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Our Authors



Charlotte Brentwood

Unlock My Heart

Jacqueline Lee

Recognition

Their song



Kris Pearson

School Run



Marianne Bayliss

Lights, Camera, Romance!



Our Authors



Stephanie Ruth

A Rose By Any Other Name

Susie Frame

There is a Crack in Everything

Prescription for Love



Virginia Suckling

Don't Let Us Say Goodbye



Yvonne Walus

Invest In Memories, They Said



Click on a title to go straight to the story.

Title	Author	Page
 Unlock My Heart	Charlotte Brentwood	5
 Recognition	Jacqueline Lee	11
Their Song	Jacqueline Lee	17
School Run	Kris Pearson	23
 Lights, Camera, Romance!	Marianne Bayliss	29
 A Rose By Any Other Name	Stephanie Ruth	35
 There is a Crack in Everything	Susie Frame	42
Prescription for Love	Susie Frame	48
Don't Let Us Say Goodbye	Virginia Suckling	54
Invest In Memories, They Said	Yvonne Walus	60

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

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





Unlock My Heart

Charlotte Brentwood



You do everything differently in a lockdown. Your flat white becomes an instant brown. Office politics are replaced by Zoom awkwardness. A catch-up over wine and a grazing platter is converted to a group message chat. A weekly meander around the supermarket is somehow now an online fight for toilet paper. And a lunchtime workout on the gym's treadmill is instead a power-walk around the neighbourhood.

At twelve o'clock on the dot, Hannah slammed the front door behind her and paused to gulp in a breath of fresh air before bounding down the steps to the footpath. She adored her little terrace house one block back from the sea, and she was so proud to have bought it on her own. She loved living free of someone else's irritating habits.

But now her tiny one-bedroom haven felt thoroughly lonely for the first time. She'd never gone a whole twenty-four hours on her own before, without a real-life conversation in person. Now she lived in a bubble of one.

At least the sun was shining, and she was able to get outside for her allowed daily exercise. She spotted someone else walking further down the street. *Social distancing*, Hannah reminded herself as she took off in the opposite direction, towards the seafront. *Two metres...*

As she turned the corner, a running person crashed straight into her. “Ahhhh!” she screamed, leaping away from them. But the person, a man, darted in the same direction.

“Sorry,” he murmured in a deep baritone.

“It’s okay –” Hannah looked up into his face and froze. The deepest brown eyes she’d ever seen. A straight nose, full lips and stubble that was just a little longer than polite. Beads of sweat on his brow, and a crimson glow in his cheeks. All framed by thick russet hair which stuck out in all directions giving him an irresistible boyish look.

A half-smile tugged those lips up in one corner as he gestured with both arms, indicating she should go first.

She nodded, without the power of speech, and gave him the required wide berth as she rounded the corner – but not before noticing that even in trackpants and sweatshirt he was nicely built. She dashed down the street until she came to a fence she could lean against, her limbs inexplicably weak.

Wow. She’d never seen *him* before. He must be working from home too, also doing exercise on a break. She cursed her own fashion choices of a baggy t-shirt and old shorts. Her hair needed a wash and was tied up in a loose bun. Not even a scrap of make-up on her face.

The last time she’d had the air knocked out of her lungs this way was when her friend Tammy had accidentally winded her in a kickboxing session. And that was a very long time ago.

She forced herself to keep moving, and soon she came to the waterfront. A promenade wound around the coast next to a seawall, and she upped her pace as she breathed the sea air. This time she was sure to keep her distance from the others strolling alongside.

If Mr Russet were sharing his bubble with a significant other, wouldn’t she be out running with him too? He couldn’t live that far away – driving to partake in exercise was forbidden.

He’s probably a jerk, she told herself. The good-looking ones always were. She shook her head in an attempt to push him out of her thoughts. Best focus on the proposal she was supposed to be sending her boss by 2pm. Why was it so much harder to keep to a deadline when working from home?

She ended up working late and consoled herself with a glass of pinot gris later that night as she flicked through Netflix. Her phone vibrated. It was Tammy.

How'd your first day go?

Hannah thought about the hundreds of emails she'd read at her dining table.

- Long. You?

Same. Pete and I are already driving each other bonkers!

Hannah smiled. They were such a cute couple. She bet even their annoying quirks were cute. Unbidden, the mystery man's eyes filled her consciousness. What details were hiding under his tracksuit? And just who was in his bubble?

She laughed out loud at herself. It was going to be a long lockdown if she was already getting this carried away about nothing. It was very unlikely she'd ever see the stranger again.

She'd *nearly* forgotten all about him by the time she was out walking at Thursday lunchtime. So what if she was wearing mascara and tinted lip gloss, and her favourite skin-tight workout clothes? She couldn't dress like a slob for the entire lockdown now, could she?

Her hair blew across her face as she stood against the seawall at the half-way point of her walk. She should have tied it back – she would have if it weren't for the chance of meeting...

Suddenly, there he was, running straight toward her. And this time, he wasn't in a tracksuit. Clad only in a singlet and shorts, muscular arms and legs were on display.

She closed her gaping mouth and straightened, not sure if he'd seen her yet. Turning in his direction, she flipped her hair over her shoulder and looked out over the ocean with what she hoped looked like nonchalance.

And then he ran right past her.

Of course he did. He couldn't have stopped and talked, even if he wanted to. He probably hadn't even seen or recognised her. If he had he would only know her as the clumsy girl he'd tripped over the other day.

But something made her look back over her shoulder, before she began marching homeward. At that exact moment, he stopped at the side of the road about fifty metres away and turned back to face her as he jogged on the spot. And smiled in such a way that Hannah knew he remembered her.

She smiled back and felt compelled to run over to him. But he looked in both directions and ran across the road, his long strides taking him down the street and around a bend much faster than she would have liked.

She leaned back against the wall and sighed. There was something in that smile. It wasn't a conceited sort of "I caught you checking me out" smile. It seemed like a "hey, I'm glad I saw you again" smile. Friendly, and maybe more too.

You've lived alone for too long, she chided herself. How was she supposed to concentrate on work now?

She collapsed on the couch with an iced water when she got home, and sent a message to Tammy.

I'm in trouble.

Within a few seconds, her phone burst into life with an incoming video call. Tammy's face filled the screen. "What's up, hon? You okay?"

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. Sorry to worry you."

"No problem. I'm happy to have a break anyway. So, what's going on?"

Hannah sighed and shifted on the couch to prop up her phone. "There's this guy."

Tammy smirked. "Oh yeah? Someone you met online?"

"No, in real life, actually!"

"What? How is that possible? How did you meet?"

"Welllllll, we haven't." Hannah explained her two brief encounters with the enigmatic stranger.

When she finished, Tammy was grinning at her from ear to ear.

"What?"

"I haven't seen you smile like that in ages. And then it was probably cronut-related."

Hannah shrugged. "It's probably just all this lockdown craziness that has me so hyped up."

"Uh-huh. So does he have a wedding ring?"

"I don't know. Yet."

"Do you know where he lives?"

She shook her head, laughing. "I'm not going to stalk him, Tammy."

"Well how else will you find out if he's single? Unless you, you know, ask him?"

The seed planted, Hannah found herself hiding behind a hedge on the following Tuesday, watching the russet man's retreating form. A few covert moves later, and she finally saw him turn down a garden path, and into a two-storey townhouse.

She pulled her hoody down over her face and strode slowly along the street on the opposite side, peeking over at the house. Movement caught her eye, and through the front window of the house she saw the man embrace a woman. Her heart sunk to her feet and bounced from the footpath to the street where it was squashed flat by a passing truck.

She blinked hard and hurried away before she could see anything else. This was downright creepy. What right had she to spy on him? Now she knew.

He's in a relationship.

Oh hun, I'm so sorry!

It's all good, I'm fine.

So fine that she ate a whole block of chocolate in one sitting. She didn't dare weigh herself lately. Lockdown love handles were fast developing.

Hannah busied herself with work and video-calling her family. She changed her schedule so she could do her walk an hour later. Life would go on as normal, once they were out of lockdown. If only she could get those stupid brown eyes out of her head.

And then, finally, the lockdown was lifted. On the day all the cafes were allowed to open, Hannah waited for a spot at her favourite little table opposite the sea. She ordered a flat white and a mini-cronut and gazed out over the waves. She took a deep breath and sipped her coffee. Ah, the simple pleasures.

"Hello."

Hannah fell off her chair as the sound of that baritone voice literally knocked her sideways. Coming to her senses, she looked up into those same dark eyes and squeaked, "Hi."

He extended his hand toward her, and into her bubble. "Mind if I help you up? I was hoping I'd see you around."

Warily, she accepted his help, but the warmth and strength of his hand sent her pulse racing. She seated herself with as much composure as she could manage, running her hands through her hair and again wishing she'd worn something more attractive. Not that it mattered now.

“Great to be out again, right?” she said lightly. She could do this.

“Sure is. My sister and I have been going insane with only each other’s company.”

She frowned. “Your sister?”

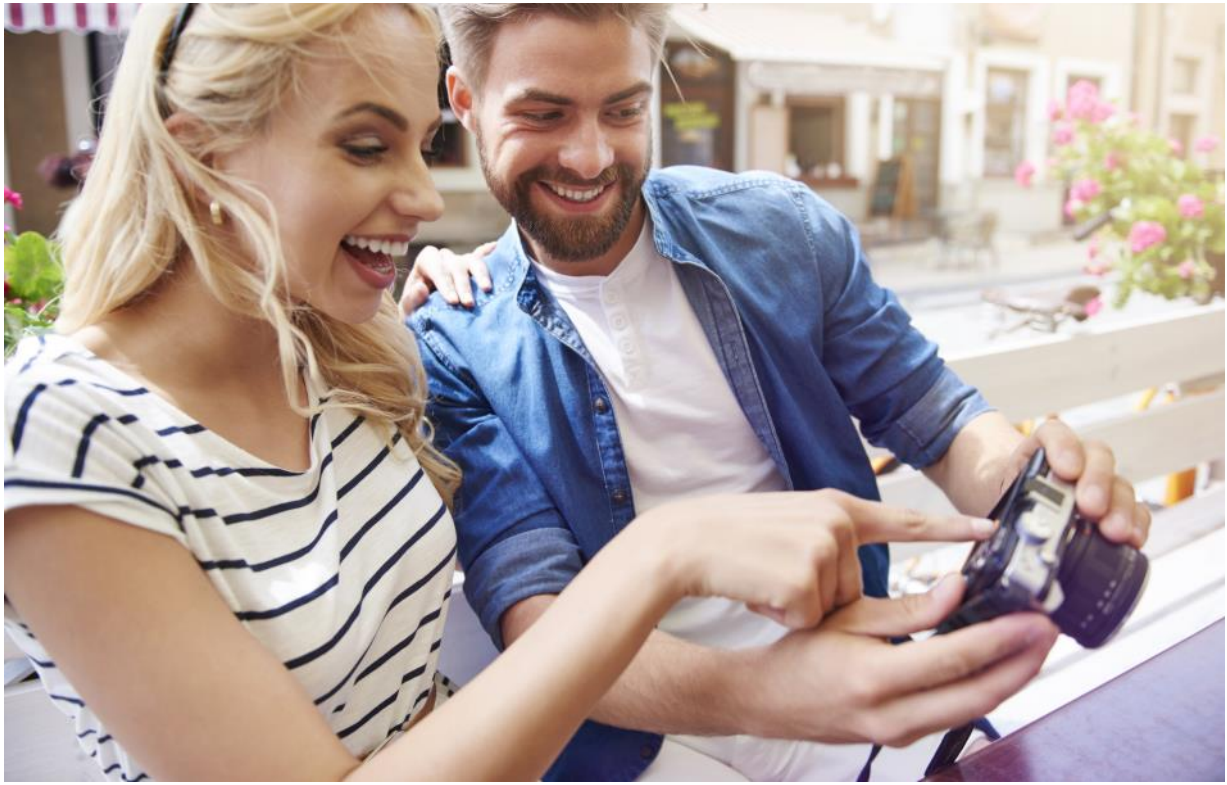
“Yep. We bought a house together three months ago. We usually get along great, but we weren’t counting on this lockdown thing!”

“Oh! Yeah...” She stared at him as he broke into a smile. That friendly yet spine-tingling smile.

“I’m Ben,” he said, offering his hand once again. “Mind if I join you?”

She glanced at his other hand – no ring. Then she curled her fingers around his and allowed herself to sink into those eyes, smiling back. “Hannah. I’m very pleased to meet you.”





Recognition

Jacqueline Lee



“Oh my god, it’s you,” the words fly out of my mouth without my permission. Unfortunately, due to the intrinsic properties of sound waves, I can’t reach out and grab them back.

The guy sitting in 15A blinks at me. “Uh... sorry, I don’t think we’ve met?”

I knew he’d have a gorgeous voice to go with the rest of him. A deep, rich voice with just a tinge of humour, like there’s a laugh there waiting to escape.

A woman behind me clears her throat impatiently, and I realise I’m blocking the aisle. Oops, letting people finish boarding the plane so we can leave on time is probably a good idea.

“Uh... no, we haven’t met,” I say as I sit down in my assigned seat of 15B, hastily stowing my bag under the seat in front of me.

I glance at the guy. How insane is this? But it’s definitely him, I’d recognise him anywhere. I’ve spent hours gazing at photos of this man. That curly dark hair. Those hazel eyes. That perfectly proportioned forehead that is now crinkled in confusion as he looks at me.

He tilts his head. “So, if we haven’t met, you know me how...?” Oh dear. I really need to explain myself so he’s not concerned he’s sitting next to some crazy woman for the next couple of hours.

“I’m a graphic designer,” I say quickly. “I’m putting together an advertising campaign for a local dentist and we’re using photos of you from iStock. Well, if it’s not you, then you have a doppelganger out there with the same freckle under their left eye.”

His hand flies to his freckle. “Seriously? You’re using those photos for a campaign?”

“We seriously are.”

“Oh my god, I let my friend take those photos as a joke. She thought she might be able to sell them, but I was really sceptical.”

“Well, now you’re advertising Snazzy Smiles dental services.”

The smile that spreads across his face right now is the reason we chose him for the campaign. It’s a genuine, open smile that shows off his incredibly straight, white teeth.

“That’s so weird,” he says.

“Weirder than a Brussel sprout and jam sandwich combination.”

Oh shit, what am I doing? But that’s me. I’m the quirky girl who spouts random stuff all the time. Normally I bury it deep when I’m talking to a cute guy, because my humour is definitely an acquired taste.

His lips quirk. “Weirder than a broccoli and chocolate ice cream smoothie.”

I laugh and he laughs too.

“I’m Alex,” he says. “Since you’re intimately acquainted with my freckle, I feel like you should know my name.”

“It’s nice to meet you Alex, I’m Josie.” I hold out my hand for him to shake. His palm is warm. A tingling feeling races up my arm, like a circuit has just been connected to create an electric current.

The flight attendant comes over the intercom then. I wait until she’s finished telling us what to do if we plunge towards our doom, before I turn back to Alex.

“So, if you’re not a full-time model, what do you do?”

“I’m a photographer.”

“Oh, cool. What kind of stuff?”

“Scenic photography is my passion, but I also do some product stuff to pay the bills.”

We continue to talk as the plane takes off. For some reason, our conversation quickly morphs past the usual, superficial topics between strangers.

Maybe it's because he's so familiar, but I'm not nervous like I usually am when talking to a cute guy.

I end up telling him about how my mum died a few years ago, and how lost I still feel sometimes without her. He talks about his brother who was born with cystic fibrosis, and how hard it's been to see him struggle over the years.

We're cocooned in this little bubble of intimacy as we talk. Alex's gaze barely flickers from my face.

It's not until the flight attendant announces our descent that the bubble bursts. How has two hours passed so quickly?

Alex leans down to readjust his hand luggage. He clears his throat as he straightens up. "Uh, can I give you my contact details so you can send me the ad? I'd really like to see it."

"Sure. But you've got to send me some of your scenic photos in return," I say.

He gives me his perfect smile. "It's a deal."

And that's how Alex and I start messaging each other.

He sends me amazing natural landscapes and gritty, urban shots. He's so incredibly talented I'm almost embarrassed to send him my stuff. But when I finally relent, he asks me really interesting questions about the composition and we end up in long discussions about layouts and different layering techniques.

We also message about our dreams for the future, me to have my own graphic design business, him to have an exhibition of his scenic photos.

And somehow our text messages descend into messaging about random stuff.

I mock him about his addiction to American late night shows. He mocks me back when I confess I can't turn off the train wreck that is *Married at First Sight*. We discover a joint obsession for epic prank videos and send each other our favourites.

"Are you dating someone?" My colleague Angela is at my desk.

I whip my head up. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you're constantly glued to your phone at the moment." She uses an extra loud voice just as Janet, our boss, is walking past.

You know the colleague who steals your ideas and throws you under the bus at any opportunity? That's Angela.

"No, I'm not dating anyone."

"So, alone again for the Christmas party then?" She smirks.

Looking at Angela's smug expression, an idea comes into my mind.

I message Alex. *Any chance you're free on the 8th?*

I wait outside the restaurant, trying not to wipe my palms on my dress. Sweat hand imprints isn't the look I'm going for.

This is not a date. This is Alex doing me a favour. Alex is so far out of my league it's almost laughable. I mean, I'm attractive enough, but no one is ever going to use my image to sell anything.

But as much as I'm trying to tell my body that this isn't a date, it's going through the full checklist of date preparation. Butterflies in my stomach. Dry mouth. Racing heart. Check. Check. Check.

Alex and my messaging has ramped up another notch in the past week or so, to the point where there's a constant stream of thoughts and jokes flying between us.

He was so easy to talk to on the plane. And so much fun to message. What if it's weird between us now in real life?

Here he is, coming down the street, looking impossibly gorgeous. Somehow, Alex in 3-D is even more attractive than the version on paper.

"Hey." He comes to a stop in front of me.

"Hey."

There's this awkward moment where we don't know how to greet each other. After a few seconds, he leans in to kiss me on the cheek. The scent of his sandalwood cologne lingers.

Janet is greeting people as we walk in. She shakes Alex's hand before turning to me "Oh Josie, those mock-ups you sent for the Brentwood campaign are fabulous."

"I'm glad you liked them."

"Of course I did. You've got to believe in yourself more," she says as she turns to the next person.

Alex nudges me as we walk further into the party. "Is that the mock-up of the farmyard that you sent to me?"

"Yes."

"I told you it was brilliant."

"Thanks."

We head to the bar. Angela is there collecting drinks. She does a double take when she sees Alex, mouth dropping open, eyes going wide.

"Holy hell, you're the guy from the dentist ad!" Angela says.

"I am indeed. Hi, I'm Alex."

Angela gives his hand a perfunctory shake before turning to me.

“What did you do, stalk the guy? Did you need the real life version to drool over too?” Nastiness infuses her voice.

Heat inflames my face. “There was no stalking involved.” I manage. “We met on a plane.”

Angela narrows her eyes. “That’s a big coincidence.”

“It’s a fantastic coincidence,” Alex says easily.

Angela opens her mouth to speak again, but I cut her off. I don’t want to give her a chance to embarrass me further.

“I’m just going to get some fresh air.”

It’s not until I’m out on the balcony that I realise Alex has followed me.

“So, I want to hear more about this drool,” he says. “It sounds like an interesting topic of conversation.”

My stomach clenches but I manage to keep my tone mocking. “Do you seriously need to hear I think you’re attractive? I mean, I chose you from hundreds of other models on iStock. But don’t worry. I like messaging you and hanging out with you. I’m not going to ruin that by developing some unrequited crush.”

Alex raises his eyebrows. “Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever been friend-zoned so fast in my life. I’ve got whiplash,” he says the words jokingly, but there is another element underneath. Hurt.

I stare at him.

“Do you not want...” I swallow hard. “Do you not want to be friend-zoned?”

“I definitely don’t want to be friend-zoned,” he says, staring at me with such heat in his eyes that words fail me.

But I don’t need words because Alex’s mouth is suddenly on mine.

This kiss.

I’ve never had anything like it before.

It’s hot and passionate but it’s also deliciously familiar. Like it’s something I’ve done before, so I know exactly how to kiss Alex back. The best way to meet the slide of his tongue, the best way to deepen the kiss to the point where my whole body is trembling.

It’s a first kiss like no other. Books about kissing will have to be rewritten based on this kiss.

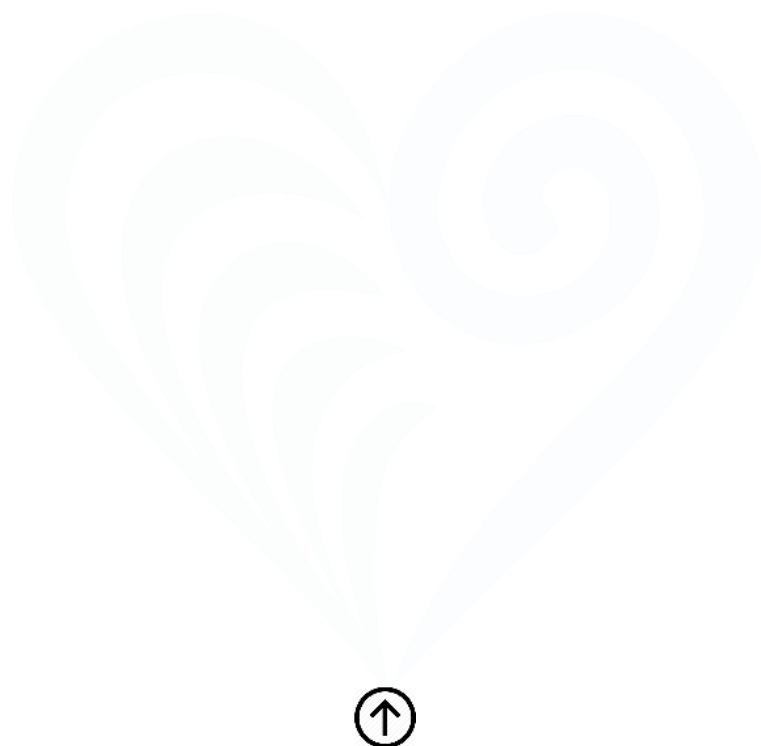
Alex pulls back gently, his hand still lingering on the side of my face. He stares down at me.

“Oh my god, it’s you,” he whispers.

And the look on his face is the same as I’d had when we first met. Recognition.

But this time, it’s not a superficial recognition based on appearances. This is a soul deep recognition of what we’re going to be to each other.

The next time I hear him say those words is when he’s holding our daughter for the first time.





Their Song

Jacqueline Lee

The song was playing the moment they met.

Just as Ed Sheeran's smooth yet sultry voice crooned about people falling in love in mysterious ways, she glanced across the bar and saw a pair of dark eyes watching her.

"I feel like flirting with men who are the real deal," her friend Helena had announced a few hours earlier. "You know, the type who work with their hands and have grease under their fingernails. The type who know how to change the oil on your car and will push you hard against a wall and kiss you until you're breathless."

It was an oddly specific fantasy, but who denied a bride-to-be on her hen's night? And so the group of them obligingly trekked out east to a working-class pub full of the kind of men Helena described.

Now, as the guy with the dark eyes made his way over to her, she was so grateful they'd come.

"Hey." His smile had a tinge of shyness that caused her heart to rattle against her rib cage. Like it was reminding her it existed.

"Hey," she replied.

Now his smile went from shy to amused as he raked a hand through his hair.

"Well, we're bound to win awards for original opening lines, aren't we?"

“Oh, there will be essays written in the future about our creativity and flair,” she said.

“Maybe even songs.”

“Epic poems at least.”

The grins on their faces could probably produce enough wattage to power the city.

They exchanged names – Luke, Annabel – and the usual details. He was an apprentice tile layer, she worked in marketing. He had three sisters and had grown up out east with a plumber for a dad and a stay-at-home mum. She’d grown up in the leafy western suburbs as an only child, both parents accountants.

They had nothing in common at all.

But there was something about his open posture as he stood talking to her, like he was ready to embrace the world and everyone in it. Something about the way he listened so closely to everything she said, his head on a slight tilt, like nothing had ever fascinated him as much as she did. Then there was the way his eyes twinkled, the skin around them crinkling whenever she made a joke.

A bubble of hope and happiness grew inside her and she realised Ed Sheeran was right, there was indeed something incredibly mysterious about this whole process.

It seemed only right to play Ed Sheeran’s song, now christened as ‘their’ song, for the first dance at their wedding.

She was so familiar with the words, she sung along in her head, secure in Luke’s embrace.

As Luke twirled her around the dance floor, she tried not to glance at her father, who was watching their first dance with his arms crossed, expression stony.

Luke hadn’t asked her father for her hand in marriage. They’d decided it was safer if they presented their engagement as a done deal. She knew secretly Luke had been afraid her father would refuse to provide his blessing.

It had been the right call. Even when he was about to walk her down the aisle, her father had fixed her with a look.

“It’s not too late to back out, you know.”

“Dad!” she’d admonished.

Now, Luke looked in her father's direction, his happy expression fading. "Your father doesn't think I'm good enough for you."

"My dad would think a prince who'd won the Nobel peace prize wouldn't be good enough for me," she replied. "That's what fathers are like."

Luke swallowed. "I know I don't earn much, but when I finish my apprenticeship my wages will go up."

"We'll be fine," she comforted. "We don't need money when we have love."

And she lay her head on his shoulder as he continued to guide them around the dance floor.

When the first bars of their song came over the tinny car radio, she almost didn't recognize it. The speakers were crap, just like the rest of the car.

Plus Jackson was screaming in the backseat, which was pretty much all Jackson had done for the past three months since he'd been born. It was like he'd picked up on the mood of the tiny rental they lived in, with its mouldy curtains and the simmering, seething atmosphere.

The recession had hit hard and Luke had lost his job when the tiling place had shut down. Apparently, people prioritized eating over renovating their houses. She didn't blame them. She understood all about prioritizing your bills now.

They'd started fighting. Not the cutesy fights they'd had when they first married, the we-should-make-this-mild-disagreement-slightly-stronger-so-we-can-have-fabulous-makeup-sex kind of fights, but real fights, voices thick with frustration, hissed insults about his stubbornness and her being spoiled.

Fights where their real levels of rage had to be suppressed so they didn't wake the kids through the paper-thin walls.

A few months ago, her parents had offered to help them out. Luke's pride had refused. So she'd started to take money from them secretly, furtively. Nina was only two, and as a mother, it was hard to look a bright-eyed toddler in the face and deny her new clothes and toys.

But Luke's cold fury tonight when he'd discovered her betrayal would stay with her for the rest of her life.

Now, she was going to stay at her parents. Just until everything settled down.

Even over the noise of the rattly engine and the sobbing child, she could hear Ed starting to hit his stride in the song, singing about how he'd still be loving his wife when he was 70.

She reached over and with an angry twist of her wrist, she switched the radio off.

When she entered the restaurant and saw Luke on a date, her stomach hollowed. Seriously? Couldn't the universe give her a break for once? It was like she was starring on some cosmic version of Candid Camera.

At least he looked equally horrified to see her.

She tried to keep her legs from trembling as she'd followed Helena's friend Jeff to their reserved table.

But in the same way you couldn't help looking at a car accident, her gaze was drawn back to Luke and his date. He was wearing his good shirt, the dark green one she'd bought him their first Christmas together. Her eyes stung with prickly tears.

Had his well-meaning friends urged him to date again, just like hers had? They'd been separated for almost a year, after all.

Luke had been so calm during the separation process. He acted like it was inevitable. Like he'd been waiting for this day since the moment they'd met. No crockery flung in rage. No raised voices.

They were so polite to each other when they handed over the kids that she wanted to scream. She wanted to pound on his chest, beg him to show some emotion, show that he cared.

But she didn't. She had her dignity, after all. It was the only thing she had left.

As she was trying to focus on the menu, it happened. Over the restaurant's speakers came the first strains of their song.

She closed her eyes. Oh god. Not here. Not now.

But closing her eyes couldn't stop the music reaching her ears. She wanted to put her hands up to block them, as if physically stopping the noise could stop the assault of memories, could stop the further ripping of her heart.

"Are you okay?" Jeff asked.

"I'm fine," she said through trembling lips.

She opened her eyes and tried to give him a reassuring smile, but from his response, it was obviously more of a grimace.

She risked a look at Luke. Their gazes connected across the restaurant just like they had that first time across the bar. Back when her future seemed so open, so full of promise.

Luke's face was pale, his expression stricken.

Her throat thickened, threatening to close up, and suddenly she couldn't pretend anymore.

She balled up her napkin. "I'm sorry, I'm not feeling very well. I need to go home."

"That's okay. Another time, maybe," Jeff said.

"Yes, maybe." She stood on wobbly legs. She deliberately avoided looking at Luke as she left the restaurant.

Outside, the heavens had opened and rain slicked her skin as she ran to the car.

"Nana, Grandpa, you need to dance. It's your song." Polly, aged eight, ran over to them, her pigtails bouncing around her face with every step.

Sure enough, one of the children had put on the familiar song. It happened at nearly every family event. The lyrics were embedded in her soul now.

Luke reached over to take her hand. "Shall we?"

"Of course. It would be a shame for the world to miss out on our dancing skills."

"We definitely wouldn't want to deprive everyone." Those same dark eyes twinkled at her like they had when they first met.

He held her close as they moved around the dance floor, at a slightly less sprightly pace than when they were young. But it was their 50th wedding anniversary, so they had a right to be sedate. The vibrations from the wooden floorboards travelled up her body so it felt like her whole skeleton echoed with the music.

She gazed around at the sea of faces watching. It always made her smile to see the blends of their features---Luke's eyes, her lips, his forehead---on the faces of her children and grandchildren.

Nina and Jackson's wife Emma watched them with affectionate smiles on their faces. Their family always sighed over how romantic it was when she and Luke danced to the song that had been part of their relationship for so long.

But she knew the truth.

The song wasn't important at all.

Because there had been no music all those years ago when Luke had turned up at her parent's house only a few minutes after she'd arrived home.

There had been no song playing as he'd stood on the doorstep in saturated clothes, his wet hair plastered to his head, his dark eyes never leaving hers. There'd only been the soundtrack of the pouring rain and her thudding heartbeat as Luke told her she would always own his heart and asked her to try again.

And so the truth was, love didn't need a song. Love didn't need to be set to lyrics and music, just like it didn't need them to be dressed up in fancy clothes, or declared with a backdrop of majestic scenery, or professed over fine wine and food.

Love just needed two hearts prepared to work together as one.





School Run

Kris Pearson

Philip Cranshaw looked scruffy. Sneakers and jeans, an old white T-shirt spotted with red paint, and two days' worth of dark stubble.

His daughter, Billie, had turned up her nose at his appearance and Philip had countered with, "But it's Sunday."

She'd rolled her eyes just like his darling wife Annie used to. "I won't be late, Daddy," she'd called as she trotted through the doorway, swinging her basketball in a cloth bag. "I might go back to Lily's mum's place later. She makes yummy cake."

He presumed the two nine-year-olds would be safe in the school grounds if they had the ever-present dog with them, but as a single dad he was always keenly on guard. He'd be 'just going for a walk' if the girls caught sight of him.

A few minutes later he heard, "Hi Lily! Hi Milly!"

He smiled at his daughter's noisy greeting to her new best friend and the big-eyed, wavy-tailed cavoodle.

“Hi Billie!” came the equally enthusiastic reply.

Philip kept his distance as he ambled along, thinking about fresh cake among many other things. Chocolate cake for choice, roast lamb, and soft home-made tiramisu, none of which had featured in his life during the past eighteen months. Ditto soft smiles, soft breasts and long, soft hair.

Somewhere ahead, the little dog started barking – high-pitched, excited, not to be ignored. The two girls joined in with shrieks and screams. Philip’s heart jolted. What the?

He spotted a well-worn shortcut through a grove of kowhai trees. One of the girls gave an even louder shriek and he burst into a rapid jog, bending low to clear the branches. His left sneaker landed in a patch of slimy mud. His left butt-cheek followed as his feet slid from underneath him.

Ahead, the screaming became frantic.

Scrambling to his feet with a curse, and ignoring the mud on his jeans, he took the rest of the path with more care but maximum speed.

Now the dog was really growling, sounding horribly fierce for such a little thing. What was so wrong?

“Billie – are you both okay?” he yelled, sprinting out from the trees and finding no-one else there. “What’s all the noise about?”

“Daddy!” There was such wonder in her big brown eyes that he’d swoop in to rescue her like this. She pointed to the ground. “It’s dead, Daddy. It’s horrible – and now Milly won’t let go!”

It was indeed dead. It was a possum, and when Philip looked up he saw a ‘kill and drop’ gas-bottle trap attached to the trunk of a nearby tree. The cavoodle was totally engrossed with her furry prize, shaking it from side to side, her whole body trembling with triumph that she’d got the better of something so big.

“Bad dog!” Lily exclaimed, trying to grab Milly’s lead.

“Very bad dog,” Billie added. “Drop it, Milly. Euw – she’s chewing it...”

Philip privately thought the pest trap was gruesome for a school, but those at ground level with poison baits would be worse. And the dog was delighted!

He grabbed the possum's tail which caused further screaming from the girls. No matter how firmly he tugged, Milly's little jaws weren't letting go. She growled through her clenched teeth. It was *hers*.

"What on earth's going on here?" a somewhat out-of-breath woman demanded as she jogged toward them up the steps from Windsor Street.

"Mummy," Lily wailed. "It's dead, and this is Billie's Daddy."

As introductions went, he'd had better.

"What's dead?" the woman demanded.

"A possum from the trap up there," he said, letting go of it – because it felt absurd to be found fighting with a small dog for its dead possum.

The woman might have been breathing hard but she had long runners' legs, blonde hair escaping from a precarious-looking bun, and beautiful cushiony lips to pant through. She watched, amused, as Milly tumbled over backward when Philip released his grip.

"Mummy, you're wearing the old nasty shorts!" Lily wailed.

'Mummy' didn't seem too concerned about that, but she reached toward Philip's paint-spattered T-shirt and asked, "Is that blood? Are you hurt? Is *anyone* hurt?"

Philip had no idea what made him do it, but he grabbed her hand and brushed it across his chest so she could feel it wasn't fresh gore. "Only paint. Weeks old."

"Daddy did our front door red for Christmas," Billie said. "It's lovely. He's very good at DUI."

"I think you might mean DIY there, kiddo," she said. "Driving Under the Influence, and Doing it Yourself are pretty different."

Philip couldn't hold back his sudden laugh.

"And doing both together could make for a really interesting charge sheet," she added, giving his chest a chummy pat before she pulled her hand away. "So no great drama, then?" she asked, turning to Lily. "Are you going to keep a firm hold on Milly's lead now?"

"Yes, Mummy, but how do I make her let go of the possum?"

"Maybe if we blocked her nostrils, she might release it?" Philip hazarded.

“Worth a try,” Lily’s mother agreed. “I’ll do the blocking, seeing she knows me better. You haul on the possum.” She bent over. He had no complaints about the ‘nasty old’ running shorts. They pulled tight over a curvy bottom and rode up high enough to show crescents of smooth white skin above her tan-line. He tried very hard not to perv as he reluctantly deserted the view for the other side of the dog.

“I’m Jillian, by the way,” she said – from an angle that gave him an equally enticing glimpse down the front of her sports top.

Once again he tried to look away. No success. “Philip,” he said. “Billie’s dad.”

“So Lily told me. I’ve filed it away.” She grinned across at him. “Or I’d be wondering why you were stalking two small girls in the school grounds on a quiet Sunday.”

He cast about for a suitable reply, but Billie beat him to it. “Lily’s Mummy’s a policeman,” she said. “And that means she’s sus-pish-iss of *everyone*.”

A blond eyebrow rose. “Not suspicious, honey – but always on guard against danger.”

“Tell me about it,” Lily murmured, just loud enough to be heard.

He returned Jillian’s grin. “A policeman, huh? I’d never have guessed.”

He was sure Jillian’s pretty cheeks pinked up a little, even though they were already flushed from her run. He watched as she pursed her cushiony lips and tried to stifle the grin, but it only made her look more kissable. “Do the nostrils,” he said, as desperation drove blood to private places.

Jillian gave a husky chuckle. Surely she couldn’t tell? She bent lower and grabbed Milly’s collar. “Can you hold this too?”

The cavoodle growled a warning as he reached across.

“Be careful Daddy!”

But the dog was not giving up her prize, despite Philip’s tugging and Jillian’s best efforts to deprive her of air.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she exclaimed. “I think we should all go home and eat some of that chocolate cake I baked this morning. I’ll bet little Madam here will get

tired of dragging something so big if we walk fast enough.”

Fresh chocolate cake! Philip’s prayers had been answered. “But we can’t leave a dead possum in the street.”

Jillian’s lips quirked. “It’s rubbish day tomorrow. If she drops it on the way, it’s your job to pick it up. We can wrap it tightly and put it out with the rest.”

That brought a chorus of objections from the girls, but the adults had had enough.

“Off you go,” Jillian said, shooing them ahead of her. Philip picked up the forgotten basketball.

They descended the steps to Windsor Street side by side. “I’ve heard about you,” she muttered. “A few bits, anyway. Widowed, an engineer, and won’t buy Lily a dog.”

He groaned, exasperated. “Keeping tabs on Lily is enough in my current situation. We don’t need a dog. She’s seen plenty of yours in the last few weeks, anyway.”

Jillian left a short silence and then said, “It would seem our daughters are hatching a plot. I’ve been told repeatedly to ‘wear nicer clothes’ when I’m out running – in case I bump into you.” She raised an enquiring brow.

“Little schemers! Billie told me off earlier today for the paint on my T-shirt and the fact I hadn’t shaved. Sorry.”

“No – I like it.”

“What – being bulldozed by two nine-year-olds?” He scratched his chin.

“No – the scruff. Suits you. Does it itch?”

He glared at her. “Not in the least. I’m just not good with personal information being bandied about. Especially by my daughter, who’d tell anyone anything.”

Jillian hesitated. “Lily hasn’t said much, actually. Has she mentioned me... at all?”

He could drown in those big concerned blue eyes. “Hmmm... cooks good cakes. Runs a lot. Has pretty hair. I didn’t know you were a cop, though.”

“They probably didn’t think that was a great selling point. It’s also probably why we haven’t met until now. My shifts can be anti-social.”

He watched as the girls and dog and possum rounded the bend at the base of the steps. “You really think they’re trying to set us up?” The thought was far from

alarming, and Jillian had such a no-nonsense manner it was easy enough to ask.

She tucked her arm through his and smiled up at him. “No doubt about it. Lily wants a new daddy, Billie wants a new mummy, and they’ve decided we’re a perfect match. You won’t believe why.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, wondering what was coming. “My great door painting ability? Superior soccer skills? Fantastic fit body?”

She snorted, then regained her composure. “No – although you do have quite a cute backside. Shame it’s covered in mud.”

Philip swiped his free hand across his eyes. “Darn. Forgot that. When I heard them screaming I ran too fast and lost my footing. So – why?”

She squeezed his elbow. “Well, you’re not looking too distraught yet, so I’ll tell you. They’re only nine, remember, and things like this amuse them. I’m Jilly. Mother of Lily. Lily owns Milly. You’re Philly – do they ever call you that to your face?”

He shook his head, appalled. “Never, thank goodness.”

She smirked. “And you’re the father of Billie. We’re set in stone, in their young eyes.”

Some little devil made him ask, “And what about Willy?”

She elbowed his side and her smirk widened. “Willy doesn’t get a look in until you’ve wrapped up that possum and taken me out for a nice dinner sometime. We could have a private chat about future possibilities. Then maybe...” She looked away, and he swore she was blushing.

Huh!

“I can do that,” he said. “What night’s best for you?”





Lights, Camera, Romance!

Marianne Bayliss



“I can’t do this.” Salena scanned the staged candlelit interview room for an escape route.

“Yes, you can. You’re intelligent, gorgeous, and brave.” Her producer, Aaron, looked at her the way he had since her first audition. It was a look that reassured her she could do anything, even be the first fifty-something reality TV dating show star.

The steadfastness in his dark blue eyes kept her from running away as quickly as her tight dress and spindly heels would allow.

“I’m going to throw up.” She pressed both hands to her churning midsection and eyed the potted plants. The cameraman stepped back.

“Salena,” Aaron’s deep, rumbling voice filtered through the panic. “The men will love you. New Zealand will love you. It’s impossible *not* to love you.”

Who was he kidding? She felt like a trussed-up sausage.

She grabbed his hand to anchor herself in the squall of lights, makeup artists, and production crew. “I thought I was ready for this. But I’m not. My ex-husband will have all his Christmases delivered to his living room twice a week for the next two months while he watches me make a fool of myself on national television.”

“Listen to me.” His voice smoothed over her raw nerve endings. “Your ex was the idiot for not valuing you when he had the chance. Now twenty-four men – expertly-matched men – are eager to prove their worth to you.”

An assistant stuck his head around the set. “Aaron, the limos are waiting.”

Salena gripped his hand tighter. “The bachelors will think I’m boring. The country will think I’m boring. In three months, I’ll be a grandmother, for goodness’ sake!”

Her hand-holder frowned. “Give us a minute.”

She could kiss him for granting her this reprieve.

Aaron stared deep into her eyes. “Let’s grab a coffee. Or a glass of wine.”

He knew her well.

And she, him. Aaron loved his job, and she didn’t want to jeopardise it. “But the limos? The bachelors?”

“They can wait.” He helped her to her feet and threaded his fingers through hers. Salena clung tight. He was her life preserver and she was barely treading water. The abrasiveness of his calloused palm sent tendrils of excitement rippling over her wrist and up her forearm.

“Sorry, I’m the reason your show is going to tank,” Salena said. “Though, honestly, the name isn’t great. ‘Golden Love’. Really?”

“Ha! Trust me, that title wasn’t my idea.” He held up a coffee cup and wine glass for her to choose.

She took the mug: no need to add to her wobbles. “Do I look like a golden oldie to you?”

A strangled sound escaped him, making the hair on Salena’s nape quiver, but she ignored it. “It doesn’t help that women my age have no collective name. Yet you,” she waved her hand up and down to encompass his height, “are a silver fox. It makes me feel like a defenceless hen.”

“You’re hardly weak. You know what you deserve and have the courage to not settle. That’s strong. And sexy. Those foxes better have brought their A game.”

The assistant approached again. “The director says we’re running late.”

Aaron dragged his hand through his hair.

He was right. She knew what she didn’t want, and that was to have her past

influence her decisions. Plus, she'd committed to this show. It wasn't an option to back out of a promise on a whim, or have her actions bring grief to the silver fox who had supported her through the storm of interviews, photographs and media releases. Except Aaron was no fox. He was a panther with a purr that thrummed through her veins whenever he spoke.

Salena squared her shoulders and put down the coffee cup. "I'm ready."

"Are you sure?"

She'd signed a contract. She'd keep her promise. "Yes."

He slid her a smile that made her weak.

"Well, Darren, it was nice chatting with you." Salena was telling the truth.

"Likewise," the mechanic replied. "Can I walk you back inside?"

She looked up at the dark sky sprinkled with stars then towards the French doors leading to the living area.

"Actually, I just need a second."

Darren smiled his charming smile and strode indoors while Salena committed details to memory. Darren. Witty. Widower.

Four hours had passed in a blur, but it had been surprisingly fun. The suitors were full of compliments and on their best behaviour. She was tired though. There were only so many times you could say "mother-of-three", "divorced for four years", "yes, I am fifty-two", "no, I'm not kidding" and keep it fresh.

The sparkling stars overhead teased her. Each one of them represented a time she had to stop herself comparing the men to Aaron.

Salena sighed. There was no denying that he was the one who piqued her interest the most. So much for thinking that her feelings for him sprung from the excitement of the audition process. As nice as her suitors were, none of them made her tingle the way he did.

She needed to recalibrate. Her private bathroom should provide peace.

Fanning herself, she tiptoed down the hallway, crept through the door and ran cool water over her wrists. The irony of the unglamorous room compared to the chandeliers and floral arrangements on set amused her. If only she could chuckle about it with *him*.

Her reflection in the mirror was a flawless touched-up photograph – no puffiness or dark circles. These makeup artists were next level. What would the bachelors think when they saw her bare faced, with the first signs of droopy eyelids and sagging jowls? It hadn't seemed to bother Aaron.

But he was not a contestant. There was no getting around that.

“Salena?”

Speak of the devil.

“Everything okay in there?”

Not really. “Uh, yes. Fine. Give me a sec.” She dried her hands and took a couple of deep breaths.

What was she going to do? Her nature was to be a peace-keeper not a fighter. Should she ignore her feelings for Aaron, or speak her mind and set off an explosion?

Salena opened the door to see Aaron in the hallway. Wearing a tuxedo. And looking so dashing that James Bond would be jealous.

“What are you wearing?”

The ever-present cameraman stood a couple of metres away, flanked by a battalion of lights.

Aaron cleared his throat. “Salena... Um, hi.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ve... uh... asked to be removed from the show.”

“Oh.” Pain, sharp and unexpected, pierced her heart. “Okay. That’s...” Awful. Terrible. “Okay.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’d like to be a contestant.”

Whoosh! The pain vanished and her heart jolted to life, beating so fast she thought she might collapse. “Is that allowed?”

“Not exactly. I kinda had to resign.”

Her mind went numb. Her ears started ringing. His expression was more puppy than panther, and all hope of forming a sentence vanished.

“So, um, do you want me to be a contender?”

“Hey. Everything okay here?” Andrew-moustache-banker approached.

Confused by Aaron’s transformation, the lights, and the ambush, Salena

spluttered, “There’s an intruder.”

Paul-hunky-landscaper and Jonathon-chef-three-divorces rounded the corner, making the narrow hallway even more crowded. The mansion had three floors of opulence, so why did this drama have to unfold in front of the toilet?

Voices ricocheted around her.

“What’s happening?”

“Who’s this dude?”

“Intruder.”

Her scalp and upper lip prickled with sweat and she yearned to take off her shoes and hurl them at the lights.

“Salena?” Aaron’s rumbling purr was unmistakable. “It’s okay.”

Allowing Aaron to become a contestant was going to cause a ruckus, and a lot of men were going to be mad at her. These bachelors had signed up to meet her. They had suspended their jobs and family commitments and put their faith in the show. She couldn’t dismiss that.

But she was tired of keeping the peace and if she could leap out of her comfort zone enough to do this show, she could soar further and choose what *she* wanted rather than do what made everyone else happy.

Decision time.

“Gentlemen, Aaron is joining us.”

The protests were loud.

Salena held up her palm to stop the onslaught and clutched the door jamb behind her. When the barrage showed no signs of receding, she did the only sensible thing possible: retreat to the bathroom again.

The voices amplified.

She clasped the towel rail and pressed her flaming cheek to the cool tiled wall.

How had her life come to this? Forcing breath to the depth of her lungs she waited for the noise to abate. It felt like an age.

Despite wishing so, it wasn’t an option to stay in the lavatory for the rest of the show. It was time to face the firing squad.

Salena opened the door a crack.

A cameraman sprung to attention and hoisted a camera on to his shoulder. There was no point hoping he'd gone AWOL; this is what she'd signed up for. Her heels clicked on the tiled floor with an energetic, percussive beat on her way to the main living room.

The conversations stopped. Twenty-four men who were keen to impress her earlier now oozed with anger, frustration, and annoyance.

Had she lost their trust?

Raoul-smells-good-rock-climber walked out.

Salena took two, three steps towards him and then caught herself. No more chasing after moody men.

Aaron shifted behind the sofa. It was the smallest movement, but his calmness radiated towards her. It was up to her: continue as she had always done or dare to do differently.

A glass clunked on the coffee table.

Were these guys – senior citizens – seriously throwing a tantrum? Her children didn't get away with it when they were toddlers and now she would not accept it from a grown man ever again.

"Gentlemen. Thank you for your patience. As you may have heard, Aaron is joining the show." The irascibility escalated. "I understand this is unexpected, but I'm sure you'll agree, life rarely goes to plan. I'm on my journey to find love, and it's not without its twists and turns. So, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get to know him too."

He padded towards her, slicing the tension with each prowling step. Goosebumps hummed along her spine.

Salena made eye contact with the men who challenged her, offered them a smile, then announced, "See you at the elimination ceremony."

She took Aaron's arm and click-clacked her way out of the room. It was time to step into the spotlight and find her leading man. "Let's do this."





A Rose By Any Other Name

Stephanie Ruth



“Fuckssake.” Curtis slammed his palm against the length of architaving he’d drop-sawed to size.

The wrong size.

He’d cut the forty-five degree angle on the reverse side, ruining a perfectly good piece of rimu.

“Bugger.” The voice came from behind him, more than a little tongue-in-cheek.

Curtis swung around, dropping the offending length of wood on the sawdust covered floor, expecting to see a senior carpenter. But the boss’s niece lounged against the rear wall, laughing at him. All legs and smirk, as usual.

Tamsin’s shorts were too short, and her metallic-grey eyes picked up every damn thing as she scanned him, from dust-choked hair to steel-capped boots. Like she could see beyond the grime to his deepest, darkest desires.

Heat crept up his neck.

“Is Jonno around?” Tamsin pushed herself forward, her fitted biker jacket an eye-popping green. She sure liked to stand out in the crowd.

“You can’t wear open-toed shoes in here,” Curtis growled, then cringed, always on the wrong foot with grown-up Tamsin.

His body’s visceral reaction scared the hell out of him and made him come off all judgey.

“You don’t like my sandals?” Tamsin fake-pouted.

The puckering of her lips was effective in nudging his libido further awake.

“Not for a worksite, no. Not safe.” He glanced at the sandals again—ridiculously strappy things criss-crossing halfway up Tamsin’s calves.

Great calves; lean, smooth, and tanned.

Curtis frowned, trying to assimilate this vision with the Tamsin he’d known at intermediate school.

“Jonno’s not here,” he added, when Tamsin remained silent.

Way out of bounds. Tamsin wasn’t just the boss’s niece, she was practically his daughter. And Jonno wielded a formidable pair of fists if the occasion called for it.

They’d been friends, Tamsin and Curtis. Sort of friends. Well, on friendly terms, playing on the same football team for two years, Curtis as centre-back and Tamsin up front.

She was a decent striker. Slippery on the ball, with a wicked left curl.

She. He.

It was tricky to know which pronoun to use for the past. Back when Tamsin was Theo.

“But, I really *need* him,” Tamsin groaned, cultivating her flair for the dramatic. “When’s he due back?”

“Dunno.” Curtis shrugged and turned away from her—Tamsin who was once Theo—wishing she’d leave him alone. Though he felt a bit cheated when she did just that, without another word or backward glance.

*

Tamsin was at the new-build again the next day, bowling up while Curtis was trying to hold a series of measurements in his head.

“Hey, Curtis.”

He held up a ‘stop’ hand.

“Wait...” Thirty-eight, or thirty-nine? He measured again, scribbling the sum on a piece of two-by-four. “Two hundred and thirty-nine divided by four,” he muttered before turning to her. “Jonno’s putting in the back deck.” He waved a hand in the general direction, and refocused on his simple division.

The flowery Doc Martens didn’t move from his line of vision.

Curtis looked back up and caught Tamsin checking out his pecs. At least, that’s what it looked like. He quashed the sudden urge to flex.

“Anything else?”

“Fifty-nine, point seven-five.”

“You worked that out on the fly?”

Tamsin angled her head a little, like he was an unusual specimen she couldn’t quite make out. The feeling was mutual.

“Sure. Round up to forty, then minus the one at the end.”

“Of course,” Curtis bluffed.

For him, maths took time—methodically writing everything down and checking it twice. Witnessing Tamsin ace it was slightly demoralizing, but then, she’d always been a smarty-pants.

“Nice boots.” He deflected.

“I *know*, right?” Tamsin’s face split into a mile-wide grin, and she struck a pose with one hand behind her head, jutting her chest out. “Tough decision between yellow roses and blue, but blue rocks, yeah?” She wagged a boot towards him.

“I was thinking more about safety. Keeping your toes attached.”

Tamsin’s smile faded like the sun going down below the horizon, all the sassy glow gone.

“Oh, right,” she muttered, turning to go.

He felt like a complete ass. “I like the blue, though. Looks good with the denim.”

Turning back, Tamsin brushed a hand down the front of her short, stonewashed skirt. The rips showcased little slivers of black tights underneath. Her chin notched

and eyes narrowed, Curtis got the distinct impression she was measuring him up; deciding if he was worth her time of day.

“I painted them myself.”

“No shit?” Feeling like he’d passed some sort of test, Curtis took a closer look. The flowers were incredibly detailed. “Nice job.”

“I used to paint old leather handbags and sell them at the market for pocket money. Kept me out of trouble.”

“I remember.”

Tamsin had started growing her hair, changing up her clothes, and wearing make-up around the same time.

Transitioning.

They’d been in different high schools by then, Curtis unsure what to say or how to approach—still figuring out his own sexuality.

Older now, those teenage hang-ups were behind him. Mostly.

“Still playing soccer?” He sought their old footing, some commonality.

“Nope.” Tamsin turned to stare out of the half finished window, toward the sparsely inhabited valley below.

He followed her gaze. The deep green of the native trees looked cool, damp, and inviting.

“Why not? You were good...” he trailed off, realising he’d said something wrong by the shuttered look on her face.

“I run, now. Nothing competitive. It gets hard, you know...” Tamsin waved her hand in a throwaway gesture and flicked him a look. “People like things neatly categorised.”

She fidgeted, stepping from one foot to the other. That was one of Tamsin’s traits, the jiggling. Like she couldn’t sit still for fear the paint would dry solid and she’d be stuck there forever.

Categorised?

The male-female thing. He’d never taken the time to really consider how hard that would be. Not only big-assed decisions, but everyday expectations. Constant regimentation—pressure to conform to clear definitions.

Fit in, or else.

“You working, or gabbing?” Jonno shoved his head through the window cavity.

The boss had a stare like paint-stripper.

“Hi, Jonno. Curtis was telling me where to find you.” Tamsin leaned out to hug her uncle as if he were a big, soft teddy bear.

*

A week passed before Curtis saw Tamsin again, smack-bang in the centre of trouble in a club off George Street. Holed up by the toilets, she was standing defiant against two weed-smokers Curtis recognised from the football scene.

Dope-Head-One had an arm up, blocking Tamsin’s exit. But rather than scared, she looked irritated, hands on the hips of her short, sequined dress.

“What *bits* have you got, then?”

Curtis caught the slurred words as he approached, context clear from the suggestive sneer.

Dope-Head-Two sniggered, his teeth yellow and stained. “Are your tits fake?” He reached out with obvious intent.

Curtis saw red. “Leave her the fuck alone.” He didn’t have to shout. It was quiet away from the dance pit.

“What are you planning to do about it?” This from the guy with not-so-bad teeth.

“Plenty.” Curtis readjusted his stance, and waited.

“Fuckin’ homo,” one of them muttered as they stumbled past.

“At least I don’t have to hold a girl hostage to see her boobs,” he called after the retreating assholes.

“*Girl?* Stick a hand up her skirt before you take her home. She’s packing!” The two idiots fell over each other laughing as they blundered away.

“I didn’t need your help.” Tamsin pushed off from the wall and brushed by Curtis, like *he* was the annoyance in her evening.

“Just biding your time before you brought out numb-chucks?”

Tamsin turned to scorch him with a look, and he noticed her heels brought them to the same height.

“It’s *nanchaku*, actually.”

Little witch.

“Are you correcting me, after I risked a fist in the face?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus. A simple ‘thank you’ would suffice.”

“*Thank* you,” Tamsin offered the words with such sarcasm, the meaning was reversed. “I guess *you* want to see my tits, now?”

“Don’t be a dick.” Curtis flushed as soon as the word left his mouth, and Tamsin burst out laughing.

“Oh! You’re more of a cock man?”

Both, actually. Bisexual.

Curtis opened his mouth, but the words wouldn’t form. He wanted to tell Tamsin he saw her as something special, an electric ball of crackling energy and talent, not a sexual plaything.

“Leave off,” he muttered instead, no doubt beetroot. “Do you want a lift home, or what?”

“What if I choose *or what*?” Tamsin was all snark, her lip curled like a Billy Idol wannabe.

It was hard not to stare. The defiant angle of her jaw left her smooth neck open to Curtis’ gaze. He’d read up on gender reassignment since last week, and even though he was looking for it, couldn’t see any sign of an Adam’s apple procedure.

Did Tamsin begin hormone therapy before puberty? Had her family come to terms with the irreversibility? At twenty, did she hold any regrets? Curtis had a litany of questions, with no right to ask any.

He tried to crack a smile, aiming for confident and unbothered. “You could buy me a beer?”

Tamsin blinked, making Curtis smile for real. She clearly hadn’t been expecting that.

Troubled steely-greys settled back on his face. “You want to have a drink with me... after that?”

“Sure, why not? They don’t own the place.” Not the club. Not the city. Not the planet.

An agonising minute later, Tamsin conceded with a shrug and slight nod.

They stayed for one drink, though Curtis checked behind them every two seconds in the jostle and push of the place, expecting more trouble.

None came.

“Who’d you come with?” He leaned in to catch her answer.

“Friends. They left. I was leaving too, after the pee. You?”

“Some guys from work. You want to join them?” He gestured towards the tradesmen on the other side of the bar. Not exactly sloppy drunk, but not far off.

“No. I’d rather keep you to myself.” Tamsin laughed, and Curtis wondered if this was a joke to her. Was she stringing him along? Mocking the guy in the closet for fun?

“Done.” Taking a chance, he reached over to cover her hand with his.

Cool to the touch.

Tamsin stared at his hand for a long moment. Then, in slow motion, she twisted her wrist until they were palm to palm. When she finally looked up, her grin obliterated the rest of the world.

“You’ve gone and sullied yourself now,” she ribbed him, slim fingers curling through his and holding on.

So, his workmates were watching? Big deal.

Heart thudding and suddenly ready to face anything, Curtis brought the back of Tamsin’s hand up to his mouth, and kissed it.

“Bring it on.”





There is a Crack in Everything

Susie Frame



Monday, March 23rd, 2020.

Carl stabs the remote's 'off' button and bangs it down onto the white oak coffee table. I can see he's cracked the veneer. But I don't care at all. It's officially his table now after scoring it in last week's divvying-up-of-marital-chattels exercise.

"Well. That's it, then. I'm literally stuck here for at least the next three weeks." He throws me a look as if to say the Corona virus is all my fault.

I think back to a time when the idea of being told I had to stay at home with my husband for three glorious weeks without anyone, or anything, coming between us would've been bliss. Pure bliss. A time when a PJ Saturday was a regular occurrence and we'd lounge around reading poetry out loud to one another, play chess, discuss government policies.

I loved our PJ Saturdays, but I loved sex day Sundays even more. We flipped the bird to the world and stayed in bed experimenting, Carl's spice-coloured eyes never leaving mine as he caressed me, made love to me; slow, delicious love. And after every coupling we'd lie in each other's arms hoping we'd just made the baby we both desperately wanted.

But that was then. And now is now. Loving slowly and deeply, has been replaced with ferocious waves of animosity; waves that have tossed us in all directions and sent us crashing onto unforgiving rocks.

Carl was supposed to be moving out, although where to was undecided. But that can't happen now.

Stay home. Save lives. The PM and her advisors have no idea how much they're asking of us. We may not make it out of this alive.

"Why don't we treat it as a bonus opportunity to get the house ready to sell?" I suggest, false cheerfulness dripping off every word.

Carl runs his left hand through his hair. *When did you take off your wedding ring?* "Didn't you hear Jacinda? If we can work from home, we *work* from home. I won't have time to do anything round here except try and stay afloat."

I find his reference to water interesting. We drowned a long time ago – four years into this thing called marriage, in fact. We tried to get to shore but clearly our life raft, like my one remaining ovary, was faulty.

He stands. "I may as well go to the office and start packing everything I need for Lockdown. I don't know when I'll be back."

"Okay. Do you want me to—"

The front door slams before he hears my helpful offer to set up the spare room as his temporary office.

Sunday, March 29th

Three days in. So far so good. We're managing to stay out of each other's way. It helps that Carl works in the spare room all day and when I'm not drafting my new novel, I *KonMari* like there's no tomorrow. I wonder if the Japanese organisational guru has ever considered writing a marital self-help book? 'Can your relationship be recycled? Are there parts of it that still bring you joy?'

I let the questions settle and consider them carefully. I know the answers.

I don't need to ask Carl what he thinks.

Thursday, April 2nd

"I need to get out of here before I go crazy," Carl says. "I'm going for a walk."

He sees me lacing my walking shoes. "Oh, you are too?"

I nod. "Yeah. I've done enough cleaning today."

"What's that supposed to mean, Alice?"

“Nothing. I just—”

“I’ve told you I can’t do anything round here right now—”

“I know. I didn’t mean—”

He strides through the kitchen and out the back door.

Monday, April 6th

Carl takes in the dining room table then turns, his eyes darken as they capture mine. “Do you think being holed up together when we don’t want to be is something to celebrate?”

I shake my head and bite down on my lip. *Breathe in. Exhale. Keep calm*, I remind myself. “I was cleaning the pantry and found some tins of stuff that were near their use-by date so I—?”

A smile pulls at the corners of Carl’s mouth. He laughs. The sound sparks a feeling - an old familiar feeling. I shrug into it like a sloppy-Joe and enjoy the nomadic warmth as it drifts outwards from my chest.

“That’s quite witty, Alice. I’d almost forgotten how funny you could be.”

It takes a second or two for the penny to drop, and when it does, my heart drops, too. I don’t find him comparing our marriage to tins of nearly-had-it coconut milk and chick peas amusing. As the warmth dissipates my brain scrambles to find something to say back. It appears my word bank is temporarily closed for business.

Carl speaks and what he says is bizarre, off the wall. “Why don’t I go and get that bottle of wine we’ve been saving for a special occasion? May as well drink it.”

I don’t want to state the obvious and say that using up old pantry stock is hardly special or cause for merriment. I nod. “Okay. I’ll dish up, and then you can...”

“What? Tell you about my day? My day in the spare room?”

I used to look forward to our sharing time in the evenings. We’d sit at the table at night, eat the dinner we’d prepared together, drink good wine and talk. Sometimes till the stars carpeted the sky. I loved those days. I can’t remember when all that stopped. I’m sad it has. We were good. Really good.

Once.

We eat our meal in silence. Carl scrapes his plate clean with some homemade flat bread. “I didn’t realise how hungry I was.”

I look at him.

“What?”

I can't remind him he used to say that to me after we'd made love. *'I didn't realise how hungry I was, babe,'* he'd say. And then he'd ask if he could have seconds. I always told him to help himself.

"Might go back for seconds," he says. "If there's any left?"

Food? Not much.

Us? I know there's plenty. But he's chosen to give up. He thinks counselling's for sissies. *'We tried. We failed. End of.'*

The gospel according to St. Carl.

Amen.

He moves his chair back but he doesn't head to the kitchen. He sees my tears and fiddles with his screwed-up serviette. He hates me crying. "Now what? I thought we were done with the crying, Alice?"

"I thought I was, too. It's just that—"

"What?"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Go and get your seconds."

He's the one dropping pennies, now. His eyes soften. He clears his throat and stands. I feel him looking down at me. I don't trust myself to look at him; doing so might risk me pleading with him to stay. I don't want to look pathetic.

I look out of the dining room window and see the cloudy, troubled sky. I know how you feel, I think.

Carl heads to the kitchen.

Thursday, April 9th

I'm not usually claustrophobic but the walls are starting to close in on me. I know Jacinda's told us to walk in our neighbourhood but I head off to Totara Hill a couple of ks away. I don't bother telling Carl.

No cars. No noise. Just me, the *tui*, the *kereru* and my thoughts; my deafening thoughts. I climb quickly till my thighs burn.

My feet propel me towards the place. *The* place. The place where Carl and I stood and exchanged our vows. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health.

Till divorce do us part.

I hear him before I see him.

He's standing on our spot.

Crying.

I turn quietly and walk home.

Friday, April 10th

"Thanks for dinner, Alice."

My heart quickens. I can't remember the last time Carl did that. I don't know why I do it but I put the compliment into my memory bank.

I push the just-throw-everything-into-the-pan-and-hope-for-the-best risotto around my plate. There's so much I want to say. Like, I saw you yesterday, Carl. At *our* spot. And you were crying. Want to talk about that?

But I don't. "You're welcome," I say. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Listen to us. Anyone would think we were happily married." And just like that, the moment is ruined.

Don't, Carl. Please. Don't.

I take our plates to the kitchen.

Saturday, April 11th

I can't put off doing a *KonMari* number in our bedroom. *My* bedroom. I reach for the suitcase on top of the wardrobe and pull it towards me. The contents spill everywhere. I cry out as my skull takes the full impact of the heavy glossy covered book.

Carl's footsteps thunder down the hall. I brace myself. I've probably interrupted a very important phone call.

The door bursts open.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"What happened?"

I point to the offending object. "That just fell on me."

Carl looks down at our wedding album then sits down beside me on my/our bed. "Where did it hit you?"

"Here." I rub my temple.

"Whoa. That's gotta hurt."

"I'll survive." I close my eyes. I take myself to a tropical island and will the pain to stop.

Carl leaves the room then returns a minute later. "This should help." He gently places a packet of frozen peas on my temple.

"I was going to use those for dinner tonight."

“No, you’re not. I’m cooking.”

I forget my aching head. “Really?”

“Really.” He picks up the wedding album.

I take it from him and toss it in the half-filled black rubbish bag.

I watch as he fishes it out. “Don’t want to reminisce?”

“Don’t be cruel, Carl.”

He puts the album down and looks at me. “We need to talk.”

Monday, April 13th, 12.59 pm

Carl turns on the TV. “What do you think Jacinda’s going to say?”

‘Kia ora koutou, everyone.’

Carl frowns. “She’s wearing black. She always wears dark clothes when she announces stuff we don’t want to hear?”

That night, long after we’d finished our dinner, we sit at the table and talk about what’s happened to the world; about what’s happened to us; about the future of both.

I bring our favourite CD up on Spotify and soon Leonard Cohen’s rich voice fills the air.

There is a crack, a crack in everything, he sings. That’s how the light gets in.

Carl and I fill our wine glasses. It feels wrong, but we toast to Lockdown.

We toast to the light that has wakened our hearts.

Carl’s hand slips into mine. Our wedding bands touch.

He leans towards me, his eyes fixed on mine. His lips swallow my smile.

And stars carpet the sky.





Prescription for Love

Susie Frame

I walk into the practice and slip off my coat. ‘Hiya, Jen!’

‘Hey, Simone. How’re things?’ she responds with a bright-eyed smile.

‘Great, although I think I have a headache brewing.’

Her smile fades. ‘Oh, poor you. Started those birthday celebrations a bit early?’

Oh, yeah. I forgot. Today’s my birthday. I carry on as if I’ve totally remembered.

‘Me? Celebrate early? Hardly. No, I fell on my way to work this morning. Got tangled up in a dog’s lead, and get this? The dog’s owner said because of the bump to the head he thought it would be a good idea to give me the once over. Now, there’s a pick-up line to beat all pick-up lines. What a creep.’

‘Trust me, I wasn’t trying to pick you up. You *did* bump your head and personally, I don’t think you should be at work.’

I want to die. I know that voice.

‘Ah. You must be Doctor Connelly,’ says Jen. ‘Lovely to finally meet our new locum.’

The guy I thought was a creep is the locum? Awkward.

‘Dr Connelly’s far too formal. Call me Marcus.’

‘And who’s this delightful little pooch,’ Jen adds, leaving her post behind the reception desk to rub the poodle between the ears.

‘This is Noir. I hope it’s okay to bring him in?’ He scoops up the dog and strokes Noir’s coat lovingly. ‘Mum’s in a moon boot so I’ve moved in to help her for a week.’

Of course, you have. Good looking, love animals – and your mum. If I was looking for a bloke, you’d tick the boxes. But after what happened with—

‘Well, welcome!’ The phone rings. ‘Simone will show you to your office. I’ll bring you a coffee as soon as I’ve answered this.’

‘Thank you, but we *are* in the 21st century. I’m quite capable of making my own coffee.’

Jen throws Marcus a smile then me a sly double eye-brow waggle. I know exactly what she’s thinking. It’ll only be a matter of time before she tries to matchmake the pair of us.

‘So? Simone? Why don’t you show me to my office? My first patient isn’t for another ten minutes so I think that’ll give me time to...’ A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. ‘...give you the once over.’

I feel the warmth creep up my neck and burn my cheeks. ‘About that. I’m really sorry. If I’d known you were a doctor—’

‘You didn’t give me much of a chance to explain.’

‘Fair comment.’ I lead him down the narrow corridor to the small office at the end. ‘And I’m not sure how much you heard when you came in but...’

‘If you’re referring to the bit about me being a creep, then, yeah, I heard the lot.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m sure you’re not a creep at all.’

‘Well, thank you, Simone. I’m glad we’ve cleared that up. Right. Sit.’

I do as instructed, then realise too late Marcus was talking to Noir. He could use this opportunity to laugh at my gaffe, but he doesn’t. ‘Right. I’ll just get Noir some water.’

I want to escape. ‘I’ll get it.’

‘You’re not going anywhere until I’ve taken your obs.’

Marcus returns a minute later with one of our sturdy disposable bedpans and fills it at the sink. ‘The versatility of the trusty old pee collector, eh? Don’t tell Jen I’m wasting resources.’

‘Mum’s the word. Talking of mothers, I’m sorry to hear about yours.’

‘She’ll be okay. It’s you I’m more worried about.’

A tingling warmth radiates round my body and settles in the pit of my stomach.

It's been forever since anyone has worried about me. I know Marcus is just using his professional patter but hearing the words makes me feel good all the same.

'Pulse first.'

He places his first fingers on my wrist and times my heart on his watch. I command my cardiac muscle not to react, but it's not listening. His forearm is strong and masculine and his bowed head sports a stylish, tousled mass of dark curls. He smells good, too. Pine forest with a trace of sandalwood.

'Mmmm, a bit elevated but no cause for concern. Eyes.'

He shines a penlight into each of my eyes. I catch a glimpse of his; cornflower blue with flecks of hazel.

'Pupils contracting nicely. Blood pressure.'

Marcus pumps up the cuff and watches the read-out carefully. 'A bit on the high side, but totally understandable, considering. Full name?'

'Simone Mitchell.'

'What day is it?'

'Monday, 14th April, 2021.'

'Date of birth?'

'14th April, 1988.'

'What? Today's your birthday?'

'Yes.'

'Well, most people leave their birthday bash for later in the day...' He starts laughing at his joke. 'Sorry, that wasn't funny.'

Damn his pun to hell. Humour in a man is the biggest turn on for me.

Inconvenient.

'Yes, it was,' I say and allow myself a little chuckle. 'Look, thanks for what you've done but I – we – better be getting back to work.'

He laughs, his blue eyes light up his face. 'Are you always this stropky?'

I stand to leave.

'I'll do another check in a couple of hours,' he calls after me. 'Send in Mrs Jones.'

He's as good as his word and double checks my vitals two hours later. He scrapes a hand through his hair as he hands over what looks like a prescription. 'You seem fine but I'd like you to take this.'

'If it's for paracetamol, I have plenty.'

'It's not.'

'I'm not taking any pills.'

He presses the slip of paper in my hand. 'Take it,' he says, his cheeks colouring slightly, then asks to see his 11.15.

Our evening at Three Chefs passes too quickly.

'I thought you'd take one look at the "prescription",' he says, making inverted commas in the air, 'and toss it in the bin. I didn't think you'd come.'

'I didn't think I was going to, either. But Jen can be very persuasive.'

'Persuasive...and a good informant.'

I wasn't happy about Jen telling Marcus I was single. I'll talk to her about that tomorrow, but for now I'm going to enjoy the last moments of a rare night out.

'How're you feeling, now?'

'I'm fine. Really. And you didn't have to do this. Although I've been dying to come here. I've had a wonderful time. Thank you.'

'Well, then. It's a win-win. You're out for your birthday and I get to say sorry for this morning.' Marcus picks up his glass. 'Cheers and happy birthday, Simone.'

We sip our drinks. A gaping silence yawns between us. I fill it with: 'How's your mum?'

'Good. She'll be up and about by the time my period as locum finishes.'

I've only known Marcus for a matter of hours and my heart sinks at the thought of him going.

We order coffee and play 'Twenty Questions'.

'Where do you see yourself in five years?' I say.

'Whoa! That's a biggie.' Marcus leans back on his chair and inhales deeply. 'To be honest, I don't know. Let's face it, we never know what's going to happen tomorrow let alone five years from now. Look what happened this morning. I thought I was going to be putting in another humdrum day as a locum and spend the night in front of Coro Street with Mum and Noir. Look how that turned out!'

Bubbles of laughter travel up the back of my throat. 'You're right. I thought I'd be watching The Chase eating grilled cheese toasties!'

'Wow! What a couple of party animals we are, eh?'

I lower my gaze and fiddle with my serviette. I think of my ex; his lies, his cheating, my heart being ripped out and thrown to the wolves. And the fact that I'd reached thirty-three an orphan - albeit a grown-up one - without a home of my own, a husband, children. It's not what I'd planned. I swallow the tightening lump forming in my throat.

‘Honestly? I haven’t felt like partying much lately.’

Marcus looks sad, pensive. He reaches for my hand and holds it tenderly in his.

‘I don’t know how much Jen told you, Marcus, but...’

He squeezes my hand and I don’t pull away. ‘All Jen told me was that if I upset you in any way, she’d do something that involved a tourniquet and my testicles.’

Our laughter echos around the restaurant.

‘I’m in the healing-slash-helping business, remember, Simone. It’s not my MO to upset people.’

I notice the restaurant lights dim. ‘Oh, we’re the last ones here. We better get going.’

Marcus offers to walk me home. I have no excuse for him not to, seeing his Mum lives just around the corner. He slips his arm through mine, his warmth warding off the winter chill in the air. We reach my gate. ‘This is me.’

‘Well, I guess I’ll see you in the morning?’ He leans in front of me, flicks the latch and stands back to let me through. I catch his heady, intoxicating scent. A kaleidoscope of butterflies takes flight in my gut. ‘And I’ll try and time it so that you don’t get tangled up in Noir’s lead again.’

I smile as I desperately think of something to say to keep Marcus talking. I don’t want the night to end. Is it possible that this man I’ve only known for a matter of hours has managed to cut through the barbed wire fence that I’ve carefully built around my heart and soul; the fence that’s kept me prisoner for so long?

‘Night, Simone.’

‘Night. Thanks again for tonight. It’s been the best birthday.’ I turn and walk towards the front door.

‘One last thing,’ Marcus calls.

I’ve already decided if he asks to kiss me goodnight, I’ll say yes. He’s not a creep. Far from it. He’s the kind of guy Mum and Dad would have approved of.

I turn to see him reach into his man bag for his prescription pad. He scribbles something, hands it to me then disappears into the darkness.

I walk inside, flick the hall light and read what Marcus has written.

I get to ask the next question.

I’m like an infatuated schoolgirl. I run out of the house and down the street towards Marcus.

‘Ask me now,’ I say as I catch up with him.

In the street light I see his full smile.

‘I don’t want to rush you but—’

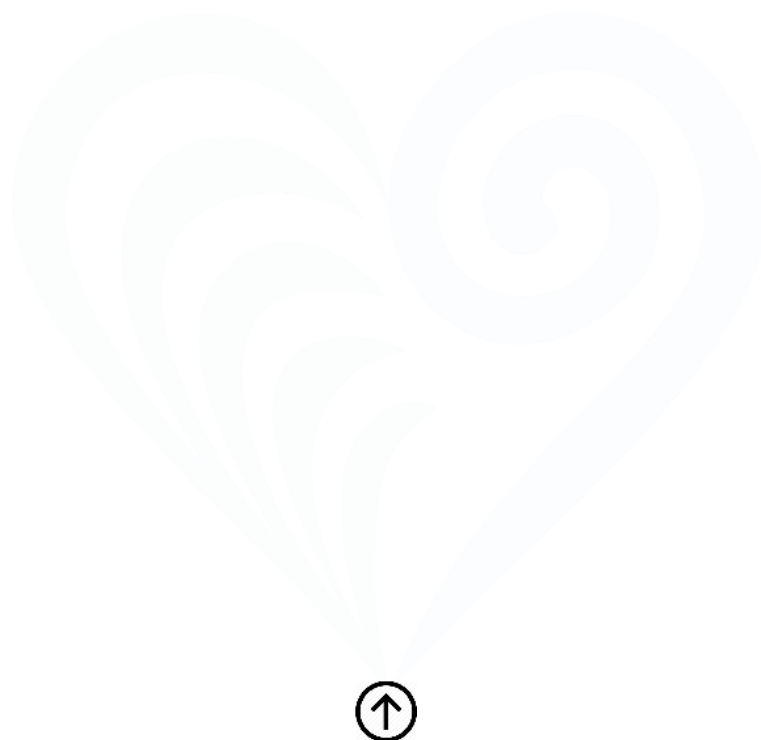
I lean up towards his mouth and his lips are on mine.

His arms wrap around me. Unlike the barbed wire fence that’s held me fast, I feel free in his embrace.

I pull away and smile up at Marcus. ‘You know what?’

‘What?’

‘You’re just what the doctor ordered.’





Don't Let Us Say Goodbye

Virginia Suckling

Anticipation can be better than the reality, so they say.

I popped the star-shaped chocolate into my mouth, waiting for the inevitable melding of chocolate and liquid-centre of whatever flavour it might be. It took seconds and always exceeded my expectations.

Through my craving for chocolate, I'd found my soulmate who satisfied every facet of my life.

As I did his.

New to Wellington, I blessed the day I met Ben Stuart in his shop, Chocolate Heaven, on Tinakori Road.

'What can I tempt you with?' Those were his first words to me.

Are you on the list of goodies? 'A chocolate with a liquid centre or marzipan.'

From the regimented lines of sweets in the showcase, he chose one. 'Try this.'

The coffee liqueur encased in dark chocolate was ambrosial.

He held out another heart-shaped and decorated with silver scrolls. 'And this.'

'Yummy, marzipan. I'll have to take a bag of each of those amazing flavours.'

By the end of six months, we were married.

I was a kilo heavier.

Seven years later, we separated.

I'm willing to admit it was a blame shared. We loved our demanding jobs, mine as a rest home manager, his as a chocolatier. The breaking point—a miscarriage—drove us apart until we lived as strangers. Resentment increased each day as I saw him going to work as though nothing had happened. Until, bottling up my emotions like pressure in a faulty glass bottle, I exploded.

He left.

Reconciliation became harder with time, rejection a stumbling block. What if he'd found someone else? I was a coward, unable to move forward but equally unable to face the past.

Three months into the separation, my sister Evie, announced one morning, 'Gabby, you're a social recluse. You need to find younger company than all those old people you look after all day. Lovely though they may be.'

'Those old people, as you put it, have led interesting lives, if you're prepared to listen.'

'I'm sure,' she replied. 'Nevertheless, starting tonight you're going out. I've booked a table for us at the newly opened restaurant, Vincent's, for seven thirty.'

'In that boutique hotel. It's owned by a friend of Ben's, you know.' I frowned. 'Why there?'

'Why not? Ben, by the way, is as reclusive as you. He's lost weight and looks hag...'

'Taboo subject, Evie.'

She waved a hand at me. 'Fine. I'll see you tonight.'

I bit my lower lip. 'Okay.' *Was I going to regret this?*

Evie smiled, and thinking I couldn't see, mouthed a silent yes.

Several hours later, I stood inside Vincent's. The Maître D' smiled at me. 'Mrs Stuart, please come this way.'

Weaving our way through the full restaurant towards a long picture-window overlooking the harbour, I looked for Evie. Where was she? A man sat with his back to me. Someone I knew only too well.

Ben.

I touched the Maître D' on the arm. 'I'm just going to the ladies. Please tell him I won't be long.' Anger ballooned as I paced the restroom floor, my thoughts tussling

with staying or leaving. Should I say hello? It would be rude not to, wouldn't it?

Decision made, I dodged busy waiters and diners as though I was doing some weird dance. Reaching the table, I grabbed the back of the chair to steady myself. His cheeky grin increased my pulse rate. I told myself the cause was resentment and not pleasure at seeing him again. I sat down heavily, facing him. 'You enjoyed that, didn't you?'

'Couldn't help it, my love. A woman teetering on high heels shouldn't wear them.'

'You know I normally wear flat—'

'I used to know everything about you. Times have changed.'

My gaze registered his pallor and more pronounced cheek bones. Still strikingly handsome, his curly raven-black hair caressed his white shirt collar. And he still wore his piratical silver stud in one ear. Dark-brown eyes sparkled with humour as I gaped at him.

'Do you like what you see?' he asked.

Definitely. I blurted out, 'I'm not staying.'

His down-turned mouth belied his flippant reply. 'Shame. I had hoped we could enjoy a catch-up meal.'

'Why now?'

'Do you miss me, Gabby?'

Too much. Not that I'd tell him *that*. 'Mmm, sometimes.'

His deep laugh made me hitch a breath; even now it curled my toes and gave me goosebumps.

'I did wonder, Gabby, because you're not wearing your wedding ring.'

Caught unawares, my vision blurred with tears. 'Not intentionally. I've lost it. It slipped off my finger.'

He reached across and squeezed my hand. He'd be thinking, like me, of the simple inscription inside the gold ring—forever yours, B.

'Stay and eat. Your favourite meal is on the menu.'

Any hunger pangs have evaporated since seeing you. Taking my silence for acquiescence, he skilfully filled my wine glass with one hand and replaced the bottle in the ice cooler.

My annoyance at Ben and Evie's deception began to evaporate as I drank the Sparkling Shiraz, savouring the sight of him, sitting across from me, relaxed with his dark-blue tie loosened and top shirt button undone.

We could be on a date.

I wished we *were* on a date. And we'd go home together.

My thoughts ran amok.

He refilled my glass as the entrée of smoked salmon, avocado and grapefruit salad arrived.

When the waiter had left, he said, 'Gabby, I want you back.'

Did I want a reconciliation? I picked up my fork and then put it down again.

'That depends—'

One eyebrow quirked. 'On what?'

'Can we get back what we had? Before we lost...the baby.' *There, I'd said it. Brought it out in the open. Honesty was best, wasn't it?* I avoided his eyes, afraid of what I might see. Taking a sip of wine, I nearly choked as it passed a huge lump in my throat.

'Serious stuff.' He put his elbows on the table and steepled his long fingers, watching me. 'Shall I tell you what I see?'

'Do I want to know?' I said, softly.

'I see a beautiful woman who loves her job, very commendable, but with its demands, a husband takes second place.'

'My career is important to me.'

'But at what price? Have you thought about that?'

'Ditto, Ben.' I stared at my entrée, clenching my jaw to stop the tears but as soon as I blinked, they ran down my cheeks.

Ben took out a handkerchief and handed it to me, saying nothing until I got a grip on myself.

'I'm sorry,' I gulped.

'Your miscarriage, us losing the baby, was the biggest issue. I admit I wasn't as supportive as I could have been.'

I cried out unable to stop the flow of accusations. 'You weren't there. You went to work as though nothing had happened and left me.' I lowered my voice. I didn't want to sound like a hysterical woman. 'You left me on my own to go over the tragedy over and over. It drove me mad.'

'I didn't know what to say. You continually bit my head off and at night any time I touched you, you retreated to the other side of the bed.'

'Did I?'

He nodded. 'I apologise. It appears we only saw things from our own perspective.'

'I'm sorry too. I've made such a hash of things.'

‘We both have. I think now we must be honest and decide what matters.’ He carefully ran a finger down the crease of his serviette before looking at me. ‘Is there an us?’

‘Do you still love me?’

He put his head back and laughed deep in his chest. ‘Of course, I do. I fell in love with you the instant I saw you.’

‘As I did you.’

He gazed at me for several seconds and then nodded. Was I giving him what he wanted to hear from me? Somehow, I felt that we’d turned a corner.

‘Let’s have that meal, Mrs Stuart and then we’ll talk. The chef has spent all afternoon preparing it. Do you remember what we had the first night I cooked for you?’

I massaged my forehead with my left hand as if considering my answer. ‘Mmm, now let me think...’

His lips thinned while his eyes became an intense espresso brown. A tacit sign of his irritation.

Quickly, I said, ‘I’m teasing. This entrée followed by steaks with mushroom sauce. To finish, tiramisu.’

His smile evinced his pleasure. ‘So, you do remember?’

‘How could I forget all my favourite dishes?’

Ben’s meaningful shrug said the rest. ‘We had a lot of good times, Gabby, and I’d hate to say goodbye to them.’ His expressive brown eyes had always been my downfall, and it was no different this evening.

If Ben was willing to make the effort, could I give us a second chance too? ‘So would I.’

He nodded to a waiter who brought along our main meal. It tasted as wonderful as the first time Ben had cooked it. The rest of the meal I saw through a blur of hope and happiness. I ate and drank the different wines Ben had chosen for the dishes.

Drinking coffee, I didn’t want the evening to end. I could see Ben felt the same.

‘I have something special for you.’ He took from the empty chair next to him a beribboned box with his Chocolate Heaven logo on it.

‘You couldn’t have given me anything nicer,’ I said smiling and reached out with both hands to take it from him. I knew from the smell of vanilla, cherry, and roasted coffee that they were some of my favourite chocolates. Even replete after the lovely meal, my tastebuds expected the bitterness and creaminess of the dark and milk

chocolates making my mouth water. I quickly opened the box and discovered a variety of hearts and stars sitting on crushed red velvet. A cone ring-holder tipped with gold leaf stood in the middle with my wedding ring perched on it. I looked up at him and gasped. 'Is this... my ring?'

He nodded and smiled. 'Evie found it in her car and I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to return it.' He reached across, took the ring and gently put it on my finger. Then he turned my hand over and kissed my palm.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Now I definitely don't want this evening to end.'

Ben laughed. 'Just as well I booked a room here. There's a bottle of champagne waiting with more of your favourite chocolates and then maybe...' he paused, raising an eyebrow.

I giggled. 'I think the champagne and chocolates can wait until after the maybe.'

He replied with a cheeky grin. 'That sounds good to me.'





Invest In Memories, They Said

Yvonne Walus

Invest in memories, they said. Money can in fact buy you happiness, they said, but you must purchase experiences, not things.

We would have been better off purchasing things.

Or at least Dan – my darling dishy Dan would have been better off with a Porsche Cayenne, or a collection of Rolexes, or a waterfront property. Because, what good is spending a fortnight (and a small fortune) on the Trans-Siberian Express if you can't remember it?

Oh, I don't mean that Dan can't remember having taken the trip – it's just that he can't recall the details. Not a single meal of the gourmet spread that featured smoked Baikal omul, borsch served with pepper vodka in an earthenware pot, salad of boiled veal tongue and quail eggs. Not the sights, apart from the Kremlin and a famous submarine in Vladivostok. Not even that we made Saskia and Josh in the train's honeymoon suite. Ironic, given that we've never even got around to tying the knot.

Thank heavens he still remembers Saskia and Josh. It would have been beyond awful if he were like the amnesiac heroine of that rom-com, *50 First Dates*, the one whose daughter was a stranger she had to get to know every morning.

“Why is it important to you?” the psychotherapist asks me at one of my sessions. Yes, I talk to a counsellor about Dan’s less-than-total recall. And yes, first-world problems.

“Why is *what* important?” I’m tetchy this morning. “That Dan remembers our kids?”

“That he remembers – anything. Why does Dan’s memory matter to you?”

I guess the right answer is that I’m worried about Dan’s health. Truth be told, I’m not. I know it’s not amnesia or Alzheimer’s. The doctor told us it was normal for some people to forget aspects of their life’s experiences, particularly as we get older and accumulate more facts to remember. The *getting older* remark didn’t sit well with me. Just because we look a bit crinkled around the eyes, or because we don’t have sex as often as we used to, doesn’t mean we’ve passed our best-by date. Sex was always something we were awesome at together. Please, please don’t tell me we’ve been forgetting to *have sex*.

The silence stretches.

“Amy?” my therapist prompted.

So. Dan’s shoddy memory. It bugs me, because...

“Dan can remember all the chemistry facts from university,” I say. “He solves complex scientific problems at work. Gets 15 out of 15 on almost every online Stuff quiz. There’s nothing wrong with his brain, and I’m thankful for that.”

“But?”

Should it matter that Dan can’t remember the caviar on the train or the lotuses in the Volga river? If I had my life over again, would I’ve chosen to grow my bank account instead of the photo albums? Would I’ve chosen to not walk on the Great Wall of China? Not to splash with the twins in the Caribbean? Not to fly over the Nazca Lines in Peru in a plane so small it made my stomach want to spill out of my throat whenever the pilot swerved to show us the monkey, the cat, the astronaut? Of course not.

The room is as quiet as the Blue Grotto in Italy. No noise coming from the outside, no smells apart from a faint aroma of rosemary. Hang on, didn't Shakespeare mention rosemary and remembrance? Is remembrance the same as memory? Dan would know.

So – what do I want?

The answer comes quick and visceral, slamming into my chest. I want my Dan back. I don't care if his abs are softer or his hair greyer. I want the Dan who remembered what I wore the day we kissed for the first time (grey skirt and a super-tight green top), and that I fed him strawberries in a spicy mustard sauce in the bath for our three-month anniversary, and that we once kissed to Alphaville's maxi version of *Forever Young*, one long kiss that filled the whole six minutes and six seconds and made *Forever Young* 'our song', and that before *Forever Young* our song had been *Next Time I Fall in Love* from *Karate Kid 2* –

I'm rambling, I know. It's just that the other day Dan told the twins he'd *never seen it*. At first, I assumed he's teasing me, but no. He genuinely didn't recall having watched *Karate Kid 2*, the very movie that moved our relationship to the next level.

Do I really mean so little to him? Is that why he never proposed – because I'm not good enough to marry, and now evidently not even good enough to make love to?

Abandonment issues, that's what my therapist calls my lack of confidence. My childhood – I wish I had Dan's ability to forget *that*.

I expected him to pop the question on the Trans-Siberian express. That trip was the first time we had enough money for something other than backpacking, and the luxury only added to the already romantic setting of the sun rising over the Ural Mountains, the endless steppe, the obelisk marking the border between continents where we drank champagne with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia. With every new landmark I wondered whether this would be where Dan dropped to his knee and opened a small box lined with velvet, especially as rings with diamonds from a Siberian mine were on sale in the train's souvenir shop.

When I told Dan we were pregnant, I naturally assumed we'd get married. Instead, Dan suggested we move in together. I thought, *small steps*. Six months later, I was sure Dan was preparing a surprise for me: I knew him too well not to have noticed the sense of furtive planning, the air of anticipation, the phone calls halted whenever I walked into the room. Turned out he was planning my baby shower.

The day Saskia and Josh were born was the happiest and the most difficult, exhausting and exhilarating, a rollercoaster of emotions. Dan cried when he held Josh for the first time. He cut Saskia's umbilical cord with reverence that bordered on worship. But even that magical day ended without a marriage proposal.

"What do you think you're missing by not being married?" The psychotherapist's tone is impartial, but she must be judging me. Nowadays, marriage is just a piece of paper. Historically, it's an institution steeped in gender inequality, a patriarchal way of acquiring land in exchange for a girl's virginity.

To me, marriage means stability and teamwork, the ultimate expression of love and faith in your future together.

Soppy, I know. No way am I sharing that with my therapist.

"What *am* I missing?" I repeat instead. "The wedding day, for one."

Ah, the wedding day: a slice of fantasy, the chance to be a princess and to have a banquet that outshines even the Trans-Siberian Express. Marriage is no fairy-tale, but a wedding can be.

Saskia's wedding was a fairy-tale, a modern fairy-tale with two brides in matching white gowns. Dan was a bit disappointed not to be walking Saskia down the aisle, but he hid it well, and during his speech he even mentioned how relieved he was not to have to give his little girl away, even in a figurative sense. "It would break my heart," he said. Saskia's chin wobbled and she led him to the dancefloor, the first dance of the night between one of the brides and her dad, which was a bit unusual, though it worked well as they were instantly joined by the other bride and her mum, then by Josh and me. Love. Joy. Family.

Does Dan even remember that day, that dance, his emotions? Does he remember how he grinned at me, crumbs of wedding cake still clinging to his mouth, and said, "Thank you, Amy. Thank you for everything beautiful in my life."

The therapist nudges a box of tissues closer to me. I take the hint and blow my nose.

Who are we if not our memories? Perhaps a better question is whether I can love someone who forgets our shared past. Fortunately, I know the answer to that one. Yes. Yes, I can. I love Dan, and I will love him even if he forgets me every night and wakes up to a stranger in the morning. In a way, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe some things are better left forgotten. Like the time I crashed his vintage Ford Escort, or what

I look like when I gargle. Maybe we'd end up having fewer grudges and more sex.

"We've made good progress," the therapist brings me back to the present. "Same time next Thursday?"

Have we? Have we made progress? All these years of being a couple, and I still don't know whether Dan loves me enough to marry me.

I guess there's only one way to find out. If Saskia could propose to her girlfriend, I can propose to Dan.

A month later, on a Saturday, I make Dan's favourite eggs bene for breakfast.

"This is the life," he says when I hand him his espresso. Our fingers touch and there it is, that trademark Dan grin, the one I fell in love with even before I fell in love with Dan.

He returns to the Stuff quiz on his tablet. "The best synonym for *perturbed*," he mutters to himself.

I look over his shoulder as he aces the questions. Finally:

Perfect score!

And, right underneath:

If your name is Dan Cameron, please click here.

"The hell?" Dan mutters.

My heart stands still.

He clicks.

The sixteenth question is a photo of me with a speech bubble: "Will you marry me?" Two possible answers.

He clicks on the yes without hesitation. Lifts his eyes. "I thought you'd never ask," he says.

Bitterness is making my neck hot. "Not my responsibility," I begin. "Just like it's not my responsibility to put the dishes in the-

Dan's laughing and I backtrack. "Why haven't you ever proposed?"

"I thought we'd decided to blow the reception money on that Trans-Siberian trip. Remember how you didn't want to waste time on debating what font to use in the wedding invitation and what table centrepieces-

Damn. He's right. I'd forgotten that.

While Dan – Dan remembered. My darling dishy Dan whose scientific brain stores giant abstract concepts over sensory details. He may not remember the menu on that train trip, but he remembers why I wanted to take it. Back then, I was a feminist who didn't want to be a princess.

And now? Now I'm a feminist who wants a fairy-tale wedding so that she can share her happiness with family and friends.

First things first though. Dan's mouth is on mine. He tastes of coffee and the sex is as awesome as ever.

