



# LIAISONS 2019



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

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



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## Our Authors

**Sue Kingham**

*The Art of Falling in Love*



**Susie Frame**

*Breaking the Rules*

**Emma Bryson**

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*Love On Wheels*

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*Never Under Any Circumstances*

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**Pamela Swain**

*The Plan*



## *The Art Of Falling In Love*

### **Sue Kingham**

“Chloe, what *you* need is Florence.”

Over a glass of wine in my best friend Nicky’s London flat, I’d been moaning about my drop-kick boyfriend. I frowned and asked, “Who’s she?”

“Not who, where.” Nicky leaned closer. “Let’s go to Florence at the end of term.”

The idea of running away seemed crazy, but our year at art college had been hectic, and I did need a break. Nicky checked online for bargain plane tickets. “These prices aren’t bad. Shall I book?”

“Why not.” It must have been the wine talking; I knew my boyfriend would be furious. “Just do it!”

Nicky clicked *buy now* and, to celebrate, we cracked open another bottle.

The three weeks until I left were horrendous. As I hauled my backpack down the steps to the waiting taxi, I knew my relationship was over. What’s more, I didn’t care. Nicky was waiting for me in the car. I fastened my seatbelt then pulled out my phone.

“On *TripAdvisor* last night I found us a great hostel,” I said, showing her the webpage.

She skimmed through the blurb. “It’s perfect.”

Neither of us had much spare cash, so the hostel was basic, but it was only a six-minute walk from the Galleria dell’ Accademia art museum. I booked it as we drove to the airport.

The next day, inside the museum, I caught sight of Michelangelo's gigantic statue of *David*, and a shiver ran down my spine. Lit by a domed skylight, the white marble shone. Although I'd arrived at the end of the day, it turned out for the best; if I'd gone any earlier, crowds would have blocked my view. A security guard, roughly my age, stood next to the statue. He had beautifully chiselled features, and I smiled, thinking I'd like to sketch him. I sat crossed-legged on the floor and began to draw; the cool tiles kissed my ankles. With my raised right thumb, I measured out the proportions working quickly in case the guard asked me to move on. Half an hour later, he walked over to see what I'd drawn.

"*Sei brava*," he said nodding.

"Sorry? I don't speak Italian."

"Is very good." His voice was warm, and his accent made me melt. I could feel myself blushing as I began to pack away my things.

"*Mi dispiace*. Stay. The museum is open one more hour." He walked back to his post.

Whenever he wasn't looking, I glanced in his direction. I've always gone for tall, dark, handsome types. His stance was strong, feet slightly apart, with hands clasped behind his back. His hair, a rich dark chocolate, fell in waves to his collar. The identity badge on the lapel of his navy-blue uniform told me his name was Angelo.

The next day I returned armed with a couple of well-practised Italian phrases. Just seeing him gave me butterflies in my stomach.

"*Il mio nome è Chloe*," I said with a smile.

"*Che bello incontrarsi di nuovo*," he replied with a grin. Then, seeing my confused look, he repeated himself in English, "Good to see you again, Chloe."

When I finished my sketch, he squatted beside me. "I am *artista*."

A spark of electricity ran through me at his closeness. I asked, "Sculptor or painter?"

"*Dipingo*... I paint at the Florence Academy of Art."

Now that I knew he was an artist, I felt embarrassed. I began to shut my sketchbook.

Angelo put out a hand to stop me. "Is good!" He pointed to *David's* hand holding the slingshot. I could tell he was searching for the right words. "Excellent line." He went back to his post, and I studied that section of my work. He was right; I'd nailed it.

When the museum was about to close, Angelo came over. "Wait outside? I can show you my work."

"I'm with my friend. May I bring her along?"

"*Si*." He flashed me a smile, and his deep brown eyes sparkled.

On the steps, I flicked Nicky a text. *Meet me in front of museum. Hot Italian wants to show us his etchings!*

Her reply pinged straight back, *Hot Italian!!! On my way* 😊

She arrived just as Angelo strode out wearing ripped black jeans and a white tee, which showed off his muscles to perfection. He greeted Nicky with a warm, "*Ciao*." Then he directed us through the side streets, eventually stopping at a dark green door next to a small grocery shop. He fished out his key and led us inside. The hallway was dark and cool, and to the left, a wide staircase curved upwards. Angelo bounded up two steps at a time, before stopping to wave us up. His studio apartment was on the top floor. Translucent white muslin curtains hung at full-length windows, and colourful abstract prints covered the walls.

"*Accomodatevi*. Please sit." Angelo pointed to a red leather couch and went into the small galley kitchen.

"*Vino*?" he held up a bottle of Chianti.

"Please," Nicky answered for both of us.

We sat with our wine while Angelo showed us some of his work. A few were charcoal studies of classical sculptures. I recognised a section of *David* I'd spent two hours drawing that afternoon. Angelo's use of line was decisive. The carefully executed muscles and tendons seemed to throb with energy. His paintings were equally vibrant. I couldn't stop myself from jumping up to examine his expressive brushwork.

"I love your art," I said. "How long have you been painting?" I was astounded when he replied he was only a second-year student. My head was full of his colours, and I wanted to discover more about this talented guy. As we finished our drinks, we discussed our favourite artists, and then went out for pizza. I couldn't believe how easily we communicated. Occasionally, one of us pulled up Google Translate, but for the most part, we chatted with ease. Angelo explained the museum job paid his rent, and he did life modelling to cover his tuition. I tried to keep a straight face when Nicky shot me a wicked glance.

From then on, we ended each day at Angelo's or met him in a nearby bar. He had a friend called Marco, who instantly clicked with Nicky. On Friday evening, the four of us went dancing. Angelo looked hot in his distressed jeans and a short-sleeved red shirt. On the dance floor, I held Angelo's hand and occasionally brushed against him. With every casual touch, I felt a searing heat rise inside me. I tried to encourage him to kiss me by wrapping my arms around him, but he just laughed and pulled away. Utterly confused, I excused myself and asked Nicky to come with me to the toilets. At the handbasin, I buried my face in my hands.

"What's going on, Nick? I thought Italians were sex mad. Why's Angelo holding back. Is he just not into me?"

"No, he's crazy about you! But Marco said Angelo's getting over a messy break-up, and he's nervous about getting hurt again."

Aren't we all? I thought as I retouched my lipply. My cheeks were still flushed, and it wasn't just the embarrassment. The desire I felt for Angelo had left me breathless.

We wound our way back to the hostel through the early morning streets. As the sun peeked over the historic spires, I longed for Angelo's kiss. At the door, he pulled me in for a hug. My heart did a flip when he dipped his head towards mine. Surely this was it?

He pecked me on both cheeks. My heart hit rock bottom; I had to fight back the tears.

With two days left in Florence, I put on a brave face and told myself to make the most of it. That afternoon we met him and a group of his friends in the park. I was exhausted from the late night, and it was a sweltering day. I couldn't believe the way everyone dashed around kicking a soccer ball; even Nicky played in goal. One guy did a sliding tackle and Angelo went down, badly skinning his knee. I rushed over to help, and we went to sit under a shady tree. Gently, I tied my cotton bandana around his leg to stop the bleeding.

"Your scarf, it is ruined," he said.

"I don't mind," I replied, finishing the makeshift bandage. We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, before I said, "Look, I recently broke up with a guy I'd been seeing for a while. I'm so glad that I did. This week with you has shown me how much I was missing."

He reached out and touched my hand. "I too was with someone. She had a terrible scooter accident."

My eyes widened. Had his girlfriend died?

He looked away into the distance. "I took off six months to help. When she recovers, she leaves with my friend."

"Oh, no!" My hand shot up to my mouth. "That's awful."

"Si." He nodded and looked down, but I noticed his eyes were glassy. We were interrupted by everyone coming over to join us, and the moment was lost.

The next day was my last. That evening, Angelo made a picnic and took me to a quiet spot on the banks of the Arno. As the sun sank behind the terracotta rooftops, we drank smooth red wine. Below us, a boat skimmed past, the rowers pulling together in unison.

“Perfect timing,” I sighed.

Angelo cocked his head.

I swallowed hard, then blurted out, “I understand you’re getting over someone. Me too. But I think this would be the perfect time for a kiss.”

The corners of Angelo’s mouth flicked up. “You do?”

“Yes... *Si.*”

Angelo cupped my face in his hand. “*Bella* Chloe, I never meet anyone like you. You are healing my broken heart.”

I smiled, enjoying the warmth of his skin on my cheeks. My heart beat in double time as he leant down. Our lips met. I could taste the wine in his mouth as his tongue found mine. He lightly tugged my hair as he ran his fingers through it. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I drew back and inhaled his unique scent of sandalwood and citrus.

He whispered, “Is so quick, but I am falling in love with you. Please stay.”

I kissed him, harder this time. He responded by drawing me into his embrace.

I paused for breath and replied, “*Si, amore mio.*”

Romance Writers of New Zealand







## *Breaking the Rules*

### **Susie Frame**

Fletcher drove to Oceanview Rest Home on yet another mercy dash. He had to face facts. It was only a matter of time before he'd be saying a sad goodbye. A boulder-sized ache lodged in his chest as he walked through the self-opening doors towards the office.

'Thanks for the heads up,' he said to the receptionist. 'I'm not too late, am I? He hasn't—?'

'No. He's still with us. Eva, our new nurse, is looking after him. I'll page her and let her know you've arrived.'

'No, don't worry,' said Fletcher, flicking a wave. 'I know where to go.'

He tried not to gag as he made his way down the carpeted corridor, the scent of roast meat with top notes of bodily by-products too much for his sensitive nose.

He opened the door to the expansive rose-garden, dragged crisp Autumn air into his lungs then went in search of his much-loved Gus.

He found him. Wrapped in the arms of a beautiful, long-legged brunette. The pair seemed lost in the moment as they waltzed around the lawn and even though Fletcher had sworn himself off women since his last disastrous break-up, a pang of jealousy towards his new friend and flat-mate knifed him in the solar plexus.

'You've officially reached a new low,' he berated himself. 'Jealous of a—'

'Oh, hi! You must be Fletcher? We've been waiting for you, haven't we, Gus?' A warm smile broke from Eva's strawberry lips, and sunlight bounced off her shamrock-green eyes making them even more radiant.

*Gotta hand it to you, Gus. You have impeccable taste in women.* Gus gave a couple of quiet barks as if

to say, 'I. Know.'

Eva smiled as Gus nestled his small terrier face into the crook of her pale slender neck. 'This boy is the most adorable creature. How long have you had him?'

'A week. He's a rescue dog and he lives up to his name, believe me. I don't know what it is about this place but this is the third time since I adopted him I've had to rescue him from here. How he manages to get out of my "secure" back yard down the road,' Fletcher said, air-quoting, 'is beyond me.'

A laugh bubbled from Eva's throat. 'I hear you. I had a Foxie. If there was a way Delilah could get out for an adventure, she'd find it.'

'Was? So, Delilah's...?'

Fletcher watched Eva's brilliant eyes cloud then disappear under lilac-coloured lids. 'Yes, sadly,' she said, rubbing her cheek against Gus's face and giving him a tight squeeze.

Knowing how Gus had crept under his skin in seven short days Fletcher's heart went out to her. 'I'm sorry. That must've been tough.'

'Yes, it was. It still hurts.' She raised Gus up in the air and playfully shook him from side to side. 'You're lucky to have this gorgeous bloke, who, by the way, knows exactly what he's doing running to Oceanview. He's a joy-bringer, aren't you my precious?'

Fletcher took in the sight before him. Eva smiling and yes, he was sure Gus was grinning from ear to ear, too. And why not? He had a feeling he'd be doing exactly the same if Eva's arms were draped around him. 'Yeah, but even though I've fallen for his loving ways I think I may have to take him back after our three-week trial. I work long hours and he needs so much exercise. It's not fair for him to be alone during the day. I don't know what I was thinking taking on this little one.'

*Liar.* He knew exactly what he was thinking. He needed to fill a void. What better way to plaster over the jagged cracks in your heart, than with an adorable, loving-without-conditions Gus?

Eva gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. 'It's obvious you have a kind heart, Fletcher. You've done the right thing. Have you ever heard the mantra we dog people live by?'

'No? What's that?'

"Dogs are not our whole lives but they make our lives whole." She handed Gus back to his waiting arms. 'I just know this handsome guy will make your life complete in ways you can't even imagine right now, won't you, sweetheart?' She reached out and drew her hand down the length of Gus's back, just as Fletcher brought his hand up to do the same. His hand rested on hers; her gaze rested on him. Their moment pyrotechnic. Powerful. Intimate.

The memory of Eva stayed with Fletcher as he drove home. He wondered if she was still thinking about him?

*Get a grip? What are you? Some hormone-drenched school boy?*

But the private reprimand did nothing to stop his thoughts. He pictured Eva again; hair flying, eyes sparkling, her slender body swaying as she'd danced Gus around the garden. She was unlike any other woman he'd met; unaffected, open, genuine.

And generous. He still couldn't believe her kind offer of help.

'So, Gus,' he said, opening the gate to his flat, 'what do you think about having a private canine-carer, eh?'

Fletcher was reluctant at first to take Eva up on her suggestion but she convinced him it'd be a win-win. 'I don't live too far from here, either,' she'd said, 'and I only work from one till five. I could pick Gus up in the mornings and take him on my run up around the old quarry. That might be enough to tire him out? His adventuring would be replaced with sleep time? There you go. Problem solved.'

Fletcher hoped he'd done the right thing saying yes to the plan. He remembered the hard and fast rule

he'd made after his cheating ex left - the You-Will-Have-Nothing-To-Do-With-Women-For-At-Least-A-Year rule. But, of course, he'd be at work when Eva picked up Gus. He wouldn't be faced with her soul-deep loveliness. Their paths wouldn't even cross.

A good thing. Definitely a good thing.

Within a week, Fletcher could see the benefits of Eva's help. Trips to Oceanview had stopped and, after work, reading the 'Gus diary' she'd slipped under his back door, was the highlight of each day. Yesterday's was a classic.

**Collected Gus at 9.30. He ran like a lunatic, chased a feral cat up a tree, had a poo, then thanked me for his run by bringing me a 'present' – a dead rat! Hope you had a good day? TTFN, Eva. PS As always, thanks for letting me take Gus. He's the best.**

*You're the best, Eva.*

Fletcher had to concede he'd never met anyone like her before. Today was her day off but she'd insisted on taking Gus out for an afternoon run. She was happy to help and expected nothing in return. No hidden agenda. She was caring and funny and her natural beauty made her the perfect package.

*You and your stupid rules.*

He opened the back door to his flat looking forward to reading what mischief Gus had got up to on today's run.

No note.

'Gus? Gus?' he called, striding out to the kennel. 'Here boy.'

No Gus.

He snatched his phone from his jeans pocket. Had he missed a message from Eva telling him about a change of run time?

No message.

Panic gripped his gut, his heart raced. His mind filled with frantic thoughts of Gus and accidents; Gus, who, Fletcher now knew, had found his forever home. And another urgent thought scudded round his brain. Had something happened to Eva?

The sun was starting to dip and the air was cooling quickly.

*The quarry. He had to get to the quarry.*

He drove quickly up to the quarry entrance then set off running around the well-worn track, a blanket and beanie clutched under his arm. He called for Gus. He called for Eva, but the only response was the echo of his own voice. The feeling of time slowing made his legs pump faster.

'Gus? Eva? Can you hear me?'

As he rounded Shingle Bend Fletcher heard the sweetest sound. He turned his ear in the direction of the urgent barks and a moment later was rewarded with the sight of Gus running towards him. He scooped him up and hugged him tightly.

*One found. One to go.*

'Where's Eva, Gus? Take me to Eva.'

Gus jumped out of Fletcher's arms and ran back the way he'd come, stopping every few bounds to make sure Fletcher was following.

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'Seriously, Fletcher! You don't have to carry me. Give me your arm and I'll hobble out.'

'Look at your ankle. You'll make it five times worse putting weight on it—'

'But...'

'That's just not happening on my watch. So, stop arguing. Right,' he said, handing her the beanie, 'put

this on and we'll get you out of here.'

He gently lay the blanket over Eva and slid his arms under her slim legs. 'Okay. You ready?'

'Bend your knees! Watch your back!'

Fletcher looked down at Eva. He brushed dirt and dust from her face and swept loose strands of hair from her eyes. 'Will you stop worrying about me and let me worry about you?'

Eva flashed him a megawatt smile. 'So that's where Gus gets his caring nature from?'

'What do you mean?'

'From the minute I tripped to when he heard you calling, he never left my side.'

*I never want to leave your side.*

Fletcher stood up carefully. 'He's a good bloke. That's what good blokes do.'

'Not in my experience. All blokes aren't like Gus. Or...'

She hesitated. 'You. Which is why I'm totally annoyed with myself right now.'

'Oh? Why's that?'

'Promise you won't think I'm loopy?'

'I like loopy,' he said, before losing his footing on some uneven ground.

Eva bounced in his arms. 'Whoa, that was close. Do you mind if I hang on tighter? For safety reasons, of course.'

'Not at all, but on one condition.'

Eva smiled. 'What's that?'

'You tell me all about this loopiness of yours.'

Fletcher soaked up the feeling of Eva's arms as they snaked around his shoulders, her radiating warmth filling him with an unexpected contentment.

'Well, I've made this stupid rule about steering clear of men since my last break up.'

'Meaning—?'

'Meaning...if I didn't have it, I'd ask you out. What do you say to that?'

He looked into the distance.

*Remember your rule.*

Then he caught sight of Gus sauntering ahead.

*"He will make your life complete in ways you can't imagine."*

'Well, I think I'd say—' He held her gaze and smiled. 'Rules are made to be broken.'

Fletcher stopped. He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her lips gently, once, twice.

Eva lovingly cupped his face.

Then she kissed him straight back.





## *The Cinderella Mistake*

**Emma Bryson**

Everything had been perfect.

The venue, the décor, her overpriced gravity-defying boobs.

Everything, that is, until Jake had sauntered through the ballroom double doors, a blissful grin plastered all over his handsome face. The moment she saw him, Madison's stomach fell. She felt winded, like all the air had suddenly left the room. Stumbling out of the ballroom, she left sparkling punch, handcrafted canapés and a trail of embarrassment behind her. Her breath caught in her throat, snagging on a shattered dream that now seemed so impossibly foolish.

*How could she have deluded herself into thinking that this ridiculous plan would work? Did she really believe that Jake would somehow fall for her, if only she moulded herself to be smarter, sexier, funnier... practically womanly perfection incarnate?*

Her chin quivered as she teetered on the brink of uncontrollable tears. She took a stuttering breath in. But she couldn't allow herself to cry. Not now, and certainly not here.

The harsh reality was that if her life could be carved into eras, then there would be three. A before Jake, a during Jake, and now, an after Jake – and after-Jake Madison felt extraordinarily stupid for spending her time, her energy, and twelve thousand dollars on a high-end boob job to impress someone who would never, ever love her. The people in this suffocating ballroom were people who had only ever paid her attention when they felt an insatiable urge to tear her down. And all three eras of Madison had let them.

Madison dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her silk handkerchief. Her only saving grace was that Dylan wasn't here to witness her downfall. While his failure to RSVP to their 10-year high school reunion wasn't much of a surprise after their fight over the theme, she still felt his smug 'I-told-you-so' face buzzing around her like a summer mosquito.

Madison ran her hand along the bannister as she descended the marble steps. Her clammy fingers skimmed along the varnished surface like river stones across water. She needed to get out of here, but even broken dreams felt more like home than the wide world beyond the ballroom.

As she descended the next step, her ankle lurched sideways. Madison gasped as she heard a *snap*. Lowering herself carefully to sit on the cold marble steps, she winced as she held her broken leopard-print heel in her hands, hugging it close to her chest.

She placed a hand against her collar bone. Her index finger twirled the mechanical hands of her broken clock necklace as she tried to ride out breathless, full-body sobs.

*If only it were that easy to turn back time.*

Forcing the stale air out of her lungs, she closed her eyes and began to count down from three, the way her psychologist had taught her.

*Three, in...*

*Two, out...*

“What’s new, pussycat?”

Madison’s eyes flew open.

Of course. Who else would catch her in an undeniable moment of weakness but Dylan?

*Perfect.*

Madison’s cheeks burned as she surveyed him. His Tarzan costume predictably left little of his oiled, rugby-hardened physique to the imagination, but the ‘I-told-you-so’ expression that she had expected to accompany his perfectly chiselled abs was surprisingly missing. Instead, his eyebrows were creased together with a concern so genuine that it caught her off-guard.

“Nothing’s *new*.” Madison snapped, forcing down the broken-dreams lump that still clung to her throat. “And you look c-completely ridiculous, by the way.”

Madison’s stomach flipped as he looked at her. His gaze was hot, penetrating, like he could reach right down into her core and pull up the little girl hiding inside.

Her cheeks heated as she waited for Dylan to respond. All the tiny hairs on her arms stood on end, her stomach still squirming uncomfortably. She pulled herself out of the silence.

“I... I thought you weren’t going to come, anyway. I seem to remember you saying something about reunions being hell incarnate – which, at the time, was rather ironic, considering you helped to plan this one.”

Dylan’s eyebrows rose slightly as he pinned her with a white-hot stare. “I guess I changed my mind, didn’t I? And don’t for a minute think that you can change the subject on me like that, Maddie. What’s going on? You look like you’d tuck tail and run out of here if it wasn’t for the broken shoe.”

Madison sighed. There was no point in hiding it from him – if Dylan didn’t manage to wangle the truth out of her now, then he would certainly piece everything together soon enough, anyway.

“Well, I was seriously considering it,” Madison muttered. “Things haven’t really gone... as I had planned.”

Dylan rolled his eyes to the heavens. “If you’re talking about the ‘Welcome to the Jungle’ theme again, I won the committee over fair and square—”

“–No, it’s not that,” Madison interjected. “It’s... something else. Something I don’t particularly want to talk about right now. Or... ever, for that matter.”

Madison’s face turned from pink to red as she stared at her two feet, one shoed, one bare, feeling as dejected and out of place as she no doubt looked.

She heard Dylan sigh as he ran his fingers through his already jungle-mussed hair. He reached out, putting a gentle finger under her chin, coaxing her to look at him. And although she staunchly managed to hold off tears, a muscle in her jaw twitched, giving her away.

Dylan’s finger hovered for a moment on Madison’s cheek.

“We used to be close, Maddie. Damned close. I know we lost touch until this whole reunion thing came along but, please. Let me get you a drink, and you can tell me all about it.”

Madison hesitated, hoisting herself off the floor. She sucked her cheek into her mouth to stop her chin from quivering. Dylan moved closer to her, piercing her with his eyes of fire, warm and comforting.

“Maddie-Paddy, I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry your leopard-printed butt kicking and screaming to that damned bar if I have to.”

Madison pursed her lips to hide an involuntary smile. As infuriating as he was, Dylan had always known how to make her laugh – right from that first day in kindergarten when he had shoved crayons up his nose to get her to shoot milk out hers.

Dylan offered her his arm. Madison took it hesitantly, though the familiar warmth of his bare skin comforted her. And as they ascended the staircase, Madison slowly started to let her guard down.

“You of all people know how hard I crushed on Jake during high school. When he stood me up at prom, I didn’t blame him. I thought... I mean... After Tyler Durden tipped that trashcan over my head at lunch, I was *luncheon meat girl*. Who wants to go to the prom with luncheon meat girl?”

Dylan scowled and scrunched his fist, and for a moment Madison was back at Valley High School cafeteria, terrified, begging Dylan not to punch Tyler, lest he be expelled and she lose her only friend. She took a deep breath before continuing. “I thought he was just too embarrassed to take me. But, now... well... I mean, I’ve worked hard to turn things around since then.”

She was silent for a moment, until Dylan arched a brow, gesturing for her to continue.

“I guess I just hoped that if I made this night perfect...” Madison trailed off, mortified about how foolish she’d been.

“You thought if tonight was perfect, you’d get a prom do-over?” Dylan had enough good grace not to look at her.

“Kind of...” Madison trailed off again.

Dylan paused outside the ballroom doors.

“And by that, what you *really* mean is that you thought that if you recreated prom night, he would fall in love with you and have your babies and you’d live happily ever after.”

“Well... yeah.” Madison said, resigned. If anyone knew she’d lived in fairy-tale land most of her life, it was Dylan. “I know it sounds stupid, but that’s exactly what I thought.”

Dylan grunted in acknowledgement. The silence between them resounded all the louder as they entered the crowded room.

And as they walked arm in arm, Madison couldn’t help but notice the way the corners of Dylan’s eyes fell.

“But, Maddie, you hardly even *knew* him. The last time you saw him was, what, at graduation?” Madison recoiled at his words, removing her arm from his.

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know that none of it matters anymore, anyway, because he turned up tonight with someone else.” Madison huffed. “And even though you’re an ass, you’re right... obviously, I didn’t know him. At least... not like I thought I did, anyway.”

Dylan looked around the ballroom, his gaze double-taking when he saw Jake hand in hand with his partner. The two men looked almost deliriously happy in each others’ company.

“Ahh,” said Dylan. “He’s not exactly... uh, buying what you’re selling, huh?”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it.” Madison glared.

Dylan’s shoulders relaxed as he led them to the bar. He cleared his throat.

“So, Maddie-paddy. Do they serve tequila, at this bar of yours?”

Madison snorted. “The last time I drank tequila, I wound up vomiting all over your mother’s prize Christmas lilies.”

Dylan grinned. “You know, she almost wrung my neck for that one.”

He chuckled as he signalled to the barman, and Madison finally felt some of the tension drain from her overworked limbs.

They sat at the bar as the night grew old, talking, reminiscing about rugby games and high school gossip. But something unsaid still sat between them.

“Maddie? I just have one question. Why Jake?”

Maddie frowned, taking a sip of her sparkling punch. “Remember when he hit Sally, my dog? Well, on Valentine’s Day he left a note in my locker. I slept with that note under my pillow for months. And I just thought... if he could be that sweet, surely he wasn’t as bad as the rest of them.”

Dylan raised an eyebrow, took a swig of his drink, and cleared his throat. “*Roses are red, violets are blue, I’m sorry about Sally, and I confess, I love you.*”

Madison’s jaw just about hit the table.

“It was you?”

Dylan grimaced. “The shmuck who asked you to prom with a note about your dead dog? Yeah... that was me.”

Once upon a time, Madison Claire thought she could split her life into three eras: before Jake, during Jake and after Jake. That is until she realised that her heart had belonged to Dylan Taylor all along.

Romance Writers of New Zealand







## Hit and Run

### Amy Blythe

Nicky was not often wrong. She'd made some epic mistakes, sure, but in her day-to-day life she was on the button. She could tell the difference between appendicitis and gas, heart burn and heart attack, internal bleeding, cracked ribs, collapsed lungs. You name it, she could diagnose it.

She could tell when patients were lying to her. "I only took the recommended dosage. I must be allergic."

She could tell when her daughter was lying to her. "I didn't touch the stuff. It was my mates and the smell got on me."

She could even tell when men lied to her, and her ex was definitely not taking it slow with his new girlfriend. Any day there'd be a ring—the sparkling diamond kind, closely followed by the telephone kind.

Nicky didn't want him back. She prided herself on never making the same mistake twice. And he was well within his rights; she had ended it, so fair play he could do what he liked with their perky, twenty-something nanny. But she would definitely prefer to have a date lined up in case she was invited to the engagement party.

A siren screamed in the ambulance bay. Nicky met the paramedics at the doors.

"Hit and run. Forty-two year old male. Multiple abrasions, probable fracture—"

"Of the left tibia. Scalp lac, possible concussion." Nicky snapped on gloves.

"Don't worry," the patient said to the paramedic. "She always does that."

Nicky had looked him over, gathering clues faster than Sherlock Holmes, but only now she properly saw his face. It was Sai.

"How are you, Nic?" He tried to catch her eye.

She scrambled to hide her surprise. "I thought you were in India."

"I was. Twenty-something hours ago. London had a charming way of welcoming me home."

The paramedic, facing Nicky on the other side of Sai's gurney, gave his blood pressure and heart rate: elevated but not alarming. Whereas Nicky's was probably through the roof.

"What happened to my luggage?" Sai turned to the paramedic, who only shrugged. "I had presents."

Nicky needed something to do. She snatched the scissors from a nurse and started cutting up his trousers.

"I bought Elise a book on Atul Dodiya. Do you remember—" He gasped in pain.

"Start an I.V.," Nicky said. The fracture wasn't compound but it might be comminuted. An x-ray would confirm. She was more concerned by his head wound.

"Dodiya did comic-style paintings, I thought Elise might—"

Nicky shone a light in his eyes. "Any loss of consciousness?"

He shook his head. "Reminded me of Elise's folio. You sent me photos."

Nicky touched the cut on his head. His ear was grazed too, gravel embedded in his skin. It had been most of a decade since she'd so much as touched him, but she remembered too well. Her hands in his hair, tongue around that lobe, lips just there on his neck.

They were cutting off his shirt.

"Nicky," he said.

"You're going to be fine, Sai."

The junior doctor who shadowed her was nowhere to be seen. This was a simple case, a good chance to practice sutures; Nicky was desperate to leave, but no such luck.

"How is she?" Sai reached for Nicky.

"She's sixteen."

"I know." He looked chastised. And so he should. He hadn't seen his daughter in more than three years. Airfare from Mumbai to London could buy a thousand inoculations.

"Set me up with 5-0, blue. I'll be back."

The paramedic followed her out into the corridor.

"He didn't lose consciousness?"

"Not according to witnesses."

Sai would be sore, and a little slow getting around, but long-term he'd be fine. Short-term, he was drugged-up to his eyes and Nicky was the one feeling the sting. Ridiculous. It had never been easy to see him since they'd broken up—but it had never been like this.

When she went back in, everything was set up. On Nicky's nod, the nurses left.

"See the number plate?"

He shook his head. "Dark green BMW X6."

"Way to disprove a stereotype."

"That's what I said."

"When you weren't busy getting run down."

He eyed the needle she was tapping.

"Lidocaine." She gave the injection. He didn't flinch. His lips turned out, about to speak, but she beat him to it. "What brings you back to London?"

"Holiday. Maybe."

She began cleaning the grit and dirt from his ear. "Maybe?"

He shrugged.

"Try not to move." She resumed washing the wound.

"It's been nine years. I don't know that I want to make it an even ten."

"No?"

"Do you ever feel like you're cleaning up a mess that keeps messing itself up again?"

"Yes," she answered deadpan, catching his eye. "People keep throwing themselves in front of moving vehicles."

He didn't smile.

She surveyed the irrigated wound, swollen and painful-looking, but clean. Next, sutures.

He had a heart rate monitor on his finger but the sound was off. In the quiet room, she could hear his breathing, her own, and the faint tick of a clock. Time. So much time had passed. He didn't look exactly the same, but he still looked so good. Dark hair and dark eyes, skin like cinnamon, lips a brilliant sunset.

She had to focus—had to thread a needle. "You can't have honestly expected to fix an entire health system in a decade."

"Of course not. But maybe, on some level, I thought ..." He shifted, in pain, no doubt.

"That you could help."

"With the benefits of education, experience, money ... I had to try."

Silence. They'd had this conversation before. So many times. He'd had his reasons to go, she'd had her reasons to stay. "How are your parents?"

"Disappointed."

"That you didn't save the world?"

"That I left."

He *was* moving back to England then.

"Can I see her?" He glanced sideways at Nicky.

She kept stitching. "Almost finished here."

He closed his eyes. "I know I'm not owed anything."

"Which strangely makes me the bad guy if I say no." Nicky tied off the last stitch. "There you go."

He turned his head to look at her properly. "You look good."

"Sure. It's the double shifts and scrubs."

"Brings out the blue in your eyes."

"Brings out the bullshit. Where's that x-ray got to?" She fled to the hallway. He shouldn't have this much effect on her.

Peterson, the junior doctor shadowing her, finally showed up. "You alright, Doctor?"

"Where you been?"

"Emergency appendectomy. Sorry, message didn't get through."

"I'm waiting on an x-ray. Chase that up for me?"

"Sure." Peterson marched off.

Nicky took a deep breath. She looked down the corridor, almost hoping for another patient, a challenge demanding all of her faculties. Nothing appeared.

Sai had his eyes shut when she went back in.

"How's the leg?" she said.

He didn't answer.

"Sai?" She touched his shoulder. His cheek. Her heart raced, blood roaring in her ears. "Sai." She thumbed open his eyes. "Sai?"

"Gotcha." He grinned.

She wanted to thump him. "Fucker."

"Wouldn't say no."

Damn those dimpling cheeks and laughing eyes. She turned away to get more saline.

"Nic." He sounded apologetic, but he wouldn't apologise; she knew him—too well.

She pressed a syringe into a vial.

"I emailed Elise."

"What?"

He hissed, the needle still in his arm.

She finished administering the anaesthetic. "Since when?"

"To tell her I was visiting."

"And?"

"She's worried about your reaction."

Unbelievable. Was he seriously trying to claim he knew anything about Elise's feelings?

"She wants to spend some time together, but she wasn't sure what you'd say."

"Or *maybe* she didn't feel she could turn you down?" Nicky started cleaning the cuts on his arm, not as carefully as she might have otherwise.

"I considered that. I asked her. She said she'd have no problem telling me to piss off—her words."

Nicky couldn't help feeling some pride in the kid.

"You're also allowed to tell me to piss off."

She paused in her work. "You're staying?"

"Hope so."

Nicky didn't want to hope—couldn't let herself, and yet she couldn't *not* hope. She turned his hand to see the rest of the lacerations. "This is deep."

He stretched out his hand. She watched his fingers curl open, remembered his hands on her. Remembered so clearly.

Open, weeping cuts dragged her back to the present. It'd be a while before he'd enjoy touching anyone with this hand.

He held up his other hand. "This one's unscathed." The heart rate monitor, perched like a hat on his index finger, touched her cheek first. "Weird, isn't it?"

"This hand took all the ..." She couldn't ignore his touch. "Sai."

"You feel that?"

"It's the Demerol."

"Is it?" He let his hand drop to his stomach.

The dark hair low on his abs led her eye to his belt, then his trousers, shredded from thigh to ankle. He might as well be wearing nothing but boxer briefs.

He caught her looking. "You on opioids too?"

What was she doing? "You might need sutures here. But at least a scar won't be obvious."

He didn't answer.

"Although, you could pull off a scar. It'd make you look mysterious. Dangerous."

"A fair warning?"

He *was* dangerous. He'd broken her heart.

"I was an idiot. Took both of you for granted."

She nodded.

"I don't expect you to trust me. Not any time soon."

"Good." She met his dark eyes, deep and pleading, and steeled her gaze. His lips shifted, as if he was trying out the words he was about to say. But she couldn't bear promises. She wanted to kiss him, wanted to know if he could make her feel like he used to, with just a kiss—like he had with a touch, a look.

"Nic." He started to sit up.

She shook her head. Firm and familiar, he kissed her, mouth closed, one desperate, restrained kiss. She pressed her forehead to his.

"Tell me this isn't the drugs," he begged.

"It's not the drugs." She looked him in the eye. "I need to look at your hand."

"I have another." He took hold of her face, the heart-rate monitor on his finger glancing across her ear as he kissed her again. He tasted like sweet coffee and spicy ginger biscuits, wonderfully warm.

"Found an x-ray," Peterson rushed in. "I'll, ah, just leave it."

Nicky pulled back.

"She's gone already." Sai's thumb kept hold of her chin and one finger scooped under her ear. "Damage done."

"I'm not worried about gossip. Your tibia could be comminuted."

"Yeah, well."

"*That's* the Demerol talking."

He lay back, smiling. "I'll lie still. Do what you want with me."

Nicky could not deny the appeal of that.

Romance Writers of New Zealand





## *If It's Tuesday and the Wind Southerly*

**Yvonne Walus**

I watch them together, my daughter and her best friend. They're both fifteen: she older by six months, he more sensible by at least six years.

"Come on, Lee." Tyler's pen tap-tap-taps the workbook on the dining room table. "Let's try the next equation."

Lee is on her phone. *In her phone* is a more accurate description, as the world outside the pixels doesn't exist for her right now.

"Lee?"

No response.

Tyler stands up, covers her hand with his. "Give me the phone, babe. You're not concentrating."

*Babe?* I expect Lee to bristle. To my surprise, she surrenders the distractor and they manage to work for a good minute another message pings.

Tyler types in Lee's password. "Not important. Keep going. You're doing really well."

I add two more sausages and lots of root vegetables to the casserole. "Tyler, you're staying for dinner." A statement, not a question. His foster parents don't concern themselves with nutrition or where he spends his evenings.

We complain so much about teenagers: they're lazy, self-centred, with a short attention span and no manners. Tyler is the opposite of all that.

"Thank you for having me," he says as he puts on his shoes after dinner. "Later, Lee."

Alexander, the man I've been dating for the last seven months, in between being a fulltime lawyer and a fulltime mother, catches my eye as Tyler hugs Lee goodnight.

"Worried?" he mouths.

"Nope."

It's a long hug but I know Lee doesn't like Tyler *in that way*. Doesn't "like" like him. She doesn't "like" like anyone in particular, or rather, she "likes" likes several boys: Matthew from debating, Ben from swimming. Last week she was grumpy because Sebastian the Head Boy acquired a girlfriend – not that Lee had actually ever said more than *hello* to Sebastian, but still.

Meanwhile, I really "like" like Alexander. The long hug he gives me when Lee goes to sleep is not a good-night hug, and we end up having a very good night indeed.

Saturday disappears in a flurry of chores, culminating in chauffeuring duties.

"Don't drive up to the house," Lee instructs. "We'll walk from here."

"Like your friends don't know you have a mum," I grumble, falling into what I imagine is teen-speak. "But whatever. Have fun, you two!"

I trust Tyler to make sure Lee doesn't touch the punch.

"Thank you for the lift." Tyler, not Lee.

The plan was to spend the evening with Alexander, but the week catches up with me and we change it to a family lunch on Sunday. Am I doing the right thing, letting a man into our lives? When Lee was younger, I was too busy with my career and making the most out of being a mum to bother with dating. Our family of two always felt complete. Alexander happened to me out of the blue, like winning the Lotto without ever buying a ticket.

As soon as I get home, I sleep until it's pick-up time.

Lee gives up her usual front seat and climbs into the back with Tyler, words pouring out of her like winter rain. Something about Audrey/Aubrey and Josh. A glimpse in the rear view mirror shows me her animated eyes.

"Tell me," I demand, mock-stern. It doesn't work often. But it does tonight.

"Audrey is going out with Josh," Lee informs me, every syllable as light as a champagne bubble. "They're so cute together."

There's more to the story, but I choose not to push it.

On Monday, Lee and Tyler get back from swimming practice too exhausted for homework. "Let's watch something so dumb we don't have to think," Lee says as she flicks through the options.

They settle on a reality dating show, but they don't last.

"It's degrading," Lee rages, her energy levels miraculously restored. "All these women, competing for one guy. Discussing their private lives on TV."

Tyler digests this. "Is it the *in-public* part that's bugging you? Or would it be less degrading if thirty



men were competing for one woman?”

“Yes!” She thinks a bit. “No.” Another pause. “I’d hate having to go to so much trouble for a guy. Love shouldn’t have to be hard work.”

*Shouldn’t it*, I muse, but don’t join the discussion. Relationships are usually constant compromise and endless effort, which is why I haven’t had many. Plus, if love were easy, would we value it as much?

As if on cue, Alexander arrives with a stack of boxes, bringing with him the smell of pepperoni and yeasty dough. Solid, steadfast, sexy Alexander. When did reliability become so hot? I couldn’t find him more desirable if I had to fight twenty-nine other women for his attention.

The kiss I steal is better than pizza.

The kids, meanwhile, have moved on. Between bites of pizza and carrot sticks, Lee says that someone called Zane is *dope the way he plays the guitar*.

“If it’s Monday, and not raining, then Lee likes Zane,” I quip.

Tyler pretends to smile. “Yeah, but what if it’s Tuesday and the wind southerly?”

Then maybe, just maybe, she can learn to like you, I think.

Later that night, barely minutes after the front door’s closed on Tyler, I receive a text from him: “How am I supposed to know when it’s the real deal? Like, you know, love? Is there a scientific method you can use to figure it out, or...?”

Now that’s something I can talk about for hours. But in a text? Not a fan of typing, I condense it to: “Imagine kissing this person – how exciting is it on a scale of zero to ten? Would you like to spend every day with her, for the rest of your life – zero to ten? Would you jump in front of a train to save her? If the answer to all the questions is eight or above, it may indeed be the Real Thing.”

Alexander leans closer on the sofa and my pulse quickens when his thigh touches mine. “What are you composing?”

I angle the screen to him. “A formula. The science behind the art of love.”

“As easy as that, huh? What about asking whether the person makes him happy?”

Happiness is not always the best measure of love, but I ask anyway. “Do I make you happy?”

“Always.”

“I know.” I do know. “But every minute of every day? Right now?”

He gives me one of those smiles that made me notice him two years ago, the same one that melted my no-dating resolve when he asked me out. “Right now,” he says, “I’ll give you a full ten out of ten for how excited I am about kissing you.”

His lips graze my neck. He smells of citrusy aftershave and minty mouthwash, and my excitement about kissing him is way above a mere ten. Lee chooses this very moment to emerge from her room, toothbrush in mouth. “Gross,” she pronounces through the white foam of toothpaste.

I edge away from Alexander. He raises one eyebrow. Those eyebrows alone can spike my hormone levels to dangerously reckless.

“Let’s wait for her to fall asleep,” I whisper.

“How is she going to learn what romantic love is, if you don’t show her?”

“I’ll show her the formula instead?”

Alexander acknowledges my joke by crinkling his eyes at me. We fall silent in that harmonious way of ours, and I think it bodes well. Our relationship is progressing from the stomach butterflies into something more settled yet equally intoxicating. It’s still far from a solid thing: we haven’t yet tested the limits, we haven’t stretched it, broken then repaired it. Perhaps we’ll never have to. Perhaps Lee is right and love shouldn’t be hard work.

“Mum?” Lee has finished brushing her teeth. “Can you tuck me in?”

“Okay, hon.” I turn to Alexander. “Give me five minutes. She needs to talk.”

He reaches for his wallet and keys. “Don’t rush it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sorry-”

“Delayed gratification and all that.” He kisses the inside of my palm, making the butterflies return in full force. “You’re worth waiting for. Now go be a mum.”

My heart sweet and soft and full, I knock on Lee’s door and, like a vampire, wait for her to invite me in. The irony isn’t lost on me: she can barge into my bedroom any time she pleases, yet I have to ask permission to enter hers. Teenagers. Not worth the battle.

I settle on the edge of her bed. “What did you want to tell me, sweetheart?”

“Do you think Tyler should go out with Brandi?”

Can’t remember who Brandi is, but what I actually think is that Tyler would be ideal for Lee. Fifteen is young, yet I wouldn’t mind it if Lee were to open her heart a bit. My life was always too independent, too reserved, too solitary. I thought I was being a feminist. Now I fear I may have been a hermit.

Lee deserves the whole bundle: a satisfying career, children, a husband who will love her forever.

“Would Tyler and Brandi be a good match?” I ask carefully.

“Don’t know. It’s just that, now that Audrey is dating Josh, it’s weird.”

My head is spinning. What do Audrey and Josh have to do with anything?

Aloud I ask, “How is it weird?”

“Audrey used to like Tyler,” Lee says as though that explained everything.

“So?”

“So he was off-limits. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings by dating Tyler, and it was all good. But now she’s no longer into Tyler, so Tyler’s available, and it’s weird. If he were to date Brandi-” she trails off.

“If he were to date Brandi, would he have time to hang out with you?” I ask.

“I? Don’t? Know?” She makes every word a question.

“How do you feel about dating Tyler yourself?”

Lee shakes her head so vehemently the whole bed wobbles. “It’s not a good idea to date your best friend. Because when you break up, you’ll lose the friendship.”

“Let me get this straight. When you date someone, he’s supposed to be a stranger? Or a sworn enemy?”

“Mu-u-m! Just not your best friend. At least not when you’re still at school. School relationships never last.”

“Give it a chance?”

Lee’s sigh is so heavy that soon it might indeed be Tyler’s turn: Tuesday, with the wind southerly. Perhaps it’ll only last a month, or a year, or perhaps their school relationship will break the rules and become The Real Thing.

Meanwhile, I’m beginning to suspect that Alexander and I are in for the long haul. The Real Thing. Whether it’s Tuesday or Sunday - and no matter how the wind blows.

Romance Writers of New Zealand





## *The Liars' Club*

### **Yvonne Walus**

The first rule of the Liars' Club is: you don't talk about the Club. The second rule is: everybody knows the Club exists anyway.

"How can I help you?" The sales assistant at the cosmetics store focuses her attention on me, and I fancy her on the spot. Her body has all the right curves, her mouth promises passion, and her name tag reads: *Dawson*. Exotic. Independent. Sexy.

I use my opening smile: baffled and a little embarrassed. "It's my daughter's birthday and I'd like to buy her some bath oils or whatever it is girls like."

"Wow, happy birthday to your daughter! How old? Is she more of a tomboy or a princess?"

The conversation flows, and soon my shopping basket is filled with scented soaps and bath bombs.

"Can you gift-wrap each item separately? My daughter loves opening presents."

I pay cash, asking for change in ten-dollar notes and for Dawson's phone number. Friday evening well spent.

Walking down Queen Street, I pass four homeless men, and I give each a tenner. Ten bucks will buy two coffees, or two burgers with fries, or a hit of whatever they need to make their lives bearable for a few hours. Who am I to judge?

As soon as I reach my apartment, I kick off my shoes and pull off the necktie. "I'm home," I call out, not expecting an answer.

One pepperoni pizza ordered, the wine bottle opened to breathe and the bath products put away, I browse the movie options. If somebody were with me, we'd probably argue about which show to watch, so it's just as well I'm alone.

Later, much later, I fall into bed and close my eyes without switching on the alarm. This is the good life.

\*\*\*

I invented my daughter fifteen years ago. My first job, a few months in, I got asked to work over the long weekend. Normally, I would have agreed, but I had already booked a romantic get-away, and because my then-girlfriend was going hot and cold on me, I needed the opportunity to figure out what's what. With an engagement ring, no less.

Plus, the project was super-boring.

"Damn," I said, pulling a disappointed grin. "Hate to miss this chance to contribute, but I need to look after my baby daughter. Her mum," I broke off, mumbled something. "Anyway, she's out of the picture. And my parents live in England." That last bit at least was true.

"Oh, I didn't realise you're a solo dad." My boss touched my shoulder, a barrier broken. "You should have mentioned it."

If I were a mother, a woman who tried to use her baby as a reason not to work on a Saturday, I'd have been deemed less-than-professional and not fully committed to my career. A man, though – what a bloke!

Unfair, I know. I felt bad about lying. Then I felt even worse when I got dumped on one knee holding up that diamond ring. Thinking back, perhaps it was karma. Or maybe Abigail – the only woman I ever allowed myself to fall in love with – simply wasn't that into me.

The feeling of guilt at the office was amplified when I got promoted to a team leader position, because, as a father, I'd be a good fit. The irony being, not many mothers hear that their parenting skills make them a natural manager.

It's all super-unfair and super-unethical. But to paraphrase a modern philosopher, we are all slaves with white collars chasing after cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy stuff we don't need. Think about today's jobs – not nurses and builders, of course, for they supply meaningful services – but all the middle managers, the data crunchers and marketers. How many of them could disappear tomorrow, leaving the fabric of our society intact?

I'm a bureaucrat working for the government. Your taxes pay my salary. And if I stopped working tomorrow, you wouldn't be any worse off. Chances are, you wouldn't even notice.

Thus, in the great scheme of things, my lies don't matter. Much.

\*\*\*

Saturday night, the gift-wrapped bath bombs in hand, I arrive at my current girlfriend's apartment. "Happy one-month anniversary," I say.

She's an environment fanatic, so the idea of bath products without a bottle is an instant hit. Consumers! No matter how careful we may be about plastics, we're still into material things. And our possessions, they end up possessing us.

Damn. Too much philosophy for a date night. Plus, I can't stop thinking about Dawson. When my girlfriend dims the lights, I make a show of checking the phone. "Hang on. Looks like I missed a call from the babysitter."

Some lies are worse than others. This one lets me leave without hurting someone's feelings, so that's ok.

When I get home, I shower until the hot water runs cold, then text Dawson.

We're getting drinks on Tuesday.

\*\*\*

The drinks with Dawson go better than expected. "Let's not play games," she says after the first glass of sparkling wine, her face so close I can see the copper flecks in her irises. "The chemistry between us... I'm not imagining it, right? Let's go somewhere private."

Her directness is refreshing. Makes me want her even more.

On the way to her place we talk. I'm surprised to discover she likes most of my favourite movies, has read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and is a certified scuba diver. If I still believed in soulmates, I'd be paying attention right about... now.

Fortunately, Abigail cured me of love a long time ago. Dawson may be smart and funny and sexy as hell, but I don't do long-term relationships. Which is almost a pity, because the physical connection we have is phenomenal. Can't remember a better first time with anybody else. Or a better second time.

"Hungry?" she asks afterwards. "We could whip up an omelette, then watch something on Netflix."

I pull her close. "Sounds like heaven." It's the truth. I love home cooking, and it's too much bother to prepare dinner for one. "Forget the TV, though. Let's keep talking. I want to get to know you."

It's not a line. The reason I date is not what you think. I mean yes, the sex, obviously. Mainly, though, it's for company.

Lame? You bet.

"I would have thought you got to know me pretty intimately already," Dawson hands me the egg whisk and a big bowl. "On the sofa. And on the carpet."

That makes me smile. "We haven't even tried the bed."

"Yet."

"Is that a promise?"

"Definitely."

It's morning before we eat that omelette and speak in complete sentences again.

\*\*\*

"How old did you say your daughter was?" Dawson asks a few weeks later as we're getting dressed. "Five?"

I struggle into my jeans. "Yes."

“That’s such a cool age. I’d like to meet her sometime.”

That’s my exit cue. Done it so many times before, I have the speech memorised: my daughter and I belong to an exclusive unit of two, my social life has to be totally separate from my family life, and I can’t risk my daughter ever getting close to a woman who will break her heart when we stop dating. It always works. The women cry, I tell them nothing needs to change. Sooner or later, they all want more than casual dating, and we go our separate ways.

Dawson is not playing by the rules. “I’m not asking for your hand in marriage.” She shrugs, watching me with an intensity I don’t yet understand. “Just thought our daughters could have a play date.”

I must be hallucinating. “Wait. What did you say?”

“My daughter’s seven. She’s at her dad’s most of the week, because his work hours are flexible.”

Hot damn. Just my luck. I really, really like Dawson. And I don’t want to lose her. Perhaps I could hire a child actor to play the part of my daughter once a week? I button my shirt and look around for the socks.

“Let me help you out,” she says. “You don’t have a daughter.”

I keep quiet. Not a strategy. It’s because I have no clue what to say.

“Chill,” she tells me. She’s only put on her underwear so far, and a primitive part of me is distracted. “It’s all good. Nobody’s truthful one hundred percent of the time. The price we pay for living in a society.”

She’s not mad at me. Can’t get my head around it. She’s caught me in a humongous fib and she’s not angry. If I were still capable of falling in love, this would make me fall in love with Dawson.

I take her hands in mine. “I’m sorry. So very, very sorry.”

“Don’t be. Lies are neither good nor bad. They’re like water: they can bring comfort, save your life even. Or they can drown you. Their gravity depends on their effect. This lie hasn’t hurt me.”

“But shouldn’t relationships be based on honesty?” Ironic that it’s me saying it, the badge-bearing member of the Liars’ Club.

“Hey, no relationship would survive total honesty.”

Dawson’s called it a relationship and I haven’t freaked out.

In fact, I called it a relationship first.

Progress.

\*\*\*

As soon as I get home that evening, I head straight for the drinks cabinet. Lagavulin has been my only love till now, a smoky rough ride into oblivion whenever loneliness gets too much.

I’m still no closer to understanding my feelings for Dawson, when the doorbell rings. The living room sways ever so slightly as I traverse the carpet to answer the door.

A young person is standing on my doormat. Short hair with a purple fringe that covers most of the face. A gold stud in the nose, like a pimple full of pus ready to be squeezed. Laddered jeans, one hole so big you can see the knee.

It looks up at me. Female. Something familiar around the jawline. Eyes the exact replica of Abigail’s,

hard like the diamond I tried to give her all those years ago.

The girl swings her backpack into my limp arms.

“Hi dad,” she says.

\*\*\*

“We can deal with it.” That’s Dawson’s reaction to my news. Immediate, unwavering, dead-on. “I didn’t mind it that you had a daughter when we first met. Why should it matter now?”

“What about Abigail? She’s bound to be in my life in some capacity.”

“Depends whether you’re still in love with her.” Dawson’s tone is casual. Her eyes, though, are two rabbits ready to bolt.

“No way.” I pull her into my arms. “I’m in love with *you*.”

This is the biggest truth I’ve ever told. And it feels good.

Romance Writers of New Zealand







## *Love On Wheels*

### **Dorothy Fletcher**

‘I can do this,’ Maria mumbled as she strained to pull herself up from the floor into her wheelchair. ‘This . . . will . . . not . . . beat . . . me.’

Her hands slipped down the handles and she fell in a heap.

She fought the tears that threatened to fill her eyes. ‘I’ll never be able to do this.’

A white and purple trainer stepped into her view. She followed up the blue jean clad leg, the lithe body in a red tee, and finally reached the smiling face. It was a good-looking face, framed with short dark hair and a matching beard. It was the eyes that held hers, though. They were hazel and twinkled as if they held some secret safely tucked away.

‘You need to keep trying – only way to learn.’ the intruder said.

Maria couldn’t place this man. ‘What?’

‘Practice – that’s how you find the knack.’

Feeling at a real disadvantage she wriggled around until she was sitting upright. That felt more dignified. She was also aware that some of her unruly hair had escaped from the tight pony tail she always pulled it into these days. Despite a quick rescue attempt it wouldn’t stay behind her ear.

‘Why are you on your own?’ he asked. ‘Where’s Mike. He should be here when you’re trying to learn this tricky manoeuvre.’

‘Someone fell in one of the rooms and he was called to help. He told me . . .’

The man shook his head slowly. ‘He told you not to try it on your own?’ Maria nodded. ‘Too impatient?’

Frustration bubbled up inside her. ‘I need to get out of here.’

‘I know you do. You have to accept, though, it’s small steps. Have you started lifting weights?’

‘No.’

‘Why not? You have to build your arm muscles to make up for your legs.’

Maria dropped her chin and stared at the floor as she admitted a little sheepishly, ‘I only arrived yesterday.’

‘Yesterday? What’s Mike doing trying to teach you this manoeuvre so soon?’

Yet another confession. ‘He didn’t.’

‘What?’ He looked confused for a few seconds then realization dawned. ‘You thought you could prove him wrong and get back in your wheelchair on your own and go home.’

Maria nodded, then felt mortified as the tears she’d been holding back overflowed her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

‘You idiot.’

If she hadn’t been so hung up on her own shame and embarrassment she would have heard the gentle, caring tone.

‘Idiot?’ she yelled as she blubbered. ‘How dare you call me an idiot when you don’t know what it’s like to face a life in this thing,’ and she hit the wheelchair hard, hurting her hand in the process. She wasn’t going to admit it, though. ‘And I don’t even know your name.’

‘Simon. Now can I call you an idiot?’

‘Who’s an idiot,’ Mike called as he breezed back into the gym.

‘She is,’ Simon said as he moved to one side so Mike could see what Maria had been up to.

Mike rushed over. ‘How did you fall out?’

Time for the truth. ‘I didn’t,’ she said as Mike helped her back into the chair. ‘I thought I could do this on my own. So I slid out to try.’

‘And?’ Mike asked.

‘I failed.’

‘Good,’ Mike said. ‘Now you know how much upper body strength you’re going to need we can get on with weight training this afternoon.’ He released the brakes on the chair. ‘You on duty yet, Simon?’

‘No. Just going to do a few weights.’

Mike started to push Maria from the room when Simon stopped him. ‘There is one thing – what’s your name? I can’t keep calling you Idiot.’

She laughed and then answered, ‘Maria.’ She was still feeling embarrassed and had the urge to keep talking. ‘Soppy name but Mum and Dad met when she played the part in West Side Story, so I got stuck with it.’

Simon struck a heroic pose and started to sing in a wonderful baritone. “‘The most beautiful sound I ever heard: Maria. Maria, Maria. Maria.’”

She laughed. ‘Now who’s an idiot?’ she called back to him as Mike wheeled her down the corridor.

‘Maria,’ Simon sang quietly. “‘I’ve just met a girl named Maria.’”

As he watched her go something strange bubbled up in his chest, something he’d not felt in a long time – hope for the future.

‘Does this ever get any easier?’ Maria asked Mike during the short break he’d allowed her in the weight lifting.

‘Definitely. Most people don’t notice the change as it’s so gradual, but one day you’ll find pushing those wheels around becomes second nature and you’ll gradually be able to go further.’

‘I suppose that’s happening – slowly.’

‘You’ve only been at it for a week. Can’t expect instant results.’

‘Why not?’

She sensed someone behind her.

‘Because you only get independence through hard work,’ it was Simon. ‘Isn’t that right?’

Mike laughed. ‘Word perfect.’

‘Every patient has to learn it,’ Simon said, and he tapped his right leg.

Simon looked Mike in the eye and motioned his head a couple of times towards the door. Mike smiled and nodded. He looked at his watch then spoke to Maria. ‘Good lord, is that the time. I should have been at clinic five minutes ago. Simon, can you help me get the lovely lady back in her chair and then return her to her room, please.’

‘No problemo,’ Simon told him. ‘Got a couple of hours before I’m on duty.’

Mike moved to help her.

‘No,’ she tensed her muscles, ‘let me try.’

Simon smiled. ‘Okay, Idiot. Go for it.’

Maria took a couple of deep breaths. She’d show Simon. She lined herself up as Mike had been teaching her. Took a firm hold of the handles and heaved with all the strength she had. The dead weight of her useless legs pulled against her shoulders and arms. She would not give in. Gradually she lugged her body up towards the seat.

The weight was too much. It wasn’t going to happen. She was going to fail again in front of Simon. This wasn’t how she’d stupidly imagined their next meeting.

She was about to let go and fall to the floor when Simon’s strong arms slid around her, giving her enough support to gently ease herself back into the chair.

Mike laughed. 'I don't think you two need me,' and he left.

Maria hung her head as tears formed in her eyes. 'Failed again,' she mumbled, at the same time trying hard to ignore the warm glow she'd felt being held in Simon's arms, and the lingering aroma of musk that heightened her senses.

'What?' Simon exclaimed. 'That was incredible. You've only been here a week and you can nearly get yourself back in your chair. Another couple of days and you'll have it. This deserves a celebration. Coffee?'

'Instant? In the ward kitchen?'

'No. There's a café across the road. How about if we abscond for a while and pretend to be normal.'

'You mean it?' she asked. He nodded. 'Right. Let's go.'

He whispered in her ear. 'I always find the best way to escape is to act confidently.'

He pushed her through long corridors, out the front door and over the road to the café. It wasn't until they were at an outside table and had coffees in front of them that they both laughed.

'That was fun,' she said. 'Do you think they'll miss me?'

'It's a rehabilitation centre, not a prison. You're allowed a coffee break. I've texted to say where you are.' He took her hand in his and they both felt the sparks fly between them. 'Wow,' he said, sounding breathless but not letting go of her hand. 'Proper introductions. I'm Simon Thompson. 34. Rehabilitation doctor, not yours, thank goodness. Two brothers, three sisters, all older. Mum and Dad are retired doctors and did you know you have the most incredible brown eyes I have ever seen.'

'No, I didn't know.' Taking a deep breath to try and calm her racing heart she said, 'Maria Spencer. 29. Only child, Dad is a writer, Mum does all his paperwork. I'm a physics teacher and I love your eyes too, so full of promise for tomorrow. And your muscles – double wow.'

Simon was also attempting to get his heart rate under control. 'Thank you for the critique. Love to hike, fish and, don't laugh, I'm an avid birdwatcher. Love nothing better than sitting in a hide at dawn watching the birds wake up.'

'Birdwatching sounds fun. I paint. Lizards mostly but have done a few bird drawings. Never tried fishing. I strangle a few songs in a choir, and with your voice you'd be a good asset to us.'

'Sounds interesting.'

They both sipped their coffee and sat in silence for a minute.

'How about tomorrow we abscond for a proper date?' Simon asked. 'Lunch and then see if we can find a few birds in the park?'

He watched her gradually withdraw into herself. She pulled her hand away and thumped her mug on to the table.

'This is useless. You are a lovely man, Simon, and under different circumstance I would jump at the chance of a relationship with you. But I'm not normal. I'm stuck in this wheelchair and the last thing someone like you needs is to be encumbered with a wreck like me. I think we should go back.'

'No.' He thumped his mug down. 'I will not be told who or what is good for me. I will decide that, Idiot.'

‘Don’t you start calling me Idiot again.’

His voice became gentler. ‘Then stop acting like one. The first time I saw you I thought what a wonderfully brave and courageous person you are. The fact that you’re gorgeous helped, but it was your personality that shone through from the first moment. That’s what I was attracted to. That’s why I’d like to get to know you better.’

‘But I could be in a wheelchair for ever.’

‘So?’ He moved around the table and sat next to her.

He lifted up his right trouser leg to reveal a shaft attached to a metal foot. ‘Know where you’re coming from. Motorbike accident.’

She tapped the wheelchair handles. ‘Fall down stairs.’

He took her hand again, marvelling at how well it fitted into his. ‘I’m willing to give this a try if you are.’

‘I might be an idiot but . . .’ and she leant forward and kissed him lightly to begin with, then deepened it into a promise of what could be to come. ‘Perhaps this will work.’

Romance Writers of New Zealand





## *Mr Tango*

### **Kris Pearson**

How was any man lucky enough to have eyes that big and dark? And crisp black hair looking even better ruffled up by the wind than slicked into place at the start of the day?

That's what Louisa thought as she dipped her brush into the pot of white enamel paint and cut in against the glass of the window sash. One smooth line, just like Grandpa had trained her. For the last eight Uni holidays she'd worked for herself, and mostly took on the small painting contracts no other tradies were interested in. The wages helped pay her course fees, and she often met lovely people who were genuinely grateful she bothered with them.

She cast another glance sideways to the tall young man with the brilliant eyes. He was quiet – not fooling around like Donny and Manu, the other builders. She moved so she could keep him in her line of sight and was unnerved to find his intense dark gaze directed straight back at her. One eye flickered with the slightest of winks before he bent to grasp the end of a heavy beam to lift into place for the other two men.

Somehow he'd lazed through her fluoro yellow safety vest and paint-daubed white overalls to touch the female body inside – the body which now glowed with delicious heat.

Louisa waited until he was standing again, then raised one blonde eyebrow in reply. Would he even see it in the shadow under the brim of her painter's cap?

His gorgeous lips curled, so yeah...

She looked back to the open window sash, trying to concentrate, but another quick glance told her he was still watching. He inclined his head very slightly.

“Hey, Pedro! Watch your fukkin feet!” Donny yelled, dragging the scaffold in front of him. He stepped sideways as adroitly as a matador avoiding a bull, and helped pull it to where it was needed.

They’d called him Pedro several times but Louisa knew it wasn’t his real name. She’d noted ‘Alejandro’ in the site register when she signed in. *Ally-handro* she murmured to herself. Suited him. Suited his Latin good looks and flexible tango-dancer’s body. Long legs in jeans when the others wore shorts. One narrow, undulating tattoo from elbow to wrist while Donny and Manu’s arms were haphazardly patch-worked as though a number of dares had been packed onto the available skin.

They were rebuilding the front wall of a house someone had driven a car through. Swerved right off the road, through the fence, and into the front bedroom. How drunk did you have to be to do that? An insurance claim. The men’s comments floating through the open window told her they were expending as little energy as they thought they could get away with.

Louisa had annoyed them by expecting to start the exterior painting the day before. If they were running late it wasn’t her problem. She kept to herself, got on with the job, eyes on the prize of her future career.

“Coffee?” a husky voice asked.

Time had drifted by with the hypnotic strokes of her paintbrush.

Mr Tango stood at the foot of her ladder. He held two takeaway cups, one raised toward her.

She’d just finished the final brush-stroke – or had he waited patiently until she had?

He stood aside, motioning her down with his arm. “One sugar. Don’t stir if you don’t like.”

The other men had disappeared. Off to the pub or the fish’n’chip shop, she presumed. Good riddance – they were a pair of roughies.

She sat beside him on the steps of the old verandah, sipping, smiling, flirting a little, throwing crumbs of her lunch to the sparrows.

“What a pretty girl I see under all of this,” he said once they’d finished eating. “You’re hiding her.” He reached across and touched the fastening on the bib of her overalls, brushing his fingers just shy of her breast.

Louisa had never felt such an immediate response to a man. A sudden jolting warmth behind her nipples. Heavenly. She drew a deep, slow breath.

If she’d been dancing in a club, showered and perfumed, hair wildly tossing instead of wound up under her painter’s cap, then she might have believed he wanted her legs wound around his sinuous body. Might have agreed to being pulled in close against his hardness. But here? In the open air, with the others due back in a few minutes? When she was covered in paint spots and perspiration? No way.

“Oh, you’re good,” she murmured, looking down at his gently stroking fingers.

He grinned. “Some anticipation sweetens everything, no?”

She drew a much faster breath. “Are you playing with me?”

“Not yet.” Such a sly smile, full of bad intentions.

“Could have fooled me, *Ally-handro*.”

That dark eyebrow she’d been watching earlier twitched up again. “You know my name?”

“For sure it’s not Pedro. I saw the site register.” She watched as he tucked his tongue into the corner of

his mouth. “And for sure you’re not a builder,” she added, touching a hand to his. “Too well cared for. No bruises or cuts on these fingers.”

“Unusual woman,” he said. “Working alone. Doing a man’s job.”

Louisa walked her nails up over his wrist. “Not my real job.”

“Nor mine.” Still that infectious, naughty grin.

“Like I said, not builder’s hands. And I’m not hiding.”

She scraped gently down again and linked her fingers through his. What would it matter? She doubted she’d ever see him after today.

Louisa watched his pecs swell between the open fronts of his fluoro vest as he inhaled. Smooth brown skin. She could lay her head right there. Hear his heart. Was it picking up speed as they dueled back and forth?

He tilted his chin. “I’m observing how things are built in your country.”

She laughed. “These guys won’t teach you much.”

“They’ll teach me how *not* to build.”

“That’s no use,” she said.

He smiled faintly. “And then I’m on to somewhere new.”

She concluded he was on a travelling holiday – picking up stray jobs and flying under the radar. Didn’t want to ask him more because he wasn’t going to be around, and right now the last thing she needed was a serious distraction. Let him remain a man of mystery.

“Yes, I’m Alejandro,” he agreed.

“Louisa.”

“In Spanish, maybe ‘Louella’. A fierce fighter.” He raised their linked fingers and nudged her chin. “Shall I kiss you? Or are you the fierce fighter of your name?”

“Possibly,” she said, parting her lips with surprise, and wondering if she’d said yes or no.

He lowered his face and his tempting mouth drew closer.

Louisa heard a low, rough noise in his throat before he nipped her top lip with gentle teeth. Then he drew back. Warm shivers ricocheted from her lips to her toes and his scent swirled around her like a teasing brush from the softest fur. Fresh and exotic and golden.

It took her a few seconds to register the ute with the other builders had returned.

“Later?” he asked. “Tonight?”

Her fantasy of dancing with him in a mist of perfume could almost have come true. She shook her head regretfully. “Tonight is for my grandfather. Set in stone, I’m afraid.” She held her breath in case he made another offer for Saturday.

He pressed his beautiful lips together. “So you remain a fascinating mirage because tomorrow I leave.”

“Life’s not always fair,” she agreed. “But a mirage in painter’s overalls? You’re kidding!”

She’d be gone on Sunday. Back to the city and the job she was finally qualified for. She glanced down at her paint-spotted hands. They’d take some cleaning up before she transformed into her high-rise, pencil skirted persona.



“Pedro’s wasting no time,” Donny jeered, striding up the steps beside them and snapping the noisy radio on again.

\*

Alejandro slid the knot of his tie home, shouldered his leather jacket on, and patted the pockets. Phone – check. Keys – check. Wallet in his satchel.

The expressway teemed with vehicles and anger; such a contrast to the routes he’d taken over the past six weeks. Invaluable weeks though, as he’d soaked up the atmosphere of suburbia, the myriad styles of Kiwi buildings, and the varying abilities and enthusiasm levels of the construction teams. Now he felt more grounded in his new country, even if it was at the cost of playing an itinerant worker willing to perform for peanuts and take orders from men with few manners and low expectations of his ability. The agency Daniel Statham briefed had come through trumps. Six sites, six totally different projects. Gold.

Alejandro parked the Audi in space thirty-nine as arranged and took the elevator up twelve rapid floors to Statham Architects. He directed a smile at the receptionist he’d met as he’d arrived for the earlier interviews.

“He’s in the boardroom – double doors on the right,” she said, waving a graceful wrist.

A deep breath before he pushed them open. And a frisson of puzzled delight as his gaze collided with the blue eyes of the painter in the concealing overalls in Papakura.

Overalls no longer in evidence.

Long blonde hair unwound from whatever tortuous device had held it up under her Dulux cap.

A hint of pale breast showing at the neckline of her businesslike ivory blouse.

A glimmer of silver resting there.

His fingertips buzzed, wanting to touch this version of her even more than the other.

“Alejandro,” Daniel Statham boomed, rising from one of the Italian chairs that matched the long, gleaming table. “Two of you starting the same day – cuts my job in half. Louisa, this is Alejandro Acosta García. He specializes in high density housing and I’m sure will bring some much needed flair to the social housing scene here. Alejandro – meet Louisa Robson. Newly qualified, and ready to shake the architectural world off its foundations.”

“Hopefully to keep it safely *on*,” the girl murmured, extending a slim hand to shake. No paint spots now. Just smooth skin and pretty pale pink nails.

“Small world,” Alejandro said. “Louisa and I had a coffee together last week.” He held her hand a fraction too long and released it with extreme regret.

“Excellent if you already know each other,” Daniel said, oblivious to the thick-as-syrup atmosphere now swirling in the room. “Always nice to have a friend close by.”

“Ali – fancy seeing you again so soon,” she finally replied, crossing her long legs.

He heard the soft brush of one past the other. Stockings? Pantyhose? Bare skin?

She held his gaze steadily. “Yes, you never know who you’ll meet twice in the same week, do you?”

Alejandro half closed his eyes. This was going to be fun.





*Never Under Any Circumstances*

**Stephanie Ruth**

*Never, under any circumstances, get in a car with a stranger.*

Abby knew that—Jonno had reiterated it till he was literally red in the face. Her uncle was known to over dramatize with warnings of dire consequences, from not chewing your food properly (and ultimately choking to death), to running with scissors (and accidentally stabbing your sister to death). Most of Jonno’s warnings carried the death penalty. He was her uncle, but her only father figure growing up, so took the job extremely seriously.

Abby thought of Jonno as she opened the ute door and squinted into the darkened interior, trying to make out the shape of the driver.

The man at the wheel was big shouldered, with deep-set eyes under heavy brows, and the voice inside her head shouted all the more urgently.

*Never, under any circumstances...*

The driver leaned across the console and thrust his right hand forward, his grin disarming. “I’m Digit,” he offered.

Abby shook his hand with a show of confidence, both her feet still firmly planted on *terra firma* as she considered her options.

*Kind eyes... gentle hands. More to the point, my ticket home. May as well go all-in.*

Deciding, Abby offered Digit her best, full-megawatt smile. There seemed to be a moment of nervous hesitation on Digit’s part—he took his hand back and brushed it over his wiry hair as he cleared his throat.

*You dufus, you didn’t introduce yourself, and now he’s the one wondering if this shared ride’s a good idea.*

“Nice to meet you, ah... Digit? I’m Abby.” She tried to show she could be charming.

“Abby,” Digit murmured. “Ok then. Let’s get your gear in the back, eh?” He maneuvered himself out of the driver’s side to open the tailgate.

Digit wasn’t as tall as she’d initially thought. From the hulking frame in the front seat, she’d imagined a giant, but they stood eye to eye as she hefted him the two large sports bags.

*Just on six foot, but twice my breadth.*

She’d shoved all her clothes into these bags last night, and the rest of what she’d amassed over two years at Canterbury University had been packed into a moving crate that would be picked up this afternoon.

Abby looked around at the cinderblock halls of residence and the dusty-leaved oaks. All was reverently quiet this early on a Saturday morning. The majority of her friends were staying on for the end-of-term party, but if she’d followed suit, she’d have missed her mum’s birthday. Flubbing out on that particular family gathering for the second year in a row was more than she could contemplate, so she’d jumped on the Share-a-Ride site and made a last minute connection.

Hopefully, Digit’s ute was up to the five-hour trip to Dunedin. Abby took another look at the peeling 1990s paint job and wasn’t so sure. As if to reinforce her train of thought, it took three slams before Digit could get the tailgate to latch.

“Son of a...” Digit muttered, a touch of red creeping up his neck. “The lock’s a bit temperamental.”

“Uh-huh.” Abby knew all about temperamental cars. “I’m going to pay you now, if that’s okay?” Scrambling to get her daypack off, she tried to remember which compartment she’d put her wallet in.

“No, you don’t have to do that.” Digit held up one hand in a ‘halt’ motion.

“Up front’s best... then you know I’m good for it.” Finally locating the old Velcro Tinkerbell wallet her sister had given her about ten years ago, Abby pulled out a fifty dollar note. “That’s all Tinkerbell’s got,” she muttered under her breath.

Digit hesitated before he took the offered cash, meeting her eyes.

“That might be too much. How about we fill up the tank, then split it? See if there’s any change?”

“Sure.” Running on zero breakfast, lunch money would be a definite bonus. She’d only managed to scrounge a bottle of water and a pack of salted chips for the trip, and would feel compelled to share.

Digit, the language-major was easy company, and Abby relaxed as her initial trepidation diffused into distant memory. Kicking off her shoes, she asked before putting her feet on the dashboard though. Some guys were very particular about their cars.

On reaching Timaru, she narrowed her eyes when Digit handed her a fiver and assured her it had only taken ninety dollars to fill the tank back in Christchurch. He was pretty insistent, so she took it.

Her beef and relish on rye was the most delicious thing she’d ever tasted, and was eaten overlooking Caroline Bay. The sun was warm on her legs, the wind soft in her hair, and a considerate guy shared her bench.

*But sweetest of all, it’s good to be heading home.*

Time flew with someone so entertaining to talk to during the trip. Digit seemed comfortable in the role of joker—making her laugh. She hadn’t laughed-till-she-cried in ages.

“Where are you from, exactly?” Abby wondered aloud as they exited Oamaru.

“I grew up in Moeraki.” Digit glanced over. “That’s where I’m heading today to see my kuia... my grandmother. She’s been at a tangi this week, so I thought she’d be feeling low.”

“Oh, right.” Crap. Moeraki was on the way to Dunedin... not in it. But it’d get her most of the distance. “If you drop me at the turn-off, I’ll hitch the last part.”

“No fuckin’ way am I letting you hitch from Moeraki!” Suddenly, Digit wore a look that was almost identical to one her uncle would have donned, given the same situation.

“What’s the problem? I’m hitching with *you*, aren’t I?”

“That’s different,” Digit spluttered. “We have an arrangement. I... we’re sharing costs.”

“But it’ll cost you more, heading into Dunedin, then backtracking—”

“I don’t give a shit about that! It’s about you being safe!”

“All right, no need to shout.” Abby took her feet off the dash and turned to stare out the side window at the lush farmland, pressing her palms together and squeezing them down between her knees. It was the first time Digit had displayed anything other than mellow, and it bit some.

“Sorry. I’d just feel better... if I saw you safely home.” Digit sounded miserable.

“Alright,” Abby conceded, but chose not to look at him. “Thank you.”

They let the silence reign for half an hour after that, and it was somewhat prickly. Abby was more than confident navigating undercurrents, and Digit seemed fairly straightforward. The buoyancy of her driving companion had been replaced by a much more sober presence because she’d offended him—mentioning the money, and slating his perceived male honour.

*What kind of name is Digit? Is he good with numbers?*

“How did you get your name?” she finally asked, breaking the quiet.

“Is that a trick question?” Digit took his left hand off the steering wheel and waggled his fingers in front of her. Half of his forefinger was completely missing, and ended in a smooth nub at the mid-way knuckle.

“Oh! Sorry, I didn’t realise...” she flustered.

*God, what an insensitive thing to come out and ask!*

“Seriously?”

“*I didn’t*,” she re-emphasised. “I wasn’t looking at your hands.”

That wasn’t entirely true. She’d been looking at all of Digit. His profile, the way his hair curled into his sideburns, his muscular forearms, and how his thighs moved in his jeans when he changed gears. So surreptitiously, she’d been trying to fool herself she hadn’t been checking out this no-longer-stranger as they drove closer and closer towards her final destination... and goodbye.

Digit moved back to grip the steering wheel, and Abby realised why she hadn’t noticed his absent half-finger before. Instead of resting his palm on the top of the wheel next to his right hand, he slid it under and grabbed from the underside.

*Is he hiding that... or is it a more comfortable hold?*

His given name was Wiremu, but he’d been loosely re-christened Digit after slicing half his finger off on his first pig-hunting trip as an eight-year-old. Intrigued by the story, and the fact Digit seemed happy to recount it, Abby dug for more.

Digit was a born storyteller, and the tale grew—no doubt more elaborate with each telling. “And that’s the story of how The Mighty Digit got his name.” He finished with aplomb.

“Did they try to reattach it?” she wondered aloud.

Digit glanced across at her, then back to the road. “No. We didn’t have it.”

“You didn’t *have* it?”

“I don’t do anything by halves, cut it clean off in the middle of gutting a big assed boar—blood, intestines, organs. To be honest, I’ve never seen such a messy kill, before or since. Then there were the dogs.” Digit looked amused.

“Dogs?” The word squeaked out, making Abby sound more like a mouse than a twenty-one year old woman.

Digit took his damaged hand off the wheel and rubbed it on his own thigh. “You have a pig dog with you when you hunt. They rout out the boars. My dad’s two weren’t what you’d call well mannered. I can’t *prove* one of them ate it, but that’d be my guess.”

“*Jesus, Digit!*” Abby squirmed in her seat.

“Wiremu,” Digit reminded her. “We’re south of Kakanui now, deep in kuia country. Anyone caught calling me Digit gets a wallop round the ear-hole from Grandma.”

“That is *so* disturbing.” Abby whispered, sitting on her hands and protecting every one of her precious fingers.

“Which... the ear-hole, or the finger?” Digit wondered.

“The *dogs!*”

“Right,” Digit had a real belly laugh—contagious enough to pull a twitchy giggle from her, even after that story. “I keep that bit of information for special occasions,” he added with an underlying softness that didn’t quite match his grizzly exterior.

*Intriguing man.*

“Is this a special occasion?”

“Absolutely.” Digit flicked a look her way. When he brought his hand up to rub his neck, Abby noticed a blush beginning to form under his stubble again.

*He’s shy, this stunning, uber-confident guy?*

“Because you’re seeing your grandmother?” she double-checked.

Digit looked even more uncomfortable. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What *did* you mean?” Abby turned her body to face him, slinging an arm around the back of her seat and tucking one leg under herself.

“I was going to ask you something... later.” Digit opened his window, then closed it—fidgeting.

“Ask me now,” she dictated, more than curious.

Digit hesitated. “Ah... if you’re needing a ride, anywhere... anytime... you’d call me?”

*Oh... he’s too adorable.*

Abby couldn’t quite hold in her smirk. “Under one condition.”

“Name it.” Digit finally looked her way and smiled, his dark eyes inviting.

“Promise to *never*, under *any* circumstances, tell my uncle how we met.”

Romance Writers of New Zealand





## *Operation Dravide*

### **Caenys Kerr**

“Hey you! What are you doing out here? Get the hell inside right now!” Rachel yelled.

The stranger pivoted towards her, nonchalant in the face of the cyclonic winds that swirled about him.

“I can’t feel the force of the storm from inside and I can’t make recordings.” He shouted against the noise.

“The only thing that you’ll be recording, if you’re not back inside the community centre in five seconds, is your name on an arrest report.”

“Yes sir, er, ma’am.” The man offered a mock salute as he leaned into the wind.

There was always one idiot who wanted to play macho or hero, or some other damned thing.

Rachel wasn’t sure, though, whether her heart was pounding ten to the dozen because of the danger outside or the half-smile that the gorgeous stranger turned on her. It was unusual for her to be affected by a well-formed hunk of male.

Inside the centre, Rachel said, “You’re not local.”

The stranger thrust out his hand. “Griff Roberts, storm chaser.”

Rachel took his hand reflexively and a bolt of energy arced between them. She dropped her arm and flexed her fingers at her side.

“Storm chaser? Huh! That’s just another name for a bloody drongo, I reckon. Go with Frank. He’ll find you some dry gear.” The guy turned up the wattage on his smile. His blue eyes twinkled beneath a thatch of wind-tossed fair hair.

“Frank?” Butter wouldn’t melt in his kissable mouth.

“Right behind you,” Frank said, winking at Rachel from a face scarred by decades of Pilbara living.

The men left and Rachel’s hand flew to the pendant around her neck. She rubbed her thumb over the smooth, tumbled piece of dravide, a brown tourmaline stone. “Be calm. Be grounded. Be the leader.” The mantra restored her balance and she went back to organising the rescue teams and their deployment.

Refreshed from his shower, Griff was drawn to a group of people wearing orange overalls with reflective stripes on chest and back. All eyes were focused on the little firecracker.

He hadn’t learned her name yet, but by God, he wanted to. And more than her name. She was a petite package with coppery hair tied in a ponytail. She was all fire, all energy and she made him feel alive in a way that he hadn’t done in a long time. And that smile, bang, straight to the solar plexus.

There was a local street map taped to a laminated board identifying areas that demanded immediate attention. The woman was delegating teams to deal with them.

Across the top of the board were the words, “Operation Dravide: Staying grounded in Cyclone Kelvin.”

Griff caught Frank’s eye. The older man stepped away from the group.

“You’re not needed?” Griff asked.

“Nah. Rachel’s got it under control.”

“Rachel? Is she always by-the-book?”

“Yeah, well, this is her first gig as commander of our little volunteer force here. She wants to make sure there are no casualties, even if there are some stupid enough to wander around in gale-force winds and rain.”

Griff let the dig pass. “She’s in charge? She’s a bit young.”

Frank thrust a hand into the pocket of his jeans. “Yeah, well, she’s a born leader.” Frank ambled back to the group as he said, “Watch and learn, kiddo. Watch and learn!”

Griff would do just that.

“Kellie, your team should handle Exeter Street and the area here,” Rachel pointed to the map. Check on Jack Dickson. Bring him in if you can. Truck four. Remember, safety is our first priority.”

“Right!”

“Mick, Havelock Street and west. Take truck one because you might meet some cherry picker action. Oh, and Edna Brons. She’ll be a tough nut, but tell her I’m going ape-shit because there’s none of her macaroon cake here. If she’d be good enough to come and make some, the whole team will thank her.”

There was a rumble of laughter and the disbursement went on. Each assignment came with a personal touch for a member of the public or for the team.

At the end of the briefing, teams scattered. Rachel was about to join the last group when one of the operators from the kitchen bustled through.

“Rachel, we need a doctor urgently. Sammy’s hurt his neck. The nearest doctor is hundreds of k’s away in Karratha.”

Griff could almost see the cogs turning in Rachel’s mind. He stepped close. “I’ve done medicine, but I’ve been out of it for a year or two.”

Rachel frowned at him as if coming to a decision. She nodded. “Looks like you’re the best we’ve got. Frank, I need you to take my team. I’ll get Sammy.”

“Sure thing, Rach.”

Rachel bit the inside of her lip and thumbed a spot between her breasts as her eyes returned to Griff.

“Storm Guy, where’s your truck?”

“Outside, I couldn’t get it through the door.”

“Smart arse. I want it.”

“You grab some towels. I’ll drive.” Griff said.

Rachel scanned the road as Griff drove through a day darkened by the storm.

“Frank says this is your first gig as commander?”

Rachel didn’t take her eyes from the road. “Nothing I haven’t done before. This time I have the title.”

“What do you do in your day job?”

“I’m... Shit! Flying iron!” She bit her lip. “Handbrake turn!”

“What? I’ve never done one.”

“Centre diff unlocked. Accelerator OFF! Clutch FULL! Swing the wheel right! Yank the handbrake now!”

The world inside the truck spun in a dizzying circle until the truck righted itself.

“Whoa! Crazy. Now floor it!”

Rachel watched the wing mirror, monitoring the corrugated iron following them down the road, felt it hit the back of the truck and saw it shear off into the bush. She pulled her talisman from her shirt, gave it a quick kiss and dropped it back.

“Well done, Storm Guy. Do a U-turn. Sammy’s in the other direction.”

“You’ve done a few handbrake turns have you?” Griff’s voice held the slightest tremor.

“Never have.”

“What? You’ve never done one and you put us at risk on a maybe?”

“Two choices, hero. Give it a go or wait to be decapitated. You’re still alive to tell the tale.”

She pulled out her two-way radio. “Frank, you there? Mary Kelly’s purple roofing iron just chased us down the road. She’ll need help. Thanks.”

Rachel glanced at her driver as her hand went to her hidden pendant. “Next left.”

“You’re not having a heart attack, are you? You keep rubbing your chest,” Griff said.

“It’s my talisman. It keeps me calm.”

Rachel grabbed both strands of the pendant’s chain and flipped it out. “There. See?” She noted the lift of one of Griff’s eyebrows, and it felt as though she’d shared something intimate with him. What was it about this guy that had her tied up in knots?

“This gateway,” she pointed.



The team had a late-teenager immobilized on a stretcher and one man was keeping watch while the other workers tried to rescue what they could of the property's roof.

Griff's assessment was that Sammy's neck was bruised not broken. He folded a towel into a firm length and wrapped it as a brace on Sammy's neck.

"He'll be right to travel. Carefully. We'll keep his neck immobilised and get an x-ray as soon as possible after the storm."

"Thanks," Rachel said and herded Sammy into the truck ahead of her. They dropped Sammy back at the centre and headed to the next incident.

"A doctor, hey?" Rachel said.

"Not now. Gave up."

"Why?"

"Fiancee." His head did a slow roll to look at her with a lopsided grin.

Rachel's heart dropped. He was spoken for?

"She didn't like the doctor thing. I became a financier."

"And?"

"She dumped me anyway."

"Oh." Rachel knew it was insensitive to feel relieved, but she couldn't help it.

"What's next?" he asked blasting her with a heart-stopping smile.

They lurched from one crisis to the next for the rest of the day. Their closeness kept Rachel in a constant, confusing awareness of him. She never reacted like this to a man. Crikey!

The winds slowed as the sun set, though the lashing rain continued.

Finally, Rachel and Griff sat on the back steps of the centre, out of the downpour, scooping up hot food.

"You were good out there today," Griff said, setting his plate on the step beside him.

"Thanks. You were the one who went around saving lives.

He shrugged. "Show me your pendant."

"My talisman?"

She set her plate aside and flipped out the chain.

He leaned close and gathered it into his hand. "That's a serious piece of rock. What is it?"

"Dravide. From Nepal," she said.

"It's beautiful. The layers move in the light."

"That's called chatoyancy – the optical effect."

"Why would you know that?"

"Er, I'm a geologist."

"Ah." He turned back to the stone. "It's gorgeous. And it keeps you calm?"

With Griff so close, Rachel's heart was hammering – no calm there – and she struggled to think.

“It keeps you grounded, especially in chaotic situations,” she said.

“You named ‘Operation Dravide’. Did it work, the grounding bit?”

“There were no deaths. It worked.” She shrugged.

“You know,” Griff said, “you’re a lot like your dravide. All those layers. You’re brave, courageous, generous, empathetic, quick-thinking. Each one of your layers holds a surprise and they’re all beautiful.”

Rachel stared into his eyes, searching for duplicity, finding none. She reached up and smoothed a wind-tossed tuft of his hair.

“Why the storm chasing?” she asked.

“To find a buzz.”

“Did it work?”

He shook his head. “But I found the buzz. You showed me.” He dropped the pendant to run the back of one finger down her cheek.

“Me?”

“You got me back into doctoring, for one. And two, you have these dimples in your cheeks when you laugh, and a couple above your eyebrows when you frown. Right there.” He rubbed his thumbs over the hollows he’d described. “Finding them gave me the buzz I’ve needed. I’ve been wondering what kissing them would do.”

“Are you playing with me, doctor?” Rachel was having trouble breathing.

“Uh huh. It feels great.”

“Compared with chasing cyclones?”

“Better! I’ll keep exploring it.”

“For how long?”

“A millennium or two.”

“Relationships formed in emergencies don’t last,” Rachel warned.

“Who said that?”

“Some wise soul.”

“We’ll just have to prove them wrong,” he said.

“How will we do that?”

“By exploring each of your dravide layers.” Griff’s hands cupped her face and he lowered his lips to hers.

“Rachel?” Frank called into the darkness. “Kelvin’s petering out, but Cyclone Lomond is coming. Category four!”

Griff chuckled against Rachel’s mouth and pulled back. The glint in his eyes promised he’d be here to see out this cyclone and a whole lot more.





## *The Plan*

# Pamela Swain

Tension creeps into my shoulders as I drive along narrow roads that snake around the mountain. Each sheer drop sings of its beauty, almost lures me towards the edge. When I reach a scenic lookout, I pull the car over to allow a vehicle to pass. The driver glares at me, but nothing will spoil my buoyant mood on my return home after a ten year absence.

I open the driver's window and a mantle of eucalypt, compost and mushrooms envelops me in a welcome hug. Teenage memories flood back. Harry and I racing along rainforest tracks until we reached our favourite swimming hole. We shared secrets, hopes and dreams and, although marriage had never been mentioned, we had an understanding. Until he'd met Pascale.

At their wedding, I'd plastered on a smile to pose for photographs, despite wearing an apricot flummery of a bridesmaid dress. That night, I'd sobbed into my pillow until it resembled a sinking lifeboat. They'd moved to Paris until Harry's return last year, minus Pascale.

I close my eyes and listen to the rustle of leaves in the breeze, meow of a cat bird and a whipbird's lash - lost in a whirl of what ifs.

But I have a plan to get my man.

I call in at the bakery for a sourdough loaf. The baker informs me he is new to the village. So far, so good. No prying questions. I have one foot out of the door and spy Harry on the opposite pavement. I leap back into the shop, sit down at one of the tables near the window and press my hands against my chest.

“Are you okay?”

The baker is crouched down beside me. I stare at him, unable to speak.

“You’re very pale. Have you got chest pain? I’m getting an ambulance.”

He reaches into his back pocket for his mobile and punches in the first number before I register what he’s doing. I place my hand on his forearm.

“No. I’m okay. Just had a bit of a shock, that’s all. I saw someone I wasn’t expecting ... well I was expecting to see them, but not today.”

I notice his eyes do a quick scan across the road before returning his attention to me. “Ah, our man from Paris seems to have that effect on the women around here.”

“Really?”

“Quite a ladies man if bush telegraph is anything to go by. Although I try not to listen to gossip, but it sort of seeps in through osmosis.”

I burst out laughing. “How new to the village are you?”

“New enough for the Inquisition to still be active.”

“You mean the quilting ladies?”

He nods. “They’ve stopped short of hot needles, but I quite like it here, so I drip feed them cappuccinos and information occasionally. Speaking of coffee, would you like one?”

I’m about to refuse, but think better of it. Only an empty house awaits me as the furniture removal van is held up by flood waters. “Thanks, that’d be great.”

He stands, extends his right hand towards me. “Max Thompson.”

“Ellie Morton.” We shake hands and a shiver tingles along my spine. He raises an eyebrow and I sense he feels it too. And then I really notice him for the first time. Maybe around my age, early forties, with dark blonde hair and no hint of grey. He has a whisper of shadow along his jawline – though not enough to hide the dimple in his chin. His eyes are a mesmerising ice blue. In some it might indicate a coldness, but the numerous fine laughter lines around his eyes hint at the warmth of his personality. As he strides towards the counter, I can’t help staring and wonder if his well defined muscles are a result of regular gym workouts. If it wasn’t for my plan ...

Overgrown jasmine vines droop above the windows like false eyelashes. A bush turkey’s nest almost blocks entry to the verandah. I side step it, keeping an eye out for snakes. Apart from a musty smell and a build up of grime in the kitchen and bathrooms, the house looks in good condition. A bed and breakfast may be possible after all. I fling windows open in each room and I’m on my way back to the kitchen when the crunch of footsteps on gravel alerts me to a visitor’s arrival. I wander out in time to see Max side step the bush turkey’s nest and trip up the top step of the verandah. He loses control of the paper bags he carries and they crash to the deck. Biscotti burst out of one and scatter along the boards, the second bag survives. He retrieves it and passes it to me.

“You forgot your bread.”

“Thanks, but you shouldn’t have. It’s out of your way.”

“Not really, I usually take the cat for a walk in the evening.”

“Cat?”

He points towards the bush turkey nest. “She ran off ... probably thought she saw a snake in there.”

“Had that thought myself. Hang on a minute ... you take your cat for walks?”

He nods.

“Really?”

He nods again. “Apart from encounters with suspicious looking bush turkey nests, she trots along quite happily in a harness.”

“Is she a special type of cat bred for walking?”

“Yeah. She’s a Bengal Stalker.”

“Never heard of them.”

He erupts into laughter. “No, neither have I, but she is a Bengal. Anyway, I must find where she’s disappeared to. Hope to see you for coffee and a chat soon.”

So do I, but it’s not in the plan.

I scrub inside the house until my body aches. My sleeping bag is in the car. I snuggle into it on the back seat and drift off to sleep.

I awake with a start. It’s daylight, but I’m disorientated and unable to process information. Is Max really attacking the bush turkey nest with a rake?

I extract myself from the sleeping bag and haul myself out of the car. My limbs are in serious need of a warm up. I grab my overnight bag and hobble past him on my way to the bathroom. “Hi Max,” I call over my shoulder. It never occurs to me to ask why he’s here.

Harry is on the verandah offering advice to Max about anything and everything when I emerge. He sees me, scoops me into his arms and spins me around.

“I heard you were back, Ellie. Couldn’t wait to say hello. Let’s catch up when you’re sorted.”

He plants a kiss on my cheek and is gone.

Max shakes his head, deep furrows etch his brow.

“Why the look, Max?”

“Thought he’d turned up to help, but hey, a day at the races takes priority.”

I’m stung by Harry’s flying visit, but resent negative comments from Max, even if I agree with them. “Remind me again why you’re here?”

“Your removal men are breakfasting at the bakery, so I thought I’d head over and get rid of this pile before they got here ... make it easier for them to unload. I didn’t think you’d risk tackling it last night.”

Hands on hips, I jut my chin out in an attempt to give an air of authority. “Thank you, but I am quite capable of removing it myself.”

“Understood, M’Lady.”

Max doffs an imaginary cap and passes the rake to me. I thrust it back into his hands after seeing a snake slither out from the pile.

“I’ll attend to it forthwith before I leave.” He doffs his imaginary cap again and I give him a playful swat on the arm. I notice his mischievous grin as he thuds down the steps.

Has he read my plan and is out to derail it?

Max and his cat arrive mid afternoon. He waits for the removal van to drive off before releasing her lead. She sniffs the air around several boxes and plants herself on top of one marked Fragile. Max wanders over to scrutinise my face. He’s in my space, but for some reason I don’t feel the need to back away.

“Have you eaten anything today?”

I shake my head. Maybe that’s why I’m flagging.

He reaches for my hand and leads me out to the verandah where a cooler box sits on the top step. The lid is upside down and on it is an array of goodies. We sit down either side of it.

He points to each item in turn. “Green olives, black olive tapenade and olive oil.”

“I’m sensing a theme here, Max.”

“There was beef salad, but someone, who’ll remain nameless, stole the beef while I locked up. So it’s spinach quiche and salad instead – they’re in the cooler.”

“This reminds me of my holiday in Provence. The markets are amazing. I’d buy a tub of tapenade and slather it on a croissant for breakfast.”

“I’ve never been there, but maybe, one day.” He holds up a bottle of Chardonnay.

“Yes please, but only one or I’ll fall asleep.”

“And me such scintillating company.”

I look him in the eye and smile. “Just why are you here?”

“Feeding you.”

“And why is that your responsibility?”

“Well you’ve nothing in the house ... I know because I checked your larder earlier.”

“Should I be worried?”

“About your empty larder. Absolutely.”

“No, not my larder ... you.”

“My cat can vouch for me.”

He tears off a chunk of crusty bread, spreads it with tapenade and offers it to me. I take a bite. It’s an explosion of olive groves, lemon trees and brine air.

“Yum. Taste bud paradise. I’m back in Provence.”

Max leans back against the railings and studies me. “You’re even lovelier than the quilting ladies led me to believe.”

“Yes, almost a supermodel if I wasn’t too short for my weight.”

“Please don’t put yourself down. Because that’s not what I see.”

Damn it. My plan is in shreds.

I check my watch for the tenth time in as many minutes. Harry’s an hour late. Max has taken off his apron and is keeping me company.

“Don’t know about you, but I hope he doesn’t turn up.”

“Max, that’s an awful thing to say.”

“You can do better.”

“With you, you mean?”

He takes hold of my hand, his gaze is intense. “Why not?”

“It’s not my plan.”

“Then start a new one.”

“On the basis of what? We know nothing about each other.”

“So make getting to know each other part of a new plan.”

He lifts my hand up to his lips and kisses it.

Fire and desire shoot through me.

He smiles and raises an eyebrow.

A new plan it is then.

Romance Writers of New Zealand





## *Scent, Not Sensibility*

**Stephanie Ruth**

“So... I just sniff each one, then mark them out of ten?” Katie eyed the row of large specimen jars on the lab bench with increasing curiosity—and faint alarm. She had a very sensitive nose.

“Correct.” Selina, the mature university student running the pheromone experiment, grinned as she drew Katie toward the first jar.

It was clear glass, so the rumpled T-shirt was visible at the base—inside-out with the seams showing.

“This is Group One. Once you’ve sampled each jar, I’ll seal each lid shut again.” Selina moved to the opposite side of the bench, the specimens between them. With one hand resting on the first lid, she read from her instruction sheet. “Jar A: rate the attractiveness of the subject’s scent on a scale of one to ten. One being the lowest, ten being the highest.”

Selina removed the lid and held it aloft, and Katie leaned in to take a long, hard sniff.

“Holy *cow!*” She pulled back immediately on a semi-gag—regretting her gung-ho inhale. Pungently male, Jar A was positively eyebrow melting.

Selina whipped the lid back on. “On a scale of—” she began.

“Zero,” Katie interrupted, holding the back of her wrist to her nostrils.

“Ahh...” Selina consulted her notes. “There isn’t a ‘zero’... one’s the lowest.”

“Then definitely one.”

“Right.” Selina frowned, duly recording that on her marking sheet. “In five words or less, describe the contents of ‘Jar A.’”

“Goddamn awful.”



“What?” Selina looked up in surprise.

“That was bloody revolting! Is that the worst one here?” Katie eyed the remaining nine jars—see-through soldiers in a row.

*Possibly snipers.*

“Ah... that’s the whole gist of the experiment. We’re all attracted to different scents. Different pheromones. I’m not supposed to influence your opinion, or show you the results, but the last guinea pig gave it a...” Selina consulted her notes and looked back up with a faint smile. “Six.”

“You’re *kidding* me! For Jar A?”

“The very same.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Right... shall we move on? Jar B: rate the attractiveness...” Selina continued with her spiel.

Katie was sure the lab assistant was smirking, so she took a more tentative sniff of the second jar. The scent was subtle though. So understated, she moved one hand to prevent the return of the lid, leaning in for another inhale.

“I didn’t realise there’d be girls as well?” She stared at Selina—hard.

Selina shrugged noncommittally. “On a scale of—”

“Four,” Katie interrupted again.

This was easier than she’d envisaged. When her cousin, Cam had dragged her into this experiment to help Selina out, she’d been a bit dubious about her skill as a lab rat. But the idea of attraction due to natural pheromones was an interesting one.

“In five words or less...?” Selina didn’t bother finishing her sentence this time.

“Feminine, pretty. Gay or female.” Katie counted out the words on her fingers as she spoke, checking it was the stipulated five before moving on to Jar C.

Selina followed, scribbling down Katie’s responses as she went.

“Jar C...” Selina whipped off the lid.

“*Now* we’re talking!” Katie crowed, sharing a grin with Selina when the lid was settled back on. “Six... no make that *seven*. Musky, masculine... full of testosterone. I think I’m really getting the hang of this.”

She pounced on Jar D, unprepared for the familiar smell within the unfamiliar lab. “Oh my God.” Katie screwed her eyes closed. “That’s Cam! Isn’t it?” She was almost positive, glancing up at Selina and expecting agreement. But the technician had her game face on again and was totally unreadable.

“Rating?”

“Tricky...” Katie mulled on it. “Let’s give him a five. Too familiar, and we’re definitely *not* kissing cousins.”

They worked through the remaining Jars, E, F, G, H, I—without issue. It was the final jar, J that became a sticking point.

*Dark. Mysterious. Sexily dangerous.*

“Well obviously, that’s ten out of ten.” Katie snorted. “Is this some kind of set-up?”

“No?” Selina looked mildly affronted at that. “Ten?” She wrote it down.

“Sublime, delicious. I could *totally* bury myself in this guy. Eat him for breakfast then take him home for seconds!” Katie laughed at her randy self—clearly too long without. “Sorry... that’s more than five words. Just out of curiosity, what scent did you use?”

“It’s not a scent, it’s an individual’s natural smell. No soaps or deodorants allowed.”

“Bull!” Katie chuckled again, calling Selina’s bluff, but the other woman didn’t even crack a smile. “You’re telling me there’s a guy out there who actually smells this tasty *naturally*?”

“Honestly.” Selina flicked back through her notes. “The last score guinea pig J got... was a measly three.”

“Give me another go,” Katie demanded, really getting her nose into the jar this time and taking a couple of deep whiffs.

*Scrummy. Cinnamon-ish with a touch of citrus, and a healthy dose of musk.*

“Who is he?” She tried for nonchalant, but knew the answer before Selina gave it—found it clearly written in the censure on the biology major’s face.

“That’s confidential.”

By the way Selina’s hand clamped down on her file, Katie knew there was little hope of *that* information sneaking out. Suddenly, the entire experiment became a little more intriguing.

*Who’s been wearing that T-shirt?*

“What’s the next step in the experiment?” Katie inquired casually.

She had to shower in the evening without soap or shampoo, without body lotion or hand cream, then sleep in the provided T-shirt for at least six hours. The T-shirt lived in the jar when she wasn’t wearing it, and she had to repeat that for five nights, just as the guys (and suspected girl) from ‘Group One’ had.

To a bodycare range developer, the rules were pretty heinous. There was only one stipulation that’d be easy to adhere to: ‘You must sleep alone.’

*No problems there.*

It just so happened that as of this week, her bed was glaringly empty.

#

“C?”

At first, Katie didn’t realise the query was directed at her, and she continued moving along the industrial-green corridor, her beaten-up Doc Martens squeaking on the lino.

“You’re C... right?” The man tried again. Katie saw the tall guy she’d just passed had turned, and was now following her—gaining easily with daddy-long-legs strides.

*Lecturer? Mature student?*

He was formally dressed and his gold watch looked antique when he reached a hand out, not to touch, but to halt her forward trajectory.

Selina had been particular about when Katie should pick up the final experiment findings, and she was running late. No time for literary-types under the fluorescent lighting of the bio corridor.

“Ah... no. I spell my name with a K.” She went to move on.

“Ten-C.” The rangy toff insisted with a touch more excitement. He had a flop of dark blonde hair that he swiped off his forehead. Taking a half step forward, he looked Katie up and down as if she were a rare, first edition hardback—rather than a short, curvy redhead.

It took a moment for the words to sink in.

*The sheer bloody nerve!*

“Wrong,” Katie ground out, her voice low in irritation. “Twelve-double D, actually,”

“Oh, God no! I didn’t mean...” the man flustered, red creeping up from his collar to suffuse his neck as he glanced down to her cleavage, then immediately up again. “I meant I smelt you.” He blinked owlishly down his aristocratic nose and boasted an English accent, but the poshness didn’t extend to his manners.

“Oh, *right*.” Katie returned with sarcasm. “That’s a much better line.” Screwing up her face, she brushed past to continue through the double doors and into the quiet lab. She hadn’t had time to squeeze in her morning coffee, and was deep in withdrawal-scratchy.

#

The bookworm was still waiting for Katie in exactly the same spot when she came back out five minutes later.

“We started off on the wrong foot.” The man tried a tentative re-take.

“No shit, Sherlock,” she muttered, desperate for caffeine now.

“Rupert.” He offered his hand to shake.

*Nope. Not touching you. That’s what trips me every time... plus, I’m on Y-chromosome detox.*

Katie skirted the long-boned fingers and wide palm, and moved purposefully towards the car park exit. But Rupert kept up, striding alongside her.

“My apologies for sounding rude. I was a bit thrown when you passed me in the corridor because I recognised you—that is—I knew your scent.”

That got her full attention, and her steps faltered without her meaning them to. Pressing her palms together, she hazarded another glance Rupert’s way.

*Not my type—lanky and earnest. ‘Studious,’ and ‘private school’ written all over him.*

“As part of Selina’s pheromone experiment?” Rupert tried one last ditch attempt, his lips twitching into a shy half-smile.

Katie’s shoulder was against the heavy outer door, poised to push. She frowned at him, not particularly wanting to appear encouraging.

Rupert waved the results sheaf he was holding, and Katie recognised the title because Selina had just handed her a matching copy.

*Did I score him low? Arresting pewter eyes. Brains—not brawn.*

Refusing to lean in and take a good sniff of a total stranger’s armpit, she merely shrugged. “See you around then, Ruben.” Purposefully misnaming him, she shoved again at the door.

It wouldn’t budge.

“It’s Rupert.” Rupert was holding the door closed with one hand. He made it look effortless... so maybe there was some brawn under his jacket after all. “I wanted to mark you down as an eleven, but Selina wouldn’t allow it. I thought you should know though—you smell amazing.”

*Flattery will get you...*

Rupert’s disarming grin took Katie by complete surprise, making his eyes light and spark—so when he stepped forward into her personal space, she just blinked up at him.

He scrawled a cellphone number and the name ‘Rue’ on the results sheet poking out of her bag, and Katie’s skin prickled into goosebumps as she breathed in the familiar masculine scent, along with his proximity. Mixed spice, tangerine... and that damn heavenly musk. She’d begun to wonder if she’d imagined its potency, but here it was again.

“My friends call me Rue.”

*I bet. I’m bloody kicking myself already.*

She cleared her throat. “And what does Selina call you?” Her brain figured the odds. Selina must’ve orchestrated the timing...

Her heart began to thump uncomfortably as Rue offered his hand forward again, his gaze steady.

*Bonus points for sheer perseverance.*

Katie hesitated. She was still nursing a somewhat trodden heart from the last one. Rue wasn’t her usual style, but maybe that was his mitigating factor? Her fingers slid tentatively into his palm, almost of their own accord. Seeking out his greater warmth.

Rue’s smile softened. “I’m guinea pig J.”