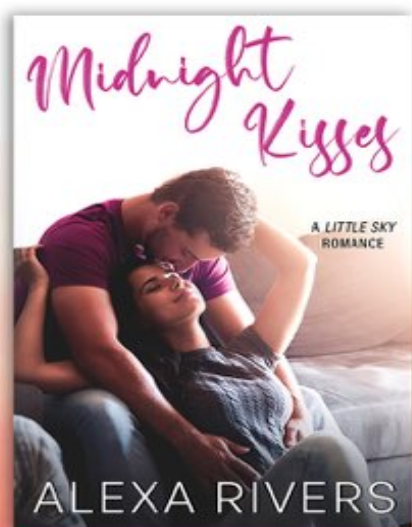


Little Sky Romance

NOVELLAS



ALEXA RIVERS

LITTLE SKY ROMANCE NOVELLAS

ALEXA RIVERS

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Second Chance Christmas

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Accidentally Yours - Excerpt

Accidentally Yours

Also by Alexa Rivers

About the Author

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MIDNIGHT KISSES

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Take that, Chloe Somers.

Emily Parker shook her fall of long red hair out of the way and scrutinized the bridal bouquet—an arrangement of white orchids and roses. Satisfied, she placed it in the center of the wedding party’s table. She tweaked a single flower that had drooped, and adjusted the ribbon holding the bouquet together. *Perfect.* No one could possibly accuse her of doing a sub-par job just because she loathed the bride, not when she’d pulled together a masterpiece with hardly any notice. Moving on from the bridal bouquet, she set out four smaller bouquets in front of the seats marked for the bridesmaids and groomsmen. She eyed them critically.

Everything had to be just right.

Even though she would prefer not to be involved with this wedding—the second Chloe Somers wedding she’d been hired to decorate—she couldn’t afford to turn down work. Not in a town the size of Itirangi, despite it becoming something of a wedding destination. Another year or two and she had no doubt her floristry business would be booming just like her gift store and commercial rental business. Happy couples were drawn to Itirangi by the gorgeous backdrop—the azure lake that was glacier-fed and the stunning green-brown of the surrounding mountains and forests. The picture-perfect New Zealand town.

Over the past few weeks, foreigners and out-of-towners had descended upon the town in droves for their summer vacations, so Emily's gift shop was bustling, and all of her tenants in the refurbished heritage building she owned—ranging from book stores to artist studios to beauty parlors—were experiencing the same wave of activity. She could barely afford the time away to decorate the vineyard restaurant for Chloe's wedding.

At the thought of Chloe's previous wedding, Emily's stomach lurched uncomfortably. Planned for a little less than a year ago, that first wedding had been canceled two weeks before the big day, when Chloe had dumped the groom to run off with his second cousin—who, incidentally, was the groom of *this* wedding. Emily wanted to drag both Chloe and her fiancé over a field of hot coals.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that this wedding actually *happen*. Though Emily would be paid either way, she could think of no better punishment for the groom, Rich Belvedere, who'd stolen another man's woman, than to live the rest of his days with Satan's Mistress as his wife. Furthermore, Emily was a professional, and firmly believed that everyone should have a beautiful wedding. She could put her feelings aside for as long as it took to give Chloe her dream wedding, and cash the paycheck.

Strolling outside to her car, Emily took a moment to enjoy the chirping of birds in the trees that ringed the graveled parking lot. The warm wind rustled through the vineyard behind her, carrying with it the scent of leaves and fruit. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she wiped it with the back of a hand. From her car, she retrieved an awkwardly-sized box where she'd stored the table centerpieces and maneuvered it back inside the restaurant, the weight causing her no problems because her arms were toned, accustomed to the heavy lifting.

Hands on hips, she surveyed the reception room, taking stock of the raw materials. A number of long rectangular tables covered by white tablecloths

dominated the space, contrasting pleasantly with the wooden walls and floors. The large windows provided a beautiful view out over the vineyard. The place had good bones.

She started assembling the table decorations, an elegant arrangement consisting of silver candlesticks with towering white candles and simple but elegant bouquets. The candlesticks were heavy. She couldn't help but think she wouldn't mind whacking the bride upside her head with one. Gently, of course. Just enough to give her a shock. Payback for running out on a good man, and for the years of torment Emily had endured at her hands in high school.

Carrot top, Chloe had called her. *Chubby cheeks*. *Ginny Weasley*.

Actually, Emily hadn't minded the last one. But regardless, after being bullied by the gorgeous Queen Bee, she could barely stand to be employed by her. The past few days, Emily had needed every ounce of her patience, and regular sessions watching kitten videos on YouTube, to make it through.

"Hey, Em."

Emily swung around, her smile wavering at the sight of Justin Simons. His broad frame filled the doorway, and his thumbs were hooked into the pockets of his jeans. He looked crazy-handsome despite the faded clothes, the halo of unruly dark hair, and the scruffy beard that hid the lower half of his face. Her silly heart danced a tango in her chest. Justin could crawl guerrilla-style into her house after spending a month battling through the wild forest that bordered Lake Itirangi, and Emily would still think he was the most striking man she'd ever laid eyes on. Hands down.

If childhood bullying was the first reason Emily hated Chloe Somers, then Justin Simons was the second.

"Justin," she said, her voice breathy. "What are you doing here?"

Did he know what today was?

Almost a year ago, Chloe had left him with the responsibility of cancelling their wedding while she skipped town with Rich. It couldn't be a coincidence that he was here now. Did he plan to sabotage the wedding? Try to win Chloe back? The town had been abuzz with speculation after Chloe ended their relationship so spectacularly, and Justin had retreated into his house by the forest, grown a beard, and barely spared a kind word for anyone since. His surliness didn't stop Emily's foolish heart from wishing he'd see her as something other than a little girl, or a friend of his sister.

"Scoping out the wedding," he replied gruffly, shifting from one foot to the other, as if he regretted saying hello and was itching to leave.

She shouldn't be offended. Justin seemed uncomfortable in *anyone's* presence these days. He was more of a loner, spending time with his family but few others. All of the locals desperately wanted to support him, but he wouldn't give them the chance.

"Why?" she asked, wondering if she'd been right about his plan to interfere.

He shrugged one massive shoulder. "I'm invited."

Like he'd pulled the pin on her emotional grenade, Emily exploded. "Oh, for fudge sake! Shiitake mushrooms on a stick with a side of flaming brownies. Are you kidding me right now?"



IF ANYONE else had uttered the ridiculous expletives that had just passed between Emily Parker's pouty pink lips, Justin would have laughed in their face. But Emily looked so adorably angry on his behalf, her entire face flushed red and her tiny fists clenched, body shaking with rage, that he was oddly flattered. Everyone knew Emily was the nicest person in Itirangi, and for her to be furious like this? It meant something. She seemed ready to go to war for him. And Justin, dirty sonofabitch that he was, badly wanted to

bend her over one of the dining tables and show her how much he appreciated her support.

Instead, he reigned in the impulse to defile Itirangi's favorite sweetheart and said, "I wouldn't joke about something like that."

"Please say you're not actually coming."

He wished he could. He'd rather be anywhere else. But Chloe and Rich had invited him to their super-romantic New Year's Eve wedding—even if they'd excluded the rest of his family, likely at Chloe's behest—and his pride wouldn't let him reject the invitation. He couldn't bear for them to assume he was pining for Chloe. He wasn't. He was well rid of her. End of story.

So here he was, getting the lay of the land, ready to venture into enemy territory come nightfall. Chloe and Rich had planned the wedding to culminate in a countdown to midnight, complete with fireworks at the moment the year changed. Very romantic, he was sure, for the bride and groom and anyone who had a date, but Justin didn't. He'd RSVP'd with a plus-one, but never got around to finding someone to accompany him. He needed someone trustworthy, but in Itirangi, very few people could be relied on not to gossip. Now that the day was here, he would happily go back in time and kick his own ass for not organizing some kind of moral support.

"I'm coming," he told her, deadly serious.

Emily folded her arms over her breasts, drawing his attention to the curves hidden by a high-necked shirt. He'd fantasized about running his hands over those curves dozens of times in the past few months. Ever since he'd recovered from Chloe's betrayal, Emily had become his obsession. Unfortunately, with her sweet nature and luscious body, Justin wasn't alone in desiring her. Every unattached male in Itirangi between the ages of fifteen and fifty adored her, and Emily was unfailingly friendly to all of

them. Of course, she treated kicked puppies the same way. Justin hoped he was more to her than just another kicked puppy.

“But why?” she asked. “Why torture yourself like that? And why on earth would they invite you in the first place? It’s too cruel.”

He grunted in agreement. “That’s what any normal person would think.”

But not Chloe and Rich. He doubted it had occurred to them that inviting him would be anything other than polite. They weren’t known for being particularly thoughtful people.

“Do you need a hand?” he asked.

That was why he’d come in, after all. He’d felt guilty hiding out in his car, watching Emily lug boxes of decorations back and forth, a job that would take half as much time if he helped.

“No, no, I’m fine.” Her cheeks reddened again. “I don’t have much left to do. I’m just putting everything together, adding the final touches.”

“So tell me what to do and you can get out of here early.” He wasn’t backing off. Not when he finally had the opportunity for some alone time with Emily.

“Okay,” she relented, and rummaged through one of the boxes for a roll of silver table runners he recognized from his own ill-fated wedding. Apparently, Chloe wasn’t above recycling. “Put these down the center of the tables with the centerpieces on top. I’ll sort out the candles.”

Justin fumbled with the delicate fabric, doing his best to lay the first one neatly, so she wouldn’t regret accepting his help. He analyzed the runner. Was it off-center? He adjusted it to the right. Checked again. Better. Shifting to the next table, he repeated the actions.

Once he’d finished with the table runners, Emily slapped a pile of folded napkins into his hands and showed him how to distribute them, along with the menus, which were handwritten in a looping script he struggled to read. He could see signs of Chloe everywhere, and none of her fiancé. But

then, perhaps Rich didn't mind someone else being in charge. Unlike Justin, who preferred to make decisions together.

He and Chloe had squabbled like children over just about everything when they were planning to get married: the venue, food, decorations, number of guests invited. Justin had wanted a casual wedding near the forest, while Chloe had wanted something high-end and less outdoorsy. His job as a park ranger had been a constant cause of friction between them. He'd mistakenly imagined they were one of those 'opposites attract' stories, but it turned out that wasn't what she'd wanted at all.

A light touch brushed his flannel-clad upper arm. "You okay?"

He came to with a jolt. Emily's unusual green eyes were watching him with concern. He focused on the darker band around her pupils.

"Fine," he snapped. He wasn't about to fall apart on her, and he'd appreciate it if she didn't look at him like he might. "What now?"



EMILY'S PULSE hammered as she touched Justin. It was the first time she'd been brave enough to initiate contact, but he'd seemed so lost staring at the decorations, as if they held the answers to everything, that she couldn't help it.

She should have made him leave.

Bad enough he was attending the wedding, it must be awful to help her set it up when the memory of the decor he'd chosen for his wedding was still fresh.

"You go home," she said gently. "I shouldn't have taken advantage of your offer, but thank you for your help."

Justin scowled and brushed her off. "You're not sending me away that easy, Em."

"But—"

“No.”

“Tell you what,” she said, feeling uncharacteristically bold. “You tell me why you’re going to the wedding and I’ll let you stay and help me.”

She didn’t usually ask intrusive questions, but this was Justin, and she finally had him to herself. She’d ask what she wanted to and hopefully make an impression. And part of her really, really wanted to know if he pined after Chloe.

His eyes narrowed, and she thought he might tell her to go to hell, but then he spoke. “I need to save face. If I don’t come, all of the old gossips will tear me apart.”

“No, they won’t!” Emily protested, horrified he’d believe that. Her hand flew to her chest. “Everyone around here loves you, Justin. They only want the best for you.”

“But a little fodder for the gossip mill never hurt.”

His shoulders were square, his expression stubborn. She could see she wouldn’t win this battle, so she passed him a stack of chair covers and demonstrated how to put them in place.

“That easy,” she said, tying the bow with a flourish.

Justin’s first attempt was such a pitiful mess she couldn’t help laughing. Initially indignant, he joined in when she snorted, her eyes widening in horror. She suspected he was laughing more at her snort than his poor efforts, but she went through the motions again, emphasizing each movement as he copied her.

“Like this. Slip it over, shimmy it down. Yes, yes, wait. Hang on a minute.” She caught his hand, gnawing on her lower lip as she realized her mistake in touching him again. His callouses rubbed against her fingertips, sending a frisson of awareness up the inside of her arm. His quick intake of breath made her wonder if he’d felt electricity zap between them, too. She studied his hands discreetly, wondering whether the rest of him was equally well built.

Tearing her attention away, she corrected his mistake, and together they tidied up his second chair. He completed the third on his own, and it wasn't bad for a guy with such thick, rough fingers. They finished in under an hour. She cast an eye over his work, making sure it met her rigorous standards—she couldn't have an unhappy customer—then, before she lost her nerve, she hugged him.

Oh, my.

She'd known he was brawny, that much was obvious. Now, being pressed against a wall of muscle, she was inclined to think of him as the Incredible Hulk. All of that body mass made a girl feel delicate. She wanted to explore the bands of muscle with her hands, to learn the way they tensed when he was in the throes of passion.

But no, this was a simple thank you hug. At his ex's wedding venue for crying out loud. She shouldn't be lusting after him.

"Thank you," she said, lurching backward so quickly she narrowly avoided tripping over an empty box. "That would have taken me twice as long without you."

"We're done?"

"Sure are. I'll come back tomorrow to collect my things, but everything is finished for today."

He grunted. Did the man ever use his words?

"Are you certain about going tonight?" she asked, reluctant to let it go. "I can't talk you out of it?"

He nodded decisively. "I'm going. But..."

"But?"

He gazed into the distance for a moment and she wondered whether he'd ignored her, but then he leveled his intense hazel gaze on her. "It might make the time pass faster if you came with me."

Emily's head spun like she'd tripped head over heels into a different dimension. "Excuse me?"

“I understand if it would be too awkward for you,” he said, his gaze slipping from hers. “Since you two never got along. But we had fun just now, didn’t we?”

“We did,” she replied slowly. “But Justin, it’s the day of the wedding. You can’t just add someone to the guest list.”

“Not a problem,” he declared. “I said I’d bring a date when I RSVP’d. But—”

“You were too embarrassed to ask anyone,” she broke in, understanding immediately.

He shuffled from foot to foot, clearly nervous about her reply. His uncertainty was what undid her.

“Of course I’ll come. I’d love to keep you company.”

“Thanks.” The word was short and sharp, but the gratitude in his eyes warmed her. He might not communicate well verbally, but his body language filled the gaps.

Her foolish heart flip-flopped. This was *Justin*. The prospect of seeing him in a suit had her panting in anticipation.

“I’ll pick you up at six,” he told her. “The ceremony starts at six thirty, then we’ll have dinner. It ends at midnight. Does that suit?”

Emily nodded, worried if she spoke, she wouldn’t be able to disguise her sudden eagerness for the evening ahead.

“Bye,” she squeaked, as he left.

He lifted a hand in a casual wave.

*H*oly shit.

If Justin had salivated over Emily earlier, it was nothing compared to his reaction when he collected her from her doorstep. His body went into hyperdrive. He was accustomed to her being curvy and cute. But in a deep green dress with a plunging neckline and a slit up the thigh, with chunky black pumps doing amazing things for her legs, he had to tighten his grip on the steering wheel to prevent himself from grabbing her and ripping the dress off.

The woman was built for sin. Her creamy cleavage played peek-a-boo, and he wanted to latch onto the exposed mounds of her breasts with his mouth. He wondered what color her nipples would be. Pale pink or apricot, he guessed, to match her complexion. With effort, he lifted his gaze to her face, only to be captured anew. She'd done something to darken her lashes and bring out the green of her eyes. Her lips glistened bubblegum pink.

“Wow,” he said stupidly. “You, um...”

Great work, man. She'll be eating up those sweet words.

To his surprise, she beamed. “Best response a girl can hope for.”

Was she humoring him? With most women, he'd assume so, but Emily seemed genuinely pleased.

“You clean up nice,” she carried on, apparently unconcerned by his inability to form a coherent sentence. Her green gaze raked over him from head to toe and she nodded approvingly. “Very nice.”

“Uh, thanks.” *Smooth, Justin. Real smooth.*

For the remainder of the drive to the vineyard, about half an hour, they didn’t speak. Normally he didn’t worry about participating in small talk for the sake of someone else’s comfort, but for once he wished he had the same silver tongue his brother, Cooper, had been blessed with. He longed to fill the silence with witty banter, or to butter her up with compliments until she was ready to strip naked and go at it in the back seat.

Observing her out of the corner of his eye, he noticed how the faint smile she wore never left her lips. He’d always thought Emily’s perpetual cheerfulness must be an act, but it seemed he’d been wrong. Either that or being here with him had brought a smile to her face.

Yeah, right.

They passed by golden fields, the grass crisped by the midsummer sun. In the twilight, the heat from the sun had cooled enough to stop the tar on the road from melting, but slicks of black amongst the gray indicated that hadn’t been the case all day. He veered around the larger patches. Eventually, the golden fields to his right gave way to rows of grapevines with large green leaves and heavy loads of fruit.

The restaurant came into sight, and he pulled down the driveway and parked beneath the same tree he had earlier. He hurried around to help Emily out. When she took his hand, his gut wrenched with desire at the feel of her smooth, silky skin. Sparks seemed to hum in the air between them as he steadied her with an arm around her waist. Her hair tickled the side of his face and he inhaled the scent of her shampoo, sweet and fruity. Did *everything* about her have to be so appealing?

“Thanks,” she murmured, smiling up at him.

He fought the urge to brush a kiss over those glossy lips. “Yeah, no worries. Come on. Let’s get inside.”

He ushered her into the restaurant and out through the other side, to a roofed pavilion. A steel arch, heavily adorned with white roses and greenery, stood at the end of an aisle edged by posies of pale pink roses and flowing white fabric. He’d wager that Chloe had selected the decorations.

Rich and two of his private school friends, who Justin vaguely recognized, loitered beneath the arch. Rich wore a white tuxedo with a black shirt and a white bow tie. His blond hair was slicked back, and even from a distance, Justin could tell sweat was beading on his hairline and upper lip. *Enjoy the good looks while you can.* The stress of marrying Chloe would age him ten years in no time.

More than half of the seats had already filled—Justin had timed their arrival so they wouldn’t have to linger and chat with others. Placing a hand on the small of Emily’s back, grateful to have her there as a distraction, he guided her into a seat in the back row. Over the next few minutes, people trickled into the other unoccupied seats. Justin tensed as he caught sight of a married couple that he and Chloe used to be friends with. They’d chosen to stay in touch with Chloe rather than him after the split.

“How many on the guest list?” he asked.

“About two hundred and fifty,” Emily replied, keeping her voice low as if to avoid attention.

“Goddamn.”

Chloe really had got everything she wanted this time around. Justin had insisted they cull their invite list down to a modest ninety.

“A bit different from what you had planned?”

“You can say that again.”

Finally, the bridal procession music started to play. Justin gritted his teeth and mentally prepared to see his ex, up close, for the first time since she’d walked out on him.



SHE'S BEAUTIFUL.

No denying it, Chloe Somers was a stunning woman. Her golden-blond hair was twisted elegantly atop her head, a few tresses spilling down her back. Perfectly made up and attired in a designer wedding gown, she could have been a Hollywood A-lister. In comparison, Emily felt like a frump. If Chloe had aimed to be the most beautiful woman present at her wedding, mission accomplished.

Beside her, Justin fidgeted. Glancing down, Emily noticed his fists were clenched so hard his knuckles had turned white. Poor guy. This had to be hard for him. Prizing one of his hands from his knees, she clasped it in her own. His fingers were cold and clammy. She squeezed, hoping to reassure him. He squeezed back.

The ceremony passed with much fanfare, but Emily didn't hear anything, her attention centered on the man next to her, attuned to his every breath, every move. She heard him scoff once or twice during the vows, but he didn't look away from the bride and groom, not even during the big kiss. She tried not to let the tension emanating from him get to her. She was here for support, which meant she needed to weather any strain with a smile. Now was not the time to let her discomfort with interpersonal issues get the better of her.

When the celebrant pronounced Rich and Chloe husband and wife, indicating the end of the ceremony, friends and family crowded the happy couple, eager to extend their blessings. Emily and Justin stayed put. When the photographer started gathering groups for the family photos, they slipped inside the reception room and found places designated for them at one of the long tables. Dinner was due to begin as soon as family photos were complete. From her involvement in the wedding planning, Emily

knew the bridal party photos had already been taken earlier in the day, when the lighting was better.

Emily scanned the other name cards on their table. She recognized a few names. Would Justin? He wasn't as social as she, or exposed to the community as often, but he and Chloe must share a circle of acquaintances to a certain extent.

“Do you know any of these people?”

Justin nodded. “These ones,” he pointed to the seats across from theirs, “were mutual friends of Chloe and I when we were together. So were the couples on either side of us.”

Awkward. “I guess it must be hard when you'd been together for so long. You grew up knowing the same people.”

“Yeah.” She couldn't read his expression. “But you quickly learn who your real friends are,” he added.

Hopefully he considered her a friend. At the very least, she wanted to be someone he could count on. She murmured agreement. Enough depressing stuff.

“How's your work going at the moment?” she asked. “Must be a busy time of year for you.”

“It is,” he agreed. “Lots of people on the trails and a lot of maintenance work is needed on the huts and tracks.”

“Long days?”

“Yeah, but it's my favorite time of year, so I don't mind.” For the first time since they'd arrived this evening, he smiled. Emily cheered internally. “The birds are out singing every day and the sun is shining. Prime work conditions.”

Many times over the years, Emily had seen Justin around in his khaki ranger uniform. It made him look virile and capable. Very sexy. Not that he needed any help in that department.

“Sometimes I wish I could spend a little more time out in nature,” she confessed. “But working with flowers gives me a taste of it. That’s why I won’t hire another florist, even though it would allow me more time to manage the gift store and my tenants. Sure, business is interesting, but I love creating pretty things with my hands even more.”

“So, that’s where it comes from,” Justin said.

“What?”

“The name of your shop.”

“Ah, right.” She’d named her floristry and gift shop ‘Pretty Things,’ and he was spot on about her reasoning.

“You must put in a lot of hours to stay on top of things.”

His upper arm brushed her shoulder and she instinctively leaned into him, expecting him to pull away, but instead he lowered his head until she could feel his breath on the shell of her ear. Goosebumps rippled up her arms.

“I do,” she said shakily, “but like you, it’s not a hardship, since I love my job.”

He laughed, husky and low. “Nice to know we’re doing something right, isn’t it?”

“We’re doing plenty right,” she replied firmly. After all, they both had stable jobs they enjoyed, good friends, and nice homes. Things could be much worse. She liked her life. The only thing that might improve it was the man beside her.

Before long, others joined them. Emily focused on remembering names and faces. She made idle small talk, got them laughing. Most seemed to be nice people. Justin barely spoke, seemingly content to let her keep the conversation flowing, which was fine by her. That was her forte at work too. The longer people chatted in her shop, the more they bought, which meant a better bottom line.



THANK GOD FOR EMILY.

She smiled, complimented people, poured drinks from the bottles of wine routinely brought to the table, and generally kept the evening flowing smoothly. Hell, Justin hardly had to say a word; she had him covered. No one needed anything from him with Emily there. He watched her work her magic, admiration blooming deep in his chest. How did she do it? How could she be so ceaselessly nice and unobjectionable that everyone she met liked her?

More than one of his old friends winked at him behind her back or shot him a jealous glance. He puffed with pride. Emily may not technically be his woman, but they didn't know that, and he'd do his level best to earn a chance with her before the night was over. While it was true that she could have any available man in Itirangi with a crook of her finger, the fact she hadn't shown any desire to do so, at least during the year that he'd been paying attention, boded well for him. And yes, she deserved a better man—one who didn't scowl so much and was more even-tempered—but he was too selfish to care.

Before he knew it, dinner had finished. They endured a half-dozen terrible speeches, then the bride and groom took to the dance floor for their first dance. Some forgettable pop song came over the loudspeakers. Another choice of Chloe's, no doubt.

The happy couple swayed together. No one joined them. They wanted the spotlight all to themselves. But when the second song began, Justin claimed Emily's hand and tugged her onto the dance floor. Someone knocked into her back and he took advantage of the jolt to scooch her closer, resting his hand on her hip, no space between their bodies. When she laid her head on his chest and sighed happily, he wondered if she could hear his heart racing.

She did that to him. Drove him crazy.

Slipping his other arm around her, his palm curved into her lower back just above her butt, high enough not to draw attention, but low enough for her to know he had more on his mind than friendship. The curve where her hips flared out begged for his fingers and he longed to explore it more thoroughly.

Emily arched into his embrace, lacing her hands behind his neck and closing her eyes as she moved in time to the music. The sight of her shuttered eyelids and parted lips illuminated by the soft overhead lighting was so erotic, he had to look away before he embarrassed them both. Thankfully, the next song had a Latin beat, quick and funky, not conducive to slow dancing. A reprieve. Or so he thought, but then Emily's eyes fluttered open and lit with excitement.

Holy hell, he was done for.



SLOW DANCING with Justin had set fire to Emily's nerve ends. Being pressed against his chiseled chest had aroused her body, while the possessive way he'd held her seduced her heart. She had no answer for it. Then the next song started, and all of the Latin dancing lessons she and her friend Clarissa had taken when they were younger rushed to the front of her mind. She knew this song, and if ever there was a chance to rock Justin's world, this was it.

She tried not to overthink, letting muscle memory take over. She whirled around, the first steps of the salsa coming easily. Justin didn't know the moves, so she improvised, wildly happy when he became slack-jawed with astonishment. And, she hoped, a little lust. Call her crazy, but she thought he might finally see her as a woman.

When the dance petered out, he stopped her and called over the sound of the crowd, “That was hot.”

“That was fun!” she exclaimed in response, exhilarated both from the dance and the look in his eye. That dark, heated expression could only be desire. He wanted *her*.

“I’ll get us a drink while you catch your breath,” he said, leading her from the dance floor then dropping her hand to head to the bar. Emily swayed with the beat as another song started, watching the dancers. Everyone seemed joyful, the way they should at a wedding. The beginning of two people’s lifetime together. The most beautiful commitment ever. She smiled.

A man she didn’t know appeared in front of her. “Hey, pretty lady. What’s your name?”

He grinned, crinkles forming around his vivid blue eyes. His fair hair was cut close to his skull, and while he wasn’t much taller than her, his collared shirt clung to his muscular torso and he radiated masculine confidence. She knew his type. Plenty of alpha males had asked her out before. Enough that she could pick one out in a crowd.

Most of the local men didn’t push when she said no. They knew she hardly ever dated. She had dated before—she wasn’t totally inexperienced—but she rarely found the time or the inclination. She’d been out a handful of times in the past few years but hadn’t had a serious boyfriend since her school days, and that had ended when he couldn’t envision a future in Itirangi and she couldn’t contemplate being anywhere else.

The guy who’d approached her didn’t know she’d rather be left alone, and he didn’t look as if he would accept a polite dismissal. Her heart sank. Hopefully if she bored him, he’d move on soon enough. She hated confrontation, and some men got ugly when rejected, especially if they weren’t aware she turned most people down and took it personally.

“Emily,” she replied, not asking for his name in return.

“Em,” he confirmed, shortening her name without bothering to ask what she preferred.

Another typical alpha male move, assuming familiarity where there was none. “I’m Sam.”

“Nice to meet you.” She gazed over his shoulder, trying not to encourage him.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he replied with a wink. “Come and dance with me, Em. I saw you out there before and you’ve got some moves. I’d love to show you mine.”

She didn’t doubt that. But she’d rather spend her time with a silent hulk who was incapable of doing more than the two-step shuffle. Thankfully, Justin strode back across the room toward them, a glass of champagne in one hand and a beer in the other. When he caught sight of Emily and Sam, he glowered and quickened his pace.

“Hey, baby,” he said, ducking to kiss her forehead. He passed her the wine glass and dragged her into an embrace with his newly free arm. “Miss me?” Emily stared at him, dumbstruck. Justin smoldered down at her, then lifted his gaze to Sam, raising an eyebrow in an unspoken challenge. “Introduce me to your new friend.”

“Justin, this is Sam,” Emily said. The two men engaged in some kind of macho posturing. Emily shrank in on herself, uncomfortable with the tension between them. The men held eye contact until Sam rolled his shoulders, tipped his head to Emily and took off. The moment he was gone, she pulled free of Justin.

“Are men always like that with you?” he asked, apparently concerned.

“You mean, a bit pushy?”

“‘A bit’ may be an understatement. That guy was pushy as hell.”

Emily shrugged one shoulder. “The tourists can be like that. Locals aren’t so bad. I should probably be meaner, but you know how I am.”

She was too nice for her own good.

“They should see you’re uncomfortable and leave you alone,” he fired back. He grabbed her shoulders and smoldered again. “Tell me if I’m stepping over a line, but tonight, I want you to be all mine, Emily. And I don’t share.”

The possessive tone of his voice sent shivers down her spine. “You’re not stepping over a line,” she whispered, “but what do you want with me, Justin?”

“Right now, I want you all to myself. Walk outside with me?”

She nodded. She could think of nothing she’d rather do.

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*H*e'd actually done it. Convinced the most beautiful woman at the wedding—bride included—to join him for a romantic stroll in the vineyard. Justin took Emily's hand before she changed her mind and escorted her outside. He decided that even if she was only accompanying him out of gratitude, he'd take it. He had been prepared to brawl on her behalf, and he suspected the guy he'd chased off had known it.

Outside, the light from the moon and a few scattered lamp posts was enough for them to see where they walked but no further, the lamps alternately casting deep shadows over their faces or illuminating them. He tucked Emily's hand into the crook of his arm and savored the brush of her body against his, from knee to shoulders. She'd stirred his blood with those sinuously sensual dance moves, and he desperately wanted to know if she'd move in the same unbelievably sexy way when they were in bed together.

His pants suddenly felt tight. God, he wanted to be inside her. He settled for saying, "I didn't know you could dance like that."

She laughed. "Neither did I. Haven't practiced since high school."

"You're bullshitting me."

She stopped walking and looked up, eyes sincere. "No, really. It's been ages."

“You’re telling me you don’t whip those moves out when you spot a cute guy at a club?” Even the thought of her twisting around another man made his teeth ache.

“Justin,” she murmured. “When would I go to a club? There are none in Itirangi, and as we’ve already established, I live to work.” She shot him a teasing smile. “I spend my spare time doing the books, not meeting cute guys at clubs.”

Relief swamped him. He tried to tell himself it meant nothing, but the truth of it was, he was glad she didn’t date around. He hadn’t been with anyone other than Chloe. *Ever*. After she’d dumped him, his friends had expected him to rebound, maybe have flings with a few tourists, but he didn’t have it in him to use random women to patch up his mangled heart. He had been with Chloe since he was seventeen, so his experience level when it came to women left something to be desired.

“Is it bad if I say I’m glad to hear that?” he asked softly.

Emily shook her head. “No.” She nibbled on her lip. “Do you go to the clubs? Spend time with any women?”

“Are you asking me if I’m seeing someone, Em?”

“Maybe.”

She looked so nervous of his answer, he chuckled. “No, I’m not. I wouldn’t be here with you if I was. I’m old-fashioned like that.”

“Good. That’s the way I like it.”

Her approval warmed him on the inside and being the recipient of her shy smile made him wonder what else he could say to bring it to the fore. He’d never get enough of that smile.

“What about you?” he queried. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No.” He thought she’d leave it at that, but then she huffed out a breath and continued, “I haven’t dated anyone more than once since Hemi, two years ago.”

Hemi was a great guy. Likable. Justin hadn't known he and Emily dated, but from the outside, they made sense together. "Why didn't it work out?"

Emily shrugged and looked away. "He was too outgoing for me, and I was too much of a workaholic for him. He wanted to spend the weekends surfing or hiking or playing sports, while I wanted to spend it relaxing or building my business. We just didn't gel."

Thank God for that. "Is there a reason you don't date more?"

He knew many women wouldn't answer that question, but curiosity was killing him. Men adored her. Why wasn't she making the most of it? In her shoes, others certainly would have played the field.

"Finding a man isn't high on my priority list."

He winced. So much for romance. "Ouch."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that. I'd be ecstatic if I found Mr. Right. I'm just not actively looking for him."

"Fair enough."

At least she didn't have anything against men. They started walking again, and he kept a hold of her hand. It felt small and breakable compared to his clumsy ones, which were roughened by years of manual labor. He kept his touch soft, afraid of hurting her.

"Do you still care for Chloe?" she asked, all of a sudden.

The question came out of nowhere, although he should have expected it, given that he was at Chloe's wedding. Everyone else here wondered the same thing, they just didn't have the guts to ask. Emily's uncharacteristic directness surprised him, in a good way, and made him wonder: how much did she care about the answer?

"No," he said, rewarding her directness with his own. "I don't want anything terrible to happen to her, but she proved she wasn't the person I thought she was. After all this time, I can honestly say her betrayal did more damage to my ego than anything else."

“Your ego shouldn’t have taken a hit,” Emily told him. “You’re a handsome, successful man. It’s her loss.”

And just like that, his head inflated. Emily thought he was handsome. Despite the beard, the outdated clothing, and the fact he should have had a haircut six months ago. He swelled with pride.

As for her other claim... “I think you and Chloe may have different ideas of what ‘successful’ means.” Since his ex had defected Team Justin in favor of Team Rich, he could only assume Chloe preferred a man with a high-paying job and malleable nature.

Emily snorted derisively. “Chloe has a skewed view of the world. Anyone who earns enough to live comfortably, enjoys their job, and is secure in their relationships with others is successful to me.”

His hand tightened around hers. “You’re a wise woman.”

“Don’t you forget it.”

He checked his watch. Ten to twelve. They’d been wandering outside for quite a while.

“Not long until the countdown,” he said. “I think the fireworks are over the other side of the building. You want to head over and wait?”

“Sure.” Emily kept her fingers entwined with his as they rejoined the other wedding guests, and it felt like a victory.



AFTER JUSTIN’S confrontation with the guy who’d hit on her, and their conversation in the vineyard, Emily had stumbled upon a shocking truth: he was interested in her. As in, romantically interested. She didn’t know how it had happened, or why, but it was impossible to misconstrue his actions. She’d as good as confessed she was interested in him, too. She blushed at the memory. She hadn’t intended to say what she had, but she couldn’t

handle him thinking worse of himself because Satan's Mistress had deserted him.

They stood in the crowd that had assembled to watch the fireworks. The press of bodies kept the chill off the air, but still, she shivered. Her dress didn't cover much.

"Here," Justin said, and warmth surrounded her. His jacket. Heated by his body.

She slid her arms into the sleeves and clutched it tightly around herself. It smelled of him. "Thank you."

Maintaining a rigid spine, she resisted the urge to lean on him at first, but then he shuffled forward so his chest aligned with her back and locked his hands around her waist. She melted into him, letting him take her weight. Being this close to him felt as natural as breathing, but neither of them acknowledged their position, as if afraid the other would run away the second they did. They stayed that way until the countdown began.

"Ten," the crowd chanted. "Nine, eight, seven."

Emily twisted in Justin's arms until she faced him. He was half-hidden by the dark, but his eyes glinted down at her.

"Six, five, four."

Her pulse hammered in her ears and desire licked through her. She wet her lips. Justin twitched in response. This was the moment. Right now, nothing existed but the two of them, wrapped in a bubble of inky darkness.

"Three, two, one."

Starbursts exploded across the sky. Emily stretched onto her tiptoes just as Justin lowered his head. They met halfway. The kiss started gently, both of them testing the water. She breathed him in, loving the scent of him. His beard brushed her lips and cheek. She reached up and curved her palm around his jaw. They parted.

A low growl emanated from Justin's chest, then he claimed her mouth a second time, no longer tentative. His tongue flicked along the seam of her

lips, which parted on command.

Their tongues touched, and he groaned, the vibration echoing through her mouth.

Boldly, she stroked his tongue with hers, then sucked. His breath came in ragged gasps. Under the cover of his jacket, he cupped her breast through the dress, then slipped a thumb inside, encountering no resistance. The rough pad of his thumb rubbed back and forth over her nipple, causing thrums of delicious friction, then plucked it into a stiff peak.

“Justin, not now,” she gasped, needing him to stop even though she desperately wanted him to continue, wanted him to shove the dress off her shoulders and lavish both of her breasts with attention. But they had to wait. They couldn’t do this with an audience.

“Damn,” he cursed, breaking away and checking to make sure she was covered. Their foreheads rested against each other as they caught their breath. “You’re right,” he said. “I know you’re right. But wow, that was quite a kiss, Em.”

“We should definitely do it again,” she agreed. “Just not here.”

“You’d want that?” he asked, searching her eyes as if they contained the answers he sought. Though he’d released her, she hadn’t backed away, so she could sense when his muscles tightened.

“Yes,” she whispered, aware she was opening herself up to rejection. Hopefully that kiss had rocked him as much as it had her.

“Thank you.” He kissed her once more, soft and chaste. “For everything. Tonight has been beyond what I expected, thanks to you. Do you even know how special you are?”

She glowed at his praise. “You’re special, too.”

He laughed, the sound booming in the silence after the fireworks and attracting a few curious glances. “If I’m special, then you must be a goddamn angel.”

She thought that might be the nicest compliment anyone had given her.

“Come on, Angel,” he said. “Let’s get you home.”

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Justin dreamed of Emily, naked and exposed for his pleasure. In his dream, they didn't stop at a kiss. He didn't drop her off at home, walk her to her door, and leave like a gentleman. Instead, he invited himself in and stripped away all the layers between them, unsatisfied until they'd been wrapped around each other, writhing and sweaty.

Consequently, he had woken bathed in sweat and hard enough to hammer nails. He'd showered, fed his demanding felines—Richie McCat and Dan Catter—named for two of the best rugby players in the world, and headed outside to burn off his frustrated energy. He drove his four-wheeler up a hiking track to a hut and spent a solid two hours chopping and stacking firewood.

Unfortunately, the hard labor didn't distract him from his Emily-related fantasies. Instead, his body fell into the familiar rhythm while his mind wandered, wondering what she looked like under her clothes, whether her skin was the same milky shade everywhere, and whether *all* of her hair was that magnificent shade of red.

As he swung the ax, hearing the thunk of steel into wood, he speculated over what noise she'd make when she came undone. Would she be shy and quiet, or tumble headlong into passion, her generous nature ensuring her

lover knew how much she appreciated his effort? He suspected the latter, but desperately wanted to find out for himself. He wanted to hear mewls of arousal spill from her lips, feel her shiver as he touched her, and shudder beneath him as pleasure overwhelmed her.

Fuck, he needed to get himself under control.

With how painfully aroused he was simply at the thought of her, he'd never be able to make her drunk with ecstasy before he lost himself. He returned the ax to the shed and rested a palm on the doorframe, listening. No one was around. The group who'd been staying in the hut had moved on and the next group hadn't arrived yet. Birds chirped in the trees and cicadas hummed in the background. The stream that flowed past the hut bubbled merrily as it made its way down the gentle slope.

He crossed over to the stream and followed it for a hundred yards to where it formed a small pool, not very wide, but deep enough to reach his shoulders. Stripping his clothes off, he laid them on a rock and waded in. The frigid water lapped at his calves. He could have sworn his balls shriveled up as the stream inched up his inner thighs, but he carried on, swearing as it rippled over his sensitive abdomen, the muscles contracting in an attempt to fend off the cold.

He'd known the water would be icy. The stream was formed by glacier melt and stayed much the same temperature year-round, regardless of the warm summer air. He gritted his teeth and ducked beneath the surface. As soon as he fully submerged, he shot back out again and laughed, despite his tingling limbs. The stream had cooled his ardor as effectively as he'd hoped. No hard-on could survive such conditions. The dunk in the pool had also rinsed off the sweat that had accumulated on his skin while he'd worked.

Wading out of the pool, he shook off the excess water and squeezed it out of his hair. He yanked his clothes back on and moisture soaked them instantly, but they'd soon dry out on a day as fine as this one. Before

leaving the hut, he checked that the recent visitors had tidied, left payment for using the facilities, and signed the logbook to say where they were going next. Satisfied, he climbed back on his motorcycle and returned home.

Usually, he'd visit another hut, or start a circuit of the traps laid out around the reserve to catch pests—most commonly stoats, which preyed on native birds—but he couldn't focus on anything other than the phenomenal kiss he'd shared with Emily the night before. For months, he'd been attracted to her, but he'd written it off as hopeless infatuation since she'd never showed any sign of returning the attraction. After that kiss, he was confident she felt at least some of the chemistry he did. A kiss like that didn't result from one-sided attraction.

The trouble was, he had zero game. He was a thirty-one-year-old man with minimal dating experience, having been with the same woman since high school. A woman who, incidentally, left him two weeks before their wedding.

What a catch.

But his skills, or lack thereof, didn't matter. There was no need for games. Emily had indicated that she wanted to see him again, so he'd be direct about it. Then she'd be under no illusions that he was capable of grand romantic gestures, and he wouldn't set her up for disappointment in the future. No point putting it off. He'd go to her immediately.

Except... Lifting his arm, he sniffed. A sour odor singed his nose hairs. Okay, he'd change clothes first. He may not know much about dating, but no woman wanted a man who could strip paint with his body odor.

Fifteen minutes later, having showered, deodorized and dressed in a freshly laundered khaki button-down shirt and cargo pants, he drove his old pickup truck into town. Since it was peak tourist season, and Emily's shop was one of the most popular in town, he couldn't find a parking spot nearby,

so he settled for parking outside his sister's house and walking into the town center.

Itirangi was bustling, with people crowded outside the bakehouse and Dux restaurant. Others had set up picnics along the shore of the lake, a beautiful blue body of water that stretched towards the mountains on the horizon and was fringed by forest. The lake gave the town its name—Little Sky, in the native Maori tongue.

The number of people around made Justin tense. He preferred Itirangi in the quieter spring and autumn seasons, when there wasn't enough snow on the mountains for the skiing crowd, but it was still too cold for the summer crowd. But the glorious day reminded him of why he loved his home. God, it was beautiful. He'd never lived anywhere else, and he'd never want to. Itirangi was it for him. From the glorious outdoors to the quirky old buildings and peculiar small-town personalities, he adored it all.

Well, almost all of it. He could do without the gossip. It had been ruthless after he and Chloe had broken up. Everywhere he went, people had stopped to stare or express their sympathy with a glint in their eye that let him know they'd be telling the next person they saw all about poor Jilted Justin. Yeah, he'd heard the nickname. Whispered as he entered a room, murmured behind hands when he turned away. He could admit public sympathy seemed to be on his side, but that didn't make being the subject of gossip any more palatable.

Emily's shop, Pretty Things, looked like her: sweet and feminine. Although he had only been inside a handful of times, he'd noticed how it reflected its owner perfectly. Excitement fluttered in his stomach when the street sign came into view. He couldn't believe how badly he wanted to see her again, to confirm that last night really *had* happened, and that she was just as wonderful as he'd imagined.

When he stepped into the shop, he noticed three things:

1. It was crammed full of women;
2. They all turned to stare at him as the doorbell chimed; and
3. Emily was exactly as gorgeous as he'd remembered.



EMILY HUMMED under her breath as she worked on New Year's morning, which was traditionally a busy day for her, being a public holiday. Tourists and locals alike flocked to Main Street and started the year by exploring beautiful Itirangi and all of its temptations. Luckily, her employee Sandra had prepared well yesterday, so the shelves were well stocked, a few popular items discounted, and both of them could spend their time with customers. The doorbell jangled constantly, and each time, Emily glanced up from whatever she was doing and greeted the customer with a smile and a friendly 'hello'.

The busy shop kept her from daydreaming about kissing Justin, which had lived up to her wildest fantasies. So when the bell rang, and she looked up with a smile only to see his bulky frame blocking her doorway, heat spiked her blood and her she forgot whatever she'd been about to say. He came to a sudden stop, eyes widening with something akin to fear at the sight of twenty or so women perusing the store.

Many of the women stopped and ogled him in return. She couldn't blame them. The soft khaki shirt he wore emphasized his thick torso and muscled arms, and his cargo pants displayed tree-trunk thighs. Emily's mouth watered. The beard and wild hair completed the 'sexy outdoorsman' image. He looked ready to throw a woman over his shoulder and carry her off to a rustic cabin in the woods. More than one of her customers fanned themselves.

Justin's eyes widened, the white becoming visible. Emily giggled, then clapped a hand over her mouth. The sharp noise seemed to jolt him into

motion. His gaze fixed on her and he shouldered through the throng of women. Without a word, he took her hand and dragged her through the rear exit into her workshop. A laugh died on her lips when he pinned her to the wall, and she felt the delicious press of those muscles she'd admired from a distance.

His eyes searched hers, then his mouth curled upwards in a self-satisfied smile. "Not laughing now, are you?"

She shook her head, unable to speak.

"Good."

He crushed his lips to hers, and all she could do was cling to him and pray he never stopped. Sparks crackled between them and she grabbed fistfuls of his damp hair. White-hot flashes of pleasure flickered across her vision and she closed her eyes, savoring the taste of him in the darkness. Spicy and very, very male.

He yanked free of her, chest heaving as his breath came in puffs. "I like you, Emily."

She couldn't help it. She giggled.

He frowned in confusion. "What's so funny?"

"I've been waiting fifteen years for you to say that." And she'd thought it would never be more than her favorite fantasy.

He blinked at her, as if gathering his thoughts. "You have?"

"You didn't know?" She'd tried to keep her hero worship private, but few things remained secret in Itirangi.

The poor man looked utterly baffled. "Know what?"

Apparently, she'd been a better actress than she'd thought. "I've had a crush on you since I was fourteen," she admitted, watching the play of emotion across his face. "Chloe was picking on me and you told her to stop being a bitch and leave me alone. This was back before you started dating her."

She could see the moment he remembered.

“She was making fun of your hair,” he said.

“And my weight, and my freckles,” Emily added. “I was an easy target. I didn’t fight back. But you stood up for me.”

“And you’ve been in love with me ever since.”

“Hey now, I didn’t say that! I had a crush, that was all.”

He smiled smugly despite her protestation. “You can deny it all you like, but you want me, Em.”

She didn’t deny it again. To tell the truth, she enjoyed being responsible for the supremely confident masculine expression he wore, especially after he’d admitted to doubting himself yesterday.

“I do.”

He lowered his head to kiss her again. Light and flirty at first, so she could feel him smile against her mouth, but it deepened as she rose on her toes and arched up. She purred contentedly as one of his hands curved around her neck, caressing the hollow of her throat.

She could kiss him like this forever. Forget the customers on the other side of the door. They could make do without her. This was far more important. But as the devil on her shoulder was convincing her to slip out the back and take Justin home with her, someone barged into the workshop and rudely interrupted the best kiss of her life.

“What is it?” Emily demanded breathlessly.

“Sorry, Em,” Sandra said from somewhere off to the side. “We need you back out here. I can’t keep up with all of these customers.”

Burying her face in Justin’s chest, Emily sighed. “Okay,” she replied, reminding herself that Sandra wasn’t personally responsible for her sexual frustration. “I’ll be there shortly.”

The door clicked shut again. Justin’s lips trailed fire down her neck. “I wish you could tell them to go to hell.”

She moaned. “So do I.”

She pushed his big chest. He moved back, nipping at the crook of her shoulder. His teeth sank into her flesh and scraped gently. The contrast between roughness and tenderness set her pulse racing, and moisture rushed to her core. She'd always craved that hard edge with her pleasure, but she'd never known how to ask for it. Justin seemed to know and instinctively give her what she needed. As if he was made for her. She shivered. If he'd kissed her back when she was fourteen, her crush would have been taken to a whole new level.

"Have dinner at my place tonight," he murmured against her skin. "Please?"

"Yes," she sighed as he licked over the spot he'd bitten, soothing the sting. "What time?"

"Seven o'clock," he replied, stepping back, holding her waist so she didn't fall. Her weak knees would have buckled beneath her weight. Once she was able to stand, he kissed her cheek and said, "See you later, Em."

She waited until he left, then sagged to the ground.

"Oh, my God," she said to herself.

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She'd said yes. More than that, she'd fallen apart beautifully in Justin's arms when he'd dared to touch her. All of that boded well. So did the fact she hadn't questioned his preference to have their date at his home—out of sight of the gossips. His love life had been the subject of enough gossip without adding fuel to the fire. As he tidied his sparsely furnished living room, he noticed for the first time in months that the cushions on the sofa were worn nearly all the way through and the wooden coffee table in the center of the room was scarred with half a dozen coffee-rings staining the surface.

Damn. Emily was the queen of interior décor. She'd turn her nose up at his home, for sure.

He couldn't do this alone. He needed reinforcements.

"Coop," he said, when his brother answered the phone. "You working?"

"Nope," Cooper replied. "And a good afternoon to you too, bro."

Justin ignored him. Cooper was too much of a smart-alec for his own good.

"I've got a date tonight," he said, without any preamble. "And I don't have a fucking clue what to do."

Cooper laughed at him, the bastard. "Sounds like a dilemma."

"Damn it," Justin grumbled. "Just get your ass down here and help me."

Cooper seemed to think about it. “Will there be beer?”

Justin ran a hand through his hair and tugged on the ends. “I’ve got a six-pack with your name on it if you’re here in less than fifteen minutes.”

“See you in ten.”

Before Cooper arrived, Justin cleaned up a few superficial things, like the coffee stains, and the layer of dust on basically everything. When Cooper sauntered through the doorway, he beelined to the fridge and opened a bottle of beer. Once he’d taken a long swig, he set the bottle on the counter and jerked his chin up in a nod of greeting.

“You got a date, huh?” he asked. “Been long enough.”

Justin grunted. “Tell me about it. I haven’t had a first date since high school.”

“Who’s the lucky girl?”

Justin hesitated. “Promise me Mum and Dad won’t hear about this. It’s one date, not a relationship.”

Yet. It’d be a relationship before long, if everything went according to plan.

Cooper spun circles with his finger. “My word is my bond, yada yada. Get on with it. I want to know who’s pulled you out of that misery pit of despair that Chloe cast you into.”

“I haven’t been that bad,” Justin muttered, a little miffed. So he hadn’t been the leader of the cheer squad lately. He’d hardly been Scrooge either. “It’s Emily.”

Cooper raised an eyebrow. “Little Miss Sunshine.” He shook his head slowly. “You asked Emily Parker on a date and she said *yes*?”

Crossing his arms defensively, Justin scowled. “You don’t have to make it sound like I’m a beast or something.”

Recalling the way Emily’s breath had come in soft little gasps when he’d kissed her and how she’d blushed prettily when she admitted she’d had

a crush on him in high school, he didn't think she had a problem with his looks.

She'd had a crush on him.

When she'd told him that, he'd felt manlier than he had in months. Years, even. How could a woman like Emily desire a man like him, when, in his typical idiotic fashion, he'd overlooked her? He could have spent years with Emily rather than Chloe, but he'd been like all teenage boys, flattered by the attention of a self-confident girl.

"Earth to Justin."

He snapped to attention.

"Where'd you go, man?"

He shrugged and didn't reply. Cooper surveyed him from head to toe, and suddenly he was very aware of his unfashionable clothes and scruffy appearance, which was exaggerated in comparison to his brother's golden good looks, low-slung jeans and leather jacket.

"I say this lovingly," Cooper began. "You're a fixer-upper, and Emily's notoriously slippery. Manages to avoid dating anyone without blatantly turning them down. So it surprises me she'd make an exception for you."

Which made it vital he not screw this up. "If you're done insulting me, can you tell me how to make sure she comes back for a second date?"

Cooper lifted one shoulder. "I don't think my advice is going to help you."

Justin's heart sunk. "Is it a hopeless case?"

His brother sighed. "You would take that comment the wrong way, wouldn't you? You're your own worst enemy. What I meant is that Emily has rejected me and most of the guys I know at some time or other, but she said yes to you and what I'm sure was the most unromantic dinner invitation ever, so I've got no idea what makes her tick. I could try to teach you my moves, but I doubt they'd do you any good." He clapped Justin on

the back. “Apparently, she likes you, bro. Just thank your lucky stars and be yourself.”

“Worst advice ever,” Justin grouched.

“Best I can do,” Cooper said. “But there’s one other piece of advice I can offer: pretty this place up a bit. Come on, it screams ‘I don’t give a damn’. Women don’t like that. Get some candles or flowers. Vacuum.” He picked fluff from his pants. “There’s cat fur on everything.”

“I could have figured that out myself.”

“So why ask me for help?”

Justin paused. He didn’t really know. Lack of self-assurance, probably. But he’d come this far on his own. He just needed to believe in himself. And in Emily. She wasn’t shallow enough to dismiss him because he lacked the polish of some men. Heck, maybe she was even attracted to him *because* of that.

He could do this.

“I’m being a dumbass, aren’t I?”

“Yes. Amen to that.” Cooper finished his beer, grabbed the rest of the box and headed for the door. “I’ve gotta get home. Got some photos to develop. Trust your gut and for God’s sake, don’t mention Chloe. Oh,” he paused in the doorway, “and try to smile. The moody, brooding thing is so five years ago.”

Justin stretched his lips into a grimace, exposing his teeth.

Cooper looked taken aback. “On second thought, maybe don’t smile. You’ll scare her off.”

“Thanks, man.”

Cooper saluted. “No worries. Let me know how it goes. And change your sheets, just in case.”

The door swung shut behind him. Justin pondered his parting comment. *Change the sheets.*

He shouldn't. It would be presumptuous. Emily wasn't that kind of girl. But it *had* been two weeks since he'd washed them. What could it hurt?

A quick trip into Timaru, the nearest city, to buy a few candles and a tablecloth—he couldn't risk buying them in Itirangi, the old biddies would be swapping stories about it within the hour—and he returned home for a tidying spree. He didn't buy flowers. Buying flowers for a talented florist seemed like too great of a risk. What if he chose the wrong ones?

For dinner, he opted to cook a barbecue, because frankly, it was the only thing he trusted himself not to screw up. Richie and Dan watched with interest and what seemed like a healthy portion of judgment. The bloody cats were always looking down their noses at him. And yet he tossed them each a treat and petted them as they twined around his legs. They were a damn nuisance, but a man couldn't deny they were cute.



AS SHE KNOCKED on the door of Justin's charming timber house, which was set back from the highway heading out of Itirangi, amongst the trees, Emily rethought her outfit for the umpteenth time. She hadn't gone on a date she really cared about in years and her nerves made her question everything. If they were going to a restaurant, she'd have an idea of what dress code was appropriate, but at Justin's home, she had no baseline knowledge to guide her decision. She wanted to knock him off his feet, but he was a low-key guy, and if she overdid it, he might think her too high maintenance. On the flipside, if she dressed down, she risked losing his interest, so she'd settled for a mint green dress with strappy black sandals and a swipe of lip gloss and mascara. Feminine, but understated.

Unsure of the correct etiquette, she had umm-ed and aah-ed over whether to bring anything. She'd considered wine, but Justin didn't strike her as a wine guy. She thought about buying dessert from the bakehouse but

didn't know what his tastes ran to. In the end, she'd purchased a small box of chocolate pralines from her friend Kayla's artisan chocolate shop. No one could say no to Kayla's chocolates. They were made with love.

When the door swung inward, Justin greeted her with a kiss on the cheek and Emily's jaw dropped. In half a day, he'd undergone quite a transformation. His hair had been trimmed and his scruffy beard tamed until it looked less caveman, more Jason Momoa. Hot as hell.

Her gaze tracked down his body, noting dark jeans and a short-sleeved button-down shirt. It seemed he had gone all-out. She hadn't seen him look so put together since Chloe left him. A warm glow grew within her. He'd made a special effort. Even at the wedding yesterday he'd been scruffy, but he'd tidied up for her.

"You trimmed your beard," she said. He nodded, touching it self-consciously. "And you're wearing a nice shirt."

He cleared his throat. "I am."

She smiled. "You look good."

"So do you. Like always. Come in."

She followed him into the living room, which featured a sofa, an armchair, and a coffee table, all in shades of brown. The bare walls were painted cream and the carpet was gray. A TV was affixed to the wall facing the sofa. Very utilitarian. Missing splashes of color. A woman's touch. If she lived here, she'd frame photos and hang them on the walls, complement them with a painting, and add colored throws, mats, and cushions to bring some life to the place. A person's surroundings affected their mood, and Justin's home needed some brightness.

Don't get ahead of yourself.

At the moment, his furnishings were none of her business. There might come a time when they were, but she needed to slow down. A black cat lay curled on the armchair and a fluffy tabby butted his head against her leg. She bent to pat him.

“That’s Dan,” Justin told her. “The one on the couch is Richie. They’re a nuisance, but they’re decent ratters, so I keep them around.”

“Unique names for cats,” she remarked, scratching Dan behind his ear, pleased when he purred in response.

“Named for Carter and McCaw,” Justin explained.

“Of course.” He’d named his cats after legendary rugby players. She wouldn’t expect anything less from a rabid All Blacks fan. “Cute.”

He glanced at the cats. “I wouldn’t know. I only care how many rats they kill.”

But the way he picked up Richie and draped him over his shoulder before opening the French door on the far side of the living room made a liar of him. Emily hid a smile. The fact he didn’t want her to know what a softie he was only made him more adorable. He could speak in a gruff voice and deny it all he wanted, but a man who wore his cat as a scarf loved that cat to bits.

“Out here,” he said, gesturing for her to join him. When she did, she heard sizzling and followed her nose to the barbecue on his lawn, situated beside a picnic table upon which three candles were burning.

“What’s on the barbie?” she asked.

“Mushrooms and onions so far, but we’re having steak, too. That okay?”

“Steak is great.”

He put the cat down and added two steaks to the grill. “How would you like it done?”

“Medium is good, thanks.”

Sitting at the picnic table, Emily crossed her ankles. The fresh scent of earth and trees hung in the air, woodsy and relaxing. The backyard was an oasis of lawn amongst the forest, with no gardens or paths. Simple and masculine, much like the interior of the house. Birds called in trees, out of

sight. Despite the hour, it was still daylight. She tilted her head back to look at the blue sky. A cloud floated across her vision.

“What a beautiful place to live,” she said. “I’m quite jealous.”

Justin checked the mushrooms and onions. The aroma made her salivate.

“You live in town, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yeah. A few houses down from Aria.”

Emily’s place was nice, but she’d always intended it to be temporary. A stopgap until she found somewhere she liked better. Then she’d gotten busy with work and finding a permanent home had slipped down her to-do list.

Justin flipped the steaks then went inside and came back with two bowls of salad: potato and lettuce.

Emily laughed delightedly. “You’ve got the barbecue meal down to an art.”

“It’s the one form of cooking I’ve mastered,” he replied, eyes crinkling at the corners. “So don’t expect too much from me on the second date.”

She liked the lines around his eyes and the faint brackets around his mouth. They showed he smiled often—or at least, he had at some point in time. They also showed that he was a man, not a boy. He’d lived enough to know who he was and what he wanted. And apparently, he wanted her. Enough for a second date, at least.

“How about I cook next time?” she suggested.

His eyes widened, as if she’d surprised him. “I’d like that. It’s a date. Provided you want to see me again after tonight,” he added wryly as he loaded steak, mushrooms and onions onto plates and carried them to the table, sitting opposite her.

“Justin,” she said dryly, “we live in a tiny town. Even if we didn’t go on another date, we’d see each other again. The perils of being in Itirangi.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

They each dished up dinner and settled in. Justin had indeed mastered the barbecue; Emily's steak was perfect. While they ate, they talked. Well, mostly Emily talked, but when Justin chimed in, she found herself laughing and feeling giddier than she had since high school when she'd watched him across the classroom. She wondered what could possess any woman to throw away his affection. When their cutlery clattered against empty plates, he put his weight on his elbows and leaned across the table toward her.

"I know this is when I'm supposed to play it cool," he said, "but I really want to go on another date with you, Em. I'm not the kind of guy who plays games. I think we could have something special, and I want to see where it goes."

Her heart thundered so loud she could hardly hear him over the sound of it.

"I'd love it if you came back tomorrow," he continued. "Same time, same place. If you'd like to cook, I can stock the kitchen with whatever you need."

"I...uh..." She thought she'd become immune to bluntness, but when Justin gazed into her eyes and said things like that, it challenged her sanity. What girl wouldn't love to be the subject of his single-minded focus? "You don't need to stock the kitchen," she said. "I'll bring over everything I need."

Her cheesy pasta bake could win any man's heart.

"So, that's a yes?"

She lifted from the seat and closed some of the distance between them. "That's a yes," she confirmed.

He seized her face and kissed her, upending the bowl of potato salad. He cursed and started to pull back, but she gripped his shirt and yanked him closer.

"Ignore it," she murmured against his mouth.

Their tongues entwined, and she didn't care that she was awkwardly splayed across a table, or that her breath probably smelled of onions, because this was *Justin* kissing her. *Justin*, who she'd wanted forever. If she could imprint this moment on her memory, she would.

Hours later, she still tasted his kiss on her lips.

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Rather than cook at Justin's place, Emily prepared dinner ahead of time and packed it in a Tupperware container. Tonight, she was a woman with a plan, and wasting time in his kitchen didn't figure into it. Tonight, she was going to seduce him.

Enough was enough. Thus far, his kisses and teasing touches had led nowhere, so it fell to her to take their relationship to the next level. She'd visited the lingerie store during her lunch break and purchased a sheer negligee and matching underwear.

In addition to the negligee, she also packed clean clothes and toiletries, hoping she wasn't being overly optimistic. Wearing a short dress over the lingerie, she drove to Justin's house half an hour early because she simply couldn't wait any longer and marched to the door, leaving everything other than dinner in her car. She'd come back for it later. *After.* Letting herself inside, she put dinner in the fridge and went looking for him. A short hall extended from the living room, with three rooms adjoining it. One of those doors opened and she stopped abruptly at the sight of a mostly naked male torso.

Holy moly.

If God ever created a man in his image, Justin Simons was it: built, masculine, uncompromising. Her eyes alighted on the wall of muscle that

was his chest. Firm pectorals, prominent trapezoids, and strong deltoids. She longed to trace the edge of the pecs with her fingertip and then beneath, to the ridges of his abdomen and further to where a deep vee grooved from the bottom of his obliques into the towel wrapped around his hips.

He straightened, hands on hips, arms bulging. Best of all, dark ink swirled around his shoulder in knots and twists. Emily's mouth watered, and she promised herself, before the night was out, she'd follow the lines of that tattoo with her tongue.

"I was in the shower. Didn't hear you arrive," he said, making no move to cover himself. Water dripped from the tips of his damp hair onto his shoulders

"I let myself in," she replied. "I hope that's okay."

Then, since he was already halfway to being naked and it seemed like an appropriate time, she stripped her dress off. It pooled at her feet, and now it was Justin's turn to stare. She held her head high and refused to waver. She knew the ruby-red negligee suited her skin tone and left most of her exposed. She hoped he liked what he saw. Based on his hungry expression, she'd say he did.



WHEN EMILY REMOVED HER DRESS, Justin's capacity for rational thought fled.

She was perfect. An angel of seduction.

The red lacy thing she wore alternately concealed and revealed, following the contours of her curves, dipping into the hollow between her breasts, presenting her for his enjoyment like a succulent, gift-wrapped present. One he wanted to unwrap inch by inch.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," he said, feasting on her with his eyes. "Can I just look at you for a while?"

He needn't have worried that she'd be too shy—she let him look his fill. “Twirl for me,” he ordered.

Torturously slowly, she spun in a circle so he could see her from every side. What he saw only reinforced his initial impression. *Perfect.*

“Take it off.”

She pulled a ribbon tied in a bow above her cleavage and the fabric fell away, leaving her in a red thong and nothing else. *Jesus.* Her aureoles were pale peach, as he'd suspected. Her skin tone was even, as if she bathed in milk every day like Queen Cleopatra. In contrast, his own skin was marred by tan lines and patches of sunburn.

He'd wondered previously whether she'd have freckles, but except for an apricot-colored spot on her breast and another on her collarbone, she was free of blemishes. Surprising, given her coloring.

“I hope you're sure about this,” he said, afraid to lay his greedy hands on her lest she have second thoughts. He wasn't sure he could survive the frustration if she did.

“I'm sure,” she replied without hesitation. “I promise. And if you're sure, too, I'd really appreciate it if you'd return the favor and get out of that towel.”

Bossy like a queen, too. A smile quirked his lips. Damn if he didn't like her spunk.

He dropped the towel and kicked it to the side, now standing in only his briefs. “Better?” he demanded.

She pursed her lips, flicked a glance down to rest on his crotch, which throbbed in response to her scrutiny, then shook her head. “Still too many clothes.”

The laugh that boomed from his chest startled both of them. But while Emily's brow furrowed with concern, Justin's heart lightened. There had never been laughter between him and Chloe during moments of intimacy. Already, things with Emily were better and they weren't even naked yet.

She had laid down the gauntlet. He responded by shaking off his underwear and posing for her, flexing his biceps and tensing his abs, his erection jutting out proudly as if trying to get closer to the source of its excitement. When it came to his body, he was confident bordering on arrogant. While he may overlook personal grooming from time to time, his physically demanding job ensured he was fitter than many gym junkies.

“Happy now?”

“Hmm.” Emily stared at him, looking equal parts fascinated and nervous.

That’s right, sweetheart. This will be inside you real soon.

He could lose his head just thinking about it. In the past, he had suppressed his dirtiest fantasies because he thought that was what Chloe wanted, but the way Emily had reacted to his rough kisses and manhandling over the last couple of days made him optimistic he wouldn’t have to rein in his impulses like he had before. That possibility only excited him further.

You can’t afford to get this wrong, he reminded himself. He had to make it so earth-shatteringly good for her that she became addicted to him and accepted she couldn’t get the same pleasure from anyone else.

Emily swallowed apprehensively, and a flicker of doubt splashed like icy water down his spine. He hadn’t been able to please Chloe enough to keep her around, and he hadn’t tried with another woman since. What if he failed with Emily, too?

He shut down the thought. Failure wasn’t an option.

“Stop thinking,” Emily said, as if she could hear the cacophony of voices arguing in his head.

He was about to say he couldn’t just switch them off when she lowered her thong so she was totally naked before him. And then, he discovered he could indeed switch them off, given sufficient distraction.



“COME HERE,” Justin growled, low and gravelly.

Even his voice made Emily wet. She went to him. To her surprise, when he reached for her, his hands landed in strictly PG locations. He cupped her face and anchored her to him with a hand on her hip. Then he kissed her.

As with their New Year’s kiss, it started sweet and soft, but when Justin scraped his teeth over her bottom lip, she moaned and rocked into him and the kiss heated quickly, becoming a gnash of tongues and teeth. They tasted each other, boldly stroking and licking. He nipped at her mouth, pinching her full lower lip between his teeth then running his tongue along its length. The contrast between the gentlemanly way he held her and the crude plundering of her mouth made her desperate for him to do the same thing all over her body. She wanted him to lick and bite and love every inch of her.

“Touch me,” she begged, sounding breathless and reckless, totally unlike herself.

“How do you want to be touched?” he asked, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder, his beard rough against her skin. He nuzzled her gently, tongue darting out to taste her collarbone. He found the spot where he’d bitten her the day before, clamped his teeth on it and sucked. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough for her to know he’d leave a mark.

She whimpered and clasped him tightly to her, searching for pressure to ease the ache between her legs. She loved the idea of him marking her, then after he was gone, she’d see the marks and remember all of the filthy, wonderful things they’d done together.

“Like that,” she murmured. “Just like that. But please, I need your hands on me. Everywhere. All over.”

The hand on her neck burned a trail of fire down her body to join the other. He gripped her butt cheeks and squeezed, his fingers sinking into the soft flesh. He guided her along the length of his erection, the blunt head dragging through her slick folds, then crushed her to his pelvis. Her head

fell back and her mouth opened on a gasp as pleasure jolted through her, sudden and intense.

“You like that,” he rasped, watching her face intently.

She barely managed to nod. He closed his eyes and slid her back along his erection, and she cried out.

“You like me being rough. Aw, hell, Em. You’re so perfect.” He rocked their bodies together and breath hissed between his teeth. “So perfect for me.” Something scraped the back of her thighs. The bed. “Lie down, sweetheart,” he said. “Legs apart. Open yourself for me.”

She lay back, then took a hold of her knees and drew them to the sides, leaving herself exposed and vulnerable. For a long moment he just looked at her, and she wondered what he was thinking. It was impossible to tell what was going on behind those near-black eyes. Before she could ask, he knelt and lowered his mouth.

She squeaked in shock. He caught her eyes and smiled wickedly. Using his mouth and lips, he teased her into a mindless state of need, then slipped a finger inside her and crooked it. As he did, his tongue flicked her, and she shuddered, breasts heaving. He did it again, then added a second finger, stretching her until she felt full. Good God, if his fingers devastated her like this, how would she ever survive sex?

She kept her eyes on him, and the sensations he created were made all the more erotic by seeing his mouth on her, watching his fingers plunge into her body. When he twisted his hand and pressed down on her, stars exploded behind her eyes and her body went limp.



JUSTIN HAD NEVER SEEN anything as mesmerizing as Emily when she came. First, her eyes squeezed shut, then her entire body shook, and finally his name passed her trembling lips and she collapsed.

She entranced him.

“Emily,” he murmured. “Sweetheart, how do you feel?”

Her eyelids fluttered, her irises now a deep moss color as she studied him from beneath her lashes. “Wonderful,” she replied softly. “That was beyond amazing. I never dreamed...”

Satisfaction roared through him, and he felt like a king. “You liked it?”

“I more than liked it.” She blinked, the haziness in her eyes lifting, and smiled saucily. “Now it’s my turn.”

He didn’t have to wonder what she meant for long. She sat up and pulled him onto the bed with her, then straddled his legs. Her slender fingers wrapped around his length and she moistened her lips. He pulsed helplessly in her palm, liquid beading at the tip. Oh, God. He couldn’t... She couldn’t... She started to lower her head.

“No!” he gasped, yanking free of her.

She frowned and reached for him again. “Why not? You had your fun.”

He groaned. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m wound pretty tight, sweetheart. I need to make this good for you, but if you play with me like you want to, I won’t be able to do that. You can play later.” God, he hoped she would. He’d love to have her hot mouth on him, but not as much as he *needed* to get inside her.

He shifted her to the side, rolled away, grabbed a condom and sheathed himself, then returned and caged her between his arms, holding himself up so he wouldn’t crush her. He tested her with his blunt head.

“You’re so wet,” he said tightly. “So ready for me.”

He eased in, an inch at a time. He was thick and the last thing he wanted was to hurt her, but then she grasped his ass and thrust upwards, impaling herself on him. His head spun. Her narrow channel clasped him tight and pleasure built at the base of his spine.

Shit. Get yourself under control, man.

He couldn't come in two thrusts like a chump kid. He had to get her there first. Luckily, he was learning what made her hot. He claimed her mouth with luscious, carnal kisses, dragging her deep into the storm of sensation with him. He nipped the end of her tongue, then licked it better. She clamped around him. He hooked his arm under her leg and drew her knee up so he had better access to her. Then he drove into her with long, satisfying thrusts.

"I love it when you do that," she gasped, rolling her hips to meet him.

Her breaths came quickly, her beautiful breasts bouncing with each thrust. The pressure at the base of his spine grew. He gritted his teeth. Even his wildest fantasies didn't come close to this. Emily was a mass of contradictions, his sweet angel with a wild side. If other men saw her this way, they'd be queuing up for miles to vie for her affection.

The thought of her with other men was like a stab in the gut. Desperate to assert his control, he dropped her leg and pressed his palm into her arousal. She bucked against his hand, but he held firm. Her head thrashed from side to side, eyes closed, desperate for the release only *he* could give her.

"That's right, Em," he encouraged. "Come for me. I want to see you come again."

He'd become a voyeur, getting off on witnessing her pleasure. He needed it. Was greedy for any sign of her approval. She moaned and spasmed around him. The moment before she drew him over the edge, her eyes opened and captured him as he emptied into her with a hoarse shout.

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Emily snuggled into Justin's side. He hugged her with one arm and nuzzled the top of her head. Tilting her face up, she kissed his lips. The frantic need from earlier had seeped away and she was boneless and sated, enjoying the way he held her close as if he couldn't bear to be parted from her. Using his chest as a pillow, she rubbed her cheek against his rough hair and smiled. Happiness fizzed through her, bubbling up her throat and emerging as a joyful laugh.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" he asked, the vibrations tickling her ear.

"Nothing," she replied, smiling. "I'm just happy."

"Me, too," he agreed. "You make me happy." A moment later, he added, "I can't believe you seduced me. Sweet little Emily Parker. No one would ever believe it."

"Not so sweet," she said, "and I haven't been little in years."

"You're little compared to me."

"*Everyone* is little compared to you."

Justin chuckled. She loved the deep, throaty sound of it. He didn't laugh often enough for her liking. If he let her, she'd make him laugh every day for the rest of his life. Not that she'd let on yet how much he meant to her. For all she knew, she could be a rebound to him.

“Can’t argue with that,” he said.

His stomach growled loudly, and Emily patted it. “Um, I think it might be time to feed you.”

“Nah, I want to snuggle.” He rolled them onto their sides, spooning her, making her feel cherished and protected. The way she felt right then, she’d do anything for him.

His stomach growled again. Violently.

“You need food,” she said firmly. “I’ll heat up dinner. Stay here.”

Extricating herself from him, which took a little effort since he refused to cooperate, she padded out to the kitchen naked. After all, out here in the country, surrounded by trees, no one could see her. She dished up two bowls of pasta bake and heated them in the microwave, then returned to Justin’s bedroom. One of the cats—Dan, she thought—had curled into a ball on Justin’s stomach. She placed the bowls on a cupboard, lifted the cat off, handed Justin a bowl and slid under the covers next to him.

“Smells good,” Justin said, eating with gusto.

Emily watched the fork fly from bowl to mouth and back in amazement. In less than two minutes, the bowl was empty.

“Would you like more?” she asked. Thankfully, the recipe was intended to serve four.

“There’s more?” he asked like an eager puppy.

She nodded. “In the fridge.”

“I’ll sort it out,” he said, pushing the blankets back. “You eat.”

By the time he came back, Emily had consumed enough that she was no longer hungry, so she set her bowl aside. She didn’t want to stuff herself because then she wouldn’t be prepared for round two of sex. And provided Justin was game, she was keen for round two.

After he’d munched down his second bowl, he crawled over her body and settled between her legs. “Time for dessert.”

“Yes,” she agreed. And she wasn’t talking about the chocolates.



THE NEXT MORNING, Justin slept deeply, not waking when Emily dressed and made coffee, or when she left a steaming mug on his bedside cabinet. She strolled through the house, exploring, though there wasn't much to explore. Everywhere she went, she encountered the same soul-crushing monochromatic color scheme.

She opened the curtains to let light into the house, except for in the bedroom where Justin was dozing. The light that filtered through the windows was weak, as they were covered by a film of dust. Searching in the laundry cupboards, she found a cloth and glass cleaner and wiped down the windows in the living room, kitchen, and bathroom so early morning sun illuminated the rooms. Hands on hips, she studied her work, then smiled. This had to brighten Justin's day. Sunlight was the primary source of vitamin D, which recent studies had linked to positive mood. More vitamin D equaled a better mood. It was science.

Unfortunately, the sun highlighted speckles of dust on the coffee table, vanity and kitchen bench. She searched for a clean cloth to clear off the dust, then fetched a few items she'd brought over from the shop last night out of her car. Collecting them in her arms, she staggered inside and laid them on the couch. Amongst the items were a green glass vase, which she'd thought would suit Justin's preference for the outdoors, a bouquet of wildflowers, two buttery yellow cushions for the sofa, and lastly, a wall hanging depicting a mountainous landscape against a brilliant blue sky.

Choosing the right things to perk up Justin's house had been difficult, and she hoped she hadn't messed up, but if she had, she could always take the rejects to her own home and try again. What was most important was that his home felt right to him.

She wondered how he'd react when he noticed her additions. Hopefully, it would be a pleasant surprise. Something to bring a smile to his face.

Being the kind of guy he was, Justin probably had no clue how to make the most of his living space. Fortunately for him, she was an expert.

She peeled the plastic wrapping from the bouquet, filled the bottom of the vase with water, and slotted the flowers into it before placing the vase in the center of the coffee table. Then, in a stroke of genius, she arranged wrapped chocolate pralines in a circle around the base of the vase. She plumped the cushions on the sofa and searched for somewhere to hang the mountain scene. A nail extended from the wall a couple of yards to the left of the TV so she hung it from that. Better to make use of the existing nail, which she assumed had previously held some kind of artwork, than to hammer in a new one and wake Justin up.

Gazing around, she weighed her efforts. She'd only added a few touches of color, but already the atmosphere had lightened. It actually looked like someone lived here, and the cave-like darkness had receded. She nodded to herself. She'd done well.

Detouring to the bedroom, she bent to kiss Justin's cheek. His muscles were slack with sleep, but he mumbled something as she kissed him.

"I'm going now," she whispered. "I've got to open the shop."

"Come back tonight," he said, eyes still closed. "Promise."

"I will," she agreed, and then left, feeling lighter than air, as if she could stretch her arms and fly. She already wanted to see him again. The day couldn't pass quickly enough.



JUSTIN'S first clue that something was off was when he wandered from the bedroom into the living room, rubbed his bleary eyes, and froze at the sight of an enormous white and blue picture occupying the wall opposite the hall. The space where the photo of him and Chloe taken on the day of their engagement used to hang. He peered at the picture through narrowed eyes.

Where had it come from? The damn thing had to be four feet tall and just as wide. It dominated the wall, detracting attention from the TV. Unfortunately, it also reminded him of Chloe, simply by virtue of its location. In a moment of clarity, he realized where it had come from. *Emily*. Almost as though she'd zeroed in on a vulnerable spot and tried to make it her own.

Looking away from the painting on the wall, Justin's gaze landed on a pair of yellow cushions on the sofa which he'd certainly not put there. Purple and white flowers graced the coffee table. Cold sliced through him. Emily meant well, he knew she did. But hell, she'd spent one night with him and already she was trying to change his home. Change *him*. That didn't bode well for the future. He sucked in a deep breath and released it. He could handle this. He liked Emily, and they were combustible between the sheets.

Don't panic.

He had a woman in his life again. Adjustments were necessary. He could adapt. It was only a couple of minor changes. No biggie.



AFTER ANOTHER SATISFYING night spent tangled in the sheets with his woman, Justin stretched, opened his eyes, and jerked back at the sight of a rustic wooden clock on the wall facing the bed. A clock that hadn't been there the previous night. It looked like a slice taken from a tree trunk with grooves etched into it to represent the hours and two simple black hands.

He considered the clock. It suited his style. If he'd wanted a clock, he may well have chosen this one for himself, but the fact was, he *intentionally* didn't have a clock in his bedroom because he didn't want to feel rushed in the morning. Sure, he usually rose early—by his standards, if not Emily's—

but if he decided to engage in a leisurely sleep-in, he preferred not to be reminded of the time passing. The bedroom was a place to relax.

Apparently, Emily didn't get that.

He closed his eyes, dug the heel of his palms into his eye sockets, and groaned. Was this her way of hinting that he should be getting up earlier? Making more of his day? Who the hell knew? What he did know was that he couldn't tolerate this change, so he dragged himself out of bed, lifted the clock from the wall and took it to the living room, where he placed it on the windowsill.

Once again, he noticed that the curtains had been opened and the glass cleaned. He couldn't decide whether he appreciated Emily's efforts, or resented them.

"She means well," he repeated to himself. He'd have to talk to her about it sometime. Just, not right now. For a little while longer, he wanted to revel in their budding relationship. In the way she felt in his arms. So perfect. So right.



EMILY WOKE with a muscular arm draped over her waist, curled beneath the front of her hip. She smiled a blissful smile and snuggled back into Justin's chest. His arm tightened around her and he nuzzled the nape of her neck.

"Good morning," she murmured, enjoying the warmth of him wrapped around her.

"Mornin', sweetheart," he rumbled, his voice raspy with sleep.

She wriggled and felt him harden against her butt. Her eyes flew open. Uh-oh. She tried to extricate herself from him, but he only held tighter.

"Don't start something you're not prepared to finish," he said, his palm skimming up her side to cup her breast.

“I need to get to work,” she replied, breathless. Although maybe-kind-of-sorta she wouldn’t mind him making her late. But he sighed heavily and released her. She slid out from the bed, dressed—she’d shower at her place on the way—and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, then the tip of his nose, and finally his forehead. A surge of affection welled in her heart. She already felt so much for her gorgeous, grumpy man.

She glanced up at the wall to check the time but noticed the clock she’d hung had been moved. That didn’t dishearten her. Quite the contrary, it demonstrated that Justin was okay with the other changes she’d made around the place. Clearly, he wouldn’t hesitate to make it known if she crossed a line. She’d made a mistake with the clock. That was okay. Mistakes happened. She hummed as she unloaded her latest acquisitions, wondering what he’d think. They certainly made *her* feel more at home. Five minutes later, she departed with a satisfied smile on her face



JUSTIN COULD TEAR his hair out.

Each time Emily visited, something new appeared in his house. A painting of Lake Itirangi on the wall. A jar of cookies on the bench. A ‘welcome home’ mat on the front doorstep. He’d tolerated it all with nothing more than a raised eyebrow, then whisked her into the bedroom. None of it had been worth starting an argument over. The clock had been easy enough to move, and he’d seen how she could imagine he’d like it, but this time she’d gone too far.

He had stepped into the bathroom, lifted the seat on the toilet—which he didn’t mind doing, for the record—only to glance down and notice the pink fluff that squished between his toes.

Pink. Fluff.

Emily had installed a fluffy pink mat at the foot of his toilet, and when he lowered the lid to flush, he noticed a matching cover on the cistern.

Fuck no.

He was a *man*, damn it. He couldn't have fluffy pink covers on his toilet. Not for anyone, not even Emily. And what was she thinking, bringing it here? They may be seeing each other, but they hadn't discussed their relationship status—which meant, as far as he was concerned, that she had no place decking out his place in pink stuff. She had no right to try to change his house or try to change *him*.

What a mess.

He raked a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends. Everything had spiraled rapidly out of control, and it was his own stupid fault. He'd been caught up in being with Emily, and not doing anything to put her off, but he needed to look at the facts.

Fact: he didn't need to be changed.

Fact: he definitely didn't need a fluffy pink mat in the bathroom.

Fact: Emily was making changes in his life that he hadn't asked for and didn't want.

Fact: he needed to nip the problem in the bud. Immediately.

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“Emily, I can’t stay quiet any longer. You’ve gone a step too far this time.”

Emily held the phone away and stared at it, stunned. Justin’s voice was low, but undeniably annoyed. Warily, she returned the phone to her ear.

“A few bits and pieces was okay, but I can’t handle a pink abomination in my bathroom”

She cringed, his frustrated tone summoning memories of hiding in her bedroom while her mother and father argued on the other side of the door. Of lying on the floor, hiding while her mum berated her dad for not fixing the sink fast enough, or allowing the dog to put its muddy paws on the sofa. Apparently, Justin didn’t like her most recent addition to his home.

She was tempted to close her eyes and stick her fingers in her ears, but this wasn’t the end of the world, and she couldn’t hide from it. She’d overdone it, but at least now she knew where he drew the line. She’d known the rug was a risk, but it had felt so soft under her feet and he hadn’t seemed to mind the other additions to the house—had even remarked on how nice it was to have cookies available whenever he wanted, and how the new scented diffuser in the bathroom smelled like vanilla. She’d thought she was brightening up his home as she’d set out to do, making it a nicer place to live. Surely, he would have said something if he’d been unhappy.

It would seem not.

“Hold on,” she said to him, then she turned to Sandra, who was conversing with a customer. “I need to take this call somewhere private. Are you all right out here?”

“Yes, we’re good. Take as much time as you need.”

With a straight spine, Emily walked to the workshop. Memories of her time in here with Justin assailed her but she did her best to ignore them and focus on the here and now. As soon as the door clicked shut, she sank to the ground.

“I’m back,” she told him. “I’m sorry about the rug. I’ll get rid of it tonight.”

He sighed, sounding wound up. “This isn’t just about the rug.”

She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them for comfort. While he wasn’t yelling or swearing, she didn’t handle conflict of any kind well. She tended to crumple the moment anyone raised their voice.

“What is it about, then?”

“It’s...” He seemed to struggle to find the words. “First the flowers, the massive picture on the wall, and now a rug? It’s gotta stop, Em. My place was fine the way it was.”

“I was just trying to help,” she whispered, her voice wobbling.

“That’s not how it feels,” he said. “It feels like you’re trying to change me. But I don’t want that, and I don’t need another woman who makes me pretend to be something I’m not.”

Emily sniffed, tears leaking down her face. Though she’d heard of his hot temper—everyone had—he’d never been growly with her, and she didn’t know how to respond. But what really made her heart ache was the fact he honestly believed she didn’t adore him the way he was.

“I don’t want to change you,” she said so quietly she barely heard herself. He paused to listen. “I like you the way you are.”

He snorted derisively. “You’ve got a funny way of showing it.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand. She had to explain, to make him understand. But in the face of his unhappiness, she couldn’t think straight let alone utter the words that would make him forgive her. Her mouth worked, and no sound came out.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he said. “I thought I was ready for another relationship, but maybe I’m not. Maybe I won’t ever be.”

Wait—was he breaking up with her? She slapped one palm to the floor to ground herself, then shifted and lowered her forehead to the wall, the coolness bringing the room back into focus, although it remained blurry at the edges, courtesy of the blood rushing to her head. Everything was moving so fast. How had this escalated so rapidly?

“I’ll take it all away, I promise.” Words spewed from her mouth, and she thanked her lucky stars that her lunch didn’t also spew forth. Once, in primary school, a teacher had publicly chastised her, and she’d thrown up on his boots. She’d been taunted with the nickname ‘Pukey Parker’ for years.

“I won’t bring any more over,” she added. “I don’t want to change you, and I’m so, so sorry if it seemed that way. I’d never want you to feel that way. Please believe me.”

“I can’t,” he said tiredly. “I wasn’t good enough for Chloe, but I ignored the signs for years and look where we ended up. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I’m not like Chloe.” If Emily knew anything for certain, it was that. She may be guilty of a multitude of sins, but she and Chloe were polar opposites. As different as gingerbread and French pastry.

“If you say so.” He huffed. “Look, we jumped into this too quickly and got carried away. Neither of us have dated for a while, and it seemed like a good thing. But we need to take a step back. Get some distance.”

He doesn’t mean it, she told herself. He’s just emotional. We can talk when he calms down.

“So, where do we stand?” she asked, insides quivering. “Are we still together?”

“No,” he said, crushing her tender heart with one cold word. “I think it’s best if we end things for now. Maybe we can reassess down the track.”

Emily crumpled. She could hear the truth in his words. He didn’t want her anymore, and knowing that ripped her apart inside as effectively as if he’d reached through the phone, torn her open and shredded her vital organs. She’d thought she was helping him, thought that they’d had something special, but instead she’d worsened his self-doubt and broken the bond they’d been building.

This mess was on her.

“Okay,” she said. “I understand.” She drew in a shuddering breath, tears streaming over her cheeks and dripping off her chin, dampening the knees of her jeans. “Do you want me to come by and collect the things I left there?”

The horrible things that had ruined their relationship, and the future she’d hoped they’d share. A pipe dream.

“No,” he replied, after thinking for a moment. “I’ll drop them off on your doorstep. It’s easier that way.”

Emily nodded, although she knew he couldn’t see her. Then she hung up and curled into the fetal position, clutching herself, trying to take up as little space as she possible, wishing she could roll up so small that she just vanished. All she’d wanted was to make Justin happy, and instead she’d gone and broken her own heart. Stupid, stupid girl.



SHE'D CRIED.

Justin had done a lot of awful things in his time, but he’d never made a woman sob like the world was ending. He’d been hurt and trying to save

them both future pain, but God, hearing her cry made him want to kick his own ass.

He was a shit. He deserved to be miserable.

No more women. They weren't worth it. He'd been okay on his own for the past year with Richie and Dan for company. He loved his family and had a few close friends he could go out for beers or watch rugby with. He enjoyed his job. He didn't need a woman.

But she'd cried.

Whatever her flaws, Emily obviously cared for him. Or at the very least, she'd cared about the idea of him. He shouldn't let her tears affect him like this. *He didn't care.* If he repeated that to himself often enough, he might believe it. But probably not.

With a curse, he tore the mountain wall hanging off and tossed it into the back of his truck. He grabbed the yellow cushions, then the painting. The cookie jar joined them. He didn't even stop to eat a cookie first. Then, the final touch, he piled the offensive pink mat and the toilet cover on top, slamming the door behind.

He looked around his living room. Job done. He'd exorcised Emily and all signs of her invasion. His home was exactly the way he liked it: plain, manly.

Boring.



THE DAY after Justin shut her out and returned everything she'd left at his house, Emily found herself sitting numbly behind the counter of her shop, speaking to Nina, a reporter from the local newspaper, the South Canterbury Chronicle.

She'd agreed to this interview weeks ago, when she'd been named South Canterbury Businesswoman of the Year, but now she'd rather be

anywhere else. For the past twenty-four hours, she'd barely been able to string together two sentences without crying.

"So, Emily," Nina said, scribbling the date on the top of a notepad, "how long have you known you wanted to be a businesswoman?"

Emily gripped the sides of the stool she was sitting on and forced a smile. "To be honest, I don't think of myself as a businesswoman. I'm a florist and a decorator at heart, but I saw an opportunity to build something special for the community, so I went for it."

Nina tapped her pink and gold pen against her chin, watching Emily thoughtfully. She had intense eyes that were nearly black, and her outfit screamed 'career woman'. "Since you were named Businesswoman of the Year, a businesswoman is what you've become, regardless of what you set out to be. Speaking of the award, how do you feel about winning it?"

"Honored," Emily replied easily. "There were so many successful, hardworking women nominated that I never expected to win."

She wondered idly whether Nina would leave if she broke down in tears, or if that would only make her determined to discover the reason why. The journalist jotted some shorthand notes. How long did it take to master shorthand? Emily's friend Aria could write using shorthand as fast as most people could talk and Nina seemed equally adept. Maybe they had competed in timed drills at journalism school.

"Let's talk about the property you own and manage," Nina suggested.

"Do you mean the shop, or the old hotel?"

"The old hotel," Nina clarified. "Tell me what gave you the idea to restore it and rent it out to other businesses."

Emily's death grip on the stool eased. She could do this. When Nina had called requesting an interview, she'd nearly turned her down out of sheer nerves, but this was her life and her community. There were no wrong answers. And the publicity couldn't hurt.

“That building had been abandoned since I was a little girl and it always seemed like a real waste to me. I could see how much potential it had, and it’s in a great location near the town center. When it came up for sale, I bought it impulsively. I wasn’t sure exactly what to do with it, but I talked it through with my father—”

“Who sits on the town council?” Nina interrupted.

“That’s correct. And Dad suggested that rather than reopening it as a hotel, I investigate other options. I asked around to see if anyone would be interested in renting a space there, and the response was overwhelming. Everyone wanted to support my project to see the old building restored, so I lined up future tenants and hired a team who specialize in restoring heritage buildings in a way that retains their original character. Some modifications were needed to make it suitable for commercial use, but I think they did a fantastic job.”

“I agree,” Nina said. “I visited before I came here. It’s a lovely building. I’ve seen photos of how it looked beforehand, so I appreciate how much vision you must have had to see the potential in it.”

Emily shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. She had a talent for seeing how to make the best of things, that was all.

Nina referred back to her list of questions. “So, the building is fully occupied now?”

“Yes, it is.” And thank God for that. Emily had sunk her finances into the building, so it was a relief to see her sacrifice and hard work pay off. That the community loved it only made her happier.

“I spoke to some of your tenants while I was there,” Nina said. “They had a lot of good things to say about you. Couldn’t stop them as a matter of fact.” Her lips quirked up. “So tell me about the shop. How long have you had it?”

“I opened four years ago, after I completed a certificate in floral design and a diploma in retail management at the polytechnic.”

“And things are going well?”

“They are,” Emily confirmed. “I love it. Business is relatively steady, with some fluctuation between summer and winter tourist seasons, and there’s really nowhere I’d rather be.”

Except at this very minute, she’d rather be at home in bed, hidden beneath the covers.

“That’s great to hear.” Nina didn’t look up. “So many women settle for positions which don’t truly make them happy or fulfill their potential because society tells them they can’t have it all. It always makes me happy to see a woman living the life she wants.”

Emily blushed. She wanted to dismiss the compliment out of hand, but the truth was, she did have it good. She *should* be proud.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

“No.” Nina met her eyes, deadly serious. “Thank *you*. You’re serving as a great role model for local girls.”

Now, Emily’s gaze did slide away, and she murmured, “I don’t know about that.”

A great role model wouldn’t have let her dream guy go without a fight.

“I do. So, in saying that, is there any advice you have for girls or women out there who aspire to be a businesswoman?”

“Go for it. If you work hard enough and believe in yourself, nothing can stop you.”

“That’s great. Well said.” Nina tucked her notepad into the Prada handbag she’d deposited on the counter, gathered her dark hair into a bun and stabbed the fancy pen through it. “Thank you for agreeing to speak with me,” she said, reaching over to shake Emily’s hand. Then she straightened her tailored pantsuit and slung the handbag over her shoulder. “It was a pleasure to meet you. Good luck for the year ahead.”

“You, too,” Emily said, waving her off.

Once the frighteningly intense journalist had left, Emily's shoulders slumped, and she drew in a shaky breath. The interview had gone well as far as she could tell. She could finally go home, build a pillow fort, and hide from the world. At least for a night.

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Two mornings after Justin reclaimed his home, he found himself opening the curtains and windows to let the sun in. The day before, he'd kept them shut, just because he could, but it had been gloomy and, above all else, pointless. Nobody noticed except for him, and he had nothing to prove to himself. So, he reasoned, there was no harm in letting the sunshine and fresh air into the house.

As he ate a bowl of chocolate-flavored cereal with full-fat milk and a glass of fruit juice, the same breakfast he'd had for the past year, because no one was around to force him to eat organic quinoa puffs with goji berries and almond milk, he looked around his living area, really paying attention for once. He'd lived here for a while, but no one would know it. Whether out of sheer stubbornness—because with Chloe he'd always had to have the perfect piece of art on the wall, or the most fashionable style of furniture—or perhaps simple laziness, he'd never taken the time to make this house his own after the breakup.

He'd been determined not to live as he had with Chloe, afraid to get comfortable in his own home, but he may have gone too far in the other direction and shot himself in the foot. It just so happened that he liked art—some art, anyway—and a little color wasn't so bad. Maybe he could occupy

a middle ground, where he didn't go back to the way he'd lived with Chloe, but didn't keep a militarily bland home, either.

So, he made a trip into the nearby city of Timaru that evening after work to purchase a plush new rug for the living room and a canvas photo of a forested waterfall to hang next to the TV. Something small enough that it wouldn't detract focus from sports games when they were on. As he laid the rug on the floor and hung the photo, he felt like he was recovering a little bit of himself. And he liked it.



“I’M SO *STUPID*.”

Emily sat cross-legged on her bed, stuffed another chocolate in her mouth and chewed, barely tasting it. Her friend, Kayla, the chocolatier, winced at her blasphemous treatment of the high-end treat, but Emily didn't care. Picking another chocolate from the tray, she bit into it and some kind of alcoholic filling oozed from the center.

“He could have been *The One*,” she continued. “And I went and ruined it by coming on too strong, then having no spine to back myself up.” She hiccupped through a sob, then blew her nose vigorously. Kayla, bless her heart, said nothing. “I could have fixed everything if I'd explained myself properly or talked to him earlier rather than just giving into my impulses, but you know what I'm like.”

Kayla nodded, and Emily sighed. Of course she did. *Everyone* knew what Emily was like. The minute anyone said an angry word, she became a blubbering mess.

“You're sweet, Em,” Kayla said. “I'm sure you meant well. He shouldn't have talked to you like that. What an asshole.”

“He's not an asshole,” Emily said, defending him. “He's a sensitive man, and I hurt him when all I wanted was to make him happy. I didn't

want to change him. He's like Goldilocks' porridge—just right.”

“You read too many fairytales, sweetie.”

She knew she did. Perhaps that was the problem. She'd always hoped if she believed hard enough and did enough good in the world then she'd get the happy ending she wanted.

She buried her face in a pillow and screamed. Kayla's soft touch landed on the back of her head, stroking her hair, and she soaked in the comfort her friend offered, the physical contact like a balm for her soul. She was a toucher. It made her feel connected. Valued. *Loved*.

Lifting her face from the pillow, she twisted and embraced Kayla. “Thanks, girl.”

“No problem. I'll be here any time you want to shit-talk a man. Or not shit-talk him, as the case may be. But gosh, I wish I could tell Justin you think he's sensitive. Could you imagine the look on his face?” She giggled. “Can I tell him? Pretty please?”

Kayla's teasing had the desired effect, bringing Emily out of her melancholy for a moment.

“No!” she shrieked, laughing through her tears. “Don't you dare!” Then she remembered the way she'd fallen short at the first hurdle. “I'm so weeeeak,” she moaned. “I need to be better.”

“You are who you are, Em. Not much you can do about that.”

“I can be better,” Emily said firmly. Or if she couldn't, she'd have to resort to dating men who never argued with her. Frankly, she didn't think she'd find one of those rare creatures, and if she did, he'd bore her senseless. No, she needed to do better, and she needed to do it *now*. Justin deserved a full explanation. She didn't want to reinforce his negative view of either her gender or himself.

“I know you can, Em.” Kayla laid her head in Emily's lap. “But you should know you're perfect as you are.”

Emily scoffed at the idea of that. Wouldn't it be nice? But no one was perfect. Not Chloe, not Justin, and certainly not her.



“HEY, BRO. HOW GOES IT?” Cooper breezed in Justin’s front door with a friendly grin.

“Just peachy,” Justin replied, wondering why his brother was always so damned perky. Must be a side effect of frequent sex with beautiful women. Justin wouldn’t know; he wasn’t getting any.

“Oooh.” Cooper winced and slapped him on the back. “That bad?”

“I said, everything is fine,” Justin snapped.

“Dude, that’s what women say when everything is the opposite of fine. How was the date with Emily?” he asked, immediately zeroing in on the problem.

“Good.” Too good to be true. He should have taken that as a warning.

“Good?” Cooper smirked as he flopped onto the couch beside Justin and put his feet on the coffee table. He glanced down. “Nice mat, is it new?”

“Yeah.”

Cooper nodded and didn’t seem to think anything of it. “The date was good. That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Damn good,” Justin admitted. “But it didn’t work out.”

“Why the hell not? You know she’s so far out of your league, it’s like she’s in a whole other ball game.”

“Yeah I know that,” Justin said, impatience evident in his tone. “And so does she, apparently. Didn’t waste any time trying to change me.”

He expected Cooper to be appalled on his behalf. Perhaps commiserate about fickle women. But instead, Cooper crossed his arms and eyed Justin as if *he* were the bad guy.

“Are we talking about the same Emily? The nicest person in Itirangi? The town’s favorite darling? Never has a bad word to say about anyone? *That* Emily?”

Justin didn’t like his implication. “You think I misunderstood.”

“I *know* you did. You’re my brother and I love you, but you can be thick-skulled. If Emily was willing to put up with you, that pretty much qualifies her for sainthood, in my opinion.” Cooper shook his head in disgust. “And you pushed her away.”

“She put a fluffy pink abomination in my bathroom,” Justin grumbled, disgruntled by the attack on his character. “She’s the one who messed up here.”

Cooper’s eyes lit up and he whooped with laughter. “Shit, man. That’s priceless.”

Justin’s lip curled in annoyance. “I’m not a fluffy pink kind of guy.”

“Based on that, you thought she was trying to change you?” Cooper asked, getting hold of himself. “Not every woman is Chloe, buddy. She made a mistake. From what I’ve seen, Emily hardly ever dates. She miscalculated. She’s not perfect.”

Perhaps not, but for a few days, Justin had thought she was.

He considered this fresh perspective. Emily was human. Humans made mistakes. But after what he’d been through with Chloe and the years he’d wasted, the idea of taking a risk on Emily and hoping she was different... Well, it was terrifying.

“Do you still have the fluffy pink thing?” Cooper asked.

Justin didn’t dignify the question with an answer.



THE BLANK PIECE of paper taunted Emily. Laughed up at her with its whiteness. Half an hour ago she’d chosen the most masculine, no-frills

stationery in her shop and set about writing a letter to Justin. Here she was, with a headache and nothing to show for it.

Pursing her lips, she wrote in flowing cursive across the top, *Dear Justin.*

There, she'd made a start. Now she just needed to fill in the rest of the blank space. Perhaps sending a letter was wimpy, but she knew she'd have a meltdown if she tried to speak to him face-to-face or over the phone. She wasn't equipped for verbal confrontation. Text messaging seemed too blasé, and an email, too cold. Which left good, old-fashioned letter writing.

While she didn't care about defending herself, she couldn't let Justin continue to believe anything was wrong with him, or that he hadn't been good enough. That was flat-out not true. Taking a deep breath, she shored up her courage. She could do this. In fact, she had an entire uninterrupted evening to get her thoughts down on paper now that the shop had closed, and she'd locked the door. She added another sentence. *Please hear me out.* Good, she was making progress. *I'd like to explain why I brought those things over to your house. I can't stand knowing that you think I wanted to change you.* God, even committing these words to paper made her stomach turn. She swallowed, ignoring the nausea. Her fear of confrontation could be debilitating at times.

Nibbling on her lower lip, searching for the right words, she started a new paragraph. *For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to make people happy, and one of the best ways I've found to do that is to surround them with things that please them. Pretty pictures, happy colors. I always thought I was good at matching people with the things that complemented them.* Although he had her questioning that.

"Don't," she told herself sternly. "Don't lose confidence in yourself. You made one mistake, that's all."

Okay, maybe a couple of mistakes. But the pink mat and toilet cover had been the last straw, and to be honest, she couldn't even remember why

she'd thought it was a good idea. She suspected she'd been thinking of herself rather than Justin. Imagining herself in that bathroom when he invited her to live with him. But she'd gotten ahead of herself. Way ahead. She should have kept it simple, with things she knew he would like, or not encroached at all.

I've made a career of it, she added. All I wanted to do was brighten up your place, to make you happy. I wasn't trying to change you. I wouldn't want you to change. Her hand shook as she wrote, smudging the ink in places and ruining her beautiful handwriting. She stared at the last full stop. Now all that was left was to put everything on the line, to go big or go home. Did she have the courage to put herself out there, knowing she'd probably be disappointed?

This is Justin, she reminded herself. He's worth it. If nothing else, she wanted him to understand how highly she thought of him. How much he meant to her.

There's a good chance I'm falling in love with you, she wrote. I don't care what your house looks like. If you want to live in a dungeon, that's fine with me, as long as you're happy. Of course, I can't guarantee I'd want to live in the dungeon with you... But we could work out the particulars later.

She was really doing this. Putting her innermost thoughts and feelings in ink. Writing them down made them feel more legitimate. Irrevocable. She plowed onward. *If you still want nothing to do with me, I understand. I didn't write this letter looking for forgiveness. I wrote it as a friend who wanted you to know the truth.* Signing her name at the bottom, she folded the paper and slipped it into an envelope, then sealed it before she could rethink her choice of words.

Then she locked it in the top drawer of her desk.

On Saturday evening, Justin visited his sister, as he usually did. Since she'd returned to Itirangi a year ago, friends and family had been invited to dinner at Aria's house every Saturday. Her return to town had happened to coincide with Justin's unceremonious dumping by Chloe, and attending the weekly get-together allowed him to pretend he had a social life. Plus, it got him out of his house. He tired of his own company, and when that happened, Dan and Ritchie tired of him. They showed it in nasty ways, predominantly with their claws.

He arrived fifteen minutes late, like always, the better to ensure he was never alone with his nosy sister—whom he adored, mind you—and also never had the dubious honor of being the last to show up. No one wanted to be the guy who delayed dinner.

“Hi, Justin,” Aria said, hugging him when he strode through the doorway.

He hugged her back, then held her by the shoulders to examine her. “Hey, Ri,” he replied. “You're, uh, eye-catching today.”

Seeing her in a lime-green tank top and electric-blue leggings, it was the kindest comment he could think of. His sister was, by his estimation, the most memorable woman in Itirangi. Her eclectic taste, which often ran to vivid, clashing colors and quirky jewelry, and her no-holds-barred approach

to friendship tended to startle people. But they adjusted quickly, because Aria also had a big heart and the best of intentions.

“I try,” she said with a smile. “Take a seat. Mum and Dad are already here.”

“Do you need a hand with the cooking?”

She shook her head. “Thanks, I’ve got it under control. You can get some plates and cutlery out, if you want.”

He began to do what he was told, but then Aria grabbed his arm and frowned up at him.

“Are you okay? You seem a little...off.”

“Off, how?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But there may as well be a black rain cloud hanging over your head. You look pretty grim.”

He blinked, astonished anyone could distinguish his mood today from his mood every other day. Either it was a testament to Aria’s superior power of observation, or a sign of how truly wretched he looked.

“Mind your own business. I’m fine.”

Even as he said it, he cringed internally. He sounded like a pouty teenager, and Aria didn’t seem to believe him in the slightest. But after raising a doubtful brow, she turned away and resumed cooking. He sniffed, trying to figure out what was in the pot, and his mouth watered. Mmm. Some kind of curry. Probably vegetarian, since Aria didn’t eat meat, but curry was curry; he wasn’t fussy. He found a stack of plates, piled cutlery on top, and carried them to the dinner table, situated near a wall in the kitchen. Aria liked to keep the table in the kitchen so that she could be amongst her family while she cooked. The kitchen was the heart of her home.

“Hey, Mum, Dad,” Justin said, dragging a chair over to join his parents, Donna and Geoff, who were sipping mugs of tea.

His mum gave him a look. “Is that any way to greet your mother? Get over here and give me a hug.”

Justin exchanged a long-suffering look with his dad. She had her kids wrapped around her finger and she knew it. A short, slightly rounded woman, Donna gave warm, motherly hugs. Once Justin had squeezed her, he sat down.

A knock sounded on the door, then Cooper strolled in, claimed a seat beside Justin, and said, “Are you still moping?”

“Aha!” In a flash, Aria was next to them. “I knew something was wrong,” she declared.

“Well, obviously,” Cooper agreed. “Just look at his grumpy face. He’s even more miserable than usual.”

“What’s the matter, honey?” his mum asked, concerned.

He had the worst siblings ever. Never had the world seen a more obnoxious pair. He glowered and silently condemned them to the deepest pits of hell. “Nothing is wrong,” he bit out. “Everything is great.”

“He’s having trouble in his love life,” Cooper said, speaking from behind a hand as though sharing a secret. And he was, damn it, but it wasn’t his secret to share.

Justin groaned and looked at the ceiling. “Why do I ever tell you anything?”

Aria glanced between them. “I thought your love life was nonexistent. What am I missing?”

“Nothing,” Justin grunted, at the same time as Cooper said, “He’s hung up on Emily Parker.”

“Emily?” Aria beamed, apparently delighted. “Good choice. I’d love to have her as my sister. How long have you been dating?”

Justin picked at a callus on his palm and wondered whether he could get away with stonewalling her. If Aria knew what had happened with Emily, it wouldn’t be long before her friends knew, and from there the gossip could

spiral wildly out of control. He knew how quickly the grapevine worked in Itirangi. Not to mention, Aria would probably side with Emily.

Cooper took the choice away. “They aren’t dating,” he told her, shaking his head sadly. “Anymore, that is. Emily moved a few things into his house, and he had a meltdown and broke it off.”

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees as all of his family members, bar none, pinned him with chilly stares. He shifted, uncomfortable under the weight of their combined disapproval.

Aria cleared her throat. “Let me get this right. So, Emily—who’s the sweetest person ever and completely gorgeous and whom every single guy in Itirangi has asked out at least once—agreed to date you, and then *you* rejected *her* because she was trying to make a place for herself in your life?”

“I didn’t reject her,” Justin muttered. “She rejected me. She was trying to change me.”

“Did you ask her why she did what she did?” Geoff asked. Avoiding his wife’s gaze, he added, “Women’s motivations are often not what we think they are. Sometimes, the things they do make sense to them, but not to us.”

“Have you been reading self-help books?” Cooper queried with a grin.

Geoff shrugged. “Your mother leaves them in the bathroom. Gotta read something when you’re on the loo.”

Justin scowled, preferring not to picture his father reading *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* while taking a crap.

“I didn’t ask,” he replied. “It was perfectly obvious.”

“I thought I raised you better,” Donna said, sounding disappointed.

Justin hunched his shoulders and ducked his head. He *hated* when his mum sounded disappointed, preferring her to just knock him over the head with a hard-covered book and get on with it.

“You shouldn’t assume the worst without getting all of the facts,” she continued. “I know Chloe broke your heart, but not all women are the

same.”

Justin flinched at the reminder of his failed relationship. But for once, rather than hurting when he heard Chloe’s name, he felt nothing other than embarrassment that anyone could still think he cared for her.

“You should give Emily the benefit of the doubt,” Aria insisted. “Or at least give her the opportunity to defend herself.”

The thing was, *he had*. When he’d called her that morning, she could have explained why she’d brought those things around, but when she apologized, that seemed as good as an admission of guilt. If he’d been wrong, she would have told him to pull his head out of his ass. Wouldn’t she have?

If the roles were reversed, he certainly would have told her to in no uncertain terms. He would have yelled until she heard his point of view. But Emily wasn’t like him. In all the years he’d known her, he couldn’t ever recall her raising her voice, let alone arguing with anyone. Every person she met adored her, and because of that, he’d assumed it was in her nature to be easygoing, but perhaps, for whatever reason, she was incapable of telling people when she thought they were being a jerk. Perhaps he shouldn’t have assumed her guilt simply because she hadn’t reacted as he would have in that situation.

He felt a twinge of guilt. He’d said things that would have been hard for anyone to hear, but especially someone as soft as Emily.

What if he’d made a mistake?



EMILY WOKE STUPIDLY EARLY on Monday and drove to the shop. She unlocked the door, then the top drawer of her desk, in order to retrieve the letter for Justin. She’d given the manner and time of delivery a great deal of thought and decided the best option was a weekday morning, before he

woke, so she didn't risk running into him while she dropped the letter off. If he came outside while she was sticking it in the mailbox, she thought she'd die from mortification, but she had no problem creeping around like a wuss.

Returning to her car, she drove to Justin's house and parked a few hundred yards away, so the sound of the engine wouldn't wake him up. She left the car idling, walked the distance to the mailbox, slid the envelope inside, and dashed back to the car, slamming it into gear and taking off as quickly as possible. Her heart galloped madly, and her breath came in puffs, whether from the running or anxiety, she didn't know. By the time she arrived back at the shop, nervous sweat had plastered her shirt to her back. Resting her forehead on the steering wheel, she calmed her breathing and waited for the sweat to dry before going inside to start her workday.



WHEN JUSTIN DROVE past his mailbox on the way to check the pest traps on Monday morning, he noticed an envelope protruding from the slit and hit the brakes. Since the envelope hadn't been there yesterday, and it was too early in the morning for the postman to have come by, someone must have hand-delivered it either late last night or early this morning.

Feeling apprehensive, he wound down the window and snatched the envelope from the slot. It had no postal stamp, which meant his deduction about it being hand-delivered was correct. His name was written on the front in an elegant, looping handwriting he didn't recognize, and when he ripped the envelope open, he withdrew a handwritten letter in that same looping script.

Who could it possibly be from? He hadn't received a handwritten letter since Cooper had been stationed overseas with the Navy a few years ago.

He scanned the words and his blood ran cold. Then he re-read it to make sure it really said what he thought it said and laid it down. Closing his eyes,

his hands fisted on his thighs. *Shit*. He'd screwed up epically. Just as his family had suspected, sweet lovable Emily had only been trying to make him happy. Maybe she'd mis-stepped, but she'd had good intentions. And he'd lumped her in with Chloe because of it.

If only she'd said something at the time.

No, I shouldn't have leapt to conclusions. God, he'd been a total bastard. The things he'd said to her.

He was unworthy of her, and he'd proved it that day. Yet here she was, writing him a goddamn letter just so he didn't feel bad about himself. Well, he felt pretty fucking awful right now.

His gut twisted itself painfully into knots. Perhaps he could go to her and apologize. Tell her that he appreciated everything she'd tried to do and that he'd be happy for her to decorate in future, provided she consulted him first. In fact, he couldn't imagine anything he'd like more than to choose new decor *with* Emily, for a home they'd share. He skimmed over the letter again, reading each sentence individually, searching for any sign she still cared for him.

There's a good chance I'm falling in love with you, she'd written. He focused on that lone sentence, which filled him with hope. But despair quickly followed. He didn't deserve Emily. Even if she gave him another chance, he'd do something stupid to screw it up. He didn't know how to be the guy who did right by her. Chloe had messed him up ten different ways and left him unable to engage in a normal relationship.

He *could* go to Emily and spill his guts, tell her how crazy he was about her and how he was sorry for treating her the way he had. Knowing what a sweetheart she was, she'd probably forgive him. And for a while, it would be bliss. But what was to stop him from hurting her in future? She was delicate, emotionally if not physically. He...wasn't. Remembering the sounds of her sobs over the phone, he didn't think he could stand to hurt her again.

So, what would he do?

For now, nothing. He needed time to think, to un-muddle his head. A day, maybe two. Then he'd decide what came next. He had time. The most important thing was that he do this right.

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The day after Emily delivered the letter to Justin, her morning had started poorly and gotten worse. Upon waking, she'd rolled over, blinked bleary eyes and checked her phone for messages from Justin. No new voicemails, no new texts, which meant the letter she'd written hadn't affected him at all.

No, don't think like that. She needed to remember that the aim of writing the letter hadn't been to win him back—although she couldn't deny she'd hoped that would be the end result—but rather to make sure he knew she thought he was perfect as he was. And now he did.

She'd just have to be satisfied with that.

Compared to the past few weeks, the shop was quiet. Peaceful. The buzz of Christmas, Boxing Day and New Year's had finished, and locals had returned to work. Tourists still lingered in the area, and she had a steady stream of customers to keep her busy, but she found herself missing the frantic rush that had occupied her mind so she didn't have time to dwell on her bittersweet New Year's romance. Now, in between exchanging pleasantries and ringing up items, her mind wandered to those days and nights with Justin when she'd been wonderfully, recklessly happy.

Then, late in the afternoon, her mood plunged dramatically. A teenage girl with bleached blonde hair and dark eyeliner entered the shop and

slowly circuited it, picking products up, then placing them back on the shelf. She seemed bored, like she was killing time.

Emily watched her, refraining from offering help because the way the girl hunched her shoulders and averted her eyes said she wanted to be left alone. But something about the girl's furtive attitude unsettled her, so rather than preparing bouquets as she usually would during the downtime, she stayed at the counter and started tallying sales. When it happened, the girl moved so quickly Emily wondered if she'd imagined it, but then the girl shifted, and the outline of the daisy wreath she'd slipped down her shirt protruded through the fabric, giving her away.

A shoplifter. Emily's gut churned. It wasn't unheard of for tourists to try their luck at Pretty Things, but usually they only dared during busy times when she and Sandra were distracted. She'd never seen anyone so blatant. Keeping her expression neutral, Emily reached for her phone and selected Sergeant Gareth Wayland's mobile number. Hands shaking, she typed out a message, earmarked 'URGENT'.

Shoplifter in my store. Please come help.

She didn't do anything else, waiting until she received a reply.

Two minutes away. Don't let them leave.

What did one say or do to prevent a thief from leaving their shop? Emily wasn't prepared to physically stop her. The daisy wreath wasn't worth it. If it came to that, she'd simply let the girl go and issue a trespass order if she tried to return.

Taking a deep breath, she plastered a phony smile on her face. "Nice day out there, isn't it?"

The girl mumbled something.

"Pardon?" Emily said. "I couldn't hear you."

"It'd be better if I wasn't here," the girl snarled, louder.

Emily flinched, taken aback by the naked hostility in her glare. "Are you here with your family?" she asked, searching for a way to continue the

conversation before the girl stalked out. “Stuck until they’re ready to go home?”

The girl’s chin jerked. “Something like that. But the trip has no end date. I could be here for a day, or a month.” She scowled darkly. “I won’t last a month in this hellhole.”

Emily blinked rapidly. “I beg your pardon?”

The girl’s lips firmed in a sullen line. “You heard me.”

At that moment, the door swung open and Sergeant Gareth Wayland strode inside. Tall and broad, with a stiff bearing and a square jaw, Gareth could intimidate most people into confessing with nothing more than a look. Fortunately for Emily, she’d never been on the receiving end of that frightening expression. He folded his arms over his uniformed chest, jaw working as he chewed gum, and leveled his famous glare at the temperamental shoplifter.

“You have some explaining to do, young lady.”

Then the door opened a second time to admit Aria Simons. Fantastic. Another reason to add today to her official list of the worst days ever. Aria may be lovely, but she was also naturally inquisitive, and—an added bonus—a reminder of the man Emily was trying to forget.

Aria stopped just inside the door. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Gareth?”

Emily squeezed her hands into fists and prayed for the whole godforsaken day to end.



JUSTIN WAS NURSING A PINT of beer at Davy’s Bar when Gareth pulled up a stool to join him.

“I’ll have what he’s having,” Gareth said to Davy, the Irishman who owned the establishment.

Davy poured another pint and slid it across to Gareth. “You look wrecked,” he told the sergeant. “What was it today? Rescuing Mrs. Dodd’s mangy cat from another tree? Busting a cheating ring at the high school?”

Justin chuckled. On many occasions, he’d seen Gareth up a tree, frail Mrs. Dodds waiting below, and he never failed to snap a photo. Never knew when that might come in handy.

“Shoplifting teenager at Pretty Things,” Gareth replied. “You know how Em is. She was shaken up.”

Justin snapped to attention and his knee whacked the underside of the bar, throbbing painfully. “There was a shoplifter at Emily’s place? Is she okay?” Tension rocketed through his body as images flooded his mind. Emily, terrified as some hoodlum threatened her, or hugging her knees and crying once the thug left, then going home and feeling unsafe in her own bed.

She hadn’t called him.

Fear gripped his stomach. He would never even have known if not for Gareth. Emily hadn’t turned to him for comfort, or to chase down the little shit and make them sorry. Justin itched to smash something. He thumped his fist on the bar, the impact sending jarring shock waves up to his elbow.

“Calm the hell down,” Gareth rumbled. “Emily is fine. She didn’t even need me in the end. Your sister turned up and sorted everything out. Bit disappointing, actually. I was looking forward to playing the hero.”

Justin growled. He *actually* growled. Like one of the wild animals he encountered in his line of work. Emily didn’t *need* the sergeant to be a hero for her. *Justin* would be her hero. Every other man could go to the devil.

“Was that you?” Davy asked, bemused. “I gotta say, I’m worried, man. I know you don’t get out much, but growling isn’t generally how we communicate around here.”

Ignoring him, Justin considered what Gareth had said: Aria had come to the rescue. His emotions jumbled together until he couldn’t recognize one

from another. He was grateful to Aria for being there, but oddly envious. *It should have been him.*

But it never would be him, he realized. As long as he stayed away from Emily, hesitating and dithering like his sister in a shoe shop, she'd never come to him for support or ask him to be her rock, no matter how badly he wanted her to. What's more, he had no right to expect anything different. He wasn't entitled to know what was going on in her life any more than Gareth or Davy, and that simply wasn't good enough.

Forget about taking time out to think, he needed to go after what he really wanted.



SINKING INTO A HOT BATH, Emily felt the troubles of the day ease away. Warm water embraced her body and soothed the tension from her shoulders. Then someone knocked on her front door. Lowering her ears beneath the water, she ignored them. Whoever it was, they were only going to make her crappy day crappier, and she deserved a break from reality. She closed her eyes and tensed then released the muscles in each limb, one by one, working her way from her shoulders down to her toes.

Vaguely, she became aware of a thundering noise, closer than the front door; someone was in her house. She straightened, water sluicing down her back. If she lived anywhere other than Itirangi, she might be concerned by the sound of a person in her house, but most likely it was just a friend who didn't want to wait outside. She never locked the door, so anyone could walk on in. She wrung her hair out and wrapped a towel around her body. As she did so, the bathroom door flew open and Justin filled the doorway, broad shoulders heaving, staring at her with some unfamiliar emotion glowing in his eyes.

Well, *that* was unexpected.

She clasped the towel tightly to her chest, pulse spiking so high she feared she might faint.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “You frightened me out of my wits.”

Justin’s mouth fell open. Then he snapped it shut, his throat working as he swallowed. “You—”

“Are nearly naked,” Emily finished for him. “This is *my* bathroom. In *my* house. Which I didn’t invite you into.”

He glowered, and she wished she didn’t notice how handsome he looked, his swarthy complexion improved by the flush on his cheeks, his hair recently cut but mussed, his beard tidy. Clearly, he hadn’t gone to pieces after their breakup.

“Are you just going to stand there?” she asked. Her nerve, a by-product of fear and indignation, began to wane. “Why are you here?”

She’d delivered the letter first thing yesterday. It wasn’t as if he could have just discovered it and rushed over here, although he certainly looked like he’d rushed from somewhere. When he didn’t reply, she stepped out of the bath, onto the mat. Her movement seemed to jolt him into action. He hurried forward, arms open, and embraced her tightly.

“Justin, I’m all wet,” she protested, but couldn’t push him away without dropping the towel. Not that modesty mattered at this point, but the towel felt like a protective layer between them.

“I don’t care,” he growled into her hair. “Let me hold you.”

His strong biceps bulged where they banded around her upper arms. She could feel his warmth through the damp fabric of his shirt, and his heart pounded frantically beneath her ear.

“Please don’t hold me like this when you don’t love me,” she muttered, desperate to put some distance between them so she wouldn’t turn to mush because of the way he held her as though she were vital to him.

“I can’t let you go,” he said helplessly, as though he didn’t fully understand it himself. “Not now, not ever.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. Did he mean that? She wanted to believe, but she was afraid to. “What are you saying? What’s going on, Justin?”

“You’re mine,” he said, his large body trembling as he spoke. “But you didn’t come to me. Something bad happened to you, and you didn’t tell me about it. Didn’t let me fix it for you.”

Something in her deflated. So, that’s what this was about. He didn’t miss her, he was just annoyed he hadn’t had the opportunity to save the day.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” she told him. And maybe, to another woman, that might have been true, but to her, it was yet another symptom of how terribly this year was going when they were barely even two weeks into it. For the sake of her dignity, she forced herself to say, “No need to look so torn up about it. I’m fine. You checked on me. Now you can go.”

“Don’t lie to me, Em.” He leaned back, tilted her chin up, and searched her gaze. “I know you better than that.”

“No.” Emily shoved his chest, towel be damned, but he held firm. “You don’t get to act like you care about me,” she hissed, forgetting the fact she didn’t like conflict. Self-preservation instincts had kicked in and she forgot anything except the way she’d hurt when he dropped her like she didn’t matter. “Please don’t pretend you care.” A tear trickled down her cheek and dripped onto his shirt. “If you wanted me in your life, you would have said something by now. You can’t do this to me, it’s not fair.”

Justin resisted her attempts to throw him off. “I know it’s not fair,” he said softly. “But I do care about you, Em. So, so much. I wanted to take the time to think everything through, to make sure we did it right this time around. You deserve that. But then it scared the hell out of me when Gareth said what happened. I was so worried about you. And do you know how much it hurt to realize that if not for Gareth, I wouldn’t have known anything was wrong? Worse, that I had no *right* to know?”

“Just like I had no right to call you,” she said, meeting his eyes, refusing to give into the impulse to look away. “You’re not my boyfriend, and I vividly remember you saying we should keep it that way in future.”

He groaned. “I was wrong, sweetheart. I made assumptions and let my fear get the better of me and I’m sorry for that.” He nuzzled her forehead, pressing soft kisses along her hairline. “I screwed up badly. I know that. But I’m falling in love with you, Emily Parker, and I hope you’ll let me prove it.”

“You are?” Emily prided herself on not stuttering. Her insides had turned to warm goo. “But I wrote you that letter and you ignored it.”

“Like I said, I was thinking. But that was stupid. I should have come to you straight away.” He drew back, meeting her eyes so she could read his sincerity. “I was an ass. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. I’m sorry.”

Emily nibbled her lip. Could this really be happening? Was Justin actually here, in her bathroom, confessing his love for her? Or, at least, something a lot like love. It was a high school fantasy come true. But it was even better than the fantasy, because this was real. Justin was flesh and blood, a man who made mistakes, but who was falling for her the same way she was for him.

“I’m sorry for getting carried away,” she said.

“The pink fluffy toilet cover was a bit hard to stomach,” he said, smoothing a hand down the side of her face. “But I completely overreacted and blew it out of proportion. The fact of the matter is, you’re too good for me, Em—nobody’s been shy about making sure I know that—but I want another chance anyway. I want to be the person you turn to when you need help. I want to have the right to be annoyed if I hear things about you from another man. Please, say you’ll give me that chance.”

She cocked her head and studied him, as if taking the time to consider her options. A muscle in his jaw twitched. She smiled, then cupped his face

between her palms and kissed him. There was nothing to think about. She was crazy for him. Maybe that made her just plain crazy, but so be it.

“Of course, I will. But next time you’re upset, talk to me about it before you get to the point of no return.”

“Promise.” He kissed her back, completely serious and uncharacteristically tender. “Do you promise to bear with me even though I’m bound to mess up another ten thousand times or so?”

“I promise,” she vowed. “As long as you give me your all.”

“I will.” His lips lifted in a sexy grin. “Now, can I peel that towel off your glorious body and make love to you?”

“Want to join me in the bath? It’s still warm.”

He glanced at it. “I’ll never fit.”

She giggled. “I trust you to be creative.”

With a deep groan, he claimed her lips, thrusting his tongue between them. She gasped at the sensual invasion, then as quickly as the kiss started, it ended.

“How about the bedroom?” he rumbled.

She watched him from beneath heavy eyelids, pouting mischievously. “That’s no fun.”

“You won’t be saying that soon.”

He bent and tossed her over his shoulder. She squealed and swatted his backside but didn’t fight too hard. After all, she kind of liked it when he manhandled her.

“Okay, okay,” she laughed. “You can make love to me in the bed.”

“Good.” He made for the bedroom, with her hanging over his shoulder. “I’m crazy for you, Emily, and I’m going to make sure you know it.”

He stepped through the doorway and turned around, then allowed her to slide down the front of his body.

“Be my girlfriend?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “What is this, high school?”

His mouth curled into a smirk. “Well, you have had a crush on me since then, remember?”

“I may have had a crush on that boy,” she said coyly, “but I’m head over heels about the man he became.”

“I’ll never deserve you,” he murmured, “but I’m going to do my damndest to make sure you never regret being with me.”

“I won’t,” she swore. “I love your family, your cats. I’m not totally sold on your house, but it has good bones and a great location. We can work with it. More importantly, you’re my One.”

He chuckled. “And you’re mine.”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Shh. Stop talking and put your money where your mouth is.”

He looked at her with wonder, as if she was the answer to all of the world’s greatest riddles.

“How did I ever live without you?”

“Unhappily,” she suggested.

Now it was his turn to cover her mouth. With his lips. And he didn’t stop for a long, long time.

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EPILOGUE

NEW YEAR'S EVE, LATER THAT YEAR

Emily burrowed beneath the thin blanket on the love-seat outside their house. A fire roared in the brazier and she poked a marshmallow into the flames, watching as it browned, then pulled it out and waited until it was cool enough to eat. The delicious sugary insides melted in her mouth.

“Yum.”

“You gonna share with me?” Justin asked, unable to toast one for himself since he’d been trapped by Dan and Ritchie, who were curled together on his lap like a yin-yang symbol.

“Of course.”

Emily grabbed another marshmallow from the packet and jabbed the skewer through it, holding it over the heat. Justin liked his marshmallows blacker than she did, so she waited for it to catch fire then blew it out. Taking the sticky blob between her fingers, she fed it to him. His mouth closed over her fingers, licking the sugar from her skin. She hummed contentedly.

“Can you do me another favor?” he asked.

He looked so adorable, not wanting to disturb his two fluffy emotional terrorists, that she’d agree to almost anything. “Sure thing.”

“Reach into the pocket of my jeans.”

She raised an eyebrow. “If this is some weird sexual game—”

“It’s not,” he said. “Please.”

“Okay.” She reached into the pocket, her touch landing on a smooth box. A box exactly the right size to hold a ring. Surely not. She gaped, her brain short-circuiting. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Why don’t you pull it out and see?”

With clumsy fingers, she extracted the box and flipped the lid to reveal a gold ring with three identical diamonds set into the center of the band. “Wow,” she breathed. “It’s beautiful.”

“The diamonds represent our past, present, and future,” he explained, as she lifted it carefully from the box and slid it onto her finger. “A year ago today, I first kissed you. I thought it was fitting that we start next year with my ring on your finger. I love you Emily, and I want to be your future.”

“Yes,” she squeaked, ogling the ring and the way it glimmered in the light.

But the glimmer of the ring was nothing compared to the way Justin’s eyes sparkled when he smiled at her. “I haven’t even asked the question yet.”

“Sorry,” she said, meeting his eyes and waiting patiently. “Was there something you wanted to ask me, darling?”

His lips twitched. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she repeated, lifting the blanket and dumping the cats unceremoniously on the ground. For once, she wasn’t going to share her man with them. “I love you,” she told him. “I want to be your future, too, bringing brightness into your life forever.”

Then she kissed her future husband, the love of her life, the gruff man with a heart of gold.

And she knew she’d never stop loving him.

“I have news for you, too,” she said, ready to drop a bombshell of her own. “How do you feel about being a dad?”

“Are you kidding?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Serious as can be.”

His hand went automatically to her stomach. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I took three tests earlier today, just to be certain. We’re going to have a baby.”

Justin leapt to his feet, took her hands, and pulled her into his arms. He dropped kisses on her face and neck, then knelt to kiss her belly. “I’m going to be a father,” he said joyously.

“You’re happy?”

“Sweetheart, you’ve just made me the happiest man alive.”

She hadn’t thought he could be any more perfect, but then he went and proved her wrong.

“Congratulations, Daddy,” she whispered.

“Congratulations, future Mrs. Simons.”

In the dim light cast by the crackling fire, Emily and Justin started the new year the same way they’d started the previous one. Nothing had changed, and yet *everything* had changed. Because they had an eternity together, and two precocious cats and an unborn baby to share it with.

Nothing could beat that.



THE END

SECOND CHANCE CHRISTMAS

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Evie Parata kicked the door of her new-to-her car and screamed in frustration.

Could this day get any worse?

A pair of little old ladies stared at her and tittered behind their hands, but Evie ignored them. She was used to the gossip of Itirangi, the tiny New Zealand town where she'd grown up, and was now stuck in, courtesy of her crappy ride.

"Filthy, slimeball salesman," she muttered to herself, stalking up the pavement and back again. When the guy had sold her the car this morning, taking the majority of her savings, he'd promised it was in good working order, and that had certainly seemed to be true. The battered Subaru had seen better days, but when she'd taken it for a test drive, she hadn't had any troubles. Not that Evie really knew anything about cars, since she'd spent the past nine years using public transportation.

Still, she'd been itching to have her own wheels for months now, and the timing had seemed opportune—she'd encountered the second-hand dealership on her walk to the bus stop in Dunedin where she'd planned to catch a ride to Timaru. On impulse, she'd purchased the Subaru instead. Two birds, one stone, or so she'd thought. Now it seemed the car might not even last the rest of the three-hour drive.

Hopping behind the wheel, she turned the key in the ignition again. The engine flipped over once, then sputtered out, and she swore under her breath.

Don't panic.

There was a mechanic less than a block away. From here, she couldn't tell if it was open, so she locked the stupid car to protect her worldly goods, which were neatly packed into a suitcase in the back seat, then jogged toward the garage. Unfortunately, the signs had already been taken in, and the lights inside were turned off. She groaned, resting her hands on her thighs as she caught her breath. *Damn.*

Never one to take no for an answer, she bashed on the door. "Open up!"

No one came. She pounded harder. Still nothing. Ducking around the side of the building, she checked the other doors. All shut and locked. Everyone had cleared out for the day, and it was only four-thirty on Christmas Eve. Not even Christmas yet. She shouldn't be surprised. Itirangi had never been a thriving hub of activity.

She trekked back around to the front door and called the contact number painted on the glass. Inside, a phone rang. She crossed her fingers, hoping the landline would redirect to a cell, but no such luck. A recorded message asked her to leave her name and details and they would get back to her on Boxing Day.

She sank to the pavement, buried her face in her hands and growled. This is what she got for impulse-buying. She couldn't afford to be stranded in Itirangi. She needed to get to her friend Monica's orchard, where she had an invitation to pick berries while she figured out what the hell she was doing with her life.

She straightened, brushed off the uncertainty that threatened to crush her every time she dwelled on her future, and used her phone's internet browser to search for other mechanics in the area. The nearest open workshop was twenty miles away, and when she called to ask about a tow

service, the friendly voice on the other end quoted a price that made her jaw drop.

She hung up and wiped her palms on her denim shorts. Despite the cloud overhead, it was a muggy, stifling day. Beads of sweat had broken out on her upper lip and at her temples. She drew in a calming breath. Getting her rage-face on wouldn't help anybody. She needed to be smart here. What were her options?

It should be simple. Her best friends in the world lived here. If she called one of them, she had no doubt they'd drop whatever they were doing to rescue her, but she was sick and tired of being rescued, and she didn't want to mess up her friends' holiday plans. They'd all settled down with partners this year and were probably spending Christmas Eve with their families, as they ought to. She didn't want to impose, especially not when she wasn't feeling her usual self.

For as long as she could remember, she'd been the wild one, the girl who was always ready to party, the one who never turned down a dare. But this would be her first Christmas alone. The first since her mother passed away right here in this sleepy little town. Grief gripped her, digging its icy claws into her heart, and her throat constricted. She blinked away tears.

If she called her friends and pretended everything was fine, they'd see right through her in an instant, and if she was honest with them about everything she was keeping bottled up inside, she'd be a blubbering wreck at the slightest hint of concern or empathy. No, she needed to be alone, so she could honor her mother's traditions and hole up with some donuts, a bottle of wine, and *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen.

Apart from calling her friends, what other options did she have? The buses had finished until Boxing Day, and she didn't have the money for a taxi. With a heavy sigh, she resigned herself to staying in her car. She had blankets, and the back seat folded down. She'd get through the holiday just fine. It wasn't like she'd planned anything fancy, and the 24-hour

convenience store would be open all day tomorrow so she could buy enough food to get her through. She'd weathered worse. Mind made up, she returned to the car, cursing the oppressive heat once again. What she wouldn't give for a shower.

She ducked inside the car and slipped her sunglasses on to mask her face, wishing she'd had the foresight to purchase her usual ten-dollar bottle of Moscato before she'd left Dunedin, rather than stopping by the liquor store here, which happened to be located next to Davy's Bar. Now she had wine, but no working transportation to escape in, and Davy O'Connor was the last person she wanted to see.

Since breaking his tender teenage heart, she'd habitually avoided him to the best of her ability. It was impossible to distance herself completely given they shared mutual friends, but she tried to train her focus elsewhere whenever they were forced into proximity. She told herself she kept away from him because of how painfully their relationship had ended, but if she were honest, what hurt most was the thought of what they could have had together if she'd cared to stick around.

She shrank lower in the seat. Hopefully Davy was out of town. Her pride couldn't stand for him to see her living in her car outside his bar. How he'd laugh to see her reduced to this after she'd brashly declared herself a woman of the world and breezed out of Itirangi, full of misplaced confidence.

Reclining the seat backward, she removed her glasses, curled onto her side and closed her eyes. If she napped the time away, it would pass faster, and she'd mastered the art of napping on cue. A few moments later, she dozed off.

She woke when a drop of water splashed onto her eyelid, and opened her eyes just in time for a second one to land.

"Ugh," she muttered, swiping it away as the drips began in earnest.

Someone knocked on the window, and she bolted upright, thumping her knee on the bottom of the steering wheel. Breath hissed between her teeth. She glanced up, and then the impossible happened. Her day got worse.

It wasn't enough for her to waste all her money on a broken car and get stranded with rain leaking through the roof. To top it off, Davy O'Connor had witnessed her humiliation. Just bloody fantastic.

He gestured for her to wind down the window. She deliberately took her time, delaying the inevitable while oddly fascinated by the way the downpour soaked through his clothes and trickled from the tips of his dark red hair.

"Hi, Evelyn," he said in his lilting Irish accent. "Car trouble?"

Evie winced. He was the only person who called her by her full name, and it made her feel seventeen again. "What's it to you?"

He shook his head, droplets of water scattering in every direction, some landing on her, then he smiled. The prick. "Can I call one of the girls to come get you?" he asked. "You'll be sitting out here all night, otherwise. Won't find anyone to fix your car this late."

"Don't call the girls," Evie said quickly. Too quickly.

His eyes narrowed. "Have you not told them you're around?"

She tried not to look guilty. She knew she wasn't being the best friend by avoiding them, but she needed privacy to lick her wounds. "I'm only passing through. Didn't seem like there was any point."

"Bullshite. You know Aria would love to have you over for Christmas." His gaze became sympathetic. "Especially this year."

This year. She knew exactly what he meant, and her throat clogged with emotion. *He'd remembered.* She'd seen him at the funeral, and vaguely recalled being wrapped in his arms, but the hug had been over too soon, and she'd been out of her mind with grief. They may not have even spoken because he'd been just one in a long line of people wanting to offer their condolences.

“I’m sorry about your mum,” he said, as though reading her mind. “The holiday season must be hard for you.”

It was—more so than she’d expected—but she wasn’t one to show weakness, especially not to him. “I’m getting by.”

His brow crinkled, and rain dripped from his nose. “You should be with your friends.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, hating to admit it. Her skin crawled at the prospect of being forced to smile and keep her emotions hidden so she wouldn’t ruin the day for anyone else. “Aria has Eli and the baby. Sophie has Cooper. Avery has Gareth. I love those girls like crazy, but I can’t be around all that cheerfulness right now.” Not when all she wanted to do was hug her photo of her mum to her chest, and cry.

Davy softened. “Why don’t you come upstairs then? You can dry off and we’ll talk about what to do next. You can’t stay in this crappy old car, and I’ve got plenty of space.”

Evie bristled at the insult to her vehicle, even if she privately agreed, and at the implication that she needed him to fix her problems. She wasn’t about to melt into a helpless puddle of femininity just because her ex had caught her at a fragile moment. Despite everything, she had her pride. “Just watch me.”

With that, she wound up the window, shifted her body to avoid the stream of water coming through the roof, and ignored him. She could wait this weather out. It was a sun shower. How long could it last?



STUBBORN FOOL WOMAN.

Davy watched Evelyn through the window of his second-story apartment. She had too much pride for her own good, shivering in her car just to prove she didn’t need him, as if he didn’t already know. He moved

away from the window and strung another strand of star-shaped lights, listening to the drum of rain outside and trying to ignore the tug of his conscience. He'd done the right thing. It wasn't his fault if she drowned out there.

He turned up the volume of the Christmas carols playing through a Bluetooth speaker and started arranging red baubles on the tree in the corner of his lounge. It had been cut only yesterday, and the scent of pine sap wafted through the air. He enjoyed decorating, even if it was only intended to take his mind off the other job he desperately needed to do.

His thoughts drifted back to Evelyn. She was also a distraction, albeit an unwelcome one. The woman was a gorgeous livewire but seeing her made him feel like an awkward teenager again, bringing back all the intense emotions he hadn't experienced since he'd been with her. She appealed to him like no one else, and for all he'd tried to rid himself of his attraction to her, he'd had no luck.

When he'd glimpsed her out the window earlier, bent over the hood of her car, he hadn't been able to resist checking her out. He'd chuckled as she booted the car and stomped away, then when she'd returned, he'd waited for her to leave. Except she hadn't. It seemed Evelyn was stuck. In Itirangi. Outside his bar. And determined to suffer rather than let him help her when she was sad and vulnerable.

The Almighty had a sick sense of humor.

Finishing with the baubles, he wandered across the hall to the kitchen, which was separated from his dining area by two long counters. It was the first room he'd remodeled after buying the place, knocking out a wall to make a welcoming open plan area. He checked the timer and flicked the oven light on. The sponge cakes he'd put in to bake earlier had risen nicely and were golden brown on top. He inched the door open and inserted a skewer into each, to check whether the batter was cooked through. *Perfect.*

Donning oven mitts, he pulled the door all the way down, retrieved the cakes, and carried them to the counter to cool. He inhaled the delicious scent. Mm. There was nothing he loved more than the smell of freshly baked cake.

The rain outside thundered even louder. Wincing, he returned to the living room window and peered out. Evelyn hadn't left her car. He'd seen how badly the roof leaked. She'd be drenched by now.

Not my problem.

Turning away, he collected a pack of candy canes from the coffee table and hung them on the tree. He was whistling along to Snoopy's Christmas and scrubbing cake tins when a high-pitched beep sounded above the music. The doorbell. He opened the window and leaned out. The beep sounded again.

He grinned down at the bedraggled woman on his doorstep. "Oh, Miss Evelyn. How times have changed."

She hadn't heard him. Her shoulders hunched, and she jabbed the doorbell repeatedly.

"Can I help you?" he called, laughing when her head snapped up and she glared at him.

"Don't just stand there," she yelled. "Let me in!"

"Are you sure you want to come in?" he asked. "That car looks mighty comfortable."

Her hands went to her hips. "Please, Davy," she said, syrupy sweet. "May I come in and dry off?"

He closed the window, amused when her mouth dropped open, but against his better judgement, he hurried downstairs to let her in just as she was storming back to her car, cursing creatively.

"Come in, silly girl."

She spun around, and up close he could see the water dripping from the ends of her shoulder-length dark hair onto her shoulders and then under the

rounded neckline of her shirt. One trail of water dipped into the valley between her breasts, which were partially exposed. He tore his attention from her chest before she noticed. Been there, done that. Had the emotional scars to prove it.

Evelyn scowled at him, every bit a bad-tempered Fae Queen seeking to bring mortal men to their knees. She fetched her suitcase from the back seat and swept past him up the stairs, coming to a stop outside his apartment door. “You going to open it for me, or what?”

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For a moment, Evie thought he might refuse. He stared up at her, as if unsure how she'd arrived, wet as a freaking drowned rat, inside his bar. If he kicked her out, that would be the icing on her humiliation cake. She was cold and miserable, marooned with hardly any money, alone for Christmas, and now the person most likely to rub it all in her face was witnessing her low point.

Lifting her chin, she eyed him expectantly. She'd never let on how much it cost her to ring his doorbell. Not even if she lived to be a hundred years old. "Well?"

He strode up the stairs to her side, making the stairwell oddly claustrophobic, shoved the door open, and waved her in. "Go right ahead. Make yourself at home."

She could hear the irony in his voice, but frankly, she was so relieved to be out of the rain she didn't care. The door opened onto a long hallway. If she remembered correctly, the upstairs area had been a hotel before Davy purchased the bar, and it had retained that layout, with a number of rooms coming off a central corridor.

"Fourth room on the right is the spare bedroom," he told her. "Drop your suitcase in there and have a shower. There's a towel on the bed. The bathroom is directly opposite. I assume you have some dry clothes."

“As long as the water didn’t get into my suitcase.” Which it could well have done, while she was busy with her head stuck up her ass. When would she learn that biting off her nose to spite her face got her nowhere? Her pride be damned. It was more important to be warm and dry.

“And whose fault would it be if it did?” he demanded.

“Yeah, yeah.” Rolling her eyes, she left him standing in the hallway, went to the room he’d indicated and laid her case on the floor. A double bed occupied the center of the space, with a standing wardrobe at its foot and a small cabinet beside the pillow. Other than that, the room was empty.

She unzipped her suitcase and touched the top layer of clothing. Slightly damp but not bad, all things considered. She hung the damp items on hangers in the wardrobe, gathered her toiletries, and crossed the hallway to the bathroom, which was a repurposed guest room, easily as large as the room she’d come from. A bathtub took up half of one wall, large enough for Davy’s rangy frame, and the floor and walls were tiled, with a shower head in the corner opposite the bath.

She vacillated between the bath and the shower, but when an image of Davy lying naked beneath a layer of bubbles flashed through her mind, she opted for the shower. The last thing she needed was to get hot and flustered over a man she’d loved and left.

As quick as humanly possible, she peeled off her soggy clothes and got under a scalding hot jet of water, sighing happily as her skin prickled and started to warm. She soaped, shampooed, rinsed, and just stood beneath the spray for several minutes. By the time she shut the water off, she felt a thousand percent better than she had going in. She dried herself, wrapped a towel around her hair and another around her body, then wrung out her wet clothing and tucked them beneath her arm. When she opened the door, steam billowed out into the hall. She stepped onto fluffy carpet, luxuriating in the softness of it against her bare feet, and looked up.

Then she froze. So did Davy, who'd emerged from the spare bedroom, where she'd left her things.

"Erm," he said, then swallowed, the cords of his throat working. His eyes widened as they traveled from her bare shoulders to her concealed breasts and down her exposed legs. She pulled the towel tighter around her chest. She wasn't what one would call shy about her body, but she felt vulnerable enough without being actually naked in front of him.

"Yes?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I, erm." His eyes darted back to her face, his cheeks taking on a sunburned hue. "I left a clotheshorse in your room, in case you need it."

"Thanks." She waited for him to move, since he was standing between her and her belongings, but his feet seemed to be fastened to the floor. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, sorry." He shuffled away, head down, the blush spreading down the back of his neck. Despite her best intentions, Evie found his embarrassment endearing. It wasn't often that a capable, talkative man like him was at a loss for words, and she was flattered that he found her attractive. Part of her wondered if he'd still react that way to her body if she'd stayed with him after high school, as he'd wanted, or would the novelty have worn off?

No, don't go down that road.

Hurrying into the bedroom, she closed the door with a soft click and leaned against it. *You made your decision*, she reminded herself. *You don't get to have second thoughts now.*

Evie could admit her weaknesses. She was flighty, scattered and temperamental, but she'd always been smart. Too smart to be dwelling on "what ifs" and the mossy green of Davy O'Connor's eyes. She dressed, then withdrew a small fleece blanket from the bottom of her suitcase. From within the folded blanket she extracted a photo frame, then wiped the glass and placed it on the bedside cabinet. She studied the photograph, which

showed a petite Maori woman with straight bangs and a short ponytail, her arm around Evie, both of them grinning. Evie and Kahurangi didn't look much alike, except in stature, but their souls had been the same. They'd never had much, but Kahurangi had done her best and often sacrificed her own wants for her daughter. She'd been all the *whanau*, or family, Evie had. Now, she was alone.

“E aroha no ahau ki a koe, e Mama,” Evie murmured. *I love you, Mum.*

Next to the photograph, she placed her scuffed hardcover edition of *The Little Match Girl*. She'd read it tomorrow. Finally, she lay down, palms resting on her stomach, and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, unwelcome doubts crept up on her, weighing heavily on her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

Sitting up, she rubbed circles over her heart and focused on the photograph of her mother. Kahurangi had never battled with restlessness the way Evie did, or with knowing where she belonged. She'd been happy here in Itirangi, and she hadn't understood Evie's desire to travel and educate herself about the world. Evie had thought her shortsighted, but now she questioned that. She'd been to half a dozen countries, worked dozens of different jobs, and she'd delighted in her lifestyle for a while, but it no longer held joy. Maybe Kahurangi had known more than her willful daughter thought.

“Oh, Mama,” she sighed. “What am I going to do?”



DAVY HAD EXPECTED Evelyn to join him in the living area once she'd dressed, but half an hour passed with no sign of her. Was she hiding? It hardly seemed like her usual *modus operandi*—which as far as he could tell was to flaunt herself in front of him at every opportunity and show him what he'd missed out on—but he didn't question her absence too much.

Having some distance from her was a relief after how he'd reacted earlier. He'd never stopped being attracted to Evelyn—any man with a pulse would appreciate the way she looked—but he'd rather she didn't know how she affected him. Not after all this time.

Affixing a wreath to the wall, he eyed his laptop, which waited on the dining table. Sighing, he rubbed his temples, then took a seat in front it, staring at the rows and columns. Numbers and words shifted beneath his gaze, rearranging themselves into gibberish. He gritted his teeth and used his palm to cover all of the columns but one to reduce the distractions. He'd been battling to make sense of the damn spreadsheet all day and was getting nowhere. Dyslexia was a bitch.

Scrolling through the numbers one by one, he tallied them on a calculator. Then two of the rows appeared to swap places and he lost track of where he was. Swearing wholeheartedly, he cleared the calculator and started again. This time, he made it to the end of the column, but even while his mind cheered at the success, his heart sank at the thought of how long it would take to get everything up to date. He had a long way to go.

He grabbed a pen and paper to record the final number, but as he did his attention wavered and the words and numbers became indecipherable again.

“Bollocks!” he growled, hurling the notepad across the room. It dislodged the wreath he'd just hung, which hit the floor with a thud. He hauled in several deep breaths, trying to calm himself. The more stressed he became, the worse his dyslexia got.

“Are you okay?” Evelyn asked, hovering in the doorway. “I heard a bang.”

“That was me,” he drawled. “Because a grown man is entitled to a temper tantrum sometimes.”

To his surprise, she crossed to his side and looked over his shoulder. “What's got you so wound up?” She scanned the screen. “The books for the bar?”

He desperately wanted to slam the laptop shut and chase her away. It was bad enough that he was failing to take care of his business's finances, but to have her witness his shortcoming—well, it wouldn't do.

“Yeah,” he muttered, twisting to face her, hoping to draw her attention away from the messy spreadsheet. “I thought you were gonna hide all night.”

Annoyance flickered through her eyes as his verbal jab struck true. “I wasn't hiding. I was trying not to intrude. But *you're* hiding something. Tell me what the problem is. It might shock you, but I'm a pretty competent bookkeeper.”

He stared, wide-eyed. He couldn't help it. It wasn't that he'd ever thought Evelyn was stupid, but in high school you'd be far more likely to have encountered her at a rave than a library. His thoughts must have shown on his face, because she huffed.

“Don't look at me like that. I'm not dumb.”

“Didn't say you were, darlin’,” he replied, knowing the endearment would piss her off. “Go ahead, then. Take a look.” It couldn't hurt to have a second set of eyes check his figures. He slid the laptop in front of her, and she sat.

“These are a mess,” she murmured, scrolling down the page while he watched, enthralled. Not only did she seem to understand the blasted numbers and words, but with a few clicks, she transported the data into a tidy table that most people would have found easy to interpret. She'd been right, she was completely competent, a fact that served to remind him of his own incompetency.

A tangled mash of guilt and shame churned in his gut. Guilt that he'd misjudged her, and shame that his brain was so broken he'd studied the numbers for hours and been unable to do what she had in a matter of minutes.

Finally, she paused, placing her hands one on top of the other and meeting his gaze. “Who taught you to bookkeep?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Nobody. I muddled my way through it.”

“Oh.” She winced. “Sorry if I was blunt.”

“That’s okay.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I know they’re not great.” That tended to happen when a person couldn’t tell an “A” from an “N” or a “5” from a “6”. He sighed. “I have an audit soon, and they’re going to have a field day when they see these.”

Her eyes twinkled, and her lips quirked up at the corners. “I see an opportunity here. You let me stay the night, and in return, I’ll tidy up your books.”

He hesitated, not sure she realized exactly how much work would be involved, and she mistook his hesitation for reluctance.

“I’ll keep out of your way,” she assured him. “I’m sure you have family plans for Christmas that don’t involve me.”

“I do have plans,” he admitted. His family weren’t the kind of people to be bothered by having extra guests, but he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about her being near them. It struck a little close to home when he’d once dreamed of her joining their ranks. But he’d also never find someone else willing to bail him out without charging thousands of dollars. “But yeah, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Great.” She grinned. “Then we’ll be even.” She paused, then added, “Perhaps I shouldn’t admit it, but I’m looking forward to digging into these. I love a good challenge, and it’s a well-timed distraction.”

He felt compelled to defend his poor bookkeeping skills, but without admitting his condition, he really couldn’t, and he didn’t want gorgeous Evelyn to know his secret. “I hope you enjoy it, then.”

Her gaze softened. “Thanks, Davy. For letting me stay here, and for not calling the girls. I just don’t think I can handle being around them right now.”

More than anything, he wanted to know why that was, but she didn't volunteer the information and he didn't ask. Evelyn wasn't his business anymore. She'd made that perfectly clear when she'd stuck a knife in his heart and driven away without a care for the shambles of a man she'd left behind.

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Evie texted Monica to tell her about the change of plans, then dived happily into Davy's financial records, pleased to have both something to occupy her time and the chance to pay him back. It had been months since she'd challenged her brain with anything more than basic sums at the cafe counter, or the daily sudoku in the newspaper, and she'd been looking for something to test her limits.

She bored easily, which was one of the reasons she constantly tried new jobs, learnt new skills, met new people, and moved to new places. At least, it had been until the constant rotation of people and places itself became dull and unfulfilling.

Seriously, though. These records were in poor condition. She could only decipher as much as she had because she'd spent a lot of time poring over haphazard data before.

Davy returned from making two cups of tea in the squared off kitchen in the corner and dropped into the seat beside her.

"Is there a reason you don't use a software program to manage your information?" she asked.

He scowled. "I prefer to keep it simple. It's a small business, there's no point in spending money on a fancy electronic system."

It may be a small business, but based on the financials, he was making a tidy profit. “You should be able to afford a basic system,” she said. “Do you have any other records I need to see?”

“I have papers in my office, but everything has been copied onto the computer. I can get the originals if you need.”

“I’ll let you know if I do, but for now this should be enough.” She stood, shuffling the papers into a pile on the laptop keyboard. “I’ll take these back to the bedroom, so I’m out of your hair.”

“Suit yourself. And thank you for your help.”

“Oh.” She deflated. “You’re welcome.” For some reason, she’d been hoping he’d ask her to stay in the living area so they could work through the documents together. Silly, but she was disappointed he didn’t want to keep her company. “Okay then. I’ll see you later.” With that, she retreated to the bedroom.

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she began to organize the numbers, cross-checking when they didn’t seem to add up. Realizing that in some instances the numbers had been reversed, she frowned. Davy may be a sloppy bookkeeper, but he hadn’t struck her as careless. As a teenager, he’d been one of the most conscientious people she knew.

Extending her legs, she reclined against the wall and scratched her chin. She’d have to get the original documentation so she could see which numbers were correct and which were mistakes. Fortunately, this only added to the challenge and gave her a reason to talk to him again. She wandered back to the terribly festive living room. She’d only glanced in as she’d passed earlier, and had been too distracted to fully appreciate the extent of Davy’s Christmas-mania, but now she paused and took it all in.

Tinsel adorned every flat surface and lights were strung up on the walls. A number of wreaths were fixed in place, and an eight-foot-tall pine tree stood proudly in the corner with a selection of gift-wrapped boxes beneath it, surrounded by fake snow. The tree itself was only partially decorated. A

work in progress. Davy hung a red ball from the end of a branch and turned to smile at her. It was an easy, toothy smile. The kind you might give a close friend. The kind that had no business making her heart flutter.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

Evie debated how to phrase this diplomatically. She decided the direct approach would be best. “Not all of the numbers match. Can I get those papers you mentioned to cross-check with the spreadsheet?”

He raked a hand through his hair, tousling the ginger locks, which stood up like he’d been electrocuted. “Man, it’s worse than I thought. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she replied. “But it’s not a big deal if you keep all your paperwork.”

He looked pained. “I do. I’ll get it for you.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Would you like me to show you what kind of errors I’m talking about? I don’t want to go ahead and change anything if I’m going to screw up your record-keeping system.”



THE BAUBLE CLUTCHED in Davy’s fist shattered, shards digging into his skin.

“No,” he snapped, hating the way she flinched back from him. “You don’t need to show me. I believe you.”

She persisted. “I know I agreed to tidy your books, but the decisions on how to do that are still yours.” She opened the laptop on the coffee table, hit a few keys, then beckoned him over.

With a sense of impending doom, he crossed to her side and pretended to read over her shoulder. He nodded, as if it made sense. In reality, the letters were circling and spinning before his eyes. She pointed to a column

and explained how she'd determined where the issues had arisen. Her words may as well have been gobbledygook.

Finally, she leveled him with an irritated glare. "Have you listened to anything I've said?"

"Abso-friggin-lutely," he exclaimed, trying so hard to sound enthusiastic that it came out sarcastic. "I mean, of course."

"I highly doubt that. What's one thing I've said in the last few minutes?" When he couldn't reply, she stood abruptly. "If you don't care about the details, just say so next time."

He grabbed her shoulder. "Wait."

She froze. Then, very deliberately, she lifted his hand off her shoulder and stepped out of reach. "What?"

He swallowed, his tongue thick. He had to come clean and hope she didn't laugh at him.

"I'm dyslexic," he admitted. "I can't understand what you're trying to show me, because I can't read it." He hung his head, studied the floor, and waited for her scorn. After all, what grown-ass man couldn't read properly?

But she didn't laugh. Instead, she ordered him to look at her. He lifted his gaze slowly.

"Why didn't you tell me that at the beginning?" she asked, her tone gentle.

He shrugged. "I was embarrassed. Wouldn't you be?"

Her brows drew together. "How did I not notice this when we were dating?"

He shrugged again. "I have lots of coping mechanisms, but sometimes it isn't enough. Some days I can manage, and some days I'm practically illiterate. It's pathetic."

Evie held eye contact and enunciated clearly, "Some people are good at some things, and some are good at others. Reading isn't your strong suit.

That's not the end of the world. As far as your records go, you'll just have to trust me, or get a second opinion."

"I trust you." He had to. No one else had ever seen the state of his records, and he'd prefer to keep it that way for as long as he could. He supposed that meant until the auditor arrived. Even the thought unsettled his stomach. He pushed it from his mind and instead pondered the mystery of Evelyn. When it came to his financial records, she seemed to genuinely know what she was doing—and enjoyed it. Weird, that. He'd never have picked her as the type of person who liked math, and he'd thought he'd known her well. Now, he wondered how much of what he knew was true and how much was his own preconception. After all, she'd thought she'd known him, too, but he'd kept his condition from her.

"How long are you staying in the area?" he asked. "This might take a while longer than you thought."

She nibbled her lower lip. "I really don't know."

He nodded. It wouldn't be the first time Evelyn blew through town with no clue where she was going or what she was doing next. She seemed to prefer living that way. A fact that rankled when he'd once hoped for her to settle down with him.

"If it convinces you to stay longer, I'll pay you for your time." Heck, she could name her price.

She rolled her eyes. "I said I'd do it, so I'll do it. I should be in Timaru for at least a week, which gives me plenty of time. A friend of mine runs an orchard and I'll be berry picking for her over New Year's. I can work on your books in the evenings. After I've gotten the old data up to scratch, you're on your own for anything going forward. Deal?"

"Deal," he replied without hesitation, shaking the hand she extended. Then, overwhelmed by a surge of gratitude, he ducked his head and kissed her cheek.

She backed up so quickly it would have been comical if not for the blow to his ego, as effective as a karate chop to the throat. “Don’t do that.” Her voice was shaky.

He held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “Sorry, sorry. I got carried away.”

“Yes, you did.”

He winced. She wasn’t letting his faux pas go without comment.

“Don’t do it again,” she said. “If you need me, I’ll be in the bedroom. You can bring your paperwork to me there. It’s more comfortable.”

The way she said that made him think physical comfort wasn’t the only thing on her mind. Had his kiss made her uncomfortable? He never wanted to be one of those men who made women nervous. He’d seen plenty of those guys at his bar over the years and ejected them as rapidly as possible. But maybe it wasn’t that. Maybe the past between them made her uncomfortable. If so, he wasn’t doing a damn thing to make it easier for her. She’d crushed him, so it was only fair she feel a little of what he had.

She took the laptop and left. He rubbed his eyelids, strolled to the sofa and slumped onto it. This was not how he’d thought he’d be spending Christmas Eve.

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Once Davy had delivered his papers, Evie perched the computer on her lap and opened a second spreadsheet. She labeled a series of worksheets and columns, and started importing data from one file to the other, matching items up to the receipts and invoices stacked beside her. As the rows of numbers morphed into a meaningful pattern, she smiled in satisfaction.

At least, she did until Christmas music blared through the crack beneath the door.

Grinding her teeth together, she ignored the festive beat. Or tried to, anyway. When Davy cranked the volume, she slapped her hands over her ears to muffle the obnoxious noise, but they did nothing to soften the drone of his voice when he began to sing.

“Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la.”

He practically yelled the lyrics. Was he actually crazy, or was he trying to rile her? If so, she couldn’t fathom why. God knew she deserved a little torture for dropping him like a hot potato the way she had, but surely revenge should take a back seat to keeping her on side until she’d gotten his books in shape. Besides, she’d thought they’d reached a truce.

Focusing on the screen, she strove, unsuccessfully, to tune out the Irishman’s boisterous singing. She endured it for several minutes, then set

the laptop aside and stomped down the hall to the living room, throwing the door open.

“Turn down the racket,” she hollered.

Davy tapped his ear and shrugged, indicating that he couldn’t hear her. His shit-eating grin said otherwise.

“Shut it off,” she insisted, and mimed rotating the volume dial.

His grin widened, and he repeated the movement.

“Shut up!” she roared at the exact moment he reached over and dialed down the music to a pleasant background noise.

His wide green eyes feigned shock. “No need to shout at me, Evelyn. I’m not a mind reader. How can I help you?”

For the first time, she noticed the scarf of tinsel wrapped around his neck and the sparkly green baubles he clasped. “Are those leprechaun testicles?”

Davy just stared at her for the length of a heartbeat, then he guffawed. “Leprechaun balls,” he choked. “That’s a new one.”

She scowled to hide the flicker of interest aroused by his smile. “That’s what they look like.”

He raised one ginger eyebrow. “Am I detecting some Grinchy vibes coming from my house guest? Are you a Christmas Grinch, Miss Parata? I’d never have thought it of you. You’re the life of the party.”

Ah, yes. There it was. Someone expecting her to be her usual perky self, exactly as she’d feared would happen. Sighing, she scrubbed a hand down her face. “I can’t always be ‘on’, Davy. Sometimes even the life of the party needs a bit of down time.”

His expression turned curious. “Of course you do. Just took me by surprise, is all. Here.” He passed her one of the green baubles. “Put this on the tree. Decorating works wonders for mood.”

She looked at the bauble as if it were a viper, then she glanced at the tree, wondering where he expected her to hang it. The tree was so

beautifully decorated it could have a full page spread in *Interior Design: The Christmas Edition*, and she was a total amateur. She couldn't help but feel that whatever she did, she'd ruin its perfect symmetry.

With a shake of her head, she tossed it back at him. "Don't be ridiculous. You do it."

He frowned at her, crossing his forearms over his plaid-clad chest. "Are you *scared* to decorate my tree?"

She scoffed. "I'm not scared of anything. I just don't *do* Christmas. At least not the way you do. I have my own traditions and they don't involve glittery leprechaun testicles."

"You know what? I think you're scared. As a matter of fact, I think you're too chicken-shit to hang this bauble," he held it up by the twine loop, "from that branch." He pointed to an empty pine twig. "If you're not, prove me wrong." He leaned forward, smirking. "I *dare* you."

If he'd phrased it differently, she could have taken the high ground, but she couldn't turn down a dare, and he knew it. She snatched the ball from his grip and threaded it onto the branch.

"There. Happy?"

"Thrilled."

He looked it too, damn him.

"If you hang another five decorations, I'll turn down the music so you can carry on in true Grinch style."

Her hands went to her hips. "I can't believe you're holding the volume control hostage."

"Believe it, girl. You'd better get your A into G."

"Fine." She reached into the box of decorations and grabbed the first one she touched. It almost crumpled beneath her thumb and she softened her hold on it. The paper sides of a handmade cube were colored alternately red and green by what looked like the enthusiastic hand of a child with a felt-tip pen. One side was smooth and glossy. A photograph. Lifting the

cube, she peered at the photo, which had been faded by years of wear and tear. It showed a little boy with a messy head of straw-like hair and a smattering of freckles.

“Is this you?” she asked, touching the miniature face.

“Yes,” he said, far nearer than she’d thought he was. If she turned, her nose might brush his chest. “That was taken back in Ireland, before we moved here. We made decorations each Christmas, and Mam kept them all, bless her hoarder’s soul. She gave them to me a few years ago.”

Something stung Evie’s eyes and she blinked, swallowing against the tightness in her throat. She would *not* get emotional at the thought of little Davy making this terrible decoration, or of his mother saving it all these years, even though it had crossed an ocean. She would most definitely not wallow in self-pity because all her own mum had left for her was a photograph and a tragic storybook. She was made of tougher stuff than that.

“Sweet,” she said, and handed it to him, choosing a selection of mass-produced baubles instead. She didn’t need any more cutesy stories.

Deciding it was easier to dive in than worry about ruining the aesthetic, she placed three baubles in quick succession and was stretching onto her toes to hang the fourth when Davy’s torso brushed her back and he plucked it from her fingers, putting it on the branch she’d been aiming for.

“Where do you want the last one?” he asked.

She hung it on the lowest level of the tree. “There. Can you turn it down now?”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

AFTER AN HOUR and a half of blessed quiet, a rumbling stomach drove Evie from the bedroom. She needed food, ASAP. There was no sign of Davy, so she wandered to the kitchen and searched the cupboards for a bowl and a box of cereal. There was nothing like breakfast for dinner. She poured a

healthy serving of cocoa pops and was splashing them with milk when footsteps padded down the hall and Davy came into view, naked except for a towel slung low over his hips.

Evie's breath hitched. She hadn't seen this much of him since they were seventeen and she'd hoped he could be her forever boy. They could've traveled the world together for the rest of their lives, a dream she'd never expressed to him, especially after she found out how attached to Itirangi he was.

Her gaze roved over him. His skin had the same milky coloring as before, and the dusting of hair on his chest contrasted sharply, orange on white. He'd filled out in the intervening years, his torso blocky and shoulders wide. He'd been a lanky teenager, with all the height of a man but none of the stature. At some point, that had changed. He'd aged well.

Breath eased from between his parted lips and his eyes locked on hers. To her surprise, no snappy quip was forthcoming on either side of the stare-down. Flecks of emerald sparkled in the mossy green of his irises, and she watched them, mesmerized. Her heart pitter-pattered against the inside of her ribcage like it was trying to break free.

A loud beeping interrupted the moment, drawing her attention to the fridge, which she'd left open. She hurried over, slotted the milk bottle into the door, and closed it. Then she grabbed the bowl of cocoa pops and sat at the dining table, spooning a mound of the crackling cereal into her mouth.

"Cereal for dinner?" he asked, making no move to cover himself.

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

He winked. *Winked*. The cheeky devil. "Not if you make me some, too."

Because she was taking advantage of his hospitality, she could hardly say no. Smiling merrily, he pulled out the chair opposite her while she returned to the kitchen area and heaped cocoa pops into a second bowl, drowning them in full-fat milk. Then she passed them to him, taking pains

not to touch his bare skin, before she settled back and continued to eat her own.

“Thank you, kind-hearted lady,” he drawled, looking pleased with himself as he started on the cereal. She recalled him looking exactly the same way after the first time they’d had sex, and her heart sped at the memory. Already, the nearness of his half-naked body had her hormones on high alert. She had a sixth sense for sexy guys, and Davy set off her internal hotness radar something wicked.

What did it mean that after all this time and distance she still wanted to jump his bones? Every other man she’d been with, she’d happily banged out of her system. If she encountered them now, she might consider a good romp for old time’s sake, but she knew without an ounce of doubt that her palms wouldn’t sweat and her thighs wouldn’t clench the way they did now.

Had she been a fool to leave him? At eighteen, with grand ideas about the adventures awaiting her in the world outside Itirangi, she’d believed with all her heart that she’d be a fool to stay. She didn’t regret the way her life had turned out, but now she wondered if she’d been naïve to think she could have the same connection with other men.

“Earth to Evelyn. You in there?”

Her head snapped up, and she hoped her thoughts weren’t written on her face. “Yes, just thinking.”

He cocked his head and set his spoon aside. “About what?”

“Nothing interesting.”

He leaned forward, one elbow on the table, chin resting on his palm. “And how do you know what I’d find interesting?”

She held his gaze. “Because I used to know you, and trust me when I say you should stop asking.” Mulling over their break-up would do neither of them any good. She’d hurt him—badly—and she didn’t want to reopen old wounds. His, or hers.

To his credit, he didn't pursue the line of questioning. Maybe he realized she was only being honest. As she rinsed her cereal bowl and stacked it away, she wondered whether he'd dated much over the years. While she'd always wanted him to be happy, she found she didn't like the idea of him seeing other women. She liked to think Aria or Sophie would have told her if there'd been someone in the picture, but then Evie had never let on how serious they'd been about each other as kids. They had no idea how deep her feelings for him had gone. Not even her reluctance to go to his bar hadn't tipped them off. They'd put it down to a disdain for small-town venues, and she'd let them believe it. If they knew one-tenth of the tangle of emotions that sprang up inside her each time she saw him, they'd have tried to push the two of them together long before now.

No, it was best for everyone involved that they'd kept things on the down low.

She bid him goodnight and decided not to leave her bedroom again for the evening. She could survive Christmas without seeing much of him at all.

She had to, for her own peace of mind.



DAVY LAY IN BED, uncomfortably hard. Having Evelyn just down the hall, where he could envision her in tiny summer pajamas, drove him out of his mind. He wasn't alone in his lust, either. He'd seen the way she'd ogled him. Though she wouldn't admit it, she was attracted to him, and that knowledge both satisfied and relieved him. Regardless of the heartbreak she'd heaped on him when they were young, he still wanted her, and thank-frigging-God she felt the same way. One-sided attraction wasn't something to be recommended.

Closing his eyes, he thought of the last time he'd seen her before today. It had been the day of Aria's wedding, and Evelyn had been a bridesmaid, resplendent in a figure-hugging gold dress. She'd sung at the ceremony, and taken his breath away. She'd always liked to sing, but he'd forgotten how moving it could be. How her raw, throaty voice could wrap around him like a blanket and make him shiver with delight. He'd hoped to talk to her, and try to put some of the awkwardness of the past years behind them, perhaps start fresh, but she'd stayed on the dance floor all night, and seemed to dance with every man except him. He'd drunk himself under the bar—which took a fair amount of effort—and by the time he'd recovered enough to make it to the wedding breakfast, she was gone.

Now she was a guest in his home, trusting him to give her safe shelter for Christmas. Much as he may want to, he wasn't going to abuse that trust by doing anything inappropriate. If only his body would get the message that she was off limits. Rolling over, he imagined jumping into the frigid water of Lake Itirangi, hoping to cool his ardor. It was going to be a long night.

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Davy woke early, stretched toward the ceiling, and smiled.
Christmas Day. How he loved it.

He checked his watch, noting that his family would arrive in a few hours for lunch, so he needed to start preparing the food. His mouth watered at the thought of their traditional Christmas fare—roast turkey, baked ham, cranberry sauce, carrots, parsnips, and a scrumptious trifle for dessert.

His stomach grumbled and he rubbed the flat surface of his belly. Food would come later. First, coffee. Without bothering to dress, he padded next door, into the kitchen and dining area, where he stopped dead in his tracks.

Shit, damn, hell.

He'd forgotten he had a guest. And apparently, she was an early riser. She stood in front of the kitchen counter, balanced on one leg, her foot on a thin yoga mat and an arm pointed out in front of her. Her other arm and leg were bowed above her body so that she looked like a ballerina paused midway through a dance. He expected her to shriek at the sight of him, but she didn't react at all. He looked closer and realized her eyes were shut. She didn't know he was there.

Feeling like a pervert, but too entranced to leave, he admired her form, both in terms of her yoga technique and her figure. She was effortlessly graceful, like she'd been doing this her whole life. She didn't teeter or move

so much as an eyelash. Every muscle remained perfectly still. He'd never seen anyone so serene, certainly not Evelyn.

Her legs, though short, were shapely, her thighs curved into a rounded bottom that gave way to a slim torso and heart-stoppingly perfect breasts, which he knew from experience could not be contained by a man's hands. Those breasts had been enough to reduce him to a slathering mess as a boy.

Her neck was long and elegant, her chin pointed, and cheekbones pronounced. His gaze wandered leisurely back down to her feet, which were ridiculously tiny. He recalled that her hands were also small. He'd burst with pride back when she'd put her two delicate hands side by side along his shaft and not fully encompassed him.

Something thumped his pelvis. Glancing down, he realized he had an erection. Also, he was naked, and watching Evelyn like a creep.

"Feck," he swore.

Her eyes opened. In about two seconds, she took in his nudity and dropped from her position into a crouch, brandishing her miniature fists at him. When she didn't scream, he had to wonder how common it was for horny men to disrupt her yoga routine with unwanted advances.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, fixing him with a psycho glare that threatened all kinds of painful revenge if he didn't back off immediately.

"I'm so sorry." He lowered his hands to cover his junk, and edged away, reluctant to turn his back lest she either attack, or be blinded by the stunning white glow of his ass. Once in the hall, he darted to his bedroom and threw on black jeans and a snug green t-shirt. Properly attired, he hurried back, intent on making amends.

In the doorway, he bumped into the rolled-up end of Evelyn's yoga mat. Or had she hit him with it? At this point, he wasn't sure, and he couldn't blame her if she had.

“I’m so sorry about that,” he told her again. “I forgot you were here. Normally I can walk around in the buff and there’s no one to see. I swear to Mother Mary, I didn’t mean to shock you like that.”

Her brow furrowed, and she glanced from him to the yoga mat, as if considering whether to whack him over the head with it. He wouldn’t stop her. He deserved it.

“Are you even Catholic?” she asked.

He grinned. She’d opted not to hurt him yet. “My Mam would have my head if I said no.”

She rolled her eyes. “But do you go to church?”

“Once or twice a year, when Mam gets concerned about the wellbeing of my immortal soul. I can recite ‘Our Father’, ‘Hail Mary’, and ‘Glory Be’ word for word, like any good Irish boy.”

“Of course you can,” she muttered, like his revelation explained everything. “Are you going to let me past? Or do I need to knee you in the nads?” She tried to step around him, but he shuffled over and blocked her path. She raised her left knee menacingly.

“No need to maim me. I’ll let you pass as soon as you tell me why in God’s name you were exercising at the ass-crack of dawn on Christmas morning. It’s a day for sleeping late and eating too much, not working on your bikini body.”

She shoved his shoulders. He backed up a little, knowing she could push him with all her strength and not move him thanks to years of playing lock on the rugby field, but he wouldn’t use his physicality to intimidate her.

“I do yoga every day,” she said as she brushed past him. “Christmas is no different. It’s a day like any other.”

“No it’s not,” he called after her. “It’s a holiday. Meant to be enjoyed.”

“So?” She paused in the doorway of the spare bedroom. “I *enjoy* yoga. And don’t be judgey, Irishman. I have Christmas traditions, too. Mine are

different from yours, but that doesn't make them any less valid."

"Touché." She had him there. Who was he to decide what was and wasn't an appropriate way to spend Christmas?



EVIE PACKED her yoga mat away and showered to rinse off the fine sheen of sweat left over from her routine. Though it was cool inside, when she peeped between the curtains, the sky was a vivid blue with fluffy clouds drifting across it. She dressed in one of her favorite scoop-necked tops and a skort—a pair of shorts with a wrap-around front that had the overall effect of resembling a skirt.

Opening the window, she leaned out and breathed in the fresh air. At this height, she could see clear over the surrounding buildings and down to the lake. It was too early for anyone to be up and about except for a lone woman jogging along the lake shore. The temperature was mild and pleasant, but the glorious summer sky promised a scorcher of a day to come.

From her suitcase, she grabbed a box of herbal tea and strode to the kitchen, determined to rescue her mood. As she entered the dining area, Davy's broad back came into view. He stood at the counter, spreading cream cheese on bagels before smothering raspberry jam on top. When she flicked the kettle on, he handed her one.

"Eat up."

"Thanks." The simple gesture touched her heart. Other than her mother and one or two of her closest friends, no one had ever cooked for her. Certainly not any man.

Calm down, she told herself. It's a bagel, not a declaration of undying affection.

Christmas carols played softly in the background. The kettle boiled and she poured hot water into a teacup, watching as pink diffused from the tea bag into the drink.

“My family is coming by for lunch,” Davy told her as he rinsed and dried a turkey. “It’s a tradition for us. Have a big lunch, then munch on leftovers all day.”

“I’ll leave,” she said, tossing out the tea bag and taking her breakfast to the table. “Get out of the way. Let you guys enjoy your lunch.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s Christmas. You’re welcome to join us.”

She nibbled on her lip, hesitant. “I don’t want to intrude.” She paused, thinking about how she didn’t actually have anywhere else to go, other than for a long walk around town. This was a large apartment, with plenty of room—she could stay out of the way. “Perhaps I could hang out in the bedroom and keep myself busy?”

He glanced up, looking dubious. “If that’s what you’d prefer, but think on it. We’re a family who firmly believes in the more, the merrier.”

She nodded, and finished her bagel and tea in silence while he mixed stuffing and shoved it into the turkey. “Thanks for the breakfast,” she said, getting up to wash and dry the plate.

“No problem.”

Back in the bedroom, she opened her ten-dollar bottle of wine and half-filled the teacup she’d brought with her, taking a sip and savoring the tingle on her tongue. Sparkling Moscato may be cheap, but it was her favorite. In her opinion, no hundred-year-old, pricey vintage could compete, although many of her friends disagreed. Clarissa, in particular, was a connoisseur.

The photo of her mother faced her from the bedside cabinet. Evie glanced away, unable to look at it for long. She grabbed a donut from the plastic carton stored in her suitcase and bit into it, loving the flakiness of the outside and the softness of the center. Cinnamon sugar coated her fingers and she licked them. *Bliss.*

She didn't need an over-the-top Christmas celebration. All she needed was this: wine, donuts, *The Little Match Girl*, and her mum.

Mum.

A tear welled up and slid over one cheek. Another followed. It didn't matter that she was upholding their traditions—Kahurangi was gone, and Evie didn't want to spend Christmas without her. Her soul ached with loneliness. Her heart hurt from it. She remembered her mother saying, year after year, "We may not have fancy gifts, but we'll always have each other, tamahine." But they didn't, not anymore, because she'd died and left Evie on her own.

This time last year, Kahurangi had been bedridden, and fading fast. Her skin had been unusually colorless, her energy low as her body used whatever supplies it possessed to fight the cancer. She'd known she was dying, but Evie denied it, preferring to cling to the hope of a Christmas miracle. Surely they deserved one after all they'd been through together. But no miracle came, and Kahurangi passed away days later.

Evie's tears flowed quickly, streaming down her face and dripping off her chin. She pushed the donuts away and clutched the book to her, rocking back and forth. A sob tore from deep in her chest. A miserable, bitter sound she couldn't contain.

It wasn't fair. Her mum hadn't even been fifty. She'd exercised regularly, not smoked, and watched what she ate. Why had the universe stolen her away?

Why had there been nothing Evie could do to stop it?

She'd wondered, so many times, whether her mum would be alive if only they'd caught the cancer earlier, or been able to afford a new treatment on the market. Sniffing, she wiped her leaky eyes on the bed sheet. *Coulda, woulda, shoulda*. None of that meant anything now. Kahurangi had died and left her alone for all the Christmases to come.

The tears started anew, and she cursed herself for being pathetic. She'd thought she'd finished crying months ago. But then, maybe her mother wasn't the only reason for her tears. Maybe the stress of the last two days had caught up with her. In the end, it didn't really matter *why* she was crying. What mattered was that she was without family on Christmas Day, for the first time ever.

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With the turkey and ham in the oven, Davy turned his attention to the vegetables and sauce. Heavy Christmas meals weren't *de rigueur* in New Zealand because Christmas happened during midsummer, but his Irish family erred toward the traditions of the homeland. They loved New Zealand, but that didn't stop his Mam from missing cold Christmases in Ireland.

As he began to peel parsnips, his playlist ended. He went to his phone, selected a new playlist, and was about to start the music when a strange high-pitched keening noise caught his attention. Frowning, he followed the sound into the hall. It was coming from the room Evelyn had claimed. Perhaps she was playing her own music.

But no, if she'd had her own sound system, she would have used it to drown out his Christmas carols.

Pausing outside the door, he put his ear to the wood and listened. The keening had stopped, but now he heard watery blubbering. Hell, she was crying. Absolutely bawling, if his ears could be believed.

What had he done? She hadn't seemed upset with him during breakfast, but perhaps she'd taken his unwelcome and unexpected nudity harder than he'd thought. Could it be that he'd frightened her? God, he hoped not.

He chewed on his tongue. Dare he open the door?

If he'd truly upset her, he should make it right. But if this was his fault, wouldn't he be doing her a favor by staying away?

Suck it up, boyo. Do the right thing.

Maybe it wasn't anything he'd done. Maybe this was about her mother. He laid a palm against the door, reluctant to bust in on her, but with any other woman, he'd have entered already. He shouldn't treat Evelyn differently because of their past. So thinking, he pushed the door open and peered around. She sat cross-legged on the bed, clutching a hardback book, a half-drunk glass of wine on the nightstand and a six-pack of donuts beside her. She looked up, and the miserable expression in her puffy red eyes hit him like a knife in the gut. Yeah, she was upset about far more than something stupid he'd done. This was raw grief.

"Go away," she moaned, shutting her eyes as though she couldn't bear to look at him. "Leave me be."

He stepped cautiously into the room, his attention focused entirely on her. "I'm sorry. I can't do that, Evelyn. Not when you're hurting like this."

"I don't need your pity," she mumbled, studying her hands.

He felt utterly useless. This was Evelyn. Usually flirtatious, always maddening, never one to dwell on the negatives. He wasn't equipped to see her this way. He watched her dab her eyes with a fingertip, shoulders hunched. She drew her knees to her chest and hugged them, her gaze flickering to something on the nightstand. Davy crossed to her side, perched on the edge of the bed, and put an arm around her.

She didn't shrug him off, which was telling in and of itself. From here, he could see the photograph displayed in a scarred wooden frame. It was of Evelyn and her mother. Sympathy twisted a knot in his gut. The women had always been close, and losing her must have been far more difficult than Evelyn ever let on.

"There, there," he said awkwardly, stroking her silky hair. "Let it out. It will be okay."

“You don’t know that,” she whispered, then screwed up her face as she realized she’d shown weakness, not something she’d ever enjoyed. “You can go. I’m fine.”

Davy didn’t budge. “You’ll have to be more convincing than that.”

She shook her shoulders, dislodging his arm, then took a deep, uneven breath, dried her eyes on the sheet, and bared her teeth in a semblance of a smile. “I’m okay,” she said. “Completely fine.”

Welp, he was convinced. Convinced that she was anything but fine. He took her hand. “Sweetheart, please let me help. I know I’m probably not who you want to be with right now, but unless you want me to call Sophie or Aria, I’m who you’ve got.”

She sniffed. “Don’t call the girls. I just need...” She trailed off. “I don’t know.”

“How about you come and help me prepare lunch,” he suggested, rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand. “I know it’s not exciting, but it might take your mind off things. Then you can stay and eat with us.”

She groaned and covered her face with her free hand. “I don’t know if I can handle being social right now. Why would you even want me intruding on your family lunch? Won’t they think it’s weird?”

He understood her hesitation. Though they’d dated in high school, she’d never met his parents, despite his wishes to the contrary. Meeting the parents had been “a little too real” for teenage Evelyn.

Yeah, that had stung.

He shrugged. “My family won’t mind a bit. They’d love to have company, and you aren’t just some random person. You’re you.”

She huffed, reclaimed her hand, and hugged her knees again. “Why do you call me that?”

He paused, caught off guard. “Evelyn? It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but nobody besides Mum ever used it. To everyone else, I’m just Evie.”

“I like the way ‘Evelyn’ sounds,” he said. “It’s a nice name. And you’re not ‘just’ anything. You’re beautiful and smart and intriguing, but I guess you already know that.”

“Never hurts to hear someone say it,” she replied, a ghost of a grin on her face. “Okay, I’ll join your lunch. I appreciate you inviting me.”

“You’re very welcome.” He stood, offered her a hand, and hauled her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she whispered, eyes glimmering with the remnants of tears. “For being so nice to me. I know it can’t be easy.” Then, to his complete astonishment, she planted a kiss on him. It was over nearly as soon as it began and she ducked around him and scurried away. He touched his lips wonderingly.

If he was sensible, he’d want nothing to do with Evelyn. She was the kind of trouble that could break his heart. But damn, she had the softest lips he’d ever kissed.



WHY HAD SHE KISSED HIM?

Evie’s mouth tingled where it had touched Davy’s. A mistake. She’d been overcome by gratitude toward him for being so kind, and it had just happened.

On top of that, it seemed she would be joining the O’Connors for lunch. Never mind that she wouldn’t add much to the holiday cheer, he seemed almost eager to have her there. While she hadn’t appreciated his interfering at first, now she was relieved she’d have something to do other than wallow in grief all day.

“Where are you going?” Davy called after her.

She turned. He stood in the hall, looking baffled. And strangely adorable. Not sexy at all, she reminded herself. For his sake, she couldn’t

afford to be attracted to him. She didn't want to risk hurting him again just because she didn't know what she wanted out of her life anymore.

"We're making lunch," she reminded him, padding up the carpeted hall to the kitchen and dining area. Heavy footsteps told her he'd followed.

He tapped her shoulder. "What was that?"

She didn't turn. "Nothing. Now let's get cooking. Don't worry, I won't mess anything up. I've worked in a few cafes and restaurants over the years." She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the space. "Where do you want me?"

A pregnant pause came on the heel of her words. She winced. She should have phrased the question differently. Fortunately, he didn't make the obvious joke.

"Can you finish peeling the parsnips and carrots?" he asked, coming around to stand beside her. "I'll focus on the sauce."

"Easy." She grabbed the discarded peeler and set to work. "Is this what an Irish Christmas lunch looks like?"

"Traditionally, the Irish celebrate with Christmas dinner," he said in his pleasant lilting accent as he moved to the stovetop to check the sauce. "We changed it to lunch, but otherwise yes, this is more or less what a traditional Christmas meal would include."

She scanned the kitchen. "Where are the potatoes?"

He grinned. "Believe it or not, we're not all about the potatoes. Although you can't deny, they're a versatile vegetable. They make chips and crisps, you can roast them or bake them, and they're the key ingredient to vodka. Potatoes are a bloody good time."

"Okay, Mr. Potato Head."

"You laugh," he said, grabbing a spoon from a drawer, "but it's true. I challenge you to name one other vegetable you can do all those things with."

Evie thought for a moment, then with a smug grin, replied, "Kumara."

“Aha! Otherwise known as sweet *potato*.”

The smile vanished. “Completely different thing.”

“One and the same,” he countered.

“Does anyone ever tell you how annoying you are?”

“Only when they know I’m right.”

She rinsed the parsnips, then turned her attention to the carrots. “How big is your family? Seems like there’s enough here to feed a small army.”

“Not that big. Just big eaters. There will be four and a half people coming over.”

She laughed. “A half?”

Davy laughed with her. “My nephew. He’s only two, so I don’t think he qualifies as a full person yet.”

“That’s Angus’s kid? He’s younger than you, right?”

“He’s twenty-two.”

Young to have a two-year-old, but old enough to be a good parent. She tried to recall his face. He’d been a kid himself last she’d seen him. Gangly and ginger, with a big mouth and a chip on his shoulder, willing to take on anyone who mocked his hair or accent. Hard to imagine him as a father.

She finished with the carrots at the same time Davy took the sauce off the stove and set it aside to cool. She leaned over the pot and sniffed. It smelled good. Sweet, yet tart.

“What next, Chef?”

“Can you whip some cream for the trifle?” he asked. “It’s in the fridge, and there’s vanilla paste and confectioner’s sugar in the pantry.”

She pulled a face. “I should have known you’d be one of those people who pollutes their cream.” Nonetheless, she searched for the ingredients he’d specified. As she reached for the vanilla paste on the top shelf, it struck her that her tears had dried and, however unlikely, she was having a good time.

“Too short, pipsqueak?”

She bounced off the floor and closed her hand around the tube. “I’m Goldilocks,” she said, waving her fist in triumph. “Just right, smart ass.”

He glanced over his shoulder and down at his backside. “Why, thank you for noticing.”

She hid her mouth behind her hand so he couldn’t see her smile. “Oh, the gems keep on coming.” After emptying the ingredients into a bowl, she searched the cupboards until she found an electric beater, and started it up.

Davy, who’d begun chopping a collection of summer fruit, jerked in surprise. “Give a guy some warning.”

She pointed to her ear and mouthed, “I can’t hear you.”

“Sure you can’t.”

She shrugged helplessly.

“Evil Evelyn, that’s what they should call you.” Turning away, he continued dicing fruit. Evie finished whipping the cream and shimmied across the kitchen, bumping him with her hip. She swiped a piece of strawberry, popped it between her lips, and licked the juice from her fingers.

“You sneaky little thief.”

She sashayed away and stored the whipped cream in the fridge. “I feel no shame. Custard next?”

“That’s right.”

They worked in tandem for the next couple of hours, putting lunch together bit by bit, exchanging sarcastic comments as they went. The mood slowly improved, though to be fair, it couldn’t have gotten worse than sobbing alone in her ex’s spare bedroom on Christmas day.

But then someone knocked on the door, and her stomach plummeted like she’d dropped twenty vertical meters.

“Come in,” Davy yelled. “It’s open.”

Evie heard the swish of the door over carpet and a woman’s voice with a thick Irish accent called, “Too busy to greet your Mam, are you, boy?”

“I’m taking care of the holiday meal you’re about to enjoy,” he said.

“Cheeky boy. I didn’t raise you to give me lip.” Mrs. O’Connor came around the corner. She had a rigid bearing with good posture and hair that matched her son’s, topping out no more than an inch above five feet. Freckles dusted her face, making her cheeks look almost tan, and blue eyes beamed like lasers from beneath hooded lids.

“Oh.” She came to a stop, her gaze settling on Evie. “And who might you be?”

Evie immediately rethought her plans to stay for the meal. She didn’t belong here. “I’m just le—”

“Evelyn,” Davy interrupted, when she’d been about to politely excuse herself. “This is my Mam and Paps.” A gray-haired gentleman with bushy brows followed Davy’s mother into the room. Behind him came a lanky redhead and a petite Japanese woman with a toddler clinging to her leg. “I think you know Angus,” he continued.

“From a very long time ago. He probably doesn’t remember me.”

Angus’s eyes widened in surprise, but he shook his head. “I remember you, Evie. You’re kind of hard to forget.” He took the Japanese woman’s hand. She smiled warmly, her dark eyes twinkling and thin lips curving into a smile. “This is my partner, Mariko, and our son Reo.”

“Lovely to meet you,” Evie said, and then the entire O’Connor clan watched her curiously, as if waiting for an explanation for her presence. She gave them one. “My car broke down and the mechanic isn’t open until tomorrow, so I’m stuck here. Davy and I know each other from school. He let me crash in his spare bedroom. I should say, one of his *many* spare bedrooms. This place is massive.”

Davy’s father glanced between the two of them, taking in the food stains on their clothing, and the tension in the air. He raised an eyebrow. “A pleasure to meet you, Evelyn.” His accent was less pronounced than his wife’s. “Call me Hugh. My wife is Eileen.”

“Merry Christmas, Hugh.” She turned to Davy. “Are you okay to finish lunch?”

He nodded.

Evie smiled at everyone. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go clean myself up.”

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“She just happened to break down outside your place, eh?”
Angus asked the minute Evelyn left the room.

Davy didn’t appreciate his tone. “She did,” he said, warning his brother off with a look. The last thing he needed was for their mother to get ideas.

Angus’s grin widened. His baby brother had never been able to take a hint. “If I remember correctly—and I usually do—you and Evie dated during high school. Odd that her car would break down outside your bar, of all places. What do you suppose she was doing here?”

Davy shrugged. “Didn’t ask. It’s none of my business. Wipe that smirk off your face, kid. Evelyn and I went out a handful of times nine years ago, it means nothing that she’s here now. It’s a small town, that’s all.”

“You dated that girl?” Eileen asked, overhearing. Her brow crinkled in disbelief. “And I didn’t know about it?”

Davy crossed his arms. Angus had done it now. “I don’t bring every girl I date home to meet you, Mam.”

“Perhaps not, but I’d have thought you’d bring home one as pretty and polite as that,” she said tartly.

Yeah, well, he would’ve, if she’d been inclined to agree.

“Lay off, Eileen,” Hugh said. “Give the boy a break. I’m sure you didn’t tell Colleen and Willy everything we got up to when we were young.”

She blushed, and Angus and Davy stuck their fingers in their ears at the same time.

“We don’t need to hear this,” Angus said. “Our ears are delicate.”

Mariko heaved Reo up and settled him on her slim hip. “Angus, why don’t you help Davy bring lunch over? We’ll set up the table.” While the O’Connors spoke with varying degrees of the Irish accent, Mariko’s sweet voice tripped over L’s.

“Excellent plan, Mariko,” Hugh agreed, ushering his sons into action.

Angus joined Davy in the kitchen area and they loaded the turkey, ham, and vegetables onto serving dishes and carried them to the table. When they returned to assemble the drinks and condiments, Angus peeked at their family to make sure they were occupied, then sauntered closer to Davy and murmured under his breath, “So, what’s really going on with Evie? The truth, brother.”

Davy looked upward as if considering how much to share. “The truth is…” He took a deep breath, then released it slowly. “Exactly what she said. There’s nothing to know.”

Angus chuckled. “You bastard. You really had me going.”

“You should have known better, kid. What happened between us at school is ancient history. Let sleeping dogs lie.”

“It’s a pity,” he replied. “She’s a looker, and from what I remember, a real good sort, too.”

“Forget it.”

At the dining table, Mariko and Eileen laid out dinner plates, glasses, and cutlery while Hugh kept Reo busy with a toy tanker truck. Evelyn edged in, looking unsure of herself, and started chatting quietly to Hugh as he and the boy played.

“Lunch is ready,” Davy announced, capturing everyone’s attention. His family hastened to their seats, Mariko balancing her son on her knee. They left two chairs free, beside each other. One for Davy and one for Evelyn.

Not subtle in the slightest. He met Evelyn's gaze and she gave him a wry smile, aware of the maneuver to force them together. She didn't seem surprised, either. Then again, she probably encountered this type of behavior all the time. Who wouldn't want a vibrant, vivacious woman to be part of their family, even if she were something of a loose unit?

She slid into the empty seat beside Eileen, glanced at the cutlery and hesitated, as if unsure of the proper protocol for a Christmas meal.

Davy came to her rescue. "Mam, would you like to say grace?"

Eileen pressed her palms together, bowed her head, and murmured, "Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Davy stole a look at Evelyn and noticed she'd bowed her head, too, muttering a furtive "Amen" afterward. He added his own voice to the chorus. "Amen. Dig in, everybody." He served himself a generous portion of everything. "Isn't this better than hiding out in the spare room?" he asked under his breath.

"I'm reserving judgment," she said. "Until after dessert."

"Good call."

"Evelyn," his mother said. "Tell me, what do you do?"

Davy thought the question may unsettle her, considering she was notoriously fickle when it came to employment, but she remained unruffled. "I'm between jobs at the moment. A friend in Timaru has offered me work at her orchard until I find something new."

"What kind of work are you looking for?" Hugh asked, splashing his turkey with sauce.

"I've worked in a wide range of fields. I have no qualifications, but I'll give almost anything a shot, and that seems to go a long way."

"Damned right, it does," Hugh agreed. "Too many young people these days are allergic to honest hard work. Would you like me to ask around? It's

busy season on the farms, and one of my friends may need an extra worker.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind, but I might only be staying in the area temporarily. I’m not sure where I’m headed next.”

Eileen frowned, and caught her husband’s eye, her matchmaking temporarily thwarted. “Is Itirangi not home for you? I thought Angus said you grew up here.”

Evelyn shoveled parsnip into her mouth, delaying her response. “I grew up here, but now I’m a nomad, really.”

Eileen brightened again. “If you don’t have roots elsewhere, why not take a job here for a while? Especially if there’s a shortage of farmhands.”

“Mam,” Davy warned, concerned his houseguest would burst into tears again if pushed.

“No, it’s all right.” Evelyn flapped a hand in his direction. “The truth is, my mum passed away last year, and I have so many memories of her here that I’m not sure if I’m ready to be back yet.”

Well that stopped his determined mother in her tracks. Because, really, how could anyone argue with grief? He felt a stab of admiration for Evelyn and her evasive tactics. The woman was cleverer than anyone gave her credit for. While it was true that her mum had died here last year, she’d wanted nothing to do with Itirangi for much longer than that.

Before the silence became awkward, she asked, “What was it like growing up in Ireland?”

And just like that, the conversation restarted. Davy stifled a laugh. She’d accidentally hit upon Eileen’s favorite topic: the homeland.



DAVY ROCKED his chair onto its rear legs, sighing with satisfaction. His belly was warm and full, he had his family around him, and it was

Christmas. What could be better?

A sultry laugh sounded to his right. *Evelyn*. His family had taken to her, and watching her interact with them reminded him of a maestro conducting an orchestra. She ensured everyone was included in the conversation, redirected questions she didn't want to answer, and coaxed little Reo out of his shell until he demanded to sit on her lap rather than Mariko's.

She was in her element. Once she'd overcome her initial misgivings about intruding on their Christmas, she'd become the focal point of the dinner table, which was quite a feat considering she was the outsider.

In short, his family loved her. A fact that both gratified and terrified him. Once upon a time, he'd been nuts about her and had felt certain she'd fit in with his family, if only she'd give them a chance. It was nice to know he'd been right.

But.

Remember how that had ended? He'd fallen for her hard, and as soon as he'd started making plans for the future, she'd ditched him and never looked back. Sighing, he flicked a crumb from his lap, and as he moved, Reo grabbed his hand to study the digital watch around his wrist.

"Hey, buddy, let Uncle Davy eat," Evelyn said, gently dislodging him.

Davy caught his mum's eye across the table, and what he saw there spelled trouble. She'd been watching Evelyn with Reo as though she'd never seen anything like it.

"Do you have any nieces or nephews?" she asked.

"Nope," Evelyn replied. "I'm an only child."

"I'd never have guessed," Hugh said. "You seem so comfortable with Reo."

"I spent some time as a live-in nanny in Invercargill." She chuckled. "Talk about a steep learning curve. But I love kids, so it worked out great. I would have stayed in that position for longer, but the family moved to

Australia and I didn't fancy making the move with them. I love Oz, but I wouldn't want to live there."

Her itchy feet had limits. Interesting.

Eileen had stars in her eyes. "I love children, too," she exclaimed. "I always wanted a whole bevy of grandkids. Reo is a good start, but I wouldn't mind another three or four to spoil. It's so nice to meet a young woman who likes children. They all seem to be focused on their careers these days."

"I see no reason why we can't have both," Evelyn said, earning Eileen's eternal devotion. Something bumped Davy's foot beneath the table. Glancing up, he saw Angus waggle his eyebrows.

"You must get lonely in this big, empty apartment all by yourself," Angus said, scratching his chin as though the thought had just occurred to him. "Surely it gets too quiet sometimes."

Uh-oh, he was in trouble now.

"I manage," he said through gritted teeth. The traitorous backstabber. "I like the peace and quiet. I see enough of people during the day. I need to recharge at night."

"Nonsense," Angus continued, ignoring the warning in his eyes. "You could have another five people here and hardly notice them."

"You could," Mariko agreed, not seeming to detect the undercurrent of the conversation. "It's such a large space for one person. I worry about you here by yourself. Why don't you get a roommate?"

"That's a nice idea," Davy said, "but I don't need a roommate. Trust me, I'm happy having the place to myself."

"He's telling the truth," Evelyn interjected. "If he had a roommate, he couldn't walk around in the nude. He forgot I was here this morning and wandered in, naked as the day he was born. I was doing yoga. He nearly frightened me out of my wits."

Silence met her statement. Then Eileen's lips twisted disapprovingly and Angus howled with laughter, slapping his thigh and hooting. "Oh, brother. That's too rich! What a way to dent a guy's ego. I hope you screamed."

"I don't think I did," she said thoughtfully. "But I can't remember for sure."

"You didn't." Davy's fists clenched in his lap hard enough that his nails bit into his palms. "I'd remember if you had." Shoving the chair back, he stood. "If you're all done laughing at my expense, I'm going to start cleaning up." Piling empty bowls on top of each other, he lugged them to the kitchen sink, stacked them inside, and ran some soapy water. His mother followed with the turkey and ham, and began packing leftovers into containers to store in the fridge.

"I like your Evelyn," she murmured, low enough not to be overheard. "She's delightful. You should hold onto her."

"She's not *my* Evelyn," he groaned, exasperated. "She's just passing through. We barely know each other anymore, and she's not even the tiniest bit interested in me."

She tilted her head and quirked a brow, clearly not believing him. "Take it from an old woman with years of wisdom, you could win that girl over if you really wanted to. I've been watching the two of you all night. You looking at her, her looking at you, both of you pretending not to. Don't dismiss it out of hand, that's all I'm asking. I can wait another few years for a grandbaby."

He nodded noncommittally. "I'll think about it."

But her offhand comment had intrigued him more than he cared to admit. Was Evelyn really interested in him? Despite the flare of attraction he'd seen earlier, he wouldn't have thought so. Now, he wondered. Damned if he didn't want to know.

*W*hile the O’Connors said their goodbyes, Evie snuck back to the spare bedroom and closed the door with a soft click. Stretching out on the bed, she rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes.

Thank God for the quiet. She enjoyed being around people, but she’d been through the emotional equivalent of a spin cycle, and she was wrung out.

Davy knocked on the door.

Davy.

Another reason for the turbulent confusion turning her world topsy-turvy. She’d never have guessed his family would embrace her as they had—eager to welcome her into the fold. Or perhaps she’d secretly been afraid they would, making it even more difficult to leave. Perhaps that was why she’d really refused to meet them. She didn’t know anymore.

“What is it?” she asked.

He peered around the corner and smiled, brackets forming around his mouth. “I’m heading down to the school for a friendly game of rugby with the boys. Are you up to joining me, or do you need a little time?”

“Ugh, I don’t know.” The idea of getting outside and enjoying the sun appealed, but showing up to a social event with Davy would raise questions

she didn't want raised, and what's more, she hadn't thrown a rugby ball in her life. Not that she'd admit as much to him. He'd been a member of the local team since primary school, and frankly, her inexperience was downright unpatriotic.

She'd watched games aplenty. A girl couldn't get by in New Zealand without watching the odd All Blacks game, especially if she frequented bars or worked in hospitality, but she'd moved around so much that joining a sports team had seemed like a waste of time. After a while, it simply became too embarrassing to admit she couldn't play. Better to pretend disinterest.

"There's not much I can do with that answer," he said. "Why don't you come along and you can lie in the sun if you don't want to take part?"

She supposed that sounded okay. "You've convinced me. Give me five minutes."

"How about two?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't push your luck, Irishman." Just to be contrary, she took her time getting ready, changing into leggings and a soft jersey because the summer air was beginning to cool. She redid her mascara and added a layer of fiery red lipstick. A touch of body shimmer lotion on her cheekbones and cleavage, and she was done.

They drove to the sports field in Davy's station wagon, with Evie in the passenger seat. "So, who will be at this rugby game?" she asked.

"The usual suspects. Gareth, Justin, Cooper, Ramsay, Blake, Hemi, maybe a few others."

Evie winced. With Gareth, Cooper and Justin present, there were more than fifty-fifty odds her friends would find out she'd spent Christmas day with Davy—and also that she'd been in town and not let them know. Less than ideal. While she hadn't been in the mood to be with people until Davy talked her around, she'd never want to hurt their feelings.

They arrived, and parked on the gravel area beside the field. Pine trees ringed the grass, with the exception of the side nearest to the makeshift parking lot and a small, weathered clubroom was to the right of the playing field. Evie caught sight of a woman with a mass of ginger hair standing with the group of men near the clubhouse. Her pulse flew into overdrive and she ducked behind the dashboard. *Emily*. Damn. Evie liked Emily—she was impossible to dislike—but if Emily was here with Justin, then the chances were that the other men had brought their girlfriends, too.

“If you wanted to be on your hands and knees, all you had to do was ask,” Davy said, his tone laced with amusement.

She swatted his thigh. “This isn’t funny. I thought you said it would just be the guys here.”

“I thought it would be. Guess I got it wrong, sorry.”

“I need to know whether Avery and Sophie are out there.”

Davy scanned the group, who’d begun to turn their way.

“Yes, ’fraid so. Emily and Kayla, too.”

Evie groaned. “Not good,” she muttered to herself. “Not good at all.” Then, more loudly, she said, “Can you take me back to your place?”

Davy stared at her as if she were insane. “No. We just got here. I’m sorry I didn’t realize the girls were coming, but they’re your friends, and I’m not just going to do a U-turn and leave. As soon as I do, they’ll all ask why, and I’ll be forced to explain how you spent all of last night in my arms and were too embarrassed to face them today.”

She snorted. “You wouldn’t.”

He smirked. “Oh, I would.”

Her lips twisted into a sneer. “You bastard.”

He shrugged the insult off. “Been called worse. But I’d hate to tell my Mam you impugned her honor.”

Impugned. What kind of pretentious dickhead actually used a word like that? And to think she’d been admiring his muscular forearms on the

steering wheel only moments earlier.

“Don’t worry about taking me all the way back,” she said, prepared to bargain with him. “If you let me out at the school gate, I’ll walk to your place.”

“Evelyn, I’m not driving you anywhere.”

Asshole. This could *not* be happening. She’d spent the night at his place specifically to avoid her friends—and yes, she knew how awful that sounded.

“I’ll stay here,” she said, in a last-ditch effort both to save face with her friends, and take away the risk of hurting their feelings.

Davy chuckled. “You can’t hide on the floor of my car for the next few hours. Suck it up, buttercup. It will be okay. I promise.”

“I suppose it’ll have to be.” She straightened, miming over-the-top movements to show anyone watching that she’d been searching for her earring on the floor, then fastened the imaginary earring in place and threw the door open without a backward glance.

“Hey, girls!” she cried, running toward her friends, arms outstretched.

Seeing her, Sophie leapt to her feet and met her halfway, yanking her into a fierce embrace. “Merry Christmas.” She kissed Evie’s cheek. “It’s been way too long since I saw you. How come you’re here?”

Evie shrugged, nonchalant. “You know me, always turning up like a bad penny. How have you been? How’s that sexy man of yours?”

Sophie flushed scarlet and Evie knew she’d struck distraction-tactic gold. Sophie had been dating their friend Aria’s older brother for a few months now, and though Evie had been surprised by the pairing at first, it made sense as soon as she saw them together. Their chemistry was hot as hell.

“He’s fine as ever,” Sophie said, her lips quirking up.

The truth in that smile kicked Evie in the heart. Sophie was happy. Really happy. After wasting years of her life on losers, she deserved it, but

seeing the contentment that ran soul-deep hit a little close to home. Evie had never looked like that, not even close, and if she kept living the same nomadic lifestyle, keeping people at a distance, she doubted she ever would.

“Did he play Dirty Santa for you?” she teased, twirling a lock of Sophie’s hair around her finger. “Don’t tell me you haven’t jumped his bones today; I can see it written all over you. You have that whole loved-up, post-orgasm look.”

“Shh,” Sophie hissed, her eyes darting to each side to check no one had heard. “There was no Dirty Santa role play, but we definitely celebrated Christmas the way it should be.”

“Good girl.”

“So, where’d you run into Davy?”

Evie pretended not to hear her, turning and waving at Avery, who was walking toward them.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Avery hugged her. “I thought you were down south.”

“I finished my job at the cafe two days ago,” Evie explained. “I’m heading to Timaru to pick berries until I find another one.” No need to mention her existential crisis.

Both women nodded.

“How’d you meet up with Davy?” Avery asked, eyes narrow above her aquiline nose.

Time to fib like a pro. “I hitched a ride from Oamaru to Itirangi. He saw me walking and suggested I come along to catch up with you guys.”

From the way Avery’s brows knitted together, Evie could tell her friend didn’t believe her. Ever the scientist, she tended towards skepticism, while Sophie trusted people, often to her detriment.

Sophie smiled. “I’m glad you did. I haven’t seen you since Lauren was born.”

“Speaking of, how is the little bundle of joy?”

“She’s adorable. Met her grandparents for the first time today, but that’s not the biggest news of all. Ask Avery.”

Evie turned to Avery expectantly. With a grin, Avery flashed her left hand and the sun glinted off a diamond on the fourth finger. A sparkling solitaire set in a white gold band.

Evie jumped on the spot, clapping her hands. “Oh my God! I’m so excited for you, girlfriend. When did it happen? How did he propose?” Gripping Avery’s hand, she tugged it closer to study the ring. “He had to pick the biggest rock in the shop, didn’t he?”

Avery chuckled, deep and throaty. “Slow down. One question at a time. He proposed just before lunch, at Aria’s place. Nothing over the top, just handed me the ring and asked.” She angled it until it dazzled the both of them. “It is gorgeous. He did well.”

“Probably took Caro with him to help,” Evie said, referring to Gareth’s sister. “Have you set a date?”

“Slow down,” she repeated. “We only got engaged a few hours ago. It’ll take a while to sort out the details. It may surprise you, but I’m not one of those girls who planned their entire wedding when they were five.”

“I’m shocked.” Evie released her hand. “Shocked and appalled.”

Avery snort-laughed. They both looked at Sophie, who flushed. While Avery had never been the marrying kind, Sophie had probably decided on a color scheme before she’d been old enough for high school. She’d had a romanticized view of marriage, seeing it as the ultimate security blanket, but these days she had a hottie of her own and didn’t seem to be in such a rush to tie the knot.

“Merry Christmas, Evie.”

Glancing up, she realized the others had joined them. Emily smiled, and hugged her. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Justin watching them. She nodded to him, and he jerked his chin in response. He wasn’t exactly

the chatty type, but he never let his girl out of his sight and Emily more than made up for his reserve with her bubbly personality.

“Merry Christmas, Em,” Evie replied. “Hi, Kayla.”

Where Emily was redheaded, curvy and gorgeous, her best friend Kayla was a petite blonde with glasses and straight-edged bangs.

“Hey, there,” Kayla said. “Shall we find somewhere to sit? I think the guys are about to begin, and we want to make sure we’re out of their way.”

They made their way to the sideline, and Evie lay on her back, closing her eyes and basking in the remaining sunlight. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

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“*J*oin us.”

“Excuse me?” Evie used her hand to shield her face against the sun as she peered up at Gareth, who’d included all of the women in his invitation.

“We need more numbers,” Davy, who’d accompanied him, said. “Would you ladies do us the honor of joining the game?”

“I’m in,” Avery replied, taking Gareth’s hand and letting him haul her upright.

“Me, too,” Sophie said, leaping up.

Emily shook her head. “Sorry, boys, but I’m happy watching.”

Kayla looped an arm around Emily’s shoulders. “I’m with Em, but you guys have fun.”

Davy raised an eyebrow at Evie. “You in?”

She wanted to. The weather was beautiful and the company was of the best variety, but she’d make a fool of herself. What kind of kiwi woman had never thrown a rugby ball?

“I’ll keep these girls company,” she said, gesturing at Kayla and Emily, ignoring the wistful part of her that wanted to be in on the fun.

“Really?” Davy asked. “I would’ve thought you’d want to be in the thick of it.”

She pursed her lips. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

Gareth’s cheek muscles twitched. She got the impression he was trying not to laugh.

Davy shook his head. “If you can look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want to, I’ll believe you.”

She sighed, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I can’t, but—”

“Then it’s decided.” He beamed. “You’re playing, which means we have even teams of five.”

With a look, Evie implored Avery and Sophie to rescue her, but Sophie was too busy ogling her boyfriend’s admittedly great ass, and Avery just smirked. She probably thought this was karma or something.

Realizing no rescue was imminent, she beckoned Davy closer. He leaned down and she whispered in his ear, “I’ve never played before. I don’t know how.”

His brows shot toward his hairline, his expression becoming incredulous. “Never?” he asked softly. “Surely you’ve played a social game, or learned during PhysEd at school.”

She glanced down. “The thing is, I might have skipped PhysEd once or twice.” Or every class she’d ever had. She’d dropped it as soon as she was able, and before that she’d preferred making out with the stoners behind the gym to actually participating. She’d reasoned that knowing how to kick a ball would never get her anywhere, whereas Robbie with the long hair and dreamy eyes might have been the next Kurt Cobain.

“You naughty girl.”

Her eyes met Davy’s, his green gaze holding her captive. She wished she could fan herself, but as it was, nobody else seemed to have noticed the way he looked at her, and she didn’t want to draw their attention to it.

“We both know I wasn’t a goody-two-shoes,” she said. “So anyway, I really can’t play. You’d be better off being a player short. I’d just get in the

way.” She heard how self-pitying she sounded and hated it. In twenty-four hours, he’d seen all the worst of her, and now she felt two feet tall in his presence.

Davy tutted. “I never thought I’d see the day Evelyn Parata sounded sorry for herself. Where’s your fighting spirit? Pull yourself together, toots. I’ll give you a quick demo, and you can come on my team.”

“I’ll be a liability,” she muttered.

“Don’t take things so seriously. It’s a social game amongst friends. We might shit-talk each other, but it’s all in good fun. Come on, you know you want to.”

She did want to. With a good-natured sigh, she agreed. “You’re going to regret this.”

“I seriously doubt that, sweetheart.”



HOW EVELYN COULD HAVE MADE it to the ripe old age of twenty-seven without having thrown a rugby ball was beyond Davy. Even Mariko had joined a game or two, and she was a pencil pusher who topped the scales at 90 pounds.

What surprised him more was how badly he wanted her to let loose on the field with him and the guys. She needed some fun, anyone could see that. He shouldn’t care one way or the other—heck, if he were being honest, he should probably prefer for her to sit out and create some distance between them—but instead, here he was, standing so close to her he could feel the nervous energy vibrating through her compact little body.

“Hold the ball like this,” he said, first showing her, then guiding her hands into the correct position. “You should have a hand at each end, with each of your thumbs on a seam, like this.”

She made a decent attempt.

“Almost,” he told her, “but keep your palms off the ball. Hold it with your fingers and thumbs.”

“Like this?” she asked, adjusting her grip.

“Perfect.” So what if the rest of her looked awkward as hell, the proud smile she gave him had his engine revving. *Cool your jets, boy.*

“How much do you know about the rules?” he asked.

“A little. I’ve watched a few games, just never played.”

“So you know you can’t pass forward?”

She nodded.

“Great start.” He tugged the ball from her. “When you pass, turn your core to face the person you’re passing to, and the right hand provides the power, the left hand just guides it. Like this.” He demonstrated the passing motion, then tossed her the ball. “Your turn.”

His stomach muscles tightened as he watched her blink rapidly, then close her eyes and draw in a long, even breath. She positioned her hands exactly as he’d shown, rotated her torso in a controlled movement, and threw the ball. It bounced along the ground and came to a stop when Hemi stepped on it.

“You’ve got it,” he said, clapping her on the back. “Now all you need to remember is to run toward the opponent’s end of the field and pass backward. Your teammates will take care of the rest. Think you can handle that?”

Her eyes were bright now, fear banished, and knowing he’d had a hand in that warmed him from the inside.

“I’m good to go, Captain.” She bumped fists with him, then spun away and skipped across the field, trying to snatch the ball from Hemi, who resisted at first, then let her take it. As soon as her hands were full, he tickled her ribcage. She bent over, gasping for breath, the ball tucked tightly in her arms, refusing to surrender.

Even while his heart lifted to see her laugh after how she'd sobbed earlier in the day, Davy's throat went dry at the sight of her playfighting so comfortably with Hemi. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

It's none of your business who she flirts with.

Nevertheless, his rarely-beheld redheaded temper flared as he stalked over to the others. Had anything ever happened between Evelyn and Hemi? They made an attractive couple, and were equally outgoing. No doubt Hemi was the type to appeal to her, with his unflappable self-confidence, dark good looks and *Ta Moko* tattoos. He certainly appealed to most of the other women in town.

"We ready to go?" Gareth asked when Davy reached them.

A chorus of yeses rang out, with a couple of cheeky 'yes, Sergeants' thrown in.

Gareth continued, "On my team, I've got Justin, Hemi, Sophie and Blake. Davy, you've got Cooper, Ramsay, Avery and Evie. Split up."

The group divided in two as he'd ordered.

"Why didn't he choose Avery for his team?" Evelyn asked once they were out of earshot. "She's his fiancée, and super competitive."

Davy huffed a laugh, dipped his head, and murmured in her ear, "Gaz likes it when Avery gets fired up. If they're on different teams, he has a legitimate reason to tackle her."

Was it his imagination, or did she lean closer?

"Oh," she said, nodding in understanding. "Sneaky devil."



EVIE SHIVERED. She didn't know what strange chemical reaction was responsible, but each time Davy came near enough to touch, every muscle in her body quivered, and electric currents raced over her skin. She'd tried to ignore it during their impromptu ball-throwing lesson, but when he

whispered in her ear, the sensation of his breath tickling her sensitive skin was too much, and her lips parted, a soft sigh escaping them.

Immediately, she clapped her mouth shut and pressed her lips into a firm line, eyes darting around to see if anyone had noticed. None of her team had, thank God, and though Davy watched her speculatively, he held his tongue for once in his life.

“Team huddle,” he said, and they formed a tight circle. “Here’s the plan.”

Two minutes later, feeling slightly dazed, she had even less clue about what to do than she had before. She tried to recall what Davy had said earlier. Run forward, pass back, let everyone else take care of the rest. She could do that.

The teams lined up. She found an empty patch of grass and claimed it as her own, assuming a hunch-backed position, knees bent, hands in front of her with palms facing forward. She suspected she looked ridiculous, but it would hardly be the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last. Someone whistled, and everyone leapt into action.

For the first few minutes, all she could do was run back and forth, just inside the sideline, slightly behind the person with the ball, in case they wanted to pass it. No one did. Then, only yards in front of her, Avery sprinted toward the opposing goalposts and Gareth lunged at her, grabbing her about the waist and knocking her to the ground. Avery dropped the ball and they both rolled to the side.

Before she’d even thought about doing anything, Evie had swooped in and grabbed the ball, squealing in surprise as Hemi tried to tackle it from her. She stumbled over her own feet, righted herself, and then she was flying across the field, exhilaration giving her wings. That was when she realized: nobody was going to catch her. She might be small, but she was speedy, and she’d had a good head start. Feet thundered in the background, gaining on her, but she’d nearly reached the end. She knew what to do.

She'd seen dozens of All Blacks in this same position, even if she'd never dreamed she'd be here herself. Keeping low, she launched herself over the back line, touching the ball down as she skidded across the lush grass.

"Yes!" she cried, rising to her knees and whooping with excitement. "I did it!"

Sophie jogged to her side and high-fived her.

"Hey," Gareth yelled. "We don't congratulate the enemy."

Sophie rolled her eyes, and tugged Evie to her feet. "Nice work."

Avery slung an arm around her shoulders. "Go, you."

Davy held his hands out for the ball, and Evie threw it to him, pleased when it didn't veer too far off course.

"Not too shabby, newbie," he called. "Now the rest of you scram, so I can score us a conversion."

The girls hurried out of his way and Evie exchanged high-fives with Cooper and Ramsay as she rejoined her team. Play resumed, and she grinned until her cheeks ached, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

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When the game finished, they adjourned to Ramsay's bachelor pad, barely a block away, for drinks and a barbecue. While Ramsay and Hemi fired up the grill, Evie snagged a beer from the chiller and flopped onto one of the chairs on the lawn.

Glancing about, she was reminded that she was the only single lady here. On the deck, Avery bickered with Gareth, and Justin pressed Emily firmly to his side. Evie couldn't blame him—given half a chance, most of the single men in Itirangi would make a move on his girl. Heck, if Emily swung both ways, Evie would make a move on her. The redhead had more curves than an hourglass. Opposite Evie, Sophie perched on Cooper's lap, giggling at something he'd said. A few seats over, Kayla and Blake passed a bottle of beer back and forth.

Evie scrunched her nose. Gag. Too cute.

She contemplated the unattached men working the barbecue. Both Hemi and Ramsay were good-looking, in their own ways—Hemi dark and dangerous, Ramsay the kind of clean-cut man women introduced to their parents. She and Hemi had always been great mates, and never wanted anything more than that. They were too similar. It'd be like sleeping with her brother. Ramsay, on the other hand, was too buttoned up for her taste. The local doctor seemed to think he could never let loose lest his clients

hear about it and desert him in favor of the exactly *zero* other doctors in town.

Everyone was accounted for, except Davy.

“Enjoying the view?” an accented voice murmured near her ear. She turned to see Davy bent over the back of her chair, resting on his elbows above her, his nose only inches from hers.

“Always,” she replied. “No better view than hot guys cooking. Well, unless they’re wearing aprons, and nothing else.”

“You witch.” He chuckled. “Objectifying those poor men. I hope you’re ashamed of yourself.”

“Oh, I am.” She shamelessly watched Ramsay’s backside as he flipped steaks and fried onions. “So very ashamed.”

“As you ought to be.” Davy paused, and Evie met his mossy eyes. “You look relaxed.”

“I suppose I am.” Her misery from earlier that morning felt like it had been days ago, rather than hours. So much had happened since then.

“I’m pleased to hear that.” He twinkled at her. “I can’t abide the thought of you being so sad.”

“Shh,” she hissed, putting her finger to her lips despite the flutters stirred by his sweet words. “Don’t talk like that. Someone might hear you.”

“Aw, sweetheart. Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?” He smirked. “Hate to break it to you, but people are gonna wonder why we arrived together. This is Itirangi. You remember how the gossip vine works.”

She groaned. “It’s impossible to forget.” She’d never succeeded at flying under the radar, though to be fair, she’d rarely tried. “By the way, I told them I was hitchhiking and you picked me up.”

Coming around the chair, he sat beside her, and though they were well spaced, she felt crowded. “Good to know.” He paused for a moment, then added, “I didn’t think it bothered you,” he said. “The attention, I mean. It

doesn't seem to stop you from hooking up with a different guy every time you visit my bar."

He'd noticed?

Of course he had. It probably confirmed his opinion of her as a heartless she-devil.

But that didn't quite ring true. Not any longer. Perhaps he'd been jealous. *Don't go there, girl*. Even if he was, it would be best if she didn't dwell on it. That would only be one more way she'd hurt him.

"Tourists," she said, shrugging. "Never going to see them again, so what does it matter?"

She'd only made out with those guys to distract herself from Davy. Maybe that did make her heartless, but she couldn't handle the memories that arose when she was near him, or the knowledge that she was responsible for ending one of the best things she'd ever had.

She waited, expecting him to go on, but to her surprise, he stayed silent. Strange. With every conversation they had, she realized more and more that neither of them were the same people they had been. Time had taken the sharp edges off their moods.

Finally, he said, "You know, this is the first time we've really spoken in nine years. Why don't you tell me what you've been doing since we left school? You must have some great stories."

"Depends on what kind of stories you want to hear."

A smile flirted with the corner of his lips, and the glimpse of white teeth did funny things to her insides. "Dodging the question? Not your style."

She nodded toward the barbecue. "Bring me a sausage in bread, loaded with sauce and onions, and I'll tell you anything you want."

"Anything?"

The wicked gleam in his eye sent tingles racing down her spine, and her breath caught. She'd seen that expression before, usually seconds before he dragged her into his embrace and kissed her as if the universe depended on

it. She needed to regain control of the situation, but she had never been good at resisting trouble when it came calling. Reaching across, she stroked a finger along the contour of the muscle in his forearm, which was lean and covered by freckly skin and rust-colored hair.

His fists clenched. Then he stood and pushed the chair back, his movements jerky. "I'll get you that sausage."

Both of them ignored the double entendre. Evie's head fell back and she gazed up at the stars that were only now beginning to appear, smiling smugly. She still had it. He still wanted her. Damn, but it felt good to be wanted by Davy.

A bread-encased sausage floated into her field of view, bringing with it the scent of sweet onion and mustard. She reached for it and sank her teeth into the crisp end, which tasted charred, and nearly seared her mouth. Sauce oozed from the side and dribbled down her chin. She hummed contentedly, wiping it up with a finger. Summer barbecues with beer, meat, music and friends. Nothing could beat that.

"Penny for your thoughts."

She blinked lazily, and Davy came into focus. She waved a hand around. "Just thinking how nice this is. I don't always slow down enough to appreciate life."

"Always on the go," he remarked. "I remember that from before."

Before. Back when the sight of this gangly boy loping across the grass, a lopsided grin in place, had made her dream about forever, even as she'd broken out in a cold sweat at the thought of never seeing the world beyond Itirangi. They'd had a summer romance, but it had meant more to her than that, and she knew it had meant more to him, too.

"Seems like you kept moving after we finished school," he said. "Is there anywhere you haven't lived?"

She thought for a moment as she finished her sausage. "The west coast of the North Island. I've passed through, but haven't lived there. I've spent

time pretty much everywhere else.”

“Even Stewart Island?” he asked, referring to the heavily forested island off the southernmost point of the country, which was home to only one small town.

“I did a summer there looking after the predator traps to protect native birds.”

“Wow.” He whistled. “You really have gotten around.”

“Hey!” She slapped his upper arm, hard enough to sting, even though she knew he was teasing.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said with a laugh.

“Don’t care how you meant it.”

“Of course you do.” He was right, his intention was all that mattered. “So tell me what kind of work you’ve been doing.”

She recognized the olive branch for what it was and took it. “A bit of everything, really. I’ve bartended, waitressed, cleaned, manned a checkout, made coffee, driven a tour bus, picked fruit, worked in a factory, harvested crops, milked cows, worked in retail, dealt cards at a casino, looked after the books for a couple of companies, managed a workshop... Guess I’m a jack-of-all-trades.”

Davy folded his arms over his chest and studied her, his expression inscrutable. “You farmed?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

He tipped his bottle back and drank, taking his time to reply. “A little bit. Milking isn’t the most glamorous gig.”

“I’m not the most glamorous girl.”

He snorted. “I find that hard to believe. Every time I see you, you’re dressed to kill.”

“Davy, think,” she said slowly, meaningfully. “Every time you see me, I’m at your bar. Of course I look my best when I’m out on the town. That’s not me all the time.”

He frowned as though this thought had never occurred to him.

“Most of the time, I’m frazzled and sweaty and less than my best. So yeah, I’ve worn overalls and been pissed on by a bunch of smelly cows, and I’ve been coated in dust at the end of a long day on a harvester, reeking of rotten potatoes.”

He shook his head and held up a hand. “Stop talking, or I’ll have to re-evaluate my opinion of you. I’m not ready for that much self-reflection.”

Her lips twisted into a reluctant smile. “If it helps confirm your worst suspicions, I also danced at a topless club.”

“You did *what*?” he demanded, rocking back into his chair, mouth gaping.

“I danced at a club,” she said, shrugging. “Made good money. No biggie. Decided it wasn’t for me. Most of the guys were fine, but there were a couple of creepers. The girls were lovely, though. I miss them a little.” People as accepting as those dancers were few and far between. It was a pity that others weren’t as accepting of them.

“Are you saying you were a stripper?” He looked ready to bust a vein in his forehead.

“Oh, for goodness sake, don’t be stupid about it,” she snapped. “It was something I tried. It’s not like I was ever fully naked on stage, and nobody laid a finger on me. I’ll tell you though, there are some places glitter just shouldn’t go.”

Color rose on his cheeks, and he wheezed a little. “I’m not bothered by it, but that *image*.”

Edging closer, wearing a mischievous smile, she asked, “Why are you so red?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I know that you know the effect you have on me.” His voice was hoarse. “And now I’m picturing you naked and covered in glitter. Have a little mercy, woman.”

Watching him battle his attraction to her stoked something in Evie. She didn't want him to put that fire out, she wanted him to consume her with it. Though it might be the stupidest idea she'd ever had, she wanted to be with him, even if only for a while. She didn't know where she was headed after Monica's orchard, or what she even wanted out of the next year of her life, but today she'd felt more alive than she had in a long time, and that was thanks to him.

"What say we call it a night?" she asked after only a moment's hesitation. Maybe she'd regret this, maybe she wouldn't, but she made it her philosophy not to hold back from something she might enjoy because of fear. "You and me, head back to your place. Together."

Davy stared at her intently, like he was trying to read her soul. Then he croaked, "Hell, yes."

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Davy and Evelyn barely made it inside his bar before falling into each other's arms. He kicked the door shut, swept her off her feet and deposited her on the counter. She parted her thighs and he stepped between them, turning his face up to her. His heart thumped wildly, pumping fire through his veins, his dick already hard. Evelyn's big brown eyes locked on his, and he could read the desire in them.

He couldn't believe this was happening. He was getting a do-over with this sexy goddess. She could have any guy she wanted with a crook of her finger, but she was here with him. He was under no illusion that they'd have anything more than one night together, but if that was all she could give, he'd take it. Hell, if she asked, he'd probably offer up his heart for her to stomp on all over again.

One of his arms curved around her waist, and the other hand cupped the line of her jaw. He hovered, mere millimeters from her mouth, feeling as though he were suspended above a thousand-foot drop. As though everything depended on what he did next. The anticipation of the kiss, the tortured bliss of waiting while they exchanged breath, almost did his head in.

But then their lips were touching. He hadn't kissed her, so she'd kissed him.

It was perfect.

Their lips clung, then separated, and the breath eased from his chest. She gripped his face between her palms and shimmied to the edge of the counter so they touched in all the best places.

This time, he took the initiative. He kissed her the way he remembered she liked, soft and unhurried. Her lips parted for him, and the kiss deepened. He clasped her tighter, one hand splayed over her hip and the other on her ass. She tasted like summer, and the forbidden, and he couldn't get enough.

Pulling back, he panted, "You sure?"

"One hundred per cent," she said, nuzzling beneath his ear, then touching his ear lobe with the tip of her tongue. "But..."

"But?" he croaked, keeping a tenuous hold of his self-control.

"But I want you to know, this means—"

"I know what it means," he interrupted. Nothing, at least as far as she was concerned, and he wasn't about to humiliate himself by begging for scraps of her affection "Don't suppose you've got a condom on you?"

She shook her head.

"Damn. Guess we'll have to drag ourselves upstairs."



EVIE WAS short of breath as she ascended the stairs to Davy's home and waited while he unlocked the door. She couldn't believe how much he'd leveled up in the kissing game since they were sixteen. He was blowing her mind. Once inside, she pressed him into the door and leapt up, wrapping her legs around his waist. Behind his sports shorts, his cock pulsed against her.

She grinned as an answering throb started between her legs. "Someone's a little excited."

“Have to be dead not to be,” he said. “You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever touched, and shite, the way you rub yourself against me drives me insane.”

That’s how she wanted it. As long as they were together in the insanity, all was right with the world.

Davy’s forehead rested on hers, his chest rising and falling rapidly, the lines of his face made harsh by passion. She loved to see him this way. All need. No sign of his joker persona. She fused her mouth to his, tearing a low groan from him.

Fuck, yeah, she loved the sound of that. Like he was helpless, enraptured by her. Tugging the hem of his shirt, she broke away to yank it over his head, then tossed her own aside, too.

They slid against each other, skin on skin. Exquisite. She ran her hands along the tops of his broad shoulders and down his arms, which were tan in contrast to the paleness of his chest and shoulders. He buried his face in her exposed cleavage, his tongue delving into the space between, then tracing the edge of her bra. Pleasure shot through her as his hand came up to cup her breast. He dropped an open-mouthed kiss on the top and moaned in appreciation.

“These are perfect,” he said. “God, I didn’t think you could get any sexier, but you did. Take the bra off.”

“Patience,” she teased, her heels digging into his butt. His hips jerked towards her. “Oh yeah, just like that.”

“You’re gonna be the end of me,” he murmured. “Death by heart failure, age twenty-eight.”

“You poor baby.” She pouted. “You’re seducing me with your words.” Strangely enough, he actually was. Most men adored her body—she was used to it—but his particular brand of humor flattered her more than any pretty words could.

“Hold tight, sweetheart,” he said, then he was carrying her to the living room, where he lowered her gently to the couch and settled between her legs. The room was dim, but they’d forgotten to switch off the Christmas lights earlier and dozens of stars twinkled around them, casting pinpricks of light and shadows that danced over their bodies.

Reaching behind her, Evie flicked the clasp of her bra open and dropped it to the floor. Davy’s gaze homed in on her naked breasts, then he molded his palms to them and stroked and caressed with a single-mindedness she found astoundingly attractive. The whole time, his eyes never left hers. He watched her watching him, interpreting what she liked and what she didn’t from the play of expressions across her face. It was the single most erotic act she’d ever been involved in.

Damn, boy.

When she was desperate for more, she writhed beneath him, creating sweet friction between their bodies, and slipped one hand into the waistband of his shorts, wrapping her fingers around him.

“Mmm.” He pumped his hips, thrusting into her hand.

“I love the sounds you make.” She slicked the moisture at his head over the silken length and glided up and down. “Don’t stop making those sounds.”

He uttered a strangled gasp. “Don’t think I could if I wanted. Feels goddamn fantastic.”

“Good,” she muttered. “I want you bad.”

Rising on one elbow, he drew her leggings and underwear down and touched her gently. “Are you ready for me?”

“Check for yourself.”

His finger slid between her folds, and when he discovered how wet she was, his eyes flicked to hers. “Oh, hell. You do want me bad, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“Like I said, so get a move on.”

“Patience.” He sheathed himself, then eased his tip inside her in increments, rocking forward an inch at a time.

“Davy,” she growled in warning.

In one smooth movement, he pushed all the way home, lodging deep inside her with a satisfied grunt.

Breath hissed between her lips. “*Fuck.*”

Davy froze. “Good or bad?” he asked. “Do I need to stop?”

“Good,” she said. “Don’t you dare stop or I’ll kick your ass.”

She heard him exhale in relief, but then she was too absorbed by the way he moved to notice anything else. She drew one of her knees up, opening herself to him, and he took advantage of the movement to thrust even deeper with long, steady strokes that had her whimpering and clutching his back.

Turning her face into his, she latched onto his lips and kissed him like it was the last time she’d ever taste a man. He groaned again, and the sound of sex filled the air. Wet slapping, panting, thumping. The noises he made had her hotter than she’d ever been, and the wilder she got, the more he moaned and grunted and sighed. She’d never craved release so desperately while also wanting a moment to go on and on and on.

Davy raised himself up, and she looked down at the place where the two of them joined, him sliding into her and withdrawing, then slamming back in again. His pale hips met her bronzed stomach, the contrast delicious.

“Oh, god,” she gasped, overwhelmed by the sight.

“So hot.” He dipped his head to suck her nipple.

She came with a violent shudder, the orgasm washing over her in waves, the intensity easing, then returning with a vengeance until all she could do was hold onto his shoulders and wonder if she’d ever feel so complete again in her life. His hands tucked beneath her body and lifted her to him. He pushed into her one more time and shouted her name as he jerked and twitched inside her. They collapsed in a blissful tangle of limbs.

“Evelyn?”

Evie buried her face in the pillow and pretended not to hear him. The whole night had been wonderful. It had felt like the beginning of something life-changing, but they’d yet to talk about what it meant, except for that single aborted conversation, and she wasn’t sure if she was mentally fortified enough to open the topic. What if he didn’t view things the same way she did? She’d hurt him once before, so it would be reasonable for him to be a little reluctant to jump into something with her.

“Evelyn, darlin’, you’ve got to wake up. The mechanic is here.”

What?

She must have spoken out loud, because he repeated, “I said the mechanic is here.”

She rolled over and sat up, blinking until her vision cleared, trying to make sense of his words. While she’d intended to call the mechanic, she never had. “What’s he doing here?”

“I called him for you. I knew you’d be eager to hit the road again.”

Touching a finger to her ear, she wondered if it had begun translating English incorrectly. Had she done something to give him the impression she wouldn’t want to hang around and talk this through—or at the very least, eat breakfast and go for another round?

Her stomach roiled as a dreadful possibility occurred to her. Was he trying to get rid of her? Was this his way of letting her down gently? Disappointment stabbed through her, leaving a cold, aching hole in her chest. She rubbed it absently.

“Okay, I’ll dress. Just give me a moment.”

His ginger brows drew together and lowered over his deep green eyes. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I am.” Her tone was so flat she couldn’t even fool herself. “Thank you, Davy, for helping me get on my way.”

She sounded like a bitch, but she couldn’t help it. She didn’t want him to rush her out the door. She wanted him to make bagels and eat them in bed with her. For once in her goddamned life, she wanted to stay. But she wouldn’t stay where she wasn’t wanted. Her mama raised her to have more self-respect than that.

“I’d say ‘you’re welcome’, but I’m not sure you really mean it. Where’s your head at, Evelyn?”

She shook the aforementioned head. “Nowhere. Don’t worry, I’m being silly.” Come to think of it, being silly would have been expecting affection from her ex, years after she broke his heart and left him in her dust. Just because her priorities had changed didn’t mean his feelings toward her had.

“Are you okay?”

No, but she would be. “Yeah, of course.”

She climbed out of his bed, the cool morning air gliding over her naked body, and noticed his pupils dilate as he looked at her. He might not want her to stay, but he still *wanted* her, and that was something. She padded across the carpet to collect her clothes, and tugged them on under his watchful gaze. Then she brushed past him and went to the spare room, grabbed her toothbrush and deodorant, and headed to the bathroom to clean up.

Once she didn't stink and her breath tasted minty fresh, she zipped her suitcase shut and wheeled it out. Two minutes later, she was standing on the footpath outside the bar, where a stocky blond guy with a short beard was waiting.

"I'm Evie," she said, determined to smother her internal bitch because this guy was out here at the crack of dawn on Boxing Day and didn't deserve her snark. "Nice to meet you."

"Joe," he replied, shaking her hand with his own. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing tattooed forearms. He was an attractive guy, and based on the way he scanned her, pausing at her butt and chest, she'd say he thought the same of her, but unfortunately, she felt no interest. Not so much as a flicker. All of her interest was reserved for the lanky redhead standing behind her, trying to usher her out of his life.

"I've already got your car rigged up," Joe said. "You good to go? Davy said you'd want to ride down with me and wait while I take a look under the hood."

"Oh he did, did he?" She tried to reign it in, reminding herself none of this was Joe's fault.

"Uh, yeah." He frowned. "So you coming, or what?" He tapped the side panel of his cab and gestured for her to get in.

"Guess so." She turned to Davy, wishing her heart didn't flip-flop like a traitor at the sight of his stupidly handsome face. "Thanks for everything." The words felt wholly inadequate after the time they'd passed together, but his expression didn't welcome anything more personal. "I'll see you round?"

He nodded. "Don't be a stranger." Then he ducked his head, pecked her lips, and stepped back a couple of paces.

Evie strode to the front of the cab, yanked the door open and leapt inside the scuffed leather interior. Then she lowered the window and waved,

pretending a light-heartedness she didn't know if she'd ever feel again.
"Merry Christmas, O'Connor."

"Meri Kirihimete, Evelyn."

She let out a slow breath, wound up the window, and smiled at Joe.
"Thanks. I appreciate your help."

"No worries, honey."



DAVY RETURNED INSIDE, cursing himself for being an idiot—not an unfamiliar occurrence for him, especially when Evelyn was around. He drew the curtains back and watched the tow truck vanish around the corner, out of sight.

It had been the right thing to do, hadn't it?

He'd been more convinced before he saw the shock in her eyes, and the stiffness creeping into her body. When the smile on her plump lips had compressed itself into nonexistence, he'd had the horrid thought he may have misjudged things. But she hadn't said anything, just gone quiet and gathered her things. She hadn't yelled at him, as she used to when he was being a moron, and she hadn't tried to persuade him to rejoin her in bed. But then, she hadn't thanked him, either.

He sighed. He was overthinking this. They'd gotten caught up in the spirit of the holidays, nothing more. And yeah, he'd been happier in the brief time he'd spent with her than he had in months, but that didn't mean she felt the same way, and it certainly didn't mean anything would come of it. As far as he knew, nothing had changed. His life was in Itirangi, and hers was in whatever distant horizon she set her compass for next.

He cared for her, but so what? His wishing for her to love him didn't make it so.

He struggled for control of his emotions, but it was futile. He'd have to visit the gym and lift weights until his body was so weary he couldn't think of anything, but he wasn't sure even that would erase her from his mind.



AS IT HAPPENED, Evie's shitty car was unfixable, so she left it with the mechanic to use for parts, receiving a small payout in exchange—enough to get her through a couple of weeks at least. As the new year approached, she found herself bunking at her friend Monica's place near Timaru while she worked mornings and early afternoons picking berries. Everything was back to normal. She should be happy, but instead the discontent that had been simmering inside her for months had grown into a festering wound she couldn't ignore, much as she tried. And she *tried*.

She searched maps for her new destination, somewhere fun she could be excited about, but nowhere she considered brought more than a passing interest. Instead, she kept dwelling on Davy O'Connor, and his soulful eyes and hot body, and all the things she should have said to him rather than up and leaving as per usual.

She should have told him what Christmas had meant to her, what *he* meant to her, and asked for a second chance. Should have sent the mechanic away and seduced the reluctance right out of him. Hell, anything would have been better than just waving to him in the rearview mirror like she didn't give a shit about him. For the *second* time. He'd never want to see her again after this, and she couldn't blame him.

"Are you moping again?" Monica asked, coming into the living room, where Evie was curled on the couch with Monica's pug, Norman.

"Nah, I'm just giving Norm some love."

"Come on, babe." Monica folded her athletic frame into an armchair and ran a hand through her short, dark hair. "If you miss him that much, just

call him.”

Evie buried her face in Norman’s soft fur and when she spoke, her voice was muffled. “It’s not that simple.” Nothing was simple when it came to her and the sexy Irishman.

“Sure seems it from here.” Monica lounged back, stretching her legs out and resting her feet on the arm of the couch. “You like him, and he must like you, otherwise he wouldn’t have gone on a trip down memory lane considering how you crushed him the first time around—”

“Hey!” Evie protested.

“—so just suck up your pride and tell him how you feel.”

She groaned. “It sounds easy when you say it.”

Monica’s expression softened. “Not easy, babe, but not impossible, either. You’re a full-steam-ahead kind of woman. Why are you being so cautious now?”

Evie honestly wished she knew. She’d thought it over a hundred times, but never gotten a useful answer. The truth was, perhaps she cared about this more than anything else she’d done. In the past, she hadn’t been concerned about picking up her entire life and starting over, and over, and over, because the stakes hadn’t been high. Sure, if things went south, she’d be stretched for cash for a couple of weeks, but she always landed on her feet.

When it came to building a relationship and putting down roots, the stakes were infinitely higher, and she wasn’t sure she had the tools to succeed.

“I’ll think about calling him,” she conceded.

Monica raised an eyebrow, and Evie crinkled her nose in response. Yeah, she wasn’t buying her bullshit either.



ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, Davy didn't want to celebrate anything. Unfortunately, it was one of his busiest days of the year. When his phone rang, he answered without checking caller ID.

"You've reached Davy of Davy's. What can I do you for?"

"Davy?" The voice belonged to a woman, and rose at the end in question. "This is Monica Jackman. Have you got a moment?"

"Not really, no." As it was, he was pouring a pint of beer with the phone pressed between his ear and his shoulder.

"It's about Evie."

Everything inside him froze. He hadn't heard that name out loud in days, although it had been on replay inside his head. "What about her? Is she okay?"

If something had happened to her before he'd had the chance to tell her how he felt, he'd never forgive himself.

"She's fine."

Of course she was. He relaxed, and pushed the beer over the counter, gesturing to his employees that he'd be back in a moment, then he headed into the stairwell, away from the noise of the bar. "Look, Monica, I run a bar and we're insanely busy right now so can you make it quick? What's this about?"

"She misses you."

His eyes bulged. "I beg your pardon?"

"She's staying with me, and she's been miserable ever since she arrived. I knew she wouldn't reach out to you on her own, although God knows why, so I thought I'd do it for her. Can the two of you please just talk to each other?"

"Erm." He swallowed. Hard. "What makes you think she misses me?"

Monica sighed, and even through the phone he could sense her eye-roll. "She talks about you every second sentence, she only gets out of her pajamas to work, and she's not her usual self."

Someone called his name, and he winced. The timing of this couldn't be worse. "I've got to—"

"Go," she finished for him. "I know. But promise me you'll talk to her." She paused. "She really cares about you."

"I will," he said, but she was gone. His heart hammered and he rested his forehead against the wall, willing it to calm down enough for him to go and serve the masses.

Evelyn missed him. Was it really possible? He bloody well hoped so, because some of the color had leached from his life when she left, and he found he didn't care about keeping his heart safe anymore—he wanted her back. If what Monica said was true, he'd do whatever it took to hold onto her, because he'd gone and fallen for her again. Every flighty, nutty, brilliant part of her. If that made him off his rocker, worse things had happened.

But before he could woo his lady, he had to make it through the night.

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*K*neeling amongst the raspberry bushes, Evie picked juicy berries from the branches and dropped them into a plastic punnet. The juice stained her fingers red, and her knees were dusty from the ground. When the punnet was full, she grabbed another and shuffled along to an untouched bush.

The sun had risen overhead, and it warmed her back pleasantly, not yet holding the true heat of a summer day. Birds and cicadas chirped, and in the distance, she could hear the music one of the other workers was playing on a Bluetooth speaker. The scent of nature, ripe fruit, and sunscreen swirled through the corridor between the rows of bushes, carried on the breeze. Her lips tugged up at the corners. While she could happily sleep a day away, she also loved being up and outside in the morning, and what better way to bring in a new year than by being out in nature?

Someone sneezed, and she wrinkled her nose in sympathy. A few of the others suffered from nasty bouts of hayfever. Thankfully, she didn't have that problem.

"Evie!"

She stood, stretched, and smiled at Monica. "Hey, Mon. What's up?"

Monica nodded in greeting and said, "Take a break. You've been at it for hours. The berries will still be here in ten minutes."

Evie grinned. “Not if someone else picks them first.”

Monica’s hands went to her hips. “Don’t you sass me, girl. I’m your boss, remember.”

Evie stacked her punnets into a crate. “I’m fine, Mon. Really. I could do this all day.”

“That may be, but as your boss, I’m putting my foot down. Go get a drink, and lie down for a bit.”

Evie didn’t argue again, just nodded and watched Monica stroll off to boss someone else around. A break couldn’t hurt—she’d been picking for the better part of five hours. One of the benefits of living with the boss was that she could start as early as she pleased.

Heading to the tap to refill her water bottle, she paused beside her backpack and wiped sweat from her forehead with a towel, then exited the fenced portion of the orchard and rounded the corner, coming to an abrupt halt before she reached her destination.

There, sitting cross-legged on a checkered red and white blanket with a picnic basket at his side, a few yards from the water tap, was Davy. Her heart stuttered at the sight of him. She hadn’t expected to see him again until the next time the girls dragged her to his bar, and when that happened, she’d expected them to behave like polite strangers.

But now he was here. At her work. A million questions flew through her mind.

What was he doing here?

Was he here for her? And if so, why?

Had he always looked so damned *fine*?

In front of him lay an oval platter of finger foods. Cheese, crackers, fruit, chocolates. A bottle of wine rested against his knee, two paper cups beside it.

An actual, honest to god, picnic.

He grinned at her, and Evie felt an answering smile creep over her face.

“Morning, sweetheart,” he said. “Happy new year.”

“*Morena*,” she replied, gesturing at the blanket. “What’s all this?”



DAVY HAD NEVER SWEATED SO MUCH in his life. It trickled down the side of his neck, soaked the top of his shirt and dribbled down his spine, pooling above the waistband of his shorts. The morning was warm, but the primary reason for his excessive sweating was nerves. It had been days since he’d seen Evelyn, and now he’d turned up at her workplace unexpectedly. Worse, he’d conspired with her boss to get her here, working on the premise that she returned his feelings. But what if he was wrong? What if Monica had misread the situation?

When she’d first come into view, wearing tiny pink shorts with her hair tied back in a ponytail, a red bandanna wrapped around her head and her face free of makeup, he felt like he’d been struck over the head by a frying pan.

This is her.

The woman he wanted to spend years of his life getting to know. The one he wanted to see across the dinner table at family Christmases from now on. He was batshit crazy for her.

His mouth went dry as he took in every glorious inch of her, as if seeing her properly for the first time. And perhaps he was. The woman before him was someone who enjoyed travelling, but wasn’t flaky. A hard worker, not afraid to learn new things. Most of all, she was someone who loved fun but had experienced life’s ups and downs, too.

She took his breath away.

She’d never looked more beautiful.

He smiled. She smiled. They greeted each other.

His breathing quickened and his stomach knotted as he patted the blanket and said, “Will you join me?”

She hesitated, gnawing on her lip. “I have to go back to work soon.”

“I spoke to Monica. She doesn’t mind if you take fifteen minutes off to sit with me, but it’s your choice.”

After what seemed an eternity, she nodded. “Okay.”

He went weak with relief. He’d gotten over one hurdle. Hopefully fifteen minutes was all he’d need to get over another. With shaky hands, he poured wine into one of the paper cups and handed it to her. She sipped, and watched him over the rim.

“Have something to eat,” he said, and she selected a cracker and wedge of creamy cheese. He didn’t touch the food. He was too nervous to eat, and he feared if he poured himself a drink, he’d spill it in his lap.

“This is nice,” she said, waving the cracker.

He didn’t know whether she was referring to the food or the setup, but either way, he’d take the compliment. “I’m glad you approve.”

“What I can’t figure out is what you’re doing here.”

Time to get to the point. As his dad would say, shit or get off the pot. “I want to be with you. I want to give ‘us’ a shot.”

She stared at him like he’d sprouted a second head, the food and wine forgotten.

“I want to take you out, buy you dinner, go to the movies. Treat you right.” When she still seemed utterly baffled, he asked, “Am I bungling this?”

“No,” she said softly, shaking her head from side to side. “But I’m not sure exactly what you’re saying.”

He needed to put this simply. “I want to go on a date with you, sweetheart—a proper date—with no expectation of anything coming from it other than that we enjoy ourselves.”

She cocked her head. “You’re asking me on a date?”

“Yes.” He grinned, his confidence growing since she hadn’t run screaming or immediately rebuffed him. “My family would think I was crazy if I didn’t. Do you know how many times they told me not to let you go? A lot.”

Her mouth formed an “o” of surprise. “Ha! That’s brilliant.”

“You’re brilliant.”

She snorted. “Cheesy, O’Connor. Real cheesy.”

“I know.” He took the cup from her, balanced it on the ground, and held her hand in his own, ready to offer her his heart and pray she didn’t break it again. “So, what I’m asking is, will you let me take you out? Will you wait just a while before you move away so we can see if we could have something real?”

Evelyn pondered it. Her brows lowered in thought. For every second she remained silent, his tension ratcheted up a notch. Finally, she pursed her lips and said, in the same casual tone with which she’d agreed to join him, “Okay, sounds like a plan.”

“Yes?” he asked. “Just like that?”

A cheeky smile stretched across her face. “Did you want me to play hard to get?”

“Well, no.” He floundered. “Frankly, I didn’t know what to expect, but I didn’t think you’d agree to stay so easily.”

She laughed, and it lit her whole face. Her deep brown eyes glowed with affection. “Here’s the thing, Irishman. I’ve been feeling a bit off for a while, and I haven’t been able to figure out why, but I think I finally know. I’m tired of always being on the move.” She shrugged. “I’m getting older, and there aren’t many places I haven’t seen. I’m ready to try something new. Something like staying.”

“Seriously?” He came onto his knees and leaned over her, dropping a kiss on her lips. “You couldn’t have said this a little earlier? Like, say, before we did the deed?”

Her smile turned wry. “You didn’t give me the chance, and besides, I was still working it out for myself. You know me—I have to come around to things in my own time.”

He kissed her again, because it was that or wring her infuriating neck. “Do you have any idea how crazy you make me?”

She grinned. “I think I need another kiss to remind me.”

He obliged, and this time it was slow and all-consuming. He put every ounce of his feelings for her into it, hoping she could tell how serious he was. They drew back and he kissed her nose. Her eyes fluttered closed, and he kissed her eyelids. She giggled, her smile broadening.

“Work with me,” Davy said impulsively. “Come and do my books. Help me in the bar. I’ll need another staff member in the new year.” A wonderful, crazy idea occurred to him. “Move in with me.”

She burst out laughing, the sound light and happy and perfect. “Slow down, Irishman. One step at a time.”

“Why?” he demanded, gathering her into his arms for a kiss. “There’s plenty of space in my apartment for two.”

She cupped his face between her palms. “That’s not taking it slow,” she said, her smile saying she didn’t mind. She kissed his forehead. “Yes, I’ll work with you. But you’re not my boss. We don’t need that clouding our relationship. I’ll work with you as a private contractor. No, I won’t live with you, but I will date you, and maybe one day we’ll get there. We’re not rushing anything. I want to be wooed.”

He chuckled. What had he ever done to deserve this woman?

The sun reflected in her eyes and they seemed to twinkle. Her cupid’s bow deepened, as did her smile. She was so beautiful.

“Have I told you I adore you?” he asked.

“No, but I wouldn’t mind hearing that.”

“I adore you.” His hands steady, he helped himself to a cup of wine, then shifted to sit by her side, his arm around her shoulders. “Shall we have

a toast?”

She snuggled into his side. “I propose a toast to you, Davy O’Connor. And to summer. And a brilliant start to a new year.”

They clinked their paper glasses. “Cheers.”

Then they stretched out on the blanket beneath the high morning sun and talked for far longer than fifteen minutes, but neither of them cared. All they cared about was getting to know each other again. Davy’s heart was full and he’d never experienced such a wonderful moment as his second first date with Evelyn Parata.

The first of many.



THANK you for reading *Second Chance Christmas*. I hope you enjoyed celebrating Christmas with Evie, Davy, and his family.

IF YOU’D LIKE MORE heartfelt small town romance by Alexa Rivers, you can order *Come Back to You*, a second chance love story, here: <https://books2read.com/come-back-to-you>

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COME BACK TO YOU

I should have known when I sold my mansion in Bel Air and flew to the bottom of the world with a suitcase and a dream that nothing would go according to plan.

Returning to the small town where I'd spent the happiest year of my life had seemed like a great idea once the last of my younger siblings had left the nest. I'd put aside my own happiness for long enough. It was time to do something for me.

But Destiny Falls isn't the same welcoming place I remember. The tight-knit community has rallied around Liam Braddock. They seem to think the broody firefighter needs protection... from me.

As for the man himself? He's convinced I abandoned him for fame and fortune. He doesn't know about the impossible decision I had to make, or the nights I cried myself to sleep wishing he was there.

I lost him once, but this time, I'm not giving up on us. I'll do whatever it takes to prove we belong together.

The problem is, I'm not the only interloper in town. Someone seems to have it out for me, and if I'm not careful, the sparks firing between Liam and I will be short-lived... and so will we.

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ACCIDENTALLY YOURS - EXCERPT

Aria wrapped the camera cord around her wrist and strolled onto the Lakeview property, now owned by Lockwood Holdings Limited. It didn't have a driveway yet, and, courtesy of a long, hot summer, the grass was more brown than green. Technically, she wasn't allowed to be here, but, she'd reasoned, it couldn't hurt to pop over for a few minutes to take some photos. Maybe she could superimpose the concept plan of the shopping complex over a photo of the empty lot. Great photography equaled more attention to her article and, hopefully, a promotion. The response to her first article had been crazy. Whether people agreed with it or not, everyone had an opinion.

Flipping her sunglasses over her eyes to shield them from the sun, Aria looked down on Itirangi. Sometimes she wondered if it wouldn't benefit from an upgrade—a few more modern amenities. At the moment, the newer buildings stood out like scars on the landscape, while many of the older buildings were in need of painting, with tussocks in the gardens and scrub that grew unchecked. There was a certain wilderness about Itirangi. Aria thought it was beautiful. And, considering the booming tourist trade, she wasn't alone in her view.

She pondered her next story. She needed to provide the public with more details about the development. She'd done her research and now she

was here, searching for inspiration. Wandering around the edge of the property, she snapped photos of the yard, then walked to the highest point and stood on tiptoes. She gazed out toward the lake, over the cottages with overrun lawns and the boutique shops in hundred-year-old buildings. The shimmering lake lapped at the shore. Behind the mass of water, mountains towered brown and green, blending into the horizon. It dazzled her. No wonder someone wanted to build in this spot. They would make a killing.

A sparrow swooped into a tree, and she shot a picture of it mid-flight. Perfect. She was certain one of these photos would be exactly what she needed to liven up her article. While tucking the camera away, she heard a scuffle. Peering over her shoulder, she jumped when she saw a man standing a few yards away. She took a quick step backwards and trod on a stick which rolled under her foot. Her legs gave out beneath her, and she landed on her bottom. *Dammit!* She cursed her clumsiness, a trait it seemed she'd never grow out of. Her butt throbbed. She looked up to introduce herself. And up. And up.

The man loomed over her. He pushed a hand through brown hair tipped with gold, his sky-blue eyes wide in disbelief which slowly turned to disdain as he peered down the length of his perfectly placed nose at her. His full lips pursed, exaggerating a cupid's bow. Five o'clock shadow dusted his cheeks, and his black coat and silk tie were impeccable. The dark colors complimented his golden skin. She couldn't help staring.

Who was he?

No one dressed like this in Itirangi. Even the businessmen wore casual clothes. Jeans and shirts. This man came from another world. A god among mere mortals, gorgeous enough to drive god-fearing women to sin.



Elijah wasn't sure whether to be angry at having his peaceful night interrupted or intrigued by the woman at his feet. She had been standing tall at the end of the paddock, like a queen surveying her domain. Except, up close, she was less of a queen and more... Well, odd. Wearing an absurdly fluffy pink jersey with purple leggings, she'd presented her well-formed behind to him as he'd approached unnoticed. Now, she was sitting in the dirt with her hair falling over her face, peering up at him. How bizarre.

He felt a brief flash of sympathy, but it was tempered by annoyance. It had been a long day, and he'd had enough. Not a people-person at the best of times, when he was tired, he preferred to be alone.

Reluctantly, he reached down to help her up. She laid a small, warm hand in his. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied, her cheeks flushing a delicate shade of pink. "Thanks."

She flicked her long dark hair as she straightened, the curls corkscrewing over her shoulders. Several inches shorter than he, she squinted up into his face, wrinkling her small, upturned nose. Her eyes were brown with flecks of green that flared as she held his gaze. The woman was prettier than he had imagined based on the outlandish outfit.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

"Taking photos." She gestured helplessly at the camera that was still on the ground where she'd fallen. She knelt to pick it up, her leggings tightening over her butt.

"There are better viewpoints of the lake," he told her. This was a nice spot, to be sure. That was why he'd bought it. But there were plenty of nice lookouts much easier to access near the lakefront.

"I know that," she replied indignantly. "I'm a local."

Eli raised an eyebrow. She looked vaguely familiar. "Then, why the camera?"

She glanced away. "I'm doing some research for an article. I work for the paper."

"Look at me."

She started at his sudden command, and her eyes went to his. He jolted in recognition. She was the journalist who'd written that blasphemous article, without a doubt. What the hell was she doing here?

"Did you know this is private land?" he asked, willing to give her the benefit of the doubt this once.

"I know," she admitted with an impish smile. "You won't tell on me, will you?"

He looked up at the sky, jaw clenched. Did she have another awful article in the works? What had he done to deserve this? He tugged on a handful of hair and lowered his gaze back to her. "Tell who, Miss Simons?" he asked. "You've already told on yourself. I'm Elijah Lockwood. This is my property."

"How do you know my name?" she demanded. Then she paled. "*Lockwood?*" She seemed to pull herself together and stuck out a hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Aria Simons."

"I know," he said impatiently. "You're the journalist who's trying to ruin me."

Her jaw dropped. "I'm not trying to ruin you. I don't know why you'd think that."

"Your bleeding-heart article in yesterday's paper. It wasn't exactly open-minded."

"It wasn't untrue, either," she said, eyeing the exit as if she were considering making a run for it. "I presented one side of the argument. Not the only side."

Eli wanted to rail at her. Could he not get a break? His day had been long enough without adding reporters to the mix.

"You'll print a retraction in tomorrow's paper," he said firmly.

The reporter bristled. Her spine straightened, and her eyes gleamed. “I’m working on a series of articles, Mr. Lockwood, and there’s a lot riding on it.” He snorted derisively, and her eyes flashed before she continued, “I’ll write about every aspect of this development, but I’ll do it in my own time, and I’ll certainly not print a retraction. I’m not ashamed of my work.”

He scowled and crossed his arms. “Suit yourself. There are other ways to fix the problems you’ve made.”

“Look.” When she took hold of his arm, her nearness overwhelmed him. His palms started sweating, and he tucked them more firmly into the crooks of his elbows. Did she not understand personal boundaries? “I haven’t been trying to make problems for you,” she said. “I’m only doing my job. Your development is big news around here. We’re a small community, so you shouldn’t have expected anything else.”

Eli supposed she was right. She had a job to do, and so did he. Clearly, she wasn’t going to be as cooperative as he’d hoped. Not that he should have expected anything else. The media hadn’t treated him kindly in the past. Never mind. He’d find another way.

Eli’s gaze wandered down her body. She was slim but rounded in all the right places, and her body was nicely displayed by the tight, bright clothes. His fingers tingled with the desire to touch her, even as her touch on his arm unsettled him. Though her job offended him, he couldn’t deny that her body appealed to him on a visceral level.

“I don’t know much about small towns,” he drawled. “But I do know business, and I’ve made this town my business. You’d better get used to having me around.”



Aria didn’t like men who thought they could get their way simply because they were rich and powerful—and, okay, ridiculously good-looking. They

ticked her off. Her fingers curled tighter into his arm.

He spoke again, his voice no more than a rumble. “You know you’re still on my property, right?”

Dropping her hand, she reeled backwards. What a beast. She’d only wanted to have a look around and get out of there. It was hardly worth kicking up such a fuss about.

“I’m leaving,” she said curtly. “I shouldn’t have come. I didn’t realize it would upset anyone.”

Elijah Lockwood shrugged one perfectly clad shoulder. “I don’t like reporters. Especially nosy ones. Trouble always follows them.” He pulled a card from his coat pocket and pressed it into her palm. At his touch, jitters shot up her arm. Had a spark passed between them? Static electricity? She flinched away, unwilling to analyze the moment further. “If you have any questions about my development, call this number. Get your information firsthand.”

Aria nodded, then brushed past him. Elijah Lockwood, CEO of Lockwood Holdings Limited.

Pity. He was such a good-looking brute.



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ACCIDENTALLY YOURS



He's big-city successful. She's small-town sweet. But thanks to one reckless night of passion, these opposites are about to become family.

With her professional reputation in tatters, journalist Aria Simons needs to get back on track. A promotion at her local paper is just the way to do it. She can't afford distractions—especially not handsome ones like Eli Lockwood. But his plans for a development in her idyllic hometown might be exactly the scoop she's seeking.

Eli never expected to end up stuck in a tiny lakeside town in the middle of nowhere with his rebellious teen sister. Unfortunately, the only person who can handle the girl is a reporter looking for an exclusive. They strike a deal, but it doesn't take long before he can't get the vivacious woman out of his mind.

When one hot night at the beach has lasting consequences, will Aria fight for her ready-made family, or will Eli's empty childhood make him shut her out...for her own good?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alexa Rivers is the author of sexy, heartwarming contemporary romances set in gorgeous New Zealand. She lives in a small town, complete with nosy neighbors, and shares a house with a neurotic dog and a husband who thinks he's hilarious. When she's not writing, Alexa enjoys travelling, baking cakes, eating said cakes, cuddling fluffy animals, drinking copious amounts of tea, and absorbing herself in fictional worlds.

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