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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.

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In the Heart of
Mt Eden Village

Our Authors

Amy Hutton

Sprinkled With Memories



Susie Frame

Me and Lizzie D

Carly Writes a New Chapter

Caenys Kerr

Unmasked At Mardi Gras



Pamela Swain

Pretty In Pink

Our Authors



Sage Willow
No Profile Picture
Long Time Coming

Lyndsay-Jean Campbell
The Avocado Affair



Stephanie Ruth
Heaped Teaspoons

Virginia Suckling
For Keeps



Pragati Vasisht

The Third Night of Eternal Prosperity



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Carly Writes a New Chapter

Susie Frame

Saturday, 10.26am

Carly sits on the old green painted wooden bench outside Middlebrook's Athenaeum trying to work out how she's allowed herself to be bulldozed into becoming the township's locum librarian. She hopes Carole's total hip recuperation won't take too long. Her writing retreat time is short enough, what with her editor expecting the final edits of her novel next month *and* the synopsis and outline of the novel's sequel, too. But she'd found it hard to say no to Carole's friend Marilyn, the woman she'd since learned was called The Mayoress of Middlebrook. It seems everyone obeys her commands or suffers the consequences.

Carly turns her face skyward, the welcome summer sun warming her pale outstretched legs; her usual comfy trainers and trackpants replaced with a floral dress and strappy sandals, hoping her appearance would make her look more approachable and 'librarian-y'.

10.40am

Carly hates many things in life; skinny milk, oysters, littering, but tardiness is her pet peeve. She knows why that is. But she's not about to waste this beautiful morning thinking of her ex and the endless hours she'd spent waiting for him, making excuses for him.

Seriously. What part of *'have the key at the Athenaeum before 10.30'* did Carole's nephew not understand? She decides if he's not here in one minute the self-entitled youth is going to get the message.

Tyres screech, a car door slams.

Ready for a tongue lashing? She turns to face the guy who obviously thinks her time's not as important as his.

But any attempt at formulating a grammatically correct sentence of reproof is useless as a rugged, dark-haired Adonis flashes a movie star smile and presents her with a colourful bouquet of cottage flowers.

The man standing in front of her is indeed, a man – a well put-together one at that, and not the pimply nineteen-year-old she had in mind. She's thrown completely. But what throws her even more is her body's response to him. Trembling knees, flying pulse, adrenaline drenching her veins?

Sure, these sensations weren't altogether foreign to her, but right now they were most unwelcome. She'd made a deal with herself when Simon kept her waiting for the very last time. At the altar. Heart and soul were closed for business. She was better off on her own.

She stands and pulls herself together. "If you think a bunch of flowers will make up for keeping me waiting, you have another think coming."

Adonis smiles. "I wouldn't assume that for a minute. You know what they say; 'when we assume it makes an ass of u and me.'"

"Yes, I'm well-versed in that maxim."

"They're not for you. They're to put on the library table."

"Oh. Well. Thank you, er..." Carly feels heat rise from her neck to the tips of her ears as she watches Adonis trying to suffocate a smirk. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Dan."

"Thanks, Dan," she says taking the flowers, hoping he hasn't noticed her acute embarrassment. "Have you got the key?"

“Sure.” He takes it from his trouser pocket and hands it to her.

Did she just imagine that jolt of electricity as his fingertips grazed hers?

Inconvenient. Very inconvenient.

She holds up the key. “I better open up. Thanks again.”

“Not a problem. And sorry I was late. I had an emergency with Aunt Carole. She er, um...well, you don’t need the details. Let’s just say it involved the toi—”

“No explanation necessary,” says Carly quickly, an unwanted visual popping up behind her eyelids. But then that was replaced quickly with a different scene; one of a man helping out an elderly relative in her time of need. She couldn’t remember Simon putting himself out for *her* let alone anyone else.

“Oh, and Auntie would like you to come to lunch today to thank you for stepping up to the plate.”

“That’s kind, but not necessary. I have a tight schedule—”

Dan makes a stop sign with his hand. “Trust me. There’s no arguing with Carole. I’ll swing by and pick you up at 12.45.”

“Well, I have a deadline which—”

“—can wait. You need to eat.” Dan flashes another smile and flicks a wave goodbye. “S’ya soon.”

ipm

Carly sips sparkling mineral water as she watches Dan carefully guide Carole to the table.

“Easy does it. Don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to you on my watch.”

A lump forms in Carly’s throat. She’s touched by the concern and tenderness wrapped up in Dan’s words. For a strange moment she wishes she’s the one who’s had surgery and is leaning into Dan’s firm arms.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you, Carly dear,” says Carole, allowing Dan to help settle her on the raised dining chair.

“I agree,” Dan chips in. “For a terrible moment I thought *I* was going to have to do the job! So, thank you so much from me, too.” He places a hand on her forearm and gives it a gentle squeeze.

Heat shoots up Carly’s arm, her mouth dries. Enough already! She wishes her body would stop betraying her. “Well, Marilyn can be very persuas—”

Carole laughs. “Were you going to say ‘persuasive’? How polite of you, dear. You and I both know she’s a steam roller!”

They all laugh at this. Carly feels warmth blossoming in her chest. After six years flying solo, it feels good to be part of something, even if it's just a quiet lunch for three.

An hour later, having eaten a delicious meal prepared by Dan, Carly makes her excuses to leave. "This has been so much fun but I'm afraid I really must get back to the cottage and face my dreaded revisions."

"And miss the fruit crumble and whipped cream?" smiles Dan.

"What? That's my absolute favourite," she says, "but sadly, needs must."

"Let me drive you back."

"No. The walk will do me good. I need to clear my head."

"Nothing like Middlebrook's clean country air to help with creativity," Dan says.

Carly smiles, grateful he thinks it's plots and paragraphs she needs to sort out. If only he knew it was the effect *he* was having on *her* she needed to analyse. Dealing with thoughts of him for the two hours she was at the library had nothing on what was stirring inside her now. The heat of his body close to hers at the table, the sight of his tongue catching a bit of errant quiche in the corner of his mouth meant not only was she in dire need of fresh air but a fire-retardant blanket as well.

"Why don't you walk back with Carly, Dan?" Carole says. "I'll be fine on my own for a while."

Noooooooo! Carly's brain screams. *Sooooo nooooo!*

3 pm

Dan leads Carly through the track to her cottage, their easy conversation punctuated with the sounds of chirping birds and humming insects.

When they arrive at Sowburn Creek he reaches for her hand. "These rocks can be a bit slippery, so easy does it." He guides her over the stepping stones. "One last step and you should be—"

She performs a half step-half jump and completely misjudges her footing. She loses her balance and waits for the pain of a fall onto rocks, but it never happens. Instead, she finds herself wrapped in a strong pair of arms and being swung up onto safer ground.

"Whoa. You okay?" Dan's startling green eyes seek hers as he asks the question, his arms remain fast around her waist. For one ridiculous moment - and despite all the tough talks she's had with herself, here in Dan's arms - Dan who is really no more than a stranger - feels better than anything she can remember in a long time.

The warmth of his arms dissipates as he loosens his grip and takes a step back. It takes all her willpower to stop herself from closing the gap between them and placing his arms back where they were. Is it just her or can he feel some connection, too? “I’m fine. Nothing bruised, except my ego perhaps.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to carry on? We could just sit for a while, if you like?”

Carly smiles into Dan’s concerned eyes. “Are you always this chivalrous?”

His response is swift. “Only when it comes to blue-eyed brunettes.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really,” he says, and sweeps some strands of hair behind her ear. “And…”

Here it comes. The list of all the other women you display acts of chivalry for.

“Grey-haired aunties!”

Their laughter rings out before it’s caught on the summer breeze and disappears over the top of the fir trees.

8pm

Later that night Carly smiles to herself as she taps quickly on her laptop. She can’t believe how effortlessly the words are flying from her fingertips. Nor can she believe that what’s she’s writing is without a plan of any description and has nothing whatsoever to do with her current crime novel.

Romance? Who’d have thought?

Chapter Four, she types, wondering what will happen to Patrick and Francesca now.

A knock at the door interrupts her train of thought. “Carly? It’s me—”

Carly opens the door to Dan, standing under the veranda with both hands behind his back. “What are you doing here?” Then something occurs to her. She doesn’t care why he’s turned up unannounced, she just loves that he has.

“Aunt Carole didn’t want you to miss out on dessert. She insisted I brought you this.” He brings his right arm around in front of him.

Carly sighs as she looks inside the wicker basket. “What? Fruit crumble and whipped cream!”

“And…” Dan brings his left arm around. “For you, this time.”

“Dessert *and* flowers!”

10pm

When the muted coloured sky turns velvety-black, Carly gets back to her story. *Patrick and Francesca eat their dessert outside under the weeping cherry tree.*

“You have a little bit of cream...just there,” says Patrick pointing to the corner of Francesca’s mouth.

She wipes it away delicately, her eyes full of mischief. She holds it in front of Patrick before he takes her hand in his and guides her finger into his mouth. “Mmmm, delicious,” he moans.

Francesca smiles before leaning into Patrick. “My lips tastes even better,” she says.

“How do I know that’s true?”

“Simple. Kiss me and find out.”

Carly yawns leaving the chapter unfinished. She heads to bed, but before dreams take over, her writer’s brain formulates a plot for the rest of her current chapter.

She thinks about herself and Dan. Who knows what will happen in their story? For now, she’s happy not to plot. The fact Dan is in her story at all, is enough.



Heaped Teaspoons

Stephanie Ruth

Talulah knew something had gone terribly wrong the instant the judge took a bite of her savoury scone.

Bacon and cheese. Usually a safe bet, but going by the look on Kieran Rory's face, this batch wouldn't be winning any prizes. The celebrated patisserie chef pulled back his lips in a grimace of distaste, before expelling the morsel discreetly into his napkin.

He literally *spat it out*.

Mortified, Talulah shrunk against the tukutuku patterns on the back wall of the school hall, the heavy aroma of fresh baking suddenly losing all appeal. The scone entries were blind, so she was blessedly incognito until Murray Tankar, standing shoulder to shoulder with her, grunted the word, "Rude!"

Loud enough to reach judgy ears.

"*Shhh!*" Talulah hissed the reprimand, elbowing her mother's next-door neighbour as a few heads turned their way, accompanied by commiserating nods.

When Kieran Rory turned to stare too, resplendent in his blue-eyed loveliness, Talulah knew all hope of anonymity was lost.

Murray, or Mullet, as he was known due to his awful taste in hairstyles, wasn't one to miss a school bake sale, or stand down when he felt a show of loyalty was in order.

"Good scones, those," he reiterated loudly.

Perfect. Now every teacher, parent, and school-aged child had cottoned on to whose entry had nosedived, turning to goggle at Talulah, their part-time librarian and art teacher.

Thanks a bunch, Mullet.

"Perhaps a touch too much baking-powder in this batch?" Kieran Rory, put on the spot, behaved like a true politician, vaguely swiping at an apology without actually acknowledging he'd done anything unpalatable.

Mullet muttered, "I'll give *you* baking powder..." But it was under his breath, and judging continued on as if nothing had happened.

Talulah hadn't expected to win, but neither had she anticipated a public humiliation. True, she'd added more baking powder than the recipe stated. Double, in fact. She'd done that with *all* recent baking, because the raising agent didn't seem to be working. Possibly due to the fact her mother insisted on buying everything in bulk, and the ingredients in the farmhouse kitchen were ancient? She may've miscalculated the amount of butter too, which could account for the chalky texture...

Talulah sighed. It wasn't like she could taste-test, being allergic to gluten. What business did a coeliac have entering Wanaka's hotly contested bake-off heats? School employee participation was expected though, and this year's prize included an at-home baking session with Kieran blue-eyed Rory.

No thirty-six-year-old bachelorette in her right mind would pass up *that* opportunity.

*

"Annabelle won first place," Talulah explained to her mother later that evening. "Again."

Possibly the reasoning behind Kieran Rory's bake-with-me-at-home prize this year. Annabelle, the willowy business-woman, would stand out amongst the teachers,

the Suzie-homemakers, and a solitary, underwhelming oils artist.

“Don’t see why,” Mullet grumbled, loyal to a fault. “They didn’t look any different to yours.”

“There’s always next time.” Talulah’s mother patted her hand. “Isn’t there a cake bake-off for Mother’s Day? You could wow everyone with a gluten-free number.”

“No one eats G.F. by choice, Mum.”

“I eat it,” Mullet refuted.

Talulah snorted. “You’d eat your own right hand if I served it up with mustard and tomato sauce.”

Mullet lifted the hand in question and studied it with great seriousness, making her laugh. He was a mechanic, a good one, grease wedged into his cuticles and up under his nails.

“Help me up, love?” Her mother was smiling, too. “I’ll head to bed.”

Talulah jumped to standing, realising belatedly the request wasn’t meant for her. Mullet had already reached her mother, offering his meaty arm forward.

Exactly when the burly grease-monkey had earned the endearment, ‘love,’ Talulah was unsure.

“Now, there’s a real man,” Mum crooned as she petted his arm, like a child fondling a wild-thing’s paw. “Respecting your women.”

Talulah ignored the loaded comment, and the cheeky wink Mullet sent her way.

They were no more Mullet’s ‘women’ than they were his socket-wrenches. The man was a friend and neighbour. A solid, reliable one, sure. But that was all. Her mother had been not-so-covertly nudging him forward since Talulah had trailed home from Melbourne, tail between legs.

A broad Kiwi brogue, nothing like the soft Irish lilt she’d been daydreaming about.

*

“What was wrong with it?” Talulah took the keys to her mother’s ride-on lawnmower from Mullet’s outstretched hand, kicking one of its tires for good measure.

The damn thing had died on her yesterday.

“Simple fix. Fuel pump disconnected, probably shook loose by the gung-ho way

you hurtle it around the back paddock.”

“I do not.”

“Talulah, I live next door, you can’t hide from me. I know you’d rather be painting than mowing, so you drive like a bat out of hell.”

True.

She’d rather be painting landscapes in her mother’s barn than doing almost anything else. In fact, she’d been working on a huge canvas of murderous July clouds when Mullet had come to return the mower.

Talulah looked down at her cobalt-splattered painting smock, and sighed. “I guess that means I have to finish mowing the damn lawn, now.”

Mullet cocked his head to the side. “Why don’t I finish it, while you get on with whatever it was you were painting?”

Tempting...

“Thunderclouds. But I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You weren’t asking. I was offering.” Mullet swiped the keys back. “I’ll take it slow, so the old girl doesn’t blow another fuel-line,” he teased.

“But, I already owe you for the repair.”

Mullet shrugged. “So, you’ll owe me twice.”

Talulah went to give him an impromptu hug for being such a stand-up guy, realised she was covered in oil paint, and pulled back halfway through the motion. Mullet’s face lit up in that quiet way he had, then fell.

“Sorry, I’m grubby.”

“I don’t care about that,” Mullet muttered, blinking at her until she looked away.

The moment was as strained as it was awkward.

Talulah cleared her throat. “Mullet, I don’t think—”

“I’ll just get on with that lawn, then.” Mullet didn’t let her finish the thought aloud, jumping onto the mower to start the cantankerous old girl up with a stony expression.

*

“So, I’ve been thinking about the cake bake-off,” Talulah’s mother cornered her in the farmhouse kitchen after school on Monday.

“Yes?” Talulah wasn’t suspicious by nature, but something in her mother’s smirk made her hesitate.

“I’ve asked Murray to come and help. His mother was the best baker in the Lakes District, so the boy knows a thing or two about cakes.”

Talulah groaned. ‘The boy’ was fast approaching forty, and there’s no way she was sharing a kitchen with him.

“He’s all greasy-handed,” she muttered.

“Tosh! You’re one to talk.” Motioning towards Talulah’s paint-stained fingers, her mother tsk-tsked. “I’ve got food-safe gloves. You can both wear a pair. Murray’s bringing all the ingredients, so you don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“I owe that man too many favours already,” Talulah grumbled.

Her mother shrugged. “So, gift him a painting.”

*

“Murray Tankar! What’ve you done to your hair?”

Talulah stood in the doorway of her mother’s house and gawped at Mullet, who was clean-shaven, and missing the flowing locks of his namesake hairdo for the first time in living memory.

Mullet shrugged. “Went to a barber.”

“Holy cow.” Talulah grabbed him by the shoulders, turning him side-on to get a better look. Though he reddened, he let her jostle him this way, then that. “You’ve been holding out on me. There’s a decent face under all that hairiness.” Square-jawed, and no-nonsense.

If anything, Mullet’s redness intensified.

“What am I supposed to call you now?” she mused. “Mullet-less?”

“I guess you could try Murray, considering that’s my name.”

“Murray.” She rolled the name over her tongue.

It didn’t sound at all bad.

“Talulah, stop.” Murray held his big hands over the mixing bowl for the second time, effectively lidding it. “You can’t just go adding things, willy-nilly.”

“It says three teaspoons of spice.”

“You’ve already put in four.”

“Yes, but then I found the ginger. And anyway, they were only *small* teaspoons.”

“There’s no such thing. It’s either a teaspoon, or it isn’t.”

“Maybe it means *heaped* teaspoons.”

“Then the recipe would say, heaped teaspoons,” Murray maintained.

“You know what? Baking with you is no fun. You’re all rules and regulations, Murray. Bring back Mullet, he was less uptight.”

Murray drew back, blinking at her. He looked more than offended, he looked hurt.

“Sorry, that sounded less caustic in my head,” she murmured.

“Right.” Murray accepted her apology with a single word, but didn’t participate much after that, just hung back and let Talulah do things her way.

The cake flopped in the middle, possibly due to the extra quarter-cup of milk she’d added by mistake, but the outer-rim was tasty. Soft and fluffy, if a little heavily spiced. Talulah could attest to this, because Murray had thought to bring gluten-free flour and baking powder, which was decent of him.

“I like the hair. It looks good.” Talulah tried to make things right, as Murray gathered his belongings together.

He shrugged. “Trying something different.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.” She placed a hand on his arm to stop him moving around and avoiding eye contact.

“That’s okay.” He stared at her hand until she removed it. “Good luck with the bake-off next week.”

The bake-off? She’d forgotten all about it.

“Hey, Murray? Be honest. Does my baking suck?”

Murray hesitated a smidgen too long before looking back at her. “You’re an excellent cook,” he hedged. “Your venison stew’s second to none. No two are ever the

same, but they're always delicious. You're vibrant, spontaneous, and combustible, and it all comes out in your cooking and canvases."

"Aww." That was rather sweet. Maybe she *would* gift him the July clouds... "But, my baking?"

"Baking is for mechanical meat-heads like myself, who see measurements and instructions as concrete plans. You're clearly meant for higher things."

"You're not a meat-head."

"No?"

"No." She brought one hand up to touch the unfamiliar shortness of his hair, wondering at the timing of his monumental transformation. "Do you really think I'm combustible?"

Murray growled, sending shivers up Talulah's spine.

"You fire me up like a Catherine Wheel, Talulah. Always have."

"Oh!" She laughed, suddenly experiencing lightness where there'd been weight. "Well, why didn't you ever say so?"

"Moot point, when I'm up against the lure of Melbourne, and Kieran-bloody-Rory," Murray grumbled.

"I'm done with Australia, and guys who spit out perfectly edible scones. I need a man with a hardier constitution; one who can handle the odd heaped teaspoon, and a few paint smears."

Then Talulah stood on tiptoe to prove her point, kissing Mullet-less Murray Tankar's slow-growing smile.



For Keeps

Virginia Suckling

Cade Oakley watched the girl, Bronte, with a face as beautiful as a porcelain doll, open the Pizzeria Napoli's door quietly and come in. Dressed in a wedding gown, she glided past the tables on either side of her, focussing on finding someone.

Who?

Was it him?

No, it couldn't be because she didn't know he was back in New Zealand. And anyway, they hadn't got that far in their relationship.

If only...

Her quarry saw her first. A man whose face flushed deep red like a ripened plum. 'Bronte, what are you doing here?'

His female companion let out a gasp. 'This isn't what you think.'

Bronte stood at the end of the table. 'Really. Tell me exactly what I *am* seeing.'

'We were discussing your wedding, weren't we...?'

'Er...yes,' said Robert.

Oblivious to the stares from the other diners, including Cade, Bronte banged both her hands on the tabletop, plates rattled, glasses swayed ominously until the man grabbed the stems and righted them. ‘Come off it. I know what’s been going on and it’s not been about us, Robert. I had my suspicions, but stupid me, I didn’t want to believe that my best friend and fiancé were having an affair.’

‘We didn’t want—’

‘To hurt me. For goodness’ sake, it’s only two weeks until the wedding and this was my final dress fitting.’

Bronte pulled off her engagement ring and dropped it next to Robert’s dessert bowl. Cade recognised the unholy gleam in her eyes. He’d been on the receiving end of that several times in the past. She picked up the bowl of tiramisu and tipped it into Robert’s lap. Gasps exploded around the intimate restaurant.

Cade chuckled. Good old Bronte.

Turning around, she marched back towards the exit.

Humiliated, Robert gathered up his napkin, full of the dessert and dumped it on his placemat.

Bronte heard the door open behind her. Then Robert took her arm and turned her to face him. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want this to happen. It was beyond my control.’

‘When were you going to tell me?’

‘We were discussing it when you appeared.’

Her emotions shattered. ‘Am I supposed to feel grateful? Because I’m damn well not.’

He didn’t see it coming.

Her right hook was spot on. Blood spurted out of his nose, dripping off his chin and soaking into his tiramisu-spotted white shirt.

‘Sorry about that. It was beyond my control.’ Bronte walked away, stifling a sob.

Her vision blurred with tears, she collided with a brick wall. Or so she thought. Putting out a hand in front of her she felt, not bricks, but a muscled, warm body. Rubbing her eyes, a man stood in front of her. Not just any man.

Cade Oakley.

Damn. Why of all people, did she have to bump into him?

‘Hello, Bronte, long time, no see?’

She gritted her teeth, clenching her hands by her side. These days a successful chef, he’d started off as her friend until the relationship had segued into something

deeper. Her stubborn pride had been the reason for their separation three years ago.

‘Please get out of my way. I’m in no mood for a cosy chat.’

He sighed and stepped to one side. ‘I can see that.’

Had he witnessed that scene in the restaurant?

‘Er... Bronte...’

‘Yes.’

‘If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I’m here.’

She nodded, turned away and walked off towards the bridal shop before she did just that. What was she thinking? Had Robert saved her from making the biggest mistake of her life?

A month later, wedding cancelled, presents returned, she was walking her two Labs. Relief had replaced anger at Robert’s betrayal. Was she as guilty as him? Cade had entered her thoughts more than she’d like to admit.

‘Hello again, Bron.’

Unbelievable. After not seeing Cade for months, here he was, also walking along Napier’s Marine Parade.

‘It’s Bronte,’ she snapped. ‘I don’t like Bron.’ Reason being she’d had too many poignant and intimate memories of when he’d called her that.

‘Okay. Point taken. I forgot. Except for our recent meeting, it *has* been a year since I last saw you.’ he said dryly.

‘Ten months, three weeks and two days, to be exact.’ His lips curved into a brief smile. Bronte inwardly cursed. *Idiot*. Why tell *him* that? ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Walking Sam, Bron...er...Bronte.’

The tan and white mutt, tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth, gave her a wolfish grin and sharp hello yap before charging off towards her two chocolate Labs who had now glimpsed a new companion.

‘Your rental is for sale, I see,’ Cade said, stepping in line with her.

‘Yes.’

‘Staying put or moving?’

‘Moving. My landlords are Robert’s parents.’

‘Ah, I see. Got another place in mind?’

She looked out towards Cape Kidnappers, sighing deeply. ‘No one will accept dogs, especially two. With no family here to fall back on, it’s difficult.’

‘Bad luck.’

‘Something will turn up,’ she said and could have sworn she heard him mutter, ‘and pigs might fly’. She let it pass. Arguing with him was a waste of energy and her reserves were low.

When she glanced up at him, his features were inscrutable. A thought shot into her head, a thought she wanted to dismiss instantly, but couldn’t—she’d missed him. He’d always been there for her and but for that stupid quarrel they could have still been a couple.

‘How was London?’

‘Great. Though, I’m pleased to be home. Still at that law firm?’

‘Yes. I’m now secretary to one of the senior partners.’

‘Good on you.’

They carried on in silence until he suddenly turned to her, his voice hesitant. Unusual for the confident entrepreneur chef.

‘Bronte?’

‘Mmm.’

‘You could move back in with me.’

I could. ‘No way. I’m not that desperate.’

‘Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, sweetheart. When you’ve had time to think about it—’

‘No. No. No.’

Two days later, Bronte stood outside Cade’s Colonial-style house. Taking a deep breath, she walked up to the front door and rang the bell. Minutes went by and no answer.

Relief rather than alarm swamped her. The humble-pie moment delayed. Mentally, a voice admonished her—it has to be sometime, girl. You have no options left.

The door opened and Cade stood there with a towel around his waist. Try as she might, the temptation to imagine the rest of the taut muscles and hidden hairline below the towel was difficult. His cheeky grin didn’t help matters.

‘Bron, to what do I owe this pleasure?’

Darn it. He knew exactly how to push her buttons.

‘May I come in?’

His answer—he opened the door wide, waving her inside.

‘It’s like this, I need a place to stay and I... Don’t laugh. It isn’t funny.’

Cade stopped chuckling, though his eyes still twinkled with amusement. 'That gift horse looks pretty good now, huh?'

'I'm desperate. You don't have to crow about it.'

'Shall we discuss—'

'Only when you've put some clothes on.'

'It's that distracting, is it?'

Bronte turned away and went to look out of the window. He returned a few minutes later, with Sam panting behind him. 'I think Sam is looking forward to sharing his home with three luscious females.'

Bronte sucked in a breath. 'Needs must where the Devil drives. I wouldn't be here if—'

'You don't have to explain, sweetheart. I can imagine the soul searching, the sleepless hours it's taken you to pluck up the courage to knock on my door.'

'Huh, I might have known you'd rub my nose in it.'

In answer, he grabbed her arms and held her facing him. 'I'm telling you a home truth. And while we're at it, Robert wasn't for you, sweetheart. I'm sorry you had to get hurt.'

'How did you know?'

'I was eating at the Pizzeria. Great right hook, by the way.'

She stared into his eyes and saw sincerity instead of the habitual mocking look. Then he spoiled the moment by winking at her. *Was he pitying her?* Bronte wanted to slap his face. Instead, snagging her handbag, she marched past him. 'I'll find somewhere—'

'Cool it, Bronte. I always could get you to rise to the bait. Don't go. Of course, you can stay. We'll gladly give up the solitary life for you, won't we, Sam?'

'A pity you didn't think about me at the Christmas party.'

'Not that old chestnut again. She kissed *me* under the mistletoe. Anyway, she left the restaurant ages ago. Now what's it going to be?'

'Please, can I move in?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Whenever you like.'

'Tomorrow morning?'

'Perfect. Do you need a hand?'

'It's okay. The rental was furnished, so I only have a few suitcases.'

'The offer's there if you change your mind.'

'Thanks.'

Bronte returned the next day, excited at the thought of staying in Cade's house again. He had even put a vase of flowers on her dressing table.

Coming down the stairs after putting her cases in her bedroom, she found Cade had made a cup of tea with a scone next to it, adorned with a dollop of cream and jam. 'Is this a Cade-Oakley-pick-me-up?'

'Call it what you like. I thought you needed a bit of a boost.'

'You're right there. Thank you.'

'How's the spare bedroom?' His dark brown eyes bored into hers.

She broke eye contact first. Her hand clasped the mug tightly. *Why did he have to remind her that last time she was sharing his bed?* 'It's fine, thank you.'

'At least you won't be disturbed by me getting up at all hours.'

I wish. 'Too right. I suppose you are busy with the new restaurant.'

'I've no complaints, but I've discovered life's too short to live to work. I'm going to take more time off, have more balance in my life to enjoy family and friends.'

Cade moved closer to her. She moved backwards, stumbling over one of the Labs. He grabbed her above the elbows, steadying her. Whipping a handkerchief out of his pocket, he dabbed at her upper lip. 'You had some cream—'

Suddenly compelled to say, she blurted out, 'Forgive me, Cade. I've been such a fool.' *Oh no, he'll laugh at me.*

Cade smiled down at her. 'But you're *my* gorgeous, sweet, loveable fool.'

Bronte found it hard to breathe. Her eyes fixed on his as he lowered his head and kissed her gently on the lips. *I'm home. This is what I've missed. Robert did us a good turn. I'll have to tell him one day.* 'I love you Cade.'

He pulled her into a tight embrace. 'This time, sweetheart, it's for keeps.'



Pretty In Pink

Pamela Swain

We lined up either side of the dance studio, eyeing each other up. Seven of us. I knew my partner would be the late number eight. It reminded me of the village dances of my teens, where the braver females danced around their handbags, while the males clung onto the walls with one hand and clutched a pint of beer in the other. Twenty years later, there are no brave females here, nor any handbags. Maybe the handbags held the courage? I stared at the polished wooden dance floor until the studio door slammed open and a dishevelled swamp monster stormed into the room.

“One puddle. Just one damn puddle in the entire street, and some dickhead has to drive through it while I’m waiting at the crossing.”

He bent over and peeled off his wet jumper, half taking his equally wet tee shirt with it, leaving his toned abdomen exposed. He glanced in my direction, noticed my wide-eyed stare, yanked his tee shirt down and a blush crept from his neck upwards. It

pleased me that I, complete with stretch marks and invisibility hovering on the horizon, could still make a man blush? Yay. My lucky day. I wondered if his heart had fluttered like mine the moment I saw him.

A nudge in the ribs from my best friend and bride-to-be, Eva, jolted my attention away from the action. “James likes you.”

I turned towards her, “And you base this on years of studying Dr Google, I presume?”

“Ouch. But I’ve never seen him blush before ... maybe because he’s a nurse and seen it all, just like you.” She prodded me in the ribs again. “He keeps sneaking glances in your direction.”

When I turned to sneak a look in his direction, our eyes locked until a man buzzed into the room and announced he was Simon, our dance instructor. James’s eyes narrowed like arrow slits at the sight of Simon.

I pointed at the instructor and mouthed, “Dickhead?”

Laughter erupted from around the room which indicated I’d spoken out loud, instead of the mime I’d intended. Wall to ceiling mirrors projected multiple images of my blush from hell.

Profuse apologies and introductions followed and somehow James ended up in an outfit of black leggings and a baggy pink top courtesy of Simon the instructor. He’d emerged from the changing rooms and sashayed around the dance floor like a runway model.

During a break, I flopped down on the chair beside James, who had managed to find a fan from somewhere. He offered it to me.

I shook my head. “Thanks, I’m okay, but you go for it. I can’t believe Eva expects us to do Nut Bush and Gangnam Style. In a Queensland summer. She must be mad. All I’ll want to do is hug an ice bucket.”

James turned to face me. “Believe it. The pain is immediate and real.” He pinched a wad of legging material in his fingers. “I know because I’m the one having to drag these ridiculous things out of my arse every few minutes. Makes me wonder what I’ll wear for the real event, though.” He released the material and it snapped back into place.

I’d rather enjoyed seeing the outline of his thigh muscles through the figure-hugging material and loved his outfit realignment procedure. I bit my lip to stem the laughter waiting to erupt. “Pink is definitely your colour though. Now tell me, how do

you know Eva?

“Her fiancé is my best friend. He only agreed to dance if I did, too. So here I am, complete with two left feet.”

Gangnam Style blasted through the sound system calling us back to the floor. The more we practised, the worse we seemed to get. Maybe the imaginary lasso caused James’s knee to buckle and the pair of us to land in a mangled heap on the floor? We hauled each other into a sitting position and sat for a moment to get our breath back. I was conscious of the heat of his body so close to mine and the citrus and spice cloud of his cologne surrounding us. Once Simon established neither of us were injured, the dancing continued around us.

As we trooped out of the studio, Eva called over her shoulder, “You pair better get your act together before the next session, because we’ll be learning the waltz, too.”

I groaned.

James caught hold of my arm. “Just kill me now, please. It’ll be less painful in the long run. Why do they want a warm up act anyway?”

“It’s a ‘thing’ at weddings these days - to get everyone on the dance floor.”

“It won’t be at my wedding.”

“When is your wedding then?”

“It’s not decided yet.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’ve only just met her.”

And then he grazed my cheek with the briefest of kisses and charged off after Eva’s fiancé.

My six-year-old daughter, Chloe, clomped into the bedroom wearing a pair of my high heels, pink fairy wings over her yellow pyjamas and casting spells with her wand as she leapt onto the bed.

“There was a man at the door. I told him you were still in bed because you couldn’t move after yesterday and I said I’d show him up here, but he said that probably wasn’t a good idea.”

Despite my aching muscles, I shot out of bed and charged across the room and slammed the door shut.

“What man? And what have I told you about answering the door to strangers?”

“He said you danced with him yesterday.”

I flumped down on the bedroom chair and pressed the heels of my hands

into my forehead and then drew her into my arms. "Please don't ever answer the door again unless mummy is there."

"But you are here, Mummy. The man said I can call him James and he's got a note for the lady with the beautiful emerald eyes. Anyway, I think he's got the wrong house because your eyes are green."

I eased her off my lap and pointed to the chair. "Stay here while I go to the bathroom and get dressed, and then we'll go and see what he wants."

I found the pair of them in the kitchen. James stood when I entered. He looked every bit a princess with his pink tiara and glitter in his hair. He shrugged in an apology.

"Sorry, I was posting a note in the letterbox when I was ambushed."

"So I see. Chloe thinks you've got the wrong house because my eyes are green, not beautiful emerald."

He had the decency to blush. "I'm not some crazed stalker."

"Glad to hear it. How long have you been here? And how did you know where I lived?"

"Long enough for the ransom money to be paid." He held up his hands for me to examine his pink fingernails, "And get my nails done ... and Eva asked me to drop off the note for her as I live nearby. She said it was urgent."

"Might have known."

"Oh, and your mother has taken the dog for a walk. She thought we'd appreciate the alone time."

"Oh for fu..."

"Mummy. You're not to say that word. It's swearing."

James opened his mouth about to say something.

I pointed a finger in his direction, "Don't say a word."

"No ma'am, or is that yes ma'am?"

Our walk along the esplanade drew surprised glances from others out enjoying the sea air. Chloe, resplendent in her yellow pyjamas and pink fairy wings, waved her wand and granted wishes, while James raced after his tiara as it took flight after a sudden blast of sea breeze.

"We'll have to get elastic bands to attach it to my ears next time, Chloe."

She rolled her eyes. "You can use Mummy's hair grips."

"She might not want me to use them."

It took me a while to realise they expected a response because I was too busy

thinking about a next time.

We sat on the edge of the stage at the sea front oval and watched my mother, Chloe and the dog wander off to get an ice-cream.

James touched my arm and I almost catapulted off the stage because of the zap of electricity that pulsed through my body. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you jump, but I’ve had an idea.”

“Good for you.”

“This is a stage.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“I’ll dob you in to Chloe. She showed me her swear box. All donations are from you it seems.”

“No-one likes a dobber. Just what time did you arrive at my house this morning?”

“Seven-thirty.”

“Good grief, Chloe didn’t wake me until nine.”

“In my defence I kept trying to escape, but your mum arrived at the same time as me and we chatted over breakfast ... and it’s difficult to run while you’re waiting for toe nails to dry. I was told that if I put my shoes on too soon the varnish would scrunch up and we’d have to start again.”

I was speechless, my mouth wide open and eyebrows raised.

James slipped off his shoes and pointed to his toes. “We only had to redo one.”

“In mauve?”

“We ran out of pink.”

I allowed my gaze to travel from his feet and up along the contours of his body. The hairs on the nape of my neck raised as I sensed him watching me. Our eyes met.

From his toes to his tiara, his good nature sparkled like glitter. I’d met my soul mate.

He leant forward, cupped his hands either side of my face and peered into my eyes. “Penny for them.”

My breath quickened and despite being flooded by warmth, I shivered at his closeness. His deep blue eyes lured me into their depth and it took a couple of attempts before I could speak, “You’ll need more than a penny.”

“So how about my good idea?”

“You’ve not told me yet.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, I can’t think straight near you.”

Unable to resist our closeness, I pressed my lips against his and experienced zero gravity for the first time.

Mum and Chloe, assisted by the internet, were self-appointed choreographers and the stage, our dance studio. It was where James and I learned to hold each other, dance and fall in love.

We decided Kiss from a Rose would be perfect for our wedding waltz later in the year and that pink would be the feature colour. But before then we had Chloe’s choice of warm-up dance to learn.

The stage had proved to be a great idea.

As for Eva’s urgent note, it was blank.



Unmasked At Mardi Gras

Caenys Kerr

Britt hugged the camel coat closer, bowing her head against the bitter onslaught of the snowy wind. Would the DC winter never stop?

She edged through the office door. “Mail,” her assistant said, without looking up.

“Thanks, Mike.” She snatched the largeish package, scurrying to drop it on her desk at the rear of the open office space. Unwrapping her scarf, flipping off her warm woollen cap and unbuttoning her coat, she eyed the utilitarian envelope. She hung her outer clothes on the rack behind her chair and tugged on the fingers of her gloves.

Tearing away the outer layer of the pack revealed a beribboned white box, headlined ‘NOLA Mardi Gras WINNER’, and slashed with purple, green and gold stripes. Her heart beat double-time, her diaphragm contracted to the point of discomfort and her mind raced. She flopped into her seat.

A minute later, she dialled Mike’s number. “Break room, now,” she croaked, hung up, grabbed the package and skittered through the door in the far corner.

“Britt, honey, are you sickening for something?” Mike touched the back of his hand to her forehead.

Arching away, she asked. “What did you do with the Mardi Gras entry I wrote?”

He shrugged his massive shoulders, hooking one fist on a cocked hip. “I sent it. Your creativity bloomed, dear child. All that Shakespearean angst—far too good to waste. Why?”

She jerked her head at the box.

“Whee! You won. Myron and I will look after you. You can get warm for a few days and forget about the macho piece of shit you live with.”

“Tyler’s not a piece of shit. He doesn’t see me as a woman is all—just his landlady, scarred and unattractive. He’s been away working mostly since the others left, probably so he’s not alone with me.”

“Blind bastard. Give me the deets.” He opened the box revealing a lanyard, and a purple and green upper-face mask surrounded by gold feathers. The lining of the package, turned out to be a light-as-air, full-length, gold lamé domino. “This is divine. You’ll be gorgeous. You could wear jeans under this and still be fab-glam.”

Britt scanned the letter he’d tossed to one side. “I’m to ride on a float in the grand finale parade, Mike. What? I can’t. Everyone looking at me...” she said, lifting one hand to her burn-scarred cheek.

“Of course you can, my pretty. You’ll be all dolled-up and hiding under this fantabulous disguise. You can be whoever you want to be. Strut it. So exciting!”

“You can twiddle your hands in the air as much as you like. I’m immune to your histrionics. This is real.”

“Yes. It. Is. Get ready.”

Two weeks later, she stared at a non-descript brown door half way along New Orleans’ famous Bourbon Street. “Are you sure this is the place?” she asked the two men flanking her.

An opening appeared and a red-turbaned woman eyed them up and down.

“Hello, sweetie, we have the gorgeous ‘Rosalind’ at your behest,” Mike said, using the stage name they’d chosen as part of the contest conditions.

“Yeah? Y’all best get in here. If she’s Rosalind, who is y’all?” the woman asked.

“We,” Mike said, laying a languid hand on his partner’s forearm, “are the queen’s loyal eunuchs to protect her.”

Her gaze narrowed on Mike’s dark hair, slid over the mahogany perfection of his face and arms and across to the Nordic beauty of Myron. “Ebony and Ivory, eh? Okay, we’ll make it work. I’m Jo-Beth. The king is running late because of Dallas weather, but he’ll be here, his sister assures me. If he’s not, one of you boys can step up. I’ll

print your passes,” she said, wedging herself into a niche between towers of pamphlets.

“Y’all will ride on the City of New Orleans float. You boys can toss the beads along the way while the queen waves her pretty hand. 5.30 sharp,” she said, handing over the passes and map.

Dismissed, the trio retraced their steps and caught a streetcar to St. Charles Avenue.

“Tyler James Weston, you will be the Mardi Gras king if I have to spike your drink and kidnap you to do it.”

“I don’t reckon kidnap is part of a sister’s prerogative, Martha.”

“It is, when said sister is hell-bent on dragging you from a well of self-pity because your landlady doesn’t reciprocate your feelings. Go. Have fun. Fall in love with the queen. Enjoy yourself.”

Easier said than done, Tyler groaned hours later, stumbling out of Louis Armstrong Airport with a white box tucked under one arm and a backpack slung over his shoulder.

The plane was late. His pre-ordered taxi was a no-show. The heavy traffic on the I-10 creaked to a standstill. The Gods didn’t want him to be the Mardi Gras king any more than he did—even for the sake of finding someone to take his mind off Britt.

His landlady was a sweet, young woman who’d taken in house-share partners to make ends meet and keep the home her grandmother bequeathed her. He’d loved her from the moment they’d met—every part of her: the cheeky giggle, her sense of humour, their shared delight in Shakespeare, but, if she caught him looking at her, she’d touch the scar on her cheek, drop her gaze and invent a reason to leave the room.

She’d worked her way through college to become an actuary. He’d opted out of the college route and become a plumber. He always had work. Lately, he’d been staying with his sister in Dallas, avoiding being alone with Britt in case he said or did something to make her ask him to move out of the Washington house permanently, now that her well-paying job meant she didn’t need the extra money.

He ordered the cab driver to wait, dropped his bag at hotel reception and tucked the key into the back pocket of his jeans. Ducking into a nearby bathroom, he threw on the full-length shiny, purple cloak thingy, tugged the rest of the gear under his arm and sprinted to the car.

A turbaned woman met him at a roped-off area for the colourful floats. “You’re late.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The NOLA float is next to leave. Here’s your pass.”

“NOLA, ma’am?”

“New Orleans, Louisiana. Don’t they teach you yankees anything? The domino looks great. Put your beard and mask on.”

“Domino, ma’am?” he asked, keeping pace with her loping strides, looping elastic straps for the gold beard over his ears and donning the mask.

Her glance echoed her earlier derision. “Your cloak. How do you think I knew who you were? Up you get. Don’t mind the eunuchs. They’re friendly. They’ll toss the bling. You and the queen wave, right?” She shouted to a man further along. “Let’s go.”

“Hey,” the soft voice in the gold cape said, “I’m Rosalind.”

“Orlando,” he chuckled.

“As You Like It,” they chorused.

“Yeah,” he said, relaxing for the first time in five hours. “You here of your own free will?”

“Blame Ebony,” she said waving her hand to the guy behind her. “You?”

“My sister entered me.”

“Ditto Ebs. I’m likely to freak with people looking at me,” she said, raising one hand towards her face hidden behind the mask. “Just so you know.”

“Nah,” he said, taking the hand and holding it aloft as they encountered the first crowd of well-wishers. “You’re the queen. Wave.”

His voice had the low timbre of Tyler’s though muffled through his beard. It could have been that or the strength in his hand that sent a frisson raging through her. The only guy whose slightest touch affected her like that was Tyler. Her heart pounded. If an absolute stranger made her feel this way, was she finally ready to move on? Did she want to? She’d loved Tyler in her heart for years, never quite able to gather the courage to do anything about it in case he irrevocably rejected her and her scars.

She stiffened her spine. She’d take the weekend as it came.

Holding this woman’s hand was as natural as breathing. There was a connection between them. He didn’t let go.

Forty minutes later, the parade was over. The turbaned woman deployed a step-stool for the queen to guide her down. “Next is the civic reception.”

“Jo-Beth, there was nothing about a reception,” Rosalind said.

“An oversight. You’ll be the city’s guests at dinner, followed by your unmasking.” She strode to the next float.

“Um...” The queen’s voice trembled.

“Stick with me,” Tyler-Orlando said. “You’ll be fine.”

“You don’t understand...”

“Listen, this is one night. You’ll never see any of these people again, unless you live here. Do you?”

“No, DC.”

“Me too, usually. Relax and enjoy yourself. I’m no happier about this than you seem to be. My meddling sister wants me to move on from the love of my life. I’ll try.”

“How sad. Did your love die?”

“Nah. She doesn’t know I exist.”

“I can identify. It was my friend’s reason for entering me in the contest too.”

“Same hymn. Same song sheet.”

Anticipating the unmasking would have left Britt in an anxious turmoil, self-conscious as she was about the scars caused by a fireworks accident when she was a toddler. Orlando kept distracting her.

“Why choose Rosalind,” he asked. “The competition asked for a Shakespearean character. You could have been anyone.”

“Rosalind has the courage to demand her lover prove himself before he realises who she is. I wish I could be so brave. You?”

“Unrequited love at first sight like Orlando.” He tugged the beard lower to take a sip of wine.

“Pretend I’m Ganymede,” she said. “Woo me as if I were your Rosalind.”

“I can’t write poetry, but I would tell you I love the way your eyes light up when we share a joke. The battle scars in your life that you worry about so much, make you more desirable because you stare them down, and finally, I couldn’t imagine the rest of my life without you.”

“Oh. That’s beautiful.” Tears welled behind Britt’s eyes. “Why haven’t you told her?”

“She closes down if we’re on our own. I make her uncomfortable.”

“My problem too. I’ve loved my guy for years but he’s repulsed by my appearance and avoids being alone in the same room.”

“We’re a pair.” He chuckled.

“Yeah.”

“Time to unmask,” Jo-Beth stood on the raised platform next to their seats.

“Stand back-to-back and take off your headgear.”

Unmasked, they pivoted slowly to face each other.

“You?” they said together. “You love me?”

“Tyler?”

“Britt?”

Shocked immobility gave way to arms banded around each other and a passionate kiss for all the world to see.

“Well, folks,” Jo-Beth addressed the audience, chuckling. “Looks like it’s another successful Mardi Gras. Good night.”



Me and Lizzie D

Susie Frame

When I arrived at lunch in the stuffy dining room my Parisian silk tie was turquoise. But now, thanks to the events that unfolded while I was eating my soup, it's turquoise with a splattering of Mulligatawny.

Peacehaven's manager, Marianne Jolly, screeches. "Attention everyone! All eyes this way."

There's a clatter of silver cutlery on bone china. Everyone looks up obediently. I don't. I know it's rude to disobey, but after a year of rule-abiding at the Peacehaven Retirement Village, aka 'Heaven's Holding Pen', I'm locating my inner adolescent. I'm not letting my lunch get cold for anyone.

Marianne clears her throat. "I'd like to introduce our newest apartment dweller, Miss Elizabeth Donovan."

Did I just say I'm not letting my lunch get cold for anyone? I retract... anyone, that is, *except* Elizabeth Donovan. Or could this be another Elizabeth Donovan and not the object of my schoolboy infatuation?

I look up. The soup spoon slips from my grasp and liquid splatters all over my brand-new tie. Even after sixty-three years there is no disputing the woman standing

beside Marianne is *my* Elizabeth. *My* Lizzie, who, despite being in the same class as me for one whole delicious year, probably doesn't even know my name.

"Good afternoon, Elizabeth," says the Peacehaven chorus.

I drink Lizzie in and my breath stalls. "Oh, my stars, Lizzie D. You're still as beautiful as ever."

Twenty-five sets of eyes swivel in my direction. Oh dear. Don't tell me my thoughts have just escaped from my mouth. Again? I feel flashes of heat streak my cheeks. I curse this inconvenient habit of verbalising my inner-most thoughts; a lifetime habit sadly borne of a lonely bachelorhood. I retrieve my spoon and nonchalantly resume swallowing mouthfuls of Mulligatawny, now cold and far from appetising.

"Roly Poly! Is that you?"

What? She knows my name? Lizzie D knows my name!

"Oh, my Lordy!" Jennifer Lomas chortles at the table behind me. "Roly Poly? I have to say that suits you to a tee."

Granted, I *was* a little on the pudgy side when Lizzie and I were twelve, and now, thanks to the 'too-much-energy-in-not-enough-out' equation, I've put on a few pounds since I've been at Peacehaven, but, I'm not the only one. Little does Jennifer know, but her penchant for double helpings of the afternoon tea pikelets and cream has earned her the moniker, Lumpy Lomas. Not that I'd call her that to her face. I'm a gentleman. I'd never stoop that low.

I look up. Lizzie is smiling at me, the corners of her Cupid bow mouth up-turned, her smile reaching all the way to her bright electric-blue eyes.

I'm twelve again.

The sight of her smiling lips melts the glacial muscle beating in my chest.

"Sit wherever you like, Elizabeth," Marianne says, her tone brusque, matter-of-fact. "I'll bring you some lunch."

"Do come and join us, Elizabeth," Lumpy calls out.

Obviously, I want the only girl I've ever loved to sit with me, but I'm not going to say a word. It's going to be hard enough living the whole Roly Poly thing down without looking like a desperate Roly Poly into the bargain.

"Thank you so much for your kind invitation," Lizzie says, walking in the direction of Jennifer's table, before turning to face me, "but I think I'll have lunch with Roland."

I put down my spoon before Lizzie sees my trembling hand. How ridiculous? And

at my age, too? But why should age matter? Attraction isn't just the domain for the young, surely? I've read lots of stories about this kind of thing happening in the Autumn of one's years.

"Is it okay for me to join you, Roland? Or..." Lizzie points to the unoccupied chairs at my table, "...do you prefer to eat in peace?"

I stand, pull out a seat for Lizzie and whisper quietly in her ear, "Nothing would make me happier. I hate eating alone."

Lizzie sits. "Thank you, Roly. Still the consummate gentleman, I see?"

"What do you mean?" I say, shaking a folded pristine white linen napkin out to lay on Lizzie's lap. "*Still* the consummate gentleman?"

"Your manners were always impeccable. Don't you worry, I noticed how polite you were all those years ago?"

I'm not going to lie. This is a bolt from the blue. Not only did Lizzie D. know my name back in the day, but she noticed me. This unexpected news makes my heart sing. "You noticed my manners? Really?"

"Uh-huh. You always held doors open for girls. And you thanked the teacher at the end of the day."

I nod at the memory. "Manners maketh the man, my father used to say. And his perennial favourite: good manners will always take you far."

Although how true that is I'm not too sure. I managed to go far vocationally, granted, but good manners certainly didn't stop me from being socially inept. Never did find a Miss Right - as an adult, that is. My twelve-year old self certainly found one, though.

Lizzie nods. "He was absolutely right. Your manners impressed me. But do you know the thing that stood out the most for me and ruined any chance at happiness with any—"

"Mulligatawny soup and a slice of ciabatta, Elizabeth," Marianne announces, practically throwing Lizzie's lunch in front of her.

Seriously? You've got to be kidding me. Marianne is never around when you want her and when you don't, she turns up like decomposing cabbage. I curse Peacehaven's manager under my breath. I think Lizzie D. was about to tell me...well, honestly, I don't know what she was going to tell me but I'm convinced it was shaping up to be something quite profound.

"It looks simply delicious. Thank you so much, Marianne," Lizzie says.

Yeah, thanks a bunch, Marianne.

I wait until Marianne leaves the dining room. “Don’t mean to be a killjoy, Lizzie, but looks can be deceiving.”

Lizzie nods and strands of her grey-blond bob escape from behind her ear. “I know that only too well, Roland,” she says, her voice reflective, quiet.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?”

Was this a reference to the way I looked sixty odd years ago? Jam jar glasses, short and stocky, a moss-green cabled vest stretched across my ample stomach?

“I learned a lot from you, Roland.”

Another bolt. I had no idea Lizzie took one blind bit of notice of what I said back then. “Really? What do you mean by that?”

“You taught me never to judge a book by its cover.”

“Oh? Did I? Well, thank you.”

I watch as Lizzie parts her pale pink lips and delicately takes a mouthful of soup. “Oh, my word, Roland. How right you were.” She leans in closer to me whispering conspiratorially, “If only I could tell Marianne Jolly-By-Name-But-Not-By-Nature this would have to be the worst soup I’ve ever tasted!”

I laugh. Out loud. Jolly-By-Name-But-Not-By-Nature? Why hadn’t I come up with that? Lizzie’s a woman after my own heart. Now, to get her back to our previous conversation without looking too eager. I know it sounds conceited but I’m dying to know what she was going to say about me.

“Attention everyone!”

Oh, for pity’s sake. I wish Marianne Jolly-By-Name-But-Not-By-Nature would take a running leap along with that blinking awful voice of hers.

“Just a reminder the Peacehaven van will be out front at six-thirty tonight for those of you who’ve signed up for the local retirement villages’ Scottish Country Dancing evening.”

“Sounds like fun,” I say, wondering if Lizzie can detect I’m being slightly facetious and would rather stick pins in my eyes. “It reminds me of those Wednesdays when we had to do compulsory Scottish Country dancing for clubs.”

“Yes, how could I forget those Wednesdays?”

“Terrible, weren’t they?”

“Dreadful.” Lizzie puts down her spoon and rests her chin on her steepled hands. “The worst, in fact. I had to watch you dance with Edith Langham,” she says.

I don’t think it’s my imagination but is that a hint of avocado green colouring her

words? “Oh yes, poor Edith. Well, if I hadn’t danced with her, nobody would’ve. I don’t think her clothes ever saw the inside of a washing machine and she had the most terrible assortment of warts on her hands, you know.”

“I do know that, Roland. Yet, you still chose her. You were so kind. I’ve never met anyone as kind as you since then.”

“My MO has always been to be as kind as you can,” I say, deleting the name ‘Lumpy Lomas’ from my memory bank.

Lizzie smiles as she rests her liver-spotted hand on top of mine. A pleasant warmth seeps through my skin and travels up the length of my arm.

“Do you know how much I wished I was Edith Langham? How much I wished it was my hands you were holding?”

Forget a pleasant warmth. A burning heat is now scorching my neck. I loosen my Jackson Pollock-esque tie and gulp half a glass of chilled mineral water. Forgetting about the pins I’d rather stick in my eyes, I locate a dash of daring and clear my throat. “Well, Lizzie D, I don’t know if you’ve noticed but we’re not getting any younger. Why don’t we find out if there are a couple of free seats on that bus tonight?”

“Ladies and gentlemen. Take your partners!”

I turn to face Lizzie. Her blue eyes sparkle in the bright lights of the local community hall. They lock on mine. The moment I’ve longed for is here. My breath hitches and my heart hurtles against my ribs as I extend a hand towards her.

She slips a delicate, smooth-skinned hand into mine. It’s a perfect fit. She smiles up at me then stands. I place my free hand on the small of her back and guide her to the dance floor.

Pre-recorded music trickles out of an old CD player. The dance begins, but my joy at finally holding Lizzie close to my body is suffused with the agony of knowing that, according to the rules of the dance, I will have to release her to the arms of another man in less than five seconds.

“Change partners!” comes the call.

“Over my dead body,” laughs Lizzie, holding onto me tightly. She takes the lead and dances us away from the others until we reach the exit door at the back of the hall.

Under a star-studded sky, Lizzie and I dance to our own tune. She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me in.

A contented sigh escapes from my lips as her mouth meets mine.

Our kiss – sixty plus years in the making – is worth the wait.





Sprinkled With Memories

Amy Hutton

The music started softly at first, drifting through the air on the sultry summer breeze. Ellie tilted her head towards the clear blue sky and listened, smiling as the melody became clearer.

She peered over her fence and chirped out an excited squeak. An ice cream van was parked down the street, the familiar strains of *Greensleeves* lilting from its speakers.

Leaving her e-book on her chair, she dashed into her house, grabbed her wallet and dug out two gold coins.

“Four dollars should do it,” she muttered as she shoved the money into her shorts pocket.

She hurried down the path, slid into line, and studied the menu on the side of the van. By the time she realised four dollars wasn’t going to be enough, she was staring up into a pair of sparkling blue eyes.

“Sorry,” she said, her voice strangely breathy. She began to step away.

“Where’re you going?” the ice cream man asked.

“I don’t have enough money.”

“How much have you got?”

She showed him the two gold coins.

“That’ll get you a single soft serve.”

“But I want one with sprinkles. And that’s five dollars. Which, to be honest, is completely ridiculous. I mean, do you charge by the sprinkle?”

He barked out a laugh and broke into the most dazzling smile she’d ever seen. Then his eyes narrowed, his teeth bothering his bottom lip as his gaze drifted to her mouth, before lingering on her face long enough to make her squirm.

“Tell you what,” he eventually said. “How about you fix me up next week.”

He gave her another smile, this one even more spectacular than the first, and her breath hitched. He was sun-kissed and pretty, with unruly brown hair, eyes the colour of the ocean and a jawline that could cut glass.

Her cheeks flamed, and she shook her head. “I couldn’t.”

He leaned forward, his tanned forearms resting on the window ledge. “It’s no trouble. And this way, I know you’ll be back.”

His voice was deep and thick with gravel, and she nervously tucked a strand of ginger hair behind her ear. “If you’re sure.”

“Sprinkles, right?”

She nodded, and swallowed hard.

He straightened up, his bluer than blue eyes not leaving her face until he slowly turned towards the soft serve machine.

Her lips mashed together as she appreciated her new view—his broad shoulders and strong back, and the way his muscles shifted and flexed as he moved her cone. She lifted onto her tiptoes and admired how his cargo shorts perfectly hugged the curve of his butt, and the golden skin of his thighs that peeked from beneath their hem. When the woman behind her tittered, Ellie promptly dropped to her heels.

He rolled her ice cream, almost sensually, in a bowl of rainbow-coloured dots, then carefully pressed a piece of *Flake* chocolate into the side and presented it to her with another breathtaking smile.

“The *Flake* is on the house,” he said.

She took the cone in a trembling hand, passing him her coins with the other, softly gasping as their fingers grazed and tiny sparks of heat exploded along her arm.

Ellie dropped onto a stool in her kitchen, her pulse still stuttering, and wrapped

her mouth around the cool tip of the ice cream. Memories instantly flooded her mind. Of summer holidays and caravan parks, and Billy, the first boy she ever loved.

From the age of ten, every Christmas school holidays her family drove from Sydney to the coastal paradise of Seal Rocks. They stayed in a caravan park beside the beach, and her days were filled with sunshine and surf. Billy's parents owned the cabin next door, and for three glorious weeks every summer, she and Billy were inseparable. He would pick wild freesias for her hair, and use his pocket money to treat her to ice cream from Mr Costa's van. And one steamy night, as *Powderfinger* played on the radio, they shared their first kiss.

It was the first of many kisses—at the lighthouse, and the rock pool, or behind the ice cream van giggling because their parents were only metres away.

Then the year she turned sixteen, Billy didn't show. His mother gently explained he was spending his holidays with his new girlfriend.

Her heart had shattered that Christmas, and she never saw him again.

Twelve years on, and she still thought of him.

* * *

By the time Sunday came back around, Ellie was a bundle of nerves. She told herself she was being ridiculous—she was a grown woman, she needed to chill. But when the first notes of *Greensleeves* floated up the street, her insides fluttered uncontrollably.

She tucked her money into the pocket of her sundress, took a deep breath, and followed the sounds of the familiar tune. As she slipped into line behind a father and son, the ice cream man glanced up and his gaze collided with hers. Her stomach flipped, and she squeezed the ten-dollar note in her pocket with a sweaty palm. When she finally stepped up to the window, he crossed his arms over his sizeable chest, and grinned.

"I thought you weren't coming," he said. "I thought you'd skipped town with my money."

Ellie laughed. "I did consider fleeing to South America with your dollar, but..." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the wrinkled note. "Here's what I owe you, and enough for an ice cream with sprinkles."

He leaned forward, his blue eyes twinkling and his lips dangerously close to hers. "And here I was thinking you came to see me."

She wasn't prepared for the rush of heat that pooled urgently in her belly, and she

shuffled on the pavement. “Nope,” she said, then took a beat. “Well, maybe a little.”

His face broke into another heart clenching smile, and she wondered just how many smiles he had.

“I was thinking,” he said, as he turned to make her order. “How would you feel about going on a date with me?”

“Oh. Er. Um,” she stuttered. She was glad his back was turned so he couldn’t see her blush.

He swung around and handed her a chocolate dipped waffle cone filled with two mounds of sprinkled covered soft serve. “This one’s on me.”

She squinted an eye, a smirk playing on her lips. “Is this a bribe?”

He laughed. “I’m hoping I don’t need to bribe you.”

She smiled. “You don’t.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Yes.”

He beamed. “I’m Liam.”

She beamed back. “I’m Ellie.”

The evening was steamy, and the sun sat low in the sky.

Liam was standing in the park where they’d agreed to meet, his ice cream van behind him—music booming from its speakers, with fairy lights ringing a pink and white striped awning, and a rug laid on the grass.

Ellie walked towards him, her heart somewhere up near her throat.

He stepped forward, holding out a posy of white freesias.

“Oh. Wow. Freesias are my favourites.” She clutched them to her breast. “And are you playing *Powderfinger*?”

“Ah...Yeah. We should probably sit.” He helped her to the ground, made sure she was comfortable and poured her a glass of champagne. “Have you been to Seal Rocks lately?” he asked.

“Seal Rocks?” Her brow furrowed. “Not for ages. Why?”

A smile almost cracked his face in two. “I couldn’t believe it when you showed up at my van. All the times I’ve thought of you over the years, and then there you were.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s me, Ellie. It’s Billy. Remember? Pashing at the lighthouse. Kissing to *Powderfinger*.”

She blinked. “But—”

He nodded. “I know. Liam. After school I decided I’d outgrown Billy, and well, at the time Liam seemed cooler, so...Anyway.” His eyes searched hers. “Please tell me you remember.”

Her breath quickened as her gaze drifted over the details of his face. The cobalt eyes that flashed with mischief whenever they’d secretly kissed, the lush pout that’d been as soft as velvet against her lips, and the unruly brown hair that never looked as if it’d seen a brush.

It was him. Really him. It was Billy. Her pulse knocked against her ribs.

“Hi,” she said. “You filled out.”

His face lit up, and he laughed. “It’s been a while.” He tentatively took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. “I need to apologise for hurting you back then. I was an idiot.”

“We were just kids.”

“Doesn’t mean I haven’t been kicking myself ever since.”

Her gaze dropped to their hands, her heart booming. “What’s with the ice cream van?”

“Remember Mr Costa?”

Ellie nodded.

“I ran into his son at Seal Rocks. I still surf there sometimes. His dad had just died, and he was selling the van and, on a whim, I bought it.”

“That’s Mr Costa’s van?”

“The very one we used to make-out behind.”

Her eyes skipped between his. “Did you know it was me that first week?”

“Not straight away. But then I noticed that little freckle on your lip. The one I used to kiss.”

She touched her mouth. “You remembered that?”

“I remember everything about you.” He put down his champagne and shuffled forward—his throat bobbing up and down with heavy swallows. “Ellie. Can I please kiss you? I’ve been dreaming of kissing you again for years.”

Her heart hiccupped, and without answering, she leaned in and crushed her lips to his.

His mouth was hungrier than she remembered, and he tasted sweeter. The hand that splayed over her hip was larger, and the back she caressed rippled beneath her touch in a way his teenage back never did. She wove her fingers through the tangle of his hair, and when the tip of his tongue touched hers, she gasped into his mouth.

They kissed and kissed and kissed some more, making up for the lost years.

When they finally came up for air, she tenderly cupped his cheek.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” she whispered on uneven breaths.

“It’s me,” he said, with one of his million gorgeous smiles.

She gazed at him for a long beat, then quirked her lips and nodded towards the van. “So, does this date come with ice cream or what?”

He arched a brow. “I don’t know. Can you afford it?”

She clambered into his lap. “Can we come up with a payment plan?”

He laughed. “I reckon we can work something out.” Then he pressed his mouth to her temple, and whispered, “I’m never letting you go again.”

And when their lips found each other’s once more, Ellie knew that the boy who’d been her first kiss, was the man she’d be kissing for the rest of her life.



The Third Night of Eternal Prosperity

Pragati Vasisht

“Rrrrrriipp”.

Uma heard it, and so did everyone else on stage. As she got up to speak at the lectern her dress snagged on a protruding nail, ripping it on the side.

“Really? Today?” she thought, scanning the damage, her eyebrows burrowing closer into each other until you couldn’t tell one from the other.

She strode up to the lectern anyway, one hand clutching the side of her dress while the other adjusted the mic. She spoke directly to her table at the conference hall.

“Can someone please bring me my handbag? There’s a bit of a situation here.” There was a smile in her voice but unmistakably, this was an order. Her hapless table-neighbours scurried to find said handbag, while the hall slowly became aware of the woman now arresting all their attention.

The handbag duly delivered on stage, Uma reached for her stole and stylishly wrapped it around her hips to conceal the tear.

“You’re not winning this, *nail!*” she resolved, “I am!” And began to address the audience like nothing had happened.

Dev's eyes never left Uma as he watched this sequence unfold. He turned to the stranger next to him and whispered "Who is *that*"?

"Uhh", said the man pointing to the conference agenda, "says here she's Uma Dixit. She's been nominated for the Innovation Award, from New Zealand", his contempt barely concealed having to state the obvious.

"Aaahh", Dev conceded as he raised his eyebrows and flashed a sheepish smile. He leaned his long legs back into his chair.

He knew who she was.

He just wanted to know how it felt to hear her name from a stranger's lips.

In the darkness of the hall nobody saw his smile disappear, nor felt his heart sink, as his mind wandered further... "But who are you *now* Uma?"

"And are you still mine...?"

* * *

"Just look at the top of their heads," an old mentor had told her. Uma remembered this as she addressed the audience.

She was in the limelight once again and had learnt how to enjoy it over the years. Except this time... there was a strange unease. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone wasn't here to listen to her speak, but to simply watch her move.

"To summarise," Uma's confidence boomed across the hall, "evidence shows our innovative approach being an essential tool in reducing deaths and injuries in our most vulnerable communities".

It was over. Out of the limelight, she morphed back to her shy self. She was done. Tired. Admirers would later come up to her as she mingled with the crowd, reluctantly, looking at no-one but perhaps searching for someone...

"He lived here," she thought, "on this university campus". "So?" she chided, "will he hang out here all his life?" Angry with herself, she once again felt tired.

A figure moved in the background, a familiar voice... Or did she imagine it? Uma became motionless and quiet, straining to hear something, though not sure what. Then like a tigress going for the kill, swung suddenly, as if she could pounce on the sound.

He wasn't there.

Like he hadn't been for the past twelve years.

* * *

Dev thought Uma had seen him.

“Not yet,” he thought. He wanted to be alone with her in this moment.

Watching her moving, her dress hugging curves and her stole swaying around her hips. Her dark curly hair falling over her furrowed brow as she scribbled notes. Her shyly peeking through them to politely smile at her neighbour.

He was alive again, with her. Suppressed memories flooded back...

“Why do you love me?” he had asked. First to humour her. And himself. But eventually, with dread. Petrified at how deep he had entered her, and slowly realising she would drown if he left. When he left. Knowing he’d never love her the way she loved him.

“I don’t love you. I just use you to top up my cell phone”, she’d lie while covering his face with kisses.

At the airport, she had wept into his arms. Her kohl-rimmed eyes clear where the tears had been, her nose red. She was beautiful, and in that moment, breathtakingly so.

He had felt so small. He had broken her completely.

And he never even said sorry.

Dev twisted her black choker in his pocket, wondering if she’d ever looked for it? He watched Uma now as she spoke like she was all-conquering, moved as if nothing had ever hurt her and nothing ever could.

He knew now what he didn’t know then.

That hearing her name from a stranger’s lips felt like a crackling fire on a cold winter’s night. Like finding home after being lost.

That you could be devastated in love, and still want more.

And suddenly, he felt a lightness.

It had dawned on him that he was finally her equal in love.

Uma lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of the guest hostel room. The day before she had seen Dev’s name carved into the board of the hostel’s past Secretaries’ list and had felt a strange pang of pride. She was in his city of Delhi, his old university, even in the same hostel he had lived in for years. She had jumped at the opportunity to present at Dev’s alma mater to deliberately experience this feeling.

“Why though?” If I haven’t forgiven him, why do I look for him? What will I even do if I see him again?” Uma had asked herself these questions thousands of times, never getting an answer. Eventually she had stopped questioning. Dev Rai was unfinished business, and Uma Dixit did not like loose ends.

The WhatsApp call sang out on her phone.

“Yes Ma”, she said, as her mother requested a video call, staring with a gentle smile into her daughter’s face.

“It’s Akha Teej tomorrow. Will you come home?” her mother asked.

Mrs Dixit had been delighted at Uma speaking at the university conference near their ancestral home in Delhi, and promptly lodged herself there for a couple of months.

“No, I think I’ll stay in the hostel.”

“Is it nice there?” her mum enquired.

“It’s just easier to be at the hostel while I’m at the conference” Uma said. This was half the truth.

“Well, the neighbourhood is holding a grand function! And we need to buy something new! It’s auspicious to make new beginnings on Akha Teej” her mother reminded her.

As if jolted awake from a deep slumber, Uma knew then what she had to do.

“Tomorrow”, Dev thought. “Tomorrow!”

He would go up to her tomorrow.

“What will she do when she sees me?” he wondered.

“What will *I* do?” he thought.

Excitement, panic, regret... and love rushed through him.

He had a lot to make up for.

Delhi’s heat beat down on Uma as she set out to find where Dev worked. It was mid-afternoon by the time she made her way through a veritable maze of office blocks with obscure signs and no visible reception. She had decided not to be nervous until she stood outside Dev’s office.

Which was now.

Her heart thumping in her chest almost drowned out the receptionist’s questions. “What am I doing here!” she panicked. But there was no going back now.

“Uma”, she stammered her name after enquiring for Dev.

“Sorry ma’am. Looks like he’s away today and tomorrow”, the receptionist brusquely replied, completely oblivious that her words had cut Uma like a knife through jelly.

Nobody really noticed, but Dev was far from his usual happy-go-lucky self that morning. His was a hungry desperation, flitting between conference halls, shamelessly staring down people, trying to locate that one familiar face. The thought of being so close and losing her again despairing him more.

But she was nowhere.

He swooped in on a man she'd been talking to the day before. "Excuse me", he politely enquired, struggling to contain the feverish impatience inside him, "I was curious about Uma Dixit's lecture yesterday. Is she here today?"

"Oh, no. She said she might go see her mum today", the colleague replied.

He might as well have slapped Dev straight across the face.

Dev felt lost again.

He headed home.

* * *

Uma sat dejected, tears brimming in her eyes. Dev still had such a grip on her. Why?

For the thousandth time, she felt broken again. The numbness wasn't new, what surprised her was how deep it still gnawed at her. She did not remember how she got to the Metro train, watching the world pressed against the sliding doors, streaming in and out of the platforms like water at the shore.

Dev had deliberately worn the shirt she'd bought him all those years ago. It sat tighter on his waist now. And even in Delhi's heat of May, the woollen scarf she'd knitted him hung around his neck. He looked odd, ridiculous even.

"Well, I *do* want her to recognise me" he had excitedly thought getting dressed that morning. Serendipity had to be helped somehow, right? She couldn't just hide behind masks in this pandemic-ravaged world.

He gripped Uma's black choker in his pocket a little tighter, wondering why. She wasn't there.

The train door slid open. Uma reminded herself that a big bad city like Delhi did not care for heartbreak. She still had to get out and face the world. Standing up to leave, she caught a silhouette on the station platform.

Uma's heart stopped as she walked right into Dev.

* * *

The shirt.

The scarf.

She frantically searched for other signs.

He was still six feet tall.

She did not have time to think as waves of people streamed in and out of the train, threatening to carry her with them.

“Akha Teej” her mother’s words swirled in her head.

She squeezed his arm and pulled his mask down.

Dev was shocked out of his heartbroken stupor. Uma’s kohl-rimmed eyes, widened in shock and glistening with tears, searched his and dazzled him again.

They were both unmasked now.

As if the world was in on the conspiracy, the crowds on the platform pushed and shoved them away from the train and closer and closer into each other’s arms. He held on to her as tightly as he could. His arm slipped around her waist; her arms tightened around his while they caught their balance.

They stared into each other’s eyes long after the crowds had disappeared. Eventually, he reached for the choker in his pocket and put it around her neck.

It was Akha Teej, festival of the auspicious Third Night of Eternal Prosperity.

This beginning was going to be different.



No Profile Picture

Sage Willow

Some of you may think I'm weird. And after reading my story, maybe you'll come to the same conclusion. My name is Tess. No last name. I wouldn't want to give away my identity. I am 24 years old and work full-time as a librarian. I'm five foot six. Dress size 10. Brown eyes. Black hair. And I enjoy swiping right on profiles with no pictures on Tinder. Weird right? But hear me out, those with no profile pictures always have something to hide. And the writer in me is naturally curious about what they are hiding. There is one question that I do ask every guy I match with. *What is the naughtiest sexual thing you've ever done?* And gosh, you would be surprised by some of the answers. Let me start by telling you about Stu. Stu was a rugby coach. A rather well-known one. When Stu sent me his picture, I was pretty impressed. He was hot! Tall, fit, green eyes. Irish. This is our conversation on the chat.

"So, Stu, what is the naughtiest sexual thing you've ever done?"

"I've had a threesome with two ladies."

"Really now, I'm curious. How did that happen?"

"Well, it was back in Ireland. I was dating a lovely woman, and she invited me to her place. Her mother was there too. Her mother made a pass at me, and the daughter didn't mind. It was freaking hot."

"Wow. Intriguing."

So, when Stu asked if I wanted to meet him, I agreed. We met at the Waikōwhai park in Auckland one cloudy afternoon. The park boasted challenging but spectacular bush treks and a lookout that gave you a fantastic view across Manukau harbor. Go check it out for yourself sometime. Since we were the only ones at the lookout, Stu made his move, and I allowed it. I stood at the railing, looking out at the view, and Stu came up behind me. He slipped his arms around my waist and kissed my neck lightly. I loved the feeling of soft lips against my neck. It is one of my sweet spots. I tilted my head to give him better access and leaned against his muscular body. I could feel him hard and ready, pressed at the small of my back. Slowly, I turned my head, and his lips kissed mine. The kiss was damn good. I was breathlessly surprised to feel his tongue piercing. I've never known anyone to have a tongue piercing. As I was wearing jeans, he discreetly unbuttoned them and slipped his fingers inside. I have to tell you. Stu knew what he was doing. He touched and teased in all the right places. His lips left mine and moved lightly to nip at my ear lobe.

"Now, imagine my pierced tongue between your legs." He whispered.

I can tell you for certainty that there was a very pleasurable climax with just his fingers. Soon after, we heard voices nearby and quickly straightened ourselves to present a smiling innocent couple. If you're wondering, did Stu and I ever meet up again. The answer is yes. It was a week later, and let me tell you, Stu knew precisely how to use that pierced tongue. It was the best pleasure I've ever had thus far. After our naughty session, Stu and I said goodbye, and I haven't heard from him since. Some guys are like that. They want a quick pick me up, and that's okay because, for me, this is simply exploring my curiosity.

Before you go judging me, I do have some class and standards. I don't sleep with every guy I meet. There has to be mutual chemistry. I always met with them in public first to assess them and practiced safe sex. Also, I never go out with multiple guys at once. It is usually a guy every few months. You might be surprised to know that Stu was my first since my escape from my abusive ex-husband a year ago. This was a way for me to control my narrative.

Fast forward three months and the next guy that I met was Ben. Ben was in a

relationship, and according to him, it was miserable. I asked him why he didn't leave her. To which he didn't have an answer. I asked my usual question.

"What's the naughtiest sexual thing you've ever done?"

"Haha, no one had ever asked me that before. Umm... It was sex in the park with my gf when we started dating when things were actually fun."

Rest assured, Ben was pretty vanilla, but I decided to meet with him because he sounded sweet. We met at the Titirangi café; he was rather pleasant. Average in height, weight, and looks. We chatted for a while, but there wasn't any chemistry. After finishing our coffee, we shared a light kiss at the carpark. It was average. I told him thanks, but I didn't feel any chemistry. I always make a point to be honest; lucky for me, he agreed. We said goodbye, and that was it.

Now Ash was another story. There was nothing average about Ash. The picture he sent... Oh boy! The only way I could describe him was EFFING SEXY. The man oozed sex appeal. Tall, eight-pack abs muscled solid body with his light grey eyes. He looked like he had stepped out of a fitness magazine. Hence, I asked him my regular question.

"What's the naughtiest sexual thing you've ever done?"

"Babe, I've done so much that I can't classify which one was the naughtiest. There was 3some with two ladies. 3some with a lady and a guy. Sex on plane, park, beach, ocean, restaurant, carpark. I don't think there was a place where I haven't had sex. The naughtiest, though, would have to be the BDSM club. Hell. That was a whole new level. And now I'm hooked."

And that was when I bailed. Ash sounded like a guy way out of my league. I didn't think I had anything to offer him. He didn't seem to agree and kept messaging, promising he would rock my world, turn it upside down and inside out. Such lovely words. Good thing I never gave him my number, so it was easy to block him on Tinder.

Most of the 'no profile picture' guys I chatted with didn't even pass the chatting phase. So, for the next few months, I didn't meet anyone. There was Carter, who turned out to be pretty scary in his messages. Very demanding and persistent. His naughtiest sexual experience was BDSM in the extreme end. It sounded like he wanted a sex slave. A guy name Peter simply sent a picture of his dick, to which I replied I had never seen anyone whose face was a dick. I don't think he appreciated the joke. I thought it was pretty funny. And then there was Sam. Good ol' Sam was the police officer in Gisborne. He was attractive in your typical kiwi bloke way.

When I asked him what the naughtiest sexual thing he had ever done, his

answer was this—*being on Tinder while he was married*, I don't know if I believed him, but it didn't really matter to me. Sam and I did share some naughty pictures. We even video called while he was in uniform on duty, in his police car parked outside a residential area while I strip tease for him. Sam had a way of directing me into sexual touches that I simply couldn't resist. It was his uniform and his suggestive voice. We had fun for a few good weeks until one sunny afternoon; he was stroking himself while watching me stroke myself when suddenly a woman's voice called out that she was home. I assumed that was his wife since I never heard back from him after that. I don't know if he got caught or simply didn't want to risk coming back on.

Then there was Aiden. Aiden was engaged to get married in less than three months. He was charming, even in his messages. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and fit. He pulled off the bald look better than Vin Diesel. Okay, maybe not. But close enough. His blue eyes were mischievous. I asked him my question.

"What's the naughtiest sexual thing you've ever done?"

"The naughtiest? I've done so much. Lol. I guess it would have to be a 3some with my girlfriend and her friend."

We chatted for a couple more days before we decided to meet for coffee at the Coffee Club. I sat at the table near the back window, ordered my coffee, and waited. And waited. And waited. Halfway through my coffee, I got a message from Aiden apologizing that he couldn't make it, but he had a surprise for me. That piqued my curiosity. I was so focused on messaging him back that I didn't realize a man was standing at my table.

"Tess?"

Startled, I looked up from my phone and gasped. My phone slipped from my fingers and into my half-drunk coffee. I could feel the heat flushing my cheeks. I quickly took my phone out of the cup and dabbed it with the napkin. He sat on the chair opposite me as I wiped my phone, but my attention was on him. This stranger was handsome. Ruggedly handsome. Well over six-foot-tall, broad shoulders, thick dark blonde hair with ocean blue eyes. Those eyes were sparkling in amusement.

"I'm Markus. Aiden's older brother." He smiled, and a dimple on his right cheek appeared. I was captivated. My heart was racing against my chest. Was this Aiden's surprise?

"I'm Tess. I'm assuming Aiden isn't going to make it."

"No. I'm here to make sure he doesn't make a mess of his life."

There was something about Markus. We fell into an easy conversation about his

brother. Safe to say, Markus was not impressed with Aiden's extracurricular activities, but this was the first time Markus had stepped in. We talked about everything under the sun. Markus made me laugh so much that my stomach hurt. It was like that world faded away; it was just the two of us. We ended up ordering another coffee.

That turned into lunch.

That turned into dinner.

And before I knew it, we were on our third date. When he walked me to my front door at the end of the night, I couldn't hold back my curiosity and asked my usual question.

"What is the naughtiest sexual thing you've done?"

Markus's lips tilted in a slow smile; his ocean blue eyes darkened as he leaned in and captured my lips in an extraordinary kiss.

It was on our 30th wedding anniversary. I broke away from my husband's kiss and smiled at him.

"You never answered my question. What is the naughtiest sexual thing you've done?"

"You."



The Avocado Affair

Lyndsay-Jean Campbell

Running on hard sand beside waves curling into the horseshoe shaped bay was pure joy, and today she'd waved to another runner, a man she'd never seen in Pukemaru Bay before. Tracee had just got in when the phone rang. She lifted the receiver while wiping the sweat off her face.

'Saw ya out running darl. Gorgeous legs. Wish I had your body.'

'Hi Davina. I'm trying to get in shape but two pregnancies don't help.'

'Wait till you hit the menopause, love. Everything sags then.' Her croaky smoker's laugh sounded like gravel falling off a truck and Tracee moved the phone away from her ear.

'I'm holding a little luncheon. Just some locals. There's someone I'd like you to meet.'

'Oh, sure. I'd love to come.'

Davina was a complete contrast to the conservative farming types she'd met so far. She wasn't her usual kind of friend, but was such a flamboyant character that Tracee couldn't help liking her. Anyway, Davina knew the boys were with their dad for

Easter, and that she was free to socialise.

Tracee had been an ordinary teacher until the previous year, 1988, when she'd applied for the principal's job at Pukemaru Bay School. She'd needed a fresh start after her marriage breakup and the job came with a house. She was surprised to win it, and only learned after she'd arrived how remote the place was and that its strict religious community had driven the last principal out. Christians were alright, but this lot were fundamentals and judgmental. They apparently hadn't realised she was a divorcee and a single mother. That hadn't gone down well.

The job had meant a big move, but the boys loved the place and so did she. After spending the morning in the school office with stats and a pile of correspondence, she slipped on a dress, brushed her hair out of its pony tail, applied some lip gloss, then pulled her bike out of the shed and rattled down the unsealed road.

Davina and her toy-boy, Ron, had turned up in the bay about three months before. There'd been all sorts of speculation about the couple but no one really knew who they were. Davina wore the clothes and jewellery of a wealthy socialite but her brassy manner didn't match the look. Tracee was intrigued. Why would a classy couple like that come to a little place like Pukemaru Bay? A woman who lived on a budget, she had a tendency to notice and add up the costs.

When she arrived, several parents from the school were already seated on the deck with glasses in their hands. They clearly weren't from the religious community, but needing to preserve whatever professional image she could muster, she usually avoided mixing with parents. News of the new woman principal had fuelled the gossip mill for weeks, but lately, she'd felt a shift; most of the families had decided to accept her.

Ron loomed with a bottle of sparkling wine and a plate of canapes. It was a beautiful spot looking out over the bay. Her hostess had dressed for the occasion in a floaty psychedelic outfit she called a mu mu, accessorised with a heavy gold chain around her neck, clanking bangles and dangly earrings. Was that necklace real gold? Tracee settled in a cane chair and crossed her tanned legs. She pulled at the hem of her skirt. It felt good to get out of the shorts she usually lived in.

'We're waiting on Pierre,' said Davina. 'He promised to come.'

'Pierre?' Davina had a secretive look on her face. What was the old girl up to?

Gravel crunched as a motorbike pulled into the driveway. A male figure dismounted and removed his helmet to reveal a mop of dark curls. When he smiled up at the guests on the balcony, she recognised the runner from the beach. A warning

flashed in her mind. No involvement, no gossip and no scandals had been her motto since moving to Pukemaru. Davina clattered down the steps.

‘I’m so glad you made it back, Pierre,’ she gushed, as she brought him into the house.

‘I could not miss your party, cherie.’

The man actually had a French accent. Where on earth had Davina found him?

They had moved inside to be seated at a table set with white linen and all the correct glassware and cutlery. Davina had placed Tracee strategically opposite Pierre.

‘We met at the fishing club.’ Davina seemed to have read her mind. ‘Pierre lives on his yacht down the river.’

He raised a quizzical eyebrow. His eyes sparkled brown, and something in her responded. There’d been no men in her life since the breakup. Again, her motto flashed its warning in her brain.

‘Happy Easter ladies and gents.’ Davina raised her glass.

Then, Ron entered from the kitchen with the style of a head waiter balancing a silver platter on one hand. Sitting on individual plates were halves of a pear-shaped fruit and the fruit’s dimpled black skins contained bright green flesh topped with a small pile of seafood.

‘Avocado Shrimp Cocktail,’ Davina announced. ‘My specialty - all the rage in Sydney.’

Tracee’s former social life had consisted of smelly rugby clubs, where the menu ran to meat pies, or fish ‘n chips and beer. She had never seen food as exotic as this. Her avocado looked so pretty she simply stared.

‘Dig in.’

Her spoon dipped into the green and pink marvel. She couldn’t speak for the explosion of creaminess and the flavour of ocean on her tongue.

She raised her eyes to meet Pierre’s warm brown ones over the avocados. He smiled again and her heart leaped.

‘You like?’

‘Oh yes. I’ve never had avocado before and it works perfectly with shrimps.’

‘C’est magnifique.’

After more platters of food they returned to the deck. Ron reappeared with wine at frequent intervals and the afternoon disappeared in a haze of sun, sea and conversation. Pierre’s European style, his delightful French accent, and his sparkling brown eyes became more fascinating as the sun began to descend. Suddenly it was six

o'clock.

'Thanks for the lovely afternoon, Davina.'

'Let me escort you home,' said Pierre.

'No, no.' She gathered her things and found her way to her bicycle. She was a little tipsy, but managed to wheel the bike to the road before mounting and wobbling back along the beach front. The sea had turned tangerine and gold, and wavelets rippled in a lacey edge. She felt happier than she had in a long time.

Next morning she woke with a raging thirst and a slight headache. The phone was ringing.

'I hope you don't mind my call Tracee.'

'Pierre. You're still here?' She had been dreaming about afternoon they'd spent together. His tanned face, the sexy French voice and that warm-as-chocolate smile.

'Yes. I go today. Please will you come with me beautiful Tracee. I think you will like my boat.'

The way he said her name, Tray-cee, made her feel special, like someone she didn't know.

'I will bring you home tonight.'

She knew she shouldn't, but surely a girl deserved some fun. And before she could regret it, her motto had flown.

She laughed into the warm wind and hugged Pierre's leather clad back as the motor-bike swayed around the bends. Someone had probably seen her going off on a motorbike with a stranger, but she no longer cared. This was such fun, it was her life and there'd been a shortage of fun of late.

Pierre's yacht was moored in middle of the river and she sat like a lady in the stern as they rowed out, enjoying his strong body as he pulled the oars.

The yacht was wooden, a two-master. It was a wreck when he bought it, he said, and he had spent a year fitting it out before setting off on his big adventure. They sat in the cockpit looking into the small, well equipped galley. Pierre's bed made a cradle at the bow. He told her tales of sailing from Europe to America and across the Pacific Ocean to Australia and New Zealand. What an exotic life. How did he fund it? She didn't like to ask.

Lunch was a green salad with bread and fish he'd caught himself. He took her soft hand in his gnarly one and looked deep into her eyes. She knew she was taking a risk being on a boat, alone with this virtual stranger, but she was a grown woman and her

instincts told her she was safe.

His kiss was as gentle and his body slim and warm beside hers. The afternoon melted into evening. He sang some folksy tunes and played his guitar. They talked and drank wine. Would she stay? Of course.

A romantic morning was followed by a late breakfast. Pierre seemed distracted. He said he needed to meet someone on shore.

The remains of warmth and closeness from their night together were still present as they rowed to the jetty where Pierre tied up the dingy. He indicated a bench under a tree.

‘Please wait here, Tracee,’ he said. Pierre seemed fidgety.

She sat on the bench for several minutes then began to fidget. A tall man emerged from the shadows. He and Pierre stood together talking, their heads close.

Tracee had recognised Ron immediately. Pierre pulled a brown paper parcel from his satchel and another small bag, a sample she assumed. Ron opened it, sniffed and looked pleased. Money changed hands. Her questions were answered.

She returned to where Pierre would find her, common sense and her responsibility for the school’s children suddenly feeling like a sack of rocks on her shoulders. She liked Pierre a lot and in the short time she’d known him had begun to imagine a life with him. How foolish. The disappointment was intense. She thought of Davina, and her fancy lifestyle. Would she report them?

She’d had an amazing time with a lovely Frenchman and a night filled with romance. Men like Pierre did not come along often. By the time Pierre arrived back at the seat, she had decided. She looked into his brown eyes.

‘I saw you with Ron. You’re dealing drugs aren’t you?’

He coloured and shrugged. ‘Just a little marijuana from South America, Cherie.’

‘I have to be careful ... my job, my boys.’

‘Ah,’ he said, crestfallen.

‘We need a new groundsman at the school. Would you be interested, Pierre?’

His face lit up. ‘Ah, oui – you will give me another chance Tracee?’

‘Just one and no drugs.’

She let her head rest on his shoulder and he stroked her hair. Let them gossip. She would take a risk for love.



Long Time Coming

Sage Willow

Blair Hayes walked downstairs into the open-plan living area. Her mother was in the kitchen with her sister-in-law. In the living room with her older brother Conner, her father was talking about the rugby game tonight. And there, standing next to her brother, was Mark. Her breath caught, just as it did every time she looked at him. He was just so handsome. He was well over six feet, broad shouldered and muscled from all the rugby games he played for the local club. Mark was what you would call ruggedly handsome with short dark hair, a rough stubble which she knew was soft to touch, and with equally soft lips.

NO. She was not going to think about their kiss. This was about moving on from Mark. She was done pining for a man who was not interested in her even though they had shared a kiss that had her body trembling with pleasure. That was six months ago. Since then, nothing. It would have been better if Mark had acted like Blair didn't exist. Instead, it was worse. He went back to treating her as his best friend's little sister. Which she was. Dammit. But still.

When she was fifteen, Conner introduced Mark to the family. Blair soon developed a major crush. Mark, at eighteen, thought of her as nothing more than his best friend's sister. Clearly off-limits. Fast forward ten years, her crush had turned to love. Mark was kind, funny, fiercely protective, and had a good heart. She had hoped that the extraordinary kiss they shared one warm spring night after the family dinner would be the start of something. Except it was like ice-cold water thrown at her face when he returned to treating her as he had in the past ten years. But now she'd had enough. She was done waiting for him. It was time to move on.

"Eric will be here shortly. Sorry, I'm going to miss dinner. It does smell good," Blair announced as she dropped her handbag down on the couch. They all turned to look at her, and silence filled the room.

* * *

Mark turned at the sound of Blair's voice and froze. What? That was not Blair. Not the Blair that he had known for the past ten years. His Blair was wholesome, pretty with her heart-shaped face, cute lips, bright green eyes and deep brown hair. This woman in front of him was not Blair. The skin-tight red halter dress showed every bit of her soft curves, and the black six-inch heels made her legs striking. Her makeup was dramatic; red lipstick with dark eye shadow, and thick hair teased to fall over her shoulders. His body instantly reacted. He closed his fingers into fists and shoved them into his pockets.

"No. No freaking way." Conner looked outraged.

"What?" Blair smiled at them innocently.

"Blair." There was a warning in Blair's father's deep voice.

"Honey." Blair's mother stepped out of the kitchen, concerned, wiping her hands on the hand towel.

Before anyone could do anything, the doorbell rang. "That must be Eric," Blair said, picking up her handbag and smiling at them. Mark noticed she avoided his gaze altogether.

She walked over to the front door. Mark's eyes dropped to the sway of her ass, and it took all his effort to bite back a growl of hunger. They all watched as Eric stepped inside, and the tension in the room heightened. Dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, Eric's arms were covered in angry skull and death tattoos. His long black hair was held back in a ponytail, his expression filled with dark lust as he looked Blair over. Eric wrapped his arm around Blair's waist and pulled her flush to his chest. He went in for a kiss, Blair turned her face, and his

lips pressed against her cheek instead.

Mark's eyes locked with Blair across the room. Eric must have whispered something to her that had Blair's eyes flashing with concern for a moment. Mark's instincts screamed to stop her. This was not the Blair he knew. Not the Blair that he had tried so hard to not fall in love with.

Blair gave them a little wave, Eric barely acknowledged them, and they were out of the house with the front door shut.

"No freaking way," Conner growled as he turned to Mark. "This is all your freaking fault." His eyes were burning in anger. "She's in love with you, and you've been flaunting your dates in front of her. I swear if anything happens to her...." He left the sentence unfinished, but his eyes spoke volumes. Conner's father stood and walked to Mark with an expression of worry and resignation.

"If you have love, Mark, tell her. We would welcome you with open arms as we have for the past ten years. You are family."

* * *

Blair was seriously regretting her choice of Eric. This was too wild for her. She stood at the bar of the biker's club with music blaring and members drinking, laughing, and dancing very provocatively. Some weren't even discreet with their open kisses and sexual touches. Eric, thankfully, was busy with a few other men who were equally tattooed and even pierced so he hadn't paid too much attention to her, though he kept her close. She was way out of her league here. It was a mistake. She excused herself to go to the ladies' room. Eric barely glanced at her as she made her way out. Blair took a deep breath of fresh air and shivered in the late-night air. She now wished she had brought her jacket. She made her way past the members drinking outside, ignoring their lewd comments at her appearance until she was grabbed at the waist and pulled back into a hard chest. "Let go of me!" Blair barked, trying to push away.

"Where are you going, sweet pea?" Eric's voice sent a shiver of dread through her. "I didn't think we were done for the night."

"I am." She spun around, putting her hands on his hard chest, and pushed against him. "Look, I'm sorry. This was a mistake." She tried to keep her voice from trembling. Something flashed in Eric's eyes.

"Let her go." A deep snarl came from behind her. Mark stood a foot away, hands fisted, ready for a fight.

Eric stood to his full height; he let go of Blair's waist but kept his hand on her wrist. "Leave. This doesn't concern you." The members of the club who were outside

stood behind Eric, showing strength. Blair felt a real fear this time. There was no way Mark could take them all on. It could get ugly.

She turned to Eric, her eyes pleading as she spoke softly. "Please, let me go. This was a mistake. I didn't mean to use you like this."

Eric's hard eyes fell to hers, and Blair thought he would refuse; instead, he let her wrist go. He spoke to her in a quiet voice. "Go, little girl. We bikers might look scary, but we don't hurt innocents."

She stared at him and realized maybe she had never been in any real danger with Eric, but she wasn't going to hang around to test that. She turned and walked towards Mark, whose angry gaze never left the bikers until Blair was next to him. He took her hand and led her to his pick-up truck. Without a word, Blair got in. She looked out the window as he got into the driver's seat and started the engine. She blinked back tears. This was just too hard. Maybe it was really time to let Mark go. That realization caused a sharp pain in her chest. It would be hard to let him go.

It wasn't until Mark pulled into the driveway that she realized they were at his house. She remembered how proud she was of Mark when he'd bought his first home. "What are we doing here?" she asked, but Mark turned off the engine and got out of the truck. He came around and opened the passenger door. "Mark?"

"Inside." The anger in his tone ignited hers as she stormed to the house.

* * *

Blair dropped her bag on the couch and swung to glare at him. "Why am I here? What do you want?"

"What the hell do you think you were doing, dressed like that? Going out with a biker? Do you know what could have happened to you?" Mark growled out the words.

"Nothing that I didn't want," she fired back. "It's none of your business anyways. You made it clear you didn't want anything from me." Dammit, her emotions caught in her throat. She had loved this man for so long, waited for so long, and now she was ready to let go.

"Blair..." Mark began. What a fool he'd been, wasting all this time he could have had her.

"No, Mark." Blair shook her head as tears pricked her eyes. She was not going to cry in front of him. "It's too late." She lifted her chin and pulled back her shoulders. It was time she left.

Mark caught her wrist as she walked past him; sparks ignited as their skin touched. Blair's pulse raced hard against her chest as she turned to look over her

shoulder at him. He moved to stand in front of her. He released her wrist to run his fingers over her bare arm to her bare shoulder, caressing up her neck till his fingers were buried into the thickness of her hair. “The kiss. I haven’t been able to get it out of my head. Your lips,” his finger traced over her lips, his voice thick with desire.

She parted her lips ever so slightly.

“I’ve wanted you for so long.”

Blair couldn’t believe what she was hearing. All this time, Mark had wanted her. “Then why?” She reached up to touch his stubble. Just as soft as she remembered.

“Because you are my best friend’s sister. I tried to do right by you. By your family. They took me in when I had no one.”

Blair knew Mark had come from a broken, tortured home. It made her ache for him.

“And now?” she asked as he leaned his face towards hers, their lips a bare breath apart. His lips brushed against hers. Once. Twice. His eyes locked with hers. “I love you, Blair.”

Her heart burst with happiness. She had waited so long to hear those words. “I love you too, Mark.”