



ROMANCE WRITERS
OF NEW ZEALAND

Liaisons

2018



**An anthology from the 2018 Chapter Short Story Contest -
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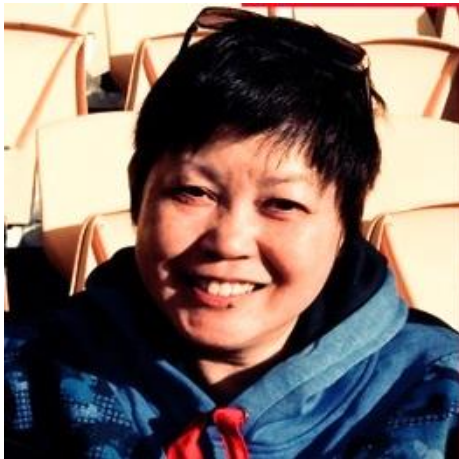
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Romance Writers of New Zealand thanks **Chapter** for their sponsorship; all of our members who entered the contest or helped with the preliminary judging, and **Jane Kemp**, Consumer and Lifestyle Editor of English Woman's Weekly for being our final judge.



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English Woman's Weekly



Romance Writers of New Zealand's LIAISONS Short Story Contest, sponsored by Chapter, is open to all members.

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The Most Important Thing

Yvonne Walus

He was younger. That's the second thing Carla noticed when they were introduced.

"Meet Luke Redmond," her client said. "Spearheading the marketing side of the project."

Luke's age was the second thing she noticed. The first was his mouth, generous and bracketed by two dimples, even when he didn't smile.

"A pleasure," she said as their hands met in a handshake that only looked business-like. It felt like holding a warm mug of coffee on a cold morning, like drinking a third glass of champagne at a New Year's Eve party, and like waiting for the MC to announce the winner of the most innovative app award when you're almost certain you've won.

"The pleasure's all mine." Luke's cheeks dimpled deeper. "Though I hope the project can do without words like *spearheading*. Buzzword Bingo is not my style."

Carla suppressed a smile. This project was going to be fun. Ages since she'd last had a crush on anyone, let alone on a work colleague. She recalled other empty phrases she'd heard around corporate offices. "In that case, how do you feel about *exit strategies*?"

"I prefer *entry* strategies myself." He held her gaze, self-assured, comfortable with the double-entendre.

She couldn't wait to try out a few entry strategies with Luke Redmond.

Her client listened with a puzzled frown. "Carla, you're not thinking of exit strategies this early in the process, are you? Because I'm totally open to re-negotiating your share of the profits—"

Well, if the client was going to misunderstand, she wasn't the one to correct him. After all, money was the most important thing in life. In her life, anyway. "Thank you, Jeremy. We'll discuss it offline. Now, Luke, let me show you the user interface."

Two minutes into the discussion, a phone chirped.

“Luke, please excuse me. I leave you in Carla’s capable hands,” Jeremy said, patting his pocket.
“I’d like nothing more than to be in Carla’s hands.”

Luke’s was a dirty mind, for sure.

Before the end of the day, Carla discovered that Luke was thirty-two, divorced, father of twins, and super-hyper rich – he worked for fun and for the love of graphic design. Carla didn’t mind the ex-wife, the twins, or Luke’s love for graphic design. She did mind his wealth - in her experience, guys with money had trouble believing in love.

In turn, she mentioned Xavier, her childhood sweetheart and her only long-term relationship, plus that it ended eighteen months ago.

“It’s not so much that he left me for a girl half my age,” she told Luke over a glass of cider at the nearby pub. “I mind that he waited too long to leave. A few years earlier, and I could have gone to a sperm bank, had a baby.”

“Your ex didn’t want-” Luke broke off tactfully.

“Something like that.” She was loyal enough not to go into Xavier’s infertility issues. Nor his rich-guy insecurity issues. “Anyway, I’m forty now, and the chances of having a complications-free pregnancy are not awesome.” She wanted to have it all out in the open: her age, her attitude towards starting a family, the fact that she’d only ever had sex with one man. Luke could take it or leave it, and she wouldn’t get hurt this early on. Disappointed, yes. Not devastated.

Luke didn’t offer platitudes, which was refreshing. “So what do you do for fun when you’re not an award-winning coder?” he asked.

“Drink cider with cute guys, of course.”

His dimples made promises, and Carla could almost taste their first kiss. Soft and exploring at first, then gaining intensity, all the way exquisite. Her lips tingled. Surely it was all right to kiss on the same day they met? He wouldn’t think her too easy? He wouldn’t expect more? No way could she do more. The thought of being naked with anybody other than Xavier made Carla cringe with embarrassment.

“Cute guys, huh? So, after a whole day of intellectual conversation,” he raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, “you’re just after my body?”

“Would you prefer me to be after your money?” She shouldn’t have said it. Stupid. Stupid. Seemed that his financial status troubled her more than she’d realised.

“No.” His face was polite, impossible to read. “I’m happy to be used for my body.”

Here it was, her chance to repair bridges. No overthinking, no what-ifs, no agonising over the age gap. “I can do that,” she said. “Use you for your body. In ways you’ve never even imagined.”

“You sure? Because I’ve imagined plenty.”

She couldn’t back out now. “Challenge accepted.”

The next morning, she slipped out of his apartment (ocean view – check, satin sheets – check, night to remember – check, check, check) before he awoke. She didn’t know what the dating protocol had to say about the morning after, especially when your one-night-stand was also your work

colleague, but she did know she couldn't face him over breakfast croissants. It wasn't so much that she went to bed with a virtual stranger – although yes, that too – it was that sometime between falling into their first kiss in the taxi and falling asleep in his arms, she had fallen for Luke Redmond. Fiercely, exclusively, absolutely.

She would have quit the project on the spot, except the money was too good. Yes, Carla Fletcher's business time and talents were totally for sale. Money was the most important thing now that her parents were gone, now that Xavier had left, now that she would never have a baby. Money couldn't buy happiness, of course: what it could do, though, was buy a good enough proxy.

Nine o'clock found her dressed in a fresh business suit, leading a PowerPoint presentation in a room full of important people, none of whom were nearly as important as one guy with dimples who got up to ask her a question.

"First off, let me thank you for the *impact* you've had on all of us." Luke emphasised the word *impact* so slightly, she would have missed it if he hadn't put a quick vertical mark on his note pad. "I'd like to *drill down*," another vertical mark, "into a few points you've made. In particular, I'd like to *unpack*," vertical mark, "the concept of..."

And so it went. Carla couldn't believe how sexual corporate speak sounded in Luke's mouth. For someone who hated buzzwords, he sure knew many. *Outside the box*. *Low hanging fruit*. *Project with benefits*. Or was it just Carla's mind that got stuck on this one track because of last night?

The second part of the meeting was marketing. Carla usually switched off as soon as she heard *customer segmentation*, except this was Luke, so anything he said was interesting. Even *brand identity*. Even *actionable analytics*. But especially a gem called *contextual marketing*. She could definitely apply contextual marketing to the app she'd developed in her private time and had never known how to sell.

The next few months proved busy: the joined project during the day, spending nights together, marketing her app in the limited time in-between. Their wealth inequality was still very much an issue, all the more prominent because it was the only one, the only snag in an otherwise perfect relationship.

"Why do you do that?" Luke asked one evening, after Carla insisted on paying half the bill, as usual. "I get feminism, but, hell, I'm scared to give you a box of chocolates in case you think I'm flaunting my money, or buying your affection, or whatever."

He deserved to know the truth, loyalty to her ex be damned. "It's Xavier. When I told you he'd left me for a younger woman, that was only half the story. Her main attraction was that she didn't know how rich he was, so, according to his logic, she had to love him for who he was, not for what he had. Unlike me." She laughed to dilute the bitterness that crept into her voice.

"You still love him that much?"

She thought: no, I love *you* that much. "No, I just don't want you to make the same mistake."

His dimples almost disappeared when he said, in a solemn tone, "You don't have worry about that."

Time raced by.

For their half-year anniversary, Luke surprised her with a home-cooked meal.

“You’re taking the no-gifts thing too seriously,” she remarked. “I’m not going to bite your head off if you buy me a dozen roses.”

“Can’t. I got rid of my money.”

“You what?”

“You clearly weren’t going to say yes while my bank account was bigger than yours. So I put all the money in a trust for the twins. Oh, and for any future children I might have, should you change your mind.”

She couldn’t keep up. “Change my mind?”

“About having a baby.”

The words hugged her like a silk blanket: soft and light and exquisite. A baby. Perhaps they could adopt. Or get an egg donor. Also, didn’t the age of the father count when it came to pregnancy risks?

“You want another baby?”

Luke shrugged. “Only if you want one. The twins fulfil me as a dad, but I’m open to having a family with you. Parenthood is the most important thing.”

She agreed: parenthood, not money. “So is that what I’m supposed to be saying yes to, now that you’re poor?”

“Nope. You’re supposed to be saying yes to this.”

This was a ring. Resting on a velvet pillow inside the palm of his hand. Luke didn’t do the down-on-one-knee bit.

“Is that a sapphire?”

“A blue diamond. Something atypical, befitting an extraordinary girl. I bought it before I signed away the rest of my fortune. My ex has the family ring, unfortunately. So is that a yes?”

Carla’s heart beat so fast, it was going to fly out of her mouth. She had to play it cool. Had to. “What? To the most unromantic proposal ever?”

“Let’s make it more romantic.”

The next hour couldn’t be called romantic by the most generous definition of the word, but it was sexy and sensual and thoroughly satisfying.

“One more time?” Carla teased, her head resting on his chest. “To help my decision-making process?”

“Give me thirty minutes to recover. So is that a yes?”

“Here’s the thing: while you were busy making yourself penniless, I sold my app to Microsoft.”

“Respect. So now you’re rich?”

“Very. Are you after my money, Luke?”

“Nope. I only ever want to use you for your body.”

She kissed one of his dimples, her soul soaring on a sweet cloud. “Has it been thirty minutes yet?”

“Mmmm. I believe I could accelerate the delivery. Now that I’m a toy boy, I have to up my game.”

Toy boy. She liked the sound of that.





The HR Handbook

Jackie Rutherford

It's just a leaving party. Just an ordinary, standard leaving party. I try to convince myself of that as I push open the door to the function room, but my stomach isn't interested in playing make-believe. It's churning with dread.

Because this isn't just another leaving party where I get to drink cheap wine and share a few jokes with my colleagues. This time, it's a leaving party for Liam.

I'm deliberately late. The raucous noise level indicates most of my colleagues are enjoying the free alcohol. Despite the room being full, I spot the man of the hour standing by the doors leading out to the balcony. I have a talent for locating Liam in any room, it's almost a superpower. Tonight he's been cornered by Kevin from accounts, and the charitable part of me wants to rescue him from what is undoubtedly an in-depth tale about one of Kevin's four cats.

But I need some alcohol in my bloodstream before I can face Liam tonight.

I head to the bar and order a glass of the house white. The bartender hands it over and I take a large gulp.

"What does the HR handbook say about the number of alcohol units you should consume at a work function?"

Turning, I find Jennifer grinning at me.

I once made the mistake of telling my team that when I first arrived at CR Stationery, I took the HR handbook home and memorised it. Literally, I can tell you what's on page 29. That's how anxious I was to succeed.

"The HR handbook states that employees who choose to drink alcoholic beverages at functions are expected to behave in accordance with usual business standards," I recite.

"Impressive."

"Thanks."

I take another swallow of my wine then glance at Liam.

He catches my eye and there it is. The smile. Liam's got this smile that goes from zero to one hundred in two seconds flat. It always floors me, how he transforms from standard good-looking, to out-of-this-world handsome, just by hitting the smile switch.

Which is not something I'm supposed to notice about someone I manage.

My heart twists and something wells up inside me as he walks towards me. I choke it down. I'm extraordinarily good at choking down my feelings for Liam. Years of practise will do that.

"Hey, you made it." He pulls up in front of me.

"Yeah, sorry I'm late. I got caught up sorting the Kinyards account."

"Definitely someone I won't miss," Liam says.

"What, are you saying you don't enjoy demanding, rude and obnoxious customers who don't pay their bills on time?"

"Shocking, isn't it?"

"More shocking than an electric eel with it's tail in a socket."

Liam's mouth twitches. "More shocking than a lightning storm in a Van de Graaff generator factory."

We're standing grinning at each other when Dave, the HR manager, rushes over. I take a step back to put some space between myself and Liam.

"Oh good Haley, you're here. It's time to do the speeches."

"Hang on a sec Dave, I haven't had a chance yet to bribe Haley to make sure she says nice things," Liam says.

Dave looks between us, an anxious crease in his forehead. Humour and Dave aren't particularly well acquainted.

"It's fine Dave," I say. "Lead the way."

Dave gets everyone's attention then I stand up in front of the crowd. I manage to hold it together while I wax lyrical about Liam's way with the customers, how he can sell ice to Inuits and sand to Egyptians. How he's the ultimate team player.

Then it's Liam's turn.

"Thanks everyone for coming. I really appreciate CR Stationery taking a chance on me when I was just a broken hockey player forced to retire who didn't know a A4 folder from an A4 binder.

"Thanks to my team, who have always supported me. Especially Haley, who taught me everything there is to know about the finer points of hole punches."

He flashes me a grin. Tears prickle my eyes. I will not cry. I will not cry.

Then his face turns serious. "I learnt something when I got injured. When I was playing hockey, I often didn't go after what I really wanted as I was worried about it not working out. But my worst-case scenario came true anyway. And I pledged to myself I would never do that again. So although I've absolutely loved my time here, it's time to go after what I really want."

His eyes graze mine. I force a smile onto my face.

Liam finishes up by thanking everyone again and steps down to a hearty round of applause.

My thin veneer of control is close to cracking. I head to the bathroom. The ladies cubicles are all occupied, so I take a quick look at the unoccupied men's room and sneak in there.

Which is a good plan, until somebody arrives to use the urinals. Two somebodies, from the sound of the footsteps and pants unzipping.

"Good turn out tonight." A voice says. I relax. It's Trevor, one of my team. He'll hassle me if he catches me, but it is infinitely better than being caught by someone I hardly know.

“Yeah, such a shame that Liam’s leaving, isn’t it?” the voice belongs to Noah, another member of my team.

“He kind of has to leave, doesn’t he? The situation with Haley can’t go on much longer.”

My breath leaves me in a gigantic whoosh. Liam is leaving because of me?

The guys finish up. I wait a few minutes then creep out, my mind churning.

As I stagger over to the bar, a horrible feeling enters my stomach.

Liam resigned soon after our trip to Lubbock. It was the one time I let a slight crack show in the shield of my professionalism.

We’d just made a huge sale. Like mega sale, blow our (very optimistic) sales targets out of the water sale. Liam and I were staying in a godawful motel a million miles from anywhere. We ended up ordering pizza and sat up until 2am talking about everything; our childhood, our dreams for the future. It felt like I could never run out of things to say to him.

And there was a moment, when his eyes slid to mine and my gaze dropped to his lips, when I thought about kissing him.

That’s when Liam cleared his throat and announced he’d better head to his room.

Did he get a glimpse then of how I felt? Did he worry about how his boss having a crush on him was going to affect him professionally?

The rest of the evening passes in a blur. The conversation I overheard torments me, made worse by the fact that Liam doesn’t come near me in the next few hours. Granted, lots of people want his attention. But he doesn’t seek me out.

I finish my glass of wine but have enough self-control to stop drinking. Getting drunk and saying goodbye to Liam are like oil and water. They will not mix well together.

Finally, I can’t stand having false happy conversations and watching Liam out of the corner of my eye any longer. I head out to the balcony for some fresh air.

I’m only out there for a few minutes when the door opens. I seize up when I realise who has joined me.

“Hey,” he says, sliding into place next to me at the railing.

I clear my throat before replying. “Hey Liam.” I try to keep my voice upbeat and professional.

Silence swells between us, and I’m trying to think of something to say. Liam glances down at his watch then turns to me. “It’s 12.01. You’re officially not my boss anymore.”

He smiles as he says it, but the words are like a dagger to my heart.

I need to know. I step back. “Liam, are you leaving because you haven’t been happy with how I’ve managed you?”

“Of course not. What gave you that idea?”

“I overheard Trevor saying you were leaving because of the situation with me.”

Liam closes his eyes. “Bloody Trevor.”

“So, you are leaving because of me?”

He opens his eyes and stares at me. “Yes.”

The words fall softly from his lips, but they still clobber me. I suck in a deep breath. “Why?”

“What does it say on page 32 of the HR handbook Haley?”

I scrunch up my face. “You want to do HR handbook jokes now?”

“What does it say?”

I think back. “Um, page 32 is about improper relationships...” I trail off.

Liam's still staring at me intently.

"I'm sorry," I gasp. "I'm sorry...that night in Lubbock, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable..."

Liam grabs my hands to stop me retreating. "Haley, that's not what I'm saying. But I'm glad you remember that night in Lubbock. Because I definitely do. That night was when I decided to resign."

"Because we almost kissed..."

"No. Because I realised that as much as I liked my job, I liked you more."

Time stops. White noise floods my ears. I desperately try to clear it, because Liam continues to speak. "And I knew we could never date while you were my boss. So I decided to change that situation."

"You want to go on a date with me?" I clarify. Just in case my hearing has turned defective. Because I definitely don't want to get this wrong.

"Actually, my mind has moved past the dating stage, to us curled up together in front of a fire in our own house, a Labrador on the rug. Or maybe a Golden Retriever, I'm happy to hear your suggestions."

I open my mouth to say something. But nothing comes out. I've been struck mute.

"Say something. Please."

I don't think I can formulate words at the moment. So I do something even better.

I stretch up and kiss him.

And oh my god, kissing Liam in real life is even better than it's been in all my fantasies. I'm not just seeing stars, I'm seeing whole frigging galaxies.

A noise penetrates our bubble.

I reluctantly wrench my lips away from Liam's and glance at the door. Where a crowd of people are pushing onto the balcony. Trevor, Jennifer, Samantha. Noah. Our whole team. They're cheering and clapping.

"About bloody time," Trevor says.

I glance at Liam. His mega-smile is at full wattage.

"What does the HR handbook say about hooking up at a leaving party?" Samantha calls.

"There's nothing in there about kissing ex-employees. But I'm pretty sure there's something about spying on your boss. So please go away."

I don't wait to see if they obey. I just return to kissing Liam.

Best. Leaving. Party. Ever.





That Igniting Spark

Jackie Rutherford

“You grab the hotdogs and I’ll grab the beers,” are the first words Tristan says when he sees me.

“Sure. Double mustard and chilli?” I’ve already taken two steps towards the stand before I hear his answer.

“Nah, just cheddar today.”

I stop short and turn back to him. “Seriously?”

Tristan and I have been coming to Thunder basketball games together for the last two years and he has never deviated from his double mustard and chilli sauce combo. It sounds disgusting to me. But then, Tristan is famous on campus for eating ketchup covered worms on a dare, so the hotdog is pretty tame for him.

“I feel like mixing it up today.” Tristan gives me a wink.

“It’s like I hardly know you anymore.” I shake my head in mock despair as I retreat towards the food stand.

A few minutes later, armed with two cholesterol-soaked hot dogs, I arrive at our seats. Tristan is already there holding two plastic cups brimming with beer. I sit down, and we do a hotdog/beer exchange.

“Cheers.” He clinks cups with me.

“What are we toasting?” I ask.

“I got an A on my calculus midterm,” he says.

“That’s great.”

“Yeah, it’s all thanks to my math nerd best friend.” He reaches over to tussle my hair.

“Hey, watch the hair.” I dodge out of his way while not spilling my beer. It’s quite a feat.

We stand for the national anthem and cheer loudly as the announcer introduces the Thunder players.

Basketball is how Tristan and I first bonded. While most of the girls in my dorm spent the first week of college piling on makeup and squeezing into boob tubes in the hope of getting hot and

sweaty with a guy later, I was getting hot and sweaty with lots of guys playing pick-up basketball games in the gym.

That's where I discovered two things. First, Tristan has the game to match his swagger, and second, he is as mad about Oklahoma City Thunder as I am.

"Have you decided how I'm paying you back for the calculus tutoring?" Tristan asks me as we take our seats again.

I lean closer to him and whisper. "Two words. Celine Dion."

Tristan recoils back in horror and I can't help laughing at the look on his face. Music is the one area where we don't see eye to eye. There's a Celine Dion concert coming up and I know that he'd prefer to eat his own toenails than attend with me.

I'm expecting him to protest but he simply takes a bite of his hotdog.

"As long as I can take earmuffs," he says after he swallows.

Conversation between Tristan and I dwindles as the game starts. We cheer together when the Thunder have the ball, moan when the Lakers get a basket and yell when the ref completely misses our players getting fouled.

The Lakers jump out to an early lead and we're quickly down 8-2.

The Thunder coach calls time out. The Thunder dancers take the floor to begin their routine.

I turn to Tristan. "They just need that spark."

"What do you mean?" Tristan has finished his hot dog and is now chewing gum.

"You know, that one play that changes the game. That motivates everyone to step up."

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean."

Time out is over and play resumes.

Then I get my spark. Russell Westbrook blocks an incredible shot right at the rim, then runs the length of the floor, dodges two defenders and pulls up for a three-pointer. Nothing but net.

You can see how it inspires the whole Thunder team. Their shoulders lift and there is new energy in the way they make hustle plays, grabbing intercepts and converting them.

The Thunder quickly go on a 9-1 run. Now it's the Lakers turn to call time out.

The song *Crazy Little Thing called Love* starts playing over the loud speaker. This time out it's Kiss Cam time.

I'm grinning at the look of surprise on people's faces when the camera is pointed at them. Then suddenly, it's us on the big screen. Me in my Russell Westbrook jersey, Tristan with his messy brown hair.

Oh god.

Tristan flashes me an evil smile. "Dare ya."

My heart skitters. But I've never backed away from one of his challenges and I'm not about to start now. I lean across and kiss him.

I'm expecting that Tristan won't let me away with just a peck. I'm expecting him to ham it up, do an exaggerated pash for the camera. And, because we're talking about Tristan, he'll probably try some sneaky tongue action just to gross me out.

I'm not expecting his lips to be soft and warm against mine. I'm not expecting him to apply the perfect amount of pressure, for one of his hands to come up to the side of my face, to cradle me softly, gently.

When my mouth does open and his tongue slides into my mouth, it's not with the glee and triumph. He kisses me tenderly. Reverently.

And that's when it changes. Without realizing it I've shuffled closer in my seat to him and the kiss has deepened. I smell the citrusy tang of his aftershave. I taste the mint of the gum he was chewing before. I feel his soft stubble scraping against my skin. All of my senses are consumed by Tristan.

Yells and screams from the crowd shatter the bubble we're in. For a moment I think it's a reaction to us, that we're still on the screen and everyone has witnessed the incredible kiss. But then I realize the players are back on court.

I pull back, blinking. What the hell?

I've just made out with my best friend.

What. The. Hell?

I'm expecting Tristan to look as flabbergasted as I am. It's as if the rules of the universe have just been rewritten and gravity is no longer tying us down on earth but is instead sending us flying off on our own adventures.

He's breathing a little heavily but otherwise looks completely normal as he takes a swing of his beer, studying the action on court.

Did I just imagine the heat in that kiss? The tenderness?

Was it just a stock standard kiss to him?

In that case, I have definitely been kissing the wrong boys.

Russell Westbrook does one of the most sensational dunks of the season but I hardly see it, my mind is churning so much.

My phone beeps. It's my friend Krista.

Just saw you and Tristan on TV! WTF????

Of course, the game is televised. The NBA feed shows all of the time-out entertainment.

I quickly message back. *We were just mucking around.*

But my finger hesitates over the send button.

"Hey Tristan."

"Yeah?"

"Krista saw us on T.V. I'm just replying to her." I try to keep my gaze and voice steady. "It was just us mucking around, right?"

He holds my eyes. "Do you want it to be just mucking around?"

I don't know what to say. His expression is earnest, something unfamiliar on Tristan's face.

"I don't know..." I stammer. "I haven't really thought about it."

Correction - I haven't let myself think about it, because I haven't wanted to set myself up for disappointment. Unrequited crushes suck. Especially on people who just see you as friends.

"I have," his voice is so quiet that I hardly catch his words over the crowd's cheers.

The Thunder have scored again. For once, I really don't care.

"You've...thought about us? Together?" I clarify.

I can't believe I'm having his conversation. Not just with Tristan, but with any guy. Normally it's such a game of cat and mouse. Maybe he likes you, maybe he doesn't. The whole daisy petal conundrum. But with Tristan I can ask the questions. He's a straight shooter both on and off the basketball court.

"Yeah, I've thought about us together," he confirms.

It's like my lungs have been caught up in this conversation too and have forgotten what they're supposed to be doing. Because they're really sucking at their job of getting oxygen into my body. I'm light-headed, breathless.

"What have you thought?"

His gaze continues to hold mine. "That it would be amazing."

My brain decides to join my lungs in the strike. It refuses to actually process Tristan's words. All it does is replay them. It would be amazing. It would be amazing. It would be amazing.

"Are you going to say something?" he asks. There's humor in his voice, but underlying it is a layer of anxiety.

"It's a lot to take in," I mutter.

"You're right, I am a lot to take in."

It's such a Tristan response that I elbow him in the ribs without thinking. He grabs my hand to stop me, and suddenly we're holding hands.

As I stare at our hands intertwined, I let my imagination go there. Us as boyfriend and girlfriend. All the fun of our friendship, along with getting to touch him, getting to sleep with him.

Oh my freaking god. He's right. It would be amazing.

I swallow. "Um...I think for once you might be correct. We should definitely give it a whirl."

Tristan smiles. For the first time, I let myself admire how his smile lights up his face. How the dimples carve up the side of his face, how his brown eyes sparkle.

He leans closer to kiss me again. If he's trying to reassure me that the first kiss wasn't just some weird aberration, he's doing a good job. A freaking fantastic job, if the truth is known.

We spend the rest of the game alternating between making out and watching the Thunder. A perfect combination.

The Thunder win. And I can't stop smiling like I have won something even better than the playoff championship.

We stand to exit, navigating the rows of seats while still holding hands.

"Hang on a sec." When he gets to the balcony railing, Tristan drops my hand and jogs back a few steps.

I furrow my brow as he goes up to the cameraman and says something. The cameraman gives him a high five before Tristan retreats back to me.

"Sorry about that." He grabs my hand again. But I'm too confused now to focus on the warmth of his hand and how right it feels.

"Since when do you know the cameraman?"

"I'm friends with a lot of people." There's an evasive note in his voice.

I stop short. "Did you ask him to point the Kiss Cam at us?"

Tristan flicks me a grin. "Maybe."

"Seriously?"

Tristan shrugs. "It's like you said earlier. Sometimes you just need a spark to ignite everything."





A Lasting Impression

Susie Frame

Andy is studying stock sheets in the warehouse of his shoe business when his cell phone chirrups.

Don't forget, Andrew. Florentino's. 8.30 tonight. You're gonna love B.

A blind date? With some random friend of a friend of Mark's? thinks Andy. *Are you nuts?*

"Yes, you are," he mutters, putting the cell phone back in his pocket. "Who wants to date a middle-aged, grey-at-the-temples, not-as-fit-as-he-used-to-be bloke?"

No matter how hard he'd tried to convince his brother he was adapting to his mid-life widowed state, Mark wouldn't have a bar of it. 'We can't have prime goods going to waste on the shelf,' he'd said. 'Come on. Just one date, then I'll stop pestering you.'

"Dad? You back there?"

"Aisle six, Jim. Up to my eyeballs in tramping boots."

"Hey, you couldn't do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"I've closed up but there's one last customer in ladies' fashion. Can you serve her? Ellie and I have that house auction at six-thirty."

"Well," Andy says, glancing quickly at his watch. "I have to..." He stops mid-sentence. Jim doesn't need to know his father is going on a date. "Yeah. Will do."

"Thanks, Dad. You're a life saver."

Jim leaves but his words remain, echoing round in the leather-impregnated air.

Life saver? That's the last thing I am.

Being unable to bring his wife back after her cardiac arrest has haunted Andy for the last three years. He blames himself for Jen's death; that her future – their future – was snatched away.

He thinks about their retirement dreams of operas at La Scala and sailing on the Med.

Gone. All gone. Our golden years snuffed out in minutes.

But as Andy walks out of the warehouse and into the store, he takes solace in the fact that while he may not have his life partner, Jim does, and together he and Ellie have made him a grandad-in-waiting with twin girls.

Jen will live on in our granddaughters.

Andy quickly wipes away the unexpected tears with the back of his hand. He sees the customer at the far end of the store padding round the shop floor in stocking feet. The designer bag and the navy pumps she's holding complement her haute couture suit.

Sophisticated with an eye for detail suggests careful retail decision making. Andy sighs. *I could be here for some time.*

"Can I help you with something or are you just happy browsing?"

The woman turns. Andy takes in the soft blonde curls framing her small heart-shaped face and the striking pink-coloured lips that part in a full smile – a smile that reaches all the way to her cerulean blue eyes. He's momentarily stunned. He wouldn't describe her as a classic beauty, she wears her unconventional beauty well.

"Oh, I hope you can," she says. "I need a pair of shoes to go with this." A black tailored cocktail dress materialises out of a Hospice Op Shop bag.

There's a turn up. His first thought was this mature, immaculately turned out customer would shop at Oooh, La La, or Sew In Style.

Obviously not.

"Well, let's see." Now aware that his customer's modus operandi is budget chic, he heads to the more reasonably priced fashion wall. "These would go well," he says, handing over a pair of plain black courts.

"Oh, no! They're not outrageous enough..." she says, looking at the price tag. "...and they're a bit on the cheap side. They may not... 'last'."

Andy has lost count of the times he's heard that old pun over the course of his shoe retailing years.

"See what I did there? 'They may not last'!" The woman throws her blonde head back and laughs. "Seriously, Trixie. You should be on the stage!"

Andy joins in with her laughter. The bubbles of mirth lighten his chest; a welcome change from the dragging heaviness that is often its default setting.

Andy's mystified and intrigued. He certainly didn't have this enigmatic Trixie pegged as a comedienne...or indeed an op-shopper with a penchant for expensive shoes.

"No. Plain black courts are definitely off the menu, today." Trixie gives the shoes back to Andy, the touch of her slim, well-manicured hands leaving a faint trace of warmth on his. "Your brief," she says, "is outrageous...and extravagant. I deserve it. I've had to scrimp and save every dollar since my husband up and—" She quickly puts her hand over her mouth and looks up at Andy. Her widened, dark lashed eyes, sparkle like gemstones. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she says, gently touching Andy on the arm. "TMI as my daughter would say."

So? Is this 'Too Much Information' thing a way of Trixie telling me she's on her own; that she's available, perhaps? Andy's been out of the loop for so long he can't read the signals.

"Anyway," she says, walking over to the high fashion stand, "I became a co-director today and I've decided a new pair of shoes could be my gift to self. Plus..." she adds, picking up a pair of flamingo pink patent stilettos, "I'm meeting some friends for a quick drink tonight to celebrate. Gotta look the part."

Out tonight? I almost forgot. Andy surreptitiously pulls his shirt cuff back and looks at the time.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I holding you up?”

“Er, no...um, not at all. I...”

“You’re being too generous. Of course, I am. I’ll quickly try these on and let you get away.”

Trixie bends forward and slides her foot into the right shoe. She stands upright on the stiletto, albeit unsteadily, and checks her reflection in the full-length mirror. “Not bad,” she says, then hurriedly repeats the process with the left.

Andy’s all too familiar with this scenario. Balancing on one sky scraper heel never ends well. Trixie lurches sideways but Andy’s quick reactions prevent her from hitting the floor. He holds her bent elbow with one hand and wraps his other arm around her small waist. The feel of her soft hair brushing his cheek and the intoxicating top notes of her perfume in his nostrils heightens Andy’s senses. Excitement gallops through his veins at a speedy clip until it crashes unceremoniously against the wall of guilt in his gut.

Jen. I’m sorry.

Trixie’s face reddens. “Oh, that was careless of me.”

“No, you’re fine,” says Andy. “Those killer heels can be lethal. Are you okay?”

Trixie nods. “Yes. Just a little embarrassed.”

“Here,” says Andy. “Hold onto my arm while you try the other one.”

“Thank you. Turning up tonight with a black eye wouldn’t be a good look, would it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It *would* match your dress!”

“Ha! You’re right there...er...?” Trixie raises an eyebrow. “Please don’t think me forward but...can I ask you your name? I mean, it’s only fair. You know mine and, well, at the risk of sounding forward, we’ve already been a bit up close and personal.”

Andy extends his right hand. “Andy. Nice to meet you.”

“And...” A smile plays on Trixie’s lips. “...I’m head over heels to have met you.”

Did that mean what I think it means? “And before you ask,” he says, aware that the lightness in his chest has reappeared and is now careening round his body, “I see what you did there, Trixie. You’re very punny.”

“Yip! Guilty as charged. The life and ‘sole’ of the party. That’s me!”

Andy can’t remember having this much fun serving in the shop. There is no denying he’s enjoying Trixie’s company.

No-one will ever replace Jen, but could there be other women out there like Trixie? Someone to have some fun with? Maybe this blind date woman could be a bit like her?

Although Andy doubts that. Trixie is a one-off.

“What do you think?” Trixie walks to the mirror in the ‘flamingo pinks’, holding the cocktail dress in front of her.

Andy wants to say the shoes accent her slender ankles and give her calf muscles definition; that they match the lipstick on her perfect cupid bow lips.

He doesn’t. Instead he opts for; “‘Pur-shoe’ your search no longer. You’ll make a lasting impression in those.”

“Stop it now, Andy! You’re killing me!” Trixie takes off the stilettos. “Who knew buying shoes could be so hilarious?” she says. “How much?”

Free if you agree to have dinner with me?

“Two twenty.”

“Sold!”

Five minutes later, Andy gives Trixie a smile and a wave as she drives out of the car park. He replaces the ‘Closed’ sign on the door hoping Trixie loves her shoes so much she’ll do what most women do – come back and buy them in another colour.

Ribbons of heat flutter though Andy’s body at the thought of seeing Trixie again.

Andy pulls into Florentino’s car park just before eight thirty. He checks his image in the rear vision mirror and sees more than just his reflection. Someone parked behind him appears to be have collapsed beside their car.

He rushes over to see if he can help. Thoughts of Jen charge round his brain. *Please don’t let this be a matter of life and death.* But his hot fears are doused when he sees what’s happened.

“Are you okay?” says Andy.

“A bit sore but I think I’ll live.” The woman stops rubbing her ankle and looks up. “Andy? What are you...?”

Andy bends down and removes the firmly wedged flamingo pink stiletto from between two paving stones.

“Well,” he says, getting lost in her blue eyes, “it appears I’m here to... ‘heel’ you?” He slips the offending shoe onto Trixie’s foot.

Bubbly champagne laughter escapes from Trixie’s throat. “And how did you know I’d be here needing your ‘heeling’ powers?” she says, allowing Andy to help her to her feet.

“I’m er...”

“Duh, Trixie. Of course, you’re here for dinner. And once again, I am holding you up. Please tell your wife I’m sorry.”

“Actually, the way I see it, I think *I’m* the one holding *you* up. And...my late wife would be pleased I’ve remembered how to be chivalrous.”

“Oh, Andy, I’m so sorry. That can’t be easy for you.”

“It hasn’t been. But, I’m getting there. Slowly. Now, why don’t I help you in so you can start celebrating that promotion?”

“What? Oh, the quick drink? That was at seven.” Trixie looks uncomfortable. “I’m mortified to admit this but I’m here on a blind date.”

“Oh?”

“Funny. His name’s Andrew, too.”

“Really? Well, I have a confession. *I’m* here on a blind date. Her name’s—”

“Beatrice?”

“You know her?”

Trixie nods. “‘Eyelet’ you into a secret. Trixie’s my nick name.”

Andy feels a tingling in his chest. “So...?”

“Looks like you’re having dinner with me.”

“On one condition,” says Andy slipping his arm around Trixie’s waist. “You let me ‘foot’ the bill.”





Seeing Him Again For The First Time

Kathy Servian

Isabel frowned at the rain-soaked beach. She tucked her legs underneath her and shivered as the misty rain worked its way inside her thin jacket, soaking her jumper and trickling down the back of her neck.

“I can’t believe he’s done this to me again.” She cast a sideways glance at Dean, his lank hair plastered to his pale forehead.

An incongruously cheerful chime emanated from his jacket pocket. He pulled out his phone and peered at the screen. “He says that there’s another train at nine-fifteen that gets in here at ten-thirty.”

She looked at her watch before gesturing towards the oily sea lapping listlessly at the muddy shore. “That’s two hours that we have to wait for him in this shit hole. I only get one day off a week and I’m spending it here with...” She bit her lip.

“Sorry,” Dean muttered, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

She sighed, “It’s not your fault. He’s the one who insisted that we catch the early train in the first place. If I added up all the time I’ve spent waiting for Trent to turn up it would...” She sighed again. “Sorry, I know he’s your mate.”

He shrugged. “S’okay.”

Bad tempered gulls screamed over a McDonald’s burger box abandoned on the beach. They jostled each other before leaping into the air and pumping their broad wings to wheel overhead their cries filling the soggy air.

Isabel lowered her legs. “Let’s see if we can find a cafe open. I could do with a coffee.”

Dean nodded unfolding his lanky frame. They walked in silence along the seafront. He with his head down, hands shoved firmly into the pockets of his army surplus jacket, she staring ahead; it was going to be a very long wait.

They’d know each other for as long as she’d been with Trent, which was nearly two years. Even though Dean was always around, Isabel had never had an actual one-on-one conversation with him. She knew practically nothing about him except that he’d been Trent’s best mate since they were kids. To her, they had always seemed an incongruous pair—light and shade.

“You into motorbikes too?” she asked as they trailed along the deserted promenade past shuttered ice cream shops and stacks of rusty tables padlocked to poles outside darkened cafés.

He shook his head. “That’s more Trent’s thing than mine.”

Silence descended again as they turned into the main street. A bus roared past spraying muddy water from the overloaded gutter. Isabel leapt sideways to avoid the deluge. Her foot skidded on a slimy patch on the pavement and she swung her arms in a futile attempt to stay upright. Then, just as she was sure she was going to fall, a strong arm caught her around her waist. Bent backwards, with Dean leaning over her in a pose reminiscent of a pair of ballroom dancers executing a dip, she stared up into his face. She’d never really looked at him before. He was like a shadow, always there, but it was Trent who held the limelight. Her boyfriend was charismatic, gorgeous, and the life-and-soul of every party. Isabel knew that she was lucky to have been chosen by him. He could have the pick of any girl he wanted, a fact of which he regularly reminded her.

Dean’s face was unremarkable; a little too pale, a little too thin, but it was his eyes that caused the breath to catch unexpectedly in her throat. They were green, not that muddy, hazel sort of green that lots of people had, but clear emerald speckled with jade. But even more remarkable than the colour was the intensity of his gaze as if he could see right inside her.

A rush of warmth travelled up Isabel’s neck and onto her face. “Err, thanks,” she muttered, pushing herself away from him.

He released her. “No problem.”

Isabel turned away, trying to ignore a lurking sense of unease. They walked on, her eyes darting everywhere, except in his direction.

A rust-streaked caravan slumped at the far end of the street caught her attention. “That place looks open.”

A lopsided canopy extended over the pavement from one side of the vehicle and steam drifted lazily from a wonky metal chimney on the roof. As they approached the mingled scents of coffee, rancid cooking oil and bacon filled the air.

A middle-aged man in a grubby cotton apron eyed them with suspicion. “The fryer’s not up to temperature yet, so if you want chips you’ll have to wait,” he said without greeting or preamble.

“I’ll have a bacon sandwich and a coffee.” Isabel’s fingers roamed inside her jacket pockets for coins.

“Same.” Dean placed a ten-pound note onto the grimy counter. “I’ll get it,” he added without looking at her.

“No, I can—”

“It’s the least I can do seeing as you’re stuck here with me.”

She frowned. “Thanks.”

Isabel watched the corpulent, none-too-clean cook preparing their food and then wished she hadn’t. She turned away after losing count of the number of times he scratched his backside and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. When he finally handed over their sandwiches wrapped in damp paper napkins her appetite was wavering.

“Back to the beach?” Dean asked, tipping his face towards the sky where a weak sliver of sunlight now peaked through the low-hanging clouds.

“Sure,” she said before taking a sip of her bitter, luke-warm coffee.

The promenade was slightly less desolate in the watery light. A young couple passed with a stroller that presumably held a baby, but it was hard to tell with all the blankets swaddling the child. And an elderly woman hobbled towards them with a tiny dog skittishly high-stepping on the end of a thin leash.

They descended the steps onto the beach and squelched over the sucking, brown sludge.

“Your drawings are really good,” Dean said unexpectedly, his eyes fixed on his boots.

“My drawings?” Isabel asked, caught off-guard. “You’ve seen them?”

He nodded. “Trent’s got a couple on his bedroom wall.”

“Oh, yes.” She’d pinned up the drawings in a vain attempt to make her boyfriend’s featureless room feel a little bit homely. He’d been cutting in his criticism of her ‘girly flower pictures’ constantly threatening to take them down and replace them with some ‘real art’ by which he meant posters of large-breasted, semi-naked women sprawled over gleaming motorbikes.

“I don’t think he likes them very much.”

Dean shrugged. “The way you’ve captured the shape of the petals in just a few strokes is...” He paused. “You could be an artist if you wanted.”

Again, Isabel felt her cheeks warm. “I’d love to go to art college, but Trent thinks I should concentrate on my job in the call centre, try to get promoted to supervisor so we can both move out of our parents’ places and get a flat together.”

“Do you like working there?”

“I hate it.”

“Thought so, you get this look on your face as if someone’s been trampling on your soul when you’ve been at work.”

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. “Do I?”

“Yeah.”

Isabel took a tentative bite of the greasy sandwich. The stringy bacon squeaked against her teeth. “What about you?” she asked after forcing down a rubbery mouthful. “What would you rather be doing?”

He chuckled. “You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

He turned to face the water. “I want to be an architect.”

She stopped and stared at him. “Really?”

Two pink spots appeared high on his cheekbones. “I know it’s a stupid idea. No one in my family has ever gone to university.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that, I just didn’t realise that you were interested in that sort of thing.”

“My Dad says that I should stop dreaming and be grateful for my job at the shoe factory.”

Isabel’s heart rose into her throat. In their town being different usually got you teased at best and beaten up at worst. Guys liked motorbikes and drinking. Girls liked make-up and clothes—that was how it was. Dean didn’t fit. She had always suspected that he had only escaped persecution because of his friendship with Trent.

“Do you make sketches of buildings?” she asked.

He nodded. “I have folders full of them at home.” He glanced at her. “I brought my pad and pencils today hoping I’d get a chance to draw some of the Georgian houses on the seafront. They have great period features.”

She grinned, grasping his arm. “Let’s go and do it now.” She stopped herself before adding ‘before Trent arrives.’

They clambered up a set of decaying concrete stairs, dumped the remains of their breakfast in a rubbish bin and took up residence on a rickety bench opposite a row of houses that would once have been grand but now held an air of dereliction about them. Dean pulled a sketch pad and pencil case from his canvas messenger bag.

“Do you want to draw too?” he asked opening the case and extracting two pencils. “I have plenty of paper.”

She shook her head. “I’ll watch you.” She paused. “If you don’t mind.”

His eyes rested on hers for a moment. “I don’t mind.”

Isabel pressed unconsciously closer to him as his pencil slipped over the page creating confident marks. She’d taught herself from books and had never seen anyone else drawing before. His talent was undeniable. The detailed style, different from her own sparse renderings, captured the building in perfect scale and perspective. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered as he shaded the last column. She touched the paper with her fingertip. “The way you’ve done the windows is...” She paused, suddenly self-conscious.

He turned to her, their faces inches apart. The tang of the sea air hung about him as his eyes met hers with an unwavering gaze. He'd always made her a little uncomfortable in the past with his quiet intensity, but today she'd *seen* him for who he really was for the first time.

He was so close he could have kissed her if he'd wanted to. She held her breath. The roll and hiss of the waves and the gentle thrum of the sleepy seaside town waking up around them faded away. All Isabel was aware of was him, and her, and the current running between them.

He turned away, breaking the spell. "Better get this finished before Trent gets here."

She slid to the far end of the bench, the sandwich and coffee churning in her stomach.

"He's my best mate," Dean said finally, his gaze fixed on the page in front of him.

She nodded. "I know."

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND





A Man of His Word

Kellie Hailes

“So, you’ve lost your voice?”

Jeremy knew what was coming next. He’d heard that gleeful tone in his sister, Sara’s, voice often enough.

“The boss must be happy about that.”

And there it was. The zinger. If his voice had been in working order he’d have told her to bugger off. Luckily for him the efficient tap-tap-tap of sensible heels on polished concrete floors told him his sister was about to scarper.

“Speak of the devil. Literally.” Sara mock-shuddered as she backed towards his office door. “Don’t say anything I wouldn’t.” She winked and opened the door as Victoria – not Vicky, not Tori, always the full name, least you fancied being put in your place with one of her fearsome glowers – strode through the door, tablet in hand, pert nose buried in it, tortoiseshell glasses teetering precariously on the end of said nose.

Sara performed an exaggerated bow behind Victoria’s back before scampering down the hall to her desk. Jeremy pushed down a laugh, as much because laughing would further agonise his burning throat as it would cause Victoria to question his amusement, and he didn’t want to get his sister in trouble – she’d been in enough of that for a lifetime. Giving her a job fulfilling online orders for the jewellery company he shared with Victoria was a last-ditch attempt at keeping her on the straight and narrow. If Victoria caught wind of even a hint of insubordination, Sara would be out on her ear.

“We need to talk about a date.” Victoria didn’t look up from her ever-present tablet, her finger darting across its surface. “How does Saturday sound? 6.30pm?”

Jeremy brought up the calendar on his laptop’s screen. The night was free, but it was unusual for them to take a business meeting on a Saturday, let alone at night. Victoria had been adamant about keeping weekends clear for family and friends. Well, in his case family and friends. In hers?

He wasn't sure. He knew she had little to do with her father, and she rarely mentioned friends. Sometimes he wondered if he were her only one.

Still, if she was willing to break that rule it must be for a good reason.

He nodded his assent.

"Jeremy? Did you hear me?"

He shook his head at her obliviousness. With her gaze focussed on the tablet, Victoria had no idea a virus had stolen his voice. He rapped his knuckles on the desk to catch her attention.

Victoria's head snapped up, blue eyes darkening with confusion, and a not just a touch of irritation.

He tapped his throat, then mimed talking with his hand while shaking his head.

"You've lost your voice? Talk about timing. That's going to make things difficult."

Jeremy picked up a pen and pulled a notepad towards him.

"Why the weekend?"

He held the notepad up for her to read.

"Well it seemed like a good time, at the time." Victoria sucked in her lower lip. A rare show of uncertainty that lasted a millisecond before she released it. "But if you'd rather another time..."

Jeremy shook his head. If it had to be the weekend it must be important. Victoria had been talking with a major chain of jewellery stores about stocking their range of fine gold and precious stone jewellery, and if this was their chance to expand he was happy to give up one Saturday night. Hell, he would've been happy to give up any Saturday night to spend time with Victoria, but their deal to join forces to create 'Victorious' had twisted their twenty-year friendship from fun, and, at times, flirtatious to being all about the business.

Jeremy dashed off another note.

What restaurant were you thinking?

A groove appeared in the smooth area between her brows. "I have a contact who has a corporate box at the rugby. I understand there's a big game this weekend, so I thought instead of a restaurant we could go to that, then maybe head into town afterwards."

Rugby? Then a night out? Victoria was pulling out all the stops. She hated sports with a passion. Didn't see the point of them. Felt the same about hitting the bars too. After her mother passed she'd given up anything that gave her pleasure. Including her love of dancing. If it interfered with business she wanted nothing to do with it, but if this was what they needed to do to ensure Victorious' success, he knew she'd endure it.

"So? What do you have to say? Or... in your current case, write." Victoria pulled out the chair opposite. She sank into it and clasped her hands, the knuckles turning white as they strained against the skin. "Or are you too sick? I know it's short notice. I'm sorry. It's very spur of the moment."

Jeremy nodded, trying not to show his surprise at this jumpy, almost skittish, version of Victoria. Anyone would think she was asking him out on a date, not on an excursion designed to secure business.

"Is that a yes? Or a no?" She lifted her chin, her petite nostrils flaring with impatience. "Because if it's a no, just spit it out. I'll be fine. I'll survive. I'm a big girl. Scratch that. I'm a woman. One who knows how to survive."

What was she on about? Of course, she was a woman. And of course, she'd survive. Victoria had survived more than him not agreeing to attend a business meeting. Being raised by a father

who hadn't known what to do with a teenage daughter had meant Victoria had become self-sufficient - to the point where she refused to rely on anyone for anything. Even their business relationship had strict guidelines. She dealt in business building and finances; he dealt in design and creation. She didn't interfere with his process, and he kept out of hers.

And this wouldn't be the first time she'd secured a stockist and only brought him in at the last minute.

But that didn't explain why her cheeks were flaming redder with every passing second. Or why she kept shifting in her seat like it were made of granite and not cushioned leather.

The last time he'd seen her this uncomfortable was when they'd spilled secrets after one too many pints at the student bar. Victoria confessing the pain of losing her mother to cancer, then her father to his own grief. He the frustration of having his burgeoning career as a professional rugby player dashed after breaking his ankle. A career he'd hoped would bring enough money that he could give his mother and father the life they deserved after all their years of hard work, of sacrificing their time and money to help him achieve his dream. But had he not been benched for life, he'd never have discovered his knack for drawing. For creating.

"Right." She stood abruptly, the squeal of metal legs on concrete floor filled the air. "So that's that. Good." She brushed a non-existent wrinkle from the oyster-shell silk shirt that was tucked into a black pencil skirt, emphasising the curve of her waist and the flare of her hips.

Jeremy waited for her usual brisk nod, indicating the meeting was over, but none came. Instead a hunched-shouldered Victoria spun on her heel and made her way out at a quick clip.

He sank back into his chair, stroking his aching throat while he stared at the space in his online diary where a business meeting was meant to have taken place.

A business meeting... or?

Surely not. Had Victoria just asked him...? No...

Yet it made sense.

A rugby game.

Drinks.

On a Saturday that was reserved for friends or family.

Perhaps even dates.

He closed his eyes. *Idiot*. What he'd longed for – and long given up on – had just been offered to him. And, knowing Victoria, that offer was no longer on the table.

"Vic—" The word rasped from his lips. Agony ripped through his voice box.

He couldn't speak, but that didn't mean he couldn't act.

Pushing himself up, he strode from his office, down the hall – ignoring the inquiring look from Sara – and pushed open Victoria's door. No polite knock. No waiting for admittance. He'd waited enough.

Her back was to him, her gaze focussed on the sparkling seascape, with its circling gulls, and pleasure boats dotting the water. The dull roar of the traffic crawling down the main street below met his ears, punctuated by the bip-bip-bip of the traffic lights' walk signal, pushing people towards their destination. Their future.

He coughed into his hand, ignoring the pain. She was worth it. *They* were worth it. As a business team they were a force. As more? They'd be unstoppable.

Victoria turned, blinking so quickly he half-wondered if he'd imagined the tears in her eyes. "Yes?" The word cool, calm. Her demeanour unruffled, but the quick swipe of her index finger under her lashes told another story.

He took a step towards her and pointed. "You." He mouthed, then thumbed his chest. "Me." Holding an imaginary rugby ball he swung his arms to the left and mimed letting the ball go. "Let's go."

He waited, hoping he'd got the message across. That she hadn't misunderstood him.

Victoria's eyes narrowed as the corners of her lips lifted a little.

He beckoned for her to come forward, relief blooming in his heart when she met him in the middle of the office.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he took her hand and attempted to dance her round in a tight circle. Her feet stood their ground. Her refusal to dance strong. But he'd seen the way her body moved of its own accord when a favourite song came on the radio. Part of Victoria wanted to dance, and he wanted to be the one to relight that fire. That passion.

Tightening his hold, he lifted her, grinning as her eyes widened in shock, then lit up, as he began to spin her round. Her head tipped back as her lush lips parted into a carefree smile. One she released rarely. One he liked to believe was reserved for him.

He set her down, held her while she regained her balance, then let her go, taking a step back. Giving her space. Knowing he could no more force Victoria into doing anything she didn't want, than she could him.

He repeated his rugby move, danced a solo jig, then picked up the tablet from her desk and opened the note-taking app.

Do we have a date?

He set the tablet down, then took her hands in his. A perfect fit.

Victoria's head angled to the side, her eyes alight, her smile bright. "I thought you'd never ask."





The Message Board

Kris Pearson

Sarah read the final words on her laptop screen and pressed her lips together. It wasn't right. It wasn't good enough. Her brain was full of stories and they never came out quite the way she intended. And should she have more commas? She needed an editor, or at the very least a serious opinion from someone with a good education. She heaved a deep sigh and went to make coffee.

*

Alison stared out of the window. The lawn was overdue. That damn pear tree would snag her hair and T-shirt again unless she cut it back, and although she had a ladder she never felt safe on it. The vegie garden had lettuces gone to seed and courgette plants silver with blight and a row of radishes so far past their best they barely tasted hot. With no money to pay a gardener, maybe she should try a notice on the community message board?

She needed a strong person willing to trade their labour for home cooked meals. That was the best she could offer. Not meals to eat at her table, but in plastic containers so they could take them away to eat at home. She had several of those big yoghurt pots ready for recycling.

She put the kettle on to boil, closed her weary eyes for a few seconds, then walked down the hallway to her son's room and tapped on the door. "You want a cuppa, love?"

*

Scott was in bed. Planned to stay there permanently. What was the point of getting up? The clamouring voices in his head had faded away for a blissful while, and he could hear kids playing somewhere outside and the constant grind of roadworks on the corner. People doing everyday things, but nothing he was interested in. He wanted to be gone – from this house, from this defective body, from this world. "Leave it on the hall table," he yelled.

*

Ali bowed her head. She'd be lucky if she saw him all day. Inhaling deeply, she glared at the messy garden through the window. What did she have to lose by trying the message board? Trailing back to the kitchen she poured hot water onto the teabags, carried one mug to the table in the hallway, found a notepad and ballpoint, and took them with the other mug to the outdoor table in the sun.

An hour later she pinned her garden notice up next to one asking if anyone with a good education was interested in reading and editing stories. A tiny flare of pride made her smile. Scott had a good education. He read just about non-stop, even though he'd sunk into that strange depressed state which none of the doctors seemed able to drag him out of. He rarely left his room now, but something like this just might give him an outside interest without the need to face anyone. She tore a phone number strip off the base of the message and slipped it into her purse.

*

Joseph placed two cans of baked beans in the supermarket charity box and wiled away a few more minutes reading the notices on the nearby board. He hated being a retired widower. The compact townhouse he and Gwen had bought so they could go travelling together meant he didn't have nearly enough to do. Travelling alone was no fun, and he didn't feel old enough for those senior coach trips and cruises.

'Gardener Wanted.' Not him – he'd been a credit manager. 'Need a person to help with a garden that's getting away from me. Happy to pay with home-cooked dinners.' He scratched his chin and read it again. Something to do, maybe a bit of company, and a change from the boxed frozen meals he'd fallen into the habit of buying. And mostly eating alone.

*

Ali pushed Scott's bedroom door open without knocking and thrust her phone at him. "A call for you." She yanked the door closed behind her, leaving him astounded.

"Hello...?" he croaked.

"Oh hi, I'm Sarah. Your mum said you edit stories."

"What?"

"Stories and books. She said you're a really keen reader, had a degree in English, and lots of spare time."

He stared at his Kindle. George R.R. Martin. *So good.* "What kind of stories and books?" *What the hell is Mum playing at?*

"Well, I've just finished writing one about unicorns in the Himalayas. Umm – that might sound a bit strange, but it's good. I mean the underlying *story* is good, but for sure it needs polishing."

"Unicorns in the Himalayas?" he repeated, lost.

"Snow unicorns."

Scott swallowed, picturing hard hooves striking rock, white manes tossing in the brilliant mountain sunlight, towering icy peaks impossible for humans to climb but maybe scalable by such mythical creatures. "How long is it?"

"Nine thousand words so far. I was aiming for ten."

"Long short story then."

"Or short novella. I could make it longer, if you think it needs to be."

"I wouldn't have a clue. Sorry."

"Oh." She sounded like a mistreated puppy or a kitten starved of food.

Something made him say, "I could have a quick look for you, I guess."

“Great! Where do you live?”

No way, no way. He cleared his throat. “I meant you could email it.”

There was silence for a short while. “But what if you like it, and make it better, and then steal my file and publish it yourself?”

Scott sat up straighter against the pillows, switched his Kindle off, and glared at the phone. “I wouldn’t do that. If that’s what you think, forget the whole idea.” He could still see those unicorns. And now snow leopards, too. “Stick a big watermark over it, then you’ll know I can’t. Put your name across one corner in bright pink.”

“Pink?”

“Pink for a girl.” He’d tried for scathing but was annoyed to hear it sounded more like teasing. There was guitar music in the background, and he heard heels tip-tapping across a hard floor.

The footsteps stopped. “I told your mum I didn’t know how much it would cost.”

Scott made a mental note to Google ‘editing services’. Knew he’d never charge her anything. The snow leopards prowled closer, and the roadworks noise had been replaced by keening mountain winds. “Send it through and I’ll see if it’s worth reading.”

“Not if you’re going to be like that about it!”

Damn, damn, damn – he’d been drawn into it now. Into the idea of the story, and maybe having a play with it. He was imagining the person behind that lilting voice, too. High heels, long legs. He added a blonde ponytail and blue eyes. “Okay, sorry. Having a bad day, and this came as a bit of a surprise. I’ll give you my email address anyway, just in case you change your mind.”

*

Ali looked up as the gate latch clicked behind a tall, bearded man. Joseph from the bible! Funny how beards had become fashionable again. He was older than her by eight or ten years, and wore corduroy trousers and a check shirt on his strong, straight body. He looked more than a match for her garden as he gazed around.

Embarrassed by the state of the place, she blurted, “It’s a real mess.”

He came closer and peered at her gone-to-seed parsley. “Nothing a few hours’ work won’t put right. Like I said on the phone, I have time on my hands these days.”

“And you don’t mind being paid in food?”

Joseph had now wandered as far as the veggie patch. “As long as you’re not trying to offload all these courgettes.” He bent and pulled a monster from the sad-looking vine.

Ali felt a giggle trying to escape. “I promise no courgettes. I make a good beef casserole, nice lasagne, vegetarian curry with chickpeas, bacon and egg pie... I have a son to feed, too.”

“No husband?” Joseph’s eyes twinkled under salt and pepper brows.

“If I had a husband, would the garden look this bad?”

“I’d hope not. How old is the boy?”

Ali shook her head. “Hardly a boy. He’s thirty-two.”

One of those bushy eyebrows rose. “But not helping you with your garden?”

“He’s... not very well. Needs a lot of time in bed.” Surely she wasn’t going to admit to the recent horrible years she’d spent trying to bolster Scott up? And all her attempts to drag him back into the real world?

“Do you want me to start on the lawn?” Joseph asked, personal questions apparently done with.

Relief flowed over her like a warm breeze. She’d already hauled the mower out, intending to do it herself. “If you could help by pruning the edge of that pear tree first, the lawn would be easier. I’ve

got a ladder and some loppers.”

“Dangerous being up a ladder on your own,” he said. “In the shed, is it?”

Ali nodded, grateful, relieved, watching as he strode across to the open doorway, a man on a mission.

*

Scott flinched as an email dinged through. Would it be? Could it be? Did she trust him after all? Yes! She was sarah.k.marshall. He wondered what the K stood for. Decided on Katherine. Sarah Katherine sounded like a girl who might write about unicorns in the Himalayas.

He licked his lips as he opened the attachment. First sentence not the best. Nice description of the unicorn leading the herd. Hyphen where she should have put a dash.

Sudden danger. Geez – that’s where she should have started! He was into it now, seeing the towering mountains, the unimaginable steepness. Feeling the freezing air rushing up his nose. Almost able to touch those wild white manes and tails, and the crystalline horns like spears of razor-sharp ice. He itched to correct her writing so it would be as vivid as the Martin he’d been lost in.

He made a copy and got to work, enjoying himself more than he had in years. Finally emailed it back to her with a few notes, wishing he could talk her through it. Added his cell number, in case – and dared to say he hoped she’d send him more stories.

Suddenly energised, he grabbed his towelling robe from behind the door, pushed his bony arms down the sleeves, and belted it so Ali wouldn’t tell him yet again he was too thin and needed to eat more. Then he took his empty mug back to the kitchen – to find her sitting opposite a bearded stranger. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and the table was set for two.

Something smelled delicious. His head was quiet. Feeling almost human, he fetched a third knife and fork.

His mother beamed. “Joseph, meet my son, Scott.”





How Long Will You Still Stay Single?

Yvonne Walus

“How long will you still stay single?” Tessa asks.

We’re buying salads for lunch, and the pre-Christmas queue is snaking out the door.

“With luck, I’ll be man-free till the day I die.” Not a joke. After two decades of marriage, being single again is a treat. “Why? You haven’t arranged another blind date for me, I hope?”

The one and – fortunately – only blind date Tessa’s sent me on was a fail. Worse yet, it was an unspectacular fail: the guy wasn’t so offensive as to make it a good bad-date story, nor did I do anything entertainingly embarrassing. We met, had a few drinks, the conversation didn’t flow, we didn’t spark.

“Still working on it.” Tessa moves a millimetre closer to the salads, and I follow. “The world’s a big place, full of unattached guys. Surely one of them will prove good enough?”

I’ve told her a million times that many guys are good enough, yet she simply can’t get it into her happily-in-love heart that anybody would choose to be single.

Adam, a voice whispers in my brain. *How about being not-single with Adam?*

“How’s Karl?” I change the subject. I don’t want to be talking blind dates. Don’t want to be thinking romance. And that stupid voice in my head must shut up about Adam.

For the next twenty minutes I hear about the latest love poem Karl’s written for Tessa, and the get-away weekend in Queenstown, the one that’s just happened, and how sad it’ll be to spend Christmas Day apart, each with their own set of parents and siblings. For one insane moment I envy Tessa her age. How old is she – twenty-three, twenty-four? I’m double that. Not that I feel old, not at all: I can still put my legs behind my head in yoga classes, run a half-marathon, get wasted on a Friday night. Well, come to think of it, I can’t remember the last time I got wasted on Friday night, but that’s because on Saturdays I get up early to run. Anyway, the reason I envy Tessa is that her issues sound so – young – from where I am in life. When it’s my turn to complain, my problems tumble out all children-oriented and lacklustre, in a word: middle-aged.

At long last, I get to pay for my salad, and turn to leave.

“Hey there, Grace,” the guy at the head of the queue says.

The sound of his voice rushes to my head. My blood’s on fire. *Adam. How much of our conversation has he heard?* The salad box is shaking. All right, so maybe I do have just a bit of a thing for Adam.

“See you in the elevator,” I reply, throat suddenly tight.

The elevator, because we work in the same office building, on the same floor, and we often arrive at the same time. Sometimes I wonder whether it’s really a coincidence.

Because, here’s the thing about Adam. When we first met, he had pimples and a breaking voice. I had puppy fat and a bad perm (all right, there’s no such thing as a good perm). We played text adventure games together - I bet Tessa has no idea what they are - two teens geeky enough to own personal computers back then. Before we could progress from *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* to *Space Quest*, and from friends to something more, we finished school and went our separate ways.

On that last day, I was going to tell him. Just like that.

I’ve had a crush on you since Year 9.

No.

You’re the guy I want to have sex with for the first time.

Ick!

I mean, what else was left? *Hey Adam, I’d like to be your Eve?*

I was so out of opening lines.

That’s why I chickened out: I just couldn’t find the words. We lost touch. Reconnected on Facebook. And then, two weeks ago, Adam started working in the office next to mine, with a few more creases around the eyes and a lot more muscle around his – well, everywhere. And I still couldn’t find the words, beyond the “you haven’t aged a bit” clichés.

We said we’d catch up, except I was going away on a business trip, and that weekend it was my turn to have the children, so he asked me to message him when I had some free time. Time, it turned out, wasn’t that much of a problem. The right words were. I mean, we messaged lots, about favourite books and how to make the world a better place. Just not about the date.

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND ***

That night, the first night we met after all those years, I had a dream. I was sixteen again, sitting in front of a computer screen with a sixteen-year old Adam.

“What I’d really like to do right now is kiss you,” I said, the words flowing like Christmas wine.

His smile was easy, the way only a dream can make it, not a smidge of surprise or self-consciousness.

“That’s shouldn’t be a problem.” His lips found mine, hot and firm and teenage-sweet.

The sense of power was intoxicating. I could unbutton his shirt and run my hands down his back, all without the fear of being rejected or worrying what to do when we’re actually doing it. Oh, to be a teenager again, yet have all the confidence that comes with age!

“Grace,” Tessa pulls me out of the salad bar. “What’s that all about? You look a million miles away.”

More like *decades ago*. “Nothing.”

“Yeah, right. Tell me.”

I tell her, all the details, including the games and my dream. A mistake, because as soon as I go to sleep, I have that dream again.

Sixteen. Adam. We’re at a party, in someone’s bedroom, and it’s finally the way it should be, limbs and tongues and... other bits. My skin is smooth, my body youthful, and... ouch! Turns out, when you’re sixteen, sex hurts.

“Damn,” I say to Adam. “Forgot I’m still a virgin.”

Even in dreams, I can't escape being a realist.

The very next morning, Adam steps into the elevator just before the doors close, and I feel my face grow hot. Stupid dream. Stupid me. I should just organise that coffee. But not right now, not when in all likelihood my cheeks resemble pohutukawa blossoms.

"You look like you've caught some early summer sun," he says. "It suits you."

He's standing so near, I can smell a hint of his aftershave. Forest and earl grey tea. It would be so easy to lean into him and brush his mouth with mine.

Perhaps that's what I should do. Kiss him. If words are too hard, perhaps I can put my lips to a better use.

I get as far as placing my hand on his arm – mmm, I can feel the triceps through his business shirt – when the elevator pings and we're on our floor. Damn.

Adam steps in front of the door sensor and motions me through. "See you, Grace," he calls after me.

Right. I'll message him as soon as I sit down.

When I reach my desk, though, Tessa waves her hand in front of me with so much gusto, that I step back, alarmed.

"What?" Then I see it. "Tessa, wow! Congratulations!" The diamond is unobtrusive, and I approve of Karl's good sense to save money. "How did it happen?"

Apparently Karl's good sense to save money didn't extend to the proposal. He hired one of those aeroplanes to write "Marry me Tessa" in the sky while they had a champagne picnic on the beach.

Ashamed to say, my first thought has nothing to do with romance. It's about consuming alcohol outdoors – is that even legal nowadays? My second thought is to tell her that whatever love is, it's not spending money on skywriting proposals. Love is a cup of coffee in bed first thing in the morning, and offering to vacuum when it's not your turn so that your loved one can read a book. But her fire makes my eyes well up, and I let it be. Who am I to preach what love is? I got served cups of coffee in bed, and my marriage didn't even reach the empty-nesting stage. Perhaps skywriting will do for Tessa's relationship what coffee couldn't do for mine.

Speaking of coffee, I really should message Adam.

Except my boss pulls me in for an impromptu meeting, and I spend the morning squeezing data out of a rather reluctant server, and then my daughter texts me about her table tennis tournament, and before I know it, the day is over.

No, I spoke too soon. My phone buzzes again, this time with a text from Tessa. Strange. I thought she'd left for the day. "Coffee shop downstairs, now. Urgent. Life or death."

This generation can be so dramatic. Life or death, indeed. Probably a tiff with Karl over the choice of a wedding venue. Still, I pack up my laptop and head downstairs.

Tessa is waiting by the coffee shop entrance. "It's life," she says without preamble. "As in, your life. And your death, because I'm going to kill you if you run away now."

Even before I look inside, I know. Adam. Sitting at a small table with two cups of coffee, as desirable as ever. "Decaf latte, just as you like it, already paid for," Tessa continues. "And while you were in the bathroom earlier, I snuck onto your laptop and installed an app with vintage text adventure games. *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* is one of them. Go sit with him and play, if you find it so hard to talk. Oh, and merry Christmas!"

I go, I sit, I play. At closing time, they have to kick us out. We're only two-thirds of the way through *Leather Goddesses*, and we can't stop now. "Your place or mine?" I ask. Funny how I

have no trouble finding the words when it's about computers. And I don't care whether what we have is just for Christmas or for the rest of my life. Single, not single – not a problem, either way.

He lives walking distance away, so we take a shortcut through the beach. The moon is a huge Christmas bauble hanging above the silky water, the sand crunchy like snow.

“What I'd really like to do right now is kiss you,” Adam says. Just like in my dream, just with the roles reversed.

I don't reply. So done talking. Standing on tiptoe, I find his lips. They taste of the briny ocean air, and cinnamon, and longing. Briefly, I wonder whether sex on the beach is, like alcohol, against the law. And then I stop thinking.

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND





A Man Walks Into a Bar

Susie Frame

I sip the crisp pinot gris and replace my glass on the pristine, highly-polished bar. As I struggle to perch my ‘not-as-small-as-it-used-to-be’ derriere on the high leather-covered stool, I can’t believe I’m sitting in this inner-city hotel. Mid-day drinking is not my usual style. But today is not a usual day.

The air to the left of me is displaced. I have company.

“I hope you got your absentee note signed before you left?”

I turn to address the owner of the baritone voice. “Before I left where, exactly?”

“Heaven. I *am* sitting next to an angel, after all.”

I have to fight the urge to laugh out loud at the beer drinking, middle-aged, business-suited man.

He smiles apologetically. “Yeah, that was bad. Forgive me. So, what brings you here today?”

I consider the question. Admitting the reason I’m here would be admitting failure - and I don’t like to fail. Oh, what the hell? I take a deep breath. “Mid-life crisis stuff. Relationship stuff. I think it’s crunch time. Just need to have a think about what to—”

“I’m sorry.” My drinking companion stands to leave. “I’ll give you some space.”

“No. Don’t go. You might be able to offer some advice.”

“I don’t know if I’m the right guy for the job. My life’s hardly jolly hockey sticks, either.”

“Well, let’s help one another.” I smile and extend my hand. “Caroline.”

“Gerry.” A soft, warm, slightly-tanned hand slips into mine. An unexpected shiver snakes up my spine. What can I say? I’m into hands, and Gerry’s gentle, smooth hands tick all the boxes. I forget my crisis and picture his hand running up and down the length of my bare arm. Gerry loosens his grip and a gentle wave of disappointment tumbles over me as he wraps his hand around his glass.

“Do you do this midday prowling thing often?” I say, just as the beach-blond barman pushes the start button on a cocktail blender.

“Sorry.” Gerry cups a hand to his ear. “I’m a bit hard of hearing.”

I raise my voice and repeat the question. Of course, that’s when Murphy and his law saunter in to join us. The barman cuts the motor on the blender sending my enquiry about Gerry’s lunchtime prowling antics pinging off the panelled walls, up to the vaulted ceiling and down to every set of ears in the bar. All eyes are now on one very red-faced Gerry.

“Oh, dear. That was a bit of bad timing,” is all I can manage before I liberate the schoolgirl giggle bubbling up the back of my throat.

Gerry picks nervously at the corner of his coaster. “Great. Now everyone here will think I’m a leech.!”

My giggle morphs into the biggest belly laugh I’ve had in weeks.

Gerry turns and our eyes lock. I should apologise for putting him in such an awkward position but I don’t. I can’t. I’m lost in pools of liquid caramel; tender, warm.

I find my voice. “What do you do?” I say, leaning towards him, the hoppy smell of beer and pine aftershave filling my nostrils.

Gerry smiles a full smile and crow’s feet fan the corners of his eyes. I love crow’s feet. They tell of laughter and happy times. I want to run my fingers over the corrugations. I wrap my hands firmly round my wine glass to fight off the intense urge.

“Well, when I’m not picking up attractive women from bars in the middle of the day I...”

“No. Strongly disagree. I’m a lot of things but I wouldn’t say I’m attract...”

“Trust me. You are attractive.”

I let the words splash around in my head. Many adjectives have been used to describe me over the last few years. Reliable. Responsible. Trustworthy. It’s been a while since I’ve heard ‘attractive’. “I don’t think there’s anything attractive about a few too many kilos, batwing arms and...” I circle a hand around my face. “... this in-need-of-some-botox face and...”

Gerry rests his hand on my arm. “Stop. Now. Don’t make a burden of the gift on the giver, Caroline. Oh, and do away with that whole self-flagellation thing.”

“Well, it’s true. Aging and the old gravitational pull have been far from kind.”

“I see it differently.”

I see it differently? I lock that away in an imaginary drawer and enjoy the thought of looking at it later. I take another sip of wine.

“Tell me. What do you do?”

“Uh-uh.” I shake my head. “You first.”

“Actually, let’s flag that. I read once you learn more about a person by finding out what they do in their spare time than what they do for a living.”

Now there’s something I wasn’t expecting from this man. I reflect for a moment. “I don’t have very much free time these days. To be honest, life just seems to be work, eat and sleep.”

Gerry shakes his head. “Oh, dear. There’s a well-known saying about that sort of thing.”

I squirm on my bar stool. Am I dull? I probably am. In fact, I’m probably a lot of things now; things I never used to be. It’s difficult sitting with these unpleasant, prickly thoughts. I turn my attention to Gerry. “Okay, then. Your turn.”

Gerry’s shoulders sag. “Good question. Like you, I don’t seem to have time for fun, either. I’m a bit work, eat, sleep myself. I get what you’re saying. The nest empties out and you fill the void with work.”

Gerry lifts his glass to his mouth. I'm transfixed. His mouth is perfect. I imagine it pressed against mine and my heart bounces against my ribs. I feel excited; alive. I thank fate for this serendipitous moment. Just when I started to think coming to this bar was a silly idea, nothing could be further from the truth. I'm exactly where I need to be.

I collect myself. "Yeah you're right. It's an easy trap to fall into."

"I don't know about you, Caroline, but I always make a New Year's resolution to try and do better but by—"

"Let me guess. By mid-January you've tumbled unceremoniously off the wagon."

Gerry looks down into his beer and shrugs.

"Same." I focus on my wine glass and run the tips of my fingers up and down the cool smooth stem.

I feel Gerry's eyes on me. He clears his throat, gulps a mouthful of beer then loosens his tie. "That's a fairly loaded action you've got going there."

"I don't follow."

He gestures towards my glass. "That. The 'fingers up and down the wine glass stem' thing is straight out of Body Language 101. Supposed to indicate you're tacitly saying you're interested in..."

"That sounds ridiculous."

"Trust me. My wife's magazines contain many scientifically proven facts."

"Oh, so you're married, then?" I briefly wonder how happy Gerry is with his wife before I'm overcome with the most insane idea. I stop playing with my wine glass and locate my best Mae West voice. "I wonder what the experts would say about this...?" All sensibility jigs away as I throw myself into the body language game. I feel weightless and giddy as I reach for my handbag, take out my lipstick and turn my body right around to face Gerry. I seductively cross my legs knowing the action will send the hem of my red silk skirt riding up my thigh. I push my heel out of the upper-most red stiletto, exposing a near nude foot. I lock eyes with Gerry before twisting the lipstick tube up. I paint my mouth then smile a 'Scarlet Woman' red smile.

An amused expression flashes across Gerry's face.

"Can I borrow that?" I say, pointing to Gerry's coaster.

Gerry lifts his beer glass. "Be my guest." He passes the coaster to me and his fingers gently graze mine.

I blot my smiling lips on the underside of the coaster, then replace it back down on the bar.

I wait for Gerry to say something but he doesn't speak. I lean over placing my hand on his forearm, the fabric of his suit smooth under my touch. "Thoughts, Gerry?"

"Yes, well...I'm not sure what to say except I'm guessing that's possibly in the Post Graduate Body Language syllabus." He shrugs his jacket off. "Is it hot in here or is it just me?"

I playfully arch an eyebrow. "Well, I'm starting to get a little hot," I say and mirror Gerry. I slip off my matching red suit jacket and drape it over my lap.

"Er..." Gerry clears his throat. "Let me get you some water."

Forget the water. I need a cold shower.

Gerry reaches for a carafe and pours me a glass of lemon-flavoured water. I drink it greedily. The cool liquid cools my burning throat and settles the kaleidoscope of butterflies in my stomach.

Gerry pulls his shirt sleeve back and checks his watch. "I have a meeting. I better go."

He stands. I cannot deny it. I really like this man. The broad-muscled shoulders disappearing under the jacket; the well-styled salt and pepper hair; the smile; those beautiful caramel eyes; the perfect mouth; the hands – oh my God, those hands.

“Good luck with your...” Gerry’s eyes hold mine. “I hope things work out.”

I reluctantly disengage and busy myself with my jacket and handbag. “Thank you. This has been most enlightening. I hope you find what it is you’re looking for, too,” I say, now aware of a growing emptiness beside me.

I turn to see Gerry walking towards the door.

“You’re home early?”

I cut to the chase. “There’s something I need to tell you. Come and sit down.”

We settle ourselves on the sofa and I turn to face my husband – my husband of thirty-two years. “I met a man today.”

“So? You meet men all the time in your job.”

“No, I mean, I met a man...in a bar. I felt like I was on a date. And I loved it.”

My husband rakes his hand through his hair.

“He’s...I don’t know...he’s everything. The whole package.”

My husband’s eyes glisten. “Does this mean...what I think it means?”

My throat constricts. There’s so much to say. But for now, I go with a simple: “I’m sorry. For everything.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“What are we going to do?”

My husband takes my hands in his. “There’s plenty of time to talk about that.”

He kisses me gently on the lips then holds my head against his chest.

Something firm digs into my cheek. “What’s in your pocket?”

My husband removes the offending object and places it on the coffee table. “A souvenir.”

I look down at the coaster and smile.

Two ‘Scarlet Woman’ lips smile back.





Secret In Stone

Charlotte Kieft

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND

Tears slid down my face as I rested my head against Dad’s gravestone. “It’s so hard, Dad. I can’t do this on my own.” He’d been gone for two years, but I still missed him so much. “Mum didn’t remember me today. Kept calling me Sally.” Her long-dead sister. From the family photos, I knew I looked like her when she was my age.

Losing Dad to cancer had been horrible, but Mum’s Alzheimer’s was much harder in a way, although thankfully she wasn’t in physical pain. She’d been an historian, like I was. The irony wasn’t lost on me — an historian who’d forgotten her own history. At least Dad had recognised me, even on his worst days.

I dragged my sleeve across my eyes and hoisted my hessian gardening bag. Enough of feeling sorry for myself. Time to make the most of the sunny spring day.

It was my Sunday ritual — lunch with Mum at the rest home, then the afternoon in the cemetery. I’d started this project to keep me sane: cleaning the old graves and researching their inhabitants. I was writing a book filled with my findings, so I could restore these lost souls’ histories along with their tombstones.

I wove my way between the graves, heading for the oldest section of the cemetery. Some people thought this part spooky — all overgrown trees, crumbling graves and unkempt paths — but I found it peaceful. Especially after visiting Mum.

I started by weeding ‘my graves’ — a row of weathered plaques and tombstones. I paused beside one I’d recently restored.

Alban Daniel O'Shea. Departed County Cork, Ireland after WWI to seek his fortune. Died in New Zealand in 1921 following the sinking of the SS Plymouth. His closest friend, John Campbell, buried him here, knowing of no family.

He had no family, like me — at least none who knew who I was. I plucked some wild flowers and placed them against Alban's tombstone, then turned to my latest project — a stone angel whose face was almost obscured by lichen.

I'd been working for an hour when I heard the crunch of gravel on the path. A man with shoulders wide enough to carry a tombstone strolled towards me, a cemetery map in his hand. His eyes — the colour of sage leaves, grey with a hint of green — met mine. Laughter lines shadowed the sides of his mouth, although today his face was sombre.

"Excuse me. But I'm looking for this grave," he said in a soft Irish burr, pointing to a lot number on the map. "Can you help?"

The lilting accent was soft as velvet, fitting for this quiet place.

I recognised it instantly. "Why are you interested in Alban O'Shea?" I asked, standing up and pulling off my gardening gloves.

"For starters, he's from Ballincollig in County Cork, like me. We're a close-knit bunch."

The Liam Neeson look-alike must know Alban — how else would he know his hometown? I'd only just discovered it myself, during my preliminary research. I motioned him to follow. A five-minute break wouldn't hurt. I kept a hold of my pruning shears, in case he was a nutter.

"This here's Alban's grave. You're lucky. I only cleaned it last month. Before, the inscription was unreadable."

"Do you work here?"

"No," I replied.

He gestured to Alban's restored headstone. "Then why...?"

How could I explain my hobby without sounding crazy?

"This older section of the cemetery is neglected. When people first die, it's all flowers and visits. But as the years go on, family forget. Or move on." Irritation bloomed in my chest. "The graves get overgrown. Headstones weather and crack, like Alban's. I take care of them. None of their relatives can be bothered."

He crossed his arms. "Have you ever stopped to think that maybe their family don't know they're here?"

"They will, if they bother to read my book, once it's done." I gestured to my graves. "I've been researching their stories."

"What have you discovered about Alby?" he asked, eyes sparking.

"Very little, so far." Alby. A terrible thought hit me. "Are you related?"

"He's my great uncle. I'm Dan. Daniel O'Shea."

"Same surname as on the grave," I squeaked, my cheeks burning. I'd basically accused him of not caring, but here he was — all the way from Ireland.

"I recently moved to New Zealand for work. During my weekends, I've been scouring this cemetery for Alby's grave. I promised my Nan back home I'd find out what happened to her big brother." He handed me a sepia photo. A young man in a poorly-fitting suit stared out at me. He had the same jutting jaw as Dan. Scrawling copperplate on the back read: *Alban O'Shea, County Cork, 1915.*

“Sorry about before,” I choked out. “I didn’t mean to imply...”

“Don’t worry about it. I never would have known this grave was his, if you hadn’t cleaned it.”

“How did your great uncle end up on the other side of the planet?” I asked.

“He left Ballincollig under a cloud, after his boss accused him of stealing. Alby denied it, but afterward no one would hire him. I guess he ran as far away as he could. Nan never heard from him again. She’s always worried he came to a sticky end.”

So Alban wasn’t forgotten, just lost. “Do you want me to see what I can dig up?”

His face lit. “That would be grand. I’ve been scouring the ancestry websites — that’s how I knew he was here. But that’s all I could discover. My Nan is getting on. I’d hate for her to die thinking the worst of Alby.”

“It must have been hard for her, not knowing what happened to her brother.” At least I knew exactly where Mum was. Even if she didn’t.

“Much appreciated, Ms...”

I offered my hand. “Gartner. Libby Gartner.”

* * *

I watched Dan as he strode across O’Reilly’s Irish Pub and settled into the chair opposite me, my pulse thudding with excitement. Seeing him had become the highlight of my week.

Dan’s smile of greeting was broad enough to light the room. “Anything new?” he asked eagerly. “Nan’s waiting for an update.”

I slid an envelope towards him. I’d begun by emailing Dan my findings, but he’d insisted we met regularly in person — whether I’d found something, or not. I didn’t object. Dan was good company and had a dry wit.

“You could say that.” Chasing down Alban’s history had become an obsession. Nothing to do with Dan, of course. I’d been sharing my project with Mum. In one of her lucid moments, she told me about an expert in New Zealand naval history. Turns out, he had eyewitness accounts of the sinking of the SS Plymouth. And it was there I struck gold. “Your great uncle’s surname had been recorded O’Shay in the official records. That’s why we couldn’t find him.”

“I should have thought of that.” Dan scanned the newspaper clippings, his body radiating excitement. “Alby rescued five people from the sea, including a mother and her toddler. He died soon afterwards, from pneumonia, caught that night.” He squeezed my hand, eyes shining. “He died a hero. Nan will be over the moon.”

My stomach fluttered. It was the first time we’d touched, except for accidentally. Pull yourself together, I chided myself. He was only showing gratitude. It didn’t mean anything.

“How can I repay you?”

“There is one thing...” I moistened my lips. “I’ve been telling Mum about you and Alby.”

“Have you now?” He raised an eyebrow. “All good, I hope.”

I smiled shyly. “She used to be a historian, and has been giving me a hand. I could never have found the SS Plymouth link without her. She’s been on at me to bring you to the rest home to visit. Would you mind?”

“Of course not.”

“I should warn you. She’s got dementia. Some days, she’s fine. But others...” I shrugged.

“When we visit, she might not even remember she asked to see you.”

His gaze held mine. “I’d be honoured to meet the other talented lady who helped me find my uncle.”

The day of the unveiling was beautiful and sunny — the 12th of February, the anniversary of Alby's death. Now we knew the truth, Dan had decided to give his relative a more fitting memorial. It was a bittersweet occasion. My research was complete. After today, we had no reason to meet.

Mum and I stood side-by-side, heads bowed, while an ancient Catholic priest intoned a prayer.

Dan motioned me forward. "Will you help me do the honours?"

Help with the unveiling? It was a huge honour. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "If it hadn't been for you and your mother I never would have recovered my Great Uncle."

Together we removed the velvet cover, each holding one corner. A Celtic cross carved from weathered sandstone rose above the grave, the old plaque embedded in its base. I crouched down to read the new additional epitaph, which Dan had kept secret.

Here lies Alban Daniel O'Shea. Hero of the SS Plymouth. Lost to his family for many years, then restored by the kindness of a stranger. Loved and never forgotten.

Tears pricked my eyes. Dan had captured my assistance forever in stone.

"Do we know the departed, dear?" Mum asked.

"It's Alban. The man you helped me research."

"Of course. Your Dan's Great Uncle." Today was one of her good days.

My Dan. I flushed, hoping he didn't overhear.

He produced a bottle of Kilvannon — Alby's favourite — and poured a dram for each of us, then tipped a libation over Alban's grave.

We stood in silence, sipping our whiskey.

"Hey, Libby," Dan said. "Where's your mother going?"

I looked around. Mum was tottering purposefully down the path.

"Mum," I called. "Come back." She'd done so well, but the strain must have become too much.

"I'm going to visit your father," she said over her shoulder. "If my memory serves me right, he's somewhere over here."

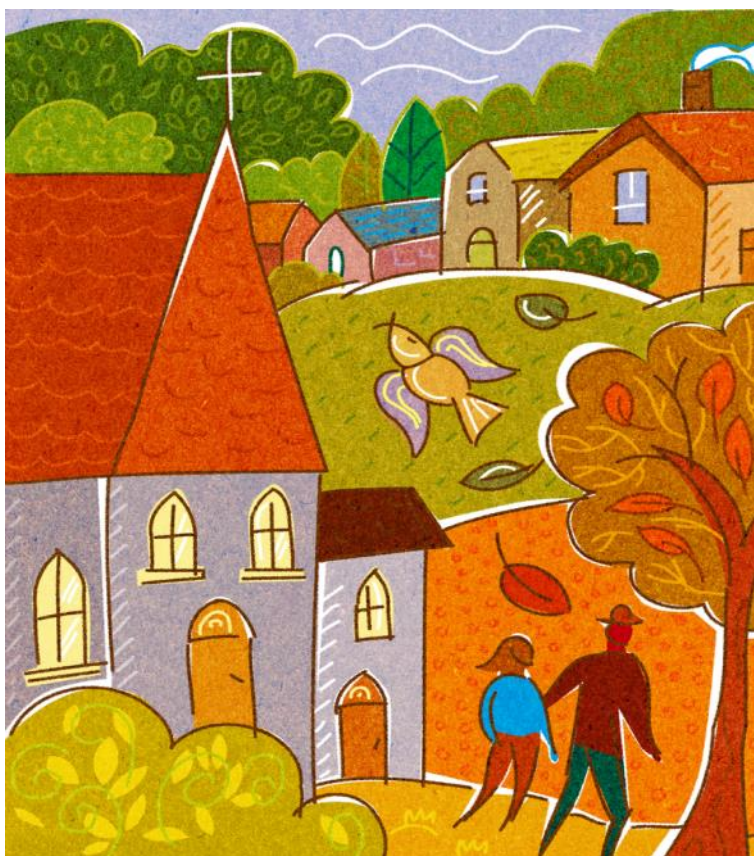
My eyes widened. She remembered the location of Dad's grave? "Hold on. I'll come with you."

She waved me off. "Don't rush, dear. Your young man and you will want a moment alone with his Great Uncle. You need to celebrate after all your hard work."

"He's not my young man," I called, cringing in embarrassment.

Dan took my hand. "But I'd like to be. What do you say, Libby? Do you want to go on a date? A proper one. Just you and me, with no Alby."

I smiled, my heart soaring. It was time to stop living through other people's history, and to make my own. "Yes. I'd like that very much."



Flying High

Pamela Swain

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND

In my teenage dreams, I had it all worked out. I'd become a commercial pilot and pick up a husband along the way, maybe in some exotic location. He'd be a combination of Mr Darcy, a Gladiator and mystical new-age guru. Of course he'd adore me, keep me safe and help me to achieve my every dream. We'd live in a chic city apartment, close to the airport until children came along, and then we'd move to a house in a tree lined street.

But life got in the way. Dad divorced mum, he flew under the child maintenance radar and the resulting boom blasted pilot training off my radar.

Now, age thirty, I'm a receptionist in a faded country town's motel and live in a low set Queenslander, where peeling paint hangs from the verandah in ribbons. Cane toad races held at the pub are the highlight of the week.

On my days off, I can usually be found in the family history section at the library – such as it is. Two large rooms tucked behind Wanda's bakery. Today, in between customers, Wanda entertains me with stories about her Bert's prostrate – I've given up correcting her – and my nerves are jangling. I forget to drop the library key off to Jen, the librarian, and arrive home before I sense its weight in my pocket. I trudge back into town to return the key.

I sneak past the bakery and hand the key to Jen, who is in her front garden savaging rose bushes with a hedge trimmer. The wild look on her face and curses about rubbish anniversary presents, screams volumes. The roses are collateral damage.

I take the scenic route home through the better end of town, up a heart pumping incline to the church, before a gentle downhill amble to my place. I reach the church, lean against a gate to recover my breath and notice the door is open. The church has been up for sale for years and, rumour has it,

never been viewed. I wander over, pause at the entrance, peer inside and notice several pews pushed up against the walls. The air is a kaleidoscope of red, blue and green dust motes from sunlight shining through stained glass.

“You must be Julia, from the Real Estate.”

Once I regain my composure after being taken by surprise, I notice the owner of the voice has a tousled, blond surfer vibe about him.

“Col.” He takes hold of my right hand and pumps it in a handshake. “Colin Firth.”

I don’t reply and he interprets this as a need to explain.

“My mother loves *Pride and Prejudice* ... particularly the TV series with Colin Firth as Darcy. Hence my name ... Colin that is, not Darcy ... and as my surname’s Firth ... but I just said that. I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

Tongue-tied, I ease my hand out of his and stare at it, because his touch leaves it tingling.

He takes hold of my hand again, like it’s a piece of porcelain. “I’m sorry. Did I crush it? I’ve been dealing with large animals today ... I try to leave my vet’s hands at the surgery.”

I shake my head. *Where is my voice?*

“I know the place isn’t mine until tomorrow, but the door wasn’t locked, so I’ve been clearing up a bit. I hope that’s okay?”

I shake my head again and we stare at each other. His blue eyes sparkle with anticipation and excitement.

“I’m not Julia,” I blurt out.

He raises an eyebrow and a rush of electricity courses through my veins and takes up residence in my cheeks. He bites his lip, presumably to stem laughter, and I remove my hand from his, grab my decorum and leave.

Jen is busy slotting books onto a shelf. She looks up. “You? Speechless? That’s a first.”

“Thanks, friend.”

She pushes the trolley of returned books aside. “You’re welcome.” She picks up her mug. “Cuppa?”

I nod and she disappears into the makeshift kitchenette. There’s been no mention of the rose bush incident.

I stand to stretch my legs and close my eyes for a moment, to rest them from screen glare.

“Hello, Not Julia.”

I leap forward and bump into the table. “Would you stop doing that?”

“Stop doing what?”

“Creeping up on people and making them jump.”

“Sorry. Next time I’ll make sure I’m close enough to catch you.”

“Better to announce your arrival instead ... make a noise or something.”

He crosses to the trolley and picks up a book. “Good to see Agatha Christie is making a come back.”

I ignore him, settle back down on my chair and adjust the computer screen. He saunters over and leans against the corner of the table. A cloud of citrus surrounds him, shower fresh, with no undertone of horse or cattle. His blue shirt matches the colour of his eyes, which I’m trying to avoid looking into, and his jeans, while not quite skin tight, allow the definition of his thigh muscles to be visible. I’m staring and he knows I am.

“Well then, Not Julia, nice to see you, but work calls. Cute cheeks, by the way.”

My hands shoot up to my face. He laughs and strides towards the door, almost colliding with Jen.

“Sorry.” He holds out his hand for a handshake. “Col ... the new vet. You must be Jen?”

Jen nods and he glances towards the mugs in her hands.

“Amazing ... you didn’t spill any. Not Julia has been keeping me entertained while you were out.”

Jen looks in my direction. “You mean Charlie?”

I glare at Jen and then Col. “Charlotte, if you don’t mind. Charlie to my friends.”

“Right, well, I’ll be off. I only wanted a sausage roll, but Wanda insisted I come through to see Not Julia.”

I shake my head and continue to glare at him. “And how does Wanda know about ‘Not Julia’?”

Colin leans against the door frame, crosses one foot in front of the other, strokes his chin with his index finger and furrows his brow in mock concentration.

I hold my hand up, palm out, in a stop position. “On second thoughts, I don’t want to know.”

He performs a theatrical bow and leaves.

Jen places the mugs down. “Wow. You didn’t tell me he was a ten.”

“Hadn’t noticed.”

I dunk a biscuit in my tea, until it disintegrates.

Jen laughs. “Bet you’ve noticed now, though?”

Wanda appears, carrying a plate of pastry treats.

“Such a lovely young man. You know, a vet could be considered as good a catch as a doctor, Charlotte.”

I grit my teeth. Jen averts her eyes.

No-one speaks.

ROMANCE WRITERS OF NEW ZEALAND

I take the scenic route home, having decided to call in at the church and warn Col about Wanda’s Bakery being gossip central. I puff my way up the hill and notice a pew wedged in the church doorway. A red faced Col races around the side and begins to tug at it. He’s as breathless as I am. We flop onto a pew that is already out in the yard.

“This is nice,” he says, after a brief rest. “We ought to bring a picnic next time.”

I half turn to face him and shake my head. “That’s so last century.”

“Just call me old fashioned.”

“Want a hand with the pew stuck in the doorway?”

“Please.”

I help him move the rest of the pews outside and it’s dark by the time we finish. I learn he’s single, loves sausage rolls, is terrified of snakes and plans on doing the church renovations himself. He, in turn, learns zero about me, but not for lack of trying. At one stage, he mutters, ‘I’ll just ask Wanda, then.’

But it’s because of the town’s gossip grapevine, that I clam up. Next time – if there’s a next time, I’ll tell him anything he wants to know.

Col insists on driving me home and I accept, because I’m also terrified of encountering snakes. He parks his ute beside the verandah and we lean forward, unsure what to do next. We end up shaking hands.

A citrus cloud floats into the library and a chair scrapes across the floorboards. “Is this the Family History section? Only I want to trace someone.”

I don't bother to look up from the computer.

"Although, I think I've found her now."

He sits down beside me.

"Do you know you have the cutest nose? Especially from this angle."

Col has my attention and I turn to face him. He hands me an envelope.

"A thank you for helping with the pews."

I laugh when I read the invite to a Deconstructed Picnic at the church.

"More this century, don't you think?"

"Absolutely."

It's official. It's a date. I try on every outfit I possess, before settling on my final choice - blue jeans, poppy patterned blouse and my favourite strappy sandals. I attempt to straighten my mop of red hair, but several errant curls refuse to be tamed. I give up.

The altar is outside the church, with a pew either side of it. A tablecloth, I recognise as Wanda's, is weighted down with old horse shoes. No sign of Col, so I wander inside. He jumps down from some scaffolding, waves his phone in the air.

"Better signal up there. Sorry, but I've been called out to a mare in trouble."

"Can I tag along?"

He nods, thrusts a plastic container in my hands. "I didn't have time to deconstruct the goodies from Wanda."

After a tense battle, the foal emerges. Col clears mucous away from its nostrils and rubs along its ribs with straw. The mare nuzzles her foal, a beautiful chestnut filly and I'm still abuzz on the drive back and can't keep my eyes off Col.

"That was amazing. Did you always want to be a vet?"

"Always. What about you?"

"Be a vet? No."

"You know what I mean?"

I nod, not that he can see. "I wanted to be a pilot."

"But not now?"

I shake my head. "No."

He parks the ute at the side of the road.

"Why not?"

"I don't know really. Fear of failure, perhaps."

"Did you keep the picnic invite?"

I nod.

"But you didn't read the PTO?"

I fish the invite out of my handbag, read the flip side and fling myself into his arms. It seems a natural progression to trace kisses along his neck. He moans and tilts my chin until our lips almost touch.

"Wanda's suggestion." His lips graze mine. "But, if that's my reward for an introductory flying lesson ..."

Our lips press together and I'm flying high without an aircraft. I sense an exciting journey ahead.