, even accidentally, since that first night. I want to scream, to grab hold of him, to beg for another chance.

"I'll get a proposal to Ian by Friday."

"Does it include the staff?" I hold my breath.

"Yes." Ben leans back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table. "I've missed you, Matilda. Have dinner with me on Saturday night to celebrate?"

'Missed me'. I flop back in my chair, my heart racing. "I can't. Saturday."

"Can't or won't?"

“My brother has a band. His singer’s sick. I’ve promised to fill in.”

“I know what happened.”

“Pardon.” My head’s still stalled on ‘*missed me*’. Hope blooms.

“I went to your house, spoke to the neighbours. Your parents died, your brother was touch and go for months, you weren’t even in Sydney. Your socials went blank.”

“When you asked about my parents, you knew?” I lick my lips, and his eyes settle on my mouth.

“Why didn’t you ask *me* for help?” Bewilderment clouds his voice, and guilt pushes hope aside.

“I wasn’t Matilda Richards, carefree university student any more. I was Jon’s legal guardian. I decided it was right to cut you out of my life.”

I have his full attention now.

Shit, shit, shit. Time to take responsibility. I owe him the truth.

"I doubted that you'd still want me, love me, accept *us*."

He stills, shock creasing his features, then pain.

It’s too late to take back what I’ve said, what I’ve done. The words I should say are stuck in my throat. I was scared to trust your love. Your family’s wealthy, I was destitute. I didn’t want to become a burden. Too late to discover it wasn’t my decision to make. I should have given him the choice to be part of Jon’s and my life. My insecurities sabotaged whatever might have been.

For a moment he just looks at me, emotions chasing each other across his face as he relives the past. He stands, closing the shutters on his thoughts with me on the outside. "I’ll go."

Still, I catch his sleeve. To hold him in place? To make excuses? "What about the merger?"

Did I just ask that stupid question?

"I’ll submit my offer by the end of the week." He shakes his arm free, his tone flat. "That hasn’t changed."

"I’m sorry, Ben."

I’m still in love with him. I questioned his love. I was sure of mine.

Tears run down my cheeks. Ben won't sabotage the merger. He's not a coward, like me. I was too shell-shocked to see it six years ago. I didn't see anything clearly six years ago.

Ian's thrilled with Ben's offer. It's everything he wants.

I listen to Ian's lavish praise while my heart is breaking. *Again*. Ian says Mr. Peters arrived with the contracts. Ben hasn't called me, won't call me.

On Saturday night, I don the uniform. Figure hugging black silk minidress. Check. Stilettos. Check. Purple smudges under my eyes from crying. Check. I can only hope the audience doesn't look too closely. I don't want to sing tonight.

I can't let Jon down.

Halfway through the night, I nod to the band and abandon the playlist.

"This next song is for an old friend."

I start a hauntingly beautiful love song. For Ben, but he'll never know. I stare out across the stage lights. He's there. Or am I fantasizing again? Then, Ben waves before he moves to a table at one side of the room.

I'm deliriously happy for no reason. Except Ben's *here*. At the end of the number, I take a break. Applause rings around me, but I don't care. I step from the stage and walk to Ben's table.

"Great show."

"Thanks." I smile. Uncertain. "Ian's delighted with your offer."

He shrugs. "It's a good deal for us. Will you work for me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Still don't trust me, Matilda?"

"It wasn't about trusting you."

"You didn't love me."

"I loved you, but I didn't want to see your love die. I wasn't functioning normally. My insecurities tripped me up. It was my mistake, not yours."

"No, perhaps you were right. I did love you, but I imagined a carefree, romantic love. I might have hesitated about accepting all that responsibility." He stops my protest. "That's why I was so stunned when you told me. I needed time to think about that."

He'd loved me! He's using past tense. I killed his love!

"Tilly, it's time for the next bracket."

I gesture frantically to my brother. "Give me a minute."

"It's all right, Matilda. I'll be here until the end."

"I must finish the show." I plead for understanding.

"I've waited for you this long." He grins. "I can wait a bit longer, that is, if you answer a question."

"The answer's yes."

I love you.

He leans forward to brush his lips across mine. "I haven't asked the question yet."

"It's still yes."

The band plays the opening chords of the next number. I see the promise in Ben's eyes, and take a risk, cupping his jaw with one hand, and settling my lips over his.

He wraps me in his arms, deepening the kiss, ignoring the wolf whistles of the crowd.



Mistaken Identity

Susie Frame

Ry Fletcher moved in next door yesterday. I just happened to see him through the micro blinds in the kitchen. I'd read in one of the latest rags that the ageing bachelor rocker had hung up his guitar in favour of the quiet life. Destination unknown. Except now, *I* knew. Well, if he was after quiet he had it by the shovelful relocating to Morrison's Lane. Average age of its inhabitants? Eighty-four going on comatose.

I loved him when he performed in the 70s - his easy swagger and ability to connect with his audience was his super-power, but the fact he clearly didn't feel the need to live in a swanky penthouse made me like him even more. *And* when I noticed my Boris nosily sauntering over to investigate Ry's arrival, my darling cat was swept up lovingly and patted and talked to for a full five minutes. The ruggedly good-looking, cat-loving muso was the perfect package. Oh, be still my shrivelled ovaries.

I decided I wasn't going to be one of those pathetics and gush at him living next door to me. I certainly wasn't going to tell him I had a poster of him on my childhood bedroom wall, either. No. I was going to play it cool. I'd be neighbourly, of course; take over the regulation batch of biscuits in a day or two, give him phone numbers of the Morrison Lane residents and the rubbish bin schedule. But for now, I'd be Angela Brown. Quiet, never-married, devoted-to-Boris, Angela Brown.

Today

If this was a play, the words *Enter Universe* would appear on the script. Because at this very moment, looking an absolute wreck in my gardening gear, no makeup and hair in need of a comb and a centre-parting dye job, I find myself wrapped in Ry's arms, my cheek pressed against his plaid flannel shirt and the smell of soap and male muskiness snaking up my nostrils. And before you start thinking *I'm* now one of those pathetics, my actions were out of my control. The sight of him at my front door carrying Boris's lifeless body in a cardboard box was just too much to bear. Ry caught me as I was about to faint. I'm sure when he woke this morning, the last thing on his mind would be contending with a lifeless cat in a box under one arm and a near-lifeless woman under the other.

"I'm so s...s..orry," he stammers. "It's entirely my fault. Your cat just appeared out of nowhere and before I knew it, she was under my back whe..."

"He. He's a he. B..b..oris," I sob. "His name is..." I reach into the box and pat my late pet's still-warm body. "...was...B...Boris."

"I never saw him. One minute the driveway was clear then—"

As much as I don't want to - *no offence, Boris* - I reluctantly leave Ry's arms and take my feline buddy in mine.

"I'm not blaming you, Ry. Accidents happ..." I realise my mistake. He probably wants anonymity and I've ruined it for him.

"Ry? My name's not Ry."

“It’s not? Oh, of course. That would have been your stage name.”

“Stage name? What? I think you have me mixed up with someone else. I’m Matt. Matt Cunningham.”

He’s good. Really good. But then he’s probably been spinning that lie for ever. Maybe he’s spun it for so long he believes he actually *is* someone called Matt? He tenderly strokes the length of Boris’s body. Ry’s speaking. I think he’s asking my name but I can’t be sure. My mind has wandered to the thought of a stroking of a completely different kind. My disloyalty to Boris lands like a load of bricks in my gut. *Sorry, Boris.*

“Your name is...?”

“Angela,” I manage, before my tears crank up to full flood. And although my thoughts should be on Boris and Boris alone, my mind turns to Ry’s strong arms and how much I want them holding me. *Sorry, Boris. Again.*

“Right, Angela. I’m not sure what the etiquette is in these situations but the least I can do here is offer to dig a hole for Boris.”

The mere thought of my precious side-kick under the ground starts me off. I weep some more. Loudly.

“But, first,” says Ry, slipping his arm around my shoulder, “why don’t we go inside and I’ll make you a strong cup of tea.”

My emotions are in chaos. Heavy-hearted one minute, effervescent the next. Boris. Ry. Ry. Boris. I go to bed an emotional wreck; the events following Boris’s demise playing on repeat behind my closed eyes; Ry’s tender words as we drank our tea; his sensitivity when we buried Boris, and his insistence that he provided something to mark his grave. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear I was falling in love. *Can you fall in love in seventy-two hours?*

There’s a light knock on the open front door. “Angela?” Ry’s voice floats in tantalising my eardrums. Breath hitches, heart hammers. *Ridiculous, Angela. You’re being totally ridiculous.*

Ry’s holding a beautiful, smooth, white rock and on it is an image of Boris. “H... how? Wh...at?”

“Do you like it? I thought we could have a blessing ceremony for Boris – if you’d like – and we could lay this on his grave.?”

“Like it? I love it, Ry...er...Matt.” I decided I’d go along with his story and call him Matt, even though he’d always be Ry to me.

“I’m an artist. A portraitist, actually.”

Another yarn you’re spinning, Ry?

“This is Boris to a tee. How did you capture him so perfectly? You hardly knew him.”

Ry shrugs. “It’s nothing special. Just something I’ve been able to do.”

“Like sing and play the guitar?” I give him a sly wink.

He smiles quizzically, raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, that too. Just a bit of a strum at parties.”

Have it your way, Ry.

He hands me the rock. “Shall we?” he says, pointing to Boris’s grave.

Ry ushers me forward. I place the rock down on the still-soft earth. “I love you, Boris. And thank you for loving me, my friend. Fly free.”

We stand in silence. Ry clears his throat and pulls a hanky from his pocket. *Soft-hearted. Emotionally available. Is that my ovaries stirring?*

Then his gravelly voice fills the air. My favourite Stray Cats’ song from the 80’s fills the gap between us. His voice sounds quite different now, but who cares? Ry is singing for my Boris. Then before I know it, Ry’s hands are in mine and we’re grooving around Boris, laughing and singing.

I wish I could be carefree and wild,

But I got cat class and I got cat style.

Ry twirls me towards the wrought-iron seat under the cherry tree. He sits down close to me. “Who doesn’t love a bit of *Stray Cat Strut*, eh?”

“I know. It’s great.” I repeat the chorus softly under my breath. “Carefree and wild...was that what it was like for you when you were—?” I stop. He clearly doesn’t want to talk about his performing days.

“What? Younger?”

“Yeah, younger.”

“I’d like to think I’m still carefree and wild, Angela. Just a bit slow on it these days.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Oh, I know that feeling so well...the slow bit at least.” I look up into the umbrella of cherry blossoms. “Definitely not the other.”

I feel the seat wobble as Ry shifts his weight. He turns to face me. “Never too late, you know.”

My shoulders lift and drop in a shrug filled with regrets of a life half-lived. “I don’t think you can suddenly become carefree and wild when sensibility and self-control have been your constant companions.”

The warmth of his hand that now rests on my shoulder seems to say, tell me, tell me everything. “Has that what’s life been like for you?”

Dutiful daughter. Forty-five years caring in the same nursing home. No passport to travel. No confidence for a passport to love, either.

“I guess.” I look at him. He looks at me. And while I’m new at this game, I feel it’s not just any look. A smile creeps across his mouth. His eyes catch up. “Well, Angela. It’s official. You’ve thrown down the gauntlet. And I for one am not one to shy away from a challenge.”

I’m confused. “What do you mean, challenge?”

Before he answers he stands and walks towards his unit. “Be back in a minute,” he calls. “We need to make a to-do list!”

I follow him. “For what?”

“An adventure.”

“With me?”

“Of course, with you.”

Cautious, timid me squeaks, “But you hardly know me!”

“Well, you don’t know me either.”

Not personally, no. But I know a lot about you and your rockstar life. I couldn’t possibly...

“Whaddya say? You up for a bit of fun?”

I hesitate. I look back at Boris's grave. I throw my hands in the air. "Hell, yeah!"

April 13th

Ry and I are sitting in my courtyard enjoying an after-dinner wine. I feel so light and free. If anyone had said I'd lose my heart to my teen idol I'd have called them mad. But here I am. Light, free, and in the throes of a post-menopausal teen crush.

"Thanks for that three-course dinner, Angela. I can't remember the last time anyone cooked for me."

I wave away his compliment. "It's the least I can do for the coastal train trip, a ride on a Harley, a harbour cruise, star-gazing at the Observatory..."

Ry laughs, "And let's not forget the Night Fright tour?"

"Stop it! I thought I was going to die." I shudder at the memory. I rest my hand on Ry's leg. "These last few days have...What I mean is...umm...what I want you to know is..."

My words are lost as Ry's whisper-soft lips meet mine. I'm liquid. Molten lava. I close my eyes as Ry's hands cup my face, his kisses now sensual and deep. I've died and gone to heaven to meet my...

"Boris?"

Ry laughs. "What? Are you telling me I kiss like B—?"

Now *I'm* laughing, and crying. I bend down to scoop up the warm bundle that's just rubbed itself against my leg in greeting.

"Boris? What?" He points to the rock on the grave. "Then who...?"

"I've no idea. But look." I hold Boris's face still. "Different coloured eyes. Heterochromia."

"Heterowhat?"

"Boris has heterochromia. I was in shock when you arrived at my door with him that day. I didn't think to look at Boris-who's-not-Boris's eyes. Ry, can you believe it?"

"No! And I can't believe you still think I'm Ry Fletcher?"

I give him a knowing smile. "Whatever."





The Moment That Changed Everything Virginia Suckling

Loveday wondered if her evening could get any worse. Or had she misheard her partner of eighteen months? She put her spoon down next to her half-full coffee cup. “I’m sorry, Jake. Would you mind repeating that?”

“I think we should break up, go our separate ways. It’s—”

“We’re planning on getting married in a few months.” Her hand shaking, she lifted her coffee cup and put it down again with a soft clink. Leaning forward, she whispered, “I don’t understand. Is it something I’ve done? Am I rushing you? Do you need more time?” She bit her lower lip, holding back her tears. In a trembling voice, she added, “Is there any way we can fix this?”

Jake shook his head. “It’s me, not you. The commitment...the idea that when we’re married, my freedom evaporates. I’ll be trapped.” His words left a heavy silence between them.

Then Loveday took a deep breath and shook her head. “Look, I’m not like Jenny. I’m not going to demand a family right away or saying I want to give up my job. I’ve worked hard to become a paramedic. I *love* my job.”

Jake looked down at his coffee cup for a few seconds and then his gaze met hers. He shrugged.

Loveday shot up from her chair with such force that it clattered to the floor. She threw her napkin on the table. “Why wait until now to tell me? We’ve been sitting here as a couple, enjoying the evening and now you spring this...this...devastating news on me.” Her finger jabbed the air in his direction. “You’re a coward, Jake.”

Rubbing her eyes, she hurried from the restaurant before she broke down in tears. Thank goodness they had come in separate cars. No taxi or Uber. *Just get to the car. Only a few more steps. Then you can give in to your misery.*

She’d take the scenic road home, as there was more time to compose herself before seeing her sister. That was a bit of a laugh. As soon as her flatmate and also her identical twin, Lydia, saw her, she’d guess something was up. She drove towards a bridge which segued into a gentle route along the waterfront. A beautiful drive and it was only the moon reappearing from behind a cloud that made her spot a woman clambering over the bridge’s metal railing, obviously intending to drown herself in the river’s murky waters.

After looking in her car mirrors, she realised she was the only one to witness this woman’s desperate plight. Her heart raced as she slewed to the side of the road, stopping abruptly at the kerb. She sprang out of the car and ran to the railings. Below her she spotted the woman, her denim jacket caught in one of the metal supports.

‘Hold on. I’m coming.’ Her voice carried away by the wind must have reached the woman who looked up, her eyes wide-eyed and mouth open, screaming words which were lost to the wind.

No time to ring the emergency services. When she was within reach of the woman, she’d do it. Loveday flung off her leather high-heels, placing them next to the stone support and on top of them, she tossed her jacket. Suddenly, she remembered

her mobile phone and retrieved it from her jacket. It fitted snugly in the deep pocket of her skirt. Absurdly, a thought came to her—as a couple they had promised never to say goodbye on a sour note or go to bed with cross words between them. And what had she done? There was nothing she could do now, but hoped she'd get a chance to make that right. She climbed up the metal railing and gingerly let herself down the other side, edging closer to the woman who was now frantically holding on to a metal support, her hair flapping across her face. She reiterated her words. "Hold tight. I'm coming,"

Jake sat mulling over Loveday's accusation. Was he a coward? His chest tightened and a desolate feeling spread through his body. Why had he blurted the words out like that? He'd achieved the opposite of what he'd intended. What a mess. He bit his lip and gulped. Deciding it didn't have to end this way, he paid the bill and left the restaurant.

With a racing pulse, he ran towards his car, the keys slipping out of his hand as he tried to unlock the door. The car revved and shot forward as he left the carpark, hoping that Loveday's usual careful driving would be to his advantage tonight.

Jake scanned the straight road in front of him. Where the hell *was* she? He hadn't left that far behind her. Possibly she'd gone the scenic route, so he'd try that first.

Reaching the bridge, he slowed down as he saw a car angle parked. His gaze went past it and he noticed a figure climbing over the railing. His car skidded to a halt. He got out and rushed over his core freezing when he saw Loveday's shoes and jacket, lying neatly, sheltered by the stone buttress.

What had he done?

Her mother had taken her own life. Was she...?

He screamed Loveday's name and looked over the railing, his heart pounding in his chest as he saw her descending the metal supports to reach the woman below. She was risking her own life for a stranger while he might lose her because he'd been, as Loveday had aptly told him—a coward. *What a fool, idiot, total numpty.* His mind raced with dread and guilt. *How could he even think she was anything like his ex-wife?*

Each replay of her parting words cut deeper into his brain.

She suddenly looked straight at him. Simultaneously, the wind lulled for a moment so he heard her yell something, catching the end of the sentence, ‘!!!’.

Immediately, he dialled the emergency services and asked for the police and ambulance before giving the thumbs up to Loveday. She waved her thanks and edged her way closer to the woman until she was a few feet from her.

Jake saw them talking and Loveday’s outstretched arm grabbed by the woman. That looked hopeful. Whatever she was saying was helping.

Sirens sounded in the distance and within minutes the police were congregating next to Jake and looking over the railing.

He explained the situation and then asked, “Is an ambulance coming?”

“On its way,” replied the officer in charge.

A policeman climbed over the barrier with ropes and made his way down to them.

Loveday carried on talking to the woman throughout their slow progress back to the top of the bridge. The woman slipped at one point, but fortunately the rope stopped her and her rescuers from tumbling into the river below. Throughout Jake had stood with clenched fists, his breath coming out in ragged gasps until Loveday was back over the right side of the bridge.

Jake pulled her into his arms, cupped her face and kissed her fiercely. “I thought I’d lost you tonight. You terrified the life out of me when I saw you disappearing over the railing. Without you, my life would be a colourless existence. I’d be nothing. Sorry, sweetheart, I was a fool. Can you forgive me?”

Loveday gave him a hug and then stood back. “There’s nothing to forgive, Jake. I shouldn’t have left like that. I was angry and upset. When I climbed over that railing, I realised I might not get the chance to make it right with you. That scared me.”

“But you did it anyway. That’s why I love you, darling brave girl.”

Loveday glanced over at the woman now sitting in the ambulance, wrapped in a

blanket. "I couldn't help her. Poor woman, what a life she'd led. Drug addiction is a terrible thing. Screws your thinking."

Jake followed her gaze. "You saved her. What will happen to her now?"

"She'll go to the hospital and be seen by the Mental Health Team."

He nodded. "Hopefully, she'll get the help she needs."

A policewoman came over and asked Loveday if she was all right. "Have you been checked over by the paramedics?"

"I'm okay, but I'll go and see them before I leave. Thanks."

"We won't keep you now, so please come to the station tomorrow to make a statement."

"Will do," said Loveday.

Jake put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the ambulance crew, who gave her the all clear. From there, they went to her car. He kissed her on the forehead before opening her car door. "I'll follow you. Go to mine."

"Okay."

Half an hour later, they were sitting on the couch, each with a nightcap in front of them. Both of them started to speak at the same time.

"Sweetheart—"

"Look, I—"

Jake waved a hand in her direction. "You go first, Loveday."

She took a deep breath. "As I said earlier, I love my job and I'm not planning on giving it up anytime soon. I know I'll be working shifts, but we've managed with that so far, haven't we?"

"Loveday, I want us to get married. Tonight made me realise a lot of things, but mainly I need you in my life and you're not like Jenny."

"Or your parents?"

"True. I couldn't believe Jenny and I would end up with such a toxic relationship like them. It made me wonder if there's some kind of pattern here. I'm really sorry,

Loveday. You're *definitely* not like them. I must need my head examining."

"I don't blame you. Such an acrimonious divorce as yours would get anyone to question his future relationships. Especially as you had to live with two people that hated one another and made you a pawn in their slanging matches." She put her hand over his. "If you want to delay the wedding until you're sure, I'd be happy—"

"No, sweetheart. We have something that neither my parents *nor* Jenny had. We love each other unconditionally and that will see us through."

"I'll toast to that."

They clinked glasses and drank their brandy nightcap.

Jake leant over and kissed her. "Come on, sweetheart, let's go to bed."

"What a brilliant idea."

As they went up the stairs holding hands, he said, "Love you."

"Ditto, Jake."





Ribbonwood Reunion

J Hawthorn

5th

As Beryl Graves stepped off the plane onto the tarmac of Ribbonwood's one gate airport, the smack of frozen air solidified that this was the end of the line. She was back in the tiny town she had desperately tried to escape. Her old life was over.

She had liked her job — until the redundancies. She was forced to compete against her friends, and it killed her. Her five years working in administration had meant nothing. Only once she was fired did she realise that work had taken over her life. She was lost without it.

Beryl had liked her apartment — until the rent spiked and her house-mate's sleepover with his boyfriend turned into two months of the guy sitting on Beryl's couch eating her cheese.

It was all too much. No job. Nothing was hers anymore. So Beryl did the one thing she hadn't done in months: call her mother, Lucy.

The last words they'd shared were heated and awful. Her mother loved the modest little town of Ribbonwood, and refused to understand why Beryl had to leave to go be someone, anyone, far away from this claustrophobic dead-end.

And look where that got me, she thought.

Following the line of passengers, Beryl hurried through automatic gate doors, sweater and jacket bundled under her arm, an empty bottle of ginger beer clutched tight in both hands.

Spotting a rubbish bin that had seen better days, she stepped out of the line. Her head throbbed and she was certain there was a thick miasma of desperation surrounding her. Leaning against the metal bin, she dropped her bottle into its depths and silently thanked it for staving off nausea and saving her dignity on the turbulent flight.

Cold air whipped her hair. The automatic doors blasted quick gusts as the last passengers entered the terminal. She turned from the bin and gave the airport a proper look. She hadn't been back in five years and absolutely nothing had changed.

The airport was still tiny, boasting a cafe (closed), customer service counter (closed), and a hole-in-the-wall bar (inexplicably closed).

She scanned the terminal. Families swarmed around her.

Her mother was nowhere to be found.

Lucy would have called if something was wrong...wouldn't she?

She needed to move. To find a better vantage point. Beryl stepped out, and her purse caught on the buckled side of the bin. The strap snapped. Everything scattered on the ugly carpet. Beryl looked up from her mess in time to see one of the cabin crew giving her a bored, pitying look before entering the staff area.

Beryl bit back a frustrated cry and squatted down. She scrambled for her stuff. This was just bloody typical. If she was the kind of person who believed in signs, then this whole fiasco was one shrieking, migraine inducing siren. Her whole life was imploding and where the hell was her mother?

Anger turned to panic. Had her mother got the date wrong? Had she been in an accident?

Two heavy brown work boots appeared in front of her. "Beryl Graves?"

Beryl looked up at a patch of blue gingham stitched into the knee of a woman's denim overalls. She followed it up to a tall, broad woman standing over her, hands on hips, haloed by fluorescent light. Beryl swallowed, her face heating.

The stranger's hair fanned out in short, wild waves, like she'd stuck her head out a car window while breaking the speed limit. She wore a basic work shirt under the overalls. Pens and a beat-up notebook poked out the pocket over her chest. She cocked her head with a smile, brown eyes glittering. "It is Beryl, right?"

Beryl sucked in a breath, dazzled. "Who the hell are you?"

The woman laughed, a deep sound full of warmth Beryl could just swim in, and knelt. She scooped up Beryl's wayward items. "You don't remember me, then?"

She had absolutely never met this woman before. Beryl would have remembered those eyes, and she definitely would have remembered that luxurious voice late at night while her hand wandered south...

Be! Normal! Beryl screamed in her mind. She swallowed, voice coming out a pathetic tremble. "Sorry. I don't know you."

The corner of the woman's lips curled up ever so slightly. Beryl's mouth dried up. The woman placed the dropped items into her unresisting arms. "My name's Tiffany, but everyone still calls me Tinker."

Beryl gasped. "Tinker Ryan?"

There was no way this stunning woman was the Tinker Ryan. The boy who had sat next to her in English class. Memories from school poured in and she couldn't believe that kneeling before her, like a sexy butch knight in shining armour, was the scrawny boy in threadbare, third-hand clothes. The boy with dark bags around his eyes. Who doodled in work books and was always getting in fights...

Clearly she had bloomed in a way Beryl had never expected.

"Damn, Tiffany. You grew up good," she croaked.

Tiffany laughed, nose and eyes crinkling. "I could say the same to you."

She watched Beryl closely, as if she was the most interesting thing she'd ever seen. Beryl had to look away. Those brown eyes felt like spotlights. Her skin heated and she hugged her items to her chest.

Tiffany sprung to her feet. She patted Beryl's shoulder before walking towards the exit. "Come on, Lucy sent me to pick you up."

"Wait! I have bags!" Beryl called. She looked around desperately, not seeing a baggage claim anywhere.

"Hurry up, then. Tony can't wait around!"

The exit doors opened at their approach, blasting Beryl with more cold wind. Outside the doors a man stuffed his face with chips atop an idling quad bike. The man leaned back in his seat and jerked his thumb to the trailer behind him, which contained only Beryl's suitcases.

Tiffany pointed to them with a raised brow. Beryl gave a bewildered nod, jogging after Tiffany as she easily hefted the bags in each hand and playfully kicked a tire. "Thanks Tony!" Tiffany called, heading to the car park.

What the hell was happening? Beryl raced after the tall woman, marvelling at how she didn't seem at all bothered by the cold wind. Her sleeves rolled up, showing off her strong biceps - wow, yeah, impressive biceps that easily swung Beryl's suitcases up into the bed of her truck. It wasn't a good truck. It was worn out with faded

bumper stickers, covered in dust and dents. Those biceps rippled again as she hooked the cover over the truck bed.

Beryl felt faint.

Tiffany opened the passenger side door and nodded to the seat. "You coming? I promised your mother I'd get you home on time."

"You make it sound like you're taking me home from our senior formal. I don't have a curfew." Beryl winced at her words. What the hell was that? She scolded herself. You're only here until you're back on your feet. Don't flirt with your only ride home!

"It's been a hot minute since I've been on a date," Tiffany chuckled, that enigmatic curve to her lips back.

Beryl's heart fluttered against her will. She clambered into the cab, dumping her stuff into the foot well. They rolled up to the parking machine. Beryl felt around by her feet for her purse. "Let me pay—"

"Not on your life." Tiffany waved a hand. "What kind of host would I be, letting my date pay for things?"

Beryl looked out the window and screamed internally. Oh my word, this is NOT happening. She caught a glimpse of herself in the dark window and winced. God, she looked dreadful. Of course now is when a gorgeous butch blast from the past would come into her life.

They drove in a comfortable quiet. Tiffany didn't put the radio on, and soon rain was falling, pattering against the truck. The setting sun rippled in the growing puddles. It was beautiful. Beryl chewed her thumbnail, casting short, furtive looks at Tiffany.

"How do you know my mother?"

Tiffany didn't turn her gaze from the road. "We were always posted opposite

each other at the markets. It happened so often I suggested we carpool. Then, you know, after her fall she needed some help around the place—”

“What fall?”

The silence turned icy.

Beryl turned in her seat, pulse thundering. “Tiffany, what fall? When did she have a fall?”

Tiffany rubbed her face with a quiet curse. “Couple’a months ago.”

Beryl pressed herself back into the seat. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

She could hear Tiffany’s breathing over the rain. She felt the truck pull over as tears blurred her vision. This is not happening. How could her mother not tell her something like that? And why was this woman the one to help her? Beryl would have dropped everything to have been there for her —

Wouldn’t she?

Tiffany placed a hand on her knee. The person Beryl was last year, head down, fighting for scraps, would that person have dropped everything to hole up in Ribbonwood?

The guilt storm battered at her ribs. She wouldn’t have. It’d taken her life falling apart for her to even consider coming back, and while she had been able to call her mother and cry — Lucy hadn’t felt able to do the same thing.

“I’m a terrible daughter.”

Tiffany’s hand on her knee tightened. “Hey, now—”

“No, I am. I’m selfish and awful and—”

“Beryl Graves, you stop that right now. You are none of those things.”

She scoffed, hurt turning to annoyance. “Yeah? We sat next to each other at school for years and I didn’t remember you. My own mother felt like she couldn’t tell

me she'd been hurt. What else could any of that mean?"

Tiffany turned in the driver's seat, flicking on the cab light. She leaned in, eyes locked on Beryl's. "You're here now. That's what counts. And I remembered you." Tiffany smiled softly, eyes sad. "I always have."

Beryl closed her eyes, shaking her head. "Stop being nice to me." She felt Tiffany's arm slide around her shoulders, pulling her into an awkward, but comforting, hug. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she melted into Tiffany's warmth.

"Bet you're regretting calling this a date now." She mumbled.

Tiffany chuckled. The sound vibrated through her chest, making Beryl shiver. "Never."

Beryl leaned back, wiping her eyes. And through the tears saw Tiffany. Really, truly saw her, haloed once more by the truck ceiling light, and wondered if maybe it was time to believe in signs. "Wanna have a do-over?"



Scene 2

Kris Pearson

Filled with excitement, my sister Emma and I biked to the huge Apple and Pear Board building for the National Daffodil Show. School holidays – we were free! It was chilly inside because the last of the apples were still in storage. As consolation, the air was sweetly fragrant.

We pinned on our official name-tags and got to work. Emma – only eleven – was entering ‘three spring blooms’ (velvety blue anemones), a bridegroom’s buttonhole, and a vegetable novelty. This was a piece of board sprinkled with grated carrot to look like the red surface of Mars, and the top half of a small old pumpkin sliced off and supported on three stubby cucumber legs to make a flying saucer. It had holes scraped on it for windows and an aerial that was the tail of a parsnip. Pretty weird!

At fifteen, I was tackling the adult floral art classes for the first time. I unpacked my vases, a curly piece of driftwood, some floral foam, daffodils and jonquils, zig-zaggy twigs, and other bits. Emma was done in no time and went home. I stayed on, fiddling happily.

Everywhere I looked, anxious and excited people were busy – other floral art ladies, kids with their fanciful creations, and the serious daffodil exhibitors. One of them - a lanky guy with a shock of bright red curls - was much younger than the usual weather-beaten grandpas. After I'd packed up my scraps, he loped across. His name-tag said 'Rusty Donaldson'.

"All finished?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, smiling because I thought I'd done okay.

I saw him swallow and glance at my name. "Is there any chance you could help me for a while, Sarah Poole?"

He certainly had a lot of empty vases – and heaps of beautiful blooms still packed into boxes and trays.

"Okay," I said. "So you grew all these?"

"It's Dad's business," he said, hefting a big sign that said 'Donaldson's Daffodils'.

I dived behind his bench and grabbed the other end before he knocked any of his exhibits over. He was in a tizz, for sure.

"He had to go down south because my uncle was in a car smash," Rusty continued, securing the sign. "I've helped him before, but I'm running way behind on my own."

So together we arranged lots of trios of lovely daffs. He handed me the narrow water-filled vases and the right flowers, I made them stand up nicely with little packers of crumpled newspaper, and he took care of the name-tags. I told him I was fifteen and aiming to do a graphic design course at Victoria University eventually. He said he was twenty-one and wanted to buy a Honda motorbike. You couldn't shut us

up!

As we stood in front of the finished display, both nodding with satisfaction, he said, "Write down your address and I'll send you some bulbs as a thank you." Months later a box with a Donaldson's Daffodils label arrived. Mum and I planted them in the garden, and they were gorgeous – a reminder each year of that day.

*

So – university, marriage, two great kids, not such a great husband, and back to my old home town sometimes to see Emma.

"There's a new garden place out in Havelock North," she said on my most recent visit, arching a sisterly eyebrow and knowing I couldn't resist.

Off we drove, enjoying the brilliant summer weather and planning where to have coffee later. She slowed as we approached a big green and cream sign saying "Russ & Rob's Garden Gate". I immediately assumed the owners were gay.

Yep - the shop really did have a gate – an old lichen-covered farm gate that swung open in front of the proper doors when a sensor detected customers arriving. "To keep the dogs out?" Emma whispered with a grin as we strolled inside. They had an impressive display area for pots and vases, ornaments and indoor plants. My designer's fingers itched to rearrange some of it, but we kept walking because Em was keen to check out vegie seedlings and ferns. Eventually, purchases chosen, we made our way to the front again. She went to pay, and I surreptitiously moved a couple of indoor plants so they showed to better advantage.

"Still making things look pretty, Sarah Poole?" a deep voice enquired from right behind me. I whirled around and almost hit my nose on a dark green polo shirt. Which was stretched over a beautiful chest. And wafting coconut-scented cologne towards me.

I looked up. And up. Found a tanned face, brown eyes, a long straight nose, and lips quirking with humor. His hair was shaved short at the sides but still billowed red and wavy on top. "Rusty?" I gargled, with no class at all. "How did you know it was

me?”

“Just ‘Russ’ these days,” he said, tapping his name badge. “And I’ve never forgotten the little blondie who helped so willingly all those years ago. I still have the newspaper clipping somewhere of you and your sister and her prize-winning flying saucer entry.” He raised an eyebrow. “How are you doing, Sarah? And what are you doing *here*?”

“Not much,” I said, totally thrown. “I mean – visiting Emma, and she wanted to check out this place.”

Rusty/Russ glanced over to the counter where a willowy brunette was packing Em’s ferns and vegie plants into a recycled banana box. “Special discount, Rob,” he called.

“So *she*’s the other half of Russ & Rob’s?” I asked, blindsided. Not two men after all. Excellent!

“My daughter Robin.”

Huh. So where was the wife? “Good name, Russ & Rob’s,” I gabbled. “Catchy. And we liked your old gate.”

“Bit of a gamble, that,” he conceded. “But these days a business needs something memorable.”

I was absolutely not prepared for him to touch my elbow and say, “Are you back here for keeps? With your family?”

Emma and Robin seemed happy chatting about the plants so I stayed where I was and said, “Um, no.”

“Er...” he muttered. “No to which?”

“No family now,” I said. “Divorced. And my twins have just started their ten weeks’ Basic in Waiouru. For the Army. But I’m not living here.”

His chest expanded with a deep breath and he directed his twinkling brown gaze down to mine. “Can I ... um... take you out for dinner and catch up properly? If you’re

free?”

I was so surprised I hadn't registered Emma moving closer. "Yes, she's free," my meddling sister said.

I cleared my throat.

Russ cleared his, too. "Call for you at six-thirty?"

I nodded. "Same address you posted the daffodil bulbs to all those years ago." Jerking my head toward Emma, I added, "She bought the old family home."

"Seventeen Cornwallis Street, then."

"How the *heck* did you remember that?"

There was surely a blush starting under his tan. He looked up at the ceiling, avoiding my gaze. "I bought that Honda bike I told you about, and if I came into town, I sometimes... moseyed by... in case I spotted you."

I swallowed. "I wouldn't have known it was you with a crash helmet on."

"Yep. And I wouldn't have stopped until you were older."

I prickled all over.

"Just my little fantasy," he murmured.

Emma hefted her box of plants higher. "She was always at swimming or netball or floral art classes, and then uni. You'd never have found her." She sent him a wicked grin. "But you've found her now. C'mon sis – I'll loan you some false eyelashes to flutter at him."

I sent Russ an agonized eye-rolling grimace of apology before I turned away.

He stood there, knees braced back, teeth buried in his bottom lip, shaking his head and trying to hold back a smile.

*

So we had dinner, and being on our own was magic. Juicy steaks, deep dark Shiraz, intense gazes, and neither of us could stop talking. His wife had died of

pancreatic cancer five years earlier. Robin was their only child. I confessed that I was kind of thinking about leaving Wellington and coming back here to live now the twins were more-or-less launched into the world. Only 'kind of' thinking, though. And only 'more-or-less' launched. I emphasized Emma had no idea about my plans yet.

By dessert, our hands were clasped on the table, little squeezes and thumb strokes going on. Soft smiles, hot glances. Honestly, we were supposed to be adults, not teenagers, but we didn't seem to know it.

Finally, coffee finished, Russ sighed. "When do you have to go back?"

"Tomorrow night."

He shook his head, eyes closed, then looked at me intently. "I haven't had a relaxed meal out like this in years. Friends sometimes suggest suitable women, but they never are."

I coughed with surprise. "Never are *what*?"

"Suitable for anything at all," he said with a rueful grin. "When you and I met up all those years ago, we couldn't stop talking. There was just 'something' between us. Even though you were still a kid. Even though I was hellish awkward around girls back then." His grin grew broader. "Being tall and skinny with this red hair didn't help."

I gave an inelegant snort. "You've filled out very nicely," I insisted, sliding an admiring glance across his chest and shoulders.

"You too," he said with a wicked smirk, looking pointedly at my boobs, which Emma had persuaded me to showcase in a scoop-necked sundress.

"Blame my sister," I said. "It's her dress. She didn't approve of my T-shirts. She tarted me up for you."

"Blame the jumbo bags of potting mix and advanced-grade trees," Russ shot back, flexing an impressive arm. "You need some muscle to heave those around." He drew a deep breath. Swallowed visibly. Reached for my other hand, held it warmly in his, then said, "Can you arrange some time away from your job, Sarah? And come back? Sometime soon? I can't leave the business right now while it's so new, but



maybe you're more flexible? I'd love to meet up some more. Find out how far we can take this, because... you know... it feels good. To me anyway. How about you?"

I stared at him, no doubt wide-eyed. "Just like that? After a couple of hours? You're mad!"

"Possibly," he conceded. "But is there a better option? I don't want to lose touch with you again, never knowing how great it might be. Isn't it worth a shot?"

I sat, statue-still, considering. "Maybe," I finally conceded. Hot and cold, scared and thrilled.

"A 'maybe' is better than a total turn-down," he teased. "A 'yes' would be nice though".

I closed my eyes, opened them, fluttered Emma's eyelashes, squeezed his big hands, and found myself whispering, "Yes please."



Snakes On A Plain

Kylie Maguire

No freaking way.

She looked again.

Yes freaking away.

Slithering slowly across the red dirt was a long thick brown snake. Her heart raced. That snake looked like the one that sat on the top of Australia's deadliest snakes list. A king brown or something.

She shuddered.

Just her luck.

'Let's go for a holiday to Outback Queensland. It will be fun. Think of all those sunrises and sunsets. We can go horse riding. Find a hunky cowboy or two.' That's how

her best friend Bekka had sold the vacation.

They hadn't been disappointed so far. The view was breath taking. Clear blue skies. Vast red earth sporadically covered in mulga trees. The drawcard, a mini oasis of water in the middle of nowhere. An artesian bore it was called, a natural underground freshwater reservoir.

But this ... a damn snake?

Nobody mentioned snakes in the brochure or an odd chance encounter with one. She wanted to go home. The vacation was over. End of story.

What should she do?

Jemma propped herself up on her elbows and peered over the edge of the freestanding bath. Baths that they'd set up down by the bore had sounded so relaxing out in the open. Except for the unwanted visitor.

The trespasser was still there. Slithering towards the raised deck. Jemma held her breath and slowly eased her arms back into the water.

Could snakes glide their way up raised objects? Such as this bathtub? Her heart raced. It wasn't like she could climb out and make a run for it. Snakes were sensitive to vibrations on the ground. Getting out would be a mistake.

Jemma shivered, despite the warm water lapping around her body. Eyes narrowed she watched, the snake was on the move again.

Stuff this. She couldn't sit here and wait for the snake to leave. Carefully Jemma reached for her phone that sat on the old keg between the two baths.

So much for an indulgent soak while sipping chilled wine. Right now she could do with something stronger. Like vodka or tequila. She vowed silently, this was her last ever visit to a holiday farm.

Jemma stared at her phone.

Who was she going to call? Not Bekka. No she'd gone horse riding with Joey down by the creek. Abandoned by her bestie so she could have an adventure with the hunky country boy.

Jemma dried her hand on the handtowel before picking up her purple phone.

She stared at it. Would someone be in reception to answer her call?

Wouldn't they be out doing chores right now? Checking on stock. Feeding chickens or the dogs. Collecting wood for tonight's bonfire. Preparing dinner. Everyone would be busy.

Jemma glanced over to where the snake had been. It was gone. She couldn't see it anywhere.

Quickly she hit redial.

It took six rings. Six long rings before somebody picked up.

Inwardly she groaned at the voice on the other end.

'Sawyer O'Grady speaking.'

It just had to be him, didn't it?

Mr Grumpy cowboy.

Mr Not A Fan Of Tourists.

'Hello?' He repeated in that deep sexy undertone that sparked shivers down her spine.

'Sawyer, this is Jemma.'

She heard the breath he tried to suppress. She could almost visualise the frown on his tanned face. The crease on his forehead. His chocolate brown eyes narrowed and his pouty lips pressed together in annoyance.

'Look Jemma, I'm busy. If you want another bottle of wine you'll have to come to reception and get it. I don't have time to run after you.'

She gritted her teeth.

Judgemental jerk.

She didn't even like the wine. It was an acquired taste and a little too bitter for her liking.

Hurriedly she gushed. 'I'm down at the tubs by myself and there's a snake. A massive brown one that is at least three metres long. I don't know where it went and I don't want to get out in case the snake is still here.'

'A snake?'

Did he not believe her?

‘Sawyer?’

She heard him grumble, ‘I don’t have time for this.’

‘Are you coming down?’ No answer.

Panic set in and she blathered, ‘Are you going to ignore the fact I’m in danger? How do you think it would look if I got bitten by a snake? I’ll sue for negligence ... I’ll ...’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘If it will get your attention then yes.’

‘Are you sure it was a snake?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll be there in five. Don’t go anywhere.’

He hung up before she could reply. Jerk. He knew she wasn’t in a position to leave.

Jemma looked around nervously, searching for the snake. This was a situation she was not accustomed to. What if the snake was gone? Had she overreacted?

Sawyer would arrive and call her a liar and a time waster. He’d be thinking she was a whiny city girl. He shouldn’t be working in hospitality with that attitude.

She was almost relieved when she spied the snake. It had wrapped its body around the base of a light pole. Its forked tongue darted out. She shivered.

As much as Sawyer annoyed her, she wished he’d hurry the hell up.

Sawyer slammed the door shut after jumping into his four-wheel drive. Damn tourists. He fired up the engine, shoved it into gear and headed down the dirt track towards the shearing shed.

Damn his sister for roping him in to help with her farm stay business. Yeah it was popular but he had other things to deal with.

Fences.

Cattle.

Feed the horses.

Not rescue damsels in distress. Especially a hoity city girl like Jemma. How dare she threaten to sue. The last thing his family needed was a lawsuit against his sister's dream business.

Dust flew up behind his car as he sped down to assist her.

'You took your time,' she bit out as Sawyer climbed out of his Hilux. He thought about getting back in, giving her a wave and driving off.

Just to tick her off.

Only he wouldn't hear the end of it from Jemma or his sister if he did that.

'Came as fast as I could.'

'I'm sure you did.'

He tipped his black Akubra back a fraction. 'Want me to rescue you or not? I can quite easily go check on the cows. Less drama.'

She shook her head.

'Where did you see it last?'

'Over by the light pole.'

Jemma stood up and he swallowed. Oh boy. Her bathing suit, what there was of it, was a skimpy black two piece showing off tanned skin and sweet curves.

He hated he was even noticing.

A feather, about fifteen centimetres long in soft shades of blue, pink and yellow decorated her rib cage. His fingers itched to trace the intricate outlines.

Hot damn. Not what he expected to see.

He looked to the light pole in search of the snake. There was nothing there.

'Was this just a ruse to get me up here?'

'A ruse?' She echoed, her tone went up a notch. 'Oh you do have tickets on yourself Sawyer O'Grady. If there is one thing I despise more than snakes, it's men who think they are god's gift to women. I was hoping for anyone but you to answer that phone.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. Now can you look for the bloody snake so I can get out.'

‘I did look. I can’t see it.’

‘Whatever. Can you pass me that towel please?’

His gaze shifted to the fluffy blue towel she pointed to that hung off a hook.

That’s when he noticed the long brown snake, sunning itself at the base of the wooden stump. Right below the towel she wanted.

He shook his head. ‘No can do.’

‘Fine, I’ll get it myself,’ she snapped.

He held up a hand. ‘No. Stay there.’

She glared at him, mouth open ready to vent but he pressed a finger to his lips. Signalling for her to be quiet.

Jemma started to lift one leg and Sawyer rushed forward. Boots heavy against the wooden deck. He tried to keep one eye on the snake and the other on Jemma. He grabbed her arm, ‘Stay where you are.’

Jemma tried to shrug his hand off, so he held on tighter.

“The snake is right there where your towel is.’

Her gaze followed his nod.

Pointy nails dug into his arm as her grip tightened. Jemma shrank backwards dragging him off balance.

Sawyer clung to her as he tumbled against her.

They were both falling. In an attempt to steady himself he grabbed at the body in front of him. A hip. Smooth silky skin. Wet fabric. Temptation.

Jemma’s loud shriek filled the air.

They tumbled into the tub. The air whooshed out of her lungs as Sawyer landed on top of her with a thud. Bubbles splashed up into his face.

Warm water soaked into his jeans and his knee was wedged between her thighs.

As Jemma struggled to sit up, Sawyer’s gaze landed on perfectly rounded breasts. He closed his eyes. He was in trouble.

‘Did you look?’

Oh he looked. She was wet and slippery and tempting. Not that he would tell her, she’d have him up on sexual harassment charges in an instant.

‘The snake?’ She prompted.

He propped himself up. The snake was gone from the tree stump. He could see the shiny body slithering across the hot ground towards the mulga trees.

He pointed to the snake. ‘Sorry I didn’t believe you. I didn’t mean to scare you either but any sudden movements could have startled ...’

He stopped talking. Jemma had closed her eyes. Her breaths uneven. His body was still pressed against hers. Her hands flat on his chest.

‘Are you alright?’

Her eyes opened, lifting to look at him.

Damsel in distress or not, she was worth the hassle.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good.’

Her voice was soft. ‘Thank you for rescuing me.’

‘Right now, all I can think about is kissing you.’

‘You can kiss me but I still won’t like you.’

‘That goes both ways Jemma.’

Sawyer dipped his head lower until his mouth touched hers. Lingering, tasting the wine and chocolate on her lips. He wriggled clumsily, his body covering hers.

Jemma curled her hands around his neck.

‘I like kissing you,’ he whispered huskily.

‘That goes both ways but I think less talking ... more kissing is in order.’

He had to admit this farm stay business had its perks after all. He got to play hero and kiss the girl.

What could be better than that?

‘Your wish is my command,’ he told her before crushing his lips to hers.

There was no better way to spend an afternoon.



Unbound Truths

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

3rd=

Rita led me into the night, through the shadowed cottage garden, past the blooms cloaked in moonlight. We walked downhill to where the garden unravelled into the wild tangle of the orchard of apple and mulberry trees. The dark forest lay beyond, and further still, the distant lights of Beirut twinkled against the vast, black sweep of the Mediterranean Sea. Jasmine-scented warmth hung heavy in the air, a sharp contrast to the aroma of roasted meat and za'atar that permeated Rita's father's home.

Rita stopped, waiting for me to catch up. She wrapped her arms around my waist and kissed me-tender, yet urgent. Her body pressed against mine, stirring my desire for her. She pulled back.

"I've wanted to do that all night," she said, the moonlight catching in her dark eyes. "It's so good to have you finally in my arms."

"Oh, babe..." I said breathlessly as I shed the first layer of my protective shell.

Every hour of this trip that denied our relationship was torture-the restraint, the hidden touches, the longing glances. A kiss, a brush of fingers, even the hope of intimacy, impossible. I felt at ease for the first time in weeks, hidden from the judging eyes of a patriarchal and conservative world. No shame. Just us.

Rita warned me what to expect in the Middle East as we planned the trip. She told me gently, yet firmly, to soften my feminist edges, to quiet my queerness, change how I dressed, and hide my pin-up girl tattoo. I didn't argue. My need to understand her world, her heritage, her work as a cultural historian outweighed everything else. And I did. I knew her soul.

Stories of the Armenian genocide loomed large in the places we visited-the suburbs of Beirut that had grown out of Armenian refugee camps, and Rita's father's house in the hills east of the city. I learned the details of her grandparents' struggle for survival in the aftermath of the genocide, and how it affected her father. Rita showed me the ruins of her family home destroyed in the civil war, not long after her mother had taken her back to Australia.

Rita still held me close as we wandered further until we found a place to sit. We sat with our knees pulled to our chests, the view stretched out below us. The night was silent except for an occasional cricket and a distant dog barking.

"It's so beautiful here," I said, admiring the view.

"I come here when I need to think," she replied, brushing my thigh with her hand, sending a quiver through me. "This is where I realised my marriage was over, that we couldn't fix it, no matter how hard we tried."

Sadness tinged her steady voice.

“Oh,” I said, unsure what else to say, touching her thigh, reciprocating her gesture.

“But now,” she continued, turning to look at me, her hand enveloping mine, “I’m so sure of this. Of us. I’ve never felt like this before. You’re everything I want in a partner... in a soulmate. I didn’t know it until I met you.”

Her words caught me off guard, full of depth and certainty. They hung between us, drawing us closer to each other. She leaned in and kissed me again, deeper this time. We collapsed onto the earth. Rita leant over me, her dark hair brushing my face. I responded hungrily to her kisses, exploring her mouth. I ran my fingers through her hair. The world shrunk until there was only her and the night and the warmth between us. She pulled away from my lips, but her face was still close.

“Ang,” she whispered, “I love you beyond compare.”

I touched my hand to her cheek.

“I...”

Rita’s father’s voice suddenly jolted us from our embrace as he called in Armenian from the house. Adrenaline shot through me.

“Shit!” I said.

“Don’t worry. He can’t see us down here.” Rita reassured me as she manoeuvred off me and stood.

She held her hand out, and I took it, pulling me up to her.

“Are you sure?” I said as I brushed myself off.

“Yes, but we should go back. He wants to share his homemade arak with us. He must like you.”

“Really?” I replied, unsure that he did.

Rita’s father, Vartan, came across as grumpy, and hadn’t warmed to me.

“He does. That’s just his way.”

“Oh, ok,” I replied.

Rita took my hand in hers for a moment, then let go as we started walking back up the hillside through the darkness. The feel of her lips against mine lingered in my thoughts.

Morning filtered into the kitchen, golden and gentle. I found Rita already up, her black pyjamas clinging softly to her frame as she brewed Armenian coffee. The aroma filled the room. We were alone, her father and stepmother, presumably still asleep.

“That smells amazing,” I said.

She turned, smiled, her lips curving into that familiar, heart-melting grin.

“It does,” she said, abandoning the coffee for a moment to wrap an arm around my waist and pull me close.

“Good morning, babe,” she said, her voice soft. “I wanted you so much last night.”

And I her. Separate rooms had kept us further apart than the twin beds in our hotel rooms in Cairo and Beirut. Before I could answer, she kissed me-soft, unhurried. But just as quickly, she pulled away. Her eyes shifted toward the doorway. Her father stood there, silent and wide-eyed.

“Papa! I thought you were asleep.”

“I’m not now,” he said gruffly.

Rita turned back to the coffeepot. I brushed a strand of hair behind my ear, unsure what to do.

“Umm... I’m making coffee. Do you want some?” she asked her father, trying to regain control.

“No. I need a drink,” he replied.

Rita’s expression flickered with surprise. Vartan crossed the room to a wooden buffet and poured himself a generous glass of arak, downed it with practiced ease, before pouring another. He sat heavily at the table in the centre of the room, eyes moving from the steaming coffee to us as we lingered in the kitchen. The silence was awkward.

Rita poured the coffee and handed me a cup.

She whispered, “Can you stay with me? I need you.”

Without hesitation, I replied, “I will.”

If she needed me, I would be there with her, even if it got tough. My coming out was easier than others. My family was and is accepting and unconventional.

“Marguerite.” Vartan barked Rita’s full name, complete with French pronunciation. “Sit with me.”

Rita hesitated, cup in hand.

“I will,” Rita replied, as she reluctantly moved towards the table, sitting opposite her father. “But I want Ang to join me,” Rita continued as she gestured toward me.

My heart thumped in my chest as I made my way to the table and sat next to Rita. Vartan’s burning gaze met mine and my stomach tightened. Did he blame me for this? Rita’s hand reached for mine under the table and squeezed it. I squeezed hers in return.

“When were you going to tell me?” Vartan demanded.

“Eventually,”

“Does your mother know?”

“Yes, but...”

The front door suddenly opened and Rita’s stepmother, Lilit, arms laden with bread and pastries, entered. Her eyes landed on her husband and his drink. She barked something sharp in Armenian-her disapproval unmistakable, even if I didn’t understand the words.

“Votch!” Vartan replied in Armenian, then deliberately said in English, “It is not. I’ve just found out that my daughter is gay, and Ang is her girlfriend. Her sirahar!”

Rita stiffened, the weight of the words landing heavily in the room. Vartan rose from the table and argued with Lilit in Armenian. He gestured angrily. Lilit looked from him to us. I searched Rita’s face, unsure whether we should stay or go. She shook her head, barely perceptible. Then, quietly but firmly, Rita spoke.

“Papa, before you say anything else-I don’t need a guilt trip. Don’t talk to me about bloodlines, or disappointment, or how I’m not passing on our heritage.”

Vartan turned to Rita and was about to speak before Lilit’s touch to his arms stopped him. She spoke to him in Armenian. He listened.

“I might still have children. But even if I don’t, being in love with a woman doesn’t make me any less Armenian. It doesn’t erase our history. If anything, I carry it more deeply now that Ang wants to learn about it too. She respects it and asks questions. She listens. That’s more than I ever had with Kurt.”

Vartan was silent, his jawline tense. But he sat down again.

Rita continued, “So no-I won’t let you shame me for this. I’m still your daughter. I still carry our past, our grief, our pride. I work with it almost every day, and when I don’t, my family reminds me of it. Loving Ang hasn’t changed my soul or my blood.”

Her words were beautiful, yet powerful, and made my heart soar despite the tension that filled the air. Rita turned and smiled at me with unspoken affection, then turned back to her still silent father. Vartan looked at Rita for a long moment. The fire in his eyes had dulled, replaced by something softer. Older. The weight of tradition wrestled with the love he still held for his daughter. I seized the moment to leave them to talk in private. I squeezed Rita’s hand, picked up my coffee, and left the room. Instead of joining Lilit in the kitchen, I headed into the garden.

The warm sunlight touched my cheeks, the jasmine scent filling my nostrils. The knot in my stomach loosened. I sipped my coffee as I watched Rita and her father, still deep in conversation. Although Vartan was animated, Rita remained still and stoic. Then they rose from their seats. Vartan first, raising his arms in the air with frustration, anger, or acquiescence, then lowering them to his sides. And next Rita. She approached him and they hugged, tentatively at first, then warmly. I breathed a sigh of relief. I turned to look at the view, past the orchard, the forest and the city, to the pale blue of the Mediterranean.

Then Rita was suddenly beside me, speaking my name. I turned to her, and without thinking, hugged her. I pulled away, my face still close to hers.

“Babe, I’m so proud of you,” I gushed.

“I can’t believe I did it,” Rita said as she ran her fingers through her hair. “I can’t believe I said all of that!” She met my gaze. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“Anytime,” I replied. “Because I love you beyond compare.”



The Marchbury Cake Contest

Cerys Lloyd

4th

Another bead of sweat escapes my hairline, trickling down my temple before I swat it away in annoyance. This stuffy marquee is a much poorer second to the one that it's styled on. For starters, there's no cute bunting or Darren Purchase from The Great Australian Bake-Off, and the custom-made, wooden benches have been substituted with fold-out, white plastic tables. Maggie Beer would be seething.

I suck down a deep breath and remind myself that I'm judging this country town's cake competition purely to promote my new bakery, *The Paddington Pâtisserie*. Nestled in Sydney's inner suburbs, complete with eye-wateringly high rent, I've sunk all of my savings into it, and I'll do everything I can to make it a success. I steel myself

to overlook the low-to-moderate level of skill and appreciate Marchbury's enthusiasm for replicas of royal wedding cakes: Charles and Diana's is a clear favourite.

Now, to find my co-judge and get this show on the road.

A voice rings out behind me. 'Smellery Grant! Is that you?'

Gritting my teeth, I slowly turn. 'It's *Valerie*. Hayden Simpleton, what are you doing here?'

'It's *Templeton*,' he replies gleefully. 'I'm judging this schemozzle! Did you enter a cake? My God, are you that sugar horse and carriage with an actual pumpkin down the back?'

'No you idiot! I'm judging this too—don't tell me you're my co-judge?!' I don't even try to pull back my look of distaste.

A smile spreads across Hayden's smarmy mug. 'Sure am.'

'But...why? You run restaurants – you wrote a book on avoiding sugar! You know baking can't occur without sugar?'

He shrugs apathetically. 'I'm from Marchbury, they invite me back every year to be a judge.' He leans in closer and I can smell his faint and fresh cologne tickling my nostrils in an irritating way. 'My Mum and Dad wanted to get modern this year and made the Pikachu cake. It's...,' his face pinches, '*...horrifying*. Just nod and smile, okay?'

It's difficult to ignore the fact that someone with no baking background whatsoever has been included to judge. I've had to clamber my way up through pastry chef apprenticeships and kitchens to get to where I am, and Hayden just gets invited because he's from here.

Plus, he's super-annoying. We were at culinary school together and he just... grated. Since then, his career seems to have skyrocketed and I've felt wholly eclipsed on the odd occasion that we still run into each other. He's always exasperatingly

friendly and has these sparkly blue eyes that make his too-frequent smiles kind of spectacular. I'm sure its contributed to his career success.

'Shall we?' I ask with a sigh, indicating to the room and perusing my clipboard for details of the first entry.

Carol from the Country Women's Association, which is running this gig, appears before us. 'Oh good, you two found each other. Great to have you here, Valerie, I love the *Paddington Pâtisserie*, always stop in when I'm in the city. Thanks for the rec, Hayden!'

I pivot back to Hayden who is squinting at a replica of the bottom-tier of Queen Elizabeth's wedding cake. 'You're recommending me to people now?'

He looks uncomfortable as we slowly circle the cake. 'Ahh, well, why wouldn't I? The *Paddington Pâtisserie* is fantastic.'

I look at him, surprised. 'You've been there?'

'Several times. Those little *choux au craquelin* keep me coming back.'

I can't help smiling to myself, I purposely change the flavour of those *choux* daily to keep them exciting. 'Well, that's nice to hear. But, look, you don't owe me any favours—it's not like we exactly got along at culinary school.'

'Ahh, well. Not completely accurate. I had a huge crush on you at culinary school and always did clumsy, stupid stuff around you.' We're standing side-by-side, facing the royal wedding cake where, instead of using sugar for the ornamental lattice work, the baker has cut shapes out of a piece of cardboard and poked it into the ivory icing. 'This is just a plain cake with the side of a Weetbix box stuck in it,' he whispers.

I shake my head to clear my ears. 'What did you just say?'

'Five out of ten...if we're being generous?' he whispers, ignoring me.

I'm still trying to quiz him when we move to the next entry, which is the Templeton's Pikachu cake and it looks like a fluorescent prop from a horror movie. Glowing yellow icing sags in the heat, stretching an eye out of place, and Hayden's parents used those lollies that look like dentures for the mouth, giving it

terrifyingly human-looking, bared teeth. I meekly congratulate Mr Templeton and join Hayden in assuring him that his ghastly cake is impressive.

My gaze is caught by the next table: a simple, two-tiered cake with blush pink icing and white embellishments. Moving closer, I bend down to examine the intricate lace and pearl detailing with handmade sugar-peonies. An elderly lady smiles at me from behind the table. 'It's a replica of my own wedding cake, a long time ago now!'

Hayden joins me before the pink cake. Glancing at me sideways, he finally says, 'Yeah, I totally liked you. But I was always so nervous around you. You were, well, slightly intimidating.'

'What do you mean, *intimidating*?' I lean closer and whisper, 'This is the winner, by the way.'

'You know, you wore a leather jacket, didn't take shit from anyone....*really*? It's so plain.'

'She chose something she could execute and she did it well. It's simple but perfect.'

He glances back at Pikachu. 'Yeah, I suppose there's something to be said for knowing your own limitations.'

Something bothers me about his earlier words. 'Wait, what are you saying? That I was...argumentative? Scary?'

'No! You just... didn't let other people's views sway you,' he clarifies.

'So, intimidating and stubborn. That's not a compliment!'

Hayden might not know it, but this cuts deep. People often categorise me as "difficult" or "abrasive", just because I'm willing to say what I think and I don't automatically go along with everything others want.

I feel my chest tightening at the injustice. 'You know what, I don't need this. I'm sick of people giving me their unwanted commentary on my personality.' My voice is louder than I intended.

‘Woah—that’s not what I’m saying at all!’ Hayden replies. ‘Can we, ahh, talk outside perhaps?’

It’s just us outside the white wall of the marquee; the breeze a light relief from the muggy heat inside the tent.

My mind is flooded with flying thoughts and I can only speak plainly. ‘Are you messing with me, Hayden? Trying to rub it in my face that you’re this...big, established name in Sydney cooking. Trying to tell me how I should do it, how to be more *agreeable* to make people like me?’

His happy face falls and his brow furrows. ‘No, not at all! I think you get along with people just fine—’

‘And why are you saying you had a crush on me at culinary school? You’re making that up!’

‘I’m definitely not making that up.’ He pauses a beat. ‘You’re gorgeous and smart, and a phenomenal cook. I *liked* that you were unwavering, you were true to your ethos about the food you made.’

His words stop me in my tracks. I’m so used to feeling riled by this type of comment that I’ve ceased to think about whether there’s any positive spin to it.

He indicates towards the marquee. ‘It’s like, that cake in there. I would probably choose one of the royal wedding cakes to win because that’s what they seem to like in this competition. But you’ve identified a cake that shows skill and care and is actually very beautiful...’ He trails off, looking at me.

‘You don’t think I’m just a flop because it’s taken me so long to get on my own feet?’

He shakes his head. ‘You’ve got this...vision for delightful pastries and cakes, and you’ve gone after that. I admire you for it. For what it’s worth, I think the Paddington bakery is going to be a huge success, you just had to find a way to do it on your own terms.’

I blink. I have an uncomfortable feeling I might have misjudged Hayden. There’s a warmth welling up in me, making me feel all soft and a bit emotional.

‘Okay. I, ahh, didn’t know you felt like that. That’s...actually how I kind of view myself. I feel misunderstood so often, when people think I’m being disagreeable for the sake of it.’ I bite my bottom lip, my mind searching for words to verbalise what I’m feeling. ‘Umm, could we please...start again, maybe?’

He grins and it’s one of those stunners that reaches all the way to his eyes. ‘Of course—what a good idea!’ A sly note enters his smile. ‘You know, all good fresh starts usually involve a dinner.’

That warm feeling uncoiling inside me makes the corners of my mouth twitch. ‘Is that so? Well, I guess I can cook for you if you want?’

Hayden laughs, ‘No, I meant let’s go out for dinner. Someone else will cook for us both and we can just enjoy each other’s company. How about it?’

‘Like a date?’ I ask suspiciously.

He nods, watching me intently with those sparkling, sapphire blues, waiting for my response.

Do I want this dinner date with Hayden Templeton? In the space of an hour, he has unravelled me with his...niceness and honesty. I always thought being nice was for pushovers, but maybe there’s space in my life for being nice? A Hayden-shaped space?

‘Okay, fine.’ I reply, not quite keeping up with the new direction this is taking.

Relief spreads across Hayden’s face and he says softly, ‘Good...*great*. Hmm, how about tomorrow night?’ He tilts his head, watching me. ‘Valerie...’ he murmurs, ‘Are you completely shocked that you agreed to go on a date with me?’

I nod again, knowing I’ll hate myself later for not having a pithy reply so he knows I don’t care that much.

‘Here, let me give you a hug. It’s not all that bad.’ He opens his arms and I step hesitantly into them. I’m immediately enveloped, Hayden smells of warmth and cinnamon and my eyes close all by themselves in a moment that I can only describe as unexpected bliss.

The hug helps me find my voice again. ‘We’d better get back to the judging, but... thanks. For what you said. That makes a difference to hear someone—you—say that stuff.’

Hayden beams like an earth-bound sun as we re-enter the marquee, and he leans down to whisper in my ear, ‘This has been the best Marchbury Cake Competition in its entire history.’



The Worst First Date

Sharyn Swanepoel

2nd

This was the *worst* date I'd ever been on.

The man sitting opposite me was nothing like his online profile. His hair was light brown and his eyes were hazel, as expected, but he had a lot more wear and tear than his dating profile indicated. It wasn't just his photo, although that was easily a good decade old. It was also his words.

I don't know who sent the messages to my inbox over the last month since we'd matched, but the words out of his mouth were a far cry from those.

Not that I'd fallen for him through his words either, to be honest. It was peer pressure that made me go on this date. Or should I say, pressure of my sister peering

over my shoulder as she looked at my online dating options. That's what happened when you reluctantly rejoined the dating pool in your late twenties.

In a bad batch of online profile responses, Rodney had at least asked a few questions about me. Beyond what I was wearing, anyway, like the majority of others.

Those questions had clearly dried up now though, as he sat opposite me. All I'd heard about today was his latest sales figures, his Tesla, and his many complaints.

Instead of trying to make conversation, I changed focus to the ambiance in the room. The ambiance which included our server, Javier. It's a pity *he* wasn't sitting opposite me right now. We'd had a moment when I first arrived. A meeting of the eyes that lingered. I'd wished for someone just like him. Someone tall, with eyes that sparkled in the light and a smile that put me instantly at ease. Someone who made you feel you were the most important person in the room.

Then he'd brought me to Rodney, who sat tapping away on his phone.

Rodney had barely looked up when I arrived. While it didn't bode well for our dinner date, it gave me the opportunity for one more glance at Javier. *His* smile I felt all the way down to my toes. Even the way he nodded, pulled my seat out, then placed my napkin on my lap... If I hadn't been here to meet Rodney, I would have asked Javier out for sure.

'Have you been to this restaurant before?' I asked Rodney after our drinks arrived, presuming he was a regular. Certainly, the way he'd clicked his fingers to get Javier's attention earlier made me think he was too familiar.

Rodney looked around, as if trying to remember where we were. 'No. A colleague recommended it to me.' He rolled his eyes. 'I won't be trusting his advice again.'

He downed his drink, then did the finger clicking action again.

Javier appeared straight away, taking orders for Rodney's second drink, and also our meals.

The next half hour was excruciating. At least now, with our meals in front of us I could skip the talking and focus on the chewing. And the chewing was all I could focus on, given the loud clicking noises from Rodney's side of the table, followed by the occasional sucking, of what I presumed was him extracting bits from his teeth.

'You said you liked bushwalking,' I said, hoping to at least get some sort of conversation going. 'Is there somewhere you like to go locally?'

'Work has been too busy.'

I presume that's what he said, anyway. It was hard to tell, given he still had a sizeable chunk of steak in his mouth as he spoke.

'Nothing much to see around here, anyway.'

Being a member of a local running group, I begged to differ. There were so many great walks. I was beginning to think his dating profile was completely made up. Was Rodney even his real name?

After what seemed an eternity, Javier stopped at the table to enquire if we were finished with our meals.

'Thank you,' I said, smiling. My first genuine smile, for the last half hour at least. 'Everything was delicious.' My steak had been cooked to perfection, and the roast vegetables had just the right amount of crisp on the outside. Like my gran used to make.

My smile dropped when I turned my attention back to Rodney. We'd met in person less than an hour ago, yet I knew what he was going to say next.

'That's the worst steak I've ever had.' Rodney stabbed the remnants of his meal with his fork.

I flinched. Given he'd eaten most of it with *excessive* vigour, I found it hard to believe he'd not enjoyed it.

Javier apologised, collecting Rodney's plate. He glanced at me before walking away, the pity clear on his face. *What must he be thinking.*

Rodney picked up his phone, muttering to himself about leaving a one-star review. He kept scrolling until Javier returned.

'Could I tempt either of you with dessert?'

I nodded, thinking Javier could tempt me with a lot of things.

'The lemon ricotta fritters look amazing.' They would at least make something about this date worth the time and effort.

Rodney nearly dropped his phone. 'I don't think we need to do dessert.'

The way he scanned my body when he said that, it was lucky Javier had removed the forks. I had never been one for violence, but the idea of stabbing him like he'd stabbed his rib-fillet was strangely satisfying.

Rodney turned his attention to Javier. 'We'll have our bills now. I'm expecting a hefty discount on mine. I know the owner of this place very well, and I won't have much good to say to him if you don't make up for that meal somehow.'

I couldn't look at Rodney for one more minute.

'I'm going to freshen up.' I stalked down the hallway and stayed in the bathroom long enough for my breathing to return to normal. If I didn't need to get my handbag, I might have stayed there.

Rodney was back on his phone when I returned. I didn't see the point in sitting down again, and thankfully, Javier arrived with our bills as I reached over to get out my wallet.

Rodney examined his bill, nodded, then handed over his credit card. Obviously, enough discount to keep him happy.

I gave Javier my card for my part of the bill and watched as he walked away to process the payments. While he was gone, I stood there, glancing around the restaurant. All the other diners seemed perfectly happy. I looked down at Rodney. He didn't even seem aware of my presence, and I wondered if I could slip out without him even noticing.

‘I’m sorry, this card isn’t working.’

I looked up to see Javier was talking to me.

‘What do you mean?’

He handed Rodney back his card, with a paper receipt included, but held mine up as if holding it in ransom. ‘Please, follow me?’

Rodney stood up, tucking his wallet into his pants pocket. ‘I’ve gotta go. While you were gone, I had a call. I’ll message you.’

‘I guess he didn’t want to be forced to pay for my half of dinner.’

Javier handed back my card as we watched Rodney rush out the door.

‘I’m so sorry, that card should work. There’s plenty of money in that account.’

Javier laughed. ‘There’s no problem with the card, but please, follow me.’

I followed, admiring the view from behind. Broad shoulders, toned arms. If I wasn’t getting dessert, at least this was tasty.

‘I’m sorry about your boyfriend not liking his meal,’ Javier said, pointing left to another section of the dining area.

‘I’m sorry you thought he was my boyfriend.’

He raised one eyebrow. ‘Friend? Colleague?’

‘No, just a terrible first date. There will *not* be a second.’

‘I am so glad to hear that,’ Javier replied.

We stopped next to a table set with two bowls of lemon ricotta fritters, complete with drizzles of lemon curd and dustings of icing sugar.

‘On the house,’ Javier said, as he once again pulled out my seat. ‘I’d hate for you to leave without trying these.’

My mouth dropped open. ‘Are you rescuing me from a terrible date?’

‘Not rescuing, as such. Just ensuring you have the best possible experience at my restaurant.’

It was only when I had taken my seat that all his words registered. *My restaurant.*

‘But Rodney said *he* knew the owner.’

Javier shrugged, as if people made that comment all the time. ‘I’ve never met that man in my life. Believe me, I would remember.’

‘Is there someone else you are hoping will have the best possible experience?’ I asked, pointing to the second setting opposite mine.

He raised an eyebrow and said the very words I hoped he would say. ‘Would you mind if I joined you?’

I thought back to what my sister had said about going on a date with Rodney. *You’re never going to meet anyone by sitting at home.* I just hadn’t expected I’d be meeting someone else besides Rodney. Someone so much better. ‘I’d love you to join me.’

As I took my first bite of those lemon ricotta fritters, I closed my eyes, savouring the taste. A groan escaped my mouth.

‘Good, aren’t they?’

I didn’t even wait to respond, instead shovelling a second fritter ball into my mouth.

‘I hope I never see Rodney again in my life,’ I said, holding up my glass of wine.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Javier replied. ‘But does the same rule apply to me? I’d love to ask you out on a proper date.’

Not that long ago I’d rehearsed all the excuses under the sun why I wouldn’t be available. Now it was Javier asking, the answer was easy.

‘I’d like that. Even more than I like these fritters.’

Next thing I knew, the restaurant was getting ready to close. The fritters were long gone, same with a bottle of wine. We’d talked, we’d laughed, and the only time Javier had pulled out his phone was to type in my number.

As he escorted me to my waiting Uber, I felt a pang that this lovely day had ended.

‘I do have one thing to thank Rodney for,’ Javier said, opening the car door for me.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, turning back to him, not ready to leave just yet.

‘That he didn’t hang around to sample dessert.’

He drew me in for the softest kiss. Even sweeter than the fritters. And the promise of a future getting to know him.

This was the *best* date I’d ever been on.

