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Our Authors



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The One That Got Away

Cordelia Fox

Bembe

The Sweetest Thing



Jackie Rutherford

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Restarting Hearts

Stephanie Ruth

Heads or Tails

Second Act



Our Authors

Kellie Hailes

The Art of Paying It Forward



Kim Roscoe

The Bridge



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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Quarantini With Bubbles

Yvonne Walus

Lockdown Day Minus 2

Today I felt doubly lucky. Lucky that I was back in New Zealand after months of travelling, and lucky that I had nobody I cared about overseas. Make that: nobody I cared about, full stop. Except for Ana, my best friend, of course. And Bubbles, my black dachshund. And Josh.

Note to self: don't think about Josh.

Because Covid-19 was the only thing in the news, I thought work would be quiet. I was wrong. A queue outside the agency's door, phones already ringing, and I could only imagine my email inbox.

"My mum's in Italy. Can she come home earlier?"

"Should I postpone seeing the grandkids in Scotland?"

“The Silver Muse - both my daughters are on it. How safe...”

My heart broke for these people.

At one-thirty, Jacinda announced Level 4 in just over 48 hours. From “stay at home if you’re over 70 or have health issues” to “stay at home” - just like that.

The phones went berserk.

“We don’t know what this means for our agency longer term,” my manager said as we were closing. “For now, work remotely. Help our customers.”

I didn’t have the strength to face the supermarket. Back home, I made myself a drink.

Whatever’s- in-the-Cupboard Quarantini

1 shot rum

Orange juice

Fresh mint leaves

Verdict: I needed this.

Lockdown Day Minus 1

Two texts arrived before breakfast. One was from Ana, offering her lounge for the duration of the lockdown. “Don’t be a bubble of one,” she’d said. “The twins would love to have you.” I adored her kids, but four weeks sounded like a lot.

The other text was from Josh. “Spent so much in the liquor store, I got cheered by the crowd. The spare room’s empty and the pantry full. Plus, Bubbles misses you. Quarantine with us?”

Josh and I – it’s complicated. Officially, we were over. He loved bush hiking - bugs creeped me out. I liked exotic places - Josh thought New Zealand was enough. “If I want to see the world, I can just watch *Jamie’s Italy*,” he’d told me. Oh yeah, cooking was another thing we didn’t have in common.

Unofficially, though, I still had feelings. And he still had my dog, because his place – which used to be *our* place for a while – had a garden. So, yeah, complicated. Evening came and I still hadn’t made up my mind.

All-out-of-Booze Quarantini

Cream

Rum

1 teaspoon sugar

Verdict: Meh.

Lockdown Day 0

So, newsflash: I moved in with Josh, just as flatmates. Bubbles went ecstatic and folded himself into pretzels. Josh looked pleased, too.

Felt weird to unpack my rucksack in what used to be our home office. Now it had a narrow bed instead of Josh's computer, an empty desk for my laptop and a small bowl of flowers from the garden.

Note to self: after a toilet pit stop in the middle of the night, remember not to go back to what used to be our bedroom.

Josh made us drinks in a real shaker, and I felt puzzled by his sudden enthusiasm for mixology. When we were together, he'd have a beer on a hot day, or a glass of wine in a restaurant. We never had a drinks cabinet. Who got him into cocktails?

Chocolate Quarantini

Baileys

Vodka

Chocolate liqueur

Verdict: Not a bad start to a strange time.

Lockdown Day 1

Our travel agency worked around the clock to bring people back home. When I was too exhausted to see straight, I took Bubbles for a long beach walk. We're lucky to live so close to the ocean. I mean, Josh was lucky to live here. I was just lucky to be visiting.

For dinner, Josh made pizza from scratch. Note to self: when choosing a life partner next time, his disinterest in overseas travel should not trump his ability to cook.

We ate in front of the TV, with Bubbles snuggled up between us, like the old times. Happily, we always agreed on enough Netflix programs not to fight over the remote.

At one point, our hands met between Bubbles' velvety ears.

"Oh, sorry," we chorused.

Josh got up. "I'll fix us a drink."

Love Potion Quarantini

Peach schnapps

Vodka

Cranberry juice

Verdict: Worthy of its name

Lockdown Day 2 through to 10

Same as the previous day, with a different drink at the end. One cocktail a night during Level 4, that's the deal.

Lockdown Day 11

Ana facetimed me this morning. I think she wanted to talk about something specific, but she ended up yelling at the kids. So glad I don't have small children. Bubbles totally satisfies my parenting instincts.

Would I want a baby with Josh? If I had to answer truthfully, even if it made me look shallower than a puddle, I'd have to admit that I'd be keen to practice making babies with Josh again. Like, every night. But with a condom, for now.

There.

I'd better have a cocktail to take my mind off Josh.

Chocolate Amnesia Quarantini

Whisky

Chocolate milk, hot

Verdict: Josh who?

Lockdown Day 12

When you reject a diamond ring in favour of travelling, you don't switch off your feelings when you board the plane to Singapore. In movies, the heroine is over the guy as soon as she says no, but reality doesn't work like that. It's not "we either get married or we break up and instantly stop loving each other" – not when genuine emotions are involved.

I told Ana all this during our Zoom session. Her reply? "So get back together." Like an equation, where X equals Y equals Z. Love is not maths, either.

"Anyway. How are you?" I asked, like I had every day of the lockdown.

"Going crazy."

"The kids?"

"Rocco."

Her husband.

"Can you talk?"

She moved closer to the camera. "He's more irritable than usual. I know it's one of the symptoms of cabin-fever, but it just feels... I don't know... off."

Everything I'd read about family violence came crashing into my head. "Are you safe?"

She grimaced. "It's not like that. You know Rocco."

Did I know Rocco? He always seemed outgoing, in the loud Mediterranean way that sounded like fighting even when it's just a normal conversation. For my liking, he was perhaps a little bit too jokey with women, but that was a culture thing, right? Josh always managed to be the soul of any social gathering without raising his voice or chumming up the girls.

“So what are you saying?”

“That marriage is a bitch sometimes. Hi Josh!”

I didn’t even realise Josh had come home from the supermarket. Just as well we’d finished discussing *my* feelings.

“Hi Ana. Comfy there on our coffee table?”

Meeting friends online meant that “comfy there on our coffee table” was now the new normal, but that’s not what struck me. Josh had said *our* coffee table. As though we were an item again.

I liked that way too much.

Later that night, it was Josh’s mum on the coffee table. I didn’t want her to know we were flatting together, so I hid in the kitchenette, trying to make sense of the dinner ingredients.

“When are you going to bring your new girl around, Joshy?”

My heart stung. New girl? What new girl?

The cocktails!

Damn. I never realised it would hurt this badly.

“Mum, it’s lockdown.”

“But you are with someone, right? I can tell.”

“Yes mum.”

Regrets? Did I have regrets? If I had my life over again, would I give up South America and marry Josh?

Yes.

No.

Maybe yes?

“Bring her to lunch when you visit.”

“Mum,” Josh said. “Gotta go. Speak later. Love you.”

“Bring her home to us.”

He disconnected the call. “When I was about fifteen, I promised myself I’d never, ever get married.”

“Why’s that?”

“My mum’s really bossy. I love her to bits, but my whole childhood it’s always been *do this* and *don’t do that* to my dad. It sucked. I didn’t want that life.”

“You proposed to me.” I honestly didn’t mean to remind him. It just slipped out.

“Are you serious right now? You’re the least bossy person I know.” He walked over and took the knife out of my hand. “Also the least chef-like. Stop murdering the carrots, honey. Sit down and relax. What would you like to drink tonight?”

Honey. He’d called me *honey*.

Honeysuckle Quarantini

Gin

Honey

Lemon juice

Verdict: I’m pretty sure I’m his “new girl”

Lockdown Day 19

Another Zoom session with Ana. “He’s having an affair,” she told me without a preamble.

“Bastard.” I didn’t ask her how she knew. “What do you need me to do?”

“A big favour?”

“Want me to kill him? Or just cut off his balls?”

“Bigger. Could he quarantine in your flat while you’re with Josh?”

While you’re with Josh made us sound like a couple. Mmm.

“Absolutely.”

She said how it was just temporary, how she hadn't made up her mind about leaving him, how children needed a father.

I'd never had a father and I'd grown up just fine. Then again, I'd rejected a man who would never cheat on me, all because he didn't want to fly over the Nazca Lines, so maybe *fine* was an overstatement.

On my daily walk, I noticed for the first time how eerie the world had become. Sport fields - empty. Beaches - empty. Malls and roads - deserted. Illicit lovers kept apart, ex-lovers shacking up together. Strange times.

Bubbles started sleeping on my bed.

Apocalypse Now Quarantini

Tequila

Vermouth

Baileys

Verdict: I want Josh

Lockdown Day 21

Our travel agency had to close down. During the goodbye bash (online), we played a game. Complete the sentence: "It only took a global pandemic ..." Some were really good, like "... to realise that what I normally buy I don't really need, and what I really need I can't buy anyway", and "... to discover the reason I don't garden is not because I don't have time", and "... to feel grateful for the country we live in".

My contribution was something vaguely humorous about yoga on Zoom. What I could've written, though, if I were totally honest with myself? *That it only took a global pandemic to admit I was still in love with Josh.*

"Are you okay?" he asked when I logged off.

"No."

He sat down on the sofa and held me. "One day, the borders will open and people will travel again. You'll go back to doing what you love."

“I’m already doing what I love,” I said. “Don’t even care if I ever see Africa.” And then I found his lips.

He kissed me back.

Bubbles wagged his tail.

Makeup Sex Quarantini

Shhh....





Bembe

Cordelia Fox

8am. There he was, as regular as clockwork. She could set her watch by him. Jane peeked over the railing of her first floor balcony, taking care to keep herself shielded by the leaves of her lemon tree. The citrus smell was sharp in her nostrils as she watched him set off with a smile and a wave to Mrs Barker in the apartment below. The man's limp was barely noticeable when he left but it was different on his return. He staggered back dragging his leg, his singlet drenched with sweat and his face clenched. But every day, like a penance, he ran.

Jane busied herself, watering the herbs and picking out the small weeds that always sprang up around the tomato plants. What had happened to his leg? She was unlikely to find out now. It was only a day before the lockdown that he'd moved into the apartment block connected in an L-shape to hers. He had the ground floor flat that Jane actively coveted for its garden plot. She couldn't see into it because of the fence around it, but it was a prime location for a garden with unobstructed north and west sun. Beggars couldn't be choosers. She was lucky to have a large balcony for her plants.

Jane glanced at her watch. 8.20am. It bothered her, his leg. The determination on his face as he ran, as though he was propelling his body out of sheer will, told her it was no ordinary running injury. But there was no way to find out. It wasn't as if she could strike up a conversation with him, even under normal circumstances. She avoided men, handsome ones in particular, and this one looked as if he'd walked off the silver screen; tall, panther-black hair, flashing white teeth.

Jane snuck a look at her watch again. 8.30am. There was time to make a pot of tea before her vigil ended. Maybe she'd have a slice of orange cake. Breakfast was long gone and it was the small treats in life that were the most important, particularly now. Cake and tea in the morning sunshine was just the thing to bring a smile to her face. Perhaps it would help settle her stomach too. Watching and waiting for him to return made her belly twist.

The page of her sketch pad was almost full by the time he returned. He was 20 minutes late and the drag of his leg was more pronounced than ever. In the two weeks Jane had been watching for him, he'd never been out this long, and he'd never looked this bad. He stumbled through his door. She hoped he was alright. He was alone in there.

No one had come out or gone into his apartment since yesterday; everything was still. Jane bit her lip, indecisive, anxious. She had to go to the supermarket anyway. Her menu for the week was planned and her shopping list was ready. She could ask Mrs Barker if she'd seen him. Jane gathered up her shopping bags, muttering positive affirmations under her breath. By the time she'd made it down the stairs she was almost convinced that her fears were groundless.

Jane rapped on Mrs Barker's door and stepped back the required two metres. Through the bobbled glass door she could see the old lady shuffling closer.

"Hello dear. How lovely to see you."

Jane squirmed under the old woman's smile. She should have looked in on her every day or at least phoned her. The Prime Minister had made a point of encouraging citizens to support the elderly.

Jane cast about for a way to begin. It was just small talk, no biggie. She gestured to her bags. "I'm off to the supermarket. Do you want me to pick up anything for you?"

The old lady took it from there, thanking her for the offer, and declining with grace.

"If you're out and about perhaps you could call on our new neighbour? He doesn't seem to have anyone visiting him."

Here was her chance. Jane unclenched her jaw and forced herself to make eye contact.

"Have you seen him today?"

"No dear, not today, but I've been on the phone with my daughter for most of the morning."

Jane dragged her feet back down the path. She'd just talked to one neighbour. She could do it again ... in a minute or two. She'd learned some good techniques from the Breathe2Relax app; she just needed to use them. She leant against Mrs Barker's fence and turned her face to the sun, breathing deeply. She was a sunflower, drinking in the warm life-giving rays. She wiggled her toes, sending the roots of the plant deep into the earth to anchor her. She'd be fine. She *was* fine.

Shaking her shoulders to loosen her tight muscles, Jane raised a trembling hand to knock; as she did, the door swung open. He was so close, so tall, his smile so wide. She tripped in her haste to move away and fell backwards, hard onto the path, bags tumbling from her grip. He came towards her, smile gone and a look of concern on his face. She scuttled backwards, holding up her hand.

"Oh my. Are you hurt? I will not come closer, but are you damaged in any way?"

His voice was rich and deep, with a lilting rhythmic accent that she couldn't place.

"I'm fine." Jane scooted back a little further, not daring to meet his eye.

The man paused for a moment, then lowered himself to the ground, holding his leg out stiffly in front of him.

“Here now, in that case we can both sit in the sun and feel its warmth.” His voice lifted and fell in a sing-song cadence that was soft on her ear.

Jane risked a glance. He was smiling again and he seemed perfectly at ease.

“My name is Bembe. Bembe Clarke. I am pleased to meet you.”

“Bembe.” Jane whispered the unfamiliar name under her breath, trying it out.

“The name is new to you? Very many boys are called this in my country. It means prophet.” He paused again. Jane could feel him watching her. “It is very kind of you to drop in.”

She kept herself still, eyes averted, but she could sense him shaking. Was he laughing? She snuck a look, stung that he was making fun of her.

“I am sorry. I apologise for my mirth. It is an unexpected pleasure to have a lady to visit with me. It is only the manner of your arrival that causes me amusement.”

His voice was extraordinary. Like music. Jane relaxed enough to remember her manners.

“My name is Jane.” She hesitated, gathering her nerve to go on. “I live up there,” she gestured to her apartment.

“Oh, my goodness. You are the lady with the most beautiful garden?”

Jane focused on his voice; sweet and slow, like syrup and his words so courtly and polite. Her shoulders unclenched.

“Yes, I have some plants on the balcony,” she admitted.

“I see it when I go by. It is an oasis, rich and lush. You have the green thumb I think?” He continued. “I am ashamed for you to see my desert.” He nodded towards the garden plot.

He was right. It was a desert; dry, empty, with tufts of brown grass amongst the gravel. Neglected, unloved. A small sound escaped her.

“You are right to cry,” he said. “I also am saddened, but by misfortune of timing I could not purchase either soil or plants to restore it.”

“I can help you,” Jane blurted.

There was a moment’s silence.

Jane met Bembe’s eyes. They were resting on her face. She was able to look back.

“I have compost and manure in my garage ... my apartment is packed with plants.”

“You are indeed blessed,” he replied.

Jane forced herself to explain. “I’m a gardener. I brought the plants home with me, before the lock down, to look after them.”

Bembe nodded. “How wise you are. You must be filled with joy to work with growing things, for them to surround you.”

Jane stared at him. He spoke with such gentleness that she forgot herself, her awkwardness. Then she remembered the purpose of her visit.

“I didn’t explain why I was here,” she flustered. “I see you running every morning, but you didn’t come out today.” She ducked her head, red faced. “I was worried about you, about your leg.”

“Jane.” His voice was like a caress. “Your kindness is overwhelming. My arrival in this land, like my garden, has been afflicted by the timing of the pandemic. I have been alone here, but to think that you have been watching out for me ...”

Jane looked up, despite herself.

“I think perhaps you are an angel, sent to me by the almighty spirit.”

Jane sucked in her breath, startled, shaken.

Bembe’s eyes were moist but his mouth was curved into the sweetest smile. “I know it is against the rules for me to offer you food and drink, but would you accept a chair, and the gift of music?”

Unsure, she nodded. She watched him use the door frame to pull himself to standing. His skin shone like warm mahogany in the sunlight.

“Your leg?” she started, but Bembe shrugged aside her concern and went inside. He returned carrying a chair. Jane scrambled up and moved aside so he could position it on the path.

“I have no symptoms, but for your personal safety perhaps you should refrain from placing your hands on the chair.”

“Thank you, I’ll take care.”

Bembe brought out a chair for himself and disappeared inside again. When he returned he was carrying a cello.

Jane gaped at him. He'd called *her* an angel, but he reminded her of the pictures in her aunt's holy books; the heavenly hosts gathered together with their instruments, ready to give praise.

He smiled at her surprise and sat down, cradling the instrument with his long limbs. Without a word he began to play.

As the music enveloped her, Jane closed her eyes and drank it in like a plant taking water. It was marvellous, magical; unlike anything she'd ever heard before.

When Bembe stopped playing, Jane sat; eyes still closed, and tried to hold the memory of it inside her.

There was a long pause then Bembe spoke, the deep timbre of the cello in his voice.

"Perhaps one day I might be permitted to wipe the tears from your cheeks?"

Jane felt the weight of his eyes on her, his warm gaze covering her like a cloak. She imagined his fingertips stroking her skin. Her heart fluttered open.

"I'd like that," she said.





Unexpected Discoveries

Jackie Rutherford

The only thing more embarrassing than stalking your ex is getting caught doing it.

It hadn't been my intention, per se, to visit the love nest my ex-boyfriend Adam had set up with his new girlfriend. But, somehow, when taking Beasley, my beagle-crossed-with-neighbourhood-roaming-dog out for his evening walk, my feet carried me to the park that adjoined the villa where Adam and Felicity now lived.

I knew it wasn't healthy to fixate on my ex, to wonder what qualities his new girlfriend had that I didn't. But there had been 'overlap' between us, as Adam had admitted under interrogation. Personally, I preferred the phrasing that he was a two-timing, weaselly, lying, cheating, scum bag.

Unfortunately, my stalking was hindered by the fact there was a large fence around the house. Damning the person who invented fences, I stretched on my tippy toes to see into the backyard. No luck.

A large walnut tree growing beside the fence offered a potential solution. Right. Time to channel my ten-year-old self.

Beasley, my ever-faithful sidekick, Robin to my Batman, waited patiently underneath as I grabbed a branch and pulled myself up, my sneakers scraping against the trunk. Using long neglected arm muscles, I managed to scramble inelegantly onto one of the lower branches.

It was only once I was up there that I made a surprising discovery.

Someone else was already in the tree.

A guy sat perched on the opposite branch to mine. In the dim light, I could see he was as startled to see me as I was to see him.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Um...I...” I was trying to stammer out an appropriate reply when a light came on in the backyard of the villa and there was the distinct noise of a door opening.

“Ssshhh,” he said.

I didn’t need to be told twice. Being caught spying by a random stranger is one thing, but being caught by the ex takes it to a whole new level of pathetic.

Adam and Felicity walked out onto their patio. Adam was wearing the Ninja T-Shirt that I’d bought him for his birthday paired with faded old jeans.

My throat thickened. It thickened even more when I saw Felicity’s fingers daintily wrapped around the stem of one of my favourite wine glasses - the bastard must have snuck them into a box when I wasn’t around.

They stood together gazing out into the backyard sipping on their wine for a few minutes, before Adam folded Felicity into his body and kissed her. My tree-mate made a choked-up noise in his throat, like a sob had crawled there to die.

Luckily Adam and Felicity didn’t linger for too much longer. Their back door shut with a final click that reached us like a gunshot through the still night air.

The guy’s shoulders slumped and his whole body listed forward.

“Let me take a wild leap and guess that you’re Connor,” I whispered.

Connor’s eyebrows threatened to fly off his forehead. He seemed perturbed that a random girl in a tree knew his name.

“I’m Hannah. Adam’s ex,” I explained.

“Oh. Right.”

“We better get down.”

“Yeah.”

I was about as elegant climbing down the tree as I had been scaling it. Beasley greeted me with enthusiasm when I reached the bottom. Straightening up after patting him, I took stock of Connor, who was brushing himself down after his own dismount. He was cute. Tall, dark hair, olive skin, strong features. Felicity obviously had a type. It was unfortunate it overlapped so heavily with my type.

“You want to go and get a coffee?” I asked.

His eyebrows bunched together and he hesitated.

“I just thought maybe we could talk,” I said.

“Yeah, okay.” He stuck his hands in the pocket of his hoodie.

Connor and I ended up at the Turkish restaurant down the road. I tied the ever-patient Beasley up outside the doors and gave Connor a tight smile as we headed in.

“So, how did you know my name?” Connor asked as we settled at a table by the front window.

I snorted. “I’m not an amateur. I don’t just limit my stalking to the real world. I saw you on Felicity’s Facebook page.”

“I don’t normally do stuff like that,” he said, rubbing a hand along his jaw. He had a nice defined jaw that currently had a few days’ worth of stubble darkening it. I guessed his shaving routine had been interrupted by the breakup. My legs were currently suffering the same fate.

“Yeah, me neither.”

“I was just so blindsided, you know? I thought we had something strong. I couldn’t believe it when she said she’d met someone else.” He swallowed.

“I know. And for the record, that was my first foray into arboreal spying too.”

He grinned, and a dimple emerged on his cheek. Holy shit. Smiling propelled Connor from the realm of good looking into out-of-this-world handsome.

“At least I know you won’t judge me for it,” he said.

I put my hands up. “Absolutely no judgement here.”

As the waitress took our order and returned with thick Turkish coffee, Connor and I compared notes. It turned out we'd both been fed the same lies by our lovely ex's. They were working late. They were at the gym.

"Thanks." Connor blew out a breath. He looked down at the dregs of his coffee. "It's actually really helped, talking to you about this. Someone who understands."

"Yeah, definitely."

"Can we do this again next week? The ex catch up." His face looked hopeful.

"Okay," I said. "Although maybe we should skip the tree climbing and just stick to coffee."

He huffed out a laugh. "Okay. Agreed."

We exchanged numbers and I felt inexplicably lighter as I left, like helium had been injected into my shoes.

And so Connor and I began our weekly catch-ups where we discussed love, life and cheating ex's.

We also messaged between catch ups, updating each other on the little, hurtful things Felicity and Adam did as they extracted their lives from ours; the coming back for forgotten stuff, the arguments about who had paid for the coffee machine.

Because it was a small neighbourhood and Murphy seemed to make the laws in my life, I always encountered the happy couple at the most cringe-worthy moments. Like the time I was buying facial hair bleach at the pharmacist while they were buying condoms and lubricant. Somehow, it made it easier to cope when I knew I could message Connor and he would send funny memes in reply.

I found myself looking forward to our catch ups, a warm hum of anticipation in my stomach.

As the weeks went by, Felicity and Adam dominated less of our conversation. We talked about Connor's job as an architect, and mine as an event planner. When he got a promotion, I made him a skyscraper cake. Seeing his face light up when I gave it to him made the effort of icing the fiddly windows worth it.

It turned out we both loved sci-fi, and we started exchanging books and movie recommendations.

He'd never watched *Orphan Black*, so I sent him home from one coffee date with the instructions to correct that oversight immediately. For the next week he bombarded me with messages about his conspiracy theories as he binge watched the entire five seasons.

On our next catch-up date, my stomach fluttered weirdly as I walked in the door of the restaurant.

"Hey." I slipped into the seat on our regular table.

"Hey you." Connor had a way of quirking up the corner of his lips right before he broke into a smile. It was up there on the adorable spectrum along with kittens drinking milkshakes from straws.

Ayla, our waitress, placed our coffees in front of us. She knew us so well now that we no longer had to order. I immediately started to spoon sugar into my coffee.

When I looked up, Connor was watching me, a line creasing his forehead. "So, did you hear the news?"

"Is it that the education secretary has finally decided to take my advice and make sci-fi a compulsory part of the school curriculum?"

He grinned at me. "No, it isn't that."

"Then I'm all out of ideas."

His grin faded and he suddenly looked awkward. "Felicity and Adam broke up."

I stopped stirring. "How did you find out?"

"Felicity rang me."

My stomach flipped. "What did she say?"

Connor swallowed. "Uh...she said she made a massive mistake. She wants to get back together."

My heart hammered in my throat. "And what did you say?"

He met my gaze steadily. "I told her I had moved on."

"Oh, okay." Some kind of emotion inflated my chest like a balloon.

"So, you won't try to get back with Adam if he contacts you?" he asked, his eyes intent.

"No." I looked down, fiddling with my spoon. "Definitely not."

It had become our routine for Connor to walk me home. We usually chatted easily, but tonight our conversation stuttered.

We stopped outside my house. My mouth was dry, my saliva glands appeared to have gone on strike.

“So, I guess I’ll see you next week?” Connor’s dark eyes caught mine.

My pulse raced as words fell from me. “Um...do you want to come in? For a coffee? I mean, I know we’ve just had coffee, but we could have another cup. I have decaffeinated if you don’t want more caffeine. I also make a mean herbal tea—“

Connor cut off my babbling by kissing me. I went still under his lips for a moment, then I kissed him back. It was incredible - like his mouth was designed to fit over my mouth, his tongue was destined to be touching my tongue, his body was created for the sole purpose of pressing up against mine.

He eventually pulled back, his pupils dilated and his hair tousled from where I’d been running my hands through it.

“I would love to come up,” he said.

That was Friday night. He didn’t leave until Monday morning.

A fortnight later, I took him home. Quite soon, I know, to be doing the ‘Meet-the-parents’ thing. But it felt right. Everything felt so, so right.

He brought my mother gerberas. A blooming bouquet of flowers with their happy upturned faces, because I’d once mentioned they were my mother’s favourite flowers.

As he leaned down to pat our cat, Mom gave me a massive thumbs up and I grinned.

I tried to wipe the giant smile from my face, but Connor looked up and saw me grinning and a matching smile crept up his face.

“So, how did you two meet?” Mom asked brightly.





Heads or Tails

Stephanie Ruth

Virginia joined the gardening group partly for company, and partly because she was sick of killing stuff. Her late husband had been the green thumb, spending hours in his glasshouse or working on his compost's pH level. Franklyn had always been up a ladder trimming hedges, or out with a torch at night hunting snails, and was survived by a truckload of gardening books.

Virginia had some basic skills, but the enormity of the garden was daunting. This past year she'd done the bare minimum, and even to her own eyes it looked a bit unkempt. Hiring a gardener would probably be a smart move. A relief.

Maybe she should sell the family home and move on? Buy something more manageable. But all her memories were here—the twins growing up, and Frank.

Frank had adored the garden, and she felt closer to him out there with dirt under her fingernails.

It was her daughter, Belinda, who pushed the local ‘seniors’ gardening group. The eldest twin by four minutes, she was always manipulating the rest of the family, very like her father.

“If you won’t get help, at least join a group.”

“I’m hardly ‘senior!’ ” Virginia huffed, insulted. At forty-nine she was still fit, even if her body had taken to doing its own thing. A few extra pounds on the hips, and hot flushes that rendered her breathless.

“Of course not, Mum! But they’ll be knowledgeable. About gardening. About grief. It says ‘all ages welcome.’ I’m just asking you to try. If you don’t like it? Fine.” Belinda wasn’t above squeezing the truth, and Virginia narrowed her eyes, smelling a rat.

“I’m not promising anything.”

“Mum—”

“*Don’t* push me. I’m not in the mood.”

“Fine!” Belinda blustered. “But stop pretending you don’t *need* people!”

“If I find you’ve set me up with another—”

“No.” Belinda held up her hand. “I haven’t, I swear.”

“Good.”

At twenty-seven, Belinda thought she had all the answers, but how could she know how it felt to have a partner wrenched from you? The ‘heads’ to your ‘tails.’ The joker in the pack.

Virginia slipped her hand into the pocket of her jeans and curled her fingers around Frank’s lucky coin. She’d taken to keeping it close, a talisman in uncharted waters.

A year wasn’t long to come to terms with being alone. Nor *remotely* long enough to contemplate filling the gap.

A random heart attack had taken Frank, but Virginia wasn’t bitter. They’d had thirty years together—thirty-two if you counted dating. It wasn’t Frank’s fault she could barely remember who she’d been before her King-of-hearts had sauntered in.

Virginia was nervous when she entered the community garden the first day. She'd decided to bike, it was such a beautiful morning, and had packed what she'd need in the front basket. Secateurs, gloves, a hat, and a trowel.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she warned the organiser, Cherry, who didn't look a day over forty.

Cherry laughed. "None of us did, originally. I'm setting you here, weeding carrots with Leonas. He's an old hand."

Leonas... unusual name. She'd known a Leonas once in high school. Leo. They'd sat together in Art History, and he'd kissed her after the sixth-form dance—both of them tentative, their collective inexperience affirmed by an awkward tooth-bunt.

"This is—" Cherry began as they approached a man on his hands and knees. He sat back on his haunches and turned.

"Leo!" Virginia stopped dead, her mind going a hundred miles an hour. What was he doing here? Where had he been hiding all this time? And why, oh *why*, had she not worn more flattering shorts?

"Gin. Lovely to see you." Leo smiled, calling her by the old nickname she'd almost forgotten. He still carried a slight accent, but it had softened over the years. Russian? Latvian? She couldn't remember...

Lithuanian.

She tugged at the hem of her shrunk-in-the-drier cutoffs.

"You two know each other? Perfect." Cherry beamed and hurried away, no longer needed.

"I was sorry to hear about Franklyn." Leo shaded his eyes with his hand as he gazed up at her.

"Thank you." She couldn't read his expression under those dark brows. "You knew Frank?" She didn't remember them hanging out in the same circles.

"Two years of senior volleyball. He had a hell of a serve, and no-one could beat him at poker." Leo grinned.

Frank had loved both games—his overriding hunger to win only softening with the children.

“Yes, he did.” She attempted a smile, but it felt a bit wobbly. “And no, they couldn’t.”

“How are you doing?” Leo held out a hand to help her down next to him on the grass.

She could see his eyes now, a clear blue, and her own began to smart at the honest sympathy she could read there.

“Mostly okay,” she managed, blinking rapidly to rid herself of the unwanted moisture. “I’m a work in progress.”

“Aren’t we all? *The Birth Of Venus* wasn’t painted in a day. It’ll be alright, though. You’ll see.” He smiled encouragingly.

“You haven’t changed much.” The thought came out of her mouth without any editing. He had crow’s feet and more wrinkles, but he’d kept a thick shock of dark hair, and it was only peppered with grey around the temples. It was his eyes, really. They were just the same as Leo-aged-seventeen—alert and optimistic.

Leo chuckled. “I wish. You, on the other hand, look pretty as a Botticelli.”

She blushed under the brim of her hat. Leo was openly flirting. Perhaps he’d thought she was trawling with her comment about not changing? She may have held some small resemblance to Sandro Botticelli’s pale-skinned goddess once, but that was decades ago.

Sliding hands into gloves, she moved further from where Leo knelt, and began plucking weeds from between the regimented rows of carrots.

Leonas had given her a single white rose, she remembered suddenly. Delivered it to her door the morning after the dance. Why had he never followed that up? That was right before Franklyn had asked her out on their first date.

Funny how life had small offshoots that could alter your whole trajectory. The choices taken... or not.

“Are we leaving these little purple flowers?” She pulled some chickweed and left the dainty shamrock look-alike.

Leo leaned over for a better look. “No, that’s *Oxalis*, a noxious weed. Try to dig a bit deeper and get the bulbs out, it’s tenacious.”

“What a pity. They’re so sweet,” she murmured.

Leo sat back on his heels again and stared at her. “Sweet and all encompassing,” he warned, his voice low. “Hard to recover from once you’ve let it go.”

Virginia got the distinct impression there was a double meaning hidden within that statement, but she ignored it and moved on to the next row.

They worked for an hour in the community garden, then went around to one of the older ladies houses to trim back fruit trees. Ten workers achieved a huge amount in the space of an afternoon, even with sultana scones and a cup of tea thrown in.

Virginia stationed herself with Cherry’s husband, Brian, the following week. He was safe, with no links to the past, no references to Renaissance paintings, and no inclination to make her blush. Working on stringing up young tomato plants in the glasshouse, Brian showed her how to nip out the side shoots with her fingertips.

“This seems cruel,” she admitted.

“Gotta be cruel to be kind,” Brian countered. “Best thing for the plant, remove the laterals.”

Leo popped his head into the muggy space. “Could I see you before you go? I’ve got something for you.” He offered her a small smile, and she relaxed enough to give him one back. So far she’d been given seedlings, cuttings, and mountains of advice. Everyone was being friendly.

She’d read too much into Leo’s words last week, and felt a little silly about it. Just because she’d crushed on him at seventeen, and was pretty sure he’d felt something too, didn’t mean there was anything between them now.

“Nearly done removing laterals,” she muttered, wondering how many potential offshoots she’d lopped off by marrying young.

It was a large terracotta pot with soil in it—the gift.

“Ah, thank you?” Virginia wasn’t sure what to make of it, and couldn’t hide the fact. The corresponding humour in Leo’s eyes curled her toes.

“Not exactly kosher.” Leo’s settled the pot in her bike basket. Close up, he smelt of earth, and sunshine-on-skin. “But you’re right, it’s very sweet.”

Oxalis. *Beyond* sweet. He'd gone and given her potted bulbs of a flowering weed.

"Why didn't you ask me out?" she blurted.

"What, last week?" Leo looked taken aback. Maybe he had a wife, and a team of children. "It seemed too soon... for you."

No.

"Not last week. Thirty-two years ago."

What a ridiculous thing to ask him, after all this time. She turned away to put on her helmet, furious at herself.

"Franklyn never told you?" Leo was holding her handlebars steady, his gaze direct.

"No."

"He won you."

Virginia frowned. "*Won* me? He certainly did not!"

"I've upset you." Leo's hand touched hers, frozen in the act of fastening her chinstrap. "Sorry. You see we both liked you—tossed a coin for who would ask you out first. I lost."

Wait.

"You tossed... *Frank's* coin?" Surely not. Virginia removed her hand from under Leo's and patted her thigh, feeling for the familiar circle. "And Frank chose *heads*."

"Yes." Leo's brows compacted up.

"Because he *always* chose heads. Oh, Frank... you *crook*!" she hooted, delving into her pocket for the offending coin. "Win, by any route."

Leo looked even more confused.

"Let's toss." She smirked, waggling Franklyn's 'lucky' coin between thumb and forefinger. "Heads—you buy dinner. Tails—you don't."

"Okaaaaay." Leo was watching her carefully.

She flicked the coin skyward, and slapped it down on her arm as Frank always had. "*Whaddayaknow*. Heads!"

Leo's lips twitched at her sideshow-hustler routine.

“Heads—you drive,” she continued.

“Of course—”

She’d flipped again before he could finish. “Would you look at that? *Heads*. I’m betting ‘heads’ you’ll mow my lawn tomorrow.”

This time when she spun the coin high, Leo caught it himself. He turned it over in his palm, and she was relieved to see him smiling when he looked up from examining the double-headed coin. “Forever heads.”

“His father’s. A rare miss-mint,” she divulged. “Never supposed to go into circulation.”

“I see.” Leo pondered this for a moment. “Frank removed the laterals.”

“*Precisely.*”

“Clever.”

“Sneaky,” she corrected.

“That too.” Leo held up the coin, a glint in his eye. “Heads—I buy you coffee?”

Virginia laughed. “I think I like this game.”





The Bridge

Kim Roscoe

The bridge was in sight. This was where we'd agreed to meet. Rays of bright light encompassing the structure caused me to squint in pain as I approached. The rising sun was so intense, balloons and ribbons festooning the balustrades were barely visible. Thick ribbons of colour, tied in large loopy bows, competed with helium filled balloons for every inch of the hand railings. Someone had obviously made a monumental effort.

A shadow crested the hump of the bridge. His silhouette was instantly recognisable. It had been years since we'd last met, and despite being backlit by that strong light, I knew it was him.

Fond memories of our years together replayed in my mind. I'd hoped our love would survive any trial, but shyness and doubt washed over me.

Slowing my walk to a crawl, I feigned interest in the lush gardens that bordered the path. Cheeky pansy faces ringed neatly trimmed rose bushes, splashes of yellow and orange dotted amongst the blacks and blues. Bending to sniff at a white rose close to the path, I allowed myself to sneak a glance in his direction.

He'd stopped at the crest, leaning casually against the balustrade, idly pulling on the string of one balloon. It was gold and heart-shaped. Was this a sign? A signal perhaps? My heart lurched with each tug. Would we once again have a future together, or had the passing of time changed our feelings for one another?

Our separation had been sudden and unexplained. He'd been there one day, and gone the next. There was no discussion, no preparation, no choices. I'd just been left alone. Devastated, I fell into depression. My friends united, trying to shelter me from the desolation of my broken heart. Life went on despite my sorrow. So many years, and now he was back. Would he want to be with me?

Should I run to him, my heart on my sleeve? The need to be wrapped in the warm shelter of his body was overpowering. If pleading was needed, I could do that.

We came together at the base of the bridge. Our first embrace was tentative, almost formal. Looking up to face him, our eyes met. Familiar blue eyes locked with my own; the ever present distinctive moustache, as much a part of him as any limb. I'd always idly wondered if it concealed something; a childhood tattoo perhaps? I'd threatened to shave it when he wasn't aware. He'd just chuckled in response, shaking his head.

The ends of his mouth crinkled upward, his smile as mischievous as I remembered, but something had altered, an almost imperceptible difference. What was it? Searching, my eyes scoured back and forth. He'd been so pale when I last saw him. He was now a healthy pink. Was that it?

It struck me like lightning; the marks were missing from his face. No scars, no under eye shadows, and no worry lines! What had he done? Surely only major surgery could remove these?

"What is it, Kitten?" The familiar endearment was music to my ears, despite the concern in his voice, but couldn't quieten my dread. "You're frowning."

"I . . . I don't understand. What's happened to your face? Brown hair again too. That can come from a bottle . . . but your face?"

"It's just how it is here, Love," shaking his head, he came closer, "Did no one tell you?"

"Tell me? Who would tell me? It's not like there was a travel agent to go through all the details." I struggled to comprehend what I must have overlooked. "I've seen no one. I came directly here. Just as we agreed," I whispered.

His arm settled at the small of my back, folding me closer again. I welcomed it, leaning into his chest, overcome with emotions. The warm, familiar smell of him enveloped me. I'd missed this contact so much. Ten long years of solitude fell away.

He stroked lazy circles across my shoulders, sparking recollections of the few times he had done this previously. Close physical contact was never his customary response. A tough childhood had taught him to keep his emotions well hidden, least any sentiment be seen as weakness. In the past, it was only when we were grieving, that he'd loosened the tight control on himself; putting my obvious need ahead of his own comfort. "I've missed having you in my arms, Kitten. I'm never going to let an opportunity pass me by again," he growled.

I placed my hand over his heart, our silent communication for the love we shared. The rhythmic solid thumping radiated through my fingers, no words were necessary. Memories of the years of separation faded, the loneliness dissolved, all that pain now a distant memory. We melded as one, together once again.

Lifting my chin in one hand, he turned my face upward; his thumb smoothed away the tears rolling down my cheeks. "I asked the others to wait. To let me have you all to myself for just a few minutes before we joined them," he murmured, stroking my hair.

"Others? What others?"

"Yes, they're all here," he continued. "Where else would they be? They've been so excited since I told them you were coming. They want to welcome you home."

"Home?" I whispered numbly, "Will this be our home?"

"So long as we're all together, anywhere can be our home."

"Together," I echoed. "Yes . . . together."

"C'mon, they'll be getting restless. Patience has never been their specialty."

"You never answered my question. Who are 'they' exactly?"

Smiling, he whispered, "Let's see if you remember them all. I'm sure you will." Taking my hand, he led me to the bridge. The early morning sun continued to bathe everything in bright light. This was no yellow brick road, just a simple concrete path leading to the humpbacked crossing. He remembered to slow his stride, matching my much shorter one. Despite this, I still stumbled as we approached the apex. "Careful, Love," he whispered, catching me easily in his arms, "This can be overwhelming. Just pause and take a breath."

The balloons bobbed in a gentle breeze, fluttering ribbons formed myriads of colour, both very distracting as my gaze lifted from my feet. Turning, he released me,

though my hand remained secure in his grasp. His gentle squeeze urged me to follow him over the crest.

As one, all movement stopped, their faces turning toward me, ears trained forward, searching. Little, round, faces; black ones, tabby ones, tortie ones, creamy ones, some fluffy, some smooth, all waiting quietly.

I dropped to my knees on the grass, now so easy without stiffness or pain. They all crowded around, smothering me with smooches, purring and chirping, as I greeted each one in turn. Everyone moved with ease, no one limped; there were no bumps, lumps or infirmities. In wonder, I turned to my beloved, eyebrow raised.

“It’s as I told you, Love. That’s just how it is here.”

My hands disappeared into the crowd, tickling chins, stroking bodies, ruffling heads, wagging tails. Some flopped to their sides, exposing bellies for fondling. My eager fingers took up the challenge. “It’s been so long since I’ve done this. After you left, the pair that remained became my steadfast companions. Then age robbed me of their company. Their passing was excruciating without your support,” my lip quivered. “I just didn’t have the strength to adopt another.”

* * *

Hours passed as we lay side by side on the grass, relaxing in the warmth of the day, content with our own company. The feline blanket moved back and forth between us, each cat frolicking, running, jumping or simply washing as we watched on. Time had no relevance or limitations. We just existed to be together, enjoying each other.

Eventually, he turned to one side, elbow bent, supporting his head on his hand. His free hand reached for mine. Warm lips pressed against my knuckles, a brief old-fashioned kiss. “Are you ready to go on?” He rose to one knee, gently tugging me upward.

“Go . . . to where?”

“You didn’t think we’d be limited to this field, did you?”

“I sort of wondered,” I said, blushing. “But I was so enjoying us all being together.”

“The together won’t change, Love. Just the location.”

“Oh, where are we going? What about the girls?”

“The girls will obviously be coming with us,” he chuckled. “We’ll never be without them again.”

“So, where are we going?”

“Nana and Pop made me promise to visit them once we were reunited. Pop was especially pleased, as Nana sweetened the request by offering to make us bread and butter pudding. He told me to say he was depending on you.”

“Oh, that old chestnut.” I chuckled. “Pop always says Nana won’t make him dessert unless they have company.”

As I stood to join him, the girls all gathered around. We would go forward together . . . together, forever.





The Art of Paying It Forward

Kellie Hailes

Lauren's eyes flicked to the café's door for what must have been the hundredth time in the last minute. A shadow darkened the doorway. Her heart sank at its shape. It was not the shadow she'd been hoping for.

Damn it. *He* wasn't meant to get the coffee. It was meant for *the* guy - the one who wore the suit... perfectly cut to show off a trim waist, toned bum and swimmer's shoulders. Not this one with his bohemian beard and man-bun, and his knee-skimming, olive-green shorts and basic black T-shirt.

'It's good to see you again darlin'.' Eryn, the café owner, smiled at Mr Wrong. 'The usual?'

'Yes, please.' Mr Wrong went to pull his wallet out from his shorts' back pocket.

Eryn waved her hand. 'Put it away. This one's paid for.'

His head angled to one side. From her perch on the stool at the café's bar that ran the length of the room, Lauren could see lines corrugate between his brows.

‘How’s it already paid for?’ He glanced around the empty café. His eyes landed on Lauren.

Espresso-brown. Curious. A touch confused. And rather attractive... If big and luminous was your thing. Heat washed over Lauren’s cheeks as his gaze lingered, putting two-and-two together. She ducked her head and pretended to focus on the newspaper in front of her.

As her eyes skirted over an article about local road improvement funding, or lack thereof, she heard the grind and hiss of Mr Wrong’s coffee being made.

Her shoulders inched down at the slap-snap of jandals on wooden floorboards.

He was leaving. Good.

Awkwardness avoided.

She’d just have to pay it forward again tomorrow and hope Mr Suit wasn’t running late, and then her not-quite-so-best laid plan would be exacted: The coffee would be Mr Suit’s. He’d realise she was the one who bought it for him. He’d stop by to say thank you, and it would be instant love. Or attraction. Or vague interest.

She’d settle on vague interest, which was more than he’d shown her since he’d started buying coffee at her local café two weeks ago.

‘Thank you. That was really kind.’

Lauren’s heart slammed against her chest, and not in the way she’d hoped it would had Mr Suit been the recipient of coffee.

Why couldn’t this guy have just let it be? Gone on his way, free coffee in hand. Now she was going to have to make conversation with someone wholeheartedly inappropriate. Total un-boyfriend, un-husband, un-*anything* material.

She could see her mother’s eyes narrow with that ‘not good enough’ haughtiness Lauren had spent her life trying to avoid.

She fixed a polite smile to her face and forced herself to look up. ‘It’s nothing, really. Just something I do. You know, pay it forward. Do something nice for a stranger.’

She dipped her head back to the article, figuring the conversation was finished.

‘Cool. I’ve heard of paying it forward, but I’ve never been lucky enough to be part of it.’ He propped his elbows on the table and leaned in.

A hint of lemon and mint wafted towards Lauren. She breathed in, a smile tugged the edges of her lips. Citrus and fresh, the perfect combination.

‘Does that mean it’s my turn to pay it forward? Do something nice for someone randomly?’

She gave a non-committal shrug. ‘If you want. Up to you.’ *Move along, already.*

Guilt swamped her gut. Just because her plan hadn’t panned out, it didn’t mean she had to be rude.

‘I wonder what I could do?’ He drummed the tabletop with his fingertips. ‘I mean I could buy the next person a coffee? But then that’s copying, isn’t it?’

‘I guess. Though the person getting the free coffee wouldn’t mind.’ Lauren tapped her phone’s screen. The clock flashed up, her stomach sunk at the numbers. There was no way Mr Suit was coming in today. He was never this late. Maybe he’d moved on? Maybe she’d missed her shot?

‘Maybe I could paint something and leave it in a random spot with a note for someone saying it was theirs to enjoy. Or pass on if they hated it.’

Lauren pushed the paper away. Mr Wrong was clearly in the mood to chat, and the only other option she had was to head back to work early. A shiver rippled down her spine at the thought of entering the soulless, grey concrete building that housed the hospital she worked at earlier than necessary.

Chat it was.

‘You paint?’

‘A little. It’s a hobby. I’m Josh by the way.’ Josh offered his hand and Lauren shook it.

Warm, firm and unexpectedly capable of creating palm-tingles.

‘Lauren.’ She released his hand and wrapped hers around her coffee cup, half-hoping the heat would deal with those tingles. Half-hoping it wouldn’t.

It’d been a long time since she’d been tingle-touched. At least five years. Another artistic type. Another doomed relationship. Dead the moment her mother met him and later told Lauren he wasn’t good enough for her. For her? More like for their straight-and-narrow, well-respected family, filled with doctors, lawyers, accountants and the like.

‘Is this your local?’ Josh glanced round the small café. His eyes falling on the art decorating one wall.

None were for sale. Lauren had refused to let Eryn put a price on them. She didn’t want the money. Didn’t want to think she could’ve done well from the talent her parents had refused to indulge, seeing the arts as a waste of time.

‘Those are amazing.’ His head tilted to the side as he took in the series. Stretches of sea, each with a lone character looking out to the horizon. ‘You get a sense of loss. There’s hope there, too. And... defiance. I wonder if the artist has other works? They’re good enough to be exhibited. Their work would be snapped up. I wonder if the café owner has a contact number...’

‘No.’ Lauren grabbed Josh’s hand as he made to go to the counter. ‘The artist doesn’t paint for money.’

Josh’s eyes locked on hers. ‘You seem to know a lot about the artist. Do you have their number? And do you intend on holding my hand forever?’

Lauren released her grip on him, embarrassed at her rash action, and tucked her hands between her thighs. ‘I know the artist. Well enough that I can assure you she isn’t interested in exhibiting in a gallery.’ *Even if the idea of it sets off fireworks in her heart.* ‘Do you exhibit your work?’ Lauren attempted to change the topic, to put the focus on Josh.

‘Oh no. I’m a terrible artist. It’s a stress release for me. Knowing I’m awful takes the pressure off.’ A dimple appeared in his left cheek as he smiled self-deprecatingly. ‘If I had a touch of the talent of that artist...’ He nodded to the works on the wall. ‘I’d be a happy man. Possibly also a wealthy one. You sure the artist won’t change her mind?’ The dimple deepened.

Lauren’s heart squeezed tight. *Because of the compliment, not the gorgeous dimple*, she told herself. ‘She won’t. Her family don’t approve.’ She sank her teeth into her lower lip. What was she saying? Why was she being so open? So obvious? With a complete stranger?

Josh’s brow furrowed, his chin dipped to his chest. ‘It’s a pity she cares what they think. She could have quite the future, quite the life, if she set herself free.’ He brought his coffee cup to his lips and took a deep swallow. ‘Ah well, thanks for the coffee. I’ll be sure to pay it forward.’

Lauren followed his path as he left the café. How could a stranger she'd just met leave her with such a sense of loss? She shook the thought from her head. She was being stupid, and if she didn't get a wriggle-on she'd be late for work. Nursing wasn't quite up to her parents' expectations, but it was at least in a respectable field. And the way Lauren saw it, if she couldn't make people – or herself – happy with her art, at least she could improve their lives through giving them high quality care, along with the odd doodled caricature to give them a laugh.

She finished her coffee, nodded her thanks to Eryn and promised herself she'd pay it forward again the next day – for real this time. Not to capture the attention of Mr Suit in the hopes of pleasing her mother, but because a moment with Josh had filled her with a feeling she'd long given up on – hope.

'Your usual?' Eryn angled her head towards the gleaming coffee machine.

'Please.' Lauren sat at her usual seat, and found her gaze on the doorway. Empty, bar for the odd person striding past. No men in suits walked through.

No man with a top-knot, delightful dimple and eyes she hoped to share a smile with again.

She pushed aside the disappointment and thanked Eryn as she delivered her coffee.

'Here.' Eryn passed a crisp white envelope. 'This is for you.'

She caught Eryn's knowing eye. 'Is this from...?'

'Hot man-bun guy? Sure is. He came in yesterday afternoon and insisted I let him take your work. Said he knew someone in the art industry. I disagreed for no seconds at all. It's about time you were happy. That you did what you were born to do. That someone recognised just how special you are.' Eryn gave a cheeky wink, then went back to the counter.

Lauren turned it over, half afraid to read its contents.

With trembling fingers, she ripped along the top edge, and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, embossed at the top with the logo of one of the city's most popular art galleries.

Lauren,

I hope the artist won't be too angry with me – but I've borrowed the paintings and I intend on hanging them in my gallery so that others can enjoy their beauty. Call it my way of paying it forward. And when they sell – which they will – I'll ensure the money reaches her.

Over a coffee.

My shout.

Josh.

A warm glow spread through Lauren as she hugged the note to her chest, and found herself excited to spend time with a man whose touch set her tingling, whose eyes saw to the heart of her, who gave her art a chance and believed in her when no one else would. Not even herself.

'Eryn? The next five coffees are on me.'

'Still hoping to catch Mr Suit's attention?' Eryn angled her head in surprise.

Lauren pocketed the note, then paid for the coffees. 'Not at all. Just wanting to spread the love.'





The One That Got Away

Yvonne Walus

A permanent guy in her life was the last thing Gina wanted. That was a firm *no-no*. No to beard stubble in the basin, *no* to beer cans in the lounge, and a definite *no* to a stepdad for Allison.

Sill, much as she hated to admit it, she wasn't happy. The prestigious yet humdrum job, the shallow dating scene, even the miracle of motherhood – the days blended into one another with predictability that should have been comforting, and felt wearisome instead.

“Mummy, what are you doing?”

“Making lunch. Want to help? Hands clean? Good job! Love you.”

“Love you, Mummy.”

Fulfilment and boredom rolled into one lively six-year old.

That's why she did it: looked up Nick on Instagram. Or rather: looked up Nick on Instagram *again*. She'd done it before, of course, several times. Several times a week

during one particularly lonely July when she was a freshly single woman. Back then, Nick's Instagram had consisted of memes which mirrored her own sense of humour, plus personal photos of Nick with a sports car, Nick at the beach (yum!), Nick attending their five-year school reunion (while she'd been drowning in nappies and sleepless nights), Nick getting married to a dark-eyed woman who looked skinny even in a puffing wedding dress.

Every time she thought of him, the lyrics of a Katie Perry hit would play in her head. She and Nick had never made out in a Mustang to Radiohead or got matching tattoos, yet somehow he was the boy in the song: the one that got away.

"Mummy, what are you doing?"

"Finishing a report for work."

"Read me a bedtime story?"

"Always."

Anyway, life was too busy to waste on old crushes. It was only after her divorce, the obligatory period of mourning for the relationship that could have been, and a few 'meh' attempts on Tinder, that Gina's mind turned back to Nick.

His Instagram bio wasn't filled in, which didn't necessarily mean anything regarding his relationship status. His feed featured photographs of the recent Australian bushfires, guy-only poker nights, and no dark-eyed woman from his wedding photo – which still didn't necessarily mean anything, either.

Should she message him? What would she say? His latest post was a tray of home-baked apple pie. She double-tapped it and watched a heart blossom underneath, like an ironic symbol. What now? Perhaps write a comment, something humorous, and -

"Mummy?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can we make vanilla fudge?"

"Maybe in a little while? I'm busy."

"You're always busy."

Guilt punched her square in the chest. She'd failed as a wife, and now she was failing as a mother. And for what? A guy she had liked at school. Okay, had liked a lot. Maybe more than just 'liked'. Anyway - time to make vanilla fudge.

Later, with Allison asleep, Gina posted a photo of cream-coloured fudge squares on her Instagram, like a nudge to Nick and his apple pie. Several friends hearted it right away. Then a comment flashed on the screen. She caught her breath. Nick.

“Looks delish, Genie! I’ll swap you a slice of apple pie for fudge.”

Genie. She’d forgotten he used to call her that.

“Whose small hand is holding the plate?”

Gina squashed her unease. This was Nick, not her stepdad. “My daughter’s.”

“Congratulations on your baby girl – belated. Can I have the recipe?”

Gina smiled to herself as she typed. “For making babies?” Then hit *send* before she could chicken out.

“Sure.”

Her heart hammered in her throat. A recipe for making babies. Now what?

The notification icon flashed a direct message. From Nick.

“I had a quick lurk through your photos...?” An unspoken question, which would have been too much too soon, except hadn’t she just talked about making babies?

“Unattached at the moment. You?” As though she hadn’t cyber-stalked him.

That’s how it started.

It took two weeks of FaceTiming about books, movies, food, minority rights and the environment, before they got round to discussing their jobs.

“I’m an actuary,” Gina confessed. “I know. Even more lacklustre than a librarian, right?”

“You kidding? I love librarians. Nearly as much as I love books. Actuaries, I’m not so sure. What is it that you do *exactly*?”

“Life insurance.”

Nick grinned at her from the laptop’s screen. “I could use that.”

“What are you, a spy?”

“Firefighter.”

Gina had to fan her face. She made of show of it, like it was all pretence, but her cheeks felt hot and her hormones screamed that it had been months since sex. “A fireman? Like those guys posing with puppies for that calendar?”

“Been trying to get into *that calendar* for years. Want to see the poses I strike at auditions?”

“So much!”

He unbuttoned his shirt slowly, his smile intimate, the abs beautifully sculpted. He shrugged off the fabric, stood up as if to unzip his jeans, halted.

“Hey!” Gina didn’t bother to hide her frustration. She had never, ever, wanted any man more. “Don’t stop...”

“I like how you say, *don’t stop*.” His tone was full of innuendo. “But the rest will have to wait for real time.”

“Come over now.” Gina couldn’t believe the words escaping her mouth.

“My shift starts in an hour.”

She had to bite the inside of her cheek to avoid suggesting a quickie at hers on his way to work.

Their first date was a home-cooked dinner – at Gina’s, because she couldn’t find a babysitter. Nick cooked and served the meal. Allison loved the restaurant vibe for five minutes, then ran off to watch cartoons. Gina didn’t call her back for dessert - too busy letting Nick lick chocolate mousse off her mouth.

“Genie,” he whispered between kisses.

She didn’t want to talk, but they couldn’t go on with Allison in the next room, so Gina stilled her breath, sent a stern mental note to her hormones, and asked, “Why do you call me that?”

“Cause when you rub a lamp, a genie makes all your dreams come true. And, yeah, I know it sounds lame, you’re my dreams come true.”

She didn’t think it sounded lame. “Wait, you always called me Genie. All throughout school.”

“Didn’t you know what a massive crush I had on you? For years and years.”

“And you didn’t say anything?”

He kissed her again, softly this time. “You were always hanging out with the brainy bunch. I had confidence problems back then. Thought I wasn’t smart enough for you.”

All throughout school, Gina had assumed she wasn’t cool enough for Nick. “If only we’d talked about it back then.”

“Yeah, because that’s what every guy wants to do with a hot chick, right? Talk about her feelings till dawn.”

That made her laugh. “No, but seriously. Next time we have a problem, let’s talk it out. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Mummy, is there dessert?”

“I left some for you. Bath soon. Love you.”

“That’s my cue,” Nick said. “Goodnight, you two.”

It was ridiculous how much Gina wanted him to stay. “Playing hard to get?” she murmured as he zipped up his jacket.

“Playing for keeps. I don’t want to be a one-night-stand, Genie.”

Alarm bells sounded. She didn’t want a relationship. She didn’t want a stepdad for Allison. Then Nick drew her to him and she smelled the warmth of his skin, and her objections melted.

She fell asleep happy. Waiting for sex with Nick was like waiting for Christmas.

Nick was also divorced, but while Gina’s husband left because he couldn’t cope with the baby (Allison had been a surprise), Nick’s marriage ended because he’d wanted children, while his wife hadn’t.

“Did you really give up your marriage for the dream of having kids one day?” Gina asked about six weeks into their dating.

He nodded. “I wasn’t ready to give up the dream of having kids for the sake of my marriage.”

In a way, Gina had done the same thing. Her ex had hinted about an abortion, and she refused to sacrifice the dream of Allison.

All that talk of babies, Gina reflected, must have contributed – on a quantum level – to their contraception failing, because not three months later Gina stood in the bathroom watching the second line on the pregnancy test grow bolder and bolder.

The thing was, she did want more babies. Absolutely. A guy in her life though? Still a *no*. So how do you tell a man that you're pregnant and want to raise his baby without him, even though you maybe love him and are still super keen to have sex?

She didn't phrase it like that, but that's what he got from her, anyway.

"So, wait," he said. "Am I just a distraction to you? Good enough in bed, but not smart enough to raise our baby?"

It was almost tempting to make him believe that. Problem solved. Nick would walk away from her life, and Allison would be safe....

Hold it. Nick was not her stepfather. Allison *was* safe. One thing that Gina had learnt at an early age was how to spot a child molester.

Plus, they'd made that deal about resolving problems by talking.

"Nick. Please. I'm explaining it really, really badly."

She tried again. Her stepfather's eyes, small and mean and eyelash-less. The way they used to zoom in on Gina, on her mouth and her boobs. The way he'd grin, his face turning arse-ugly. When she was eleven, the bathroom door had mysteriously broken, and for months she'd shower knowing he watched her. He'd never abused her physically, never touched her, so fortunately sexual intimacy wasn't an issue for her. Stepdads, though, were potential creeps – and worse.

She cried as she spoke, her voice rough, tears welling up even though she wasn't feeling sad anymore.

Nick held her tight throughout. "I'm going to kill him," he said when she finished, his face a blend of pain and fury.

"Fortunately, a heart attack beat you to it. Thank you for the offer, though."

"So now what?"

Oddly enough, the idea of Nick's empty beer cans in the lounge didn't sound too terrible. The idea of no Nick in her life was unbearable. "Now I don't know."

"Here's how I see it." Nick took her hand and kissed her little finger. "If we have to break up, let it be for the right reason." He kissed her ring finger. "This here is not

the right reason.” Next finger. “I’ve looked up what an actuary does. Numbers and probability, right?” Pointer. “So get this: most men are decent people. Selfish, yeah, and lazy for sure. But at least 99.9 percent of us are not monsters.” Thumb. “So will you give me a chance?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

His lips found the inside of her hand and they stopped talking.





Second Act

Stephanie Ruth

Bianca couldn't see Trent anywhere, just a sea of coats, hoodies, and beanies buffering their humans against the cool evening. Some were seated in camping chairs, others standing, and from the back everyone looked the same.

Finally spotting her boyfriend's jacket near the edge of the crowd—perhaps vetoing his VIP seat to gauge audience reaction—she stepped up beside him and slipped her hand into his fleece-lined pocket.

She'd forgotten her mittens in the mad race to leave the flat and already regretted it, her fingers like icicles. She felt Trent start, then glance down at her as she leaned forward to get a better look at the outdoor stage.

"Sorry, no car parks." Reckoning on irritation at her tardiness on opening night, she avoided eye contact, feigning preoccupation in the play. "What did I miss?"

"Me, I hope." Trent's chuckle caught her by surprise. The stress of pulling together this open-air version of *Othello* had been mounting, and they were all stretched thin with final exams looming.

Bianca turned to look up, but Trent read her action before she'd completed it, playfully covering her eyes with his free hand.

"Aren't you going to kiss me hello?" A smile warmed his voice, and she returned it—happy he was in a better mood than anticipated.

"Uh-huh..." She stepped in front, eyes still masked, and offered her lips up.

She'd expected perfunctory, and that's what she got at first. But his mouth returned for a second graze, then a full, sizzle-your-socks-off third. Suddenly there was no uncertainty left and they were all-out snogging, strangely secluded within the crowd—under the brilliant stars.

Trent always smelt good, but he was wearing new cologne tonight: musky, like minted cloves. It heightened everything.

Bianca slid her free hand up the contours of his chest through the open jacket, gaining a responding pressure from the fingers still entwined with hers in his pocket. Reaching higher, she discovered the crisp flick of Trent's new haircut and buried her fingers in it, her tongue delving to meet his. He was unshaven, quite unlike him for such a public production, and the faint rasp from his stubble gave her goose-bumps.

It was an unbelievably hot, *wish-we-were-alone* kiss, and from the growing pressure against her hip she wasn't the only one to think so. Trent was usually anti-PDA—his hang-up, not hers. Open to the shift in attitude, she all was mussed up and moaning softly.

It *almost* felt like—

"Bianca." His lips meandered across her cheek, a whisper of touch, and the hand lightly covering her eyes moved to slide her hair from her neck. He settled his teeth just below her ear, murmuring through the mock-bite, "Holy *shit*, I missed you."

Trent *never* swore.

Bianca's breathing was ragged and her pulse juddered under his lips—thickly erratic. Sliding chilled fingers down his neck, urging him closer, she came to a dead stop when she discovered a fine chain settled there.

Nor did he wear jewellery.

Her head jerked back in denial. Dragging both hands to his chest, she forced enough space between them to get a good look at him in the moonlight.

Not Trent.

Ashton.

Trent's twin gave her a lopsided grin, as familiar as it was mocking.

Had she known? Her *body* sure had—straight back into the hot, slick groove from the past. Ashton had been her first for many things, but wasn't anything to do with her present.

Her ex-lover's chuckle let her know he could read the damning knowledge on her face, and he leaned forward to tease, "Is that how you welcome *all* the boys home, B?"

The shock of finding Ashton at close quarters began to ebb, and Bianca was left shamefaced about the public nature of what they'd just done.

"What are you *doing* here?" she hissed, again pushing at Ashton's chest and the solid band of his arm around her waist.

He loosened his hold, leaning forward to take one last inhale—nose buried in her hair. "I wasn't really sure up until now. You smell good."

So did he.

She made like a statue to stop herself rubbing against him, still struggling to catch her breath.

Ashton eased back all the way and contemplated her.

Nearly three years since they last saw each other. She stared back, committing the small changes to memory. He was still beautiful, and raw edged—still taking more than what was on offer.

"Why are you in Trent's jacket?" she muttered, perturbed by her body's response to his.

Pinging, buzzing—all but on fire.

She pressed the back of her hand against her lips for a moment, unsure if she was trying to hold the kiss close, or wipe it off. "That was a cheap trick."

Ashton shrugged. "I'm dossing on Trent's sofa, and it's cold." His eyes were dark, watchful, taking in every nuance. She squirmed under the scrutiny, but there was no point hiding. No one could read her as easily as Ash. "Going by your input, you found that about as 'cheap' as I did." He mocked her with a light chuckle. "You have the most kissable lips, and no notion what that pout does to me."

Bianca had a fair idea, and was glad the low light would hide the beetroot-hue of her face. She looked around furtively. Either the crowd had crept forward, or Ashton had managed to manoeuvre them backwards, to the periphery.

She wiped both palms down the thighs of her jeans, gathering herself.

“We shouldn’t have done that.” But her voice held less censure than she would’ve liked.

“No? You didn’t enjoy it?” Ashton’s grin had gone, but a hint of humour still tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“I didn’t know it was you!”

“Mmm...” Ashton reached forward to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. The tender action rendered her knees a bit wobbly. “I knew it was *you* though, and I refuse to regret it, or forget it. Not ever.” He spoke huskily, and the tone touched something primal within her.

Bianca wasn’t an inexperienced high school student anymore—he shouldn’t affect her this way.

But affect her was exactly what Ashton did. Always.

Ashton smoothed a hand over the fall of her hair, across her shoulder and down until he reached her palm. Always so warm, she’d used him as a heat source their whole senior year—hands in his pockets, under his shirt, all over him.

Her first.

She didn’t pull away.

“I won’t regret this, either,” Ashton murmured, tugging her hand, inviting her forward until she was once again hard against him. He hesitated only to stroke a finger down her jawline. “God, B. You got prettier. How’s that even possible?” Then he brought his lips down, kissing her with an aching sweetness that had her blinking back tears.

Ash.

No matter how much she tried to fool herself, she’d missed him—everything about him. From his brash, outspoken nature and self-deprecating humour, to the way he looked at her as if nothing in that moment mattered more. As his lips grazed

hers, her mind skipped back to their first stolen kisses behind the bike sheds—their consequent voyages into sexual discovery.

Bodies naked and wet, neither experienced, nor sure.

Until they both were.

She missed the implicit trust of having someone wholeheartedly watching her back, someone to share secrets with. Someone whose own secrets she would guard with her life.

Bianca brought her hands either side of Ash's face and kissed him back, whimpering in the back of her throat as the tryst deepened, and every cell in her body welcomed her first love home. When they broke apart, she laid her head on Ashton's chest and held him close, drawing her arms under his brother's jacket.

His brother's jacket.

Oh God... Trent.

The guilt slid and settled, sickening.

"Figured out who you're kissing this time?" The question rumbled in Ashton's chest, and despite her misgivings, Bianca smiled and nodded against the fabric of his shirt—within the warmth of his arms.

"You were in Indonesia."

"Bali. I got back yesterday. Back for good."

While she'd slogged away at her degree, Ash had been all over the world—posting Facebook photos to show where he was crewing each week, and with whom. On a different charter yacht every season, Ash lived as a sea-nomad. They'd fought before he left, about him running away, not facing his demons.

Bianca hadn't been ready to let him go, but their stormy separation had eased into calmer waters eventually, and they'd become... friends? Old friends with history. Seeing other people.

"Trent didn't say you were back."

Ash laughed. "Trent didn't know."

"Oh." She chewed on her bottom lip. "I should go find him."

There was a long silence. Neither spoke nor moved.

“Should you?” The words were a mere whisper in her hair.

“Yes.” But Bianca remained smushed against him for a full minute longer, her eyes pressed closed. Finally pulling back, she fussed with his jacket collar—anything to avoid looking into eyes so like Trent’s, yet expressing a seismic difference in emotion.

She’d tried not to compare the supposedly identical brothers, but it was difficult not to.

Trent studied English Literature—studious, absorbed by the written word. She’d bumped into him last term, and they’d gone out a few times. Not serious at first, they’d spent those first dates reminiscing about Ashton and the trouble he’d gotten into at school. It had taken them a whole month to even attempt a kiss.

In contrast, nothing ever moved slowly with Ashton—the hot-headed one who asked more of her than she could ever comfortably give.

Moving to the side, Bianca slipped her hand back into Ashton’s pocket, and his fingers wove into hers as if they’d never left.

“Would you like a programme?” The roving tout moved towards them and Bianca took the offered photocopy. She thought she recognised the brunette from the dress rehearsal. The woman did a double take, staring at Ashton before her eyes flicked back towards the stage. “Would you like one too?” she queried, hesitant.

“No, thanks. Wasted on me.” Ashton spoke without any hint of derision. “I’m dyslexic.”

Bianca jerked in surprise. *Public disclosure.*

Was he at peace with it now? Accepting himself?

Deep in the jacket pocket, she squeezed Ashton’s hand. He returned the pressure with a slow clamp, replying to her unspoken message.

‘I know you’ve got me. I’ve got you too.’

They waited until the end of Act One to find Trent.

He watched them approach—oh-so careful not to touch, oh-so unnatural—and his eyes travelled between them before narrowing.

Something told Bianca Trent already knew, as he’d probably always known.

Her heart belonged to his brother.





Restarting Hearts

Jackie Rutherford

Heartbreak feels a lot like a heart attack, I discover. Shortness of breath. Tightness in the chest. Intense pain.

I'm a doctor, so I know theoretically the chances of having a heart attack when I'm a healthy twenty-six-year-old are slim. I start calculating the distance to the nearest defibrillator anyway, because doing mental maths gives me the distraction I crave. I need to distract myself from what's happening right in front of me. The fact that the love of my life is getting married. To someone else.

He's standing there, looking impossibly handsome as he watches Melinda walking up the aisle. She looks stunning, but you'd expect that as Melinda looks like a supermodel even dressed in sweatpants. Try as I have, I can't actually dislike Melinda. You can't even fault her for her perfection, because despite having been born into money, she has chosen to be a teacher in an underprivileged neighbourhood; she has a low dirty chuckle that she brings out when she tells a raunchy joke.

And okay, her and Dan often seem more like good friends than passionate lovers, but I'm fairly sure that's me just seeing what I want to see.

Her father kisses her on the cheek, and she joins Dan at the altar. Seeing him smile at her cleaves my heart into two.

"Hey Ben, you've got the rings, right?" Jared, the best man, whispers.

Because that's me. I'm the other groomsman.

"Yeah, I've got them." I pat my jacket pocket to make sure the satin bag hasn't escaped through some invisible hole. Technically it's Jared's task to look after the rings, but he's famous for losing things. His car keys, his phone, his underwear on the stag night... Everyone decided I was a surer bet to safeguard the symbols of the eternity of Dan and Melinda's love.

Yeah, don't think about that. Don't think about the vows they're about to make to each other. Don't think about how it's snuffing out the fragile hope I've always had flickering away inside me. Finally. Forever.

The minister, dressed in the traditional black and white robe, begins by welcoming everyone to the wedding. "We're gathered here today for the celebration of Mel and Dan's love."

Then he gets to the part I've been dreading. "If anyone knows of any reason why these two should not wed, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Dan's back stiffens. I stare at the rigid line of his shoulders. I've been lying awake at night for the last fortnight wondering how I would handle this moment. If the urge to tell the truth would overwhelm me.

The words 'I love you' lie thick on my tongue. I clamp my jaw to make sure they don't escape. I'd wire my mouth shut if I could.

Because I can't do that to him. I can't ruin his wedding day with some misplaced feelings that he doesn't return. The time for saying anything passed long ago.

After a brief, expectant pause, the minister continues to speak.

As Dan turns to Melinda to recite his vows, I study the side of his face. The slice of his cheekbone, his aquiline nose, the strong jaw line; I know his profile better than my own.

Dan and I were best friends through high school. The kind of friendship that involved doing everything together. Baseball, lacrosse, debate club; Dan approached everything with an intensity that I admired.

Then there was the week where everything changed.

It was near the end of senior year in that weirdly euphoric, high-school-is-ending-but-real-life-hasn't-quite-begun phase. It was a hot day at the start of summer, and we were mucking around in the pool, wrestling like we had a thousand times before. He used his superior body weight to pin me up against the side of the pool. I squirmed and laughed, pressed up against his body as I tried to get away.

But when our laughter faded, we were still staring at each other. The intensity in Dan's eyes was so familiar as he lowered his mouth to mine.

In some ways, kissing Dan was the most natural thing in the world.

The next week was incredible. Every chance we could, we would sneak away for some heavy make-out sessions. Everything was perfect, until the moment his father walked in on us.

I was sent home in disgrace, so I never witnessed the confrontation between them.

When I next saw Dan, he was standing on my doorstep, hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, I was just messing around. You know, experimenting." His voice was bleached of all emotion.

That summer his Dad got him an internship in the city and we barely saw each other before going away to different colleges.

We didn't communicate much through college. That week had made everything awkward, destroyed years of easy friendship. Even though it had been the most enlightening week of my life, setting me on course to accepting who I really was, I still came to regret it because it had ruined the thing I valued the most.

But when I moved to New York to begin my residency, I decided to message him. A non-committal, let's-catch-up-if-you-have-the-time message.

The message sat in my phone for two days before I had the courage to press send. But Dan replied almost instantly, suggesting that we meet up for a drink the next week. And upon seeing him, it was like nothing had ever changed. We fell back into our friendship, meeting up weekly for buffalo wings at the local sports bar, catching a

game on television. I tried not to show how any single one of those nights meant more to me than all the dates I'd ever gone on.

And when he asked me a year later to be one of his groomsmen, I couldn't say no.

"The rings?" I'm jolted back to reality by the minister's voice.

I take the satin bag out, fumbling with the opening, the drawcord unwilling under my fingertips. I finally manage to slip the two rings onto my palm. They feel heavier than the platinum they are constructed of. They feel like they have the weight of the world soldered into them.

I hold them out to Dan, an offering. It's a watershed moment, my own silent vow to him. This is me offering him pure and true friendship, accepting that I need to bury my feelings for him forever, promising him I will do everything I can to help make his marriage a success.

Dan stares at the ring in my outstretched hand. Then he looks up and meets my gaze.

I offer him my fake smile. In the history of forced smiles, nothing has made cheek muscles ache more than this one. I know my smile doesn't reach my eyes, but I'm hoping I've at least managed to suppress the utter devastation I'm feeling at this moment.

Something in his face changes. He stares at me like he's just seen the zombie apocalypse bearing down on him.

He glances at Melinda, who's still wearing her perfect smile. He looks back at me and his face crumples.

"I can't do this," he says quietly.

Melinda's expression morphs from benign happiness to disbelief in a second. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, I just can't."

He lurches away, down the two steps off the side of the altar.

Jared bolts after him. I'm left standing there, blinking. What the hell just happened? I glance at Melinda and the shock on her face mirrors my own.

Mutters and murmurs start in the congregation.

I need to follow him. I force my legs to start working, force myself to walk down the few stairs, following through the side door where Dan and Jared disappeared.

Dan is leaned over the back of a chair in the vicar's room, rasping sobs wracking his frame. They knife me in the chest.

"Just breathe," Jared says. He throws me a look of total bewilderment. I shrug helplessly, taking a position leaning against the table a few feet away. I don't trust myself to go closer. I don't trust myself not to seize on any words of doubt, not to twist them to my own advantage. The best I can do is stay mute.

"It's going to be okay," Jared says.

Dan's father bursts into the room, followed closely by Melinda and her bridesmaids.

"What the hell is going on?" his father bellows at the same time as Melinda speaks. "Is Dan okay?"

Dan puffs out a choked laugh. "No, I'm not okay, actually."

He wipes a hand across his face and straightens up. His eyes sweep the room, skipping past Melinda and his father, until they land on me. His gaze softens.

"What's going on?" Melinda asks.

He blinks, redirecting his gaze to her, and blanches. "I'm so sorry, Mellie."

Her face reflects total disbelief. "Is this really happening? Are you actually ditching me at the altar?"

"Of course he's not," his father butts in.

Dan ignores him. "Mel, you're one of the most amazing people I know. But you must know deep down our relationship isn't right. I can't marry you. It would be a lie."

His father hisses. "If this is what I think it is Dan, then I suggest you stop before you ruin your life."

Dan straightens up. "Actually, Dad, the time when you can threaten to cut off my college tuition has well and truly passed. And going through with this marriage will ruin both mine and Melinda's lives."

Melinda's watching him with wide eyes. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

He takes a deep breath. "I'm gay."

My legs threaten to buckle beneath me. I stare down at my hand, cataloguing the whiteness of my knuckles. I'm still clutching the rings. They dig into the flesh of my palm.

"I'm so sorry. But you deserve to know the truth." Dan's voice thickens with emotion. "And the truth is, I've been in love with someone since seventh grade."

I whip my head up. He stares steadily at me, ignoring the babble of voices, his father's loud squawks of protest.

He's looking at me like I'm the only thing on the planet that matters.

"It's always been you," he says.

My breath leaves me in a ragged gasp.

"Yeah. Ditto," I finally manage.

The smile that spreads over his face is the definition of happiness. But in that smile is something else.

A promise.

A promise, like the rings in my hand were supposed to be a promise. But this is a genuine, truthful promise I know he'll never break.

My calculations to the nearest defibrillator are meaningless now. Because my heart, which has been on ice since the end of high school, has now restarted.





The Sweetest Thing

Cordelia Fox

Ground Zero - February 10

“If I had a dollar for every time I’ve been called Babe, I’d be a billionaire.”

Zac pricked up his ears and tuned into the conversation taking place behind him. The café was busy with the lunchtime rush but the end booth provided him a place to eavesdrop, and the cover to remain unseen. It amused him to match voices and conversation to imagined faces and personalities. He was fond of the simple pleasures in life.

The woman continued her voice ripe with annoyance. “And as for Love or Darl, well I’d be as rich as Bill Gates.”

Angry Girl. That was a good name for her.

Another woman chimed in, her voice soft and hesitant. “What about the old guys? You can introduce yourself, wear a name badge as big as Africa and they still call you Dear.”

She sounded like a mouse. Zac pictured her walk; creeping and sidling, quiet, hopeful.

Angry Girl cut in again. "I think men just can't be bothered learning names. It's too much effort."

A third woman pitched in. "I think they just need training."

Zac sat up straighter. This woman's voice was something else; low and sexy, with a Bonnie Tyler hoarseness that had the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. He was tempted to turn around and take a peek, but settled for tilting his head back to listen more closely. She continued.

"I had a major breakthrough last week. You know Des the orderly? He called me 'Bea Love', instead of his standard Sweetheart."

Aah, now he had a name, and he could picture the rest. Long black hair. Tall, shapely, olive-skinned, with a sway to her hips as she sauntered along. Sultry Bea shimmered in front of Zac's half-closed eyes.

The Mouse piped up again. "How on earth did you manage that? He calls everyone Sweetheart, even the guys."

Bea laughed. Her throaty chuckle was even sexier than her voice. "Every time he called me Sweetheart I grabbed his shirt and pointed to my name badge and enunciated very clearly. I think it helped that Bea is just one syllable."

Zac smiled. Sexy and a sense of humour. A perfect combination.

"Pesto and brie focaccia?"

Zac looked up, pulled out of his Bea-filled daydream. "Yes, thanks."

Zac glanced at the waitress' name badge. Georgia. There was a lull in the conversation behind him. The cafe was momentarily quiet, apart from the music. It was one of his U2 favourites; *I still haven't found what I'm looking for*. He smiled up at the middle aged woman holding the plate.

"It looks great. Thanks Cupcake."

There was a moment of silence then an explosion of sniggering erupted behind him.

"Women as food, now there's another whole category," drawled Bea, and the conversation took off again.

Life was sweet. A plate of food and free entertainment. A man couldn't ask for more.

February 11

Another stinking hot day. It must be over 40. No wonder the hospital depended on agency nurses. No one in their right mind would live here full time. It had been busy on the ward today and Bea was keen to get home. She flicked the sweat out of her eyes and slowed her pace. The house would be cool but there was no point biking any faster. If she started puffing she'd get a mouth full of flies. Her friends in Perth had warned her that the North West was hell on earth in the summer, but the money was too good to pass up. Study wasn't cheap but she was earning agency rates up here. Some of her law school friends were serving coffee for minimum wage.

The phone was ringing as Bea entered the house. That could only mean one thing; the hospital. She was right. Someone was needed to work the night shift. There was a patient in isolation who had to be specialised.

"No problem," said Bea. "I'll see you this evening."

Time for a shower, a meal and maybe even a nap before she headed back in. Only one patient and ten hours of overtime. Bea calculated her pay for the fortnight and smiled. A girl couldn't ask for more.

February 12

Zac's head pounded. Thud, thud, thud like the incessant bass of a rock song. He didn't feel well, not at all. He needed a bucket, now.

"Over you come." Hands gripped his shoulder and hip, rolling him. "Let it out."

Zac couldn't have kept it in, even if he'd tried. Hot liquid surged up and out, wave after wave. Sweaty and exhausted, he crashed back into sleep.

A long while later Zac resurfaced his brain furry and slow. He moved his head, trying to think. Bad idea. Pain rippled from his head, down his neck. He let out a moan.

"Zachariah. How are you feeling? Are you in pain?"

Zac tried to nod his head, but the pounding in his skull paralysed him. What had happened to him? What was this god awful pain?

“Yes,” he managed to croak.

“It’s okay. I’ll give you something, just relax.”

He could feel cool hands on his arm.

“You’ll be fine Zachariah. Just hang in there.”

February 13

Bea listened to the handover. The poor guy had been in a bad way last night. It hadn’t been the cruisy deal she’d anticipated. All the same, Bea didn’t mind another night shift and it wasn’t just the money. She had become attached to Zachariah last night. Maybe it was something to do with the way he’d called her name in his sleep. Or maybe it was just his face. She’d always been a sucker for dark-haired men. She’d thought of him frequently throughout the day while she tossed and turned in her bed. Bea rarely slept well after night shift and today had been particularly difficult. Bea gave herself a mental slap. What was it her father always said? Proximity and time equalled attraction. Ten hours shut in a room with a handsome man. No wonder she’d been dreaming about him.

Bea pushed open the door. Soft snores echoed through the room. She walked noiselessly to the end of the bed. He did look better. There was colour in his cheeks and his sleep was peaceful. Bea glanced at her watch. Time to get busy. The doctor had prescribed a whole barrage of antibiotics.

It was the blood pressure cuff that finally woke him. Bea felt his pulse skitter and jump under her fingers. The mystery bug was still taking its toll.

“Zachariah, how are you feeling?”

“It’s Zac,” he rasped, licking his dry lips.

Bea held a straw to his mouth and he sipped, eyes open, watching her. They were a lovely colour, his eyes; a deep velvety brown. Bea felt her own pulse skip a little.

“Do you know where you are?” Bea asked softly. There was no way he’d remember the previous night, or her. It was like losing something that had almost been within her grasp.

“A cafe, I thought,” Zac said, with a frown “But I guess not.”

“You’re in hospital. Nickol Bay Hospital.”

Zac stared at her, a look of confusion on his face.

Bea tried again. “It’s the hospital in Karratha. Your notes say you work for Rio Tinto, the mining company. You’re a geologist there. Is that right?”

“Bea?” he said questioningly.

“Yes, my name is Bea,” she replied, pointing to the badge on the front of her uniform. “I’m a nurse here. I looked after you last night. Do you remember?”

“Just one syllable, easy to remember,” Zac muttered. “That can’t be right.”

Bea looked at him intently. Was he delirious again? She laid a hand on his forehead but his skin was cool.

“I’m Bea. I work here at the hospital,” she repeated.

“You’re not Bea,” Zac said weakly, looking defeated. He closed his eyes, muttering. “Dark hair, olive skin, surely?”

Bea rubbed his arm reassuringly. “Don’t worry,” she soothed. “Go on back to sleep.”

Zac reached for her hand. “Don’t leave me,” he mumbled, halfway to slipping into sleep already.

“I won’t,” Bea assured him. “I’ll be here all night.” She stroked his hand and watched him relax into unconsciousness.

February 14 - Valentine’s Day

Zac drifted slowly back to awareness. The pain in his head was gone, and his stomach had stopped churning. He could hear birds outside. The dawn chorus. He heard a rustle and swung his eyes towards the sound. A woman was sitting at a table, side on to the bed. She had a book open in front of her, fingering a page, crinkling it, as she read. She was wearing a pale pink uniform. He thought nurses always wore white. The pink suited her, especially with her wispy blonde hair struggling loose from its ponytail. She looked sweet, like candy floss or coconut ice. No, something more substantial than candy. A cake maybe, but a tiny one. A cupcake. As if she could feel his gaze, the woman swung to face him.

“Zac, hey there. You’re awake. Perfect timing. I was just about to check you.”

Zac jerked in surprise. It was the sexy, husky voice of the cafe woman. He’d recognise that sultry tone anywhere.

“Bea?” he asked, hoping he wasn’t hallucinating.

“You remembered!”

A grin split Bea’s face as she moved towards Zac. She sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand, her fingers feeling for his pulse.

“You’re doing so much better.” She put something in his ear and checked it. “No fever and you’ve slept for four hours straight.”

Zac couldn’t take his eyes off her. It was like some twisted fantasy come true. She looked like a miniature blonde angel, curvaceous and soft and ever so sweet. But her voice ... good Lord. The low throatiness was the sound of sin.

Bea leaned towards him. She smelled like honey. Zac’s mouth watered. He could almost taste her sweetness.

“How do you feel?” Bea asked, her blue eyes searching his.

“Like I’ve woken up in cupcake heaven,” Zac blurted.

Bea pulled back, frowning.

He grabbed her hand. “I’m not delirious. I think I was, before,” Zac babbled. “I kept dreaming about you, at least I dreamed of bees. And your friends from the cafe were there, Angry Girl and the Mouse.”

Bea’s eyes widened.

She must think he was crazy. He was. Half-crazy with love. Smitten by her sinful voice and her cherubic bloneness.

He took a big breath, inhaling her sugary scent. Bono’s lines rang in his ears. U2 had already nailed it with their song. This was it. Absolutely. Bea was the *Sweetest Thing*.

The end...

