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Liaisons 2023

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Romance Writers of New Zealand thank **Chapter** for their sponsorship, and also 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.

Our Authors

Holly Brunnbauer

Scorpio



Rex Fausett

Trouble With Muses

Catherine Hart

Shared Breath



Charlotte Jardine

The Yin and Yang of Love

Leanne Jepson

Hiding Place



Our Authors

Effie Knight

Rude Vegetables



Kris Pearson

A Brush With Daniel

Stephanie Ruth

Unfinished Business



Pamela Swain

Storm of Attraction

Pragati Vasisht

Happy Holi Moley



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A Brush With Daniel

Kris Pearson

I love airports. The people dressed up to meet someone special at the end of their trip. Some dressed down to travel in comfort. Those obviously killing time while they wait for an arrival or departure – eyes constantly checking... checking... And then, with their coffee not quite finished, pushing to their feet and hurrying off.

That's how I met Daniel. I'd given my friend Rose a ride, and we'd struck horrible roadworks so we were cutting it fine for her check-in. She'd flung her arms around me in a tight hug, off to England for the foreseeable, and the goodbye was so quick that I wanted to sit for a moment or two, enjoy a coffee by the huge windows, and watch the planes taking off while I avoided that wretched road home for a little longer. I was going to miss her so much.

The place was as busy as an ant colony. Maybe I wouldn't bother staying? But something made me buy a latte, and then I turned and swept my gaze over the crowded tables. A hand rose... fingers beckoned... and a pair of black eyebrows

quirked. I stared a moment or two longer. The gesture was repeated. Okay, meant for me. A table for two with only one occupant. The kind of man I wouldn't choose to approach under other circumstances. Late thirties. Denim jacket. Knees showing through ripped jeans. Long hair in a woolly dark mess to his shoulders. Tattooed neck. God, that must have hurt.

But there were so many people there that other seats were few and far between, and it's not every day a stranger is so polite, even though he would have looked right at home in a prison documentary. As an inmate and not a guard. I carried my coffee across and set it down opposite him. "Thank you."

"Very welcome. So busy."

Hmmm – interesting accent. European, although four words weren't much to identify it by.

"You have sugar?" he asked, pushing it across to me.

"Already sweet enough, thanks."

Those eyebrows rose again, and the corners of his wide mouth tucked in. Half a grin. Half a *gorgeous* grin.

"Daniel," he said, tapping his chest with a handful of dirty fingernails. The nails definitely cancelled the appeal of the grin.

I lifted my coffee in case he had any idea of shaking hands. "Sarah."

"My mother is Sarah also," he said, nodding slowly. "Or Sara." Was he French? Spanish?

He noticed where I was looking, and curled his hands closed. "Not what you think," he said, flicking his gaze down to the table top. "Not dirt or engine oil. Paint."

I shrugged. It was none of my business. I took a sip of my coffee. He took a sip of his. Then he dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He leaned closer to me.

From the clothes and the nails and the unkempt hair I'd half-expected him to smell unwashed, and it was hard not to lean away. But no – maybe just a waft of herbal shampoo? "Are you French?" I asked.

He shook his head, scrolling, holding the phone so I couldn't see the screen

until he found what he wanted. Then he tilted it in my direction.

“From Croatia. Here is the Adriatic.”

It was a stunning scene. Almost too good to be true. And then lightning struck.

“A painting? Did you do that?”

He inclined his head. Proud yet shy.

I reached to steady the phone, and peered at it more closely. “Amazing. You have more?”

His long forefinger swiped across the screen. The paint-stained nails faded into insignificance. Islands, waves, a waterfall, roses tossed onto a glinting copper tray. A small girl with huge dark eyes, two kittens curled in her lap. “My daughter, Mia.” Said with both pride and sadness.

“Is she here?”

“At home in Croatia with her grandmother.” No further explanation. No mother mentioned.

“She’s beautiful. Nice to have her painting when you’re so far away.”

A nod and a sigh. His finger continued its slow swiping.

“For sale?” I asked as the images glided by.

“Sold. All except Mia. It’s how I live.”

I shook my head. I knew no-one who supported themselves totally with painting. “So?” I asked, indicating the suitcase I’d just noticed tucked in behind his chair.

“Paints and clothes. I live light.”

“*Travel* light. Is that really all?”

He shrugged. “I can buy canvas where I live.”

I hardly dared suggest it, but there was the sleep-out... “You have somewhere here yet?”

“I will find,” he said, taking another sip of his coffee and somehow still managing to swipe his finger over the phone. Tropical islands. Azure water so clear it couldn’t possibly be paint.

Did I dare offer?

“How long will you stay? Before you go home to your daughter?”

He shook his head. “She will come to me, but not quite yet. My brother is here.”

“Here in Wellington?”

“No – on a farm. Not a good place for me because no people to buy paintings.”

He laid the phone on the table and took a deeper gulp of his coffee; then put down the heavy cup and stretched, burying his hands in his unruly hair and gathering it back into a pony-tail with a gusty sigh. My eyes tracked his straight nose, sharp cheekbones, a jaw shadowed with dark stubble. Suddenly he was intensely handsome. Something deep inside me jolted.

“I have...” I said tentatively, “a possible place you could live and paint for a while? Until you get settled?”

This wasn't like me, practically inviting a stranger to move in! “I have a house,” I elaborated, looking down at the table-top, “but at the back is a big separate room – built for parties, years ago. Warm and dry. No-one uses it now.” I risked a glance at him. He was still holding his hair back, frozen like a statue. Eyes so dark and unmoving he might have been marble.

“Yes,” he said. “I would like.”

I'd never in my forty-one years done anything so extreme. I'm the daughter of older-than-usual parents, both now dead – hence the house. A conservative shopkeeper who sells suitable clothes for fashionable matrons and mothers of brides. What had got into me?

“I will paint you,” he said, sounding very determined. “As a thank-you, until we see.”

Paint *me*? Me with mousey blonde hair, always cut short. Safe apricot lip-gloss. Blouses and knee-length skirts. My mother's daughter in every respect.

*

The roadworks men were clearing away as we stop-started past them. “The same in every country,” Daniel said, lips twisting in a wry grin.

I wished I wasn't driving. I wanted to look at him.

The accommodation met with his approval once the blinds were up. I showed him the small bathroom, the coat rack, and pulled the divan cover down to check for sheets.

"Plenty good enough for me," he said, far more interested in the light than anything else.

"Beef stroganoff for dinner?"

"I will buy hamburger. You don't need..."

I shook my head, and later enjoyed his sharply handsome face across the dinner table because he'd tied his hair back. While I made coffee, he fetched a sketchpad. He drew me, his features tight with concentration. I'd never been looked at so intently.

"Breakfast at eight?" I asked.

"No, I do myself, but thank you."

Every day or two he'd bring paintings to the shop. Not huge. Not expensive. Local scenes, cats on fence posts, children paddling at the nearby beach, each one a glowing masterpiece. They looked great in the window. People lingered, admired, bought. Someone from one of the city galleries came in to ask more about the artist.

Every night he ate with me – sometimes at home; sometimes he took me out – and as we walked home from a local café, slightly tipsy, relaxed and happy, we fell into a kiss and it led to more.

We slid into being a couple so easily. Me with my conservative clothes, him with his denim and tattoos. What did the neighbours think? Who cared!

After almost seven months he left for Croatia. I was bereft until he returned with four-year-old Mia. By then the sleep-out was totally his studio. We shared my parents' bed. Mia had the room at the end of the hall.

He never spoke in any detail about his wife, but Mia did. "*Moja mumija* was sick and flew up to heaven," she told me one day. "When I was three years." So Daniel had

probably been deeply grief-stricken when he'd beckoned to me at the airport that day. Lonely. Desperate for a friendly face. For company.

Well, me too, when I thought about it. What a miracle our lives had connected.

*

On my birthday Mia insisted we had a cake, and I had the fun of watching her decorate it (and the job of clearing up the mess of gloopy icing and chocolate sprinkles when she'd finished.) She shyly presented me with a picture of a kitten she'd drawn, but from Daniel there was nothing but a card and a kiss. While I'd been cooking a better-than-usual dinner he disappeared out to his studio. Muffled thumping followed from our bedroom. Mia kept a steely eye on me and prevented me from going anywhere near the noise. "Secret from *Tata*," she said, spreading her arms out across the hallway when I asked her what was up.

And later that evening he showed me – the painting he'd promised me all those months ago. I'd sometimes wondered what had become of the drawing he'd done on our first evening together when we'd eaten beef stroganoff and sized each other up. Now I knew.

The canvas hung above our bed. It was huge. He'd finally painted me - as a life-sized angel, kneeling nude, thighs pressed together to hide my groin, one arm partly concealing the curves of my breasts, huge feathered wings extending above me. It was me, yet not me. Prettier than I'd ever looked, golden haired, almost smiling, yet secretive. It was powerful and thrilling. Did he really see me like that?

"I know you now," he said as I protested he'd made me too beautiful. "So lovely, through and through. Your body and your spirit. You saved me. You brought me to heaven, so –" He shrugged, and smiled, and kissed me. "And you generously let me share your shop window. I have a surprise because of that."

He moved my pillow aside. Under it lay an exhibition catalogue, and on the cover was the spectacular painting over our bed. I opened my mouth to protest, but he put a finger to my lips. "Only there. No-one but me sees the real one. I give them just a tiny taste of my heaven. Happy birthday, my darling Sarah."



Happy Holi Moley

Pragati Vasisht

Delhi, February 2009

“You know what?” Mala pondered as they walked towards the park.

“Just because Holi is the festival of colours, doesn’t make it all Luurrvve! and Partayyy...!” Mala’s voice trailed off while her hands drew squiggles in the air, her head bobbing side-to-side in mock-hippy fashion.

“There’s a story of timeless significance. Of faith.” She paused before turning to look at Adi, “and the fearlessness that comes from faith.”

“You just made that last sentence up didn’t you?” Adi grinned, secretly loving these bursts of passionate righteousness from her.

Mala playfully punched his arm.

“Well, what’s sacred anymore! Everyone’s just looking for an excuse to get drunk!” Mala continued indignantly.

“Yeah, let’s ban them drunk 8-year-olds this year” Aditya deadpanned, edging closer to her.

“But I’m right!” Mala protested, laughing.

“You are... and you’re not” he smiled, not quite finishing because Mala abruptly took his hand as they turned into a nook completely hidden from public view. She pinned him against the wall, threw her arms around his neck and giggling, enquired “Do you love me, Aditya Khanna!”

“Absolutely not” he replied, his tall frame completely enveloping her as he laughed a kiss onto her lips.

* * *

Auckland, February 2023

Mala froze mid-speech, eyes glued to the laptop. All the blood left her face then flooded back with double the force, her cheeks flushing crimson and her eyes starting to.

To: Mala Awasthi

Subject: Visitor

Mr Aditya Khanna here to see you. He says he doesn’t have an appointment but you will know him.

Mala collected herself, aware that her team had begun wisening to her turmoil, hyper-aware of her hand shaking as she pressed Send.

To: Reception

Re: Visitor

Down in 15.

“Sorry guys, I need to head to reception immediately. Matt, could you please lead the meeting from here?”

She did not wait for a reply as she stormed out of the room.

* * *

Mala stood in front of the full-length mirror of the toilet block, unblinking. When she finally stirred, she looked down at the make-up kit in her hand, threw it back into her purse untouched, and defiantly headed downstairs to meet the man who had abandoned her fourteen years ago.

* * *

Adi waited in reception, eyes closed, meditating on the here and now. Because the then and past was too painful.

And the future was 15 minutes away.

His mind wandered again to the happy time he’d last seen Mala, oblivious to the clackety-clack of her approaching heels.

“Adi?”

Reverie broken, Adi jolted his eyes open.

Long legs, delicious curves, kind brown eyes. Everything about Mala was indelibly branded in Adi’s brain, but he instinctively searched for, found, that mole above her lip where he’d left his heart years ago...

Adi stood up; Mala looked up at him.

“Hi” he released.

Moments passed, both unable to tear their eyes away from the other, nor venture anything intelligent.

Mala snapped first, “I heard you got married?”

Before that familiar, disarming honesty could warm his heart, the grief in her accusation seared through him. Her eyes questioning, a faint shadow beneath the kohl-ed rims, carrying a dashed hope.

Had he done this to her?

“Yes” he replied, downcast, “I did.”

These were the last words he said for the next forty-eight hours as Mala slapped him across the face, hid her own sobbing one in her hands, and spun around to head nowhere near the direction she had come from.

* * *

Subject: Please

Mala,

You have every reason to be mad. I was married. Not anymore. Please let me explain. I ask for nothing more.

Yours,

Adi

Re: Please

WHY? Because then I give you the most precious gift of them all Adi – I give you my time. In my head, my heart, my life! Do you deserve that? Did you ever!

Re: Please

But don't you deserve the truth?

Please.

Adi

Yes she did deserve the truth, Mala resolved, and perhaps *he* needed a lesson.

* * *

The doorbell chimed. Adi's tentative smile and a happy bouquet of flowers greeted Mala, unaware that she had no plans for niceties tonight.

“Thanks for... this. It-it-means a lot to me” he said.

She motioned him towards the sofa and disappeared into the kitchen to emerge with masala tea and *paneer-pakora*.

Crisis food.

“Did you do those?” Adi smiled gingerly, gesturing towards a gallery wall where sixteen small paintings hung in a four-by-four sequence. “You always loved colour...”

A wave of joy rose inside Mala, but she stopped it from surfacing to her face.

“Adi... you said I deserved the truth. I do. So please”.

Adi’s smile evaporated as he nodded in understanding, remembering how she hid sorrow behind anger.

“Do you remember the last time we met?”

“Yes. 2009. Two weeks before Holi. I was organising the colony’s celebrations.”

“It was two days before our parents were to meet to discuss... us”

Mala’s lips parted and eyes widened slightly at this new reference.

“Uncle Satya had had a heart attack. His family and business needed support. Dad and I headed to Mohali. When we got there... Uncle’s son, remember Akash? Alcohol, graduating to god-knows-what. Business had fallen to the wayside while they battled his addiction, debts had started piling up. The main creditor – Mr Gupta – was particularly persistent, so Dad and I went to meet him...”

“A week later, there was a... family conference. Gupta had decided to erase the debt on the condition that...” Adi closed his eyes as his forehead creased deeply “...I become his son-in-law.”

Mala’s mouth fell.

“I was told in no uncertain terms that this was the only way out.”

Adi exhaled sharply, looking nowhere in particular.

“I suppose the first red flag was that Dad tried to *convince* me instead of...” his voice trailed. “He stood to gain a lot. Money. Esteem. I found out later that... *she*... had blackmailed her own dad into arranging the marriage.”

Adi deliberately avoided the name.

Mala's disbelief met the deadness in Adi's eyes. He sank deeper into the sofa, fingers absently circling the rim of his cup. He recounted the tumultuous marriage, trips to court, leaving with nothing. No money, no home.

No family.

"I resented them for not being... brave. They sacrificed my future for their present. My love for their convenience. Living paycheck-to-paycheck for years was soul-destroying. I was too ashamed to return to you being... *nothing*. It took years for that faith to return. But bit-by-bit, I got there Mala."

Adi's spirit returned as he inched towards her "I had *hope*. The borders had shut down by the time I felt ready to contact you again but..."

Adi paused before adding, "Do you recall Om Kapoor...? Instagram...? Asking you to consider selling your paintings?"

Mala's furrowed brows morphed into arches.

"Yeah, that was me... I bought your first painting. Did you run the analytics on your YouTube channel? I found an app to keep refreshing the page so your views would increase..."

Like all her senses, Mala's tea had gone cold too. "I wondered... I only have nine followers...?" she whispered absently.

Adi suppressed a grin.

"That I might have made you happy would keep me *floating* Mala. The pandemic was a hopeful time. My business boomed, I held something you'd made, you still seemed to be avail-"

The doorbell rang.

No. Nonononono... Not now! Mala raced to the door, trying to stave off the guest before they entered.

Too late.

"Hey baaaaabe! Missed you!" Josh boomed as he swept inside, his hands moving quickly from Mala's waist to her ass.

“Josh! Sorry! No...! Wait! Can I please talk to you?” Mala yanked his arm and led him outside. She returned minutes later, slamming the door shut with her body, grinning nervously at Adi.

His open-mouthed, slit-eyed frowning asking all the questions.

“Th-that’s nothing! He’s n-no-one!” Mala stammered, her arms vaguely gesticulating towards the door, like *that* would lend credibility to her words.

“So, *no-one* touches your ass and calls you babe?”

Adi’s voice, blazing with envy, then went cold.

“I’m sorry... Are you with...?” not being able to finish the implication.

“NO! I... He... I wanted to... I asked him... pretend...” she couldn’t find any words to make sense of what she’d done.

“*Pretend?* You got someone to...? What for!” Adi’s fingers ran furiously through his hair, his jaw set hard.

A gloomy silence fell, broken occasionally by Mala choking back tears.

“I guess you had as little faith in me as I had in myself.” Adi finally said, barely audible, heading towards the door.

“Adi, no!” Mala started after him.

“No Mala!” Adi shouted, “We’ve both been through enough!”

Mala grabbed his hand, “Aditya Khanna I haven’t waited fourteen years to have you leave me all over again!” her eyes pleading, voice vibrating with emotion before shattering completely.

“Come” Adi made no attempt to withdraw as Mala led him to her room. She set an intricately decorated box on the bed.

“First bangles you got me. From Jaipur.”

“A napkin you had doodled on.”

“Wrapper from the first chocolate you left me under that banyan tree.”

“This random list I kept because it had your handwriting.”

“All your texts, handwritten into this diary. I didn’t know how else to save them...”

“All of them?” Adi asked, eyebrows raised.

“All of them.”

Adi now only watched her face as she ticked off the contents one-by-one, her features reliving every memory.

“The last thing you gave me...” Mala’s voice trembled.

A half-open packet of bright pink powder.

Adi put his hand on hers. Their eyes met.

“Your leaving... broke me completely. I ran half a world away from you. But I could never leave, Adi. Because all this time, you lived inside me. There was no-one else, there never could be. For me, our love... my love... had a sanctity to it. Tonight... with Josh... I thought I could hurt you. Not realising that if I broke your heart, I’d break mine. Because you have it...”

And Mala started to sob silently.

They sat opposite each other, the box of memories between them, the silence now soothing.

Adi smiled through his tears and lifted her chin.

“Do you remember what I called you whenever you cried?” his thumb grazing the mole above her lip.

Mala smiled knowingly, resting her face in his hand.

Adi’s face dropped again.

“Do you think we could... start again? I mean, without the ass-touchers for hire...?”

Mala bit her lip, stifling a grin.

“Do you allow me to try again, Moley?”

“Yes...” Mala whispered.

Adi reached into the half-open packet and smeared the bright pink powder over her tears, her face.

He smiled wider, “Happy Holi, Moley.”

Mala touched her mole and started to giggle.



Hiding Place

Leanne Jepson

Three black cars, red rats spray-painted on the hoods, swerved into the Pines Tavern car park on the corner of my street. *Red Rat Crew*. Thugs. Thieves. I hurried past, heading home from my afternoon shift at the dairy.

Sometimes I considered walking straight past my street. Heading in a direction I'd never been before, with blind hope that there was love and kindness, and a life free from gangs, beyond the horizon. Maybe one day.

When I arrived home the TV was blaring in the lounge. I turned it off, walked through to the kitchen.

"Mum? Jimmy?"

No reply.

That's when I saw him, through the kitchen window, Sebastian Yeates, climbing over the back fence. He waded through weeds past the rusty fridge and household junk that Mum and my older brother, Jimmy, had accumulated during my twenty-four years of life.

"Jimmy's out," I said, standing within the paint-cracked frame of the back door. I left it open so he could follow me inside.

Seb and Jimmy had been best friends back in our school days. Seb used to trek over the paddocks from his fancy house on the nice side of town, and sheepishly ask Mum if Jimmy and I could play.

Five years since I'd seen him. He looked different, taller and leaner. His hair streaked with blond and styled in a way that made him look more serious, or professional than I remembered, but his clothes were the same: jeans, sweater, sneakers. He smiled, warmth and kindness. I was happy to see him, but nervous, like I was nineteen again.

"How'd you know I'm here for Jimmy?" he asked.

"Aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

My phone rang. A message from Lacey up the road.

RRC Raid

I looked at Seb, leaning beside the sink as though he often came by and this wasn't his first visit in years.

"Red Rat Crew," I muttered. "Raiding now."

Seb frowned.

"Yes, it's still happening," I said, opening the pantry doors and crouching on the floor. "Not much we can do is there? No law here."

I pushed Mum's box of 80's Barbie dolls to the side and unhooked the trap-door in

the wall. "Don't try to be a hero. Get in."

Seb looked like he might laugh, as though we were kids again and Jimmy had told one of those rude jokes that Seb didn't understand. Like he was waiting for me to laugh first. I didn't.

He glanced at the door and the window above the sink. It was cloudy outside, which cast a dull light across the room. It made the linoleum floor seem dirty rather than faded, and I thought the cupboards looked more beat-up than usual. Or maybe I was particularly conscious of it because Seb was here.

He crawled in.

I followed, shut the door.

It was pitch-black in the cubby. My back pressed against the trap-door, legs entwined with Seb's, chest pressed against his. His breath fell on my cheek.

"I didn't know this was still happening," he said.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, the monotone black lifted into greys and shadows. Seb's brow was heavy and low, his mouth pursed firmly.

"It's fine," I quipped. Then I tried to joke, "So you didn't come to see me then?"

"You never asked. I would've, though."

He pursed his lips again. His eyes traced a pattern from my right eye, to my left, to my mouth. I kissed him.

We'd kissed in here as kids, and out the back of the tavern as teens, experimenting with intimacy whilst Jimmy lost his mind trying to find us. Being in this place with Seb felt familiar. Safe.

The sound of his breathing, and my heart beating, seemed louder in the small space. Maybe, because my sight was limited, my other senses were more acute. I noticed the musty smell of timber from the back wall mixed with the fresh, herbal scent of Seb's t-shirt.

“It’s been a while,” I giggled.

“Yeah. It’s like we’re still hiding from Jimmy.”

“I didn’t realise you two stayed in touch.”

“Hadn’t heard from him in years,” Seb said. “Then he messaged me out of the blue with a business proposition.”

“You know he earns money bare-knuckle wrestling these days?” I sighed. “I wouldn’t trust him with any business.”

I was jealous that Jimmy’s stupid business idea had brought Seb back from the city. Seb and I exchanged messages every few weeks, about movies we’d seen or media releases that annoyed or intrigued us, but nothing I said had made him visit.

I asked, “Is that the only reason you’re back?”

“I’m mainly here for Mum and Dad. They’re getting divorced. But I think it’s a good thing. Relationships need respect, right? I feel like to really love someone you need to admire them, or be in awe of them in some way. Even if it’s just their ambition or the way they talk. Mum and Dad never had that, it was always the opposite. More like resentment.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ve been thinking about it too much.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Though I wasn’t sure if that’s what he wanted to hear. I added, “I admire you, actually. I guess I always have.”

“Really?”

I nodded. He looked thoughtful, like he was measuring the weight of my words.

I heard footsteps in the kitchen and pressed my fingers to Seb’s lips. The house creaked with movement. Gang members searching rooms, cupboards, drawers. *Thud, thud* against the pantry wall beside us. Cans and jars rearranged, knocked to the floor. On the other side of the trap door, Mum’s box of Barbies dragged across the linoleum.

Seb grimaced, tried to speak. I shook my head. There was nothing he could do. The Red Rat Crew were volatile. A few months ago they beat up my friend, Lacey, when she

pleaded for her necklace back. It'd belonged to her Nana.

"Nothing!" The intruder in the kitchen shouted. He shuffled out.

Seb wrapped his hand around my fingers and removed them from his lips. He nuzzled his mouth close to my ear and whispered, "You should've told me about all this."

He stayed like that, his cheek pressed against mine as though we were hugging. I stared into the grey shadows behind him, thinking about what he'd said earlier, '*You never asked. I would've...*' and I wondered if that was just our *thing*.

"I know," I whispered, "I always feel happy when we talk, though, and I wanted to keep it that way. You know what I mean?"

He nodded and his nose brushed against my ear. I liked the feeling and leaned into it, pressing my body even closer to his, embracing that familiarity and comfort again.

"I want to talk to you about everything," he breathed, "The bad and the good."

I nodded. He kissed me. This time it didn't feel like a game or a childish experiment. There was an ache in my chest and all I wanted was to be held by him.

#

Seb and I were still hiding. I heard Jimmy raging and pacing through the house. When I emerged from the cubby, he charged at me, swearing. He pushed me against the back door, grabbing at my throat with his battle-calloused hands. I squinted in the daylight, *was Seb out yet?*

"They took my TV!" Jimmy bellowed, "And you hid in there like a..."

Seb launched into Jimmy's side, shoulder first, under the ribs, crashing my brother hard against the wall. They both crumpled to the floor, stunned, I guess, that the day had panned out this way, or that they were brawling, like kids.

"Don't touch her like that again, Jimmy," Seb yelled.

Jimmy bared his teeth, fixed his mean eyes on Seb, and laughed.

“Let's go, Seb,” I murmured, opening the back door. Seb stood and followed me outside. We passed through the wild yard and climbed over the fence. Jimmy mocked us from the doorway: *weak, wimps, pathetic*.

“Ignore him,” I said.

Seb held my hand and we set off across the paddocks, wading through the same weedy grass that inhabited Mum's backyard. I figured we were heading to Seb's fancy house. But as we walked uphill there was only the horizon and dusky pink sky. It felt like we could be going anywhere and, not for the first time since Seb left, I thought about my life and where I was going.

Mum had never been much of a carer. For most of my childhood, she'd hunched at the kitchen table, smoke trailing from her cigarette as she sipped whisky-lemonade and played card games on an old laptop computer. Nowadays she played at the casino. I'd stuck around after college, to look after her and Jimmy. But, I realised now, they probably wouldn't even notice if I was gone.

“I'm sorry I said no,” I mumbled, “When I finished college and you asked me to move to the city.”

“It's OK. I know why you did.”

“Mum can't manage the house properly.”

“I know,” Seb said, “I just didn't realise Jimmy had become so bad.”

I stopped at the top of the hill and Seb stood beside me. Ahead was the sprawl of wealthy suburbia, mowed lawns, double garages and playing fields. Behind were the tall buildings of the city, and my childhood street, languishing in the gloomy shadows. I didn't want to be in the gloom anymore.

“If you asked me again, I'd say yes,” I blurted. “Actually, even if you don't ask, I'm going, so you might see me around.”

Seb turned to me, cradled my face in his hands and said, “I love that about you.”

I smiled. I loved that he knew how stubborn I was, and admired me for it.

He kissed me, gently. When he took his hands from my face, I shivered briefly. The crisp coolness of the evening had set in. I stuffed one hand in my pocket and Seb held the other. We continued across the paddocks.

Seb said, “But will you, though? Will you come live with me?”

I squeezed his hand, thinking of the times I’d imagined walking past my street, never going back home. Wasn’t it odd that after five years, Seb turned up on the same day as a raid? If we hadn’t hidden in the cubby, maybe I would’ve never kissed him again, or told him I admired him. Our frequent messages might’ve dwindled until they eventually stopped.

I felt like my dream was coming true. Walking away from home, towards love and kindness. It was time.

“Yes!” I gushed. “I’ll live with you. ’



Rude Vegetables

Effie Knight

“Is that a giant carrot in your hand, or are you just happy to see me?”

Ellie couldn't believe she just said that out loud, let alone to the handsome guy restocking the produce at her go-to greengrocers. She desperately tried to turn invisible, but Mr. Handsome-with-a-carrot turned and saw her, taking his own sweet time, too. His eyes wandered from the purple streaks in her hair down to her black-and-white checkered sneakers and up again. As he looked in her eyes, he smiled and replied, “Both.”

Ellie froze. This was no stranger, but someone she knew from high school! And not just anyone: Michael Chang had been a popular senior when she was only a freshman. She had pined for him from afar all year, knowing he was hopelessly out of her league—hers being the league of extra awkward. When he went overseas to study, she'd cried for a week. But that was ten years ago, and her memories of the beautiful boy faded fast as she took in the attractive man in

front of her. His wide shoulders and narrow hips were obvious even in the ugly grocer's apron, and his biceps straining the t-shirt sleeves said he took his workouts seriously. Any teenage softness was long gone from his face, and his now angular jaw sported a five o'clock shadow.

Michael's smile widened as she kept staring. He leaned a little closer and stage-whispered, "If you ask nicely, you can *have* my giant carrot."

Ellie's face flared into a beet red inferno. Going by his impish grin, he enjoyed her embarrassment immensely. He followed up with a flirty, "Do you come here often?"

Ellie willed her blank mind to reboot. When it finally did, she tried fake a cool she didn't possess.

"Sure. This shop has the freshest veggies and fruit in town, and Asian foods over in that corner. But what I like best is there's no music and that I don't end up with a shopping cart full of stuff I didn't intend to buy."

She cringed inwardly. Why did she only ever notice how weird things sounded *after* she said them out loud? But since Michael looked more amused than put off, she went all in, smiled, and extended her hand: "Hi, I'm Ellie, and I have no filter. That means you never have to wonder if I'm for real."

Michael laughed and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Ellie. I'm Michael, and I appreciate clear communication. And I'm glad you like our shop."

Wait, what? 'Our shop?' Ellie's mind boggled, then unboggled... of course, *Mrs. Chang* was his mother! That explained why he was working here.

Michael's hand felt warm, dry, and strong, and Ellie didn't want to let go. But she did.

She swept a strand of hair behind her ear as she asked, "You were studying overseas, right? What are you doing now?"

Michael smile disappeared instantly. "We just met. How do you know that?"

"Uh... I..."

"Yees?"

“I... may have... had a crush on you in high school.” Ellie looked down at her shoes, willing for the floor to swallow her.

Michael’s face went from confusion to recognition and then amusement. He waited patiently for Ellie to look up or speak again, but she did neither and gradually, her face colour began to look unhealthy.

“Ellie, breathe,” he said.

She gulped for air, choked out, “Yeah, right, carrots,” tossed a few carrots in her basket and tried to flee. But Michael took her hand and gently closed her fingers around the oversized root vegetable that sparked this conversation. With the most suggestive grin and wink she’d ever seen, he said, “Enjoy your giant carrot, Ellie.”

* * *

That night, Ellie was a mess. The whole situation had thrown her so much that she’d all but run from the shop. Now the one shop where she could always buy food no matter how frazzled she felt wasn’t safe anymore. She dreaded going back, but she had to return the shopping basket and pay for the carrots she’d accidentally stolen, including the embarrassingly large one that had made her think of Michael all day.

The next afternoon, Ellie sat in her car in front of the shop. “This is ridiculous,” she chided herself, straightened her back for the umpteenth time and this time, actually got out. Her plan was to continue shopping as she if hadn’t run away and to pretend everything was the same as it always was. But one thing was different. It wasn’t Mrs. Chang at the checkout, but Michael in all his vexingly charming glory, and he’d seen her, and he’d smiled and waved as she entered the shop.

Ellie came prepared, though. She was wearing 60s-style sunglasses for protection, pink glitter lipstick for confidence, and the t-shirt that said “Introverted but will talk about romance” for preventative defence. So she smiled

and waved back, put yesterday's shopping basket in a trolley and made her way through the aisles, ticking off the items on her shopping list one by one. The familiar surroundings and the routine settled her mind, and she soon got completely absorbed in the pleasant task of selecting the best produce.

"Hi!" Michael said from behind her. Ellie startled and spun around. "Geez, you scared me! Don't do that!"

"Sorry!" Michael took a step back waited for her to stop glaring.

"May I try again?"

She huffed and shrugged. "I guess."

Michael cleared his throat. "Hi, Ellie. I'm glad you've come back. I was worried I'd scared you off yesterday."

Now that her heartbeat had slowed again, she found she wanted to talk with him after all. "Well, I startle easily, but I'm not afraid... of carrots." She grinned a little, and he grinned back.

"Also, this is where I always shop, so..." she gestured vaguely.

Michael nodded. "That's good. I'll make sure to keep rude vegetables contained in the future and that the staff knows not to be inappropriate with customers."

Ellie wasn't sure what to make of that. He had spoken with a perfectly straight face, but... No! Her eyes narrowed.

"Are you messing with me?"

"Yes." There was that impish grin again. "You're fun to mess with!"

When Ellie didn't react immediately, he added, "But I can stop if you don't like it."

She was fairly sure '*Don't you dare stop!*' was the wrong thing to say, so she fell back on what she'd rehearsed in the car, her words tumbling out like potatoes from a split sack: "I wasn't trying to steal the basket and the food, they're right here. I just interrupted my shopping and now I'm back, and I'm going to pay for it all, like I do every time."

This time, it was Michael who didn't know what to say.

Damn.

Should have gone with 'Don't you dare stop!'

Ellie shook her head and laughed at herself. “That sounded *much* better when I practiced it.” Then she deadpanned, “I have to warn you, I have a black belt in non sequiturs.”

Michael laughed. “Thanks for the heads up. In that case, would you like to talk about romance?”

Ellie’s eyes lit up. “You read romance?!”

“Not yet, but maybe I’m missing out. So tell me, what’s so great about romance?”

Ellie talked easily about her favourite subject.

“Well, first, the women get what they want.” She looked at him and added, “And the men, too, of course. Second, it’s fun to read how the characters overcome the obstacles that life or their own hang-ups throw in their way. And third, knowing they’ll have a happy end makes it worth wading through all their heartache on the way there.”

“Huh. That does sound fun. So what’s your all-time favourite?”

Ellie froze again, because she couldn’t remember a single story she loved that didn’t involve spanking, and she wasn’t going to—

“And don’t even *think* about censoring! You said I’d never have to wonder if you’re for real, so be honest. Which one?”

Ellie protested, “But you’ll judge me!”

Michael’s eyes brightened and he grinned like the proverbial cat with the canary. “Now I *have* to know! Tell you what, I can’t promise I’ll like it, but I *can* promise to keep an open mind.”

She still hesitated, but relented eventually. “Okay. It’s ‘No Sugar Added’”.

“Why this one?”

Ellie bathed in Michael’s undivided attention as she searched for a truthful answer that didn’t give away the spanking.

“I like that he is all protective and knows what he wants, and how they discover they can both really be themselves with each other in the end.”

Whispering, she added, “And it’s hot!”

Michael looked thoughtful. “I think everyone deserves a relationship in which they don’t need to hide who they are.”

Just then, Mrs. Chang called Michael to deal with a delivery in the back. He left with a quick, “Sorry, gotta go! See ya!”

When he didn’t return for several minutes, Ellie paid and went home. She put away the groceries and carefully picked apart every moment of this interaction.

* * *

Over the next few days, Ellie’s worry that Michael would judge her if he looked up the novel grew so big that she didn’t dare go back to the shop. But after three weeks of boring supermarket veggies and no coriander, she got angry. She deserved coriander in her life! And someone who wouldn’t judge her for her taste in romance novels or lack of banter skills. So Michael could just go and get... frozen peas! Ellie felt sad when she decided Michael’s opinion of her didn’t matter, but also relieved to move on. She wrote a shopping list that started with coriander, put on sunglasses and glitter lipstick and drove to the shop.

She said hello to Mrs. Chang like always and went through the aisles in her usual pattern, but neither that nor the fresh produce sparked joy today. She scolded herself for her stupid longing for Michael, but still moved at snail’s pace, her hope to see him stronger than her pride. When she put her veggies on the checkout counter, Michael spotted her and came over.

“Mum, I got this,” he said as he gently nudged his mother away from the till.

He weighed and added up Ellie’s shopping. “Hello stranger. Where’ve you been?”

Ellie tried to play it cool. “Around. And I figured out I deserve coriander and judgement-free friendships.”

Michael laughed. “You absolutely do! And that’ll be \$27.50, please.”

As Ellie was paying, Michael said, “I read ‘No Sugar Added’...”

Ellie held her breath as she tried to read his face, unsuccessfully.

“... and now I have a lot of questions.”

“What sort of questions?”

“Personal questions. Starting with, will let me take you out for dinner to hear the rest of them?”

Ellie’s next breath sparked all the joy, and she grinned from ear to ear. “I’d love that—but I have one condition!”

“What condition?”

“Don’t you dare stop messing with me!”



Scorpio

Holly Brunnbauer

Lindsey tiptoes into the office to avoid Mae from Payroll. Or Motormouth Mae, as she secretly calls her. There's no time for small talk. She needs to dive into her to-do list and get the hell out of there before daycare closes and they sting her with exorbitant penalty fees.

When arriving at her pod, that's as grey as Melbourne's city views, she greets her team with a brief hello. They're huddling in a corner, whispering. Probably plotting a mutiny. Working at the Department of Planning is as dangerous as being a character on *Game of Thrones*. Two of the older gentlemen have the decency to wave. Not Gerald, the person sitting close enough to torture her with rock tunes blaring from his headphones.

Through Clark Kent-style glasses, Gerald stares at a report, stroking his stubble. It's an inch too long to toe the corporate line. *Rebel*. What kind of name is Gerald, anyway? It doesn't suit a thirty-six-year-old with tattoos hidden beneath his crisp

white shirt. His parents must've hated him, and who can blame them? He barely speaks to Lindsey and whenever he ducks down to the cafe, he doesn't bother asking if she'd like something. Is she invisible?

Sliding out of comfortable white sneakers and into tight heels flicks a mental switch. She's not Lindsey, the tired single mum, she's Lindsey, the project officer with killer spreadsheet skills.

A nearby printer beeps louder than a reversing truck. Mae bangs on the plastic exterior, shouting expletives, while Lindsey sinks further in her seat. It's too late to hide in the bathroom. Mae abandons the task, causing papers to spit out of various trays. Wearing ankle-breaking stilettos, she trots along the carpet like a runway model. The sun pours through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a halo around her curvy silhouette.

The two couldn't be more different. Mae's a twenty-something with cheerleader energy—despite swearing off caffeine. Whereas Lindsey is well and truly past the acceptable age to refer to herself as early thirties (and yet still does), who would hook herself up to an IV coffee drip if it was an option.

'Enjoy your day off?' The question bounces out of Mae's glossy lips like a pop song.

Lindsey holds in an eye roll. There's nothing enjoyable about being trapped under a snotty one-year-old, even if he is the cutest thing ever. Tommy's forever picking up bugs at daycare. The kids must sit around licking each other. Whatever plague he caught will wreak havoc on Lindsey soon enough. She clears her scratchy throat, rummaging through her drawer for multivitamins. It's not like Tommy's dad will take care of their son if she's incapacitated. Dirk is about as reliable as the condom he used. That's the first and last time she goes home with a semi-hot guitarist.

'I've got a lot to catch up on, so ...' A dull headache appears as Lindsey squints at sixty-two unread emails.

The dizzying scent of Mae's tropical perfume lingers as she does. 'What star sign

are you? I downloaded an app that gives daily readings.’ She drums impractical acrylic nails on her phone. ‘I bet you’re a Pisces.’

Lindsey squirms in her swivel chair. How does she know? Is it because water signs are over-sensitive? Everyone thinks she is because of that *one time* she snapped at Gerald. Was it too much to ask he didn't eat tuna at his desk? She was pregnant, for goodness' sake! It doesn't matter; horoscopes aren't real. Everyone knows that. The only numbers she's interested in are the ones not adding up in row D. Fucking Gerald must have played around in the shared document again. Lindsey sends him telepathic death threats as he rolls his broad shoulders.

‘Yes, I’m a Pisces. What does it say?’

Mae’s feathered eyebrows dance as she reads silently from her phone. ‘Oooh,’ she coos. ‘It looks like your love life is about to get some attention.’ She shimmies her hips before continuing the rest of the spiel. ‘Look up, they’re right under your nose.’

A snort escapes Lindsey. The only thing under her nose is a cheap supermarket foundation that’ll sweat off by noon. Not that she’s buying into this nonsense, but it’d be great to break her dry spell. The last offer she had was when Dirk suggested an old-school method to kick start labour. Considering she was eight days overdue, it was tempting. Instead, she opted for the bear-sized hand of a midwife who performed a rigorous stretch and sweep.

‘According to this,’ Mae adopts a dramatic whisper, ‘he’s a Scorpio.’

‘Morning, ladies.’ A rich tone travels over the partition.

A whoosh of heat rushes to Lindsey’s cheeks as Marco joins them. It’s not because of how his skin gleams after his morning cycle. It also has nothing to do with getting drunk off his salty scent. She’d never go there. Number one, Marco is her manager and number two ... well, she can’t remember because she’s drowning in his caring eyes that haven’t given Mae the time of day.

‘I wasn’t expecting you today. How’s Tommy? Poor little guy.’ Marco’s dark brows crinkle.

‘Much better,’ Lindsey lies, fighting the urge to call and check.

‘Marco ...’ Mae tilts her head. ‘What’s your star sign?’ She releases an ear-piercing squeal upon learning he’s a Scorpio.

Lindsey doesn’t react because she already knew. She *stumbled* across his date of birth when *accidentally* looking him up on Facebook.

‘I’ll leave you two alone.’ Mae double-taps her nose before returning to the printer crime scene.

‘Have a minute?’ Marco motions to an empty breakout room.

Lindsey’s chair gasps as she deserts it without a single thought. Gerald pretends he’s not watching, but an over-the-shoulder glance catches him in the act. Probably jealous she’s Marco’s favourite.

Marco holds the door open, and if anyone else pulled that move, she’d tell them she’s perfectly capable of doing it her-*damn*-self. When Marco does it, she gushes about how chivalrous it is. They move into the tiny space with fishbowl-style walls, and Lindsey lowers herself into a beanbag as gracefully as one can with abdominal separation.

‘I wanted to give you a heads up that I’ve accepted a role elsewhere. I’ll be finishing up in four weeks,’ Marco says.

If Lindsey wasn’t already on the ground, the news would’ve knocked her over. Marco can’t leave. Not because every time she peers up from her desk, he winks at her. No. Her heart is racing faster than an Olympic sprinter because Marco’s a brilliant manager who doesn’t breathe down her neck. What if she’s not as lucky with whoever they hire next?

The sight of busybody Mae spying behind a nearby pole brings that zodiac rubbish to the forefront. It’s purely a coincidence Marco was born at the start of November and his resignation means he’s free to date anyone at this government agency.

‘Will you have a break before your next job starts?’ A wave of nerves crash over Lindsey.

‘About two weeks.’ He drops his clean-shaven chin and mumbles, ‘I’ll be visiting Noosa ... with my girlfriend.’

‘Girlfriend?’ That can’t be right. They speak all the time about their personal lives. That’s how she knows he has a golden retriever named Howard and he’s obsessed with Japanese horror films. Not once has he alluded to dating someone.

With an apologetic grin, Marco says, ‘It’s sort of new.’

It’s sort of serious if he’s whisking her off on a holiday, and he’s sort of a dick for not mentioning it earlier. He’s the one always suggesting they try a nearby cocktail bar. If Dirk wasn’t the kind of parent who’d give the baby bourbon to settle teething issues, she would’ve taken up the offer.

Is this why Marco wanted to chat? Let her down gently? If he thinks she’ll cause a scene, he’s dead wrong. She’s taking the same approach as when offered unsolicited parenting advice—nod and smile.

The meeting ends when he stands and stretches out his arms to help her. She swats it away. For crying out loud, it’s not the 1950s; she doesn’t need a man to rescue her from a beanbag. After wriggling like a turtle caught on its back, she’s finally up and out of there.

‘What are you doing?’ she barks, finding Gerald hovering over her desk.

Gerald yelps as hot liquid spills out of the takeaway coffee he’s holding. Prompted by her evil eye, he says, ‘I thought you might need this. You looked a little tired this morning.’

‘That’s one way to say I look like shit.’ How would he know, anyway? It’s not like he bothered to glance up when she arrived.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.’ He rubs the back of his neck. ‘You look nice ... like always.’

Always? She studies the biodegradable cup to assess the contents. Would Gerald poison her?

‘It’s a latte with full cream,’ he explains as she sniffs it. ‘When you started here, you said skinny milk is a marketing ploy that preys on women’s vulnerabilities.’

She laughs. Sounds like something she'd say. How would he remember that far back?

Gerald gestures to her computer decorated with post-it note reminders. 'I'll let you get back to it. I know you don't like to speak to anyone.'

Lindsey jerks her head. Does he think *she's* the snob? Can't he see she's a part-timer lumped with a full-time workload?

Marco strolls past, beaming at her. This time it doesn't make her skin tingle with goosebumps. Her eyes prickle with tears, forcing her to scurry to her seat and blink them away.

Gerald rolls his chair closer and leans in. *What now?*

'You're too good for him.'

How's it possible for his words to warm her neck *and* make her body shiver? With a millimetre between them, she's relieved he doesn't reek of fish as she'd always imagined. His shower-fresh aroma is quite pleasing. Some might say intoxicating. Not Lindsey, who's steadying her breath and waving off his compliment.

'One more thing.' He clears his throat. 'I'm also a Scorpio.' Sliding back to his spot, he buries his head in a notebook.

It takes a second to register he was eavesdropping earlier, and a few more to realise he's throwing his hat in the ring. *Surely not?* If he was interested, she'd know—they've been sitting next to each for years. Mae's got in her head, that's all.

Lindsey flusters when she catches Gerald staring at her. The answer is written all over his blushing face. The same handsome one she doesn't allow herself to look at for too long because he hates her—or so she thought. How did she miss the signs? Gerald has been under her nose the whole time.



Shared Breath

Catherine Hart

The mundanity of hostels is wearing me down. It's in and out and full of in-depth conversations about nothing with strangers from every part of the world. It's all part of the overseas experience.

The kitchen of 'Turtle and Hare Backpackers' is filled with two groups making their dinner. The women from Spain are making a large pot of pasta, the red sauce permeating the room with garlic and onions and tomato, and the three lads from South London are heating their frozen pizzas and drinking beer.

I wriggle past to fill my cup of noodles with boiling water. One guy lifts his eyebrow at me, and I can't tell if it's flirty or friendly. I assume the latter, and try to ignore him as I find myself a table.

It's day thirty-four, or maybe thirty-five. My journey has covered France, Belgium and the Netherlands, but Scotland is my favourite.

Edinburgh isn't what I expected, and I'm tempted to change my next stop in Glasgow so I can stay here longer. There's no wonder this city has inspired magical settings. The winding lanes and tall stone buildings invite you in, holding you captive. The cobblestones make it hard to walk, but this uneven ground is unlike anything back home. Compared to farm life in New Zealand, it's enchanting.

A man sits across from me and keeps looking my way. I try to play it cool, staring at my phone as I flick through the National Museum of Scotland's website. But those blue eyes are distracting.

I eat my noodles, trying not to think about his long, blonde hair and how it might feel running through my fingers. The fork misses my mouth and noodle water spills down my t-shirt. He grins.

"Shit," I mumble, grabbing the nearest napkin.

Movement blurs in my peripheral vision, and by the time I've cleaned myself up, he's standing at my table.

"Hi, I'm Jude," he reaches out a large hand to shake, his long fingers wrapping around my fist. My whole body heats as if I've walked into a baker's oven. Blood rushes to my cheeks as his eyes capture mine. There's this tug, an instant and unnerving feeling as I'm drawn into him. I don't want to let go.

"Like the song?"

He laughs, the sound tickling my nerves. "Yes." He waits. "What's your name?"

"Malcolm."

"You're a Kiwi."

I nod. "Are you Australian?"

"Yeah. You know what that means?"

I shake my head, and he grins and it's like stars lighting up his face.

"We're friends already."

I gesture at the seat in front of me and he takes it, resting his cup of tea between us.

Jude is from Sydney, studying to be an actor. Like me, he's used most of his savings on this trip, hoping to find something we can't put a name to. We get to know each other, the other hostel inhabitants busying around us as they prepare for bed.

I don't know if he's gay. He has said nothing to hint either way, but his eyes show interest. It could be as friends, but hope is a stubborn, constantly blooming flower in my chest.

We talk for hours, my empty noodle cup forgotten. When I stand to leave and he steps forward. Lavender and pine fill the air. He towers above my shorter frame and I have nowhere to escape. I don't think I want to escape.

His hand cradles my nape and things go quiet. I think the lads stop to watch us. I think a lot of things and nothing all at once, but it's okay because something about him is safe. His lips meet mine, tentative and soft. I inhale sharply and feel his smile against my cheek.

He moves away, rubbing his mouth. "Woah."

The museum has a haunting thrum of quiet when children aren't screaming nearby. Jude trails after me as I read every single placard, trying to absorb it all. A skeleton of a European elk dominates the space, and while I try to picture it with fur, Jude strokes his fingers up my back.

Neither of us look at the other. We look at the elk, its huge antlers casting shadows while simultaneously sparkling in the white lights.

"Do you think I could ride an elk?"

I splutter. "Why would you want to?"

"It would be so impressive." He stares up at the giant animal skeleton like it has a

kind of stage presence that he doesn't.

"You're impressive enough. You don't need to ride elk for that."

"That's sweet." He kisses my cheek and tugs me toward the next exhibit.

We sit in the gardens, our gaze flicking between the castle above us and Princes Street to our right. Jude traces a finger along my hip. I suppress a shudder. He knows where to touch me without guidance. Like he intuitively knows me.

Edinburgh isn't fazed by the two gays watching it go by. He shows me a video on his phone of a poem he performed about coffee. I laugh at the jokes and try to keep the admiration flowing out of me too forcefully.

"Do you like it?"

"I do."

I tilt my head, the space between us becoming shared breath as lips reach for each other.

We go dancing. Underground bars with loud Scottish accents echoing off brick walls. Now, Jude takes me by the hand everywhere we go. He has no fear.

"Tell me about New Zealand," he says.

Do I tell him about Mum and Dad and the farm? About how awful school was and how brilliant my friends are? Maybe he'd be interested in my fashion degree, or my job in marketing?

He laughs, pulling me back to him. "I don't need an essay for an answer. Just tell me... what do you miss?"

"I miss mince and cheese pies."

"What else?"

“Hot chips by the beach.”

“You know,” he steps closer, “I think they have those everywhere.”

I shrug, trying to ignore the blush rising in my cheeks. “It’s not the same.”

The bartender asks if we want another round and Jude nods. I’m not ready to go back to our hostel either.

We haven’t become friends on social media yet, his profiles remain secret. It’s unclear whether he means to change that. I want to post photos of us anywhere people will see them. Photos where if you look closely, you can see something different in me. Even I can tell I’m more relaxed when I look at our smiles all over Edinburgh.

Mostly, I want to look at pictures of him in the moments we’re not together. I want to see him with his family—his brothers and their kids. I want to know what his world was like before I was part of it.

“I was meant to leave yesterday.” Jude scoops another bite of ice cream into his mouth, my own bowl forgotten at his words. We haven’t discussed leaving Edinburgh and what happens after. “I have a new ticket for Thursday.”

The silence becomes so thick it’s tangible. Even though it’s he’s never said anything to suggest it, it feels like he’s leaving me. Like his plans will never include me. I brush the thoughts aside, reminding myself that this is what happens when people travel: they go from one tourist destination to the next, exhausting their funds and ability to experience new cities and cultures, until they go home to the familiar.

“Where are you going next?” I ask

“York.”

“You’ll fit in there.”

His eyebrow quirks.

“Because you’re a Viking.”

“Why do you say that?” he asks.

My hand waves up and down to gesture at all of him, but he leans forward, demanding an answer. “You’re tall. Big. Blonde. Perfect for plundering.”

“I can plunder you. If you like.”

“Yes. I mean, yes please.”

He laughs, and my belly tightens.

I already miss that sound.

We take a bus to the sea. We joke about getting a lobster dinner neither of us can afford. Jude has made himself a food budget of £20 a day (not including rounds of cider). I’ve spent more money in Edinburgh than anywhere else, but I won’t let that stop me. I can be frugal later, when he’s not here to see it.

He shows me pictures of his journey so far, of Greenwich and the Brighton pier. They sit in his phone next to him laughing on stage in black and white, a photo that makes me brush my knee against his.

On our last night, lying in each other’s arms, I realise that without meaning to, I’ve fallen for him. I’ve never loved anyone before. It happened without intention, and certainly without my consent. I whisper the words as he sleeps, wondering whether he could feel it too. It’s barely been a week.

He makes me feel like an artist. I could drape fabric to signify his grace and embroider dress shirts that pale in comparison to his beauty. If given the chance, I would coat him in feathers and glitter and send him into the world with pride.

I can see myself cooking for him in a tacky apron, welcoming him home with a glass of red wine after his performance at the Sydney Opera House, and maybe, one day, offering each other delicate rings before everyone we know in fancy suits.

We stand at the train station, his ticket to York burning a hole through my happiness. I only just found him, and now I'm expected to let him go. Jude's 80 litre backpack lies on the floor, full and forgotten as he grips my fingers.

"Tell me how Glasgow goes," he says, brushing his fingers through my hair. We're Facebook friends now. I can finally find a photo of him anytime I want. I can stare at his chin and his hands for as long as I need to make him leaving bearable. And we can keep in touch. If he wants to.

"Tell me if the Vikings welcome you home in York."

He grins without admitting that he loves being compared to a people who represent strength, sex and power.

"I... I'm going to miss you. I know that sounds weird since it's only been a week but I feel like we've got something and I wanted you to know—"

His hands squeeze mine, halting my tirade.

"I'll miss you too."

"Will I see you again?"

"If you want to."

"I do."

"Then we will."



Storm of Attraction

Pamela Swain

A green tinged cloud edges its way towards the ridge where my bed and breakfast is situated. I notice what must be the new guest half way up the grassy slope as a sudden wind gust catches his Driza-Bone coat and it lifts and swirls around him. He reminds me of Mary Poppins flying in and I think this place could do with a little magic. Because I'm on the go all day, there is little time to myself or for repairs. Hence this place can be described as shabby-chic and not the Sunshine Coast meets Hamptons look I dream about.

I've not met the new guest yet. He arrived while I attended a tourism meeting in the village hall last night. Pidge, who helps daily, stayed late to welcome him and left a note for his breakfast requirements. I glance at my watch. Shit. Better get a move on. I flick the switch on the kettle, drop four bread slices into the toaster and whisk the eggs ready for making a mushroom omelette. As I search for the cheese grater, an

occasional hail stone pings against the tin roof. It soon becomes a full-on tarantella dance. Frenzied, wild and dangerous. The front door slams shut at the same time there's a huge flash, crack and sizzle from nearby. I scream and jump backwards, straight into the dishevelled guest. He steadies me, releases his hold and steps away.

‘Phew. I just walked past that power pole. Lucky, eh?’

We peer out through the kitchen window and watch the splintered pole fall into the paddock, missing the chook house by millimetres.

‘Thank goodness I let the girls out early, because that would’ve terrified them. Do you mind waiting until the storm passes and then I can use the barbeque to cook breakfast? Not sure how successful the toast will be though.’

He stares at me intently. He has amazing violet eyes, a tiny scar above his left eyebrow and the cutest dimple in his chin. His crew cut coal-black hair is just right to show off his chiselled jaw. My traitorous cheeks flare.

‘I’m easy. Whatever you can manage is fine. I’ll just strip these clothes off and be back to help.’

I imagine him naked and almost lose it. When he leaves the room, I fan myself with a place mat.

On his return he’s changed into navy linen trousers and a baby-blue linen shirt. His feet are bare. He follows my gaze to his feet.

‘Only had the boots I was wearing and they’re sodden, so I’ve stuffed newspaper inside and left them drying on the verandah. I hope that’s okay?’

I nod.

He holds out his hand for me to shake. ‘Ryan. You must be Ava.’

I nod again and stare at his hand. He keeps it held out, but looks a little unsure what to do with it. So I grab it with both hands and pump it up and down like a piston. He eventually places his free hand on top of mine, extracts himself from my clutches

and rewards me with a smile. I turn away and scurry to the butler's pantry, grab a tea towel and fan myself again. The kitchen is empty on my return, but a quick glance through the window reveals he's on the verandah holding the weather vane my dad made years ago. I rush out, snatch it out of his hands and burst into tears. His eyes are wide with shock, like I've beaten him about the head with a kipper and then served it up for breakfast. He must feel like running a mile from the crazy B and B host. But he draws me into a hug, which is a bit awkward in a two-strangers-should-we-be-doing-this sort-of way, until the unmistakable sound of metal being torn from the roof parts us.

The storm passes quickly and I'm keen to get out to assess the damage. I also need to be a good host, so join Ryan for a coffee after breakfast.

'Have you checked your vehicle yet, Ryan?'

'It's under the car port so it should be okay. It's on borrowed time anyway.'

'Why?' I reach for my mug and take a sip of coffee.

'Well, going downhill with a following wind it can manage nought to a hundred in sixty seconds.'

I snort most of the mouthful of coffee out through my nostrils and grab a wad of serviettes to mop my face.

'Sorry about that.'

'Although you should have seen us trying to conquer the goat track to your place – had to give up and reverse up the drive. Pidge saw – she probably thinks I'm a lunatic.'

'Join the club then. She thinks I am.'

'Why?'

'Running this place on my own. She thinks I should sell up and enjoy life while I'm young.'

He turned to look me in the eyes. 'Don't you enjoy life then?'

'Yes. No. Sometimes. Often. But not all the time. No-one enjoys life all the time. Do they? Maybe they do?'

'That's clarified things beautifully.'

I stand and pull on the gumboots I'd placed beside the chair earlier. 'I'm off to check how much damage there is.'

He nods. 'I'll get my boots and join you.'

I call over my shoulder as I descend the steps. 'There's a pair of new gumboots just inside the utility room. They look about your size.'

The chooks are hiding under Ryan's car. We try to coax them out and fail. The carport roof is in shreds although the car has escaped with just a couple of cracks in the windscreen.

He leans against it and pats the bonnet. 'Pity really. More damage would've forced me to replace it once and for all.'

'Why don't you replace it anyway?'

'Get rid of Myrtle? Never.'

'Myrtle?'

'That's right. Myrtle the turtle, due to her thirst for speed.'

I erupt into laughter.

'You should do that more often. It suits you.'

We then examine the extent of damage to the house and I breathe a sigh of relief to see it's only one roof panel torn off.

'Have you got a ladder?'

'In the garage – there are tarps there, too.'

Ryan fetches the ladder and holds it while I climb onto the roof, having established he has no head for heights, and throw a tarpaulin over the hole. We secure it as best we can.

We chuckle at the sight of next door's trampoline up a gumtree on the boundary and, apart from a few branches down, the damage is minimal to the property.

We sit on the top step of the verandah to have morning tea. Homemade date scones, with clotted cream and rosella jam.

Ryan wipes traces of cream away from his top lip and turns to face me. 'Heaven. I'm in heaven. Who knew a random dart thrown at a map would lead me here. To you – I mean, this place.'

I can't look him in the eye. What will I see if I do? It's scary how comfortable I feel with him beside me. How is that possible? It's only been hours.

'I don't know anything about you.' I blurt out of nowhere and immediately clamp a hand over my mouth. 'I'm sorry, you don't need to tell me anything.'

He reaches over and eases my hand away from my mouth. 'I'd really like to know more about you, too.'

He keeps hold of my hand. 'No ring is a good start.' He holds his left hand up for inspection. 'No ring either. Can I ask about that weather vane first? You were really upset.' Tears prick at my eyes. 'Dad made it just before he died.'

'It's possible to repair it.'

I shake my head. 'I can't trust anyone with it. It's too precious.'

'Understandable. Myrtle was mum's car. That's why I hang on to her.'

I release a sigh, 'So we're both sentimental.'

Ryan releases my hand. 'Okay then. About me. I'm thirty. Single. About to take over the village forge and want to concentrate on creating garden sculptures. I look good on a horse until it moves – it's the height thing, but I'm an ace with their feet.

I'm ready to find the love of my life, marry and have children eventually. Live the dream. Your turn.'

'I can't believe I'm doing this. I'm thirty. Single. This place was dad's dream, but it's mine, too. I look good on horseback even when it's moving. Love baking and upcycling furniture – hence the shabby chic look. Don't mind fence work or anything outdoors, when I get the chance. I'm ready to find the love of my life, have children. Live the dream.'

'Maybe the planets are lining up. Do you fancy coming with me to check out the forge's cottage?'

'In Myrtle?'

'If you're up for adventure.'

'Give me five minutes to lock up'

We see each other for lunch most days. I love the tingle that shoots through me as I sit and watch him work in the forge. The way his muscles flex as he hammers the hot metal into shape. The sizzle as he plunges it into water. On numerous occasions I've felt like diving into icy water after watching him work. The hammer weighs a ton – no wonder he's so fit.

He says he loves the way my chestnut curls refuse to be tamed, my infectious smile and the cute way my shoe hangs off my foot when I cross my legs. And how he hopes I leave it one day so he can search for the owner and claim her for his own. I tell him he's an idiot.

I agree to a celebratory dinner at his place. I can't believe it's been six months. He's been secretive the last few days and has not let me into the forge. On the day of our dinner, he leads me straight there. I burst into tears and fling my arms around his neck at the sight of the weather vane he's made. It's a perfect replica of my one. He must have found photos of the missing section lost in the storm.

I plant kisses along his jaw until I reach his lips. He places his hands in the small of my back and pulls me in close. We stare into each other's eyes and our lips brush together, seeking permission. My nerve endings are on fire, my body melts into his and our kiss deepens. Our first kiss. He pulls away for a moment.

'Just don't expect me to attach it though.'



Trouble With Muses

Rex Fausett

I like to write while sitting in a bar in a quiet part of the room where I can see what, if anything, is happening. I have this recurring dream where one or both of my muses walk into the bar. If they're together I know there could be trouble. Pubs are okay but often too noisy and often populated by, to quote Hilary Clinton, 'deplorables' known in some circles as 'ordinary people'.

Alcohol frees my imagination nicely. Too much alcohol doesn't help, but what is universally known as a 'slight buzz' is terrific. There's room to wander down new pathways and pick new flowers.

I talk about muses with fellow writers because I'm interested in how my fellow writers work. I write from an idea, but my muses tend to arrive just after the second beer towards the end of the second page, to let me know if the idea holds water or not. If you aren't regularly sharing with a fellow writer or an entire support group of writers, then a muse is really useful. At the end of the day, a support group of fellow

writers can be debilitating because there is always that one fellow writer who sounds exponentially better than me, uses bigger words and better sentence structure. His next novel will be momentous and make him famous. Last time we met he used the word 'effluxion' and I still haven't looked it up.

This particular day I was writing a story about romance, and I took my writing pad and a couple of pens down to the Outside Inn Bar in a suburb with less danger of intrusion by anyone except, once in a while, a bunch of women barreling headlong to intoxication. It's my favourite bar. No-one knows me and I'm never disturbed. The girl behind the bar is Anya – I think she's Russian – and despite having bought beer from her for a long time you'd swear she'd never seen me before.

I've been thinking for some years about writing *The Ultimate Love Story* and wondering what that story would look like. Even defining love against lust, like, and attraction is a minefield. I've watched friends go through all these iterations of male/female relationships and once upon a time some of my own.

I have female friends and more of those than male friends. I intend to talk to each of them about life and love before I write *The Ultimate Love Story*.

This day, my brief was something about love in the Fifties. The Fifties were a little bit ahead of my time but it always seemed to me that the fifties and sixties were gentler times when you didn't have to make excuses for being normal.

I was at the end of page two, getting along nicely, when I was aware that someone had sat down across the table from me - Isla, my original muse. She should have been Gilda but the name was already taken. If you're going to have a muse, that muse should not be ordinary, because that would miss the point. Isla is a dark-haired, red-lipped femme fatale not unlike the more famous Gilda. She wears tight black satin dresses and smokes evil-smelling cigarettes. She's the product of earlier stories when I fancied Noir might be my genre. She fixed her green eyes on me and said, "So. Romance, huh?"

For a muse, Isla is remarkably present. I sometimes wonder why no-one can see her or smell the aforementioned cigarettes. Maybe it's because I've known her for so many

years. She guided my story called 'Isla Falls'. It could almost be said that she wrote it.

"Yes, Romance. Know anything about it?"

She looked at me. Withering. "That's a stupid question and you know it. Should I leave?"

"Just kidding, Isla. Do you think you know more about romance personally or philosophically?"

"I've seen stuff. I've seen lots of stuff. I've seen *your* stuff. I've watched the great and the good, and those you call 'deplorables', get it on. The great and the good do it in style but the deplorables are more reliable, treat their partners with respect, and their marriages last longer. Keep that in mind."

"So how do you think romance figures in that. Is romance the same as love?"

"No. I think romance is what leads to love. Romance and attraction are linked. If you are attracted to someone you attract their attention by romantic behaviour. Once attraction is completed and moves to romance, the next stage is love."

"So is the urge to mate part of that?"

"I think so. The trouble is, of course, that the urge to mate clouds men's minds. If more girls were romanced instead of lusted over there would be more happy couples."

"Absolutely right, Isla," said a new voice. A voice that could belong only to a French girl, or in this case, a French muse. I'm not entirely sure how you go about employing a muse but, in this case, I believe the muse found me. (This is possibly arrogant.) It was after a very vivid dream that Clémence Poésy appeared across the table from me while I was making notes in a café in Paris. I confess here and now that I was attracted to Clémence when I saw her in *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*. Shortly afterwards, in real life, I bumped into her in Montmartre at the annual festival celebrating the new vintages from the Clos de Montmartre Vineyard. Yes, my mouth was hanging open.

I believe stalking is an abominable pastime, but I followed her career closely and suddenly one day she was sitting across from me with a cheery "Bonjour." I have no idea how this occurred but after a few months I got used to her presence and got my

mouth closed. My understanding of muses had always been that they were either a spectre or a subliminal iteration of a real, live person. Her name is Giselle.

“What are we talking about?” she asked.

“Love and romance,” said Isla.

“Wow.” Giselle’s eyes widened. “Have you agreed on anything?”

“That there isn’t enough romance. That romance is a vital precursor to love, the means by which we girls clinically assess men or lie around while we’re wooed with gifts and platitudes, that jumping into bed on a first date is a seriously bad idea.”

“Oh my God, I so loved being wooed. Three times I’ve been wooed by professional wooers. Wonderful actions and words put together, all for me alone, having someone concentrate on me, just me. Two of those guys turned out to be following a script intended to get me into bed but one of them, I’ll call him Magnus, took romance to another level. The thing is, he was interesting and if you aren’t interesting, there’s no hope. Oh, he did the usual things, took me to the best restaurants, turned up for afternoon tea with bottles of the best champagne and he bought me exquisite gifts like perfumes and lingerie to die for. Then he did the thing that tied me to him forever. I was sick with influenza, and I mean *really* sick.

“Magnus turned up at my apartment with a selection of fruit juices and a pile of things in those paper bags that expensive stores use. He asked how I was and then proceeded to make a plate of toast soldiers with vegemite on them and he boiled up quail eggs, sliced them thinly and fed them to me while I did baby thrush imitations. Then he lay down beside me and read to me from the thousand and one nights.”

“I presume, since you used the word ‘forever’ that Magnus is still with you,” I wondered.

“Well of course he is.”

I looked at Isla and asked, “Can you beat that?”

“Never mind me, what have you ever done that came close to what Magnus did for our friend here?”

I always hated being put on the spot and being put on the spot by the equivalent of

an imaginary friend was worse. I turned to pettiness. "I asked you first."

"Yes, you did, and your mind is racing through your past trying to think of an answer to my question, isn't it? Okay, listen carefully. I had a friend named Giles, many years ago, who was an important ambassadorial figure in France. He had a brilliant wife and two mistresses and was being run ragged keeping up with them all. The last thing he needed was a muse to complicate his life further, so I contrived to meet his Number Two Mistress and romance her, distracting her from her relationship with Giles, thus easing his emotional workload. If I say so myself, I did a terrific job. She called Giles to say farewell and he sent me plane tickets to New York which I shared with his former mistress. Your turn."

Giselle interrupted. "Giles? Was that Giles Warburton?"

"As a matter of fact, it was. Do you know him?"

"Um, I ... perhaps."

"You mean it was you he was seeing? You were Mistress Number One?"

"That sounds a little judgemental but yes, all right. I remember Giles was very grateful to be able to concentrate on just me and his wife, Michelle. Gosh, isn't it a small world."

My two muses contemplated one another, with amusement I thought, then Isla looked at me and said, "Do you have an answer to my question? The question about romantic moments?"

"Yes, I have one example. I assure you that I was careful to establish what Reese was into when we first started going out. I also established what she didn't like. What she liked most was music, so I took her to see the Rolling Stones. I established what she liked to read and gave gifts of reading material. Scandinavian Crime mostly but a sprinkling of stories I liked that I thought she might like too. I found out what she liked to drink and made sure I always had supplies available. I cared deeply that she could see I cared enough about her to be bothered. Romantic? I think so. I could never raise romance to the levels your Magnus reached, Giselle. It sounds like he has instincts that would put most men to shame. I'm going to take home a good

champagne and some quails eggs tonight. I feel guilty that I might not have been attentive enough. Just a moment, Isla. You said you'd seen my stuff. Does that mean you visit me secretly? Have you been watching me? Have *both* of you been watching me?"

"Just a slip of the tongue," said Isla. "Go buy that Champagne."



Unfinished Business

Stephanie Ruth

Annabelle avoided Dublin Bay like the pox, and her self-imposed embargo was usually a doddle to uphold.

Yes, she had some well-to-do clients up there who occasionally insisted she see where they'd be displaying their new artwork, but she got out of there as fast as the speed limit allowed.

There was nothing wrong with the bay itself, nor the million-dollar-view mansions dotting the slopes and supplementing sales. But in the wake of Shain, spending any length of time in the area where they used to meet was painful, and this particular house was the absolute worst.

"Annabelle! A pleasure to see you, as always." Kieran Rory, the client receiving today's flying visit, opened his front door.

The baker turned franchise magnate was oozing blue-eyed Irish charm, a gregarious antithesis to any of Annabelle's own stuffy family members. A whopping percentage of Wanaka residents claimed this man's accent induced panty-dropping thoughts, but it didn't affect Annabelle other than to remind her Shain was gone, likely never to return.

“Mr Rory, I have your options.” Direct but polite, she tapped the folder under her arm, eager to get on with business and refrain from reminding either of them of the past.

“Grand! Come in!”

Rather than entering the main living area, he motioned her towards the guest wing. Trepidation rising, she clip-clopped after him in beige heels, approaching the space she’d once known all too well.

“We’re showcasing a local artist who’s picking up national notoriety.” She began her spiel, eyes darting around the atrium-style room. “Talulah Tankar’s one to watch. Definitely worth the investment.” Annabelle would’ve been investing herself, if buying her father out of the gallery had taken everything she had.

It was all different, she realised with relief. Modernised and remodelled like the rest of the house. Skylights soaked the room with sun, and white paint showcased Scandinavian-styled furnishings.

The 1980’s shag pile rug where Shain had lain, red locks glossing over naked shoulders, was nowhere to be seen.

It was almost as if those stolen afternoons had never happened; as if Annabelle had never been yanked off her conservative foundations and shaken loose from family expectations.

“You’ll love her style and energy,” she continued, the catch in her voice hopefully going unnoticed. “The artist’s vitality jumps off the canvas.”

Whipping her folder of hopefuls open, she handed it over.

“Hmm,” Kieran Rory flicked through the clear-file, his focus intense. The exact same expression Shain, his one-time baker-in-training, had adopted when faced with a decision. “And your recommendation would be...?” Seeming to stop instinctively with his finger firmly planted on the largest canvas, *July Clouds*, he glanced back to the blank wall behind the sofa. “The size?”

Prepared, Annabelle whipped out a compact tape measure from her handbag to show the proportions on the wall.

Yes, *July Clouds* was her own personal favourite—vigorous, stormy, and unapologetically impassioned. She had mixed feelings about the fact it might hang in the room where she’d been forced to reassess every aspect of herself.

“Negotiation on the price?”

“Minimal. It’s gaining a lot of attention.”

Kieran Rory grunted, one blunt fingertip over the huge monetary figure printed below the image. "I'll take it," he decided.

He'd *take* it, sight unseen?

Ruffled, but too professional to show it, Annabelle hummed in a way she hoped sounded like assent. The Rorys were notoriously liberal with their decisions, sure of themselves and what they wanted. Being unshackled by anyone else's opinion was refreshing, if a little unhinged.

Taking the file back, she cleared her throat and finally found her voice.

"Absolutely. I'll have that invoiced directly."

"Hung tomorrow, if possible," Kieran Rory waved a hand at the blank wall, clearly delegating the job to her. "It's a gift."

"I'll oversee it myself," she promised, reasoning a commission this size deserved extra pandering, even if it was in Dublin Bay.

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Annabelle knew she'd have to employ breathing exercises to release *July Clouds* into someone else's hands. The name, the cobalt undertones, and the wintery vibrancy all reminded her of the day she'd told Shain to leave. It'd take a miracle to leave this particular client's house without a few more images of that last argument sneaking in.

What she *hadn't* expected on her return the following afternoon was to be met at the door by Kieran Rory's long-absent niece.

Gorgeous Shain in holy jeans, with a rainbow boldly emblazoned across her tie-dyed singlet-top and her hair a mass of strawberry-russet waves.

"How ya doin', hey. Long time, no see." Cryptic and teasing, Shain's lilting voice cut through the layers of Annabelle's skin, leaving her raw-boned.

An ambush, with Kieran Rory clearly at the heart of it.

Annabelle opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The handyman helping with the painting 'deliver-and-hang' shot her a puzzled look before stepping in.

"Kia ora, I'm Tony. And I'm guessing you've already met Annabelle, the gallery owner?"

"Oh, I've *more* than met her, I can assure you." Shain winked.

Annabelle squeezed her eyes closed for a moment, blocking out Tony's probable reaction.

Shain was openly gay, whereas Annabelle's situation had always been a bit more...

delicate. She wasn't beholden to her father's views anymore, but the Rory level of honesty could be confronting.

Heart beating out of her chest when Shain stepped forward to kiss her cheek lightly in welcome, Annabelle was left with a faint whiff of sandalwood and sage, and a hole the size of Ireland burning its way through her soul.

"Owner now, is it? The old hallion's finally passed on?" Shain mused, a twinkle in her eye.

Cobalt and periwinkle, all maelstrom and mischief.

The hand closest to Annabelle reached out to graze her arm, spreading goosebumps.

No, Annabelle's politician father hadn't 'passed on,' he just held a lot less clout now than he once had.

"Nah. The old right-winged bastard's still kicking around," Tony supplied helpfully, plonking the words into silence with all the grace of a woolly mammoth. "Making someone's life hell, no doubt."

Someone's, yes... but no longer Annabelle's.

Shain caught her eye, and a faint smile passed between them.

A legendary bigot, her father's political views were shouted from podiums and emblazoned across billboards.

She'd inched away from his form of politics in minor ways over the years. Deliberately seeking out and showcasing works from the rainbow community had been her first move, indigenous artists and other minorities her second. Next, she'd actively sought religiously inspired works that weren't Christian in origin.

Shocking. Yes, indeed.

A small bid for freedom, but the dividends paid handsomely.

Freedom from expectations she could never live up to. Freedom from having her livelihood held over her head. Freedom from the need to smother her own beliefs.

She'd learned from an early age to outwardly display what was considered 'right' in her household, and nothing of what was considered controversial.

Sexuality included.

It had gotten harder and harder to bite her tongue while silently cursing her father's views and the power they wielded. Even more so after puberty, and doubly so after meeting Shain.

Ignoring the decade-old elephant in the room, Annabelle turned back to Tony.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

“No. I’ll do it.” Shain nudged her aside with a shoulder, lifting her end of the package as if it weighed nothing and leading Tony through the house.

So much time had passed, but nothing appeared changed in Shain. Not a single hair on her bossy head, nor a single atom of her magnetism.

The thought was more than a little frightening, and Annabelle slid calming fingers over her taupe skirt, smoothing non-existent wrinkles.

*

When Tony left, Annabelle knew it was her cue to leave, too.

But she remained sitting, silently contemplating *July Clouds* with Shain on the chair next to her.

The painting dominated the space in the best way, as did Shain.

“I see your rugby fella’s moved on,” Shain opened conversationally.

Annabelle picked at her thumbnail. “He wasn’t... We weren’t involved in that way.”

“Ah. He was just for show, like?” Shain pierced her with a look.

“A mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“Hmm.” Shain shook her head. “What I wouldn’t give for one of those.” Reaching out, she slid one finger across Annabelle’s wrist as if testing the waters.

When Annabelle didn’t retreat, Shain grabbed hold with a lopsided smile. The baker had been scarily attractive to a closeted mayor’s daughter, and she was just as magnetic now, tossing her head at any and all boundaries.

“I’m sorry I told you to leave. You were everything to me, and I—”

“You weren’t ready,” Shain interrupted with more gentleness than Annabelle deserved.

“I said horrible things,” she murmured, regretting how her bone-deep fear had pushed Shain away.

Shain nodded sagely. “We both did.”

“You were so sure of your sexuality.”

“And you were just discovering yours.”

“Why have you come back?” she whispered, throat tight.

Shain shrugged, mischief sparkling in her eyes. “Unfinished business,” she cited sweetly. ⬆



The Yin and Yang of Love

Charlotte Jardine

I slid beneath my sheets, sighing with contentment. At last, my exhausting day was over. I drew in a deep breath and let it out, my muscles relaxing, but, as they did, a faint sound tugged at the edge of my consciousness. Was someone... chanting?

The singing nagged at me like a splinter under my skin. I peeked out my window, but wouldn't see anything. Infuriated, I jumped out of bed, threw on my dressing gown, and charged out my back door.

What the...? Candles dotted my neighbour's lawn and in their midst sat a man—a naked man—in the lotus position. Naked Guy looked around the same age as me, but a lot more athletic, based on his muscled torso and arms. A tapa cloth of tattoos decorated his mocha-hued skin. His eyes were closed, and his full lips moved in a mesmerizing dance as he continued his low drone.

My breath hitched at this Maui come to life. He most definitely wasn't either Mr or Mrs Chen. My retired, quiet and elderly neighbours were in Melbourne, meeting their newest grandson.

Was he a trespasser? Should I call the police? No, there might be an innocent explanation.

I marched over to the fence. 'Excuse me. Why are you in the Chens' backyard?'

His eyelids flicked open, and he stopped chanting. 'Good evening.' A warm smile lit his face.

I crossed my arms, waiting for him to explain himself.

'My name's Nalu.' He rose to his feet in one lithe motion and moved toward me, hand outstretched. 'Mabel's my auntie. I'm crashing here while she and Uncle Min Joon are away.'

Even though the Chens were letting him stay, he shouldn't make a racket at night. And I wished they'd told me there would be a naked guy in their garden.

'I'm Ava.' We shook hands over the fence, while I did my best to look anywhere except for the hairless expanse of his chest—or any lower. The luscious aroma of coconut wafted around me. He must use scented body wash or put oil in his short dreadlocks.

'Can you please keep it down? I work as an anaesthetist at the hospital and am attending a six-hour operation tomorrow, so will need my wits about me.'

'Sorry. I didn't realise I was disturbing you.' Nalu looked mortified. 'Do you want to join me? Mantra meditation is a great stress relief.'

'I'm not stressed,' I growled. 'I just want a good night's sleep.'

He laughed, as if I'd told a joke. 'Virgo, right?'

'Yeah.' How did he know?

'Try chanting "Embrace the imperfect" once you're in bed,' Nalu suggested. 'It'll

help you decompress, I promise.’ His soulful, chocolate-coloured eyes were mesmerising—even though he was spouting nonsense.

‘Thanks, but I’m a scientist,’ I replied, glancing away to break out of his spell. ‘I don’t believe in astrology. Or chanting.’

‘The universe doesn’t need you to believe. Only to do.’ He smiled again.

‘Night, Nalu.’ I turned to leave.

‘Why not give it a go?’ he called after me. ‘You’ve nothing to lose.’

I stomped back to my house and returned to bed.

* * *

The next day was as long and tiring as I’d thought it would be. As I monitored my patient’s vitals, I imagined I caught a whiff of Nalu’s coconut scent. His smooth baritone intruded into my thoughts.

Why was he on my mind while I was at work? He was a flake. A handsome flake, but a flake none the less.

After getting home and having dinner, I relaxed with some Netflix until it was time for bed. Aching with fatigue, I changed into my PJs and climbed between my soft cotton sheets.

I had almost drifted off when a distant noise tugged at my consciousness. My mind latched onto the sound. It was a baritone chant. I groaned. Nalu.

Concentrating harder, I could discern his words.

Every flaw is a gift, a chance to learn and grow.

Let go of the urge to control what happens.

Trust the journey.

Embrace the imperfect.

I sat upright, wide awake—and furious. *Embrace the imperfect*. He said that to me yesterday. Was he mocking me?

Jumping out of bed, I marched outside and over to the fence. Sure enough, there was Nalu surrounded by his candles, thankfully wearing boxers this time.

‘Nalu,’ I bellowed.

A radiant smile lit his face. ‘Hey there, Ava. Love the PJs.’

My cheeks heated. They were my favourite—purple silk decorated with scotty dogs—but usually I was the only one who saw them.

‘You look different,’ he continued. ‘Your aura seemed so closed off yesterday. Now, it’s a beautiful mix of reds, oranges and yellows.’

My aura? No wonder it was lit up like a bonfire—I was pissed!

I stuck my hands on my hips. ‘You promised to keep it down.’ But really, what annoyed me was the content of his chant.

His face fell. ‘Oh, I thought you just meant for last night. Because of the big op.’ He sighed dejectedly, and I felt as if I’d kicked a puppy. ‘For me, chanting outdoors is a sacred spiritual practice. It grounds me and helps me reconnect with nature. It’s as essential to me as breathing.’ Then he brightened. ‘Tonight, I’m using a mantra I developed for you. That way we can both get what we want: I chant, and it helps you have a peaceful and refreshing sleep.’

I shifted from foot to foot, humbled. He wasn’t making fun of me after all. He wrote that stupid poem... or whatever you call it... for me.

No, not stupid. That was mean.

His spoken meditations were important to him, and he genuinely believed his actions benefited me.

‘How about a compromise?’ My annoyance drained away. I was tired, and it was making me grumpy. He was being kind, in his own weird way. ‘I go to bed at ten o’clock. Can you be done by then?’

Nalu smiled his beautiful smile. 'Sure. And thanks for understanding.'

I smiled back, relieved we'd come to an agreement.

His head dipped. 'I'll head inside, so I'm not bothering you.'

He looked downcast. Was it because I was cutting short his communing with nature?

'I don't mind if you carry on for, say, fifteen minutes? Is that long enough?' I didn't want to keep him from what he loved. Not everyone understood how much I needed my sleep, either. Although, that, at least, was rational.

'Perfect. Thank you. Are you sure you won't join in?'

'I'm good. Maybe another time.' *Or, never.* I returned inside.

As I snuggled under the duvet, I listened to Nalu's sonorous chanting. Actually, it *was* soothing—probably because I knew it'd soon stop. With his words swirling around me, I drifted to sleep.

* * *

Nalu kept to our agreement. For the next few nights, he'd chant until ten, but by the time I went to bed, he'd have stopped.

I had my blissful silence back. Only, it was too silent.

On the fourth evening, I retired half an hour early. Nalu had a new mantra, something about the sea. I listened, visualising the waves crashing against a palm-lined beach, until I drifted off to sleep.

I was sharper and more cheerful than usual at work the next day. Several people commented on the change.

That night, I went to bed even earlier. He sang the chant he wrote for me—and this time, I joined in, feeling self-conscious. But, hey, it's not like there was anyone to hear me recite 'Embrace the imperfect'. And no one had done anything especially for me in such a long time. It was rude not to make use of his gift.

The following morning was Saturday. I slept in, changed into my athletic wear, then headed out for a walk. On my doorstep sat a parcel wrapped in tissue paper. I unwrapped it, and inside was an exquisite eye mask, the same shade of purple as my PJs.

I pressed the silk to my nose. The floral scent of lavender filled my nostrils, intermingled with a hint of coconut.

‘Morning, Ava,’ a cheery voice called from next door. Mrs Chen stood in her garden, trowel in hand, attacking the weeds.

I blinked several times. I had gotten so used to seeing Nalu next door; it was a shock to see my neighbour again. ‘Welcome back,’ I said. ‘How was your trip?’

‘Wonderful! Little Max, our new grandson, is the spitting image of his father at the same age.’ She beamed, every inch the doting grandma.

‘Ah, is your nephew about?’

She frowned. ‘Nalu? Why are you after him?’

‘I wanted to thank him for my gift.’ I waved the eye mask in the air and eyed her expectantly.

‘My nephew flew back to Hawaii early this morning,’ she replied.

I couldn’t catch my breath. Nalu was gone? And so far away?

‘He was only here while his beachfront mansion was being renovated.’ Mrs Chen shook her head indulgently. ‘Did he tell you he’s a famous guru? He writes personalised mantras for clients from all corners of the world and earns a fortune doing it. He bought us this house with his “cosmic cash”, as my husband calls it.’

He what? I’d assumed he was unemployed. Not that I cared. What hit me like a knife to the heart was him leaving without saying goodbye.

‘You’ve turned awfully pale.’ Mrs Chen asked. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I think I’ll have a lie down,’ I murmured, backing into my house, Nalu’s gift

clutched to my chest.

I stumbled to my bedroom, my aura feeling decidedly blue and shrivelled. I collapsed onto the bed and lifted the mask to my nose, letting the scent of lavender envelop me. As I did, a coil of paper fell out onto my chest.

Hands shaking, I unrolled it.

My precious and always analytical Ava,

I felt you chanting with me last night, and it was so amazing. I don't want to say goodbye so soon after saying hello. I would have told you in person before leaving, but I didn't want to wake you—I know how much you love your sleep!

If you feel the same, you can find me @Nalu_nirvana.

With metta, Nalu

He'd sensed me chanting with him? It was illogical, and unscientific... and I'd felt it too.

My heart bursting with happiness, I picked up my phone, opened Instagram Messenger and began typing.