



LIAISONS

An anthology from the 2017 Chapter Short Story Contest



**Kindly sponsored by Chapter Book and Tea Shop
442 Mt Eden Road, Mt Eden, Auckland 1024**

Chapter specialises in Romance Fiction, including contemporary, historical, suspenseful, fantasy and paranormal.



**They also have selections of crime, mystery, thrillers and mainstream fiction.
A mail order service makes it easy for out-of-towners to buy.**

Click the link below and sign up to receive the latest book news catalogue.



INDEX

Romance Writers of New Zealand thank Chapter for their sponsorship; all of our members who entered the contest or helped with preliminary judging; and **Gaynor Davies**, Fiction Editor of English Woman's Weekly for being our final judge.

	Annika Ohlson-Smith	<i>Celebrating First of Advent</i>	Page 6
	Susan Frame	<i>Break Up to Make Up</i>	Page 10
	Rex Fausett	<i>Dance Me</i>	Page 15
	Eileen Mueller	<i>Chrome and Burnt Orange</i>	Page 19
	Nicole Bishop	<i>Just Do It</i>	Page 24
	Susan Frame	<i>Books, Covers, and Other Things</i>	Page 30
	Emma Cameron	<i>Language of Love</i>	Page 36
	Pamela Swain	<i>Leap of Faith</i>	Page 41
	Donna Capil	<i>Lost Moments</i>	Page 46
	Charlotte Kieft	<i>Sunset Over Smuggler's Bay</i>	Page 51
	Yvonne Walus	<i>The Charity Case</i>	Page 56



Our Authors

Annika Ohlson-Smith
Celebrating First of Advent



Susan Frame
Break Up to Make Up
Books, Covers, and Other Things



Rex Fausett
Dance Me



Eilleen Mueller
Chrome and Burnt Orange



Our Authors

Nicole Bishop

Just Do It



Emma Cameron

Language of Love



Pamela Swain

Leap of Faith



Our Authors



Donna Capil
Lost Moments



Charlotte Kieft
Sunset Over Smuggler's Bay



Yvonne Walus
The Charity Case



Celebrating First of Advent

Annika Ohlson-Smith

Sarah rested her snow-wet head on the back of the pew in front of her. She sat like that, as if praying, for a long while, trying to catch her breath and swallow her disappointment.

It was the first Sunday in Advent and she'd been looking forward immensely to go to the church service with Carl this year. But just as she'd given up hope of him turning up, he'd called and apologised. His in-laws had arrived unexpectedly and he hadn't had a chance to get away.

Of course, she had no one else to blame but herself. Why on earth had she allowed herself to fall in love with a married man? It had just led to trouble from the very start.

Well, maybe not immediately, as he hadn't confessed he was married until a couple of months into their relationship. She should've put an end to 'the affair' then and there. That would've been much easier and, above all, more honourable.

This morning they'd had an escalating argument over the phone, before she'd finished the call with the only sensible words she could muster.

"Carl, let's quit this now. I don't want to see you anymore."

She had hung up before she'd regretted her words and grabbed her coat on her way out the door.

Although running all the way to church, she'd been too late. The congregation was singing the last hymn as she opened the heavy door and stepped inside. The air smelled of warm paraffin and damp wool. Breathless from the run, and with streaming eyes and running nose, she'd sat down in the nearest pew.

Now the congregation had left, most of them probably for coffee in the church hall according to tradition. Sarah didn't feel she could cope with a cheerful conversation about today's sermon – she hadn't heard it anyway – or discussing the best recipe for ginger cookies and minced pies.

After a while, she rose and walked to the black iron candle stand that stood to the right of the altar. She fumbled for her purse and found a gold coin. It rattled down into the donation box and she took a candle, lit it on an already burning one, and placed it in the stand. She stood there for a long while without taking her eyes from the flame. She wished that the candle was able to burn away all misery in the world. *What a mess we're*



making with our lives. Lord, what were you thinking, when you made us the Crown of your Creation? What was wrong with the dolphins? Not enough challenge for you, being too good and too intelligent? The stairs above creaked from footsteps and interrupted her inner conversation. She turned away and walked to the door. She didn't want to meet anyone.

Before the service, Ben had declined the offered coffee. He didn't know anyone, as he was new in town. Being a music teacher at the high school, he'd been asked in the last minute to relieve the organist, who'd fallen sick. Besides, he was already invited to celebrate Advent with his sister's family, but wasn't very keen on going there either.

While he tidied up after himself and the choir, he pondered why. Quite simply he felt like the 'fifth wheel on the wagon', when he was with his sister's family and friends. Everyone was married with children in the pre-school age group. The conversation at the coffee table would undoubtedly revolve around their kids, their illnesses and mischief. As a bachelor, he had nothing to say on those subjects. When his niece and her two brothers got tired of climbing all over him, he'd be sitting there in silence until he could leave without being impolite.

Ben sighed. He knew it would be no different today. As he was ready to leave, hymn-books in his arms, he noticed for the first time that he wasn't alone in the church. Downstairs, by the candle stand, a woman stood in silence. She wore a burgundy coat and grey high boots. Her short dark hair was tousled and shone wet in the light of the candles. She stood so he could see her profile. Her eyes were fixed on the candle flames. She looked resolute, not exactly how you'd expect a person in prayer to look. He felt an urge to say something to her, but didn't want to disturb or embarrass her, so he went downstairs as quietly as he could.

Sarah pushed the door open and felt it hit something.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't know...I heard someone on the stairs, but thought you'd already left. Oh dear, are you hurt?"

"No, not at all." Ben bent down to pick up the books he'd dropped. Sarah knelt to help and sneaked a look at the man in front of her. His thick light brown hair curled at the back of his neck and across his forehead. His face was open and friendly. His lips slightly smiling. When he looked up at her, she saw his warm brown eyes. As she handed over the books to him, she noticed him grimacing.

"You *are* in pain! May I have a look? Where did the door hit you?"

"Nah, don't worry. Just a minor bang on the funny-bone. You know how much that hurts at first, but it'll soon go away."

“It was my fault! I should’ve been more careful, but...I was a bit upset. Is there nothing I can do, as a plaster on the wound so to speak?”

Ben looked at her where she sat on her heels on the floor, with a sincere mix of concern and guilt in her blue eyes. He shifted the books to his left arm and held out a hand to her.

“Hi, my name is Ben, and when I think about it, you could actually do me a great favour.” Despite his sore elbow, he pulled her up from the floor. “Please, come with me to my sister’s for coffee. Unless you’re on your way somewhere else?”

“No, I’m not...but I can’t just turn up at your sister’s...”

“Of course you can. It’s open house. And as I said, you’d do me a great favour if you come. I can explain more on the way there. What do you say? By the way, what’s *your* name?”

“Okay.”

“Strange name.”

Sarah giggled.

“I mean, okay, I’ll come; and my name is Sarah.”

“Hi Sis! I happened to meet Sarah on my way here, so I invited her too.” Ben winked at Sarah, who blushing greeted Ben’s sister.

“What a nice surprise. Welcome Sarah, I’m Marie. Hope you can find a free coat-hanger somewhere. We’re all in the kitchen, having some mulled wine.”

“Where can I find a toilet?” Sarah whispered to Ben a while later.

“Oh, there’s one just across the hall and one upstairs in the bathroom.”

When Sarah came out from the bathroom, she heard kids arguing in one of the rooms opposite. She pushed the door ajar, just in time to see a little girl hit a boy in the head with a book.

“Okay, let’s move into the living-room, coffee is ready,” Marie said. “Ben, it’s alarmingly silent upstairs, can you check the kids aren’t up to some mischief? Let them know they can come and get gingerbread men in the kitchen.”

It really *was* silent upstairs, but when Ben came closer to the kids’ room, he heard a voice saying ‘Peter Rabbit was in trouble again.’ He opened the door very carefully and looked in. There on the floor sat Sarah, reading from a book with one of his nephews in her knee. The other children sat in a semi-circle around them, listening with half open mouths and their eyes fixed on her.

As Sarah turned a page, she caught sight of Ben at the door. She felt her face redden. How embarrassing to be caught in the act of escaping from the adults downstairs.

“You’re welcome to listen too, it’s just a couple of pages left of this chapter.” She wondered what he really thought of her behaviour.

“Has everyone got coffee?” Marie looked around the table and discovered that neither Ben nor Sarah were there. With wrinkled forehead, she went upstairs. The door to the nursery was ajar and not quite knowing why, she tip-toed to the door to have a look. A wide smile spread in her face. *Hmm, this looks good for the future.* Silently, she sneaked back to the others. She bent down to whisper into her husband’s ear, before sitting down.

At Easter Saturday, Sarah stepped inside her favourite bakery in town. She’d decided to buy the bakery’s special Easter eggs for Ben’s nephews and niece. While she was waiting her turn, she looked around. There were many people there, even inside the café. For a moment, she stopped breathing. Carl! Carl sat at a table not far away. As handsome as she remembered him. The candle on the table made the grey by his temples shine like silver. Opposite him, sat a young woman Sarah didn’t recognise. She knew it wasn’t his wife. Definitely not. Carl looked deeply into the woman’s eyes, holding her hand between his. Sara swallowed hard, but couldn’t swallow the anger welling up inside her. *Damn Casanova! Poor girl. Wonder if she knows he’s married?* Without thinking, she went straight to their table.

“Hi Carl, what a surprise to see you here. It’s not often you do our little town the honour.” A hot satisfaction filled her, as she saw the shock in Carl’s eyes.

“Er...what? Oh...hi Sarah...no...er... I’m just here over the day in business,” he stuttered.

“So I see. Though I’d call it ‘affair’ rather than ‘business’.” Sarah winked knowingly and turned to the young woman, who looked confused. “This year’s affair looks a bit too young, I think. Have you checked she’s legal? Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Sarah and was last year’s affair. Well, I assume he’s told you, he’s married? A good advice – use his taste for sweets. Like this!” Sarah lifted the plate with a creamy merengue gâteau from the table, and pressed it down in his knee. The cream splattered in all directions over his expensive trousers.

With Carl’s ‘what the hell’ ringing in her ears, she turned on her heels and went out. The sensation of relief overwhelmed her as she stopped by the counter and ordered three of the golden eggs filled with chocolates. *I did it! I really did it!* Her hands were shaking as she handed over the money.

With pounding heart, Sarah went out to Ben, waiting outside. He smiled.

“Ready to celebrate?”



Break Up to Make Up

Susan Frame

Vanessa lay stretched out on the burgundy leather sofa, a sparkling mineral water in her right hand, her latest fashion accessory on her left. She heard the living room door open behind her. “Please, Simon. Don’t say anything.”

“Okay. I won’t. But—”

Simon put his briefcase down on the polished *rimu* floor, leaned over the back of the sofa and placed a kiss on top of Vanessa’s head. “Why didn’t you wait until I got home? I could have climbed into the attic and got whatever you were wanting. And now you’re—”

“I know. Sitting here looking like Edward Scissorhands’ twin sister?” She slugged some water then looked at her splinted fingers. Her usually long and slender digits were now bruised and fat and strapped in ugly silver contraptions they’d call home for the next six weeks. Minimum. She closed her eyes and slumped back against the sofa. Her throat tightened. Her lungs burned. “This is the last thing I need. Why did this have to happen? Now? As if I don’t have enough to worry about.”

“May I?” Simon pointed to the space beside her.

Wanting to be alone had been Vanessa’s recent default setting. But not today. She nodded. The warmth of Simon’s arm around her shoulder seeped through her cotton shirt and radiated down her back. Top notes of his pine after shave lingered under her nostrils as he gathered her to him and rested his head gently

on hers. Vanessa didn't need to be a mind reader to know what Simon was thinking. She knew her worry was his worry, too.

"I have something for you." Simon got up and returned with two dozen pre-boxed roses. He placed the flowers on the coffee table.

"They're lovely...but I thought we'd decided to tighten our belts, Simon? In case we have to..."

"Let's not talk about that tonight, eh?" Simon took errant strands of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. He kissed her gently on her temple. "Now, what do you feel like for dinner?"

"Nothing."

"You have to eat something."

"But I—"

Simon pressed a finger against her lips. "Shhh. That's enough. An emergency such as this calls for carbs and sugar."

"Have you forgotten what the doctor told me?"

"Well, Doctor *Simon* has spoken. He says we can make an exception for one night." He grabbed his cell phone and dialled their local pizzeria.

Vanessa finished off the last of her pizza. "That was a great idea. Pizza never tasted so good."

"Feel like your ice-cream sundae, now?"

"No. I'll wait."

"You? Wait? There's an interesting concept. But," said Simon, nodding in the direction of Vanessa's splinted fingers, "you're going to have to be patient with this."

"I know." Vanessa's shoulders slumped.

"It's only six weeks, until those bones heal."

"That's forever? I won't cope. You know I don't do patient." Vanessa looked deep into her husband's green eyes. "Not like you." She dropped her chin. "Honestly, Simon, I don't know how you've..." Tears stabbed the back of her eyes. "...how you've put up with me these last few weeks."

Simon leaned over and cupped her face. "I know it's been tough on you. Really tough." His voice cracked. "Of course I'm going to be there for you." He kissed her cheek and busied himself clearing away the pizza boxes. "Right, I'm sure you could squeeze in some ice-cream."

While Simon tidied up in the kitchen, Vanessa returned to the thoughts she'd had as she waited for Simon to come home from work that evening, thoughts of the difficult road they had travelled over the last two

years. Month after month of acute disappointment and the emotional upheaval of the miscarriage had sent her plummeting into a pit – a pit of quicksand, overwhelming, suffocating. She'd retreated from the world but worse still, she'd retreated from Simon. All his attempts at comfort and reassurance, shunned. She wished she could turn back the clock. He hadn't deserved her cold shoulder, her icy silences. She knew Simon well. He would be hurting, too.

"You know," said Simon, handing Vanessa her sundae, "this could be the universe telling you you need a break."

"A break? Are you kidding me? That would have to be right up there with your worst pun. Ever."

Simon threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, Ness, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Vanessa reached out for Simon's hand. "And I'm sorry, too."

"What for?"

"You know what I mean. I haven't been thinking... about you. At all." She squeezed his hand. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Simon turned his head away. Silence mushroomed, the space between them a yawning canyon.

"Simon? Please look at me."

Simon didn't move. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the Persian rug in front of the fireplace.

"Simon? Say something. Please?"

He turned back to face Vanessa. "There's nothing to forgive. I can't begin to imagine how hard it's been for you. So much happiness having that little life growing inside you only for it to..."

Vanessa guessed what Simon would say next but she waited. It was important she let him finish.

"...only for it to die never knowing how much you loved it." Simon buried his face in his hands. "Only for it to die never knowing how much *I* loved it, too. And I did love our little baby, Vanessa. I loved it so much."

"Oh, Simon." Vanessa pulled her husband to her and rubbed his back with her good hand. "I know you did." She held his head on her shoulder. "And we'll have a baby. Nothing surer," she whispered, the intimacy of the moment triggering memories of how they had once been.

"At the risk of stating the obvious, aren't you forgetting something?" Simon's breath warmed the skin in the hollow above her collar bone.

Of course Vanessa hadn't forgotten. "I guess I've just fallen into the 'if you don't try, you can't fail' mentality."

Simon lifted his head and looked deep into her blue eyes. "We used to have such fun trying, Ness, didn't we?" Simon ran his fingertips through her hair. "So much fun."

Vanessa took Simon's hands in hers. "I really don't feel like dessert. I think I'll have a shower and go to bed," she said.

Simon's brow creased with concern. "Will you be okay? With this, I mean?" He reached out. Soft fingertips caressed the pale skin on the inside of her left wrist.

Vanessa nodded but made no effort to move. Simon's rhythmic stroking calmed her, unravelled her tangled thoughts. "Yes, I'll be fine." She stood, contact with Simon's hand broken. "How long will you be?"

"As long as it takes to eat two ice-cream sundaes. Do you think it would be better if I slept downstairs tonight?"

"No. You don't have to do that."

Vanessa left the living room and made her way up the curved stairway to their bedroom. She carefully undressed in the ensuite, wrapped her hand in a plastic bag and stepped into the shower. She closed her eyes and sighed as the hot water cascaded over her body. She placed her hand on her left wrist. Even through the plastic she could feel the enduring warmth of Simon's touch on her skin. Vanessa's breath caught in her throat. She sucked air greedily into her lungs. She leaned her forehead against the shower wall and released the torrent of tears she'd held at bay for so long. Her grief, black and unbridled, washed down the drain.

Her emotions settled, Vanessa grabbed a towel from the heated rack, dried herself as best she could with one hand and wrapped the towel around her body. She grappled with the lid of her coconut moisturiser.

"Are you okay?" Simon's concerned voice caught her unawares.

Silence.

"Ness? Is everything all right?"

"No."

"Can I come in?"

Vanessa hadn't let Simon see her in any state of undress since he helped her to bed after her D and C.

"Yes."

The bathroom door opened. Vanessa looked at Simon's reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"What can I do?"

Vanessa handed Simon the moisturiser. "I can't get the lid off this one-handed."

With a flick of his wrist he unscrewed the jar and placed it on the vanity. "Mission accomplished. Moisturise away."

Vanessa picked up the jar. "Simon?" she said handing it to him. "I want you to do it for me."

She tugged at her towel.

It puddled at her feet.

“So? Tell me, Vanessa. How’s it been for you?” the Fracture Clinic doctor asked Vanessa at her six week check.

“I’m not going to lie. It’s been a bit up and down.” She caught Simon’s eye and smiled.

“That’s totally understandable. For a start,” he said, flicking a nod at Simon, “having to be chauffeur driven everywhere would be very difficult for an independent person like you.”

“Yes, and occasionally it’s been a bit hard for him,” Vanessa said, poker-faced.

Simon suppressed a grin before adding, “But I’ve been more than happy to fill in when required.”

“Well, I’m pleased to say that this progress x-ray shows you’re mending well. You’ve obviously been following instructions. All I can say is whatever you’re doing, keep doing it...and...”

Vanessa felt the bubbles of laughter rise up in her throat as she watched Simon trying to control himself.

“...I can assure you’ll look back on this and wonder if it ever happened at all.”

I don’t ever want to forget this happened to me. Why would I forget I had to be a little bit broken before Simon and I could be put back together?

“See you in another couple of weeks. In the meantime, get those fingers moving. Squeezing a sponge in some warm water is very helpful. Oh, and curling your fingers round a soft ball is good, too.”

Vanessa and Simon made a quick exit from the doctor’s room. They leaned against the surgery wall outside and giggled like schoolkids.

“I think it’s safe to say we’re back to our punning best, don’t you?” said Simon.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“No?”

“I think we’re back to our best. Full. Stop.”

Simon didn’t need to speak. The sparkle in his green eyes told Vanessa everything she needed to know.

“Right, Ness. Fancy a coffee before I get back to work?”

“Mmmm. Probably not a coffee. But I’d love a peppermint tea. See you back at the car. I’m just nipping in to the pharmacy.”

“Why? You okay?”

“Yeah, just feeling a bit queasy. But, I’m sure it’ll pass in a few weeks.”

Vanessa’s heart melted as Simon gathered her body to his; her words dancing in the space above them; happiness growing in the space between them.



Dance Me

Rex Fausett

She'd only been on the train for ten minutes, not even reaching the outer suburbs, before she realised she was making a terrible mistake. She was running away again and she'd sworn she would stop running. The trouble was that when you ran away you had to go back again. Or walk. Or crawl. However you went back, your dignity was shot right up the wazoo.

It was a dull, overcast day, it was going to rain soon and the train sped up, taking her to her destiny or non-destiny, she wasn't sure which - she only understood suddenly that it was somehow futile. She wasn't even sure who was to blame but she had this feeling that maybe it was her.

'You're an idiot, Emma Wright,' Emma told herself in no uncertain terms. 'The first sign of trouble and you abandon everything instead of facing your problems like an adult.' As she used the word 'adult' she pulled a face which clearly indicated that she'd said a bad word. 'Or a grown-up.' An even worse face. She sighed heavily and resumed looking out of the train window at a black and white cow flashing past, staring back at her and undoubtedly agreeing that Emma was an idiot.

Emma found her mobile phone in her handbag and switched it on. No signal, she was truly cut off from civilisation and so she opened her laptop which she then remembered had run out of power the night before, just after Justin had called to tell her he was going out with his ex, model and artist Poppy Vlad Amundsen, just for a meal and to talk about old times. Huh! Like that cow could stop herself from draping herself over Justin wearing something that barely covered her tits and posing for the tabloids. Poor Justin! Emma knew inside that he was just an innocent victim of the Spider Lady who would bite his head off after she mated with him, but she was conflicted; he should have said no.

Poppy was the last straw that sent her packing a bag and heading for the train. Boston was where she was from and she could find sanctuary there.

Having no communications, she was obliged to think and she found she wasn't used to thinking, not about herself anyway. Thirty years old, she'd found success as a writer when she created a strong female character called Vanessa Kennedy, a life coach who found herself involved in *situations*. She got out of those *situations* with guile, humour and moves she learned in self-defence classes, and the public had lapped up six stories so far. That meant an agent who had been on her back for three weeks about a missed deadline, a publisher who thought Vanessa Kennedy needed to up her act and become a little more edgy, and a cover artist who was having a tantrum. Add to that a partner who was seeing his ex, a mother who thought Emma was looking thin, and a father who thought she needed to get a boyfriend, a boyfriend unlike that bloody hippie Justin.

Emma sighed again. She rechecked for coverage and wondered why the sign in the carriage said there was Wi-Fi when there wasn't. Clearly there was a conspiracy going on. But was it true Vanessa Kennedy was getting complacent? Was her mother right and she was looking thin? Was the cover artist some kind of psycho who thought red was a problem? And Justin? What about Justin? Her father was wrong. Justin had long blonde hair and the face of a Renaissance angel and any hippie worthy of the name would have quickly rejected him from membership of the hippie community.

That took her back to their first date. She smiled as she relived the evening which ended when Justin took her firmly in his arms in the crowded café and slow-danced her as Leonard Cohen sang Dance Me to the End of Love. Until then she had no idea that she even knew how to dance but by the time the song ended she had decided she had to drag Justin back to her apartment and continue dancing of a horizontal nature. He knew who she was but wasn't intimidated. She was on best-seller lists everywhere and tales of movie offers were floating around. She was in the newspapers and had multitudes of fans on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. People in the café had been pointing her out to their friends.

It was one of those nights when she looked very much like the picture on the back cover flap of those books, the picture that was very slightly enhanced to make her appear more seductive than she really was. Before Leonard Cohen finished his song, she became that seductive Emma Wright, dark-haired, green-eyed and very attractive.

The date with Justin had been set up by her friend Rachel whom she'd known since they were in first grade together and trusted implicitly. She listened as Justin was described in detail and she listened because Rachel wasn't a matchmaker, wouldn't even consider match-making, knowing that Emma hated the very idea. No, Justin was good-looking but he was a nice guy, she said, literate, funny and sexy and Rachel was sure they would get on. At the very least it would get Emma out of her apartment for some fresh air.

'If you don't like him you can always run away,' said Rachel, then she blushed. 'Oh, I shouldn't have said that.' She was well aware that Emma's Plan B was to run away.

Emma laughed though. 'Of course I can and I'm so good at it.'

Meeting Justin was a pleasure. He was indeed good-looking and sexy and after they talked for a while and

he revealed under interrogation that he liked Hemingway, Mankell and Murakami, she decided he met most of her standards. The only thing he hadn't done was make a reservation at a discreet restaurant and had instead taken her to a busy café that he said had good food and good music. For the past year they'd lived together in complete harmony.

Watching the world flash by outside the carriage window she started to make decisions. The hell with her agent, the hell with her publishers and the hell with the artist afraid of red. She had to get back to Justin. Problems - she was on the Express and the first stop was three hours away, her mobile phone was useless and her laptop was dead. Thank heavens the only thing on it was the proposed title for Vanessa Kennedy's next adventure. I can survive a couple of hours, she thought, and on the way back I can look that black and white cow in the eye and say 'you were right'.

Then came the epiphany – she asked the question, what would Vanessa Kennedy do? The life coach would have an answer and it didn't take much thought. Vanessa would firstly say 'grow up' or 'you're an adult, act like one.' Emma flinched. Fictional characters had no business speaking truths to their creators. And then she would say, 'your agent and your publisher both love you and are trying to get the best out of you, they want you to be successful, but they don't love you as much as Justin loves you or vice versa. And for heaven's sake give me that edge before people start to think I'm losing my touch. I'd like to be life coach to the President or the Director of the FBI. Also, get a new cover artist. You're too busy to be monitoring psychos who don't like red. Find focus, write.'

Should she grow up? What was being an adult all about? Was it relationships? So many questions. It was still a while before she could get off the train and head back home so she was thrown onto her mental resources and imagined Vanessa, life-coach extraordinaire, telling the President that if Emma Wright could act like a grown-up, then so could he. There were possibilities there but politics was probably dangerous territory.

At Boston she exited the train, bought a ticket back to New York and got her mobile working. She called Justin first. Leave a message. She tried her agent. Leave a message. Her publisher also asked her to leave a message but she did get hold of the artist and fired him. So she had an hour to kill but then the tinny voice from the speakers announced that the train was cancelled because of some mechanical thing. Then it started to rain. Emma tried her favourite airline and found there was nothing available from Boston to New York until first thing in the morning. They suggested she try the railway if she was in a hurry. It was now raining harder and there was lightning and thunder as the sky grew darker and darker. Maybe flying wasn't even a good idea.

She gave up, rang the Four Seasons, who said yes, they could give her sanctuary. Less than an hour later she was asleep in the bath when her mobile rang once and vibrated off the side of the bath and into the water. In an act of pettiness she picked up her dead laptop and slid it into the water next to the phone.

'What the hell? Did I offend one of the gods? Did I step on a crack or look at a green lizard sideways? Are the elements misaligned somehow with the sharp end pointed at me?'

There were no answers to any of these questions and the next morning Emma climbed onto the express train and headed back back to the city she called home.

Justin was waiting and held out his arms to sweep her into his safety net. 'You're home. I've been calling

you. Rachel said you'd probably run away from home.'

Emma frowned. 'I did. I know I promised not to but this time it was good because I decided it was time to grow up despite all the horrible things that growing up entails. Taking responsibility, for example. Finding Vanessa a job with a movie star who once borrowed three million from a hood and didn't pay it back.'

'And marrying me?'

Emma closed her mouth and looked up at the blonde god holding her tight. 'You're serious? You're serious! Of course I will. Don't ever let me run away again, honey. It's suddenly too demanding.'

'Of course. I love you, Emma. Should we celebrate?'

'Yes, but first I have a request. I want you to take me in your arms right now and Dance Me to the End of Love again and then, please, you can dance me to the end of time.'





Chrome and Burnt Orange

Eileen Mueller

The bell rings. We clatter out of class to our lockers. Amid clanging doors and books thumping on metal shelves, banter bounces around me. Everyone's horsing around, inviting each other over and making plans for the weekend. There's a party at Ashton's tonight—not that I'm invited. Having his ex around would cramp his style.

If I still had my Yamaha, I'd get out of here, take it for a blast. But I don't. I cram my books into my locker and slam it. Ducking a flying football, I stride past a laughing group crowded around a mobile phone.

No one calls, "Hey Elysia," or even glances my way.

My biker boots crunch though spilled potato chips, drowned out by the machine gun staccato of fake laughter. I shoulder the door open and take the stairs in two bounds. A few students wander across the car park, but I've beaten the main exodus.

When Dad got sick, Ashton dumped me. He turned my favorite photos into ugly memes, and I fell out with the popular crowd. Since then, no one's bothered with me. Although Ashton still texts me insults.

Soon I'm halfway along the main road, nearly to the library. Centennial Park is on my right, poplars rustling in the breeze. I take a shortcut, the grass springy beneath my boots. Ahead, the windows of the tourist information center are filled with posters of fun stuff to do in Leighton. I round the corner of the building, and my breath catches.

There, parked in a dazzling blaze of chrome and burnt orange, is a Ducati Sport. It's the nicest bike I've seen in a long time. Twin exhausts, black racing stripes and satin paint work—the whole bike gleams as if it's been polished. I'm pulled forward like a pebble in the tide. Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I start snapping. This baby is beautiful. I touch the throttle. 748 cc. How would it feel to let that rip? I bet the engine's loud and throaty. My hands ache to grip the handle bars. It's been months since I've been on a bike. My throat tightens like a brake lever. I miss Dad. Miss riding with him.

"Want a shot of you on the bike?" a deep voice asks, as smooth as the bike's paint work.

I spin.

Leaning against the lamppost is a tall guy, maybe a year older than me, solid as a pit bull. Black leather jacket, biker pants and boots. He pushes his shades up onto dark hair, revealing eyes like chocolate brownies—delicious, tempting, but bad for you.

"Hop on and I'll take a photo." He approaches, his hand out for my phone. That's when I notice a sign on the sidewalk: *Adventure Tours. Have fun experiencing Leighton by motorbike.* He's wearing a lanyard with photo-ID.

"Oh, um, sorry. I didn't realize..."

"No problem." He smiles. "I don't have a booking right now."

"No, I was just going." Cheeks burning, I hurry to the library.

Pushing open the doors, I rejoice as the air conditioning takes the heat out of my face.

On Friday afternoons, the library's deserted. Everyone else has somewhere to be, someone to hang with. And Mom, in her cloud of grief, doesn't suspect a thing. She thinks I'm with friends—just like before Dad died.

Before she sold my bike.

#

All weekend I can't get the Ducati or that biker out of my head. On Monday, I'm so distracted, teachers have to ask me stuff twice. Then I'm out of school like a greyhound, tearing across Centennial Park. It won't be there—there's no way I'm gonna luck out and see that bike twice. Or him. But maybe, just maybe, it's his regular parking spot.

I pass the information center, and it's there again: blazing orange and shiny chrome. I scan the street. The sign's here, but no biker. Whipping my phone out, I take some close ups: the glossy carburetor; the flowing line of the tank; the sweet angle of the handlebars; the detail on the leather seats.

He's still not around. Maybe I could just try...

As soon as I have the thought, I've straddled the bike. I tuck my phone in my pocket and place my hands on the bars. Ease the throttle back. Squeeze the brakes. If only I had the keys...

"Thought you'd be back. With those boots, you're either a bike fan or a goth—and you don't look like a goth." It's him.

Cheeks burning, I turn. "Caught out, huh?"

He winks, a smile playing on his lips. "Yeah, red-handed." His leather jacket's undone, revealing a faded Harley-Davidson T-shirt. "C'mon, lend me your phone and I'll take a few shots. Anyone this crazy about bikes deserves to pose on this beauty."

"This Ducati Sport 748's a classic bike. Early seventies, right?"

He whistles, looking impressed. "1974." He holds out his hand. "I'm Leon."

"I'm Elysia." His grip is strong, but gentle. I slide my mobile out of my pocket and activate the camera.

He takes a few shots while I lean over the bars, smiling.

"You love bikes, huh."

"My dad taught me to ride a mini-bike when I was seven."

"Ah," he says, and I know he gets it.

"Later, I had a Yamaha XV250S Virago."

"A sweet cruiser—low seat, high bars, forward pegs." He slides one hand into his back pocket.

"Yeah, but now I ride the bus. Mom made me sell it when Dad died."

"You lost your dad, that's rough."

I nod, stare at the road. Swallow the lump in my throat.

"Mums can be protective, like that. Mom threw out my skateboard because my friend Brandon broke his arm. But Brandon never broke it skateboarding. He was climbing a fence into the pool after hours."

I laugh, but he seems to realize it's hollow.

"C'mon, one more photo." He's in the middle of taking my picture when my phone buzzes—a text. Probably Mom.

Leon glances at my phone and frowns. "Hey Elysia, sorry for reading your phone... but is some guy cyber-bullying you? Look what he's written." He shows me a text from Ashton. "This guy's sick. You should block him."

"I have—three times—but he keeps getting new numbers."

“How long has this been going on?”

“A while.”

“What a creep. You need a new number. My friend works at a phone shop and owes me a favor. We can organize it, if you like.” His voice softens. “Is that okay? I mean, I don’t want to tell you what to do.” He passes me my mobile. “Look at these.”

Our hands bump, and something zings through me. He sucks in his breath and his eyes widen. He’s noticed it too.

The photos are stunning. I look beautiful—a far cry from Ashton’s memes.

“I have a secret.” His eyes turn wistful. “This bike actually belongs to a friend.”

“So Adventure Tours isn’t your business?”

“Yeah, the business is mine, just not the bike.”

Weird, but he seems legit. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s complicated.” Pain shoots across Leon’s face, making him look vulnerable, not bad for you at all. “I tell you what. I have a booking soon, but come by tomorrow. We’ll take a spin to the lookout and you can get a great shot with the sea in the background. Then we could sort your phone.”

What does Leon really want? Is he like Ashton—good looks hiding a nasty streak? I slide my eyes over him. No, there’s something sincere about him. Those warm eyes. And he cares about those texts—about me.

“Sure, see you tomorrow.”

#

The next day, I’m back, with my helmet.

Leon grins. “I’m glad you showed.” He reaches into the baggage stow for some gloves.

“Thanks.” I pull them on. We jump on the bike. When he kick-starts it and twists the throttle, the bike roars, sparking that familiar adrenaline rush. I wrap my arms around his leather-clad torso. Then we’re off.

Leon blasts along the highway, then exits onto a winding road between enormous sand dunes. He handles the bike well, leaning into the curves and powering out of them, the engine rumbling beneath us. My chin on his shoulder, the wind rushes into my face. I’m more alive than I have been in months.

We shoot around a bend and the sea glimmers below us, wild blue all the way to the horizon. Leon pulls into a car park and slings his helmet over the handle bars. He takes my helmet too. I give him my phone and pose.

He takes more pictures. “Would you like to drive, now?”

He trusts me with this bike? I can’t believe it! “Wow!” I grin. “Would I ever!”

His eyes lock onto mine. I lick my lips, nervous. His gaze falls to my mouth. Leon leans in and kisses me. His lips are gentle.

He pulls away, eyes searching mine. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” I breathe, and reach up to kiss him again.

My lips barely brush his before his hands are in my hair and he’s kissing me. My heart thrums like the Ducati.

He pulls back, his breath escaping in a whoosh, and rakes a hand through his hair. “This... I just wasn’t expecting...”

“Neither was I.”

He looks confused. “It’s been a tough few months.”

“Why’s that?”

Leon taps the tank of the Ducati. “My friend Manu owns this bike.” He waves a hand at the bay. “They found it, busted up, down on the beach. He’s missing—and his girlfriend too.” He rubs his chin, his face tight. “My dad’s a police sergeant, so I helped him salvage the bike. We restored it for Manu. Now I’m just waiting for him to come back.” He trails off, his eyes scanning the horizon.

That’s why he gets me—he’s missing someone too. I squeeze his hand.

He gives me a lop-sided smile, then strokes my cheek. “Shall we go for that spin?”

“Sounds great to me.” My heart flutters and it’s got nothing to do with the bike.

His lips graze the tip of my nose.

We tug our helmets back on and, this time, Leon hops on the Ducati behind me. I kick start the engine. His strong arms cocoon me. As I open the throttle and peel out of the lookout, the sun sets and the whole world blazes burnt orange.



Just Do It

Nicole Bishop

She smiled at the next customer in his expensive blue suit. Tall, mid-forties, a bit thin with short curly hair. His smile lit up his face and warmed his cinnamon brown eyes.

“The usual?”

“Thanks, Kate.” Her name tag made it easy for customers to call her by name. She didn't mind. She turned to make his espresso when a song came on the cafe's radio. Bryan Adams, I finally found someone. Kate froze. Her chest tightened and her eyes stung with tears. Her wedding song. She changed the radio station, closed her eyes to swallow the pain and turned back to the line of customers.



Like the other patrons waiting for their coffees, the man in blue sat at an empty table.

“Hi.” A young boy at the next table leaned over to touch the man's seat and left chocolate smear marks.

Kate admired the man's composure as he gestured to the small toy in the child's hand. “I like your airplane.”

The man smiled at Kate as he collected his coffee and leaned over the counter. “I'm Mike. I wondered if you'd like to meet for a drink?”

She frowned, a little puzzled, and pushed a strand of hair off her face. It had been so long since she'd dated she didn't know how to respond. “Thanks for asking. But I'm not dating.”

“Married?”

“Widowed.”

She was used to the subtle widening in people's eyes. The awkward way the word shut down conversations. To give him credit, he kept his response simple, “I'm sorry.”

So was she. She smiled but turned away. She wasn't interested in him. He wasn't her type. No one was.

“Okay.” He nodded. “See you later.”

After work, Kate walked into the three-bedroom house she shared with her mother and eased the black sneakers off her aching feet.

“Thanks for looking after the kids, Mum.”

Her mother smiled in greeting but then frowned. “You're working too hard.”

Kate shrugged. No choice. “It's okay.” Three years since Jack died and the bills kept coming.

Violet, her ten-year-old, raced forward to hug her. “How was your day Mum?”

“Nothing exciting. Oh, I did get asked on a date but I said no.”

That caught everyone's attention.

“Why'd you say no?”

Kate kissed the top of Hannah, her twelve-year-old's blond plaited head. “I'm not interested.”

Her mum frowned at her. “It's good you've been asked out. Does he seem nice?”

“Yes. Not my type, Mum.”

“You could see him as a practice date.”

Kate wrinkled her nose. “That's terrible.”

“It's not. You need to get out more.”

“I have everything I need here.” Kate hugged her eldest daughter.

To her surprise, her daughters didn't agree. “I think you should go out, Mummy. You deserve it.”

“Just do it, Mum,” instructed Hannah, her serious 12-year-old.

Kate swallowed. “That's what your Dad used to say. Just do it. Like the Nike ads.”

Later that night Kate washed the dishes and asked, “Christmas is coming. What would you like for a present Mum?”

“What I want for Christmas is you going on a date.”

“I don't have time. Between the cafe work and my studies, I have no time for dating.”

“Jack's been gone for three years.”

Kate shook her head. “I'm not ready. It's too hard.” The third Christmas without her husband would be next month. She thought of him every day. Jack was part of her, and part of her children. She was grateful she could get through the days without crying now. The pain was still there but it had dulled.

“You know I'll look after the girls.”

“Thanks.”

“Just consider it.”

Kate had a restless night thinking about it. Was it betraying Jack's memory to go out with someone else? To her surprise, she felt a spark of interest. It might be okay to go on a date with Mike. She wasn't attracted to him. He wasn't her type. Too tall and lanky. Nice eyes though.

The next time the man walked into the cafe, Kate stood a little straighter. “Hi, Mike. Double shot espresso?”

“Thanks, Kate.”

She tried not to feel awkward. “Is your offer of a drink still open?”

His eyes widened. “Sure.”

“Actually, I would like to go out.”

He grinned at her. “All right. When?”

“Tomorrow night?” She'd have to study harder the next night but it would be worth it.

The next afternoon Kate stared at her wardrobe in dismay. “I have no date-night clothes. I'm dreading this. I haven't been on a first date for twenty years.”

Her mother hugged her. “Those shoes are good.” Lisa pointed to the dark red stilettos nestled in the back corner.

Kate had worn them twice before Jack's diagnosis. Then she hadn't felt like wearing such frivolous shoes during his six-month decline.

Her mother wrapped an arm around Kate's waist. “It's time.”

Kate wore her nicest sequin top, skinny jeans, and the tall but gorgeous red heels. She shut the front door and walked down the paving path towards her date.

Mike looked nice in dress pants and a white shirt, his gaze warm with appreciation.

As she walked, doubts rushed in. *What was she doing? This was a terrible idea.*

She waved and tried to smile. Her foot caught on the edge of the pavement and she pitched forward onto her hand and knees. Kate took a breath as she leaned back and laughed in shock.

Mike rushed to her side and helped her up.

“Are you okay?”

“No problem. *Great first impression, Kate.* She shook her head. “Where are we going?”

“A Japanese restaurant in Takapuna. I'll pick up a bottle of wine on the way.”

Trouble came when he walked out of the liquor shop. The car wouldn't start.

He leaned his head on the steering wheel. “Oh no.”

She stared at him.

“The ignition had trouble turning over yesterday. I've booked it into a garage. I'll have to call the AA.”

“Okay.”

He pulled the yellow AA card out from his wallet and dialled.

“They'll be here in an hour.” He shook his head. “I'm sorry. I'll call a taxi to take you home. I'll pay of course.”

“No.” Her reservations about this date were fading seeing how calm he was. “I'll stay with you.”

She watched him phone the restaurant. “No luck. They can't hold our booking.”

“That's okay.”

“Not really. I'm hungry.”

“So am I,” she admitted. “We could order a pizza.”

“Great idea.”

A truck drove past. Kate noticed the message on the side panel. Just do it.

I'm trying, she thought.

In 30 minutes, Mike paid for the pizza delivery. “Let's walk to the beach. The AA will phone when they arrive.”

They walked down to the seashore, Mike carrying the pizza box, Kate with the wine and an empty bottle of water they'd found in the car. The early autumn air chilled as the sun set behind them in the west. They sat at a picnic bench. Mike unscrewed the screw cap on the bottle of wine, poured pinot noir into the water bottle and they took turns sipping from it.

The gentle sea breeze carried the tang of salt. Seagulls gathered in an expectant cluster in front of them, and the sea shimmered in the last of the light.

Everything tasted delicious. “This is the best wine and pepperoni pizza I've ever had.”

“That's because you're hungry,” he replied.

“True.”

The breeze ruffled his hair. “So is this the worst date you've ever been on?”

"No," she tilted her head, realising with surprise that she was enjoying herself. Mike was easy to be with. "This is actually pretty great for a first date. Tell me about yourself."

"I work in the city as a financial analyst."

"Where do you live?"

"Albany."

"But you get your coffee from Browns Bay." She frowned, puzzled. "There must be closer places."

He looked sheepish. "There are." He grimaced. "I like your cafe's coffee. I like coming in to see you."

She laughed.

Mike's phone beeped. "They've arrived. Let's walk back."

He stopped the car outside Kate's house. "I had fun. Would you like to meet again?"

To her surprise, although she had planned only one date, she replied. "Yes."

"I have a work Christmas dinner next week. I'd love to have your company. It's at a French restaurant in town."

She worried her lower lip with her teeth, unsure about meeting new people on a second date.

"If it's terrible, we'll just leave."

"You can't skip it."

"No," he admitted. "I have staff going so I should be there."

"All right. I'll come."

Mike arranged to pick her up at 7pm the next Saturday.

Expensive shops were out of her budget. Kate spent her lunch breaks hunting through local charity shops, grumbling to herself. *This is stupid. I don't have time for this.*

She hesitated over a pretty dress in her size shot through with silver thread. But it had a small unrepairable hole on one shoulder.

Two women walked past. "Just do it, Marcie."

The words jolted Kate out of her grumpy trance.

"Alright," she told herself. It was only \$10. "I'll fix it somehow."

That evening she showed her family the hole in the silver dress. “I need help with this.”

Hannah frowned in concentration. “What about grandma's scarf?”

“In the dress up box? Sure.”

Kate changed into the dress and swirled the pashmina shawl around her shoulders. “I like it.”

Violet handed her a butterfly brooch. “Pin it with this.”

“It looks good.”

“It does.” Kate laughed, surprised she felt the first glimmer of fun and anticipation.

On Saturday evening she picked up a framed wedding photo. She and Jack grinning at each other, thinking they had all the time in the world together. Kate kissed the photo then placed it back on the counter. Jack would never leave her heart. But it was time to try new experiences. To give dating Mike a chance.

When she opened the door, Mike waited outside. “You look great.”

“Thanks.”

When they walked into the restaurant, Mike steered her through the crowd to the bar. They ordered glasses of wine and chatted until she looked up and grinned at the cluster of plastic mistletoe over their heads.

“Look up.”

“Oh.” His face turned pink. “Would you like to move?”

“No, I'm okay. I'm right where I want to be.”

She leaned forward and softly kissed his lips. It felt good.





Books, Covers, and Other Things

Susan Frame

Meredith looked at the book that had just been placed on her desk.

“I can explain,” he said.

A shiver tap danced down her poker-straight spine. A damaged library book could do that to her. Despite Meredith noting it was one of the worst cases of book damage she had seen in a while, her shivering had nothing to do with the half-chewed non-fiction book in front of her right now.

“I’ll pay for it, of course. Although, on a student allowance it’ll take me a while.”

That voice. There was no mistaking it. Its timbre, mellow and chocolate rich, drove her wild at high school. And now, years later, its satin smooth tone tantalised her eardrums once again. Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire were giving it everything they had now, dancing up and down her backbone like there was no tomorrow.

The owner of the voice ran his right hand over the mangled book cover. Meredith remembered that right hand, and the left one. Not because they ever got up close and personal with her at school. The complete opposite in fact. Harry Martin never laid a finger on her - more’s the pity. How she’d yearned for those hands to grab her forcefully, lead her to the empty double bass cupboard at the back of the music room and explore her developing shape. But the only exploring Harry was interested in back then was how far he could push her with his thoughtless school boy taunts, what he could do with his violin...and Tilly Braithwaite, the school orchestra’s percussionist. Yes, Harry Martin may have had a lot of marks against him, but that hadn’t stopped her yearning to be pressed up against him, either.

“I can only take your silence to mean that what I’ve done here is quite serious.”

My torso is quivering. I’m up to my waist in quicksand. And I want to pee. Badly. Yes, Harry. You could say what you’ve done here is quite serious.

Meredith, grasping every bit of strength to rein herself in, kept her gaze firmly on the masticated copy of ‘How To Train Your Puppy’.

“Well, obviously, *I* didn’t do this,” said Harry.

Meredith heard a faint whoosh of a zipper.

“Here’s the culprit.”

Meredith looked up. Staring back at her over the top of Harry’s jacket were two black button West Highland Terrier eyes.

“Harry! What are you doing?” Meredith said, aiming for an air of librarian importance but missing the mark completely. “You can’t,” she stage-whispered, ruffling the puppy between its ears, “bring animals into the library!”

“But, I thought if I...hang on...” Harry eye-balled Meredith. “How do you know my...?” His emerald green eyes squinted. “Meredith? Meredith-Second-Violin-Simons?”

“Yes, Harry-First-Violin-Martin.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m the new librarian trying to explain you can’t bring a dog into this library...unless it is a guide dog...which,” said Meredith, “is clearly not the case in this instance.”

“Oh? And how can you be so sure about that?”

“Well, he...? She...?”

“He. Straddi. Short for—”

“I think I can work that out. Stradivarius isn’t wearing a Guide Dog coat.”

“But he’s just guided me back to you, Meredith-First-Violin-Simons.” Harry raked his hand through his unruly dark curls and smiled a lopsided smile. “Doesn’t that count?”

Meredith’s heart spun on its axis and heat so hot it could iron flat every dog-eared page in the latest release section, snaked a path over her cheeks to the roots of her auburn hair.

Damn you, Harry Martin. Damn you.

“I don’t have the foggiest idea what that’s supposed to mean,” Meredith said, hoping against hope she knew perfectly well what that could mean. She tapped efficiently on her computer.

“I’ve often thought about you, you know, Meredith.”

Meredith ignored Harry and his words. She spun her computer screen round to face Harry and pointed to the number printed in bold in the bottom right corner.

“Forty-eight dollars? You’re going to charge me forty-eight dollars for one book?”

“Of course not. The book’s only thirty-five. It appears you have thirteen dollars in unpaid fines as well...which means...”

“Which means...what?”

“Which means unless you pay this today I have no choice but to issue you with a notice banning you from the library.”

“Are you serious? You can’t ban me. How will I be able to access recordings and volumes of sheet music for my assignments?”

“Oh? So you did go on to study music, then?”

Harry nodded then shrugged. “But for how much longer remains to be seen,” he said, bending down to kiss the squirming puppy’s head. “Well, Straddi my precious boy. You sure have landed me in a heap of trouble. But...” He wrapped his arms around the little bundle, “...you were worth it.”

Meredith’s slight body flooded with warmth and her knees threatened to buckle. Nothing aroused her more than seeing a man totally in love with his dog.

Harry reached into his jacket, pulled out Straddi’s front paw and waved it at Meredith. “See you later, Meredith. Oh...” he said, hitting his forehead with the heel of his hand, “of course we won’t. We’ve been banned.”

“Harry! Wait. I might be able to help.”

“I must be nuts,” Meredith heard Harry utter as she led him through to the lounge of Meadow Bank, the retirement home she volunteered at. Meredith couldn’t decide if it was the stale smell of roast beef and cabbage, the multi-patterned carpet or the muskiness of Harry’s well put-together body that was making her light-headed and giddy.

“A deal’s a deal, Harry. We shook on it, remember?” Meredith certainly remembered. She was still suffering after-shocks from the electricity that ricocheted up her arm the moment Harry placed his hand in hers.

“Well, I...we... got the raw end of the bow if you ask me.”

“Really? I’m the one who’s forty-eight dollars down.” Meredith had no idea why she suggested paying for Harry’s fine in exchange for his help at the concert she had organised. She could ill afford the money but decided she couldn’t let the opportunity to get to know the Harry Martin enigma a little better, slip by either.

Meredith stepped forward to face the audience. “Good afternoon, everyone.”

The residents' chatter dropped to a quiet hum.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce my..." Meredith extended her arm in Harry's direction.

"My...?" *What are you Harry? An acquaintance? A friend? A potential love interest?* Who was she kidding? Of course he was never going to be *that*.

Harry came to her rescue. "What Meredith is trying to say is, I'm Harry, one of Meredith's..." He threw her a wink. "...one of Meredith's old school buddies..."

A buddy? Oh, well. Better than nothing. I'll take it.

"...who has been in awe of her..."

Whaaat?

"...er... her talent...for many years."

Meredith's skin tingled. *And how would you know that? You barely knew I existed at school.*

"And this, ladies and gentlemen, is Straddi, my right-hand man." Harry scooped Straddi out of his jacket. Scattered oohs and aahs bounced around the room before Harry placed his dog on a wheel-chair bound resident's knee.

Meredith watched and listened. Harry worked the room like a pro, his natural genuine manner a far cry from the superior know-all she'd considered him to be at school.

"So, what do you say, Meredith? Will we get this show on the road?"

Harry drew his bow along a small golden slab of resin, picked up his violin and with his undeniable gift of musicianship, carried everyone in the room to a place of awe and wonder.

The final notes of the haunting melody evaporated and Harry bowed to his appreciative audience.

"More!" they chorused. "More!"

Meredith joined Harry, the warmth of his body drifting over to meet hers. She steadied herself. "I'm sure Harry will play again," she managed, "but...in the meantime..." Meredith signalled to the school children waiting in the foyer. "Please put your hands together for Glendale Primary's junior choir."

Meredith took a seat. The sweet sound of young voices filled the lounge and her heart warmed. Two minutes later an unwanted sight caught her attention. Her heart turned ice-berg cold.

Harry, violin in hand, was leaving the building.

No! This isn't the way today was supposed to end!

Meredith got up, sneaked behind the choir and walked quietly from the lounge. Heart thumping she crossed the foyer and looked out the main glass door. What was she going to do? Run down the street in

search of Harry Martin and tell him...tell him what, exactly? She fancied him rotten? Always had, always will?

Forget him. He kept his side of the bargain. Now he's gone. End of.

Meredith turned and walked back to the open lounge door. Clapping broke out as the Glendale choir exited, a quiet bark punctuated the applause.

"Straddi! He forgot Straddi?"

"No, he didn't." Harry's breath kissed the skin above her collar. The hairs on her neck stood up soldier-straight. "I thought you'd..."

"Gone? You think I'd leave without having the opportunity to..."

Throw me in a linen cupboard and kiss me silly?

"...relive one of my favourite school memories?" He handed Meredith a violin. "I always carry a spare."

"What are you doing?"

"What are we doing, Meredith? What are *we* doing?"

"You don't mean...? But it's years since we played that duet. And *I* haven't played for ages. I'll sound like a constipated cat."

Harry wasn't listening. He walked to the stage and wowed the crowd with his charm. "And now ladies and gents. A surprise guest! Could you please welcome back to the stage, your very own... Meredith!"

Gasps of amazement shot around the lounge. The pair placed their bows against strings and within seconds Meredith was lost; lost in the perfection of the present moment and lost in the happy memory of her schoolgirl past.

Meredith clinked her coffee cup against Harry's. "Thanks for this afternoon. I have to admit I actually didn't think you'd—"

"What? Didn't think I'd turn up? What kind of man do you think I am?"

"Quite a different one to the one I knew at school."

"You're wrong." His face softened. "I've always been the same...underneath, anyway."

"Oh?" Meredith grinned. "You giving a librarian the old 'don't judge a book by its cover' routine?"

She waited. Nothing. "So?" she ventured. "Am I...?"

Harry leaned in to Meredith. "...a different Meredith to the one I knew at school?" His breath fanned her cheek. "Of course not." He brought his face closer to hers. "She is even more desirable than she was back then."

Harry leaned in towards her.

He placed his mouth against hers.

And their lips, like their violins an hour before, played the perfect duet.





Language of Love

Emma Cameron

Hannah started it.

The guy got into the lift on level 3 and my heart did some kind of somersault manoeuvre in my chest. He smiled at us before turning to face the doors.

I glanced over at Hannah.

“Wow,” she mouthed.

I nodded. He certainly was that.

The doors clanged shut behind him on level 8 and we waited a couple of seconds before reacting.

“He is HOT!” Hannah said.

“He really is,” I agreed.

“What’s on the 8th floor?” she asked, as we carefully exited the elevator – wary, as always, of the fact that it never seemed to line up with the floor on level 15.

“Is it the property management company?” Our firm had only just moved into the building and it seemed more important to source good local coffee and cheese scones than to find out who we shared the building with.

As we approached reception Hannah called out, “Hey Annie, what’s on level 8?”

Annie scrunched up her nose for a moment as she thought. “The French Embassy, I think.”

“He smelled so good – did you notice?” I asked Hannah as we walked down the hall to our offices.

“I did,” she said.

As I sat down at my desk she stuck her head around the door.

“Maybe this building isn’t so bad after all,” she said with a grin.

We saw him again a couple of days later. Hannah and I had run for the lift, trying not to spill our coffees. As we squeezed in, I came face to face (or face to chest, to be precise) with him. He smiled again and I, instead of behaving like a normal human being and saying “Good morning” or giving him a dignified smile, blushed and wriggled past him to stand at the back of the elevator.

Embarrassed, I tried to avoid meeting Hannah’s eyes, but she pushed in next to me and gave me a sharp jab in the ribs. Then I noticed. He was chatting with another man, a colleague, I assumed, and they were speaking French. This has to be his first language, I thought, because the words, soft and sensuous, were simply rolling off his tongue. For all I knew he was talking about the relative merits of jam and peanut butter, but it sounded wonderful regardless.

This time we paid more attention when he got out of the lift and, sure enough, the French Embassy sign (elegant font embossed on gold) was mounted on the wall directly in front of the elevator doors.

French, I thought to myself - just when you thought he couldn’t get any more attractive.

It was the following week before we saw him again. One of the half dozen or so people in the lift observed that it appeared to be getting slower and noisier by the week. We all murmured agreement – except him. While Hannah shared with the rest of the passengers her fear of getting stuck in the elderly and apparently ill-maintained elevator, I was thinking about his lack of reaction. It was then that it occurred to me – perhaps he didn’t actually speak English.

I proposed this to Hannah as we walked back to our desks.

“I guess he might not have to, if he works at a foreign embassy?” she said.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“The only way to be sure is to test your theory.” Hannah winked at me and I suddenly regretted telling her.

On the way down to lunch the next day Hannah did just that.

“I love his shirt,” she said – quietly, but perfectly audibly.

I sucked in my breath but there was no reaction.

She nodded to me to indicate that it was my turn but I froze up and could think of absolutely nothing to say. I shrugged hopelessly.

“Great hair too.”

I was both embarrassed and thrilled by her boldness. She was so much braver than me.

She held back her exasperation until we were clear of the building.

“Ugh. This is just like that time you fell in love with the bike courier that used to come to work.”

“What? No – that was different. I fell in love with his *arms*. And it wasn’t love. And this isn’t love either! I’m just admiring him – like you are.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. You talk about him all the time.”

I was almost sure that wasn’t true. “That’s not true.”

“Look,” she said, “my point is that you never do anything about your feelings. Live a little.”

Monthly billing and a juicy scandal involving one of the mailroom staff and a senior associate largely drove him from my mind for the next few days and so I was unprepared when we shared the lift again.

Hannah said nothing this time. She just looked at me – willing me, I felt, to be daring.

I stared at the sliver of his profile that I could see from the back corner of the lift.

“He’s gorgeous,” I said softly.

It wasn’t what I’d meant to say but it was out there now. I cringed in anticipation of consequences, but there were none.

As the doors closed on level 8 I breathed out a bad swear word.

“What are you worried about?” Hannah asked. “It’s not like he understood you.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about him that day. I found I was recalling details that I didn’t remember observing in the first place. His green – almost hazel – eyes. His long eyelashes. The dimple in his right cheek that only showed when he smiled.

In the safety of my own mind, I made witty and sometimes provocative observations about him.

Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, I was emboldened by my imaginary bravery.

When we encountered him again on our return from the morning coffee run, I brazenly observed to Hannah that, had I not been carrying my latte in one hand and a piece of caramel slice I didn't need in the other, I'd be sorely tempted to touch his lovely, wavy hair.

Even Hannah looked a little shocked. I was quite pleased with myself. I was being brave – albeit while hiding behind a sturdy language barrier.

One day Hannah suggested I ask him out.

That had genuinely not occurred to me. He was a fantasy. A mysterious figure that dipped in and out of my life for about forty seconds, three or four times a week. Besides, I didn't know anything about him.

“That's how most people start out,” Hannah laughed. “You go out with someone in order to get to know them better.”

I just shook my head. He'd say no – a word I actually understood in French – and all my fantasies would be shattered.

It was on a Thursday, coming back from lunch, that I discovered the truth. Hannah was holding the lift doors open for the hurrying footsteps we could hear approaching. He got in with a woman, gave us his usual handsome smile, and then turned to chat with her.

In English.

It took me a moment or two to put it all together. My smile faded. I felt my face flush with mortification. I put my head down and stared at the floor. The lift had never felt like such a claustrophobic metal box.

“Oops,” said Hannah, after they got out.

I looked up at her, nearly in tears. “I am so embarrassed. He must think I'm a complete idiot!”

She bit her lip and looked away. I couldn't understand why she wasn't writhing with embarrassment like me. And then I realised. She knew. At some stage, in the elevator without me there, she had found out. And while she had stopped making comments about him, she hadn't stopped me from doing it.

“Why would you do that to me?” I demanded.

“I thought it was romantic,” she said, as we stood on the 15th floor landing. “I knew you really liked him and I figured that, if he knew how you felt about him, he'd be more likely to ask you out.”

She correctly read the look on my face. “I'm sorry, hon. It was stupid of me.”

I sighed. “It's okay. I'm not mad with you.” I actually wasn't. “I'm just so embarrassed. And ashamed, to be honest. Making all those comments about his physical appearance as if it was clever or brave, when really I was just leering at him like a teenager. I deserve to be taking the stairs.”

“You can’t seriously be thinking of avoiding the elevator because of this – we’re on the 15th floor!”
Hannah said.

“Oh, I’m serious,” I replied.

* * *

The thing is, it’s a lot easier to talk about walking up and down 15 flights of stairs than it is to do it - at least four times a day, and in high heels.

I only lasted three days.

On the fourth day I took the lift – this time to the 8th floor. I felt sick, but I could only really see one possible way forward.

The woman who had been present on the day of the big language reveal was on the reception desk.

I hadn’t really thought this part through.

“Hi,” I said. “Um, I’m looking for – ah, a guy. He’s tall, slim. Has brown hair...” I drifted off.

She took pity on me and asked me to wait.

About a minute later she returned with him, before discreetly disappearing again.

He smiled and for a moment I forgot why I was there.

I took a breath. In the end it all came out in a rush. “I just wanted to say sorry. I didn’t know you spoke English – obviously. Not that that’s any excuse to just talk about you like that. I mean, I don’t normally do – I’ve never done something like that before. I – I’m sorry.”

His smile grew wider and a dimple appeared in his other cheek.

“No need to say sorry,” he said, his French accent turning regular English words into poetry. “It was very flattering to hear you say these things of me.”

I hoped that was true.

“Well,” I was already backing towards the lift, “I just wanted to apologise.”

“Wait,” he said. “The purple coffee.”

I turned back, puzzled.

“Perhaps you could show me where you buy this coffee?”

“Are you talking about the purple cups? You mean you want to know where the shop is? It’s on the corner of Galway and Beckford.”

“Can you show me?”

“What - take you there? For a coffee?”

He nodded.

“Now?”

“Yes. Or ‘oui’, if you prefer,” he grinned.





Leap of Faith

Pamela Swain

Sometimes I wonder if the devil himself has transported me to hell, but when the kiss of rain transforms our crusty brown paddocks into fresh green pasture, I see heaven's hand. Thirty years on the land and I've seen most things nature is capable of.

Soft clicks called from the kitchen and I make my way inside. Scud, my old cattle dog, pads across the room to greet me. His tail thwacks against my calf as he walks to heel and I lean down to ruffle the hair on the back of his neck. I reach for one of the pillow cases hanging beside the range. Mollie, an orphaned kangaroo joey, knows the routine and nestles in the crook of my arm as I measure her formula. Ben, another orphan, remains curled up and sound asleep, his hind legs stick out like antennas. I flick the kettle on to boil and tickle beneath Mollie's chin while we wait.

I settle on the top step of the verandah to give Mollie her bottle. Scud nudges my arm aside and tucks his head through. Mollie licks his lips and he returns the favour.

"Getting soft in your old age Scud."

"You and him both Lizzie."

I turn at the sound of our neighbour, Alex's voice and give him a playful punch on the arm as he drops down to sit next to me.

"Less of the old if you don't mind. Fifty's the new thirty ... or so I'm told. Not convinced about that though when I look in the mirror."

“There’s only one thing to do then, Lizzie.”

“What’s that then?”

“Get rid of the mirror.” Alex springs up and scoots towards the door, dodging my attempt to trip him up.

“You’re supposed to say I’m as beautiful as the day you first met me.”

Alex pauses in the doorway and half turns to call over his shoulder, “Nah. That’s what husbands are supposed to say, not mates.”

He emerges moments later carrying Ben and his bottle. As he settles down next to me I notice his toil worn hands. Sun reddened, scratched and scarred – farmer’s hands. Capable hands. Hands that mend fences, muster cattle, pull animals from boggy creek banks and yet are able to stroke Ben’s cheek with a feather-light touch.

I stare at his hands, thinking how I’d like to swap places with Ben. To feel the tingle of his touch. Alex turns and winks at me and my cheeks have no loyalty – they betray me at every opportunity. Just like they used to at school when caught sneaking a glance at the boy of my dreams. Except Alex is no boy – and I’m no giggling teenage girl. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Pull yourself together, Lizzie. He can’t make it any clearer. Mates, just mates. But I can’t help how I feel and I can’t say when the shift happened.

We settle into a comfortable silence. Alex is a man of few words anyway. He is my rock. My safe harbour. If something needs doing, he does it – although I try not to ask too much of him, because I don’t want to be seen as a helpless widow and he has his own property to run. Today he is here to help my son, Daniel, with fence repairs.

There is a shift in the air around us and a breeze whips off my hat and shoots it up in the air. We laugh as Scud chases after it, knowing he’ll give up long before it lands.

Alex places Ben down and turns towards me. But for some reason, is unable to look me in the eye. He removes his hat, runs his fingers through his hair, scratches at the back of his neck and clears his throat several times. He has something to say, but I’ve caught his nervousness and I spring up and almost drop Mollie. In my attempt to keep hold of her, the bottle topples down the steps and I snag my jeans on a nail standing proud of the verandah post. For a moment I’m captive, until Alex reaches to free me. The warmth of his hands radiate through the material of my jeans. I gasp. His hands shoot away and we stare at each other as if we’re seeing one another for the first time. The silence between us is excruciating. I attempt to talk, but have lost my powers of speech. Alex thrusts the bottle into my hands and strides off towards the main homestead.

“No. No. No,” drifts along in his wake.

I’m unsure what just happened, but I can’t stop thinking “Yes, yes, yes,” and then cross my fingers for luck.

Daniel texts to ask if I'd take lunch out to them. His wife, Lauren, is close to her due date, so I help out where I can. I load the cool bags into the tray of my ute and settle Scud on to the passenger seat. He used to leap in to the tray, but his arthritis renders this impossible now. He still enjoys the ride though, head thrust through the open window, barking at imaginary monsters in the bush.

As the ute bounces along the corrugations in the track, I catch a glimpse of Alex and Daniel through the trees and pull over for a minute to observe them. They're deep in conversation, sitting on the back of Daniel's truck. Alex is the broader of the two. He's tall too, although anyone is tall measured against me. I almost reach his shoulder if I raise my heels a little. His Akubra is pulled down low on his head and his face is slathered in sun block. He's had a skin cancer removed in the past and has no intentions of getting another.

Alex is considered a catch, even though he's had a string of girlfriends over the years and none ever made it to live in status. Daniel reckons it's because no-one lives up to me. He points this out every time Alex appears. And I remind him I'm fifty, with stretch marks and boobs heading south - a realist, not some desperate romantic.

Scud barks at a snake he sees slither off into the bush and both men raise their heads and look towards the ute. Alex jumps down from the truck and sprints towards us. I continue to bounce along the track, stopping when I reach him. He plants his hand on the ute's roof and leans in through the window. He's grinning from ear to ear.

"Lauren's waters broke."

I can't contain the smile on my face, nor the tears that well in my eyes. Alex opens the door and I burst out of my seat, do a happy dance and then fling myself into his arms. He wraps his arms around me and spins me around like a carousel. When he puts me down, I'm giddy from spinning and giddy with joy and plant a kiss on his lips. I cling on to him until my head ceases to spin and then race over to where Daniel is loading the truck.

"Leave that. We'll sort it out. Take the ute, it'll be quicker."

It's been a long day waiting for news from the hospital. Alex went home for the afternoon and returned to have dinner and keep me company. We finish the washing up and he is behind me as I dry the last dish. Close enough for his breath to tickle the back of my neck. His citrus aftershave permeates the air around us. The warmth of his body radiates in the space between us. What now? What are the rules? Are there any? I'm so out of practice. Am I interpreting his closeness all wrong? Does he want me to turn and pull him towards me as much as I want to feel those arms wrap around my waist and draw me into an embrace? Maybe even nuzzle my neck. Kiss an ear. Or whisper how beautiful I am. Damn. The thought jolts me back to reality. Mates. We're just mates.

My mobile rings and I note a flicker of disappointment on Alex's face as I move away. It's Daniel call-

ing so I switch to speakerphone.

“A girl, Mum. She’s beautiful ... Lauren’s been so brave. Midwife says you can visit tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait. Give Lauren my love.”

“Mine too,” Alex says.

“Hi Alex. Didn’t know you were there. How’d it go?”

“It didn’t.”

“Hell. Have I got to come back and give you two instructions?”

I turn towards Alex, raise my eyebrows. “Instructions for what?”

He shrugs and a flush creeps from his neck to his cheeks.

“Be a desperate romantic for once, Mum.”

So I decide to take a leap of faith.

Alex trembles when I trace along his jaw with my fingertips. His eyes lock with mine.

“I don’t want to lose a friend, Lizzie.”

“Me neither.”

“Because you mean the world to me.”

“You do to me too.” I stand on tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck. He tilts my chin and lowers his head until our lips graze against each other. His other arm is around my waist drawing me close. I feel the thud of his heart through his shirt. Mine is busy doing cartwheels. It’s good I’m hanging on because my legs no longer wish to support me. He presses his lips to mine and I’m lost. We emerge from the kiss breathless and flushed. I mirror his smile and reach to move a stray hair off his face and it’s a natural progression to rake my fingers through his hair. He groans, releases me from his embrace and takes hold of my hands.

‘Are you sure about this?’

I nod and lead him along the corridor towards my bedroom.

Sounds of industry drift from the kitchen. I tumble out of bed and don Alex’s shirt, savouring his scent caught in its fibres. I clean my teeth and splash water on my face before making my way along the corridor. He whistles as I sashay into the kitchen.

“Wow. It never looks that good on me. The joeys are fed, by the way.”

He gives me a playful pat on the posterior as I pass by in order to steal his coffee. He shakes his head.

“I suppose this is what happens when you live together?”

I nod, kiss the tip of his nose and scoot off to sit on the verandah. He follows and perches on the arm of my chair, his arm draped around my shoulder. I lean against him and rest my head on his chest and wonder why it's taken us this long to get together.

Whatever the reason, I intend to make up for lost time.





Lost Moments

Donna Capil

“You can scream if you want. There are no prizes for being a martyr,” says the woman.

I’m okay. It’s okay. Actually, it isn’t.

Beneath a sheet that smells of detergent, a muscle spasm jars my body and a razor sharp pain gnaws at my nerves like a serrated knife on steel. I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my teeth. She sets about her brisk but gentle ministrations, heedless of my discomfort. I want to scream, shout at her to get out, leave me alone.

The sadistic witch.

I strive to shut out her cheerful humming. She pops up the window and fresh morning air dilutes the night odours. The noisy rustle of nylon trousers rubbing against thickened thighs irritates me as she moves away. I hear a rush of water splash against porcelain, a dull thud of plastic and then a rustle of paper as she dries her hands.

I hate her.

She pads back to me. “Ellie, do you know what the day is?”

Day? Since I woke to this... nightmare... a constant stream of faces and questions have bombarded me. What’s your name? Where does it hurt? How painful is it? *Stupid questions. The day is... it is. I know this.* Pops of colour explode inside my head a fraction of a second before a white-hot, blinding pain sears my brain.

Eyes wide, I jerk and grab my head. Something hard knocks against my forehead. It's a cast... on my arm. Oh, Christ, what happened to me? Panic rises in my chest. It tastes acrid and I want to gag. I try curling in on myself, anything to get away from the pain. It's too dominant. Hot and angry, it holds me in its grip and its shrill voice is loud in my mind.

A high-pitched beep breaks through the inner noise.

"Hang in there, Ellie..." The commands, quiet and firm, swim in and out of my hearing. "...need you to relax, okay... Ellie, you're okay. Breathe... that's it. Nice and slow..."

Breathing hurts. I want to escape, to sleep—sleeping doesn't hurt.

"There you go. That's better, isn't it?"

My mind latches onto the cheerful voice. This time, I don't flinch at her touch. An ice-cool liquid flowing through my veins acts like a buffer, muting her dispassionate and methodical movements as she works on my body. Oh, I feel good. I could soar to the heavens, ride the air currents and bask on a cloud of white...

As the small plane climbs higher into the sky, the high-pitched whine of the engine hikes up my fear of heights. Dan, my boyfriend of a year, begins to fasten the metal clips that connect me to his harness. This seemed like a good idea from the comfort of our lounge, sipping chilled Riesling and eating a Thai green curry. Now that I'm squeezed into what amounts to a flying coffin, not so much.

Oh, why did I agree to this?

The plane lurches forward. My fingers dig into Dan's thighs, his strong, muscled thighs encased in durable black canvas fabric. A combination laugh-scream bubbles to the surface as I glimpse my white-knuckled grip. I want to tell him I've changed my mind but my throat has given up working. Why am I sweating when I'm shaking so bad my teeth are rattling? A rolling sensation in my stomach makes me hunch over.

I want to vomit.

Dan's larger hands clasp mine. "We're in this together," he shouts over the noise in the cabin. Twisting around, I commit my gorgeous, six-foot-two, lean-muscled thrill-seeker to memory.

Dan lifts his goggles high onto his brow and sea-green eyes lock with mine. My heart flips and not because the pilot eased back on the throttle. Dan smiles at me and my body tingles from memories of what that sensual mouth can do. Oh, that's right. I agreed to jump out of a perfectly good plane because I'm crazy for him. Right now, I would swap it for hot, desperate 'mile-high club' kind of crazy.

Dan lowers his head to me. A glint of mischief dances in those green depths.

Yes, kiss me.

He flashes a brilliant smile. *Later*, his eyes promise.

What's that yelling?

In the blink of an eye, things go from scary to downright traumatic. Someone yells, "You're up!" Dan shoves his goggles into place. He crushes me to him then spins me around to—oh, sweet Jesus, where did the couple in front of us go? One moment I'm lusting after Dan, next I'm cursing him as he shuffles us toward the gaping hole in the plane. *Oh, please Lord, I promise to go to church—all year!*

"Will you marry me?" Dan shouts over the roar around us.

Marry? "What—"

Someone yells, "Jump!"

"Wait—*dammit*—oh, God—"

My legs dangle out of the plane, buffeted by the wind, and the patchwork landscape of the Earth far below sends my heart into my throat; the next second I'm floating away from the plane...

"Ellie... "

So tired. I don't want to open my eyes.

"Wakey-wakey, Ellie," says a female voice. "Just need to do some checks."

Is there no end to this vicious cycle? I crack open an eye and all I see is a blur. I blink until things start to come into focus.

"Hi, sleepy head." A different face moves in front of me. "I'll get you set up for visiting hours after I'm done, okay?" The face disappears and the ominous squeak of wheels signals the trolley. "I expect that handsome man of yours will be in today." Dan? I open my mouth to ask and she slips a thermometer under my tongue then her cool fingers grip my wrist to take my pulse. "If he had his way, he'd set up camp right beside you," says the nurse, a smile in her voice.

Dan's been to see me. Why can't I remember him coming?

"I wouldn't mind, but it's the rules, you see. Poor thing didn't want you waking alone." She releases my wrist to scrawl on a chart.

How could I forget Dan? Tears press behind my eyes. I should remember his visits. My chest hurts and stupid tears blur my vision.

"Okay, blood pressure. Oh—" Distress must show on my face as the nurse pats my hand gently. "Now, don't go getting upset. He'll be here lovey, never fails. You'll see."

Actually, I can't see as I've closed my eyes to hold back big fat droplets.

I miss Dan so badly, I can't think straight.

The mattress dips beside me. I sniff back tears and a subtle hint of masculine warmth and an exotic wild scent surrounds me. “Hey, what’s this? Ellie, I’m here baby. It’s okay, I’ve got you.” The flow of Dan’s voice washes through me, a soft, soothing murmur. Oh, God, Dan’s here. Careful not to hurt me, he curls his body around me. His presence is a safe haven, my sanctuary from pain. Unhindered, my tears fall.

“Ah hell, please don’t cry, babe. You’re going to make me cry and my tough, macho, thrill-seeker rep will be shot. I’m your knight in shining armour; so, don’t make me cry... please, babe.”

I savour the sound of his voice, his humour, his smell... him. I smile. I can’t stop it.

“There you go,” he says. “Now, open those beautiful eyes for me.”

I do. He moves about then dries my tears with a tissue. I take a shuddering breath. “D-Dan,” I work moisture into my mouth. “I-I love y-you. C-can I have water?”

He chuckles. “The woman is a seductress even on her sick bed. How can I refuse her request?”

After a few sips of water through a straw, a readjustment of the bed, and a kiss that makes me forget my misery, Dan holds my good hand in his. He looks tired. Shadows darken the lustrous green of his eyes and fine lines fan out from the corners, aging him.

“I can’t... I don’t... what happened?”

Brow furrowed, he lifts my hand to his velvet-soft lips. “Ellie? You were in an accident.”

I remember. “I fell... sky-diving.”

He nods. “Ellie, you weren’t hurt from the parachute jump. You rode the adrenalin buzz after the jump—man, you were ecstatic and sexy as hell. I wanted you so bad...” His voice tails off and I watch a play of emotions shape his angular features.

“Dan?”

He flicks a glance over me and shakes his head. “Sorry. I... you were in a head-on collision with a car, Ellie.”

What? “But... you... how?”

“I had to stay back and help with a last-minute drop. Your parents were coming for dinner and you caught a ride back to town with some of the guys who’d done their jumps. Hell, Ellie—” Dan raked a hand through his hair. “If I’d known what was around the corner, I’d never have let you go—ever.”

“Not... your fault.” The dream I’d had of skydiving sprung to mind. My terror as I fell. But, after, there’s nothing. I try to put two and two together and got... five. “People... how many?”

“Ellie... you were the only survivor.” His voice is almost a whisper.

I close my eyes and try to remember faces, but nothing happens. “Tell me.” Opening my eyes, I search Dan’s, “please.”

“Jake, Yvette, Jon and Chris—and the driver of the other vehicle. Cops think the driver of the other vehicle took the corner too fast, crossed the centreline.”

All of them gone. “When—are... funerals?”

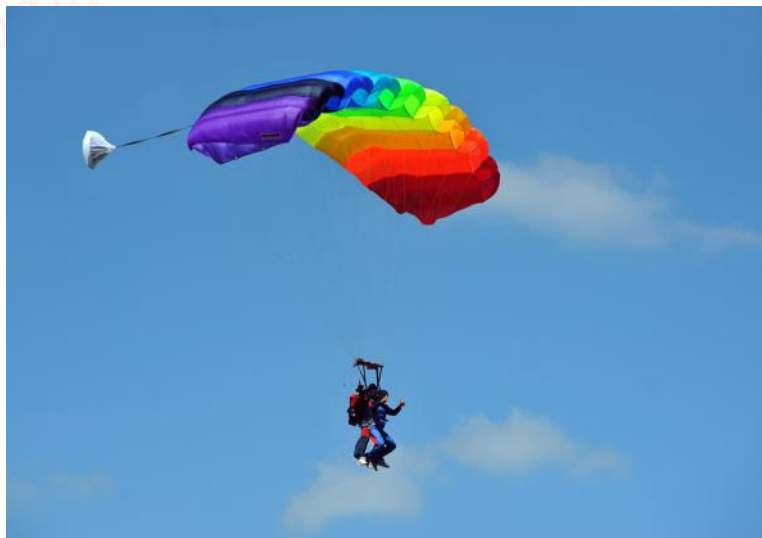
Dan inhales a breath. “The doctors put you in an induced coma so you had a chance to heal. I’m sorry, babe. Their funerals were a couple of months ago.”

Before I can voice my question, he answers. “Two months. It’s only been a week since you’ve come out of the coma. The doctors said it’ll all come back with time. You’re getting stronger every day.” His fingers grip my hand. I can feel his strength—steady and strong. “I want you home, safe with me, Ellie.”

I want it too. We hold each other while the world outside my room continues. With Dan’s body stretched out beside me, our breathing synchronised, I’m lulled into a state of languor.

Dan’s lips brush mine. “Sorry, I tired you out.” His warm green eyes hold promise of time together later. “I’m going to go—no, it’s okay. Your parents are here. Spend time with them too. I’ll be back soon, promise.”

One more toe-curling kiss and he moves from my side. He hesitates. “Hey, Ellie, remember what I said before we jumped? Get well—and I’ll ask you again.”





Sunset Over Smuggler's Bay

Charlotte Kieft

Angela pushed open the heavy door to Dunbar Sloane Auctioneers, so worn out she could barely summon the strength. Ever since she'd learned her stinking ex, Graham, was claiming half her bach at Smuggler's Bay, grief and rage had engulfed her, like a lead blanket about her shoulders. The bach was hers, dammit. Left to her in her father's will. Graham had never even liked Smuggler's. The second he'd told her that, she should've realised their marriage was doomed.

The auctioneer was in mid-patter in the next room, his voice rising and falling like the Topp Twins in full yodel. She slid into a seat near the back. Hands rose and fell, as the auction continued for the painting before hers: *Sunset over Smuggler's Bay*.

Angela had been googling Smuggler's Bay earlier, trying to work out how much the bach would fetch, when this auction had come up, and the most breath-taking painting. She'd jotted down the details, a plan forming. She was going to lose her bach – she couldn't afford to buy Graham out – but if she won the painting she'd always have something to remind her of Smuggler's.

She studied the crowd. It was a mixed bag. A hipster with full beard and waxed moustache. An elderly woman in lilac tweed, her foundation thick as the icing on Auntie Robyn's Christmas cake. A young executive, his navy suit moulding to his wiry limbs. She scowled. He reminded her of Graham – more style than substance. Her gaze drifted to a man, in his forties, his hair threaded with silver, lounging in his chair, his

long, jean-clad legs stretched as far as the narrow gap would allow. Now that was a real man. A powerful huntaway, where Graham was an over groomed poodle. Tan from the sun, not sprayed on. Shirt the colour of the sea. Jeans, frayed at the cuffs. Steel-capped work boots, spattered with paint.

He caught her watching him. His amber eyes brushed over her face, then widened as if in recognition. Had they met before? She was sure she'd remember if they had – he was not the kind of man you'd forget.

"Lot 22," the auctioneer announced. "*Sunset over Smuggler's Bay*. An oil painting by Patrick Stussy."

The Stussy family owned the farmstead that backed onto her parent's bach. Farmers, not painters – serious and dour. This Patrick must be a relation.

A white-gloved man placed the canvas onto an easel on the stage. She craned forward. Would the real painting match up to the Internet image? Her breath hitched. Oh, yes. Clearly, the artist had loved Smuggler's Bay. His painting had captured its soul. The apricot and crimson sunset reflected on the sea. The golden sand of the beach led her gaze towards the emerald hills, with their smattering of livestock. It was the Smuggler's Bay of her childhood, before architect-designed holiday homes sprouted up like corrugated iron mushrooms. A ferocious need gripped her. She had to have it.

"Who'll make the first bid? Do I hear ten thousand?"

Angela's hand shot up. She was being overeager, but didn't care.

"Eleven thousand, anyone?" The auctioneer flirted with the crowd. "Yes, I see eleven."

It was Mr Huntaway. He was sitting bolt upright, his calm evaporated.

"Twelve thousand?" the auctioneer continued.

An elderly man, his striped shirt stretching over his pear-shaped belly, twitched his hand in a bid.

"Thirteen?"

Angela's arm shot up again.

"Fourteen?"

The hipster nodded, stroking his sea captain beard as if imagining himself navigating the waves in the bay.

"Fifteen."

Mr Huntaway again. There was something familiar about him, now she looked more closely. Maybe they had met.

"Sixteen."

Angela raised her hand, her attention wavering between the man and the auction.

"Seventeen."

Mr Huntaway bid. His amber eyes met hers again. They both smiled like co-conspirators.

The bidding spiralled higher. Angela was sweating now. Her grey silk shirt caught at her armpit as she raised her hand. She couldn't afford to spend this sort of cash on a painting. It was over half of what she had left in the bank. Years ago, Graham had insisted they put their assets into a trust, claiming it was 'safer'. After they'd split, she'd discovered he was the trust's sole beneficiary. Sneaky bastard. She'd come away with a little over thirty grand, and her bach. So she'd thought. But, no. Her ex couldn't even leave her that.

Her resolve hardened. She was going to lose her bach. No way she'd lose the painting too.

Finally, it was down to her and Mr Huntaway. The warm amber of his eyes was transformed to hard to-paz. Gone were the camaraderie and smiles. Angela felt strangely bereft, but that was stupid. She was the one who should be mad – he was just another man wanting to get one over her.

"Twenty-one thousand," the auctioneer called.

Her rival nodded.

"Twenty-two?"

Angela reluctantly raised her hand. Twenty-two thousand? Madness.

"Twenty-three?" the auctioneer asked, his gaze on Mr Huntaway.

Her rival's hand wavered. She held her breath. Had she beaten him?

"Twenty-two five hundred," he called, his voice gravelly with tension.

The auctioneer nodded acceptance with a Cheshire-cat grin. It was a game to him, watching bidders offer more than they could afford.

"Twenty-three," Angela countered, sweat prickling her neck. If she kept going, she'd be left with nothing to start her new life with.

"And five hundred," her rival said, just as quick. His face was pained, his jaw jutting like a boulder holding out against the surf.

Damn him! Her childhood summers were spent at Smuggler's Bay. The happiest times of her life. The painting couldn't mean as much to him.

"Do I hear twenty-five thousand?" The auctioneer's eyes were on Angela.

She began to raise her hand, then hesitated. It was too much. Her hand dropped and her head sunk. All warmth towards Mr Huntaway was gone. She hoped he choked on his victory.

"Do I hear twenty-five?" the auctioneer asked again.

Angela shook her head. Bitterness flooded her mouth. Once again, a man had bested her.

“Sold for twenty-four thousand, five hundred to Mr...?” The auctioneer was dancing on the spot. Clearly, the painting had gone for more than he’d expected.

“Stussy,” her rival called. “Mr Patrick Stussy.”

All eyes swivelled towards him. He was the artist? Around her, people whispered excitedly.

“*Sunset over Smuggler’s Bay* was the first artwork I ever sold,” Patrick said. “I’ve spent years tracking it down.”

Her despair lifted. He wasn’t trying to beat her. He’d burned to own the painting, just like she had. Probably more.

“I’d hoped to get it cheaper.” His amber gaze locked onto her.

Angela squirmed. How was she to know he’d painted it?

The auctioneer waved his hand. The white-gloved man carried the painting away. *Sunset*, and the small drama around it, was forgotten.

“Lot 23. *Blue Duck* by Nathan Weekes...”

Angela slunk out. To her horror, Patrick followed. She scurried across the foyer, but he cut her off before she reached the door. Was he going to give her a hard time? As if her life wasn’t hard enough. This close, he smelt of turpentine and oils. Specks of paint dotted his tanned forearms.

“You still paint.” Good one, Angela. State the obvious.

“And much better works than *Sunset*.” His cheeks flushed. “The brush strokes were rough, the colour palate limited...”

“You captured Smuggler’s Bay perfectly,” she blazed. How dare he disparage it? “One look and I’m a child again, playing in the waves.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You know the bay?”

“My family spent our summers at Smuggler’s when I was little. We had a bach there.”

“Of course! You’re the Tapley girl.”

“Yeah, Angela.”

“I knew I recognised you. That glorious copper hair, always escaping your plaits, no matter how tight your mum braided them.

Angela laughed. “And you’re Patch, the Stussy’s farmhand.” She’d have recognised him earlier, only she’d been too caught up in her thoughts.

“Sure am. Remember the time I rescued your sausage dog from a grumpy bullock after it squeezed through our fence?”

“And when you taught me how to milk a cow by hand? We laughed so hard I almost fell off the milking stool.” Her smile faded. She’d never known he was a Stussy. “You were their son – not hired help.” The old farmer had worked him harder than his sheep dogs.

His steel caps thunked against the wooden floor. “This is going to sound crazy, but how about going halves on the painting? I spent more than I intended and... you had the good taste to love my work. I’d hate for you to miss out.” He gave a self-deprecating smile. “We could have shared custody – three months on, three months off?”

Angela’s heart soared. She could still have *Sunset*. And an excuse to see Patrick again. Then doubt grabbed her. She’d been stung before by a man and money. “It’s a kind offer, but...”

“I’ll pay for it now,” he said quickly. “Then get my lawyer to draw up a contract. It’ll be fair and legally binding, I promise. Get your own lawyer to look it over. You won’t even have to see me when it’s your turn if you don’t want to, although I’d love it if you came to the homestead to pick it up.”

“The homestead?”

“I’ve moved into my parents’ old farmhouse at the bay. I’m converting it into a home-cum-gallery, and planting grapes for a vineyard. The old man will be spinning in his grave.” His shoulders hunched. “I never shared his passion for farming. He booted me out when I told him I wanted to study art.”

“That’s awful!” So that was why one summer she’d come back and Patch – Patrick – was gone.

“We reconciled a few years ago. Mum even left me the farm in her will, after Dad passed on.” He grimaced. “It was hard being away all those years. I’ve always loved Smuggler’s.”

She wanted to take his hand, tell him she understood.

His smile was warm as the sunset. “I’d love to show you around. There aren’t many people who know what it used to look like. The old place was so dark. I’ve put in skylights and restored the floors and doors. They’re solid kauri, but some stupid bugger had smothered them in paint.”

Just like she’d been smothered by Graham’s deceit. “It’s a deal.” Angela felt lighter than she had in ages. As if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“Give me a moment to settle up here, then how about I shout you a bite to eat while we work out the details?”

It was time to take another chance.

Angela smiled. “I’d like that.”





The Charity Case

Yvonne Walus

The first time I see my new neighbour, he's naked. It's made the encounter memorable, for sure, but that's not the only reason I put him on my list of potential dates.

Single life is not like *Sex and the City*, with its glamour of no-strings romances and weekend brunches with girlfriends. My own experience is as far from that as Manhattan is from Auckland.

Saturday morning: a breeze is flitting through the envelopes on the coffee table. I'm sitting in the December sun (dark glasses – check, hat – check, long sleeves because the summer air is cold – check). The deck chair creaks as I lean forward to slice through another envelope.

Forget smoked salmon in a trendy café, forget girly gossip, forget leisurely lie-ins. Women like me don't need to sleep in because we go to bed at a respectable time. And in the morning, we sit in the sun and process charity funds.

Not right now, though. Right now, I'm climbing over the side fence of my six-in-a-row unit, chasing after two donation envelopes that fluttered into the next-door garden. I would've gone to the neighbours' front door, except they moved out last week.

"Morning." The voice is male, deep, and definitely amused.

"M-morning," I deliver the automatic reply. "So sorry...." The explanation sticks in my throat.

The new neighbour is stretched out on the lawn in the sunshine. Naked.

At least he's lying face down. Well, private-bits-down, anyway. His body is sculpted, the back broad and bumpy in all the right places, the shoulders strong, the buttocks-

"No," he says. "My fault. Not the best idea, huh?" Half-turned towards me, he gestures towards his hips.

"It's not my habit to climb over fences. Didn't see you move in."

"I'm a one-suitcase type of guy."

Exactly my type, I think. No baggage. No strings. And that bod.

A sudden thickness in my throat makes the words all hoarse. "I'll just grab the envelopes."

"Sorry I'm not getting up."

My mischievous mouth stretches into a grin all by itself. "Aww, how disappointing." Then I picture him getting up, and my cheeks grow hot. Ok, way too much engagement on my part. Rule number one: never date guys you might actually fall for. That's why I'm single most of the time.

"I'm Alex, by the way. Just so you know I have manners."

"Mary-Lou."

As I scale the fence once more, I know what Alex must be staring at. It's a good thing my own back-side is toned- clothed, I meant clothed.

Droplets of cold water are still sizzling on my face when there's a knock on the front door. This time, Alex is wearing a polo shirt and jeans, ripped so realistically it may be authentic wear-and-tear.

"You forgot these."

The envelopes. Right. "Won't you come in?"

Ok, full disclosure. The charity I volunteer for is the *Leukaemia and Blood Cancer Society*. The reason: I'm a survivor. Grace wasn't as lucky. Grace, my best friend. We were planning to move in together as soon as we finished school. We'd study veterinary science, open a clinic, share a flat, have plenty of come-and-go boyfriends.

So how is it fair that I got to become a teenager, go to uni, have this whole life thing experience, while Grace didn't? Was I a kinder person, a faster sprinter, a better daughter? Did I eat more greens or fewer chocolates? Did my parents pray to a more powerful God?

Before she died, Grace made me promise I'd follow our plan. Veterinary school. Clinic. Boyfriends. Lots of pets.

I'm halfway there. A qualified vet, getting work know-how until I gather enough money and courage to buy my own business. No flatmate - the fact that she's not Grace would cut too deep - but I have a huge aquarium, and I collect stray cats.

Alex is sitting on the floor, chugging a cider (I don't stock beer). He's following the fish with his eyes, taking in the clutter-free fridge door and the lack of photographs on display. Vader, my black kitten, gives him the seal of approval by rubbing his shins. Alex's leg muscles strain against the jeans when he moves to scratch Vader under the chin.

We sit in silence. Any second now, Alex will open his mouth and ask about the charity. I'm not ready to talk about leukaemia. Or Grace.

"So what do you do when not sunbathing naked?" I don't really care. Just getting there first with the chitchat.

"No, that's pretty much it. Sunbathing naked. The definition of me." Alex's eyes glide up and down my face. "Mary-Lou?"

"Yeah?"

"No, I mean, is that you? Mary-Lou? Kauri Park Primary?"

His eyes... something about his eyes. The green-blue of the ocean. The impossibly thick eyelashes. *Like pipe cleaners*, I used to tease him. "Lex?" I can't believe it. Gone are the freckles on his nose, and the sandy curls are now a dark buzz-cut, but it's him. My first crush.

When you're ten, boys are a pain in the neck. Lex was no exception. He'd pull my ponytail. He'd run away with my backpack. Push me into the swimming pool. But then there was the time I lost my shoes and Lex stayed with me after school to find them. And the time mum packed me a healthy veg wrap for lunch, and Lex swapped it for his pizza slice. And when the school bully crumpled up my water-cycle poster, Lex gave me his own to hand in. Later that day, the bully walked around with a fat lip while Lex's jumper was missing a sleeve. That was the day the Lex-scales tipped from *annoying* to *cool* in my eyes.

"You left school at the end of year five," Alex is saying now. Alex. Lex.

"Mhm." Year five. Leukaemia. Meeting Grace in the hospital. *I don't want to talk about it*. "Let me thank you properly for that time with the water-cycle project," I deflect. "Home-made pizza tonight?"

My imagination is already playing out the familiar movie. While the dough is rising, I'll have a long shower, shave my legs, dab on perfume. Go easy on the garlic, and after the pizza and a bottle of red, I'll get to see him naked from all angles. A few months of no-strings sex, and I'll make sure we drift apart. It'll be extra harrowing, because I really like him, but I've never before let silly emotions get the better of me.

That's how all my relationships work. That's how I need them. One of the side-effects of the leukaemia treatment means I can't have children, so it wouldn't be fair to get involved long-term. Men think they don't care about having a family, but I've seen my three older brothers with their kids, and that's that.

The afternoon doesn't match the imagined movie, though. Alex doesn't go home. We drink cider, make pizza together (his forearms ripple as he works the dough and I make him knead five minutes longer

than necessary), and talk more than I've ever talked to a guy before. I discover that when he's not sunbathing naked, Alex is a financial consultant, which sounds really boring but has to do with helping small businesses. Before he leaves, Alex promises to guide me through setting up a veterinary clinic and gives me a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Damn.

Sunday morning finds me back with the charity envelopes. I'm tetchy from last night's anti-climax, and think uncharitable things about donors whose illegible scribbles could rival any medical doctor's. One of them forgot to include the credit card number. I mean, really. They had one job....

I check the name. Alexander Lawson. Not even surprised, I dial the number on the slip.

"Hello?" His voice is sleepy. Sexy. If I'd played my cards right, he'd be lying in *my* bed this morning.

"Mr Lawson, good morning. Mary-Lou from the Leukaemia and Blood Cancer Society," this is my charity-volunteer language. "Thank you for your generous donation-"

"Mary-Lou?"

"Our form is a little confusing, and I believe you may have missed the credit card box."

"Give me five minutes."

He hangs up. Four and a half minutes later - I time him - he's on my front porch. Same jeans as yesterday. His jaw is dark with stubble, and a spot of toothpaste whitens one corner of his mouth. The scent of his deodorant is driving me crazy. Unless it's the fact that he forgot to wear a shirt.

"Let me explain," he says.

To be perfectly honest, I'd be happy to swap enlightenment for a make-out session. This will be the first time I date someone I could fall in love with, and my heart is going to shatter into shards when it's time to split up, but at least I'll have the memories. I'm used to memories. Memories are all that's left of Grace, and I treasure them all.

With Alex, I'll give us Christmas, New Year, and Valentine's Day. We'll make the memories count, and by Easter it'll all be over. Being neighbours might prove awkward, so I'll find somewhere else to rent.

"-and you're not on Facebook," Alex is saying.

Of course I'm not on Facebook. Facebook is for people who have friends, and I don't want any.

"-what else to do," he continues. "The teachers told us about your illness, and then about your recovery, but not where you went to Intermediate."

I was home-schooled after I got better, my parents petrified that my compromised immune system would befriend every school bug. Plus, I needed to catch up the work I missed when I was sick. Plus, I didn't want to make new friends after Grace.

“- thought you might be volunteering for the charity. I started to put little mistakes into my monthly donations, hoping you’d be the one to call me.”

The toothpaste on his mouth makes me want to lick it off.

“How did you know to move in next door?”

“You’re kidding? I didn’t know. Used to flat with my sister, but her twins were driving me nuts. Kids are such a nightmare. Um, that came across cold.” His lips fold into a self-deprecating line. “That’s my worst shortcoming, not liking children. Promise.”

Wham, wham, wham. My heartbeat is a tactile sensation in my ears.

“Anyway, pure fluke I chose to rent here. Didn’t even recognise you at first.”

Fluke. Or fate? I’m still processing, when Alex leans in. His voice grows gentle. “We had a thing last night. Or am I wrong?”

My fingers brush his mouth and rub off the toothpaste. “Last night,” I whisper. “And in year five. We’re practically an old couple.”

When his lips finally touch mine, I know we won’t be breaking up at Easter.

Romance Writers of New Zealand

