

Beautiful

HEARTS

JAX CALDER

Beautiful Hearts

Jax Calder

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Content Warning

This book contains themes of loss, grief and infidelity (not between the main characters).

If any of these themes are triggering for you, please take care while reading.

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Chapter 1

Tim

Of all the things I feel like doing on a rainy Monday morning, playing a wannabe traffic warden is not high on my list. Unfortunately, as I pull into the teachers' car park at Southlake High School, it appears to be my destiny.

My window wipers battle furiously against the rain. Through their frantic swiping, I make out a young guy dressed in gray sweatpants and a green Nike hoodie getting out of his old Honda Civic and carefully stepping around the growing puddles of water pooling on the uneven surface.

He must be a Year 13 pupil, as that is the only year students are allowed to wear casual clothes rather than the school uniform.

He's also in the wrong place.

I reluctantly put my foot on the brake and wind down my window. The rain comes pouring through, immediately soaking my arm and part of the upholstery.

"Hey, you can't park there. It's for teachers only." I raise my voice to be heard over the sound of the rain.

The guy whirls around. His hoodie is pulled low, and I can only just make out his face.

My breath catches in my throat.

Even with my vision partly obscured by the driving rain and my glasses fogging, I can see he's incredibly, unbelievably good-looking.

Square jaw. Symmetrical face. Perfect-shaped nose. Full lips.

I blink because I'm pretty sure I've never seen this student before. He must be new.

"What?" he calls back to me.

"This is the staff car park. The student one is over there." I point in the direction of the student car park. I offer him a brief smile before heading toward one of the free spaces at the other end of the car park.

When I park and get out of the car, I notice the student hasn't moved his vehicle and is making his way through the car park toward the admin building.

"Hey!" My tone is threaded with annoyance.

He looks at me, pushing the hood off his head to expose a shock of perfectly styled blond hair.

Even through my rain-speckled glasses, I can tell my initial impression was correct. This guy is incredibly good-looking.

He's definitely new. He's not someone you'd ever forget seeing.

But regardless of what he looks like, he's not having a stellar start to his Southlake High School career.

"You need to move your car," I say.

"Uh...yeah...I'm...um..." He bites his lip, running a hand through his now-wet hair.

But before he can get out a coherent sentence, Iosefa, a student from my Year 9 science class, runs up.

"Sir! Sir! Ari fell off his skateboard, and he's bleeding."

The urgency in his voice has me immediately turning away from the parking infringer. I hurry after Iosefa to the school entrance, where Ari shakily gets to his feet, blood spurting from his nose, mingling with raindrops on his face.

His eyes are panicky, his breath coming in rapid pants. Ari is also in my Year 9 class. He's one of those shy, quiet kids who doesn't like to draw attention to himself. He'll hate the number of students staring at him as they walk past.

I immediately go into reassurance mode. "It's okay. We'll get you straight to the sick bay. Did you hurt anything besides your nose?"

Ari shakes his head. "No." His voice comes out snuffly.

"Pinch the top of your nose just above your nostrils. Good job. You're going to be fine. The bleeding will stop soon."

I walk with Ari to the main administration building. Iosefa follows, carrying Ari's skateboard and bag.

"You're doing great. Keep applying that pressure," I say to Ari as we walk.

"Do you have any fun facts about nosebleeds, Sir?" Iosefa asks with a grin.

I huff a laugh. As part of my mission to convert my students to the joys of science, I start my lessons with a fun scientific fact. It's a good way to get them engaged, but it means my students expect me to spout random facts at will.

"Umm...I don't have any fun facts about nosebleeds, but your nose is really interesting. It's designed to filter and moisten the air to protect your lung tissues. Your sense of smell also has an interesting link to your memories."

"What do you mean, a link to your memories?" Iosefa asks, his brow creasing.

"Have you ever smelled something that reminded you of a particular time or place?"

Iosefa's face clears. "Oh yeah."

"It's because the part of your brain that processes smell is really close to where you form memories."

As I say the words, I think of the scents I struggle with now.

Sandalwood. It reminds me of kissing Rick's freshly shaven cheek, his skin smooth under my lips, the scent of his aftershave filling my nostrils.

Talcum powder. That scent immediately takes me back to those hazy days when our daughter, Stella, was a newborn and Rick and I were learning how to be parents together.

Lilies. I received so many bouquets containing lilies after Rick died that I will always associate them with overwhelming grief and loss.

I swallow hard as melancholy swirls inside me.

By the time we make it inside the administration building to the sick bay, the blood flow from Ari's nose has slowed to a trickle.

"What have we got here?" Jan, the school nurse, asks.

"This is Ari. He fell off his skateboard and got a bloody nose. It's almost stopped now though."

She gives me a smile. "Thanks, Mr. Reed-Beauford. I'll take over."

"See you guys in period three," I say to Ari and Iosefa.

"Thanks, sir," Ari says thickly.

The rain has eased slightly when I get back to my car to grab my box of marking. I notice the beat-up Honda Civic still in the staff car park.

Damn. Now I need to chase it up.

Yep, this policing side of teaching is definitely my least favorite part of the job, but I dutifully snap a picture of the license plate and forward it to the deputy principal to take care of.

Then, I have to scurry to make it to the staff meeting on time.

I sit next to Errol, one of the old-time English teachers who is almost an institution in this place.

I've been in some schools where the staff room is segregated by departments as if it will upset the world order if a social studies teacher and a maths teacher are friends. But not here. Here, staff of all subjects mingle in a cross-curriculum bonanza. That collegiality is one of the things I love about Southlake High.

Maybe it's a survival thing. Southlake is a low socioeconomic school in South Auckland, and we have more than our fair share of tough students who would exploit any divisions among the staff. It really helps that we present a united front.

"Did you hear the news about Lane?" Errol asks.

"No. Why? Is everything okay?" Lane is a young English teacher. As the only other openly out guy on the staff, I feel a natural comradery with him, even though I don't know him that well.

"He's more than okay. He got engaged over the weekend," Errol informs me.

"I heard it was the most epic proposal ever," Nancy, a social studies teacher, pipes up from Errol's other side.

I smile, but as Errol and Nancy discuss the proposal, I rub at the space on my left ring finger.

I took my wedding ring off six months ago. It seemed like such a big deal at the time, and I felt naked for weeks afterward, like an essential part of me was missing. However, I've decided to venture back into the dating world, and common sense dictates that a wedding ring isn't the best accessory for a first date.

Somehow, I always spend half of my dates talking about Rick anyway. The other half, I talk about Stella. Dead husband. Very alive seven-year-old daughter. Neither seems to be a particularly popular conversation topic among single gay men in their thirties, if my ratio of first dates to second dates is anything to go by.

The thing is, I've already been lucky enough to find my soul mate. And I know the statistical probability of lightning

striking the same place twice is low.

I'm still rubbing at my absent ring when Sally, our principal, strides into the room.

Trailing after her is a guy in gray sweatpants and a green hoodie.

My stomach hollows.

Oh shit.

Now that he's out of the rain, I can see he's even more gorgeous than I observed at first glance.

He's beyond beautiful.

It's like a young Brad Pitt—*Thelma & Louise* vintage—has somehow been transported into our staff meeting.

And the fact he's with Sally means I likely made a mistake.

"I'd like to introduce you to Jamie Evans, our new sports coordinator," Sally says.

My neck and ears suddenly feel hot. Fantastic. There's nothing quite like embarrassing myself to start the week.

The sports coordinator job is one of those roles with high staff turnover because the pay isn't great and the hours are long. Sports coordinators live in that limbo land of not being teachers but still having to interact with students more than most support staff.

"I know you'll all make him feel very welcome," Sally continues.

I resist the urge to sink down in my chair. I'm not sure the way I greeted Jamie will feature in the school's welcome guidebook anytime soon.

Jamie, meanwhile, grins broadly, dimples creasing his cheeks as everyone stares at him.

Forget beautiful. The guy is devastating. I don't know if Sally thought through his appointment properly. We'll have to

endure an epidemic of students trailing after him like lovestruck lemmings.

The bell rings, and there's the usual flurry of teachers gathering their stuff, preparing for the day ahead.

I glance at where a crowd of other support staff engulfs Jamie, welcoming him in a far nicer way than I did.

Time to eat some humble pie.

Chapter 2

Jamie

New jobs often feel like the first day of school, but this time my job is at a school, so it's even more appropriate to make that comparison.

Sally, the principal, introduces me to everyone at the staff meeting. I know I'm wearing the goofy grin I always have when I'm nervous, but I can't turn it off, so I smile away like I'm auditioning for a toothpaste commercial.

Actually, I'm thrilled to be here. Growing up, my dream was to go to university and study to become a Physical Education teacher.

Then life derailed those plans.

I've never forgotten my dream though. Just when I was getting bored working at the gym, I happened to be scrolling aimlessly on my phone when a job advertisement for a sports coordinator at Southlake High flashed up.

Given that I wasn't looking for a new job, it was almost like fate had a hand in the whole thing.

Besides, even if I don't enjoy working at a school, I won't have to suffer for long. I'm only planning to stick around until the end of the year so I have enough money to travel.

After the staff meeting, I'm surrounded by the other support staff introducing themselves to me. Jan, the school nurse. Marie, the science technician. Nancy and Tess, the school's administrators.

As I talk to them, I notice a guy hovering in the background. When Nancy drifts away, I turn to look at him.

It's the guy from earlier who told me to move my car.

Something about him completely threw me when he confronted me in the car park, and I couldn't string a sentence together to tell him who I actually am.

Is it because he's so cute?

He's got a clipped beard and pouty pink lips. His brown hair is cut short, and he's wearing square-framed hipster glasses that don't hide his stunning blue eyes.

He comes forward, hands in his pockets, a sheepish look on his face.

"Hey, I'm Tim, one of the science teachers. Also known as the idiot who tried to kick you out of the staff car park. Sorry about that. I thought you were a student."

His voice is deep but quiet. There's a slight flush of pink at his throat, and I have a brief, insane urge to unbutton his navy-blue shirt and see how far down the blush goes.

Holy shit. That's really top of the list of things I shouldn't think about right now.

"It's okay," I say.

Tim frowns. "It's not okay. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions."

"Nah, it's fine. I haven't been told off like that for years." I offer him a smile. "It gave me warm nostalgic feelings."

His forehead scrunches. "You got warm nostalgic feelings from being told off?"

"Sure. It was pretty much the hallmark of my school career, being told off for breaking the rules. At least this time, it wasn't for sneaking into the staff toilets and taking all the toilet paper. It's nice to have the moral high ground for once."

He huffs a laugh. Then his eyebrows shoot up like he's surprised himself by laughing.

I give him my best grin, and a slow smile spreads on his face in return. Which takes him from cute to really, really handsome. If I had his smile, I would spend my whole day grinning.

“I’m Jamie,” I say, sticking out my hand.

“It’s great to meet you, Jamie,” he says as he takes my hand.

Our fingers touch, and I get an electric shock. Like, literally, a spark of electricity shoots up my arm, jolting my body.

He jerks his hand back from mine, his forehead rumpling. “Sorry, static electricity. My shoes and this nylon carpet aren’t the best combination,” he says.

I just blink at him. I’m not wholly convinced by that scientific explanation. It feels like more than that. Like the universe is using science to deliver a message.

Take notice of this guy. He’s important.

I lean against the back of a chair and continue giving him my best smile. “So, what science subject do you teach, Tim?”

“Biology.”

I resist making a joke about working on our biology together, but it’s difficult. Especially because there’s something in the way he’s looking at me that makes me think he swings in my direction.

It’s nothing overt or inappropriate under the circumstances. Just a hint of more interest than you get from a straight guy.

If there’s one thing I’m naturally good at, it’s detecting other gay guys. It’s like a superpower. Although, it’s a superpower that has occasionally proven too effective and led me astray.

Warmth pools in my stomach as Tim and I continue smiling at each other. I flick a quick look at his left ring finger. Nope. Not married.

Not that the presence or absence of a ring provides certainty on whether someone is married, as I know only too well.

“So, have you got any hints for me on how to survive the jungle of Southlake High?” I ask.

“Make sure you watch out for the cheetahs,” he replies.

I frown at him for a second, then I get it and start to laugh.

Tim’s blush is back, and it’s even more intense now. “Oh god, I’m sorry, I spend far too much time with my seven-year-old, and she loves puns at the moment.”

I grin. “That was pun-ishingly bad.”

It’s his turn to groan as a smile edges back on his face. “I guess I deserve that. Especially as my pun wasn’t even factually correct. Cheetahs live in the savanna, not in jungles.”

I nod, trying to keep my face serious. “It’s very important for jokes to be factually correct. I hear the joke police will arrest you otherwise.”

“If the joke police existed, I’m fairly sure I’d be serving a life sentence by now,” Tim says.

And I’m laughing again. I’ve always loved a dry sense of humor, and it appears Tim is a master.

The bell rings.

“I’d better get going,” Tim says. “I have a bunch of Year 10 students avidly awaiting the knowledge of photosynthesis I’m about to impart.” He takes a step away from me. “Sorry again for the misunderstanding this morning.”

“That’s okay. Now that I know how good you are at telling people off, I’ll make sure I stay on your good side,” I say.

He quirks an eyebrow. “You’re assuming I have a good side?”

“I like a challenge. I’m all for trying to locate your good side.” I deliberately load that innocent sentence with a touch of extra meaning.

Tim looks startled, blinking at me from behind his glasses. “Ah... yeah.”

Okay, so maybe my seduction technique needs some work, judging by Tim’s speed as he exits the staffroom.

I straighten, trying to tuck my disappointment away. There will be other chances to flirt with Tim, I’m sure.

When the second bell rings, I head across the school grounds to the PE department, where my office is off the gym. It possibly began life as a PE gear storage cupboard, which would explain the fact it’s tiny, with only one small window offering a tease of blue sky. Prison cells have a better vibe.

It’s cramped to begin with and even more cramped when Annie, the head of sports, comes in.

“So, did everyone make you feel welcome in the staffroom?” she asks.

“Yeah, definitely.” I clear my throat. “I met Jan and Nancy and some of the other support staff. And I, uh, got chatting with one teacher. Tim from the Science department? He seems like a good guy.”

Annie’s gaze zooms in on me. The appraising look she gives me makes me realize that subtly is an art form I have yet to master.

“Tim’s the head of Science, and he’s great,” she says slowly. “He’s been through a really tough time these last few years.”

“What kind of tough time?”

“His husband died, and he has a young daughter he’s now raising by himself.”

Good to have it confirmed that my gaydar is well and truly still operational.

But, as always, hearing about someone losing a loved one causes a flash of pain. I’m all too familiar with what it feels like to lose someone you love. I swallow hard. How awful for Tim to have found someone he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, only to have that snatched away.

“It sucks he went through that,” I say lightly.

“Yeah, it sucks because he really didn’t deserve it. Everyone here loves Tim. We all look out for him.” Her words have a warning laced through them, as blatant as a flashing neon sign.

Don’t mess around with the widowed science teacher.

Okay. Message received loud and clear.

This year isn’t supposed to be about my love life anyway. This year is about saving enough money to go overseas. Complications in the form of a cute science teacher are not what I need, despite how certain parts of my body might protest that decision.

I let a guy derail my plans before.

I won’t let it happen again.

Chapter 3

Tim

“Can I please have some more Honey Puffs, Dad?”
“Sure thing, hon.”

I watch with pride as Stella pours Honey Puffs into her bowl, the tip of her tongue poking out the side of her mouth as she concentrates on not spilling.

There’s a tinge of sadness inside me too.

I miss Stella calling me Daddy. It’s a stupid thing, but in the past few weeks, since she started Year 2, Dad has replaced Daddy most of the time.

One of the best parts of being a parent is seeing your child discover the world around them and grow into their personalities. But equally, it leaves you mourning the version of the child they’ve left behind.

I wonder if part of the reason I find it difficult to see Stella growing up is because she’s moving further away from the child Rick knew. If he came back now, would he recognize this funny yet serious little girl from the pigtailed, mischievous four-year-old with the sticky hands he’d known so well?

My throat closes, and I concentrate on stacking the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher so Stella doesn’t see the sadness on my face. I hadn’t realized how protective Stella had grown of me after Rick’s death, how she’d rush to my side whenever she saw me upset, until my sister Jenna pointed it out.

I don't want my daughter to feel the burden of making me happy. It's not fair to her.

When I finish and turn around, Stella's spooning Honey Puffs into her mouth with one hand and studying her joke book as if she's cramming for an exam.

I love her recent discovery of jokes and how she enjoys testing them out on me, although the fact they're so ingrained in my mind that they're my first go-to is proving problematic. Luckily Jamie didn't seem to judge me too harshly, but last week, when my date, Brandon, arrived late, I'd blurted out the first thing I could think of.

"Do you know why cannibals are afraid of being late? They're afraid of getting the cold shoulder."

To be fair, Brandon seemed to get into the cannibal theme of the joke. Well, he'd looked at me like I was potentially Hannibal Lecter, anyway.

Needless to say, there aren't plans for a second date.

"What do you think would have been Papa's favorite joke in this book?" Stella asks.

I do everything I can to keep Rick's memory alive for Stella. I used to have photos of him all over our living space, but I found it too disconcerting to have him constantly smiling at me from every wall.

Stella's room is a shrine to Rick though, with an entire wall of photos of the two of them together: Rick carrying her in the baby backpack, Rick and toddler Stella eating ice cream, Rick helping her cut her *Frozen* cake on her third birthday.

I talk to her about him constantly, about the things he liked and disliked, stories he told me about his childhood. It's one of the reasons I actively involve Rick's sister, Gabby, in Stella's life, even though a small amount of Gabby can sometimes be a lot.

I want her to know her other father, even if it's only from memories.

But now I'm struggling to think of what jokes Rick liked. He had a great sense of humor but wasn't really into silly puns. I couldn't see him joining Stella and me in those moments when we tell each other silly jokes until we're breathless with laughter.

"Um...maybe one of the jokes about zombies and vampires? He liked movies about them, so I think he'd like jokes about them as well."

I actually have no idea whether Rick's enthusiasm for paranormal books and movies would extend to puns and jokes.

Am I giving Stella false facts about her papa? Does it matter?

For about the millionth time since Rick died, the weight of being Stella's only parent, of making the right decisions for her, feels like it might crush me.

I take a deep breath. She's happy and healthy. She knows she's loved. I'm getting the basics right. It doesn't matter if I'm fudging some of the details.

"Now remember, Aunty Gabby is picking you up after school today and you're staying at her place tonight. Then you'll be with Aunty Jenna, Uncle Grant, Carlee, and Max for the rest of the time I'm away at camp."

Stella nods. "I'm taking my shell collection to show Carlee."

I'm not sure if my thirteen-year-old niece will be as enthusiastic about shells as Stella currently is, but Carlee's a good kid, and I'm sure she'll manage to fake it.

I'm about to head to my bedroom to check I've packed everything when my phone chimes from where it's sitting on the kitchen counter.

It's Trudi. She's the teacher organizing the student leadership training camp I'm about to embark on.

The fact she's ringing me when we're supposed to meet at the school in half an hour turns my upbeat ringtone into something more ominous.

I grab my phone. “Hey, Trudi.”

“Tim.” Trudi’s one of those no-nonsense people who doesn’t bother with extended greetings. “Just want to give you the heads-up that Bruce just called me. He’s come down with a stomach bug.”

“Oh shit. What does that do to our ratios?”

To take pupils away, there are strict guidelines about the ratio of adults to students.

I can almost hear the frown in Trudi’s voice. “I’m working on a solution. I’ve talked to Annie about whether she can spare the new sports coordinator for a few days.”

My heart beats faster. “Jamie?” I croak out.

“Yeah. The PE department seems really impressed with him. And okay, we’ll have to deal with a few kids with overdeveloped hormones swooning over him, but Annie says he’s doing a good job being professional with the students so far.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’m trying to get in touch with him, but he’s not answering his phone. So we might have to delay leaving—” Noise comes through from Trudi’s end, and her voice grows flustered. “Oh, hang on, that’s him calling me back now. If you don’t hear from me, assume everything is proceeding as planned.”

I drop my phone back on the counter with slightly more force than necessary. It slides a few inches before coming to a stop.

Jamie.

I’ve only interacted with the guy twice. It’s crazy that my heart rate increases at the thought of spending three days around him.

It’s actually crazy how much he’s drifted into my mind over the last few days as if he’s setting up an office in there.

I think about how he said his name when he introduced himself, in a slightly husky voice, lingering on the second syllable. *Jay-meee*.

And it's not only his voice I've been dwelling on.

I'd thought Jamie was gorgeous when I'd seen him from a distance, but it turned out the distance view was nothing compared to the close-up.

His eyes are the prettiest I've ever seen. Blue-green with flecks of hazel. Like Mother Nature couldn't decide which color to go with and chose to show them all off instead.

His skin is a light honey color and almost glows as if from some internal energy source the rest of us lack.

But it isn't his aesthetics that have caused him to take up residence in my mind. It was the appraising light in his eyes, that slight pupil dilation, that flirty smirk when we joked around.

Either Jamie flirts with everything that moves, or he's interested in men.

That the gorgeous sports coordinator is potentially gay, bisexual, or pansexual shouldn't be any concern of mine.

Maybe it's not only the students' hormones Trudi needs to worry about around Jamie.

I'm too old to be ogling him. While he might be the most attractive guy I've ever seen in the flesh, I thought I was a deeper person than one who only lusts after someone based on their looks.

He's funny too. A little voice in my head reminds me.

It's true. From our brief interaction, Jamie seems to have a great sense of humor.

But he's also in his early twenties, which immediately puts him in the never-go-there category.

I've never been into younger guys, even when I was that age myself. I met Rick when I was twenty-four. He was twenty-eight. Not a huge difference in the scale of things, but

it had seemed larger back then. I'd been attracted to Rick's confidence and the fact he seemed more certain of who he was than my peers.

When I've imagined a new partner, I've always assumed I'd go for someone at least my age or older. Maybe a guy who also has kids because then he'd understand my commitment to Stella and what it means to be a parent.

Which makes it even crazier that I've been dwelling on that flirtatious look in Jamie's eyes that I'm sure I didn't imagine.

In a flurry, I get Stella dropped off at her before-school care and then make it to school, where a crowd of twenty excited teenagers huddles by the admin building.

These are the Year 12 and Year 13 students chosen for leadership roles within the school, so they are all good kids. Taking them to camp will be fun rather than an exercise in hazard management that leading reckless teenagers into the outdoor environment can sometimes turn into.

"Hi, sir," Ahmed, a biology student I've had for two years, says to me.

I greet him in return as I make a beeline for Trudi, who's standing with a clipboard in hand.

She smiles when she sees me. "Hey, Tim. Everything good?"

"Yep." I add my overnight bag to the pile of gear accumulating on the school's front lawn. "What do you need me to do?"

"Do you want to grab a van and trailer so we can start loading some of this stuff?"

"Sure thing." I catch the keys she tosses at me and stride off to the car park where the vans are kept.

I drive back slowly because the student population is starting to file in, and students with earbuds have zero regard for their personal safety. *Teacher hits student with school van*

is never a headline you want associated with your school or yourself.

When I pull up the van and get out, I see Jamie coming along the school footpath, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and a wide grin on his face. He's in a green Arctic Monkeys T-shirt and faded jeans, yet he looks like he stepped out of a menswear catalog.

It's ridiculous how much my pulse speeds up when I see him. Apparently, that's what I am today. A ridiculous thirty-four-year-old science teacher and father of one.

Jamie's impossibly wide grin stretches further when he sees me. "Hey, did you hear I'm joining you on your adventure?"

I can't help smiling in return. "Yeah, I heard."

"What can I help you with?"

"Drop your bag with the rest of the gear, and if you want to round up some students to help load the boxes of food into the trailer, that would be great."

"Sure. I'll do that."

Jamie is back in a minute, trailed by a group of obedient students.

I try to keep my gaze from Jamie's rippling muscles as he effortlessly picks up the large boxes of groceries before walking to the trailer to stack them. He directs the students to help him.

His body is a magnet, and my eyes are iron fillings. They continue zooming back to him, no matter how hard I try to keep them away.

Meanwhile, Trudi marshals the remaining students to load the rest of the gear into the other trailer. She does it with impressive efficiency, then comes over to help us load the last of the food.

"If there's ever a zombie apocalypse, I'm totally teaming up with Trudi," Jamie says in an undertone once we've loaded everything.

I laugh. “I think you’ll have to join the queue.”

Trudi addresses the students. “Right, everyone, half of you need to jump into Mr. Reed-Beauford’s van, the other half with me in my van.”

There’s a scramble as students race to climb in. Given most of them will bury their heads in their phones with their earbuds in, the life-or-death race with pointy elbows to get in the van with their friends seems excessive. Or maybe it’s been too many years since I was a teenager.

Jamie looks across at me. “Okay if I ride with you?”

“Sure.”

I completely ignore that my pulse has its own opinion on that development.

We climb into the van.

I glance into the back at the students. Sure enough, they’re getting sorted with technology, setting themselves up to ignore each other for most of the trip.

“Everyone got their seatbelts on?” I feel like a helicopter parent.

“Yes, sir.” Rosa, the nearest student to me, lets me know what she thinks of my question with an eye roll.

I start the engine and head out.

At first, I focus on the Auckland traffic, which is grim at the best of times, but morning rush hour is particularly horrific. It took me months to get my confidence back after Rick’s accident. I’d never contemplated how your entire life could be ripped away in seconds.

The thought of leaving Stella with no parents always makes my throat go dry with panic.

Once I reach the motorway, I relax slightly because traffic flows smoothly, and I dare a glance at Jamie. “So, have you ever been to the Coromandel peninsula?”

It’s a nice, neutral conversation topic.

Jamie leans back in his seat, stretching his long denim-clad legs. “Only once to Whangamata for New Year, but I didn’t really get a chance to look around,” he says with a sheepish grin.

“The whole peninsula is beautiful, and the campground we’re staying at is on the beach. You’ll love it.”

“I love camping. I’m from Whangarei, but my dad used to take me to Raglan every summer.”

“Do you surf?” Raglan is famous for its surf beach.

“Yeah, I do.”

“I grew up in Gisborne, so I learned to surf when I was a kid. I haven’t been out for ages though,” I say.

“I only moved to Auckland last month, so you’ll have to tell me where the nearest surfing is.”

“Well, you’ve got your obvious places like Piha. Anawhata’s good too, although that involves a bit of a hike.”

We discuss surfing for a while, which turns into talking about what it was like for me growing up on the East Coast.

Chatting with Jamie is...easy. Maybe it’s because I have to focus on the road, so I’m not distracted by his looks. I can just chat with him like he’s a regular person.

He’s funny, but there’s a depth to him I didn’t expect.

The stereotyping police should arrest me for assuming Jamie couldn’t have a functioning brain under his good looks.

Somehow, our conversation morphs into talking about the importance of marine reserves for protecting sea life.

Jamie gives me some stats about marine reserves and how studies have shown they help conserve biodiversity.

“Did you know that since the creation of the Tonga Island Marine Reserve, there are seven times as many crayfish and forty times as many blue cod?”

“Wow,” I say.

He flashes a grin at me. “I watched a documentary last week, so it’s fresh in my head. I’m normally not that great at recalling facts and figures.”

“Still, it’s great you’re interested in it at all.” Now I sound like a condescending seventy-year-old praising today’s youth for caring about the planet they’re going to inherit. *Way to go, Tim.*

“My dad’s a total greenie, and I guess he rubs off on me,” Jamie says.

“Does your dad still live in Whangarei?”

Jamie’s forehead creases. “Uh...no. He passed away a few years ago.”

Shit. I shoot a glance at him. I totally get it. It took me a couple of years to stop referring to Rick in the present tense, and I still have moments now when I forget.

Jamie focuses on picking at the skin around his thumb.

“It’s hard losing someone close to you.” I keep my voice steady, stating it as a neutral life fact.

“Yeah, it is.” When he raises his eyes to me, his gaze is sympathetic, telling me the staffroom gossip about Rick must have reached his ears.

I’m okay with that. It saves me from having to explain it to him. In three years, I still haven’t come up with a way to say *‘my husband died’* without bringing the conversation to a complete standstill.

“My mum split to Australia when I was a kid, so it was just my dad and me growing up. I went a bit off the rails after he died,” Jamie admits.

“In what way?”

“Started hanging out with the wrong crowd, dropped out of school, pretty sure I hit every highlight in the delinquent playbook.” Jamie chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “I was pretty pissed off at the world, so I did everything I could to piss the world off in return.”

My heart aches as I imagine a heartbroken teenage Jamie lashing out as his only way to cope with his loss.

“That’s completely understandable,” I say. “No one ever thinks straight when they’re dealing with grief.”

“I made some really bad choices when it came to guys too,” he says in a low voice.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and deliberately keep my eyes on the road.

Okay, so it’s good to have Jamie’s sexuality confirmed, to know I haven’t imagined the vibe I get from him.

“We all make mistakes,” I say.

He shoots a look at me. “I find it difficult to believe you’re the type of person who makes many mistakes.”

Do I really come across as someone who’s got their life completely together? Maybe someone as young as Jamie assumes everyone in their thirties has it together.

“In my first year as a teacher, I almost blew up a student,” I confess.

He splutters out a laugh. “What?”

I tell him the story of how I’d been carrying out the classic sodium-in-water experiment to show how reactive Type 1 metals are. Despite my warnings, one of the students bent over for a closer look just as the sodium exploded. He ended up with specks of sodium all over his face.

In return, Jamie tells me about the time he and his mates decided to have a drinking session at the town’s rubbish dump, not knowing the gate got locked every night. They had to try to escape while security guards chased them down.

We continue to share embarrassing stories, making each other laugh. Somehow the two-and-a-half-hour drive disappears, and I blink in surprise when Google Maps informs me I’m five minutes from my destination.

“We’re nearly there,” I say as we enter Hahei along the narrow, winding coastal road. We drive through the small

community of houses tucked between the road and the beach, and then we turn onto the road that leads to Hot Water Beach.

I almost don't want the drive to end. I've enjoyed the little cocoon of conversation Jamie and I have been locked in.

If I'm honest, I've probably enjoyed it slightly too much because it's been a long time since I remember talking so effortlessly with anyone.

I pull into the camping ground.

The other van pulls up behind us. Once we disembark, Trudi's back in marshaling-the-troops mode, getting the gear unpacked from the vans and trailers and the students assigned to cabins.

"I've put you and Jamie in cabin four," she says.

"Great." I try to keep my voice neutral, hiding my reaction to the idea of spending two nights in close proximity to Jamie.

I grab my bag from the van and head to cabin four.

Jamie's already inside, and his eyes light up when he sees me. "Looks like you drew the short straw on roommates."

"As long as you don't snore or sleepwalk, we're all good." I throw my bag on one of the bottom bunks.

Jamie gave me a fake incredulous look. "Two of my favorite things and you're telling me they're off the table?"

"Those are two of your favorite things?"

"Well, besides whiskers on kittens and bright copper kettles."

I blink at him. "Did you seriously just quote *The Sound of Music* to me?"

"Hey, don't knock Julie Andrews. She's a classic."

"Don't worry, I'll never knock Julie Andrews. In fact, I can probably sing you any song from her repertoire."

His face breaks out into a large smile. "Maybe that can be our go-to if I can't sleep tonight."

And we're grinning at each other. Jamie's smile should honestly be registered as the eighth wonder of the natural world. A bolt of lust shoots through me, pure and bright. Shit. I need to stop ogling the guy.

I run my hands through my hair. "We'd better go check in with Trudi."

"Sure," Jamie says easily. He follows me out, and I pop my head into a few cabins to check that the students are set up before I locate Trudi outside her cabin.

She looks at her watch. "The tide should be good for digging some hot tubs."

"Sounds great," I say.

"I can't wait." Jamie's grin is so gorgeous my heart hammers.

I turn away from him, trying to compose myself.

Jamie on a beach. Jamie in boardshorts.

I'm not sure that's what my libido needs right now.

Chapter 4

Tim

It takes us half an hour to get the students organized. When they're finally ready, we head down the path toward Hot Water Beach.

Like nearly all the beaches on the Coromandel peninsula, it's picturesque, with golden sand and clear blue water.

The special nature of the beach is not truly revealed until two hours before low tide, when the waves pull back enough to expose the spot where hot water pumps up from fissures in the earth below.

Tourists and locals flock to the beach to dig in the sand to create their own spa baths to sit in.

There's always intense competition and jostling for the best spots because there's a limited amount of beach areas offering the hot water.

I'm not particularly worried about our students managing in this free-for-all environment. Most Southlake High students can be pretty scrappy when they need to be. The tourists visiting from overseas won't know what's hit them if they try to jostle one of our students out of a space.

We head to the beach as a group and stash our gear by the base of the rocky outcrop near where the hot water wells up.

My concerns about whether any of my students will inflict grievous bodily harm on a tourist disappear when Jamie strips off his jeans.

My mouth instantly goes dry. Even though I expected it, it's still something to have the most incredible specimen of masculinity right before me. The geothermal heat definitely isn't the hottest thing on the beach right now.

His body is sculpted to perfection, evidence of an obvious devotion to the gym, but he's not one of those overdeveloped muscular guys who looks almost artificial.

Jamie is just...perfect.

I can't help huffing a disbelieving laugh as I force myself to rip my eyes away from him because, honestly, where the hell did they get this guy from? It's hard to believe he's actually real.

When we reach the area where people are already digging holes, it's not the perfection of Jamie's body that causes my breath to rush out of me when I glance at him.

It's the fact he's raking his gaze down my thirty-four-year-old body with what looks like appreciation.

I've always been lean, which is one thing in my favor. But I've never looked anywhere close to the ideal that is Jamie.

Maybe he has a kink for dad-bods? If such a kink exists, I should definitely add that particular trait to my online dating profile.

Jamie gives me a guilty grin when he catches my eye.

For a few heartbeats, we stare at each other.

"Are you guys going to dig a deluxe spa for me?" Trudi asks as she comes over.

"We're about to start," I say.

"Just tell me where you want me to dig," Jamie says.

We grab some shovels and get to work. As soon as the hole begins to fill with water, I reach down to feel the water temperature. It's only lukewarm, so I move to dig another hole a few feet away.

"It's a bit of a process to find the right spot," I say to Jamie.

A smirk overtakes his face, and I see the cheeky glint in his eyes.

“Don’t even think about it,” I say.

“I was only going to comment on how I should have guessed the science teacher would turn this into a scientific experiment,” he says innocently.

“Sure, that’s what you were going with.”

“Here’s a good place,” Trudi calls, and we head over to her and quickly work on expanding the hole.

Our students are all making their own hot tubs in various locations on the beach. I quickly wander around them, checking everyone is okay before I head back to where Jamie has finished making a spa bath big enough for three.

He gives me a wide grin as I settle into the hot water next to him.

I glance around. The whole beach bustles with people trying to find the perfect spot to dig their own personal bath. The waves crashing against the shore and the gentle buzz of conversation creates a soft cacophony of sounds.

“I can’t believe this place,” Jamie says. “It’s so cool.”

“Actually, it’s the opposite of cool,” I counter, and he chuckles his golden laugh.

“It is a pretty special place,” Trudi says. “I couldn’t believe it the first time I came here and discovered you could dig in the sand and find hot water.”

“They didn’t have to stretch too far for the name of this beach, did they?” Jamie comments.

“I can almost guarantee no creative brain cells were strained in the naming of this beach,” I agree. “But then, we do live in a country where the two major islands are called North Island and South Island, so you can’t really say high standards of originality are expected.”

Jamie and Trudi laugh, with Jamie throwing me another appreciative look.

I sink into the warm water.

Sitting here, on a lovely autumn day, chatting with Jamie and Trudi while keeping an eye on our students having a good time, an unexpected feeling settles over me.

Contentment.

It's been a long, long time since I've felt this content.

It's like all the worries and sadness that usually cloud my horizon have vanished, and instead, there's simply a beautiful sunset for me to enjoy.

* * *

The good thing about traveling and then soaking in hot water for a few hours is that our students are tired. We don't get anything beyond mild protests when we send them to bed at ten-thirty that evening.

"My little sister has a later bedtime than this," Villemi tries.

"We've got a big day planned for tomorrow. You'll need all the energy you can get," I reply. I quickly scan the boys' cabin, and everyone seems happily tucked into their sleeping bags on the bunks.

I shut the door quietly behind me and pad onto the wooden deck separating the cabins.

"Tim," a voice calls softly.

It's Jamie.

He's sitting against the wall of our cabin.

"Come and see the stars," he says.

I obligingly cross to him and sink down, my back pressing against the side of the cabin. The wood still offers some of the warmth it absorbed during the day.

I angle my head back, and sure enough, this far from the light pollution of any major city, the stars are spectacular.

“Aren’t they amazing?” Jamie breathes.

“Yeah, amazing,” I say.

His face tilts up to the sky, and the light from the kitchen spills out in golden hues, illuminating one side of his perfect face. His lips are parted slightly, his skin smooth and flawless.

For a second, my breath leaves me. Beautiful doesn’t come close to describing Jamie right now. He’s spellbinding.

I wrench my eyes away from his face to look back at the spectacular sky.

“I developed this thing about stars after my dad died,” Jamie says suddenly. “I don’t know if it was because I watched *The Lion King* at an impressionable age, but I like to imagine that one of the stars is my dad looking down on me. I’m not sure what I believe about the afterlife, but I like that idea.”

I bite my lip. I have a complex relationship with the concept of an afterlife. Before Rick died, I was scientific about it, evaluating the evidence dispassionately. Now, I desperately want to believe that there’s some kind of life after death. It’s just so hard to accept that someone like Rick, who had so much life and vitality, can simply cease to exist in a single moment. That all his thoughts and memories could simply just disappear.

“How old were you when your dad died?” I ask.

“Sixteen.”

“That’s a really young age to lose someone.”

Jamie looks at me. “It’s hard to lose someone at any age, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I clear my throat. “I also look at the stars differently since I lost my husband, but I don’t know if it’s in a good way.”

“What do you mean?”

I struggle to put my feelings into words. “I guess when you lose someone, you search for meaning, right? About what the purpose of everything is.

“And looking at the stars, which are billions of years old, makes me realize that we get, what, eighty to a hundred years on this planet if we’re lucky, which is not even a blink in the life of a star. And some of us get a lot less than that.” Despite my best effort, my voice hitches. “Sometimes it’s hard to see what the point of it all is.”

It’s not until the words have left my lips that I realize I’ve never said this aloud before, even to my family members. Yet I’ve decided to confide in our new sports coordinator? A man I’ve known only a matter of days. Jamie’s already shown he’s deeper than I expected, and I repay him by dumping on him?

My cheeks heat in the darkness. “Sorry, I know that’s kind of bleak.”

“It is bleak,” Jamie says slowly. “But it’s inspiring at the same time, right? Because if life is so short, it’s a reminder to make the most of every moment.

“And you can turn the concept around. What are the odds, in that overwhelming scope of time, that the two of us would be sitting here together, looking at the stars? Yet here we are.”

I meet his gaze.

“Here we are,” I echo.

Jamie smiles, and I’m transfixed, locked in the gaze of this beautiful man.

This beautiful man who is probably closer in age to the students I teach than to me.

The thought is like a glass of cold water tipped down my back.

“How old are you, Jamie?” I blurt.

He glances at the deck, running a hand along the wooden plank. “I’m twenty-two,” he answers.

Twenty-two. Twelve years younger than me.

I swallow. “Right.”

He raises those stunning eyes back to mine. “My dad used to say I’m an old soul.” His voice is quiet.

“I can see that,” I reply, my voice equally low.

And we stay locked in each other’s gazes until the kitchen door opens and Trudi comes out, bright light streaming out with her.

I blink, glancing away from Jamie, my heart thudding far more than star gazing should warrant.

“It’s such a lovely night,” Trudi says.

“We’ve been admiring the stars,” I say.

She joins us, sitting on the deck. “The students seem to have gone to sleep quickly.”

“Hopefully, they’ll be getting lots of energy for the walk tomorrow,” I say.

“It’s always interesting to watch the dynamics of the group on a camp like this,” Trudi says.

“I thought Mateo stood out as a natural leader today,” Jamie says. “He’s quiet, but you can see how the students listen anytime he speaks.”

“You know, I think you’re right,” Trudi says.

“Rosa’s a good leader too, although she does it in a louder way than Mateo. And I think she needs to learn that sometimes leadership requires listening to make sure everyone’s opinions are heard,” Jamie continues.

Trudi nods. “That’s something I’ve talked to her about previously. She’s getting better, but her natural instinct is just to take over. She needs to curb that sometimes to make sure she’s including everyone.”

Jamie continues to offer insights into the group dynamics that once again confirms the theme for today. He is so much more than just a pretty face.

“I don’t know about you two, but I’m beat. I’m going to head to bed,” Trudi eventually says.

Jamie turns to look at me. “You ready for bed?”

Nostalgia flashes through me at his innocent question.

For a second, it feels like we're a couple because that's a casual inquiry Rick used to make to me all the time.

"Sure," I say.

By the time I'm back from brushing my teeth in the communal bathroom, Jamie's changed into his pajamas. It's probably a good thing because seeing more of Jamie's body isn't what I need to complete my day. Not if I want non-X-rated dreams tonight, anyway.

Jamie's making up his bed, putting a pillowcase on the pillow.

He looks up at me as I come into the room. "I keep thinking about what you said about the stars."

I force a smile because I'm embarrassed at how much I revealed in that moment. Some of the darkness inhabiting me after Rick's loss that I've never been able to banish.

"I think I like your interpretation of the stars better than mine," I say.

"How many years has it been since your husband passed away?" he asks, his voice gentle.

I clear my throat. "It's been three years."

"Have you...I mean...has there been anyone since him?"

My heart thuds. Why do I feel like Jamie's question is loaded? Does it mean he's also noticed the connection between us?

My throat goes dry.

"I've recently started dating again," I admit.

Jamie pauses the unpacking of his sleeping bag. "How's that going for you?"

"I recently told a cannibal joke about three minutes into a first date, so that should give you an idea of how it's going for me."

Jamie lets out a low whistle. "Wow, a cannibal joke. That's really bringing out the big guns. See, I would have warmed

him up with an off-color vampire joke, maybe thrown in a zombie brain-eating joke to test the reception to human organ consumption, before going to a fully fleshed cannibal joke.” He looks up from where he’s rolling out his sleeping bag, throwing me a mischievous grin.

I can’t help laughing.

Shit. I like him. I really, really like this guy.

“I’ll remember that for my next date. Thanks for the advice.”

He smirks at me as he climbs into his sleeping bag. “Anytime.”

I climb into my bed and take off my glasses before switching off the light. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

We lie in the dark, and I listen to Jamie’s breathing evening out as I try to stop my brain from dwelling on everything that happened today.

I really don’t want to focus on the fact that the last time I felt anything close to this kind of instant connection was with Rick.

If I’m being honest, even that hadn’t been quite like this. Rick and I met on a dating app, so there had been something more...deliberate about our connection from the start. On our first date, we’d laughed and joked together, but all our interactions had a purpose, which was to see if we were compatible, to see if the spark between us when we were messaging was also there in real life.

But with Jamie...I’m not trying to connect with him. In fact, I’m almost resisting how effortless this is.

I turn over, trying to get into a more comfortable position. The pillows are lumpy and smell vaguely of mothballs.

It’s only a crush. It’s probably good for me to feel alive again. Maybe I needed someone like Jamie, who is pretty much a walking wet dream, to jolt me out of my stupor.

I mean, Jamie and I get on great, but what are the chances he's seriously interested in me? He probably sees me as a potential hookup because I'm gay and single and he's gay and single, but the last thing I'm looking for right now is a hookup.

It doesn't matter anyway. Jamie is wrong for me in so many ways. Too young. Too charming. Too beautiful.

But a crush is harmless, right?

Chapter 5

Jamie

I wake to daylight, and my eyes immediately drift to the bunk bed opposite me.

Tim.

He's curled on his side, facing me, still asleep.

My mouth curves into an enormous smile. I get to spend the whole day with Tim. How awesome is that?

He stirs, one side of his face twitching before his eyes open. In the dim early morning light, his incredible eyes are navy-blue.

He blinks. His face looks naked, and I realize it's because he's missing his glasses.

He looks younger without them, more vulnerable.

"Good morning." His voice is scratchy with sleep. He fumbles around for his glasses on the bedside table and puts them on.

"Are you short-sighted or long-sighted?" I ask. What is it about this guy that makes me want to know everything about him?

"Short-sighted. Without my glasses, everything farther away than about ten feet is a blur."

"Aren't you afraid of sharing that knowledge with me?" I ask.

He raises an eyebrow, an amused look on his face. "Should I be afraid?"

“Maybe. I could steal your glasses and take them more than ten feet away from you, and you wouldn’t be able to find me to get them back.”

Tim nods slowly. “I guess you could do that. I struggle to see how that would aid with anyone’s life aims, but hey, who am I to judge if you have a weird torment-men-with-glasses hobby.”

I laugh at that. I love how Tim, for all his serious, science-teacher demeanor, for all the deep-and-meaningful conversation we shared last night, has this playful side. That he not only matches my random humor but can raise it up to another level.

“It’s more of a torment-the-biology-teacher hobby,” I say. “I don’t usually get much of a chance to indulge it though.”

“Well, I guess I should take one for the team and let you indulge it now,” he says as he gets out of bed.

I check him out subtly.

Until now, I’ve tended to hook up with guys who have completely ripped bodies, their hard planes of muscles evidence of time spent working out.

Maybe it’s because I’ve spent so much time working in gyms, so those are the guys always around me. Call me lucky, but I’ve never had to reach far for someone to hook up with.

So it surprised me how attractive I found Tim’s very obviously not-a-gym-bunny body yesterday. He’s lean and well-toned but not overly muscular.

He stretches now, and his pajama top rides up, showing off a pale strip of skin on his stomach. I suck in a breath. His skin looks like it would be soft to my touch.

Luckily, I’m still in my sleeping bag, so I can hide the evidence of my cock’s reaction to that thought.

I quirk an eyebrow. “Are you saying you’re up for indulging me?”

Tim snaps his eyes to mine, and I don’t think I’m quick enough to extinguish the heat in my gaze. He blinks rapidly

behind his glasses as if checking his vision.

Yeah, maybe it's too early in the morning for quite so blatant flirting.

But shit, it's difficult to resist.

“Uh...I'm going to have a quick shower, and then we'll wake up some teenagers, okay?” His voice is slightly hoarse, and I'm not sure if it's because he's still getting it warmed up for the day or if it's a reaction to my obvious interest in him.

“Sure.”

I slowly get out of my sleeping bag, giving my cock enough time to deflate to fit-to-be-around-company status.

It's crazy how attracted to Tim I am.

It's obvious he hasn't completely recovered from losing his husband, but last night he told me he's dating again, which is promising. Maybe I can be the one to help him move on?

But what do I know about dating? I rub the back of my neck.

I've only ever had one relationship, and it's not like that was a success. Instead, what happened with Pat was more of a spectacular crash and burn, incinerate my heart, kind of relationship.

My stomach feels queasy, and I'm pretty sure my nausea isn't because I haven't eaten breakfast yet.

I still haven't defined the area where Pat lives inside me. It's an area where regret and guilt hang out, along with a whole lot of hurt. I try to keep the area closed off. It's like Area 66, a complete no-go zone.

I stitch together the gap threatening to open now with red hazard tape. I don't want to think about Pat. I want to live in the present.

And in my present is a cute science teacher who's come back from the shower. His hair is damp, and he brings a clean scent with him, making me want to sink my nose into his shoulder and breathe in his freshness.

Tim in the present is definitely more fun than thinking about the past.

After I've had a quick shower, forcing myself not to think about Tim, we go to wake the students up. It's hard not to laugh at some of the faces teenagers pull when roused from their slumber.

It turns out Trudi's not a morning person either. It's amusing to see her, subdued and blinking, sipping on a cup of coffee like it contains the elixir for her organizational superpowers.

Tim marshals the students into making breakfast, and because today's agenda contains a walk to Cathedral Cove, we need a packed lunch. Once they've finished tidying up the breakfast stuff, he mobilizes them to make sandwiches.

When I come behind him on the assembly line to make my own, I notice Tim spooning mashed-up egg into a bread roll.

"That's a lot of egg," I comment.

Tim looks up guiltily. "I have a weakness for curried egg sandwiches. I don't share that fact with many people."

"I'm honored to be let into the curried egg sandwich circle of trust," I reply. "I'm also a card-carrying member of the *eggs and bread are a delicious combination* club."

Tim laughs, and I try not to let it show on my face how much I like the sound.

"What do you call a mischievous egg?" he asks me.

"What?"

"A practical yolker."

I groan. "That's a contender for the worst joke I've ever heard. Next time you want to scare a date away, I suggest going with that one."

Tim's eyes crease at the corners. "I appreciate that advice. Although I actually do aim not to scare away my dates, for the record."

"Noted."

We both finish making eggy bread rolls for ourselves, still smiling at each other.

It takes another half an hour to get twenty students ready for a bush walk. Tim uses a patient voice as he explains to Elroy that flip-flops aren't the best footwear option for a two-hour walk and then to Tabitha that high heels aren't a good choice either.

Finally, we load the students into the two vans and head up the coast to the start of the walk.

When we reach the car park, I take out one of the soccer balls from the equipment container at the back.

"All right if I take a ball with us? Thought we could play some beach soccer once we're in there."

Tim smiles. "I like your thinking."

I like everything about you.

The thought swoops into my head like an overenthusiastic seagull, but it's true.

Have I ever met someone I've instantly liked as much as I like Tim? Maybe I shouldn't pursue something physical with him because I don't often end up liking the people I hook up with. Those guys are eager to get hot and heavy with me but treat me like I'm disposable afterward.

My like of Tim continues to grow as we chat on the way into Cathedral Cove.

The students are supposed to take turns leading the group, and with Trudi happily at the back, ensuring no one falls behind, Tim and I have time to talk.

"You're really good with the students. You ever think about being a teacher?" Tim asks.

I scratch my nose. "Yeah...I actually wanted to be a PE teacher when I was growing up."

He raises his eyebrows. "What happened?"

My stomach hollows. This isn't something I enjoy talking about. "I dropped out of school and didn't have the entrance

requirements for university.”

Tim’s forehead scrunches. “I thought university is open-entry after you turn twenty?”

“It is...” I hesitate. “But when I turned twenty, other stuff got in the way.”

I’m sure Pat would’ve loved to be referred to as ‘other stuff,’ but it’s not like he’s here to complain.

My throat thickens, and I stare at the path in front of me, the fallen leaves making a thick blanket on the ground. They make a squelchy sound as I step on them.

“You could train now,” Tim says.

He’s right. I could, but Pat’s reaction when I talked about becoming a teacher echoes in my head. *I can’t imagine you as a teacher.* The idea of starting something only to fail makes me feel slightly sick.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll look into it when I get back from my OE,” I say.

OE, standing for Overseas Experience, is a rite of passage for most young New Zealanders, where we head off abroad to inflict our talents on the rest of the world.

Tim raises his eyebrows. “You’re planning on going on your OE?”

“Yeah, me and my friend, Kelsey, are going together. End of this year is the plan, and I don’t really want to delay it by studying.”

“Fair enough,” Tim says.

We reach the top of a ridge, and Tim stops to look back at Ahmed and Rosa climbing the track behind us.

“Doing a good job, guys,” he calls to them. They’re both puffing like cigarette-addicted dragons. “You’re nearly there.”

“Who was the dumbass who invented hills?” Rosa moans.

Tim smiles at her before turning back to me to resume our conversation. “So, are you going to London?”

Most young New Zealanders head to London because the UK offers us two-year working visas, and it's a great base to work while exploring Europe.

"That's the plan." I keep my voice casual.

It's hard to explain how important the concept of an OE is to me. I already feel like I've missed so many rites of passage in my life.

I dropped out of school so I didn't go to my high school ball. Didn't celebrate graduating. Didn't go to university when everyone else did, enjoying the craziness of being eighteen and surrounded by other people the same age. Instead, I worked at a gym where most people were at least a decade older than me.

So, when Kelsey asked me if I wanted to go on an OE with her, my answer was, 'hell yeah.' I'd been aimlessly wondering what the hell I should do with my life, and the idea of traveling gave me direction and something to save for.

A couple of years of kicking around Europe sounds like a great idea.

I'll already be a mature student if I choose to go to university now, so a few more years won't make a difference.

"I only lived in London for a year, but it's an awesome place," Tim says.

And so we spend the rest of our walk into Cathedral Cove talking about traveling, the places he went, and where I want to go.

I'm so intent on talking to Tim that I miss the fact we're descending into paradise. It's only when we emerge down the endless wooden steps, and I step out onto the beach, that I realize I should have been paying more attention to the scenery.

Because...this is incredible. It's like being inside a postcard.

Clear blue water laps at the white sand.

To our left, there's a natural rock formation with a vast arch, offering a glimpse of another beach on the other side. Along the end of the beach to our right is a small waterfall tumbling down the sheer rock face.

"Wow." There is really no other word to describe it.

Tim's watching my reaction, smiling.

"It's pretty amazing," he agrees.

I crouch to take off my shoes so I can feel the sand under my feet. It's soft and dry.

The students stagger down the stairs after us, and it's fun watching their reactions as they stumble out from the shade of the bush into the sparkling light.

We're a long way from South Auckland right now.

We head toward the arch in the rock because something about it just begs you to want to know what's on the other side.

"I can see why they called it after a cathedral," I say, looking at the overarching rock soaring high like the roof of a cathedral.

"Cathedral Cove probably represents a step up in naming skills compared to Hot Water Beach," Tim says.

I laugh. "Just slightly."

By the time we've walked through the arch and explored the other small beach, Trudi and the slower students have arrived on the main beach.

We head to the waterfall, and the students retreat into the small trees at the beach's edge to change into their swimwear. This leads to all kinds of antics as they mess around under the waterfall, flicking water at each other.

We have lunch and afterward start a game of beach soccer.

I'm pretty sure this must be one of the most beautiful places in the world to play soccer.

We quickly divide into teams and start to play. Tim tackles Elroy, who's been doing some fancy footwork, but he looks foolish as Tim easily takes the ball from him, dribbles it along the sand, and shoots it through the gap between the two pieces of driftwood marking the goal.

Score.

My eyebrows shoot up. Tim has soccer moves. Who knew?

“Go, sir!” Ahmed calls out.

“You just got schooled by a teacher,” Rosa shouts to Elroy.

“Bite me,” Elroy yells back.

Tim turns and looks at me, his face breaking into an enormous grin.

I grin back at him.

What other hidden talents does he have? The thought brings a hot flush to my cheeks that isn't because of the exertion or the heat of the day.

The game finally finishes in a three-all draw.

I wade into the water to wash the sand off the soccer ball. Or try to, I should say, as the sand is surprisingly resistant to removal.

I return to the beach, where Tim has flopped down in the sand.

“I'm so not fit enough for that,” he puffs.

His narrow pale feet have sand stuck to them. He's got sand up his calves as well, and it's embedded in his leg hair.

For an insane second, I want to reach down and brush it away, just to have an excuse to touch him.

I grab a handful of loose sand instead, letting it sift through my fingers, keeping my hands occupied so I don't give in to my craving to touch him.

I'm still learning the professional standards for working at a school, but I'm fairly sure groping colleagues is a no-go.

What is it about him? Attraction is a weird thing. Tim's cute, but I've hooked up with guys who are objectively far hotter. What's insane is that fucking other guys hasn't raised my pulse rate nearly as much as it spikes now when my pinky finger accidentally brushes against Tim's.

With every conversation we have, every moment we interact, my attraction ramps up another notch.

Is he attracted to me in return? There's something in his eyes when he looks at me that makes me think he might be, but equally, there seems to be a whole lot of caution there.

Tim stares at where our fingers touch but doesn't move his away from mine. Suddenly it feels like all the nerve endings in my body have migrated to that one little strip of skin where I'm touching Tim.

I wrench my mind away from the pinky touching.

Soccer. We're talking about soccer.

"You're really good. Do you play for a club?" I ask.

"I used to play some club stuff, but that was before Stella, my daughter, was born. I haven't played since."

A pulse of excitement shoots through me. "I've just joined an LGBTQ+ soccer team. You should join us."

He hesitates. "I've been thinking about joining a club again now that Stella is older."

"Oh, you should totally come along. We've only had one training so far, but they're a great group. It looks like it's going to be so much fun." I can't keep the enthusiasm out of my voice at the thought of spending more time with Tim.

Tim gives me a small smile. "I'll think about it."

* * *

That night, after dinner, we all head back down the path toward the beach, and Tim shows us the glowworms. It takes a while for our eyes to adjust to the darkness, but then suddenly,

there are hundreds of small blue-green twinkling lights on the banks lining the path.

I know listening to a guy talk about glowworms to a bunch of teenagers shouldn't be sexy. It should be about as far from sexy as possible, but there's something magical about the quality of Tim's deep voice in the darkness.

It's as if he's showing us a secret world where you can discover the most amazing things if you pay close enough attention.

When we return from the glowworms, the students go to bed without protest, but when Tim and I go to our cabin and climb into our sleeping bags, we don't sleep. Instead, we talk. I tell him about growing up with my dad in Whangarei, and he talks about his childhood in Gisborne with his older twin sisters, who took turns bossing him around.

"Are you close to your sisters now?" I ask.

"Yeah, I am. My sister, Larissa, was actually Stella's egg donor, which creates a special bond. Although I think because of that, she's actually more cautious about not overstepping the mark with Stella. Jenna's not so restrained. I'm constantly inundated with child-rearing advice from her."

"That sounds like fun," I say.

"She means well." Tim's voice is tired all of a sudden. "But it can be a bit too much sometimes. Rick's sister, Gabby, is a career woman who's single and doesn't plan to have kids, yet she's somehow an expert on raising kids and also likes to tell me what to do."

"I always wished I had siblings, but I've got to say, you're not really selling it to me."

"Nah, they're not too bad. They mean well, and the good thing about family is that they were there for me when I needed them."

My chest feels hollow because that's what I'm missing in my life. Growing up, it was only Dad and me, and since he died, I've felt like one of those boats you see come unmoored in a cyclone, drifting wherever the tides or winds will take me.

I don't have anyone in my life to keep me anchored.

"I'm glad you have them," I whisper.

"They help out a lot with Stella, which I'm grateful for. It's hard being a single parent. I question myself constantly about whether I'm doing the right thing." Tim hesitates for a moment. "I can't help thinking she's missing out, only having one parent."

"I was raised by a single dad, and I never thought I was missing out," I say fiercely. "My dad was amazing."

Tim glances over at me, and in the dim light, I can see sympathy all over his face. "How did your dad pass away?" he asks.

"Pancreatic cancer. It was swift and brutal."

"I can't imagine coping with that at age sixteen."

A humorless laugh escapes me. "I don't think I can actually claim that I did cope. Not well, anyway. I went into an impressive tailspin."

"What got you out of it?"

"Um...I got myself into a situation where I knew he would have been disappointed in me, and when that ended, it snapped me out of everything. I realized how much I was destroying my life, and that is the last thing he would have wanted for me." My voice chokes off at the end.

"I didn't know your dad, but I find it difficult to believe he wouldn't be proud of you now, Jamie."

I want to move the subject on from me and my mistakes, so I ask the question burning in my mind.

"What was your husband like?"

Tim sucks in a breath.

"Sorry," I bumble. "You don't have to answer that."

"No, it's okay." He pauses for a few seconds. "He was kind," he says finally.

I have no doubt about that. I can't imagine Tim being with someone who wasn't amazing.

"He had one of those over-large personalities," Tim continues. "And was one of those people you noticed the moment he walked in the room, but deep down, he was a genuine, kind person."

"I really think kindness is underrated as a quality people look for in a partner," I say quietly.

I know from firsthand experience what happens when the person you're with isn't fundamentally good.

Unfortunately, sometimes by the time you realize the person you're with isn't all that nice, you are too far embedded in the relationship to easily escape.

"Maybe we should take lame one-eyed donkeys into clubs with us and see how people react and use that as the criteria for who to take home," I say.

Tim laughs, and I can't help but grin broadly. I feel this absurd combination of happiness and pride every time I make Tim laugh.

"I'm thinking there must be an ass joke to be claimed in that, but damn if I can find it," he says.

"You only get my ass if you're nice to my ass?" I suggest.

"And you found it."

"Finding the lewd joke is my superpower," I say.

I hear him rummaging around, and for a second, the light from his phone flashes.

"It's after one o'clock," he says.

"I guess we'd better go to sleep," I say reluctantly.

"Yeah."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

I lie in the dark, but despite the full-on day and the fact it's so late, I feel wired.

Tim shuffles, his sleeping bag rustling. Is he still awake? Should I say something to him?

I'm not imagining this, right? This thing between us? It can't be only in my head.

I'm not sure what to do with all this *like* I have for Tim. I like him, and I want him, which is probably a natural combination when you think about it, but for me, it's weird.

I've mainly had hookups with guys, sometimes friends-with-benefits arrangements. My only relationship experience was with Pat, but that was the definition of fucked up.

My like for Tim is what's stopping me straight-up propositioning him. I don't want to lose the start of this friendship.

It feels too important for that.

That's my last thought before I drift off to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, we don't have time to do anything but have breakfast, clean the cabins, and get the students and gear loaded into the vans and trailers.

Tim and I talk the entire drive home. You'd think we would have run out of things to say to each other, but we definitely haven't.

Our conversation is so different from the polite one we had on the way here. We drift between talking about our families, school, and sports. I even hassle him about his taste in radio stations, and he mocks my playlist.

And we laugh.

Despite how much time we've spent together during the last three days, I feel unsatisfied when we arrive at school, knowing Tim and I are about to go our separate ways.

I want to keep chatting with him.

We unload the vans and reunite each student with the right luggage. The entire time, I watch Tim from the corner of my eye, trying to work up the courage to ask the next question.

He says goodbye to Trudi, slings his bag onto his shoulder, and comes across the car park to me.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you on Monday,” he says with a smile.

“So, um...” I scrape my foot over some loose gravel in the car park. “Can I grab your number? So I can message you about the soccer team?”

Tim bites his lip. His full pink lips are framed by a neatly groomed beard that looks soft to the touch.

He rattles off his number.

“Hang on a sec. I need to actually get my phone out.” I scramble to pull my phone out of my pocket.

A blush tinges his cheeks. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

He repeats his number, slower this time, and I input it into my phone.

I lift my gaze to his. “So, it’s okay if I message you?”

Tim’s eyes are a vivid blue as he stares back at me.

“Definitely,” he says.

Chapter 6

Tim

I pick up Stella from Jenna's house. As we drive home, she tells me all about the last few days at school and how much fun it was to play with her cousins.

"Dad, can I have a brother or sister?" she asks as I turn the corner toward our house.

My mind immediately goes to the two embryos stored in a freezer somewhere. I can't bring myself to donate or destroy them, so I continue paying the annual storage fee.

Even if I thought I could cope with another child by myself, the ethics of having one of Rick's children after his death is morally ambiguous at best.

About six months before he died, we talked about starting the surrogate process again to give Stella a sibling. The conversation petered out in the chaos of working and looking after a young child, and we never got around to making a firm decision about the timing.

Had he lived, I'm certain Stella would have a sibling by now.

My chest tightens at that thought.

It's not just Rick I lost that day. I lost the rest of the family we'd planned on. Stella lost the chance to be a big sister.

"I really want an older sister like Carlee," Stella says.

I manage a laugh. "Well, even if I have another child, they would be younger than you."

In the rear-view mirror, I can see her screwing up her nose at that concept.

We pull up in the driveway, and Stella runs toward the house in her eagerness to be reunited with her toys, and thankfully, that's the end of that conversation.

It's amazing that we've only been away for three days, but the house feels unlived in, unloved.

I turn on the ducted air conditioning to freshen it up.

Rick and I brought this house a year before he died. It was far bigger than what we needed, but Rick had gotten a promotion and wanted to use the extra money to upgrade to our forever home. A place where Stella could grow up, with space for more children in the future.

He favored flashy modern homes. I liked places with character, so this renovated villa was the perfect compromise. It pushed us financially at the time, but Rick was determined to set up our life properly.

Luckily Rick was a sound financial planner. His life insurance had paid off the mortgage, meaning I can still afford to live here.

I turn on the TV to inject some life into the place as I rattle around in the large kitchen, making dinner for Stella and me. I used to enjoy cooking when I had another adult to cook for, but Stella turns up her nose at anything remotely exotic, so tonight, I just go for a simple pasta.

After dinner, Stella and I watch *The Amazing Race* together. As Stella laughs at the teams trying to complete a challenge involving giant balls and foam, I fiddle with the edge of the cushion. I picked these cushions out with Rick, both of us wandering cluelessly around the department store, blinking in bewilderment at the range of cushions available.

“What do you look for in a cushion, anyway?” Rick had asked eventually, running a hand through his dark hair, leaving one tuft spiked at the back.

“I've got no idea.”

“You know, we should have got one of our sisters to decorate for us. They would have loved it.”

“But choosing one of them would immediately offend the others, so we’d have to involve them all, and you can imagine what that would be like.”

Rick broke out in a grin. “We could sell tickets to the event. It would become one of those events like Running with the Bulls, where spectators risk life and limb getting close to our sisters as they fight about polka dots versus plaid or whatever the hell people care about with interior decorating.”

I’d laughed and picked up a cushion at random from the shelf. “Lime green?”

Rick had quirked an eyebrow. “Why the hell not?”

So we’d added four lime-green cushions to our cart and then hightailed it to the checkout.

In hindsight, lime green wasn’t the best choice for our pale-blue leather lounge suite.

But I’m never getting rid of them now. They’re a reminder of how Rick made something as boring as cushion shopping fun.

After Stella’s bathed and tucked in bed, I clean the kitchen, then find I can’t settle into anything. I half-heartedly try to watch more TV, but I find myself flicking between channels, nothing holding my interest.

I realize the reason I’m restless.

I miss Jamie.

How crazy is that?

We’ve spent nearly every moment together for the last three days, and now I feel like something is wrong, not having him to talk to.

My phone beeps with a message. I’m expecting it to be Jenna or Larissa with organizational details about Gabby’s party on Sunday,

But the message is from an unfamiliar number.

Thought you might appreciate this.

At the bottom is a link to an article about New Zealand's weirdest place names.

I laugh out loud.

My phone beeps again.

And because I can always take it to a lewd level...check out this place.

And he sends me a Google map location of a place called Hump Ridge Track.

I laugh again before replying.

So good to see you're doing useful things with your time...

And then I quickly follow up.

If you're going with lewd, I can't believe you missed this opportunity.

And I send him a Google map link to a place called Bald Knob.

He replies a minute or so later with a place called Nervous Knob.

I send him a link to a location just north of Dunedin called Shag Point.

He sends me a GIF of someone crying with laughter.

How did I not know about this place? Those South Islanders get up to some weird shit.

I quickly send a reply.

Here's some more information about the residents there and what they get up to.

And I send him a link to an article on the New Zealand Cormorant bird, commonly known as a shag.

Jamie's reply comes back almost instantly.

I don't think I have ever been so disappointed to read an article.

He makes me smile.

My phone beeps with another message from him.

For that, you deserve to go to this level of naming.

I frown when I see the location he's sent me is the Te Urewera national park because I don't quite get it. But a quick Google informs me that Te Urewera translates to *the burnt penis* after a Māori tale of a chief who rolled too close to a fire while sleeping.

I type out a single-word response.

Ouch.

I know, right?

Somehow our conversation morphs into talking about the worst injuries we've ever had. I learn about the time Jamie broke his arm after falling off a trampoline, and I tell him about fracturing my finger when I caught it in a car door.

It's not until I start to yawn that I realize it's ten-thirty, and I've spent two hours messaging Jamie.

Doesn't he have anything better to do than message me? It's Friday night. He's young, gorgeous, and single. Why on earth is he spending his evening messaging a thirty-four-year-old widowed science teacher?

Maybe he sees me as a charity case.

That thought sobers me.

It's obvious that beneath his gorgeous exterior, Jamie is a really lovely guy. He's also slightly wounded. He's been through a lot for his age, losing his dad and going through a difficult time after that.

Maybe it's his experience with his dad that makes him so empathetic to me. Does he understand how lonely I am? Is that why he's devoted his evening to making me smile?

I don't want to take advantage of his good nature.

Equally, I can't bring myself to end our conversation. The little thrill that shoots through me every time my phone pings

makes me feel the most alive I've felt in this house for years.

* * *

Nothing makes me miss Rick as much as a family event.

I love my family, I really do, but they can be hard work sometimes. Especially now.

As I walk into Gabby's birthday party, I brace myself for the onslaught of well-meaning relatives.

There are only so many sympathetic head tilts accompanying the 'How are you doing, Tim?' I can deal with it for one day before I want to run away and find a commune to join.

Gabby was...is Rick's sister—I haven't figured out the correct phrasing for when she's still alive, but he isn't—but my sisters are attending the birthday barbeque too because, over the years, our families have blended into one indistinguishable mass.

Sure enough, the first person to bear down on Stella and me when we enter Gabby's backyard is my sister, Jenna.

"Oh, don't you look cute, Stella," she says. I have to agree. Stella looks exceptionally cute in her favorite yellow party dress with embroidered bees and butterflies, her dark hair braided into two separate plaits.

I nudge Stella. "Why don't you give Aunty Gabby her present?"

Stella runs across the lawn to the edge of the large deck where Gabby clutches a glass of wine, engaged in a serious-looking conversation with one of her colleagues from her law firm.

As soon as she sees Stella, Gabby breaks off her conversation, puts her wineglass down on the outdoor table, and crouches to envelop Stella in a huge hug.

I can't help smiling. I like watching Gabby with Stella. Gabby is a few years older than Rick and incredibly focused

on her career, to the extent that she's never married or had children. She can come across as abrasive and abrupt when you don't know her, and those personality traits are still present even when you do.

From the first moment of holding Stella when she was a newborn, I've seen a softer side of Gabby, which has made me like her a lot more. I remind myself of this side every time she tries to instruct me in her lawyer's voice.

I follow Stella's path across the lawn to the birthday girl.

"Tim." Gabby air-kisses my cheeks, leaving behind a whiff of expensive perfume.

"Happy birthday," I say.

"Thank you. I've reached the age where it's slightly gaudy to celebrate birthdays, don't you think? But I thought it was a great chance to see everyone before I leave for my trip."

Gabby is about to head off overseas for a four-month combination work and pleasure trip. She initially booked this trip three years ago but canceled it after Rick's death.

"You should always take every excuse for a party," I say.

"Is there going to be cake?" Stella asks.

Gabby smiles down at Stella, making her look ten years younger. "I think I heard rumors there might be some cake," she says.

Stella's attention doesn't stay on her aunty and the prospect of cake for very long.

"Carlee!" She spots her teenage cousin and runs off across the lawn toward her.

"Should I feel offended that I'm so easily usurped?" Gabby asks.

"I don't think you're ever going to have the cool factor of a thirteen-year-old again. Sorry, Gabby," I reply.

"What a dent to the ego. I'll try to find it within myself to cope with that reality." The way her face twists into a self-mocking smile makes my stomach lurch. Rick used to pull a

similar face to that. I exhale slowly, trying to get control of my emotions. It's these little moments that swipe you sometimes when you least expect them.

A newcomer approaches. "Happy Birthday, Gabby."

"Thanks, Kelvin."

Kelvin has the preppy look of one of her law colleagues, although I'm fairly sure I haven't met him before.

He turns to me with an expectant smile on his face.

"This is...my...uh...brother-in-law, Tim."

It appears Gabby also struggles with the past-present nature of relationships.

Kelvin shakes my hand, then turns to Gabby. "I didn't realize you had a sister."

For a second, Gabby's composure slips, and she clutches her wine glass tighter. Although she tries hard to hide it from me, I know how much Rick's death devastated her. Rick's mother passed away when Rick and Gabby were in their twenties, and their dad died only a year before Rick's accident. Stella and I are the only family Gabby has left.

"I was married to her brother, actually," I say to Kelvin. "But he passed away three years ago."

And the award for best conversation stopper once again goes to me. I really should start a trophy cabinet.

I've learned the only way through is to brazen it out, acting like you haven't just dropped a nuclear bomb into an innocent conversation.

"So, do you work at Johnson and associates too?" I ask Kelvin.

"Yes, I'm in equities." Kelvin grasps the new topic with enthusiasm. "I've recently joined them. I was in mergers in my previous firm, but I'm really excited about this new direction."

I nod along knowledgeably, even though I have very little idea of what Kelvin is talking about. The legal system baffles my mind.

Kelvin and I continue to chat, mainly about the weather and how the Auckland rugby team, the Greens, are going this season, before I make my excuses.

I head across the perfect lawn to where my sisters stand in the shade of a large walnut tree. Stella is having a handstand competition with Max, Jenna's eleven-year-old.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

I have to resist the urge to get it out immediately. Instead, I count to ten before I pull it out of my pocket.

I'm not sure who I think is monitoring my behavior, and I instantly undo any points I got for restraint with the large smile that curves my lips when I see who the message is from.

Jamie.

The man I've spent nearly the entire weekend messaging.

It's ludicrous how much my heart races every time I see his name on my screen.

How's the party going?

I quickly tap out a response.

It has alcohol and the promise of cake, so I'm not complaining.

What about a clown? All good parties should have a clown.

And he sends me a GIF of Pennywise from Stephen King's *It*.

I smile as I type out my reply.

Well, there are lots of lawyers here, so I'm not sure if the presence of a psycho clown is required.

Jamie's reply comes back almost instantly.

What do you call 1000 lawyers at the bottom of an ocean?

What?

A good start.

I laugh out loud at that.

When I look up, I realize I've almost reached my sisters, who look at me curiously.

"Who are you messaging?" Jenna asks.

It's a sad statement about my life when the fact I'm messaging someone is worth mentioning.

I stash my phone back in my pocket before I answer her. "Um...a colleague of mine. The sports coordinator at school. He's trying to talk me into joining his soccer team."

"I think that's a great idea," Jenna says.

"I don't know. The team trains on Wednesday nights, and it finishes late. Then there's a game on Sunday. It's quite a commitment."

"I can have Stella on a Wednesday night, no problem. She can stay the night, and I can drop her to school in the morning," Jenna offers.

I frown. "That's a big imposition on you."

"I really think it's a good idea if you carve some time out for yourself, Tim."

"I agree," Larissa says.

I'm aware that for my sisters, I'm a problem that needs to be fixed. I can almost imagine they have a group chat, maybe one that includes Gabby, titled something like 'Ideas to make Tim happy again.'

Perhaps they're right. Maybe I do have to start taking the time to do something for myself.

And having an excuse to spend more time with Jamie? I try to ignore how my heart hammers a happy tune at the thought.

* * *

On Monday morning, I have a weird anticipation as I go about my morning routine.

After I drop Stella off, I find myself humming in the car as I drive the rest of the way to school.

My mood remains upbeat as I potter around my classroom, setting up experiments for my Year 10 science class. We're doing a unit on forces, which can be dry and boring, so I try to do as much hands-on practical work as possible to demonstrate the principles.

"Hey." A voice startles me from my focus.

Jamie's standing at the door to my classroom, looking even more gorgeous than I remember him. How is that possible?

I clear my throat. "Hey."

"You look busy," he says as he sidles into the room. He's wearing track pants and a hoodie, a standard sports coordinator outfit, yet somehow he looks like he's stepped off a catwalk.

"I'm trying to set up some experiments for first period," I say.

"You want some help?"

"Sure. That would be great."

He smiles at me, showing off his perfect smile with straight white teeth and his dimple, and I can't help smiling back.

The thing is, I could handle my attraction to Jamie when I thought he was just a gorgeous beefcake. Now that I know some of the substance underneath, it's much harder.

As he helps me set up ramps and pulleys, it's impossible not to sneak glances at him.

He catches me looking and gives me another smile, and for a moment, we're frozen in place as if his eyes have the power to immobilize me.

I blink and wrench my eyes away.

My fingers shake as I set up the Cartesian diver experiment.

Shit. What should I say? It's crazy to be tongue-tied around him, given we've spent the weekend dipping into each other's minds.

Luckily, Jamie isn't suffering from the same dilemma I am.

"So, did Stella crash after the party?" he asks.

I seize on the conversation topic like it's a life ring tossed into a stormy sea. "Spectacularly. She fell asleep on the couch while I was making dinner."

Jamie grins. "I was that type of kid too. One Christmas, I crawled into the closet in the middle of the afternoon and fell asleep. It took Dad an hour to find me."

"Stella's never pulled that kind of stunt, thankfully."

"You wait. She's got a lot of years to pull all kinds of crazy stunts."

"Thanks so much for reminding me of that."

"Anytime. That's what I'm here for."

"I thought you were here for the bad text jokes, actually."

"It turns out I'm a man of many talents," he says.

My breath hitches because I don't doubt Jamie has many talents I have yet to see, and my mind has already spent far too much time contemplating those.

"I'm sure you are." I try to keep my tone neutral as I reach for a wooden ruler.

Jamie reaches for it at the same time, his fingers brushing up against mine. My whole skin tingles.

He jerks his hand back like he's been scorched, his breathing coming in short pants.

His reaction makes me swallow. Hard.

Because as impossible as it is to believe that Jamie is interested in me, I'm fairly sure I'm not the only one feeling this thing between us.

“If you tie the balloons on the back of that toy car...” I say as I set up a large magnet a foot away.

Jamie steps back to consider the setup, a frown line marring his perfect forehead. “So, what’s the aim of this experiment? What are you trying to prove?”

I meet his incredible eyes. “That sometimes the force of attraction is greater than the resistance.”

Chapter 7

Jamie

I have it bad.

You know how your phone tells you how much screen time you've had in a week and whether it's increased or decreased compared to the previous week? I'm extremely lucky there's no way to measure how much Tim time my brain has been engaged in recently because I think someone would stage an intervention.

It's been a week since camp, and we've messaged almost constantly. I've gone to school early every day to help him set up experiments for his classes.

I also might have memorized his timetable and found excuses to be in the science department during his free periods to drop by his office.

I'm not sure how it's possible, but every moment I spend with Tim, I like him more.

Tim's decided to come along to training for Rainbow Rascals, the LGBTQ+ soccer team, and it feels like I've got an effervescent tablet fizzing in my stomach

More time to spend with Tim. Even better, time with Tim when he's in soccer shorts.

Tim's nervous about soccer because it's been so long since he played. On Tuesday night, he sends me a GIF of a soccer player going to strike the ball, missing completely, slipping in the mud, and ending up on his back.

I'm worried this is going to be me.

I sink back on my couch, preparing to engage in yet another evening of messaging Tim, which has been my main extracurricular activity of late.

After a quick Google search, I send him one in return of Lionel Messi scoring an incredible goal.

More like this is going to be you.

Haha, so no expectations then?? Maybe this?

It's one of a player going to score a goal, and not only does he kick the ball wide of the goal, but he also runs into the post.

More like this...

I send him a video of Cristiano Ronaldo scoring an incredibly beautiful goal.

Tim reacts with a laughing face emoji, then quickly follows it up with another message.

Oh shit, Stella's calling out to me. Be back soon.

I love how Tim doesn't leave me hanging and gives me these small glimpses into his life.

I try to imagine Tim in his house checking on his daughter. He's got a photo of her as his screensaver on his phone, so I know she's got the same brilliant blue eyes as him. He's explained that Rick is Stella's biological father and his sister, Larissa, is her egg donor.

I fidget with my phone.

So far, I've managed to resist the cyberstalking urge, but right now, waiting for Tim to message me back, my resistance is low.

So I give in and start Googling.

Tim's not on TikTok, but I wouldn't expect him to be. The idea of Tim engaging in TikTok antics makes me smile.

But I find his old profile on Facebook. It doesn't look like he's updated it in years.

I stare at the cover image. Tim's standing at an altar dressed in a tux next to a good-looking guy dressed similarly.

They're both laughing.

I can't define the feeling inside me as I stare at Rick.

Rick is conventionally good-looking, slightly taller than Tim, with a straight nose and brown hair, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he laughs with his husband.

Tim said he was kind.

He looks kind.

A queasy feeling starts in my stomach.

Is it weird to feel jealous of someone who is dead?

But jealousy isn't my main emotion right now.

Seeing the carefree laughter on a younger Tim's face stirs up other feelings inside me. It makes me realize how sad he is now, even when he's laughing. I've never seen him look as relaxed and happy as he does in that photo.

Shit. I'm actually regretting looking at this now. I have a horrible feeling of inadequacy. No matter how hard I try, Current Tim will never be as happy as Past Tim.

"What are you looking at?" Damn, Kelsey's good at the sneaking thing. She's behind me, looking over my shoulder.

"Ah..."

Her face morphs into a frown. "Who's that?"

"A teacher I work with."

I quickly exit Tim's profile. Shit, it's one thing to engage in stalkerish behavior. It's another to be caught red-handed.

Kelsey plops on the couch next to me and gives me one of her intense stares. That's the thing about Kelsey. She's known me since we were twelve. I crashed at her family's place for six months after my dad died, and she's the closest thing to family I have. She's probably the only person in my life who cares enough to give me the look she's giving me now.

"Is that the guy you've been messaging constantly?" she asks.

I clear my throat. "Yeah."

Kelsey continues to stare at me. “How old is he?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Early thirties?”

My words settle between us.

She shakes her head. “What are you doing, Jamie?”

“I really, really like him,” I blurt.

She wrinkles her nose. “I thought you learned your lesson. You’re not trying to fill the void your dad left behind with another older guy, are you?” Kelsey dealt with the fallout from everything with Pat and listened to me endlessly agonizing, so I guess she has a right to ask.

“He’s nothing like Pat.” My words come out defensively, but they’re true.

Pat, with his smooth lines and cocky confidence, compared to Tim, with his genuine smile and heart of gold. No comparison.

Tim is one of the kindest people I know. Pat turned out to be...not kind.

“What’s he like then?” she asks.

And okay, she probably doesn’t want Tim’s life story, but it comes burbling out of me. How he was married, but then his husband died, and now he’s raising Stella by himself. I talk about how sad he seems sometimes and how much I love it when I make him smile.

“Wow. You really do like this guy.”

“Yeah. I do,” I say.

Kelsey’s frown is back. “But he’s got a kid. He’s at a completely different life stage from you. I thought you wanted to come traveling with me.”

“I do. Of course, I do.”

“So, what, you’re looking at Tim as someone to pass the time with until you leave?”

My throat thickens. What exactly do I want with Tim? I want to touch him because every moment I spend with him

makes me crave him more.

But I don't think this thing with Tim is just physical. It feels like more than that. Way more.

I glance down at my phone, which I'm still gripping, waiting for Tim's next message.

"I'm not sure," I say honestly.

* * *

My conversation with Kelsey stays in my mind the next day.

What do I want with Tim? Where the hell can it lead? I'm leaving at the end of the year.

I've never resisted hooking up with someone I'm attracted to before. Normally it's a straightforward scenario. I find someone hot. I flirt and suggest getting together. My success rate for this method hovers around the ninety-nine percentile, so I've never really been forced to change things up.

But with Tim, I'm treading carefully, like I'm wearing clown shoes in a minefield. I don't want to ruin the friendship that's sprung up between us.

That night when I arrive at soccer training and see him on the field, it's like one of those science experiments I've been helping him set up for his class. I'm drawn to him by an invisible force. You might not be able to see it, but it's definitely real.

"What happened to your glasses?" I ask when I reach him.

He glances at me and smiles. Holy shit, Tim in his soccer gear, with those slinky white shorts and a sports shirt molded to his lean chest, makes my cock twitch.

I have to stuff my hands in my pockets to stop myself from reaching out to touch him.

"I wear contacts when I'm playing sports," Tim answers my question. "It's easier."

Without his glasses to hide behind, his brilliant blue eyes are on full display.

It turns out I've never fully understood what is meant by eye contact before. As Tim and I stare at each other, I suddenly get it. Even though we're not touching, the intensity of our gazes locking together makes it feel like we are.

"Hey, Jamie!" Scott, the guy organizing the team, comes up to us.

I rip my gaze away from Tim to greet Scott.

"Hey, Scott, this is Tim, the colleague I messaged you about."

"Hey, Tim, nice to meet you." Scott sticks out his hand, and Tim shakes it.

Scott turns back to me with a flirtatious look in his eyes. "So, Jamie, after our last practice, I'm looking forward to seeing more of your ball control skills."

Scott is tall, dark-haired, and buff. Totally the kind of guy I'd normally go for. At the last practice I was at two weeks ago, he flirted outrageously with me, and I reciprocated. But that was before camp. Now, in front of Tim, it seems wrong to engage in any kind of flirting.

"I'm not all that good," I mumble to the ground. "You should see Tim's ball control. He ran rings around a bunch of teenagers last week when we were at school camp."

Scott's eyebrows shoot up.

"I'm incredibly rusty," Tim protests. "Think of me as the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*."

I laugh. "You realize you've left yourself open for a lewd comment about lubing?"

Tim chuckles. "Only you would go for that. I guess I should be grateful you didn't go for the has-no-heart angle."

"Only because I'd be leaving myself open for the Scarecrow, has-no-brain comparison," I say, and Tim laughs even harder.

Scott's eyes bounce between Tim and me, his forehead creasing.

"Anyway, come over and meet the other guys," he says to Tim.

Tim and I obediently follow Scott over to the group of guys, most of who I met last time, and introduces him to everyone. And then we begin.

Practice is loads of fun. We do some drills first, then divide into two teams and play a quick game of seven-on-seven. It's a diverse group of people, both in age and ability. Maybe it's because we're all part of the rainbow community, but everyone is supportive of each other. No one gets too highly competitive or takes things too seriously.

I watch proudly as Tim does a great run down the left-hand side of the field before sending the perfect cross to Declan, who hammers the ball home into the back of the net.

Tim's puffing as I run over to congratulate him.

"That's a total Ronaldo move if I've ever seen one," I say.

He gives me a wide smile, and my heart flips.

Shit. If I'm trying to tamp down my crush, maybe spending more time with Tim isn't the best idea.

After practice, we go to The CrossBar, a sports pub conveniently situated across the road from the clubrooms.

Tim sits across the table from me. He's next to Seb, a slim cute guy with a shy smile. Damn. I didn't think through this side of recruiting Tim to an LGBTQ+ soccer team—that there would be other single guys here. Guys who would notice how cute Tim is. Guys potentially better suited to him than I am.

I pretend I'm not eavesdropping as Tim asks Seb what he does for a living.

"I'm a lecturer at Auckland University," Seb replies.

"What department?"

“Biological sciences.”

“Oh, cool, I’m a biology teacher at a high school in South Auckland.”

Seb’s face breaks into a genuine smile. “If you ever want to bring your students in to see our lab facilities, just let me know. I should be able to organize something.”

Declan pulls me into a conversation about soccer tactics. I try to contribute while keeping half an ear on Tim and Seb’s discussion, but they don’t progress beyond a professional conversation about careers in the biological sciences.

I glance around the pub, trying to work out how to insert myself into Tim and Seb’s conversation when the back of someone standing at the bar catches my eye. Dark curly hair. Solid build.

Pat.

My breath catches in my throat.

Shit.

He turns so I can see his profile, and my breath rushes out of me.

It’s not Pat. My mind has tricked me like this so many times during the past few years.

Besides, why would Pat be in a pub in South Auckland? He lives on the North Shore, or at least he did when I knew him, so he’s not likely to slum it down here.

I met Pat at the gym in my hometown of Whangarei. Back then, the gym I worked at was one of my favorite scouting grounds for guys to hook up with. I got to see them in skimpy clothes, what they looked like huffing and grunting, and honestly, it normally didn’t take much hinting to get them to agree to some other exertion involving puffing and grunting.

Pat came in as a casual visitor. I watched him set up on the leg press, and I deliberately used the rowing machine next to him.

Pat had looked at my body as I worked out beside him, but then you could almost see him beating himself up for looking, screaming a very loud and clear message.

He was closeted.

The arrogant nineteen-year-old me liked the challenge of a closeted guy.

After I'd gotten off the machine, I'd used the kettlebells by the mirror, in Pat's direct line of sight, so he could see me working out and multiple reflections of me.

He'd been wiping the machine down when I'd sauntered over to him.

"Hey, how's it going?"

He'd looked up at me, then looked away immediately. "Good," he said.

"I haven't seen you here before," I said.

"I don't live here. I'm only here for work."

"You staying at the Lancewood?"

He blinked at me. "How do you know that?"

I shrugged. "It's the closest hotel. I'm quite familiar with the Lancewood. I've spent some quality time there." I gave him a wink.

His breath quickened.

I leaned forward, lowering my voice into the husky range. "You want to tell me your room number? I could come by tonight, and we could have some fun."

His eyes widened.

"Ah...no," he said. He backed away from me like I was something dangerous and headed straight to the changing rooms.

As he left, he threw a look over his shoulder, and I couldn't help grinning.

He'd be back.

Sure enough, a week later, Pat came to the gym again.

And this time, after another round of outrageous flirting, when I asked what room he was in, he told me the number.

Someone clangs a glass of beer on the table, and suddenly, I'm back in the present, memories of Pat fading.

I immediately turn toward Tim. Somehow seeing a Pat look-alike has made me want Tim's reassurance, to remind myself there are truly nice guys around.

He catches my eye and smiles at me, and I smile back.

After one drink, everyone makes moves to go home. Tim heads to the restroom, and I'm hovering by the entrance, not wanting to leave without saying goodbye to him, when Scott approaches me.

"Hey, Jamie, do you want to hang out sometime?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Sometime?"

He gives me a charming smile. "We could hang out right now if you want."

I know Scott's type. I know it all too well. He has playboy stamped all over him.

I could go home with Scott now and have a good time. Maybe even a great time. There would be no expectations, nothing besides two guys letting off some steam.

It has been a bit of a dry spell for me.

But I don't want to. It's not Scott's touch I'm craving right now.

"Um..." Shit, I'm not used to knocking someone back, certainly not someone who looks like Scott. I'm struggling for the right words when a movement catches my eye.

Tim emerges from the restroom and heads toward our recently vacated table. His forehead scrunches.

"Tim," I call, and he turns toward me, breaking out in a smile as he changes his direction toward us.

I turn my attention back to Scott. “Sorry, I’m not really up for hanging out right now,” I say quickly.

Scott’s bemused smile plays on his face as he watches Tim approach.

“No prizes for guessing why.” His voice is low. Before I can scramble to reply, he gives me a good-natured clap on the shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

Chapter 8

Tim

It's lunchtime, and I'm on duty. Duty has to be one of the worst parts of teaching, patrolling the school grounds like a wannabe cop, trying to track down any students getting up to mischief.

Today, it's not too bad because I'm on duty on the school fields, and Jamie is running a touch rugby tournament. So I get to see him in action, organizing students and refereeing games. He's in his element, a natural leader the students instinctively respect.

Jamie has a swarm of mainly female student admirers who follow him everywhere. Today he's using them to boost the numbers of the touch tournament. Students who wouldn't normally be seen doing anything athletic are suddenly racing around the field, trying to tag the person with the ball.

All because they can't refuse Jamie anything.

Not that I can judge them too harshly.

Annie stands next to me and watches for a few moments, a small smile on her face.

"He's so good," she says. "We got lucky with him."

"Yeah, you did." I try to keep my voice neutral.

"It's a pity he's only planning to stay for the year. Mind you, the good ones never last in this job."

My stomach hollows at the thought of Jamie leaving.

It's hard to believe Jamie's only been at school for a month. That it's only been two weeks since camp. He's already had such an oversized effect on my life.

I've never fallen into a friendship as fast as I've fallen into this one.

The warning bell for the end of lunch rings, and Jamie blows a whistle to end the games.

"Great job, guys," he says to the students. "Now go get changed and get to class before the second bell and before I have your teachers coming for me with pitchforks."

I wait until the students have obligingly scattered before I approach him.

"I'm not sure if pitchforks are the go-to weapon for most teachers," I say.

A sheen of sweat glistens on his forehead, which makes his already beautiful skin glow even more.

He flashes me one of his stunning smiles. I will never stop marveling over how beautiful this man is.

"What is the go-to weapon for a science teacher then?" he asks

"Detention slips. Or maybe making you copy out the periodic table."

Jamie laughs as he starts to collect the bibs the students left scattered behind. "Equally scary concepts. Remind me to never piss you off."

"I'd come up with a different set of punishments for you," I say.

He snaps his head up to look at me, his eyes widening.

I replay my words, and my cheeks heat.

Shit.

It appears this is what happens when you haven't had sex in three years. You make inappropriate comments while you're at work.

“Here, let me help you.” I bend down to help him, partly to hide my red face but also because it’s only fair as he was in the science department the period before lunch, lending an extra set of hands for a biology experiment with my Year 13 class.

As I pick up the bibs, I suddenly realize if Jamie was busy helping me right before lunch and has spent the entire lunch period running around coaching touch rugby, he probably hasn’t eaten.

“Did you have any lunch?” I ask.

Jamie looks up from where he’s stuffing bibs into a bag. “Nah, I didn’t have time to grab anything. I’ll be okay until after school.”

The bell rings to signal the end of lunch.

I have a free period next and a pile of marking waiting on my desk, but first, I head to the school’s canteen. They’ve officially closed, but I knock on the door and talk nicely to Elena, who runs the canteen.

Then, armed with an egg sandwich, I head back to where Jamie is packing up the last of the cones.

I place the sandwich on the grass next to him.

“You need to eat.” I somehow manage to sound like a crotchety grandmother, which, in retrospect, probably isn’t my most endearing tone.

Jamie looks up, those incredible patchwork eyes crinkling into a grin. “I’m not sure you can tell me I’m a growing boy at my age.”

“It’s curried egg and salad,” I try to make my voice enticing.

His grin widens. “You really know my weak spots.”

“I didn’t realize you had any weak spots,” I counter.

“I’m not sure if you’ve done a thorough investigation of all my spots quite yet,” he says, and my stomach flutters with the extra edge to his grin.

Okay, at least I'm not the only one making slightly inappropriate comments in the workplace.

"How's the pack up going?" Annie's coming across the field toward us, which is good because it breaks the moment between Jamie and me.

My heart hammers as I stoop down to pick up the last cones.

As much as I try to insist to myself that Jamie and I are just friends, I'm aware there's something else simmering beneath our interactions. It's like a pot of water, bubbling away incessantly, and every time I check the temperature, it's grown even hotter.

What's going to happen when the pot overflows?

* * *

The next evening is soccer practice.

Jenna's happy to have Stella overnight again, so I feel freer than usual when I pull into the car park. I'm looking forward to kicking the ball around with a great group of guys, then having a beer in the pub afterward. Simple, grown-up pleasures that have been missing from my life for the past few years.

I get out of my car just as Scott climbs out of his expensive Lexus next to me.

"Hiya, Tim," he says cheerfully.

I try to match Scott's level of enthusiasm, but it's difficult. Scott was blatantly flirting with Jamie last week. He's the kind of guy I imagine Jamie with: tall, muscular, handsome, confident. From the conversations in the pub last week, I picked up he's into property development. Judging by his car, he's obviously successful.

He comes across as slightly too arrogant for my tastes, but I imagine most men would have a hard time resisting him.

I walk with Scott to the group on the field already kicking a ball around. Jamie's golden head is in the thick of them, and my heart pounds. It's a nonsensical reaction, given we saw each other at school today and spent most of the afternoon messaging each other after school.

Surely the amount of time I spend with Jamie should mean I'm building up some immunity to him?

But when he looks up and sees me, the grin that lights up his face has my heart knocking against my chest wall like it wants to leave my body and go straight to Jamie.

Jamie wanders to the edge of the group to greet Scott and me.

"Hey, Jamie," Scott says.

"Hi." Jamie gives Scott a cursory smile before looking at me. "How was Stella's dance lesson? No more incidents with The Wicked Witch of the West?"

My throat thickens with emotion. When we messaged this afternoon, I'd told him Stella was reluctant to go to her dance lesson because her teacher had yelled at her during the previous class. I also might have confided my secret name for her dance teacher, an elderly lady who is supposed to be one of the best dance teachers around but has an uncanny resemblance to a *Wizard of Oz* character in both looks and temperament. The only thing missing is the green skin.

The fact this stunning guy is concerned about my daughter's dance lesson blows me away.

"No, the Wicked Witch behaved herself today, thankfully," I say.

Training begins. Jamie slots in beside me naturally as we run around the field.

I'm hyperaware of him, of his breathing, of the way he moves toward the ball, the way his muscles flex under his shirt.

Like last time, we play a quick game of seven aside after the drills. This time Jamie does a perfect cross to me when I'm

in front of the goal, but my subsequent strike goes wide of the mark.

Damn. I should have put that away. My soccer skills might not be as rusty as an iron nail suspended in a salt solution, but they're still slightly corroded.

Scott wipes some sweat off his face. "Right, guys. I think it's pub time."

"You're speaking my language," Declan says with a grin.

The team gathers up the gear, leaving me with a frustrated frown.

Jamie jogs over to me. "What's up?"

"I feel like I'm not striking the ball properly," I say. "My timing is off."

"Do you want to practice some more?" he asks. "I'll go in goal for you."

"That would be great."

Jamie moves past me to stand in front of the net.

He quirks an eyebrow and smirks. "Let's see how many times you can get it past me," he says. "Come on, show me your stuff."

He follows his words up with some elaborate stretching and arm pumping, and I can't help chuckling.

"You're trying to put me off by making me laugh, aren't you?"

"Am I that transparent?"

"As a piece of cling film."

He laughs loudly at that, and I take the chance to smash the ball into the back of the net.

"Hey, that's not fair," he complains.

"Who says I play fair?" I retort.

Jamie stares at me for a few moments, then he matches my smirk. "Oh, it's like that, is it?"

“It’s most definitely like that,” I say as I strike another ball. This time, Jamie moves easily to stop it.

Jamie and I continue to trash-talk each other while I kick ball after ball until I feel like I’m making better contact. I’m finally tapping into my muscle memory from years ago.

“Thanks for that,” I say to Jamie as we head off the field together.

“I’m still trying to adjust to the reality of Tim, the trash talker,” he says.

I laugh, and when I glance at him, he’s grinning, his dimples creasing.

We meet some team members coming out of the changing rooms as we head in.

“Hey, we’re going to the pub now,” says Scott. “Are you okay with locking up after you’ve finished?”

“Sure,” Jamie says easily. He effortlessly catches the keys Scott throws at him.

We head into the changing rooms. My heart pounds when I see it’s empty.

It’s Jamie and me in an empty changing room.

Why does this feel dangerous?

Jamie shucks off his shirt, and I turn away quickly so my eyes don’t linger on his incredible chest. I strip off my shirt before heading to the showers, armed with a towel.

I have the world’s quickest rinse, trying not to let my mind dwell on Jamie’s naked body in the stall next to me or imagine the water spraying on him, soap suds dripping down his perfect chest.

My cock gives a twitch, so clearly, my powers of non-imagination aren’t that great.

I abruptly turn off the tap and take a few deep breaths to calm myself.

My calm doesn't last long when I hear the sound of the water being switched off in the cubicle next door.

Jamie is only a few feet away from me, naked.

With trembling hands, I wrap a towel around my waist and open the shower cubicle door to find Jamie emerging out of his. I have to plant my feet on the ground to avoid bumping into him.

Shit.

My breath leaves me.

He's wrapped a towel around his waist, but his stunning chest is on display, a mere two feet from me.

Jamie stops still and unashamedly rakes his gaze down my body. His top teeth scrape his lower lip, turning it even pinker than normal.

When he raises his gaze to mine, his eyes blaze with want.

I have the most beautiful man in the world standing half-naked and looking at me with an invitation in his eyes.

"Jamie..." My feet seem to have their own mind, taking a step toward him.

And I can't bear it anymore. I can't bear another moment of not touching him.

I reach out one hand to touch his stomach just above the top of the towel, feeling his warm, smooth skin.

His muscles twitch under my hand.

He looks down at my hand, and when he raises those beautiful eyes to mine, the heat in his gaze almost makes me combust.

"Oh god, yes, Tim," he whispers.

He leans toward me, and our lips meet.

And to hell with it. I can't hold back.

A flame ignites inside me.

Suddenly, I'm kissing him wildly, lips grappling, biting, sucking, tongues sliding, stroking, tasting.

I clutch at him, pulling him into me, my hips pressing against his, reveling in the feel of his body against mine.

His mouth is so warm and inviting, and a shiver of pleasure shoots through me as he kisses me back just as frantically as I'm kissing him.

When I finally pull my mouth away from his, I stare into his eyes.

His lips are swollen and red, his eyes hazy.

I've never seen a more perfect sight in my life.

"Holy fuck, Tim," he pants. His chest is heaving and his eyes are wide.

I don't give him a chance to talk anymore. I attack his mouth again, my hands in his hair, tugging him closer. Jamie kisses me back with the same force.

Our towels drop away, leaving our steel-hard cocks grinding against each other, eliciting a moan from deep inside me.

He's everywhere, all heat and smooth muscle, and honestly, how the hell have I gone so long without this?

Shit. I've never had sex like this before. I've never had such lust burning through my veins, overtaking every molecule of my being.

Want.

No, it's more than want. It's need.

As fundamental as gravity tethering me to earth, I need to have my hands on Jamie's warm skin. I need to feel his muscles tensing under my touch and dig my fingernails into him like I'm gripping on for dear life.

I push him back so he's against the wall, kissing him like it's an act of possession, like with this one act, I can own this beautiful man.

I want my mouth on him and his on me, but I don't think either of those things will happen because we're grinding against each other frantically. The friction is so exquisite. I feel my desire ramping up to a level where I won't be able to hold back for much longer.

Jamie gets one of his hands between us, and how have I failed to notice his hands are as beautiful as the rest of him? For a few moments, I watch him stroking us together.

But my mouth finds his again, and the combined pleasure of his tongue touching mine and his hand around me has me convulsing, my orgasm scorching through me with the heat of a thousand suns.

Then Jamie buries his face in my neck, and I feel him shudder through his release.

For a few seconds, we stand there. My panting is loud in the empty room.

"Holy fuck, Tim." Jamie's face is still buried in my neck. He raises his head to look at me. "You've had that pent up in you this whole time?"

I laugh shakily, and he smiles. We stare at each other for a long moment, and then I can't help swooping in to claim his lips again.

My lips are already tender from our earlier kissing, but pleasure overrides any other sensation.

We kiss and kiss. These are not the same ferocious kisses as earlier. These kisses are sweeter. Lips teasing and tasting.

Every time I think I should stop, I decide I need one last taste because kissing Jamie is like an addiction I can't quit.

When I finally come up for air, I discover my beard has rubbed his face raw.

"Oh shit, sorry." I brush my hand gently across the red patch on his face.

Jamie reaches to touch my beard, his fingers soft as he strokes it.

“This thing should be registered as a weapon.”

I laugh, and his eyes darken as he closes the distance between us and kisses me again, as though he’s chasing the sound down my throat.

This kiss is deep but somehow even sweeter than our light kisses. A long, lingering kiss.

Jamie finally wrenches his mouth from mine. He’s breathing heavily. “We’d better get to the pub before they send out a search team.”

Damn. I’d forgotten we have twelve people probably wondering where we are.

Suddenly I’m aware we’re standing naked in the changing rooms, our towels pooled around our feet.

I reach down and pick mine up, using it to clean myself. Which is a good excuse not to look at Jamie as I wrap my head around what happened.

“Hey.” Jamie’s voice is soft, and my eyes fly up to him. “Are you okay?” Concern is etched on his forehead.

I clear my throat and answer honestly. “Yeah, I am.”

“We’re probably not the first people to hook up in the changing rooms, and I’m pretty sure we won’t be the last,” he says.

A hookup. Something twenty-two-year-old gorgeous guys do without thinking.

Something thirty-four-year-old widowers with a child really shouldn’t be engaging in.

But as Jamie and I get changed and walk to the pub together, I can’t find an ounce of regret inside me.

Chapter 9

Jamie

When Tim and I finally arrive at the pub, Scott gives me a knowing grin.

I know the beard rash on my face must be like a neon sign screaming, ‘Tim and I hooked up in the changing rooms.’

But I can’t give him the grin I usually would when I’ve been caught out like this. Partly because I want to do whatever I can to protect Tim’s privacy but also because I’m still in a state of shock about what happened.

Holy fuck.

Having the usually buttoned-up, reserved Tim lose control like that blows my mind.

My imagination has spent a lot of time contemplating what it would be like to be with Tim, but never in a million years did I think it would be that hot and intense. Having the nicest person on the planet turn into an absolute tiger during a sexual encounter? Having his teeth scraping my skin, his fingernails digging into me, claiming my mouth in the most possessive kiss I’ve ever had.

Tim unleashed.

And now I want nothing more than for that to happen again.

During the next half hour, it drives me wild having Tim sitting next to me, making polite conversation in his benign professional teacher voice. Knowing that under the polite,

calm outer shell, there's another layer to Tim few people get to see.

We talk very little with each other, but I'm hyperaware of his every movement. How his hand grips his glass, his fingers leaving marks in the condensation. How the tendons in his forearm flex when he lifts the glass to his mouth. How his throat works as he swallows.

Who knew that the simple act of drinking beer could be such a turn-on?

Around eight-thirty, there seems to be an unofficial consensus that it's home time, with people downing their drinks and shuffling to their feet.

Tim and I stand at the same time.

"Um...so...do you have to race off?" is my smooth opening line, my voice low among the scraping of chairs and the clattering of glasses.

Tim's forehead creases, and he seems intent on collecting the glasses into one easy pile for the server to collect. "Stella's staying at Jenna's for the night," he says.

"You want to come back to my place?" I try to make the words as casual and nonthreatening as possible.

The line on Tim's forehead creases even more, and he bites his lip. I can almost see his internal battle.

"Yeah, I would," he says finally.

The heat in his eyes when he raises his gaze to mine has me immediately reaching out to touch him.

Until I remember our circumstances and pull back.

"Great," I say.

Tim follows me back to my flat in his car.

The entire way, my heart pounds in a mixture of nerves and anticipation.

“Kelsey’s working a night shift, so it should be just us,” I say. I’m hoping Tim doesn’t notice my hand shaking slightly as I unlock the door.

“Okay,” Tim says.

Inside, embarrassment eclipses my nerves at the state of our flat.

Tim’s a grownup, who I’m sure lives in a grownup house with matching furniture rather than the mismatch Kelsey and I cobbled together from things given to us by her parents and the secondhand store. In fact, one of our armchairs came from the side of the road where someone put it out for collection. Neither of us are naturally tidy, and we usually do a big cleanup once a fortnight before her parents are due to visit. They came a week ago, so it’s in the process of descending back into a mess.

But when I look at Tim, he doesn’t seem to be paying much attention to the decor.

His gaze focuses solely on me.

I swallow, and the words on the tip of my tongue about to offer him a drink die instantly.

Instead, I wordlessly lead the way to my bedroom.

As soon as we’re inside and I’ve shut the door, I turn to see him looking at me with naked lust.

“Jamie,” he says.

His voice throbs with such need that I’m compelled to close the distance between us and kiss him.

It’s as frantic and frenetic as it was in the changing rooms. From the moment we start kissing, fire engulfs us so fast it’s like someone’s struck a match in lighter fluid.

Tim pushes me against the wall, and I let myself be pushed. Fuck, I love how assertive he is, this side of Tim where he completely owns the kiss, his tongue invading my mouth like it’s setting up camp. Maybe applying for residency.

He sinks to his knees. I'm pretty sure the elastic waistband of track pants is the best invention ever because it means Tim can, in a single movement, pull down my pants and boxers.

"Is this okay?" he asks.

"For the record, anything that involves your mouth on my dick is okay with me," I pant.

He laughs, and I feel the puff of his breath against my cock.

Which is a new one for me. I usually don't have guys laughing at me when they're in that position.

He leans forward and takes me into his mouth, and all thoughts of how much I love laughing with Tim are driven out of my mind, leaving only the incredible sensation of his mouth on me.

And fuck, I've received my fair share of blowjobs in my twenty-two years, but nothing, nothing prepared me for this.

For the absolute...devotion that Tim brings to what he's doing. The way he completely worships my cock with his mouth.

The world boils down to the incredible sensations rippling through me.

When he looks up, his brilliant blue eyes electrify my body. All of me hums with want and desire.

I reach down to palm the side of his face, and he leans into it, his beard tickling my fingers.

"Tim," I say, but then I can't get anything else out.

It's not just due to the incredible, mind-blowing blowjob he's giving me. It's not my awe at the vast array of skills he's got that means I'm probably won't be able to look at his mouth in the same way ever again.

I'm overwhelmed by how much like I have for the guy.

He does this thing with his tongue on the sensitive head, and that's when my knees buckle.

Tim pulls off for a second. “Okay?”

“Fuck, Tim, you’re making me legless.”

He smiles.

“Bed?” he suggests.

“That’s the best idea you’ve ever had.”

I stagger the few feet from the wall to the bed, stepping out of my track pants and boxers, pulling off my T-shirt as I go.

Tim’s eyes darken as he strips off his own clothes.

“Damn, Jamie, you’re so gorgeous,” he says as I lie back on the bed.

Pride flares inside me because I work hard on my body, and it’s nice to know Tim appreciates it. But there’s another emotion there, something that feels almost like disappointment.

I’ve been told that so many times by so many guys over the years. *Fuck, you’re hot. You’re so sexy.*

I don’t want Tim to remind me of them. The guys who only saw me as someone hot to get off with.

But the way he looks at me as he climbs up my body so we’re aligned perfectly, our hard cocks scraping along each other, is different.

He’s studying my face with something that looks like wonder, and that disappointment immediately flees.

This is *Tim*. Tim, who messages me about his daughter’s dancing lessons. Tim, who asks my opinion on the experiments he’s doing with his classes. Tim, who brings me sandwiches so I don’t skip lunch.

Tim, who kisses me now like my lips contain the secrets of the universe.

I’m breathless and panting when he finally pulls off my mouth and returns his attention to my cock.

And honestly? It takes only a minute of his incredible mouth on me before I’m clutching his hair, intense pleasure

pulsing through me as I come.

“Tim...”

Shit. I’m pretty sure that orgasm just wiped my mind clear.

When I finally come back online, I turn to look at him. He’s lying next to me, watching me, a small smile on his face as he casually strokes himself.

“Hey, that’s my job,” I say as I reach for him. He immediately drops his hand away, letting me take over stroking him.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to interfere with you doing an honest day’s work,” he says with a gasp.

I laugh, and he joins in with me. Honestly, I thought getting off with him in the changing rooms was beyond incredible, but this, where we get to laugh together while I touch him, blows my mind in a completely different way.

Speaking of blowing...I have a favor to reciprocate.

I don’t rush it. Instead, I kiss my way down his neck, noting how his breathing changes as I suck lightly on his neck.

I deposit a kiss in the hollow at the base of this throat.

Then I move down his chest, planting light butterfly kisses on my journey.

I tongue his left nipple, and he rewards me with a gasp of epic proportions.

Okay, so he has sensitive nipples. Good to know. I can work with that.

When I reach his other one, I devote lots of care and attention, sucking on it, then giving a little nip.

I get my wish. The gasp turns into a low, guttural moan.

“Jam-m-i-e.” God, I wish I had a recording of Tim saying my name like that. It would be my favorite soundtrack ever.

I give his nipple one last flick with my tongue before moving down his stomach. I remember seeing that sliver of his skin when he was changing at Hot Water Beach and wanting

to touch it way back then. I almost grin as I imagine how ecstatic Past Jamie would be about what I'm getting to do now. Kissing Tim along his stomach, which is as soft under my lips as I imagined it all those weeks ago.

I kiss across to his hipbone. He groans and juts his pelvis up.

"I'm getting there," I say between kisses.

"Pretty sure you're going to kill me," he grits out between clenched teeth.

"But what a way to go, right?" I plant another kiss on his other hipbone

I may not have the finesse Tim has with his oral skills, but I've trained myself out of a gag reflex, so I use it to my advantage as I take him deep into my throat.

Tim gives a moan so deep it almost rattles my bones.

He reaches down and threads his fingers into my hair. I grip his thighs for leverage as I rapidly move up and down.

He starts to thrust, his hands tightening in my hair as he fucks my throat.

It's so incredibly hot.

Suddenly his fingers dig into my scalp. "I'm going to..."

"You're going to what?" I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock.

"Come," he groans.

Before he says anything else, I suck in as much of his cock as possible. He lets out a deep guttural groan as he explodes in my mouth.

I swallow everything he gives me, then look up at him, meeting those brilliant blue eyes.

"Sorry. It's been a long time," he says.

"Yeah, I don't think you need to apologize for anything right now," I say as I flop down next to him.

When he turns his head to face me, I have to ask the question blaring in my mind. “Am I...am I the first guy since your husband?”

Tim’s silent for a second before he answers.

“Yes, you are,” he says.

The silence thickens between us.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you think about that right now,” I say.

“No, it’s okay. I think it’s probably a good thing this happened like it did.” He meets my gaze, his eyes intense. “I wasn’t planning it, but it reached the point where I couldn’t bear not touching you.”

Hearing him say those words makes it impossible not to kiss him.

I move so I’m on top of him, propped up on my arms, hovering over him.

Tim stares at me, a small smile teasing his lips.

And I lean down to claim that smiling mouth.

Kissing Tim...it’s unlike anything I’ve ever done before. How can the same act I’ve done so many times, with exactly the same components—mouths, lips, tongues—be so different when it’s with Tim?

I love the feel of his beard scraping my face. I love his plush, full lips against mine. I love the way our tongues seem to dance together.

We kiss and kiss, but somehow, it’s still not enough to satisfy me.

I don’t know what will be enough with this guy.

Chapter 10

Tim

I wake up early the next morning.

For a second, I relish the feeling of the press of a body against mine. It's been so long since I've had this. So long since I've woken with someone else in the same bed as me, breathing the same air, someone warm and so very alive. I feel the expansion and contraction of Jamie's rib cage, and my biology teacher brain imagines the air flowing into his body, down his trachea, and into his lungs, filling the bronchioles and the alveoli, oxygen diffusing into his bloodstream, keeping him alive.

The small miracles of the human body.

I squint at the alarm clock on Jamie's bedside table. It's almost six a.m. I can't stay here much longer. I need to get back to my house to get ready so I'm not late for school.

I should have left last night, but the lure of spending the night with Jamie was too much. We'd both been awake around two a.m., and the exchange of sleepy kisses led to mutual hand jobs, panting into each other's mouths as we stroked each other to blissful completion.

With three orgasms in fewer than twelve hours, it's surprising my balls aren't on strike. They haven't been asked to perform at this level in a long time.

I slowly turn to see Jamie, his arm resting lightly around my waist.

He's fast asleep, facing me, his blond hair tousled messily against the pillowcase, probably the result of how many times I've run my hands through it.

I stare at his face. His long lashes fanned against the smooth curve of his cheek. The absolute perfect symmetry of his features. Even the one ear I can see should feature in a perfect hearing organs textbook.

He looks even younger when he's sleeping.

Which isn't a good thing.

I don't need anything to remind me that he's only twenty-two.

I focus instead on how his moist and plump lower lip juts out like an invitation to kiss him.

This man is beyond beautiful. I feel guilty thinking about that. How he's undoubtedly the best-looking person I've ever slept with. It feels like a small betrayal of Rick.

I admitted to Jamie last night that he's the first person I've been with since Rick died. I'd been fretting over being with another guy because I hadn't been with anyone else but Rick since I was twenty-four. But now I'm so glad about how it happened between us. While the changing rooms might not be the most romantic setting, my pent-up desire had driven out all thoughts of anything else. If I'd known it would happen, I would have built it up to a massive thing in my mind and probably had some related performance anxiety, so spontaneity was definitely a good thing.

The memory of how his mouth felt against mine, how it felt as he kissed my skin, hardens my cock.

My pressing need for the bathroom stops me from going further down that line of thought. I gently pull away from him.

Jamie stirs, his perfect forehead scrunching slightly, a small groan escaping his lips, but he doesn't wake.

I tiptoe out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind me, and almost bang into a woman walking down the hallway.

Fiery red hair curls around her face, and she's wearing what looks to be a nurse's uniform. Her eyebrows fly up, and she comes to an abrupt stop.

Shit.

It's been so long since I've done the awkward meet-the-flatmates thing. I feel every second of my thirty-four years. It's six a.m., and I have to be standing in front of a class of teenagers teaching them about food webs in under three hours. But I'm currently standing in a freezing hallway in only my boxers with a strange woman who looks like she's trying to decide whether to use the phone in her hand to call the cops because there's a random guy in her house.

I clear my throat. "Hi, Kelsey, right? I'm...ah...here with Jamie."

She nods slowly, her suspicion fading. "You must be Tim."

Now it's my turn for raised eyebrows because she says it like there's no possibility I could be anyone else.

Jamie's talked to his flatmate about me? What's more, he's talked about me in such a way she doesn't think he could have anyone else in his bed.

A happy feeling starts in my stomach.

"Um...yeah. Yeah, I'm him. I mean, I'm Tim." My fumbling amuses her because a smile flirts with the corners of her mouth.

"It's nice to meet you," I continue, offering her my hand.

She stares at my hand for a second, then tilts her head. "Is it hygienic for me to touch that hand?"

Oh god. My cheeks heat faster than an induction cooktop.

I withdraw my hand, wiping it on my boxers. "Yeah, maybe not."

She smirks.

"I'm on my way to the bathroom," I say feebly.

"It's the second on the left."

“Okay, thanks.” I try to summon as much dignity as possible in this situation—which, let’s face it, will never be much—as I walk past her toward the bathroom.

“Tim...” she calls after me.

I turn to look at her.

“It’s nice to meet you too, but if you fuck with Jamie, you fuck with me, got it?”

She opens the door to what I assume is her bedroom and closes it again while I stand in the middle of the hallway.

“Got it.” My voice echoes in the empty hallway.

My reflection greets me with a startled look in the bathroom mirror. I make sure I wash my hands thoroughly before I leave.

When I return to Jamie’s room, he’s awake, blinking at me sleepily from the bed. He looks warm, cute, and inviting, and I resist the urge to climb back into bed with him.

Instead, I rummage for my clothes on the floor.

“So, I met Kelsey,” I say as I pull my pants on.

Jamie’s instantly at full attention, alarm on his face. “What did she say?”

“Um...not much. We introduced ourselves. Oh, and she also threatened me with grievous bodily harm if I fuck you around. Well, she didn’t so much as threaten me, but I’m pretty sure that was the intent behind her words. Given she’s a nurse, she probably knows a lot of ways to harm someone and make it look like an accident, which is disturbing.”

“Oh...right.” Wariness is stamped across Jamie’s face.

Pulling on my T-shirt, I clear my throat. I really, really don’t have time to start a deep-and-meaningful right now about what we’re doing or what this means. Yet I don’t want to leave without addressing this.

“I’m not planning to fuck you around, you know that, right?”

His eyes soften. “Yeah, I know that.”

I move forward to kiss him. He sits up, the duvet falling off his shoulders to expose his incredible chest.

Our lips skim across each other, a ghost of the kisses we’ve exchanged, a tease of the ones still to come.

I draw back reluctantly. “I’ve got to go, or I’ll be late for school.”

“Next time, you’ll have to bring clothes with you so you can go to work straight from here,” he says.

Are his words a test? There’s something about the way he says them that makes me think my response will be graded and evaluated.

“Yeah, I will. Next time,” I say.

When I see the relief on his face, I realize it was most definitely a test, and I aced it.

Jamie is amazing, so it’s hard to believe he’s insecure about things between us, but I keep getting glimpses of his vulnerability. And Kelsey is obviously very protective of him. Which causes a question to swell in my mind.

What happened in Jamie’s past to create that?

While it’s difficult for me to understand why he needs reassurance, I’m happy to provide whatever he needs.

Honestly? I think the greatest minds on the planet, both past and present—I’m talking in the league of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato—could present me with a thesis on why this is not a good idea, and I’d happily ignore their rational arguments because my desire to continue this, to be with Jamie, is so great.

“See you at school,” I say.

* * *

The next three weeks fly by in a blur of teaching, Stella, and Jamie.

Jamie's busy nearly every lunchtime with his job, but on Tuesday and Friday, I have a free period before lunch. He tracks me down, and we sit in my office and eat curried egg sandwiches. It's such a small quaint thing, eating lunch together, but it makes me so happy.

We keep it professional at school and don't touch, but the lingering looks and goofy smiles we give each other have my science technician, Marie, giving me raised eyebrows and smirking every time she sees us.

Jamie continues to help me set up my experiments and asks me afterward how they went.

We message almost constantly, mainly funny things to make each other laugh.

And every Wednesday after practice, I go back to his place, and we have incredible, unbelievable sex. It turns so hot and heavy the moment I get my hands on him that we haven't progressed beyond hand jobs and blowjobs because we're both too impatient to bother with prepping, but it's still the best sex of my existence.

We mess around over FaceTime as well, when Stella is fast asleep and my bedroom door is locked, because Jamie has relit a fire in me I thought was extinguished. Once a week will never be enough with this man.

We still haven't defined this thing between us. I keep thinking I should talk to him about it, but when we're together, the importance of having that conversation slides away.

Is my lack of desire to label this thing down to guilt? I'm not cheating on Rick. Rick is not around to be cheated on. The rational part of my brain knows that.

Yet, emotionally, I can't help feeling that by having this thing with Jamie, I'm relegating Rick further into the past. The memories of the physical side of our marriage, of our tender and loving sex life, are now buried under an avalanche of fresher memories of incredible, explosive sex with Jamie.

Today it's the first soccer match, and it looks like I'm continuing the theme of goofy smiles around Jamie. When we arrive at the ground, I can't keep my traitorous lips from curving into a large grin the moment I see him.

"Who are you smiling at, Daddy?" Stella asks.

I force my gaze away from Jamie. "Just my friend," I say.

Guilt immediately surges through me. I try not to lie to Stella, to always give her age-appropriate truths, but I haven't yet worked out how to categorize this thing with Jamie in my own head, so how on earth would I explain it to Stella?

And Jamie is definitely my friend.

Jenna arrives in a flurry of apologies, and then Larissa comes a minute later. Apparently, this 'Tim finding a hobby as step one to finding a life' thing is something both my sisters want to verify with their own eyes. When I asked in our family message thread if one of them could be here because I wasn't comfortable leaving Stella on the sidelines by herself, a mini scuffle broke out between them as they both volunteered to come. In the end, I wrote that they were both welcome to come and laugh at their brother's attempt to play soccer after a seven-year break. The conversation then descended into a wager about the odds I would make it through the game without being injured. The betting wasn't particularly flattering.

Leaving Stella with her aunts and her cousins, I make my way over to where our team is warming up.

Jamie's doing some practice headers with Declan, but as I jog across the field, he looks up, sees me, and seems to forget what he's doing. The ball Declan throws at him smacks him straight in the face.

Declan doubles over laughing while Jamie's face reddens.

"Nice move," I say as I approach them.

"Can we pretend that didn't happen?" he asks.

I make a big deal of looking around. "I'm pretty sure there's no video evidence, so we can totally rewrite that if you

want.”

Jamie nods along. “Let’s rewrite it to: I pulled off the perfect header and impressed you with my manly ways.”

“And I fell at your feet in absolute awe of your athletic ability,” I agree.

Declan’s gaze bounces between us, a growing smirk on his face.

Scott calls us over for a team huddle before we start.

“I’m sure we don’t need to remind you that this is our first match, and we’re going to use it to get into the swing of things. It’s about having fun and seeing what we can do.”

Declan shoots a look at the opposing team.

“They look scared of us already,” he says.

“It must be the jerseys,” Jamie says because while we all agreed on the concept of rainbow jerseys, there’d been a few eyebrows raised when Scott produced them in fluorescent rainbow colors.

“You think they’re worried they’ll be blinded if they look at our jerseys for too long?” Declan asks with a grin.

Scott just rolls his eyes. “Let’s do this,” he says.

The game begins, and it’s quickly apparent our teams are evenly matched.

It becomes a blur of color as the ball moves quickly back and forth, up and down the field.

My first touch, and I get around one defender and send it through to the middle where Declan is free. He strikes the ball cleanly at goal, but their keeper saves it with an impressive dive.

It’s scoreless until almost halftime when Jamie punctures their defense with a quick sprint and whacks the ball into the back of the net.

The other forwards crowd around to hug him, and he gives a wide grin, showing his perfect teeth and glowing skin.

He lifts the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his face, giving a tantalizing glimpse of his smooth tanned skin and ripped abs.

Damn, he's so incredibly gorgeous. And I'm sleeping with him!

I often get these moments of incredulity about Jamie. I look at him from an outsider's perspective and do a double take because I'm the one who gets to touch his body. It should be outside the bounds of what is allowed by reality.

Yet, somehow, that feeling dissolves when we're together. It turns from him being Jamie, an astonishingly good-looking guy, to Jamie, the sweet guy who makes me laugh and laughs with me, sends me links to some crazy place names, and has serious conversations with me about grief and loss, telling me about his dad and listening when I talk about Rick.

By halftime, I'm puffing and huffing like a big, bad wolf.

"Daddy!" Stella runs out onto the field, engulfing me in a hug, not seeming to care how hot and sweaty I am.

"Hey, honey." I cup the top of her head.

Jamie watches us with a small smile that I can't help but return as I beckon him over. He pulls a surprised look but obligingly joins us.

"Stella, this is my friend, Jamie," I say.

"Hey, Stella." Jamie crouches down to her and offers her his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Stella looks at his hand for a second, her forehead creased. Then she takes his hand and shakes it, her serious face reminding me of when she's concentrating on tying her shoelaces.

My heart has an involuntary spasm at seeing the two of them together.

This feels like a significant moment.

Jamie meeting Stella. The most important person in my life meeting the person who's quickly carving out so much

space in my life that he feels important too.

“Team huddle,” Scott calls out.

“You’d better get back to Aunt Jenna and Aunt Larissa,” I tell Stella.

She skips off across the field, leaving Jamie and me watching after her.

“She’s really cute,” Jamie says.

“Most of the time.”

Unfortunately, despite Scott’s tactical advice at halftime, we don’t score any more goals in the second half. Neither does the other team, though, so it ends with us scratching out the win.

“Not bad for our first game.” Jamie catches up with me as we walk off the pitch.

“I’m just proud of the fact I don’t need a walking frame or crutches to get off the field,” I say.

He grins at me, that bright one with the dimples that always magically tugs up the corners of my lips in return.

We’ve barely made it to the sidelines before Jenna intercepts us.

“Good game,” she says.

“Thanks.”

Jenna glances at Jamie. Her eyes widen as she clocks how good-looking he is. She turns to me, raising an expectant eyebrow.

Shit. Introductions. It was one thing to introduce Jamie to Stella, but sisters are a whole different scenario. My heart rate, which had started to calm after the game, increases again.

“This is Jamie. We...ah...work together.” I scratch my nose. “He’s the one who invited me to join the team. This is my sister, Jenna.”

Jenna holds out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Jamie.”

Jamie engulfs her small hand in his large palm. “Nice to meet you too.”

She gives Jamie a bright smile as she lets go of his hand. “Thank you for inviting Tim to join the team. We’ve been trying to get him to extend his hobbies for ages.”

Carlee comes up and tugs on Jenna’s coat, distracting her away from Jamie.

Which is an incredibly good thing because Jamie slides me a sideways look. “I’m all about extending Tim’s extracurriculars,” he says in a low voice.

I almost choke on my tongue.

“Great game, Timmy.” Larissa’s just turned up on my other side.

“Thanks.”

Jamie’s still standing next to me, and Larissa’s eyes flick to him, so I stumble my way through another awkward introduction.

“This is my colleague, Jamie. He’s the sports coordinator at Southlake.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Jenna turns her attention back to me. “So, apparently, Carlee and Stella have arranged for Stella to come to our house for a sleepover.”

“Right. Okay,” I say.

“You get an entire afternoon and evening to yourself. What will you do?” Larissa asks.

Jamie seizes up next to me, and for a second, I contemplate answering honestly.

Jamie. I’m pretty sure I’m going to do Jamie. If he’s up for it, anyway.

“I’m sure I’ll find something to occupy myself,” I say instead. I lean down to hug Stella. “Be good.”

She squirms out of my hug as quickly as possible and dances off toward Carlee.

“I feel so loved,” I say.

“Get used to it. It gets worse when they become teenagers,” Larissa says.

I shrug nonchalantly. “I’m a high school teacher. I’ve dealt with thousands of teenagers. I think I’ll have the teenage years nailed.”

Jenna snorts. “Famous last words. I’m going to quote that back to you.”

“He’ll be begging us for advice by then,” Larissa agrees.

Jamie’s eyes are bouncing between us. I know he doesn’t have siblings, so the affectionate hassling between my sisters and me might be foreign to him.

“Anyway, thanks so much for coming,” I say. “I think you both lost the bet because I’m still mobile right now.”

“There’s always next game,” Larissa says as she stretches to give me a kiss on my cheek. “Look after yourself, Timmy.”

“I will.”

She turns her attention to Jamie. “Good to meet you, Jamie. It’s always nice to meet one of Tim’s colleagues.”

Jamie smiles, but it’s a tighter version of his normal, carefree one.

“Nice to meet you too,” he says.

Jenna says her goodbyes too, and Jamie and I stand together, watching as Larissa and Jenna both head across the field toward the car park. They’re not identical twins, but the farther away they get, the more similar they appear: two dark-haired women of similar height and slim build.

“So, Timmy, you’re footloose and fancy-free now, huh?” Jamie asks, and my gaze flicks to him.

Despite his playful words, there’s an edge to his tone.

“Yeah, I am,” I say. “Although I wouldn’t say I’m fancy-free because there’s definitely something I fancy doing.”

Jamie rolls his eyes at my lame attempt at seduction, but he can’t stop the smile from overtaking his lips. He wrestles it back, frowning as he rubs the back of his neck.

“I guess I should ask if you want to hang out because that’s what people who work together sometimes do, right?”

Shit. That’s behind the tension I’m sensing.

Guilt flares inside me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t introduce you properly to my sisters,” I say. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“Maybe, this is Jamie, the man I’ve been seeing,” Jamie suggests.

“Well, I guess I have been seeing a lot of you recently.” I’m desperately trying to lighten the mood, and Jamie catches my innuendo because a reluctant smile flickers on his face.

It only lasts a few seconds before it’s extinguished. He takes a deep breath before raising his gaze to mine. “I like you, Tim. I enjoy spending time with you.” Vulnerability flashes in his beautiful eyes. “But I can’t be a secret,” he continues, staring at his feet, shuffling them. “Because I’ve been there before, and it almost destroyed me.”

I blink at him. “Someone tried to keep you a secret?”

I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to sing to the world that Jamie was theirs. If I didn’t have a seven-year-old daughter to consider, I’m sure I would have hired a skywriter by now.

Jamie’s jaw tightens. “Yes, someone kept me a secret.”

“I definitely don’t want to keep you a secret, Jamie, but I’ve got Stella to think about. She’s never seen me with anyone besides Rick.” My voice catches. “I don’t know if she even remembers us together. She was so little when he died.”

It’s a horrible thought that Stella will retain no memory of her fathers together.

“I don’t want to do anything to upset Stella.” Jamie’s voice is quiet.

“I really want to continue what we’ve been doing because I’d have to be insane not to want more of it,” I say

Jamie nods seriously. “I think the sex gods will punish us if we decide not to use their gift well.”

I laugh. “Well, I don’t know what kind of punishment sex gods might inflict on someone, but I imagine it wouldn’t be pleasant, so I’m on board with doing everything we can to avoid their wrath.”

He grins then, but it quickly fades. I hate that Jamie’s smiles have a short shelf-life at the moment, and I’m the cause.

“As soon as there’s the chance to naturally drop it into a conversation, I’ll tell my sisters.”

His eyes widen. “You will?”

“Yes, I will. I’m not sure what the right timing is with Stella. Maybe you could hang out with us sometime?” I bite my lip. “I don’t really think it’s appropriate for you to stay the night at this stage because I’m not ready to have that conversation with her, but maybe some low-key hanging out?”

Jamie swallows and then nods. “I’m fine with low-key.”

I’m reminded of the other factor that’s a big issue between us. It’s not an elephant in the room yet, but it’s probably around the size of a wildebeest.

“You’re planning to leave at the end of the year.”

He stares at me before nodding slowly. “I definitely want to travel.”

“And I don’t want to get in the way of that. So, I guess what I’m saying is that I really want us to continue, but I understand it’s got a limited lifespan, okay? I don’t want you to feel guilty when you plan your trip.”

Maybe this is actually good for me, the fact there’s a definite end point with Jamie. It will stop me from obsessing

about the future and allow me to enjoy the present.

He takes a deep breath and gives me a small smile. “Okay.”

I feel we’ve fulfilled our heavy-talking quota for the day. In fact, we’ve probably exceeded the yearly quota for the number of heart-to-hearts you should have while standing on the side of the soccer pitch.

“Anyway, are you up for indulging my fancies this afternoon?” I ask.

Jamie cocks an eyebrow. “Fancies or fantasies?”

“Maybe both?”

A grin overtakes his beautiful face. “Sounds good to me.”

Chapter II

Jamie

On Friday morning, I'm sitting on a chair in the staffroom waiting for the daily briefing when Tim walks through the door.

He sees me across the staffroom, and his face lights up.

Apparently unconcerned about the number of staff who I'm sure are curious about how much time the head of science spends with the sports coordinator, he makes a beeline for me.

"Hey," he says as he slides into the seat next to me.

"Hey, yourself." I can't keep the smirk off my face. "Good night last night?"

I had an exceptionally good Thursday night. Mainly because Tim and I had an epic session over FaceTime.

Tim quickly catches up with my not-so-subtle line of thinking because his neck flushes.

He meets my eyes, his eyes crinkling in the corners in one of those little Tim smiles you miss when you don't know him well. "I'd give last night an A."

I just start to preen when he adds, "A for adequate."

I splutter. "Adequate? You're seriously going for adequate?"

"Satisfactory then?"

"Man, you grade on a tough curve," I say. "What do I need to do to get a higher one?"

“Well, I didn’t get to touch you,” he says in a low voice.

Heat pools in my groin at the memory of how it feels when Tim touches me. Before I remember my surroundings and attempt to stop the escalating situation.

Thank god my job requires me to dress in sweatpants.

Tim quirks an eyebrow and smirks like he realizes the predicament he’s caused.

“I’m going to get you back for this,” I say.

“You started it,” he replies.

I shake my head, still concentrating on getting my body under control.

Tim seems to know how desperately I need a change of subject. “So, how did Kelsey’s patient go with her operation?”

When Kelsey had come home the other day, she’d been worried about an elderly woman on her ward who was about to have surgery to fix a broken hip.

“She came through surgery okay. They’re hopeful she’ll regain some mobility.”

“That’s great news,” Tim says.

Sally starts the staff briefing by talking about appraisals, which isn’t relevant to me. It gives me time to contemplate how it’s possible for me to like someone as much as I like Tim.

He treats me so well. I’ve never had this before from a guy I’m sleeping with.

Never had someone so considerate of me, asking about my day and caring about the answer. Someone who wants to know all about me, who peppers me with questions about my childhood, encouraging me to share memories of my dad. Someone who seems to care not only about me but also about other people in my life.

The nights when we get to be together, we lie in my bed after incredible sex, chatting and laughing, hours whittling away, never running out of things to discuss.

There's no game-playing with Tim. No pretenses. What you see is what you get.

A lump grows in my throat.

When the bell rings for the start of the day, I head to my office. I've got to sort out the gear from the netball tournament over the weekend.

But my mind can't help dwelling on Tim.

Tim knows how to be in a relationship. He was with Rick for eight years. I feel like an amateur compared to a professional.

Pat's the only other person with whom I've had anything that came close to a relationship, but being with Tim now really highlights how fucked up things were with Pat.

I knew going into it that it would be fucked up. But I was young and dumb and still hurting from the loss of my dad, and the idea of hooking up with a closeted guy seemed like an exciting distraction.

The first night Pat told me his motel room number, I waited until eight p.m. before I knocked on his door.

I deliberately dressed in a mesh singlet top and tight gym pants to show off the muscles I worked hard to maintain.

My nipples pebbled under my singlet top. It was a cold night, and I must have looked stupid to passers-by.

Pat opened the door. He'd changed into jeans and a sweater, clothes that actually matched the horrendous weather.

"Hey there." I gave him my most charming smile.

"Hey." He literally gulped, but then his gaze dropped, and he scanned down my body.

When his gaze returned to mine, wariness was there, along with heat.

It was the heat I focused on.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Pat still looked wary when he closed the door behind me.

It was time to be proactive.

I closed the distance between us and kissed him.

I felt the moment his restraint dropped away when he kissed me back.

Was I the first guy he'd kissed? The thought turned me on and made my cock harder as I pressed against him, letting him feel it through our clothes.

He pulled back, shutting his eyes like he was trying to blot me out. "I shouldn't be doing this."

"You're closeted, right?" I didn't wait for him to answer but plunged on. "This can stay just between us. Let's just have some fun."

He opened his eyes and eyed me silently, looking me up and down like I was some kind of prize cow he was deciding to buy.

"I'm up for some fun," he said eventually.

Let's just have some fun.

Those words echo in my head now.

How cocky and naïve I'd been.

I had no idea what it meant to start something with a closeted man, no idea that it would turn into the opposite of fun.

My recollection of Pat makes me antsy all morning. Because it's a Friday, Tim and I usually eat lunch together. I go to the cafeteria and grab our usual curried egg sandwiches.

When I get to the science department, I can see him through the window in the science prep room. He's frowning in concentration as he's weighing something on the electronic scales, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Seeing Tim in serious, professional mode reminds me that he's a mature man in his thirties, more than a decade older than me.

Is Kelsey right? Did I gravitate to Pat and now Tim because I'm trying to plug a hole in my life? Trying to find some of that security I lost when my dad died?

This is why you should never psycho-analyze yourself.

He looks up, sees me through the window, and his face breaks into one of those amazing Tim smiles.

I try to smile back as I open the door, but as soon as I'm inside, his smile fades and he tilts his head. "Are you okay?"

Tim knows me, really knows me. Something Pat never bothered to take the time to do.

"Just a busy morning sorting everything after that netball tournament."

He moves to the sink to wash his hands. "Did you get it done?" he asks. And there it is. The way Tim asks that question, like he really cares about the answer, like me sorting netball bibs, balls, and skirts is of the utmost importance in his life.

"I'm missing a few bibs, but I'm hoping one of the coaches has them. I've messaged her, but I'm waiting to hear back."

"Good luck tracking them down."

"Don't worry, I'm planning to be the Sherlock Holmes of netball bibs."

He grins at me. "I'd prefer to be Agent Poirot myself."

"Come on, you can't beat Benedict Cumberbatch if you're aspiring to be anyone."

Tim laughs, and I follow him through to his office. We sit at the small table where we usually eat lunch together. His desk is in the corner, cluttered with stacks of marking and textbooks.

It makes me feel better about the chaos my house is usually in when he comes over.

But it also underscores another fact. I have no idea if Tim is as messy at his house because I've never been to his home.

“Are you a messy person?” I blurt out.

Tim’s eyebrows shoot up.

“I’m embarrassed that when you come to my place, you might think Kelsey and I are complete slobs because of the state of our flat,” I say.

“I’m not a naturally tidy person. Rick was tidier than me, so I guess I got in the habit of being more organized at home than I am at work.”

“Oh. Right.” I stare down at the table. His words are just a reminder of how he was once in a proper partnership.

Tim unwraps the clingfilm from his sandwich. “Oh, before I forget, I promised Stella I’d take her to the butterfly house tomorrow. Do you want to come?”

My eyebrows fold together. “You want me to spend time with Stella?”

“Yes, I do.” He smiles at me. “Well, time with both of us. I thought the butterfly house would be a relaxed place for us to hang out if you want that.”

“I definitely want that,” I say, letting out a shaky breath. It’s like a pressure valve has been released inside me, letting out the tension that’s been building all morning.

He’s not Pat. He’s Tim.

And I know Tim will never do anything to hurt me.

Not deliberately, anyway.

Chapter 12

Tim

It's Friday night, and I'm having dinner with my sisters in one of our monthly family catchups Jenna instituted after Rick died.

It's a beautiful evening for this time of year. The kids have already finished eating, and they've run outside to play on the trampoline. Their laughter and shrieks float through the open window.

"So, are you and Stella doing anything exciting this weekend?" Jenna asks as she helps herself to more potatoes.

"I've got my soccer game on Sunday, and I promised to take Stella to the butterfly house tomorrow."

"That sounds like fun," Jenna says.

I think of my promise to Jamie to tell my sisters about him. Now seems like as good a time as any.

Jenna refills her glass of wine as I open my mouth.

"I'm seeing someone," I blurt.

My sisters freeze. Larissa slowly puts down her fork, turning to stare at me.

Jenna puts the bottle of wine on the table with a thud.

"You're seeing someone?" she repeats like the words are unfamiliar.

"It's early days, but yes."

Her forehead creases in confusion. “When do you have time to see someone?”

Translation: *I thought I had complete knowledge of your social life.*

My heart beats faster, and I scold it into submission. I’m a grown man. I have nothing to hide.

“I work with him,” I say.

“You work with him? Who is it? When can I meet him?”

I look down at my glass, running my hand along the top of the rim. “You already have.”

“What?”

I take a deep breath. “You know, the sports coordinator from school? He’s on my soccer team. Jamie. You met him last weekend.”

I look up to see both my sisters blinking in astonishment.

Jenna’s eyebrows shoot up. “Well, I don’t have to ask what attracted you to him, do I? He’s very good-looking.”

“He’s more than what he looks like,” I say sharply. Because dismissing Jamie as a himbo is so unfair.

“Isn’t he a bit young for you?” Larissa asks.

I swallow. Jamie is young. Very young. I sometimes find it difficult to get my head around the difference in our ages and life experiences.

“He’s twenty-two,” I mutter.

From the looks on their faces, I’m not sure if that helps my argument.

“Have you introduced him to Stella yet?” Larissa asks.

“She met him at the soccer game, and he’s coming to the butterfly house with us tomorrow.”

Jenna blinks. “Should Stella spend time with someone who’s not going to be around long-term?”

“How do you know he’s not going to be around long-term?” My words are out before I can think them through.

Of course Jamie won’t be around long-term. He’s leaving at the end of the year.

Although...maybe...?

I banish the thought before it can put down roots in my head. It’s not fair for me to start wishing for things to be different.

Jenna’s eyebrows rocket up. “Do you think he’s looking for long-term at his age?”

I don’t want to admit that Jamie’s planning to leave. Instead, I answer benignly, “Like I said, it’s early days.”

Jenna opens her mouth again, but I notice Larissa catches her gaze. They have one of those weird twin moments where something is communicated without actual words. Jenna snaps her mouth shut. It used to bug me when they’d do that when I was a kid, but it’s worked to my advantage for once.

Silence settles at the table.

“I’m sure you’ll do what’s best for Stella,” Jenna says finally.

Jenna’s words haunt me throughout the night, making me question myself.

Should I introduce Stella to Jamie when I know he’s going to leave? Am I setting her up for heartbreak?

But it’s seven months until the end of the year. That’s months and months of keeping two major parts of my life completely separate. I just don’t think it’s possible.

The next question is, am I setting myself up for heartbreak?

That one is not quite so easy to answer.

* * *

Jamie meets us at the entrance to the butterfly house. He's dressed casually in jeans and a light-green T-shirt. As we draw closer, I see the T-shirt brings out the green flecks in his eyes.

"Hey." Jamie shuffles forward like he's going to hug me but then seems to think better of it. He stops and rocks back onto the heels of his feet.

"Hey, Jamie." I keep my voice neutral. "Stella, you remember meeting Jamie last weekend?"

"Hi," Stella mutters to her feet. She sidles closer to me like she's trying to melt into my body. Oh god, she's going into shy mode. It never fails to amaze me how my daughter can be totally confident in some situations and retreat into herself in others. And I always fail to predict which version of Stella I'll get on any given day.

"So, Stella, your dad told me you like jokes," Jamie's voice has forced joviality in it, like one of those children's television presenters. "Do you know any butterfly jokes?"

Stella shakes her head wordlessly.

"Well, I've got a couple up my sleeve. You want to hear them?"

She looks at him for a long moment before she nods. I let out a breath.

"What happens when you throw a piece of butter out the window?"

Stella's lips curl up. "What?"

"A butterfly."

She giggles, and Jamie shoots me a relieved smile.

We head to the reception area, where the young woman behind the counter gives us our tickets while shamelessly ogling Jamie. Not that I can judge her for that.

Meanwhile, Jamie continues to tell Stella butterfly jokes.

“What looks like half a butterfly?”

“What?”

“The other half.”

Stella giggles again, and my shoulders relax.

We reach the entrance of the enclosure. You have to go through two doors to get to the butterflies, and I carefully hold them open for Jamie and Stella.

As soon as we’re inside, the warmth and humidity hit me.

Stella runs ahead along the path toward the waterfall. She still runs like a little kid, her arms and legs flailing in all directions.

“I’m incredibly impressed with your repertoire of butterfly jokes,” I say to Jamie.

He throws me a shy smile. “Google may have helped me.”

This beautiful man Googled butterfly jokes to tell my daughter? I try to tamp down the warm flush spreading through me.

“What does a chatty caterpillar become?” he asks.

“What?”

“A social butterfly.”

I shake my head. “Oh my god, that’s really, really bad. Bordering on horrendous even.”

“Who says jokes are meant to be funny?”

“Um...I’m pretty sure that’s the definition of a joke.”

“Well, if you want to get all technical about it,” he says, and I can’t help laughing while he grins back at me.

I love this about Jamie. He’s stirred up this long-lost part of me. Rick, for all his good attributes, hadn’t been into silly fun. I’d learned to curb that part of me in our relationship.

But with Jamie...all fun is on the table.

Stella’s leaning over the side of the railing toward a butterfly feeding station. Iridescent butterflies, bright blues,

greens, reds, and yellows swirl in the air.

“Do you know some people believe that if you see a butterfly, it’s a message from a loved one who has passed away?” I ask.

“I think I’ve heard that before,” Jamie replies.

We’re silent for a few moments, watching the butterflies weaving their tangled dances.

“I looked for signs everywhere when Rick first died,” I say finally. “I would have given anything to have a meaningful sign from him. Just one more conversation with him, you know? We were together for eight years, yet after he died, I realized there were still so many things I never said to him.”

Jamie quickly looks at Stella, who is now leaning down to observe the turtles in the pond. Then he takes my hand and gives it a quick squeeze.

“I felt the same way after my dad died,” he says quietly as he releases my hand. “I’d find myself thinking, ‘I must talk to Dad about that.’ And then I’d remember I couldn’t, and it was the worst thing ever.”

I give him a grimace-smile because I’d also had that so much in the beginning. Small moments when I’d forget Rick was gone, followed by grief slamming into me when I remembered.

God, I can’t believe we’re five minutes into this, and I’ve dovetailed the mood. Jamie began with jokes to make my daughter laugh, and I turned everything forlorn. It’s a talent.

Time to change the trajectory of our conversation. “I find it difficult to see butterflies as the messengers from loved ones who’ve passed away. They’re only flying gonads, after all.”

Jamie quirks an eyebrow. “Flying gonads?”

“The purpose of a butterfly is simply to procreate. Some butterflies and moths don’t even have mouthparts to feed. They literally exist only for sex.” Now I’m in biology teacher mode, which is hopefully a step up from depressed widower mode.

“I’m liking butterflies more and more,” Jamie says.

I laugh, and he smiles.

“Actually, maybe Rick would choose to use butterflies as his messengers, come to think of it,” I say.

Jamie chuckles, but it seems slightly strained.

So now I’ve moved on to talking to my current lover about how much my dead husband liked sex. Yeah...maybe not the best idea.

I never know how much of Rick I should share with Jamie. I’m so used to trying to keep his memory alive with Stella that it naturally bleeds into my interactions with Jamie.

“Sorry,” I say. “You probably didn’t want to hear that.”

Jamie gives me a sympathetic look. “It’s fine, Tim. Rick is part of you like my dad is part of me. I get that.”

That’s the thing, he does get it. Maybe that’s part of what draws me to Jamie. He might be only twenty-two, but he knows what it’s like to lose someone important in your life. There’s an understanding shimmering between us that most people don’t get.

“That’s the way they live on, right? Through us,” he continues, and my breath hitches. Because I don’t think anyone has ever said it so perfectly to me. How people who’ve passed away continue to influence the world through the actions of the people they left behind.

Stella wouldn’t exist without Rick. And I am forever changed from having loved him.

“Dad!” Stella calls, and I snap my attention away from marveling at Jamie.

She’s waving us to where she is farther along the winding path.

“Look at the bright-blue ones,” she says when we reach her.

“They’re amazing, aren’t they?” I stop at the railing to look out at them. “They’ve got tiny scales on their wings that

reflect the light, making them seem a slightly different color depending on what angle you look at them from. It's called iridescence."

Stella's used to my little spiels, so she accepts my comment without question, but Jamie gives me a wide smile. "I should have known coming to a butterfly house with a science teacher would be an educational experience."

"It's all part of the benefits package of hanging out with me," I say.

"I quite like the benefits," he says softly.

Heat flashes through me in response to his words, and for a crazy second, I contemplate closing the distance between us to kiss him. I stop myself, though, instead turning my gaze to the butterflies as I try to control myself.

I stare at the iridescent blue wings of the butterfly.

Iridescence is one of those natural phenomena you can't help but marvel over. How something can be bright and shiny yet change into something even more beautiful when you look at it from a different angle.

Like Jamie.

"I saw a yellow-and-black striped one over here," Stella says as she leads us farther down the path.

"Which one is your favorite?" Jamie asks.

She screws her features up into her thinking face for a few moments.

"The big red ones," she says finally. "Because red is my favorite color."

I'm fairly sure last month her favorite color was orange.

Jamie nods. "Red is a great color. It's my second favorite."

"What's your favorite?"

"Green. A bright green, like a green apple."

"I don't like green apples. I only like red ones."

“I guess that’s why your favorite color is red and mine is green, isn’t it?”

Stella giggles.

We continue around the winding path as Jamie and Stella chat. He’s great with her. I don’t know why I was so nervous. He has a way with kids. I’ve seen it at school many times, and now it’s on full display.

That’s because he’s barely more than a kid himself.

That voice in my head sounds suspiciously like Jenna’s, so I quickly banish it.

I do some mental maths to reassure myself that Jamie is closer to my age than Stella’s. There are fifteen years between him and Stella and only twelve years between him and me.

The fact I actually have to do a calculation to reassure myself of that isn’t a great sign though.

What was I doing at twenty-two? It was my last year of university before I’d decided to become a teacher, two years before I met Rick. I had no real idea what I was doing in life or love.

“Come see the caterpillar nursery,” Stella says to Jamie because I’ve apparently been relegated down her list of favorite adults on this trip.

I trail behind them, and we reach the glass window, giving us a view of caterpillars happily munching away on leaves. The cocoons hang in a separate window, the magic of metamorphosis going on inside the static structures.

“Look, there’s one hatching!” Stella presses her nose against the glass. Jamie and I exchange a quick smile before turning our attention to watching a butterfly inelegantly emerging from its cocoon. It’s probably the most awkward a butterfly ever looks.

Stella turns to me with concern. “Its wings are all wrinkled.”

“They’ll dry out. You just watch.”

Sure enough, the butterfly's small and wrinkled wings quickly transform as blood pumps into them, and within a few minutes, it looks like a normal butterfly.

“And we think human puberty is difficult. Imagine suddenly finding yourself with wings,” Jamie says.

I laugh. “No thanks. Human puberty was hard enough.”

“What's puberty?” Stella asks.

Jamie slides me an apologetic look, but I happily give an age-appropriate but biologically correct summary of human puberty, which Stella loses interest in halfway through.

“Let's find some more butterflies,” she says, cutting me off halfway through a sentence explaining sperm production in the testes.

She runs back down the path.

Jamie just gives me a big grin. “I love how you take a biological approach to the facts of life.”

I shrug. “The facts of life are biological. I don't want it to be a big deal, you know? My parents made out the details were this huge secret, and I don't know...it made the whole thing seem taboo. I definitely don't want Stella to know nothing and try to find information using only the internet as a resource.”

Jamie flinches. “Yeah, you wouldn't want that.”

I bite my lip. “Do you think I overstepped the mark?”

This is the hardest part of being a single parent. Not having a second opinion on how to approach these issues.

The smaller stuff is easy. Say please and thank you. Sit when you're eating. Always wear a seatbelt.

The bigger issues are not so clear-cut.

I don't always know how I should approach topics like sex, religion, and politics. It worries me that Stella only gets my homemade fudged-together-out-of-egg-cartons-and-masking-tape ideas and that what I say to her will form the basis of her worldview.

While I'm sure Jenna and Larissa and Gabby would helpfully provide their opinion if I asked for it—in fact, I'd probably get three different TED talks on sex education for children—they are not available to consult for snap judgments.

“I think you did a great job,” Jamie says. He seems to realize how much this means to me because his eyes don't leave my face, as if the force of his stare will embed his words into my brain.

I exhale. “I think I overdo it on the biology aspect sometimes. Stella once asked me why she had two dads while other kids had a mum and dad. Instead of focusing on LGBTQ+ issues in society, I possibly went into too much detail about homosexuality in the animal kingdom.”

Jamie raises an eyebrow. “Homosexuality in the animal kingdom?”

“Oh yeah, it's rife across many species. Lots of bird species have same-sex partners. Penguins and albatrosses have been known to happily raise eggs with members of the same sex. There's even a species of sheep where ten percent of the rams refuse to mate with ewes and will only mate with other rams.”

He gives me a smile. “If I was a sheep, that's definitely the type I would be.”

We catch up with Stella, who has a yellow butterfly flapping around her.

“If you hold really still, it might land on you,” Jamie says.

Stella barely breathes as the butterfly flits around her, hovering by her shoulder, then settling near her elbow.

Her face lights up.

“Dad, look,” she whispers.

“I can see,” I whisper back.

Jamie gets his phone out of his pocket to snap a picture.

Stella's eyes move up to look at the phone.

Jamie clicks away, and the butterfly stays motionless for a few seconds before launching into the air.

“Did you get it in the picture? Can I see?” Stella asks. She leans forward toward Jamie, bending over to see his phone.

Her dark hair is such a contrast to Jamie’s fairness as their heads lean in toward each other. Whatever they see on the screen causes both of them to smile.

For a second, my heart swells to the point it feels like my chest can’t contain it.

Stella looks up. “Dad, come look,” she says.

And so I take the few steps to join my daughter and Jamie.

Chapter 13

Jamie

Wednesdays are by far my favorite day of the week. The day my body hums in anticipation of spending the night with Tim.

I've only met Tim's sisters briefly at soccer, but I want to send them a massive bunch of flowers for taking turns having Stella at their house on Wednesdays so I get Tim for the entire night.

I drive to soccer practice with a wide smile that nothing—not even Auckland traffic crawling along at a pace that snails would sneer at—can wipe off my face.

Thanks to the traffic, it's ten minutes after practice officially starts when I pull into the car park.

“Hiya, Jamie.” Declan climbs out of his car at the same time. Declan's around my age and seems like the kind of guy I could easily be friends with. The problem is I haven't wanted to stick around too long at drinks after practice. Tim and I go for the obligatory beer, but it's probably obvious to anyone paying attention that we're biding our time until we can escape and get our hands on each other.

“Did you get stuck in that accident on the southern motorway too?” I ask Declan.

“Nah, I'm late because I had to do an extra job for my boss.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a personal assistant for the CEO of an accounting firm.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“It sounds more important than it actually is,” he continues after he clocks my reaction. “It basically means I run around picking up my boss’s dry cleaning and doing the dogsbody jobs no one else wants to do. I’m proving to be exceptionally gifted at filing.”

“That’s always an important life skill,” I say.

Our conversation is interrupted by another car pulling into the car park. It’s not just any car. It’s a Maserati. The king of all cars.

The car door opens, and Seb climbs out.

My mouth drops open. Of all our teammates, unassuming Seb is the last one I’d expect to drive such a flash car.

He told Tim he was a university professor. He must have a hell of a side hustle to afford a car like that.

Declan gives a low whistle. “Nice car.”

“Ah...thanks.” Seb flushes. “I’m borrowing it off a friend because my car decided to die yesterday.”

“That’s a pretty good friend if they’re prepared to lend you their Maserati,” I comment.

Seb’s blush only grows deeper. “Ah...yeah.”

Declan and I shoot looks at each other as we follow Seb onto the pitch. From Seb’s blush, there’s obviously slightly more to the story than a simple friend favor.

Training has already started, and Scott has everyone dribbling the ball through a series of cones.

Tim finishes weaving through the line of cones and immediately makes a beeline for me.

“You okay?” he asks. He’s puffing slightly, his cheeks above his beard flushed.

“Yeah, got stuck in traffic,” I say. “An unambitious sloth could have probably outrun the cars on the southern motorway today.”

Tim laughs. “What about a slovenly tortoise?” he asks.

“It would have been a close race, but my money would have probably been on the tortoise.”

We’re grinning at each other, and I have that pulse of happiness I always have when I’m around Tim.

It’s been two weeks since we went to the butterfly house, and things keep getting better between us. Last weekend he invited me to come with him and Stella to the beach. It was too cold to surf, but we went for a walk, and Stella collected shells and rocks she liked the look of. Tim’s and my pockets were laden with her collection when we got back.

Then I spent the car ride home Googling jokes about shells to make her laugh.

What’s made of chocolate, has a shell, and lives at the bottom of the sea? An oyster egg.

What happened when a pet snail lost his shell? He started to look a bit sluggish.

It was such a simple way to spend a Sunday afternoon. But it was probably one of my favorite days for ages.

“Oi, Jamie! Are you here to train, or are you here to flirt?” Scott’s obviously noticed the intense smile-a-thon Tim and I have going on.

“Can’t he do both?” Declan asks. “It’s a total myth that men can’t multitask.”

“You reckon he can dribble accurately with a goofy smile?” Scott asks skeptically.

“I’m up for the challenge.” I move to intercept the ball from Scott’s feet and take off for a little show-off run, dribbling around the cones while trying to maintain my grin. It proves to be quite difficult to keep smiling like a loon while controlling the ball.

When I reach everyone, the look Tim gives me, a cross between affectionate and indulgent, is worth my aching cheek muscles.

Scott just rolls his eyes.

“All right, let’s play some seven aside,” he says.

We quickly divide into teams.

Tim and I are on the same team. Scott, Declan, and Seb are on the opposing team.

Scott kicks off from halfway. He plays center-back in our games, and he really is the general who controls everything.

He sends a long kick to Declan, who has proven to be quick on his feet and slippery as an eel. His fancy moves don’t work as well against Tim as they do against the opposition, and Tim gets the ball off him, kicking it to me.

I’m dribbling the ball down the field when Seb tackles me. Given he looks exactly how you’d expect a university professor to look, you definitely don’t think ‘athlete,’ but he’s got some surprising ball skills and is an aggressive tackler.

He closes in on me just as I snap my head up.

Crack. Our heads collide.

Oh fuck, that hurt.

Suddenly, I’m on the ground eating a face full of dirt.

“Jamie!” Tim’s voice sounds frantic.

I turn over toward his voice and cautiously open my eyes.

If anyone in the team had any doubt we were together, it must be gone now, given Tim’s on his knees next to me like I’m a fallen battlefield hero.

“Oh my god, Jamie, are you okay?” he asks.

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the throbbing pain, and quickly realize that head movement is not what this situation needs.

“Seb has a surprisingly hard head,” I say.

It appears Seb could say the same thing about me because he's clutching his head and looking almost as woozy as I feel.

"I'll take both of you to the emergency department to get checked out," Tim says decisively.

"I'm fine," I protest.

But I can see from the look on Tim's face that I'm not going to win this argument.

* * *

It takes one hour and forty-five minutes at the emergency department for the doctors to confirm what I told Tim. I'm fine. Well, I have a sore head, but there's no sign of concussion, although Tim is given a list of what to look out for.

"Do you want a ride home?" Tim asks Seb once the doctor is finally finished with us. He's been given the all-clear too. "Or back to the club to pick up your car?"

Seb glances up from his phone.

"Um...no...I'm fine, thanks. Someone is coming to pick me up."

"Okay."

As we're walking out, a Ferrari pulls up in the pick-up zone.

"Um...that's my ride," Seb says. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"See you at the game on Saturday," I say.

"See you then." He hurries to the car and climbs in.

Tim raises an eyebrow at me as the Ferrari pulls off with the purr of its engine.

"He drove a Maserati to practice. Said he'd borrowed it off a friend," I say.

Tim puts a hand on my arm to help guide me down the stairs. “By day, he’s a university professor. By night, he’s part of an illicit ring of European car importers?” he suggests.

I laugh, but it makes my head hurt, and I put a hand up to touch it.

Tim’s eyes fill with concern. “Let’s get you home.”

By the time we get home, my head throbs, and it’s not the fun head that usually throbs on a Wednesday night when Tim is around. They gave me extra-strength painkillers at the hospital, so hopefully, they’ll kick in soon.

Tim pulls up in my driveway, and despite my sore head, anxiety spikes my stomach. I don’t want Tim to come inside and be disappointed when we can’t have our usual Wednesday night fun.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “These painkillers are making me even dopier than usual. I don’t think I’m up for anything tonight.”

Tim looks at me like I’ve just suggested we rob a bank dressed in Star Wars cosplay. “Of course we’re not messing around tonight. You need to rest.”

He climbs out of the car, and I gingerly get out too.

“Where are your keys?” he asks.

I rummage in my pocket and find them. “Are you coming in? Even though I’m not good for anything?”

Tim stops walking and stares at me for a few heartbeats. “We seriously need to talk about your taste in men sometime,” he says finally as he takes the keys out of my hand and unlocks the door.

“I’m actually quite happy with my taste in guys right now,” I say

“It appears I’m an outlier in your data set.”

“You’re definitely an outlier,” I agree as I collapse on the couch.

Tim doesn't sit next to me, instead remaining standing. "What do you need? Do you want a drink? Something to eat?"

"I've always wanted my own man-servant," I say sleepily.

"And I've always wanted to wear a leather collar and answer to Jeeves, so it appears all our fantasies are in play."

I laugh woozily.

Tim gets a glass of water from the kitchen and sits beside me.

"Make sure you drink that whole glass. The last thing you need is to be dehydrated."

I obligingly pick up the glass and take a sip.

"Satisfied?" I ask.

Tim frowns. "Am I sounding like a dad? Sorry, it's hard to turn off that part of me."

"No, you're not sounding like a dad. You're sounding like"—I swallow—"a boyfriend."

Tim's eyes soften. "Well, that's okay then. I'm fine with sounding like a boyfriend."

My breath leaves me. Tim is my boyfriend. I can't help a smile at that. "I'm fine with that too," I say.

Tim moves toward me like he's about to kiss me, then obviously remembers the head situation.

He pulls back.

"Damn, you're just going to have to pretend I kissed you," he says.

"You can still kiss me," I say.

He looks doubtful. "Do you think we'll be able to stop at kissing?"

I lean back. "Fair point."

Let's be honest. There's not enough self-control in the universe to stop things once Tim and I start kissing.

Instead of kissing him, I snuggle into him. He puts his arm around me and pulls me close. We stay like that for ages, cuddling each other, talking quietly about school, Stella, and soccer. It's like the conversations we normally have after sex, only this time, it's occurring without orgasms.

I'm just about to suggest we should go to bed when there's the noise of a key in the door, and Kelsey walks in.

Her eyes widen when she sees Tim and me snuggling on the couch.

"Hey," she says. "I didn't expect to see you guys out here."

Code for *Normally, on a Wednesday night, you disappear into your bedroom faster than Houdini to screw each other's brains out.*

"Jamie decided to use his head as a battering ram in soccer practice," Tim says.

Kelsey immediately switches into nurse mode. "Are you okay? Did you get checked out by a doctor?"

"Tim took me to the emergency room. I'm fine," I say.

"Make sure you keep an eye out for concussion symptoms," Kelsey instructs Tim. "They can sometimes be delayed."

Tim nods. "The doctor told me what to look out for."

"How was work?" I ask her.

"Busy." She flops down on the chair opposite us. She meets my gaze, raising her eyebrows.

I love how Tim doesn't pull away from me under Kelsey's scrutiny, keeping his arm exactly where it is.

He asks her about what department she's working in at the moment, and she tells him about orthopedics, and it descends into a random conversation about bones.

"You're such a science nerd," I say.

Tim quirks an eyebrow. "You can't pretend you're just learning this about me."

“No, there have been other signs along the way,” I agree.

Tim laughs, and I grin at him.

When I glance up, I see Kelsey watching Tim and me, one eyebrow tilted. I recognize that eyebrow tilt. When she gives it to me, it’s normally followed by a barrage of hard-hitting questions.

At least with Tim here, she won’t go into full interrogation mode about the state of our relationship.

I yawn.

“Come on, Mr. Head Clash. Let’s get you into bed,” Tim says.

“Okay,” I agree sleepily.

It does seem like an epic waste of opportunity to have Tim in bed with me without anything fun happening, but when he tucks himself around me, spooning me, one hand resting on my waist, I find I don’t mind too much.

* * *

The next morning, I wake up to find Tim already awake, watching me.

“How’s your head?” he asks.

I cautiously lift my head off the pillow.

“Better, I think.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“I can’t believe we had an entire night together and nothing even remotely fun happened,” I complain as I slide forward and put my hand on his hip.

“Don’t forget we’ve got Lane Fenwick’s wedding this weekend. Larissa’s babysitting, so I’ll be yours for the night.”

“I’ll brainstorm some wicked ways I can entertain you.” I move my hand down to his cock.

Yep, from the firmness of Tim's cock, it appears he's thinking along the same lines as me. Well, his cock is, anyway.

He gives a small groan of pleasure, but as I go to grip him properly, he glances at my bedside clock. "We don't have time for anything this morning."

I pull my hand away, pouting. "So, no fun at all?"

Tim smiles indulgently. "You can have a kiss."

"Do I get to decide where the kiss is?" I ask.

He laughs and leans over to stroke the side of my cheekbone. I have to close my eyes because I don't think anyone has ever looked at me like Tim is looking at me now.

He brushes his lips over mine in a sweet kiss.

My breath leaves me.

Other guys I've been with, it's been all about the sex, and while things with Tim are red-hot in that department, there's so much more to this.

Our kiss deepens slowly, like sinking into a warm bath. Even though I know it can't lead to anything right now, it's still one of the nicest kisses of my existence.

I love fiery, intense Tim who can't keep his hands off me.

But this version of Tim—gentle, sweet, and caring—is fantastic too.

* * *

It appears I was an unrealistic optimist to think I'd escape Kelsey's inquisition.

I'm barely through the door after school when Kelsey ambushes me like a snake ambushes its prey.

"So, this thing with Tim," she says.

My mouth goes dry as I chuck my bag near the couch. "Yeah? What about it?"

"It's not a fling, is it?" Kelsey says.

“What do you mean?” I hedge.

“You’ve said it’s a short-term thing, but oh my god, Jamie,” she continues.

“What?”

“I would pay a million dollars to have someone look at me the way Tim looks at you.”

Happiness floods through me at her words.

But then my doubts bubble to the surface. “I don’t know. He called me his boyfriend yesterday, but I don’t know how seriously he’s taking it. I’m the first guy he’s been with since his husband died. I mean, he’s introduced me to his daughter, but I’ve never been to his house.”

It’s understandable that Tim is taking things slowly, but I always want more. More Tim. I want to know every part of his life.

“And you’re leaving at the end of the year,” Kelsey reminds me.

“And I’m leaving soon,” I echo.

A few months ago, the thought of going on my OE made excitement fizz in my stomach. Sights to see, guys to meet, fun to be had. A rite of passage I was finally going to claim.

But now my stomach is churning rather than fizzing at the thought of leaving.

Kelsey’s gaze narrows. “You’re still planning to come with me, right?”

“Of course.”

But somehow, despite the certainty of my words, I can’t pump any enthusiasm into my voice. Which is stupid.

I’ve already let one guy derail my plans.

And I swore I would learn from my mistakes.

Chapter 14

Tim

I'm attempting to knot my tie properly when my phone chimes with an incoming FaceTime call.

Gabby.

I reluctantly hit accept because it's been a few weeks since Stella last talked to Gabby, and I know she misses her. But Gabby is intense at the best of times, and the fact I'm dressed in a suit won't escape her notice. It's not exactly my every day Saturday afternoon attire.

"Where are you at the moment?" I ask quickly, trying to head her off.

"I'm in London."

"How's it going there?"

Gabby chats for a few minutes about her travels before giving me the most impressive once-over possible via video call.

"You're looking very flash," she says.

"Thanks. I'm going to a wedding."

"Whose wedding?" Yep, it's not hard to see Gabby's interrogation tendencies come to the forefront. She must be an excellent lawyer.

"A colleague of mine from school," I answer.

"Oh. Right." There's a brief pause. "So, are you going with anyone?" From the way Gabby asks, I know she at least

suspects what my answer will be. It's as if I'm on the stand, and she's leading the witness to incriminate themselves.

"Yes, I'm going with my boyfriend," I say.

The word feels unfamiliar on my lips. It's been so long since I've called anyone my boyfriend, and it's such a fraught word to say to Gabby, of all people. It's hard enough with my sisters wading in with an opinion, but it's even more complicated for Gabby. Will she feel like I'm betraying Rick? If I feel like that sometimes, how can she not?

But Jamie deserves to be claimed loudly and proudly.

Gabby bites her lip. "I heard there's a boyfriend."

Exactly as I suspected. The family gossip mill has been running at full speed.

"It's early days," I say.

I said that to my sisters too, but it feels false as it falls off my lips now.

From a purely time standpoint, this thing with Jamie is definitely in its infancy, but on every other level, nothing with Jamie feels like the casual start of a relationship.

He's leaving. It can never be more than a short-term thing.

I have to remind myself more and more of this lately.

"I'll find Stella for you," I say quickly before Gabby can ask me more questions about Jamie.

I take the phone to Stella's room. "Aunty Gabby wants to talk to you."

Seeing Stella's smile reminds me of how important it is that I continue to foster her relationship with Gabby, even if it feels like hard work at times.

I leave Stella and Gabby chatting together and wander back down the hall to my room and into my ensuite.

I unearth hair gel from the bottom cupboard that hasn't seen the light of day for years. In fact, I think it belonged to Rick.

Yep, using my dead husband's hair gel to look good for a date with another man.

There are always going to be moments when the past and the present clash in a way that jars me.

I study my face in the mirror as I attempt to tame my hair into a slick hairdo.

I'm putting more effort into my appearance than I have for a long time. And I know it's because I feel inadequate next to Jamie. I'm never going to have his effortless, turn-heads looks. This is our first proper date, and I don't want to see the question marks on people's faces as they wonder what a young, beautiful guy like him is doing with someone like me.

Unfortunately, it turns out hair gel is not a miracle worker. Slathering on copious amounts doesn't make up for the fact I've done nothing but utter 'short back and sides' to my barber for the last five years.

With the amount of grease now in my hair, I look like a throwback from the seventies. All I need is an unbuttoned shirt and a gold chain to complete the look.

"Aunty Gabby said she's going to bring me back a Paddington Bear from England." Stella comes into the bathroom and puts my phone on the counter.

"That sounds great," I say. I glance at her in the mirror and see she's still minus shoes. "Are you almost ready, kiddo? I've got to drop you off at Aunt Larissa's house before I pick up Jamie."

"Is Jamie going to the wedding with you?"

"Well, yes. Jamie's my date because he's my boyfriend now, remember?"

At dinner the other night, I'd tried to have a serious conversation with Stella about how Jamie was my boyfriend and what that meant. She'd seemed more interested in using the discussions about relationships to tell me the particulars of the love triangle she's apparently in with her friends Marlie and Hamish than asking questions about Jamie and me.

“Oh, that’s right,” Stella says now. I watch her face closely, but there doesn’t appear to be any emotions lurking there.

“I like Jamie,” she says.

“Me too,” I say.

* * *

I’d heard rumors Lane’s fiancé was a big deal in the New Zealand TV industry. Pulling up to an incredible country homestead where they are having their wedding confirms it.

Jamie lets out a low whistle. “Wow. Check out this place.”

“Yeah, fancy,” I agree.

There are easily four hundred people milling outside on the huge lawn. Judging by the chairs and the huge archway set up at the front of the property, it looks like Lane and his fiancé will exchange their vows in an outdoor ceremony.

“Welcome to Lane and Sam’s wedding. Are you on the groom’s or the groom’s side?” Somehow I get the feeling the usher isn’t going to get sick of making that joke.

“Definitely the groom’s,” I reply.

I spot a bunch of our colleagues gathered on one side of the lawn, and Jamie and I head over to them.

I’m sure there’s been some staffroom gossip about Jamie and me, and turning up together isn’t going to quell it, but I don’t particularly care.

“Hey, Tim. Hey, Jamie.” Trudi’s the first one to greet us. And yep, there’s the knowing element in her grin that I expected.

Annie comes over to talk to Jamie, and they start a conversation about some of the logistics around the rugby tournament our students are currently attending.

Which gives me a chance to stand back and admire Jamie.

Jamie dressed in only sweatpants is incredibly good-looking. But Jamie in a suit and tie takes my breath away. The cut of his suit jacket shows off his broad shoulders and how his torso tapers to his narrow waist while his suit pants hug his perfect ass.

Trudi sidles closer to me, raising an expectant eyebrow. “So, you and Jamie...?” she asks in a low voice.

I guess I’m not doing a good job of hiding anything in my expression. At least I haven’t started to drool.

I snap my gaze to hers. “Whatever you’re asking, the answer is yes,” I say.

She smirks. “I thought so! I’d have placed money on this outcome after camp.”

My eyebrows fly up. “You would have? Why?”

She shrugs. “He made you smile, and it had been a long time since I’d seen you smiling like that.”

I don’t have time to conjure a reply because music comes over the sound system indicating the ceremony is about to start, and everyone moves toward the chairs. Jamie sits in the seat next to me and gives me a grin.

I smile back. I reach out to grab his hand, giving it a squeeze, loving how his smile gets even bigger.

But my own smile fades as the music starts and Lane and Sam walk down the aisles to meet at the altar.

A wedding. A gay wedding, where two men stand facing each other, declaring their love for each other and expressing their intent to spend the rest of their days together.

A lump rises in my throat.

Love doesn’t die when one of you does. But your marriage ends because you can’t have a marriage when there’s only one person left.

Strange how I’ve never thought about it that way before. Rick and my marriage, which began on a sunny beach on Waiheke Island, ended on a stretch of State Highway One

when a tired truck driver swerved into the oncoming traffic and Rick's car happened to be in his path.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to force out the thought.

Shit.

I feel pressure on my hand, just a gentle squeeze, and I open my eyes to see Jamie's concerned face.

I try to rummage up a smile to reassure him, but it's difficult because I'm currently drowning in a swamp of memories.

What do I remember from our wedding? The day itself is almost a blur. The night before is my strongest memory because we'd tried to do the traditional night apart. I'd gone to stay at Larissa's house, but around midnight, a tapping sound on the window woke me. I'd pulled back the curtain to see Rick standing in Larissa's flower bed.

"I couldn't sleep without you," he'd said after he'd made the most inelegant window-climbing attempt in the history of humanity. Rick was such a smooth operator in so many areas of his life, but there were some random things—dancing, climbing, getting into a kayak—where his smoothness turned into extreme incoordination. It was a nice reassurance to those of us who weren't smooth operators in any aspect of existence.

He'd snuck out the next morning before anyone else awoke, and it had always remained our secret.

It's small memories like that which make me lonely. Memories the two of us used to share together that I'm now in sole possession of.

Like, how anytime Tahiti was mentioned, Rick would catch my eye with a grin. It brought back memories of our honeymoon, of days spent exploring the tropical island and nights spent in crisp sheets where we explored the concept of married sex. Which turned out not to be all that different from unmarried sex, but we were very thorough in our investigations just in case.

Sometimes it's so incredibly lonely being the one left behind.

I try to pull myself out of the memories and concentrate on the scene in front of me. Lane and Sam exchanging vows, neither of their gazes flickering from each other's faces as they say the timeless words. They are so caught up in each other that you get the feeling all their guests could disappear and they wouldn't even notice.

That makes me smile for real. Any reminder of how much love there is in this world is a good thing.

My smile turns into laughter when it's time for the ring exchange. Sam and Lane are using two dogs as their ring bearers, but the dogs don't appear to appreciate the significance of what they carry on their collars.

The German Shepherd cross stops to lift his leg on the large flower arrangement at the base of the arch while the Cocker Spaniel pauses halfway down the aisle, trying to scratch his collar off.

Lane crouches to call the Cocker Spaniel. "Casper. Here boy!"

The dog snaps his head up at the sound of Lane's voice and then bounds toward Lane, pulling his lead out of the hands of the person walking him.

As soon as he reaches Lane, he jumps on him and licks his face.

"My aim is to always greet you as enthusiastically," Sam says to Lane, and they share a smile that makes my heart contract.

Lane retrieves the ring and straightens. Then, guided by the marriage celebrant, they exchange rings.

"With this ring, I take you, Sam Heaney, to be my husband," Lane says.

Sam's dark eyes don't waver from his face. "With this ring, I take you, Lane Fenwick, to be my husband."

My hand unconsciously rubs the spot where the ring Rick placed on my finger sat.

Am I capable of loving again? I've steeled myself for the idea of never finding the same connection I had with Rick because it seems unrealistic and greedy to demand the universe deliver me another soul mate.

But I haven't ever shut myself off from the concept of having another significant relationship.

Grief is the price you pay for love. Someone said it to me at Rick's funeral, one of the many well-worn platitudes that swirled around as people desperately tried to comfort me, to diminish the absolute tragedy that someone so vibrant and with so much to live for could be so cruelly snatched away.

I drew a strange comfort from that saying in the weeks and months after the funeral when I struggled with basic functioning. When I would look at Stella, my innocent four-year-old who now faced the rest of her life without one of her fathers, and the enormity of Rick's loss would hit me afresh.

I liked thinking of grief not as a standalone terrible thing but as the flip side of the most amazing thing. You only grieved for someone because you loved them. I'd had an incredible love for Rick when he was alive, so it made sense that I had overwhelming grief now he was dead.

But, going forward, the only way to protect myself from grief was never to love, and who wants to go through life like that?

I flick a glance at Jamie and find he's watching me intently with those beautiful eyes that I get so easily lost in. And my heart starts thudding.

Maybe...

Around us, applause and catcalls break out. I snap my attention back to the altar, where Sam and Lane must have been announced husband and husband because they're engaging in one of the longest altar kisses I've ever seen.

When they pull back, they give each other such radiant smiles that my heart clenches. I have a sudden flashback to the smile Rick gave me after we'd first kissed as a married couple, happiness with a tint of 'I-can't-believe-we've-done-this.'

Suddenly, it feels like something has wrapped around my chest, squeezing tightly.

Jamie leans over to whisper in my ear. “Are you okay?”

His breath puffs against my skin and the tangy scent of his aftershave fills my nostrils.

I use those two senses to anchor myself in the present rather than being swept into the past.

“Yeah.” Despite my best efforts, the word comes out congealed.

“I didn’t think about how difficult this would be for you.” Jamie’s voice is still low, wrapping us together in an intimate bubble. “Is this the first wedding you’ve been to since Rick passed away?”

I give a short, sharp nod, and Jamie reaches out a hand to grab mine.

Conversations have erupted around us. For a few moments, we just sit there, Jamie holding my hand, running his thumb over my thumb while I compose myself.

Finally, I blow out a shaky breath. “We should get something to drink before the Southlake staff drink the bar dry.”

For the reception, Jamie and I sit at a table with some of our colleagues from Southlake High. It becomes apparent that the combination of an open bar and badly paid teachers isn’t a particularly good one, and everyone is definitely on the merry side of happy by the time the speeches roll around. I’m driving, so I sip on my one beer and watch the other staff travel back and forth to the bar with the same enthusiasm that honeybees visit flowers.

Lane’s best woman stands to speak.

She’s in a flaming red dress and gives a cheeky grin before she begins, “So, the story of how Lane and Sam met...” She then has to stop because half of the guests immediately laugh.

Jamie raises an eyebrow at me. “Obviously a funny story,” he says.

“Obviously.”

And when the crowd finally settles down enough to let her tell it, it becomes apparent that it is a very funny story. It’s one full of a series of coincidences that all led to this moment, where you have two guys grinning at each other like they both believe they’ve won the lottery.

“Who was your best man?” Jamie asks me after her speech is over.

“My best friend, Cam,” I say. “He was one of my best friends growing up in Gisborne, and then we both went to university in Dunedin and moved to Auckland around the same time.”

“Do you still see much of him?”

“Yeah, he lives on the North Shore. I don’t see him as much as I should. He’s got two kids just a bit older than Stella. We used to hang out, the four of us. His wife, Hannah, is lovely too, but after Rick died...” I trail off. “It became hard, you know?”

No matter how enjoyable it was to see them, there was always the lingering reminder that someone was missing.

“You’re talking to the person who ditched nearly all his friends, dropped out of school, started hanging out with losers, and made incredibly bad decisions when his father died, so I’m not going to judge you.” Jamie’s voice is gentle.

“We all cope with grief in different ways,” I say.

Jamie leans into me, just a gentle press of his shoulders, and I press some of my weight back.

“Have you heard how Sam proposed to Lane?” Jamie asks.

“Yep. I heard someone discussing it at the bar.” I grin. “It’s pretty cool.”

“I like the idea of a big romantic gesture. You know, when the person does something amazing that shows how much they

care...” He trails off, his face changing into a frown. “You disagree with me.”

“What?”

“I can tell from your face that you disagree with me,” he says.

Shit, he can read me well.

“It’s not that I disagree with you. It’s just when I look back at my marriage, it’s not the big gestures I remember, but the small ones, you know? Like the time Rick went out of his way to buy me M&M’s when he knew I’d had a bad day or cooked dinner for me when I had a headache. There are dozens of little things I’ll never forget.”

Like the fact you find time for us to eat lunch together. Like how you remember what experiments I’m doing with my classes and ask me how they’ve gone. Like how you look up jokes to make my daughter laugh.

Lane stands to speak. He fumbles with the switch on the microphone, but his voice is steady when he starts to talk.

“I thought it was wrong timing when I met Sam,” Lane says. “The last thing I wanted was a relationship. But fate...” He throws a grin at his new husband. “Fate definitely had other ideas.”

I swallow, looking sideways at Jamie, who is watching Lane avidly.

Is it fate that I met Jamie?

But rather than fate, there’s another idea swirling in the back of my mind.

Did Rick have a guiding hand in it? Did he send Jamie to me?

I like the concept. I really do.

There’s something appealing about the idea that Rick’s spending his time in heaven combing through the eligible gay population in New Zealand, looking for someone who will make Stella and me happy.

And somehow, he stumbled across Jamie and realized that, yep, despite Jamie's age and the gap in our life experiences, this stunningly beautiful guy who loves surfing and soccer and cheesy jokes would be the perfect person to make me smile again.

And there's the fact that Jamie is fundamentally a kind person.

The one thing I loved about Rick was how kind he was, deep down. Some people had to look hard to see this trait in Rick because he also had confidence, charm, and ambition that could obscure the kindness. But deep down, he was a decent, kind guy.

Jamie and Rick don't have much in common on the surface, but at their core, they are so similar.

The thought startles me.

After Lane finishes, Sam gives an incredibly eloquent speech, and I find it easier than I expected to listen to his words about love.

What I don't find easy is watching how many guys hit on Jamie once the formalities end.

It's a gay wedding. Of course there will be lots of single gay guys looking to hook up. And, of course, they're going to zero in on Jamie.

Rick had been good-looking but not in the same league as Jamie. I've never had a partner who attracts so much attention from other people.

I watch from the table as Jamie makes his way back from the bar carrying two beers and is intercepted by a guy in a purple suit who gives him a once-over. His body language pretty much screams, 'Let's hook up.'

Jamie quickly shakes him off and makes a beeline for me.

"A nonalcoholic beer for my fair gentleman," he says as he sets it down in front of me.

I fiddle with the label on my beer bottle, tearing it away at the edges.

“That guy in the purple suit was hitting on you,” I say.

Is he going to deny it? Pretend he wasn't hit on by that guy? Pretend half the guys here at the reception wouldn't love a chance to get in his pants?

What must it be like to have the world desiring you like that?

Jamie leans forward so his lips graze my earlobes. “It doesn't matter because I only want you.” He says the words matter-of-factly, like they're a fundamental law of physics, and my breath is sucked out of me.

I raise my gaze to meet his. “It's a lucky thing you've got me then, isn't it?” I say.

His beautiful eyes don't waver from mine. “It's exceptionally lucky.”

A swell of feelings rises inside me. Emotions I don't have a name for right now.

I take a swill of beer to wash them down before putting the beer bottle back on the table.

“Do you want to dance?” I ask.

All our colleagues are watching, but it's a chance to touch Jamie, and I will never deny myself.

Besides, it's important to Jamie to be claimed loud and proud. If the consequence is gossip in the staffroom, I'm prepared to live with that.

Anything to see him smiling at me the way he is now.

“Definitely,” he says.

Sure enough, after we're on the dance floor together, I glance back at the Southlake table. There's an epidemic of raised eyebrows at the sight of Jamie and me dancing so close together.

I don't care. Jamie's arms are around me, and that's all that matters.

Of course Jamie is a fabulous dancer. He's so good he enhances my average coordination and makes me look like I'm the next Fred Astaire.

Rick was a mediocre dancer like me. It was another area where his smoothness faltered, but I didn't mind. Together we used to muck through, and while we enjoyed dancing together, I've definitely never been part of a couple on the dance floor that people stare at with admiration.

The song "Blue Moon" plays. Jamie pulls me closer to him.

"I love this song," he says.

My breath hitches.

This was Rick's favorite song. Which was an incredibly random choice for someone born in the late eighties. It's even more random for a twenty-two-year-old to love it.

Is it a sign? Is this Rick telling me that, yes, he's looking out for me? He found Jamie and sent him to me, so now all I have to do is relax and enjoy spending time with this beautiful man.

Jamie sings the lyrics softly in my ear, the puff of his breath sending goosebumps down my spine.

We press close together as we rotate slowly, his hand on the small of my back, pulling me closer.

Jamie shifts so his hips are aligned with mine, and I feel his cock hardening against my thigh. The lust that surges through me could be harnessed to solve the world's energy crisis.

I pull away slightly.

"You want to get out of here?" I whisper.

Jamie's gaze is dark and hungry on mine.

"I thought you'd never ask," he says.

We say the world's quickest goodbyes to our colleagues and wish Lane and his new husband the best before heading out.

The night is cool compared to the heat of the reception room.

We're silent as we head across the car park, the gravel crunching under our dress shoes.

When we climb in the car, and I start the engine, Jamie reaches over and puts his hand on top of my hand, resting on my thigh, lacing his fingers through mine. He strokes his thumb lightly across the top of mine as we head down the driveway. It's the same gesture from earlier when he comforted me, but now it appears my thumb has a direct connection to my cock because I go from half-mast to fully hard and throbbing within a few seconds.

Shit. I don't think I'll survive the thirty-minute drive to Jamie's house.

I abruptly turn off down a country lane.

Jamie's eyebrows knit together. "Is this a shortcut?"

"It's a shortcut to this." I pull onto the verge, turning off the engine and undoing my seatbelt all in one movement.

Jamie's eyes crinkle in amusement as I lean toward him.

"Is that the handbrake, or are you happy to see me?" he asks.

"I'm always happy to see you." I nudge my nose up his neck, sucking and nipping at his earlobe, and he turns to catch my mouth in a kiss.

And we're kissing furiously, the pent-up sexual tension from the dance floor exploding between us in parted lips, nipping teeth, and fumbling fingers.

He frantically works to get his hands under my shirt, and I'm equally focused on touching his golden skin as soon as possible.

His hands slide under my shirt, fingers digging into my shoulder blades, and I groan.

The front seat of cars definitely wasn't designed with this in mind, but somehow Jamie and I ignore the handbrake and

the lack of space in our frenetic pace to touch each other.

I'm dazed with lust, dazed that somehow this beautiful man is mine, dazed I get to yank open his shirt buttons and stroke his sculptured chest.

I get to be the one who fumbles with his belt and undoes his pants' buttons, releasing his straining erection from his boxers

I get to be the one who grips his cock and strokes him, who watches his eyes roll back in his head as he comes apart in my grip.

His mouth finds mine, and we're kissing, and then he's tugging at my pants, making it easy for him to kiss down my chest and take my cock into the wet heat of his mouth.

"Fuuccckk." I arch my head back, giving myself over to the incredible sensation of Jamie's mouth wrapped around me.

The angle makes it impossible for him to take me too deeply, so instead, he works over my cock in short, shallow movements, focusing most of his attention on the head, using his hand to help stroke my base.

My orgasm hurtles toward me at a speed I'd almost be embarrassed about if it wasn't so completely hot.

Jamie swallows everything, wiping his mouth as he straightens and promptly bumps his head on the steering wheel.

"Car sex is so much better in theory than it is in practicality," he says as he rubs his head.

I laugh loudly, and he grins back, and somehow, even with the space and handbrake issues, we cuddle against each other, as much of our bodies touching as possible. We share a gentle kiss and something burns bright inside me, something that's so unfamiliar it takes me a moment to identify it.

Happiness.

Pure, undiluted happiness that I'm here in this moment, with this man.

What Jamie said that night at camp gazing at the stars slides into my mind. He turned my struggle to find meaning in life into the lesson that every moment is precious.

It's precious that I get to be here with him. That I get to have this with Jamie, even if it's only for a short time.

"Precious." I don't realize I've whispered the word until Jamie pulls back to look at me, his forehead creasing.

"Are you brainstorming pet names for me?" he asks.

"I was thinking something deep and monumental actually," I say. "About how moments like this are so precious."

He plants a quick kiss on the side of my cheek.

Then he pulls back and arches an eyebrow. "Nice cover story. It's really your pet name for my cock, isn't it?"

I laugh.

"I'm thinking you should extend it to My Precious, like from *The Lord of the Rings*." He says *My Precious* in a Gollum voice, and I'm laughing even harder, and then he's kissing my smile, putting his hands up to cup my cheeks like I'm the thing that's precious, and goddamn, it's going to hurt when this man leaves me.

But I've got this moment, and that's what matters right now.

Chapter 15

Jamie

It's Wednesday, and I'm at the gym, killing time until soccer practice when I get to see Tim. Even though I spent Saturday night and quite a bit of Sunday with him before he had to pick Stella up, and I've seen him every day at school, I have that breathless anticipation I get when Tim and I are about to spend a decent chunk of time together.

I channel some of that nervous energy into the work I'm doing on the bench press. My biceps and pectoral muscles burn.

Since starting the Southlake job, I haven't been to the gym nearly as often. I'm losing some muscle definition, but I find it hard to care.

For a long time after my dad died, getting my body to look the best I could was so important to me. Having as many guys lusting after me as possible was my goal.

Now it just seems...shallow.

I do twenty bench presses, and I can't help but notice a guy working with the kettlebells on the mat glancing in my direction, then looking away as if he doesn't want to be caught.

It reminds me of Pat, about how I first caught him checking me out covertly.

My stomach dives as it does every time I think about Pat.

It seems crazy now that I thought I'd been in love with Pat.

I know better now.

Because what I had with Pat was nothing compared to what I've got with Tim. Nothing.

I put up with scraps of affection from Pat, but with Tim, I have a seven-course meal complete with silver service.

With Pat, I'd placed him on a pedestal. Even though I was more experienced with men than him, he was much older than me and more experienced with life in general. He had a confidence about him that when he said something, it was as if it was a fact, and there was no room for me to have another opinion.

As I move onto the leg crunch, the time I talked to Pat about becoming a teacher flits into my head.

We'd just had sex and were lying on the bed together afterward.

At first, I used to leave quickly after we hooked up because it was obvious he wasn't comfortable having another guy touching him in any way that wasn't about getting off. But as the months went by, he gradually became more affectionate, and that night, when he stroked his hand down my chest, happiness poured through me.

And that bit of affection had tipped me over into spilling what was on my mind. "Did I tell you I'm thinking of starting university next year?"

I always seemed to do this when we were together. Tried to share my life with Pat. Even though he didn't seem interested in sharing much back. He'd grudgingly told me he lived on the North Shore, where he worked in his family business. His family was incredibly religious, which was why he couldn't be open about his sexuality. He always shut me down when I asked more questions.

But I wanted more from him. For our connection to be more than just about our bodies. So I would deliberately tell him about funny gym incidents, getting a thrill when he laughed.

I'd seduced him into sleeping with me.

Now I wanted to seduce him into loving me.

He pulled back to look at me. “You’re thinking about going to university? What do you want to study?”

“Physical education.”

He frowned at me. He had the cutest frown, one that I always had to resist smiling at.

“What good would a PE degree do? You already work in the fitness industry. Do you need a degree to go higher?”

“I want to be a PE teacher.”

His forehead scrunched up even more.

“I can’t really see you as a teacher,” Pat said.

I swallowed. “You can’t?”

“Nah, you belong in the exercise industry, where everyone can look at you and be inspired about what they might get to look like one day if they work hard enough.” He trailed his hand to my abs, playing with the grooves and ridges, sliding down to my V line. “This would be wasted on a bunch of teenagers.”

I laughed uneasily. “I guess I should take that as a compliment?”

He kissed the side of my neck. “You should definitely take it as a compliment.”

And later that week, when the deadline to apply for university rolled around, I decided not to apply. Going to university would require me to move from Whangarei, and then what would happen between Pat and me? Okay, he might have never said anything to indicate that he was considering long-term between us, but there was definitely starting to be a change in how he acted toward me when we hooked up.

Besides, Pat’s words had dented my confidence. I’d dropped out of school and hadn’t achieved anything near the entrance requirements for university. I’d been going to make use of the exemption policy in New Zealand that as soon as you turned twenty, you were guaranteed entrance to university.

Just because they would let me in didn't mean I was smart enough to succeed.

I decided Pat was right. I had a decent job where I was liked and admired. Why did I want to change that?

As I think about it now, though, I realize how much of what held me back was fear. I was scared to try because if I failed at the one thing I really wanted to do, where would it leave me?

My thoughts burn as much as my thighs and calves as I finish up my session, heading to the changing rooms.

I'm starting to change when a guy stands next to me, stripping off his T-shirt.

I send a sideways glance and recognize the guy with the kettlebells who was eyeing me up earlier.

He's now removing his track pants, giving me a great view of his boxer-clad ass.

I would roll my eyes if I hadn't used the same technique multiple times.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I reply.

It appears his gaydar is as in tune as mine because I'm sure I haven't been giving off any vibes to warrant the heated look he gives me.

He tilts his head and gives me a smirk. "You want to...?"

"Sorry, I have a boyfriend." I can't help the pride that seeps out in those words.

Surprise shoots across his face. Then he gives a no-harm-done shrug as he pulls on a clean T-shirt.

He gives me another lingering, admiring glance. "Your boyfriend is a lucky guy," he says.

Actually, I'm the lucky one.

"Thanks," I say as I stuff the last of my gear into my bag.

My steps are almost a skip as I head out of the gym. Only an hour until I get to see Tim.

I'm just outside the gym entrance when a movement on the other side of the road catches my eye, and I stop abruptly.

A guy is standing there. Dark hair. Tall solid build. My breath catches in my throat.

But before I have a chance to unfreeze, the guy has taken off, disappearing around the corner.

I continue to stand there, my heart thumping, trying to wrestle my imagination under control.

For months after Pat disappeared from my life, I thought I'd seen him everywhere. I even stalked a few guys on the street, determined they were him. But it never was.

Just like it's not Pat now. The sensible part of my brain knows that. I haven't seen Pat for years. He's not suddenly going to reappear in my life after all this time.

Because I was thinking about him, my mind was primed to believe a random stranger was him.

After all, it's not like tall guys with dark hair are a rare species.

I drive to training, and the lingering feelings of thinking about Pat wash away as soon as I see Tim.

He looks up as I approach and gives me a wide smile, and honestly, the sun is nothing compared to Tim when he's in full-beam mode.

"Here he is. Jamie, the super-striker," Scott says as I reach the group.

"The super-soaker, you mean," Declan corrects, and I laugh because, yes, after Saturday's game, I might have been a bit liberal with spraying around the contents of my drink bottle after Declan's last-minute goal meant we won the game two to one.

I love the good-natured banter that's started in our team as we get to know each other.

Practice goes fast, a blur of running, balls, sweat, and laughter.

When we finish, our faces cover all shades in the red spectrum. From Declan, whose pale complexion is such a fire engine red it looks like it might set his hair on fire, to Seb, who must be sneakily fit as his cheeks are only tinged light pink.

At the pub afterward, Declan sculls his beer like a man dying of thirst.

"I don't know how you can drink that so quickly after all the running around," I say.

"It's an acquired skill," Declan replies. "Acquired by many hours spent at the pubs when I was at uni. One pub used to have this promotional period where you paid ten dollars and could drink all you wanted for an hour. It got very messy. It was after one of those hours that my mates and I decided it was a good idea to go collect all the road signs from a construction site. Unfortunately, the police didn't think it was such a great idea."

I laugh.

Tim's laughing too. "I think my husband had a similar story from university, only his involved waking in the glasshouse of the botanical gardens surrounded by road cones and a very unimpressed police officer."

Everyone laughs at that, although I notice Declan sends a questioning glance in my direction like he expects me to be upset that Tim is talking about Rick.

But I quite like it. Even though it makes me feel inferior sometimes because Rick was obviously a cleverer and more successful person than me. Although maybe not when he was getting drunk and collecting road cones.

I feel bad sometimes, though, because Rick's death is obviously a tragedy, but if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be

with Tim. Honestly, I'm at the point where my entire body seizes up at that concept.

My mind slides to the picture I saw of Rick and Tim on their wedding day, how they were laughing together. Do I make Tim laugh as much as Rick did? I try not to dwell on the question because I'm pretty sure madness lies down the path of constantly wondering how I compare to Tim's husband.

Rick is part of Tim. Tim wouldn't be the same person if it wasn't for Rick.

And part of the reason why Tim is able to be so loving and generous toward me must be because he learned some of those skills in his relationship with Rick. So I really do feel grateful to Rick.

It feels weird to have profited from someone else's extreme misfortune though.

I thought Tim and I were getting slightly better at staying at the pub for longer and not making it obvious we're desperate to rush off to have sex. But I flick a look at Tim and give a slightly suggestive eyebrow tilt, and he replies with an anticipatory grin.

The moment is shattered by Declan's complaint. "Oi, you two! Stop rubbing the rest of our noses in the fact you're about to get laid."

I snap my eyes away from Tim to give Declan a *sorry, not sorry* smirk.

Scott claps Declan on the shoulder. "I know a good app that can solve all your problems."

"I don't want a hookup. I want that!" Declan points a finger at Tim and me. "I want someone to look at me the way those two look at each other."

Scott screws up his nose like Declan said something distasteful. "Really?"

"You saying you don't want that?"

"Nah, I'm not really the relationship type," Scott says. "Never have been, never will be. Why limit yourself to one

guy?”

“What about you, Seb?” Declan tries to draw an unusually quiet Seb into the conversation. “Are you the relationship type?”

“Maybe,” he says in a quiet voice. “It depends on how healthy the relationship is.” There’s a heaviness in his voice that seems to weigh his words down.

Declan’s eyes sparkle. “I want a relationship that’s healthier than a green salad.”

“Yeah, you might want to leave that description off your Grindr profile,” Scott says. “Not sure that’s what guys are looking for, to be compared to lettuce.”

“And on that note, I think we’ll head off.” I stand, looking down at Tim.

Declan smirks at us. “Enjoy playing with cucumbers and tomatoes.”

“Fuck, there are some places you just shouldn’t go, Declan,” I say.

Tim laughs as he follows me out.

“Have I said recently how much I appreciate you inviting me to join the team?” Tim asks when we reach the pavement.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “That’s what you’re thanking me for?”

He stops and gives me a heated look. “What, in particular, do you think I should thank you for?”

“The night is young. I’m pretty sure I can come up with a list of things for us to thank each other for.”

His eyes heat even more. “Meet you back at your place.”

Tim and I start kissing on the doorstep, which makes unlocking my front door a more prolonged process than it should be.

But as I finally unlock the door, a muscle in my shoulder protests.

I roll my shoulders as I walk into the living room, reaching one hand up to rub my neck.

“You okay?” Tim asks as he follows me inside.

“I went to the gym after school, and now I’m really feeling it.”

“You want a massage?”

I wiggle my eyebrows at him. “Can you promise it’ll have a happy ending?”

“Most definitely. It’ll be a fairy tale massage. Guaranteed happy ending.”

I shuffle toward him. “I like the sound of that.”

Tim grins at me as he leads the way down the hallway to my bedroom.

“So what fairy tale reenactment are we aiming for?” I ask when we get inside, pulling off my shirt and shucking out of my pants. “Are you going to be the big bad wolf and huff and puff and eat me all up? Or are we going for Goldilocks and the three bears because you’ll make it just right?” I give him a saucy wink.

“It’s official. You’ve ruined fairy tales for me.”

“You mean I’ve enhanced them for you?”

“Yeah, this is not what I want to think about next time I read a fairy tale to my daughter.”

Oops, I didn’t think of that.

I tug at the hem of his T-shirt. “You need to take off your shirt too.”

“I wasn’t aware that’s one of the criteria of being a masseur,” he says.

“It is when you’re my masseur,” I reply.

Tim whips off his shirt, and I take a moment to admire his lean chest, the light sprinkling of hair on his pale skin, and his

tight pink nipples.

It appears we've got a mutual thing going on because Tim's eyes heat as they rake over me.

"Your body is so incredible." He says the words in a hushed tone, like he's imparting state secrets.

"I used to be so much more toned when I worked at the gym every day."

Tim raises an eyebrow. "You used to be even more toned?"

"Yeah."

He prods at his own stomach. "I don't think anyone is ever going to mistake me for a Chippendale."

"You're perfect as you are," I say.

Tim's eyes soften. "On your stomach, muscle boy," he says.

I obligingly lie down on my bed.

I hear Tim fumbling in my top drawer, then feel the cold sensation of lotion as Tim's hands slide along my shoulders. I let out a long groan.

"Do you miss working at the gym?" he asks as he digs his fingers into my muscles.

I tilt my head to the side so I can answer him. "Not really. I like what I'm doing now way more."

"You're really good at your job," Tim says.

"Are you trying to get laid?" My tone is jokey. "Because I thought we've already agreed on the ending of this, so there's no need to butter me up. Unless, of course, you want to use butter instead of hand lotion."

Tim's hands go still on me, and when I glance at him, he gives me a stern look. "Seriously, Jamie. You've got that x-factor, you know? It's not something you can be taught. You'll make a fabulous teacher if you decide to go to teachers' college."

I swallow.

Is it déjà vu when it's the same scenario but a completely different result?

Talking to the man I'm sleeping with about becoming a teacher.

Pat told me I was better off working in a gym to show off my body. Tim tells me I'll make a great teacher.

As if I needed more proof of how this thing with Tim is so different.

"Thank you," I say quietly.

Tim runs his hands over me again: along my shoulders, down my arms to my biceps, along my spine, and out to the sides of my back. His hands are gentle yet firm, and he pauses to pepper kisses on my shoulder blades.

He shifts his weight, and his cock digs into me. It's definitely turned up wanting to play.

And that fact has my own cock rushing to join in.

I arch my ass back into his groin.

Tim's breathing falters.

"Do you want to...?" I ask.

I'm certain Tim has all but stopped breathing.

In one quick movement, I roll over beneath him so Tim is straddling my stomach, looking down at me.

"Hey, Tim, wanna fuck?" I say in my most seductive voice.

"That's romance if ever I've heard it," Tim says. His eyes are brighter than I've ever seen them before as he stares down at me.

I grin up at him. "I'm offering my ass to you. If that's not romance, I'm not sure what is."

Tim's eyebrows scrunch together. "Are you sure?"

Tim is so talented with his mouth that I haven't felt the need for anything else. Our brief conversation on the topic

revealed we both prefer to top, so it's not something either of us has pushed for.

But I have a craving for Tim that I don't think can be satisfied by having his hands or mouth on me. I want him to own me completely.

"Yeah, I want to...with you," I say.

Tim's eyes darken with lust.

He leans forward and kisses me so wildly, so passionately, that any nerves I might have fall away.

He draws back. "Um...do you want me to use a condom?"

My heart races.

I've never had penetrative sex without a condom before. I've never been in this position, in an exclusive relationship where we'd both been tested, where I trusted him completely.

"No, I don't think we need to use condoms." My voice comes out husky as I scrummage in my bedside drawer. "Definitely need lube though."

When I throw the lube on the bed, Tim swallows hard, looking at it like it's the first time he's ever seen it. I suddenly realize how long it must have been for him.

"I'm sure it'll be like riding a bike," I say.

He blinks a few more times at the lube, then lifts his gaze to mine. Then he starts to laugh slowly. "Did you just compare yourself to a bike?"

I shrug. "I'm fine with being a bike. I'll be one of those carbon graphite road bikes that cost more than a car."

Tim's still chuckling. "I think I'm one of the rusty tricycles that squeaks every time you turn the pedals."

"You're really selling having sex with you," I say.

"I wasn't aware I was still at the 'making the sale' portion of this exchange."

I laugh, and he leans forward to kiss me. Our tongues tangle, and I moan into the kiss. There's nothing quite like

kissing Tim.

Tim teases me with his kisses, nibbling on my lower lip, then soothing it with his tongue. He moves his lips to my neck, and I arch into him, giving him better access. His mouth is hot against my skin, and the roughness of his stubble scraping against me makes my cock throb.

Eventually, Tim stops kissing me and reaches for the lube. He squeezes some into his hand and rubs it across my hole.

I moan as he pushes a finger inside me. One, then two fingers. He crooks his fingers to hit the magical area of my prostate, and I see stars. Fuck.

“Jamie,” he moans, his voice husky.

Of course I should have realized this would be a different experience with Tim than the few other guys I’ve let fuck me.

Tim will never see my body only as a vessel for his enjoyment. He’s going to do everything he can to make it great for me.

And prepping me is obviously doing it for him, too, because his cock is rock hard and leaking.

I’m a writhing, panting mess, but he takes his time, scissoring his fingers inside me.

With his other hand, he grabs hold of his cock and strokes himself as he watches his fingers fuck me. The sight of him pleasuring himself while he touches me is so incredible that I can’t help but jerk myself off too.

“This will be over too fast if you do that,” he gasps.

I stop immediately. I don’t want that. I want to feel his cock inside me. I want to feel him thrusting, owning me.

“Tim...” I moan. He must sense how on edge I am because he stops stroking himself and withdraws his fingers. I immediately feel the loss of him.

He slicks himself with more lube.

I move onto my hands and knees. When I glance back, Tim’s eyes are wrecked with lust. Oh, holy fuck. My whole

body trembles in anticipation.

“Every part of you is gorgeous,” he murmurs, and for once, I don’t seize up at having a guy compliment my body in bed.

Because Tim knows more parts of me than anyone else, ever.

This feels like extending that concept of Tim knowing me in every way possible, and I want that.

He lines himself up and pushes into me. His cock is hot and thick, and my muscles tense.

“Let me in, beautiful,” he whispers hoarsely.

I try to remember the tricks of this, bearing down to help ease Tim inside.

He inches in, and I feel every movement of him sliding inside me.

But past the pinch and burn is the feeling of fullness. Tim is everywhere.

The bristles of his facial hair against my skin, his breath hot on the back of my neck, giving me goosebumps.

We both moan when he bottoms out.

“Okay?” he pants.

“Holy fuck, yes.” I’m not quite sure if the words make it out of me in anything but a husky groan.

Tim starts to move, slowly at first, but then picks up the pace as I moan in pleasure. He grabs my hips and pulls me back onto him, driving into me deeper and harder.

I writhe beneath him, feeling every inch of him moving inside me.

I’m lost in the sensations—the slide of skin on skin, the wet sounds of our fucking, the cries escaping from our mouths. They build until I’m teetering on the edge.

Fuck. I’ve never had this before. Never wanted someone to consume me. To possess me.

I'm whimpering, begging for release.

I grab my cock and start stroking.

"That's it," he pants behind me. "Let go."

His cock pounds against my prostate, and I'm undone. I come hard, exploding all over the bed.

Fuck.

I've never felt so intense an orgasm in my life, like I'm flying apart, like I'm coming from every pore in my body.

With a final deep thrust, I feel Tim shudder inside me.

I collapse onto the bed, boneless.

Tim collapses over me, and it feels like we're both melting into the bed.

We just lie there for a few seconds, both breathing hard.

"Wow, Jamie, that was intense," he murmurs into my hair.

"You could totally turn me into a bottom if it's like that every time," I say.

Tim rolls onto his side, taking me with him. He slowly eases out of me, then turns me over and kisses me on my sweaty forehead.

I nudge his nose so I can kiss him properly.

We kiss and kiss. These kisses hide a truth I've been trying to deny myself.

I'm falling for Tim. So hard.

Eventually, our kisses settle down. After we've cleaned up, we lie pressed together like we're trying to connect as much of our bodies as physically possible.

Tim falls asleep, but I lie awake, watching him breathe, smiling to myself at the little crease between his eyebrows that he gets when he sleeps. It's like his dreams are perplexing him.

And the question that's been perplexing me swirls in my mind.

How can I leave him behind in a few months?

The answer is simple.

I can't.

Chapter 16

Tim

Saturday afternoon, and I'm playing soccer.

I'm so glad Jamie encouraged me to join the team. Not only am I slowly getting fitter, with training once a week and a game on Saturdays, but I love being part of a team again, that sense of comradery you get on the sports field.

I'm dribbling the ball down the field, the other team's defender bearing down on me.

Jamie charges down the center. "Tim! Tim!"

I wait until the defender is almost upon me to send a kick across to Jamie. He sprints up the field, beating his defender one-on-one before crossing to Declan. Declan gathers the ball, then sends it sailing into the back left corner of the goal.

We run over to congratulate Declan, slapping his back and ruffling his hair.

There are only ten minutes left in the match, and we hold on to win two to one, moving to second in the league.

It's a recreational division, so the only thing on the line is bragging rights, but I'm sure most of the guys on the team get the same satisfaction I do from being on an LGBTQ+ team proudly wearing rainbow colors and consistently beating other teams. I don't know if you can grow up as a gay kid in a country like New Zealand—where masculinity is trussed up in sports, drinking beer, and chasing women—and not deal with some shit regarding your sexuality.

“Great game,” Larissa says as I come off the field to greet her and Stella. I don’t get the full contingent of family supporters now that I’ve proved I’m not a comedy act, but one of my sisters usually watches Stella on the sidelines for me. I probably don’t need to be so overprotective—Stella’s playing off by the trees at one end of the field with a bunch of other kids—but it means I don’t have to constantly scan the sidelines while I’m playing to reassure myself she’s safe.

“Thanks,” I say to Larissa, still puffing. I pick up my water bottle and take a swing.

“Do you and Stella want to come to my place for dinner? Jenna and Grant and the kids are coming,” Larissa says.

“Sounds like fun.”

Larissa’s gaze shoots to Jamie. “Bring your boyfriend if you want.”

“Um...maybe.” So far, Jamie’s made polite conversation with my sisters on the sidelines of soccer, but I’m not sure if I’m prepared to expose him to a full interrogation.

Speaking of the man, Jamie comes loping toward us, a large smile on his face.

“I’ve got something for Stella in my car. Do you want to come grab it?” he asks me.

I return his smile. “Sure.”

“I’ll track down Stella for you,” Larissa says.

“Thanks.”

Jamie and I head to his car. We’re walking so close together our shoulders touch.

Without thinking, I grab his hand, linking our fingers.

Jamie looks down at our joined hands, then up at me, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he gives me his special Jamie grin with the full component of dimples.

When we reach his car, I turn toward him, using my free hand to tug the collar of his shirt as I pull him in for a kiss. He tastes both salty and sweet. I keep it light because I’m aware

of our surroundings, but it's still incredibly satisfying. Kissing Jamie always is.

Jamie's face is flushed when he pulls back. "What was that for?"

I shrug. "Just because."

"Feel completely free to continue to kiss me like that for no reason," he says. "Although maybe not at school."

I laugh, and he gives me a lopsided grin as he opens the front door of his car. He emerges holding a book.

"I thought I still had this, so I rummaged around in some of my boxes in storage. My dad gave me this for my ninth birthday, and it was my favorite book when I was a kid. I thought Stella might like it," he says, handing it to me.

I read the title: *A Child's Guide to New Zealand's Natural History and Wildlife*.

"There's a whole section on identifying shells near the back."

"Jamie..." I start but can't continue because my throat is clogged with too much emotion. I stare down at the book cover, trying to control myself.

I've felt this way around Jamie a lot recently. Like my emotions are too large for my body to contain.

I raise my gaze and find his beautiful eyes studying me as if he's trying to make sense of my reaction.

"Do you want to come to dinner at Larissa's tonight?" I blurt.

His brow furrows. "Am I invited?"

"Yes, she asked me just now and wanted me to ask you too."

Jamie turns on his full-watt smile. "I'd love to come."

"Great."

The unease at exposing Jamie to my sisters fades when I see how happy this simple invitation has made him.

I like making Jamie happy.

I pick Jamie up from his place an hour later, after we've both had time to go home and shower.

He comes out to the car and slides into the front seat, greeting me with a smile.

"Do you live here with your mum and dad?" Stella asks him as I back out of Jamie's driveway.

I almost choke. Does Stella think Jamie's so young that he still lives with his parents? Or is this simply one of those kid things where they don't understand fully how the world works?

"No, I live here with my friend, Kelsey," Jamie says easily.

"I wish I could live with my friend, Pippa," Stella says.

"Gee, thanks, kiddo. You really know how to make your old man feel special," I say.

"You can live at Pippa's house too, Dad," Stella says seriously.

I flick a smile at Jamie. "I'm glad I'm invited."

Jamie twists around in his seat to chat with Stella about her friends and school, and soon they're both giggling like lunatics.

While they chat, my mind slips to what happened between Jamie and me the other night. The sex was the most intense I've ever had. It was almost like an out-of-body experience.

I feel slightly bad that it's the twenty-two-year-old, the guy I'm in a short-term relationship with, that has given me that memory.

When I think of the hottest sex of my life, is it wrong that I'm going to think of Jamie, not my husband?

Guilt throbs through me, so I push the thought out of my mind.

I pull up outside Larissa's large two-storied house. Larissa and her husband are both architects, and in my opinion, their house is an overdesigned monstrosity. Just because you can put spiral staircases and frosted glass everywhere doesn't mean you should.

Larissa's husband, Harry, greets us at the door while Stella immediately runs off to find her cousins.

"This is my brother-in-law, Harry," I say. "This is my boyfriend, Jamie."

Harry shakes his hand. "I'll grab you guys a drink," he says as he gives Jamie a sympathetic smile. "I get the feeling you're going to need it."

Jamie's eyebrows shoot up. "I'm going to need alcohol tonight?" he asks as Harry retreats toward the kitchen.

"Knock, knock." The reason Jamie needs alcohol has arrived.

Jenna sweeps in with a smile that gets wider when she sees Jamie. "Hi, Jamie. Larissa said you were coming. This is my husband, Grant. Grant, meet Tim's new boyfriend."

"Nice to meet you," Grant says. He shakes Jamie's hand and gives him a warm smile but quickly sidles toward the kitchen.

Larissa and I have often tried to remember whether Grant was this quiet when we first met him or if it's a result of being married to Jenna for fifteen years.

Sure enough, Jenna doesn't waste any time hijacking the conversation and turning it into an interrogation.

"So, Jamie, tell me all about you."

Jamie scratches the back of his neck. "Uh...what do you want to know?"

"Well, first, where did you grow up?"

As Harry emerges and presses beers into Jamie's and my hands, Jamie tells Jenna the basic facts. She asks follow-up questions and quickly gets it out of him that his mum is in

Australia, his father passed away, and he worked in a gym before coming to Southlake.

“So, have you had many serious relationships before?” she asks.

Oh my god, I can’t believe she asked that. It’s so far past the line of what’s appropriate we can’t even see it in the rear-view mirror.

“Jenna,” I growl.

“Um...no real long-term relationships,” Jamie answers at the same time. His grip on his beer tightens. “I had one that lasted around six months. But ah...that was a while ago now.”

My eyebrows rise as he stumbles his way through his answer. Shit. I haven’t actually talked to Jamie about his relationship history. He’s alluded to the fact he made mistakes in the past, and he told me someone tried to keep him a secret.

Given how amazing Jamie is in so many ways, it seems ludicrous that he doesn’t have a past full of guys who worshipped the ground he walks on.

“And what did your ex do?” Jenna asks.

“Jenna!” This time my voice is even more growly. It’s the one I use when I’m scolding Year 9s for mucking around with the Bunsen burners.

She turns to me with innocent eyes. “What?”

“Please excuse my sister,” I say to Jamie, my voice tight.

“It’s okay.” Jamie looks at Jenna. “You’re just checking that I’m not a science-teacher groupie, right? Making sure I don’t have a fetish for test tubes and safety goggles.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me. “I thought it was my lab coat that really did it for you,” I say.

“You can’t forget the scent of formaldehyde,” he quips back.

We share a quick smile, and I turn to Jenna, who’s already opened her mouth to ask her next question. “Shall we talk about some of your ex-boyfriends now? Because there are

some stunners in that collection. Lance the Devil Worshipper is my personal highlight.”

“He wasn’t a devil worshipper, only interested in the occult,” Jenna protests.

Larissa pokes her head around the doorway. “Dinner is ready.”

“We’re coming,” I say.

I wait until Jenna has left the room before I turn to Jamie with an apologetic look.

“I’m so sorry about that.”

“That’s okay.” Jamie stands from the couch. “I’m just going to the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

I wander through the living room, where Larissa has set up the kids on a picnic rug to watch a movie. Stella’s so absorbed in watching the TV she doesn’t even notice me.

Larissa is serving up her famous lasagna when I arrive at the dinner table.

“Looks good,” I say as I sit.

Harry sends me a smile. “Jamie seems like a good guy.”

“He is a good guy,” I say, in what may be the understatement of the year.

“You’re obviously having fun with him, but he’s so young,” Jenna says.

My shoulders stiffen.

“He’s making Tim happy at the moment, and that’s what counts,” Larissa says.

“He is definitely making me happy,” I agree. I reach for the bottle of wine and fill my glass.

“He’s so different from Rick. I just can’t see it lasting long-term,” Jenna says.

I rub my jaw. Jenna's comments cut straight to the truth of what I've always worried about with Jamie.

He's young. And he is different from Rick. He's definitely not the type of person I thought I'd ever be with.

"He's leaving at the end of the year," I say. "It's never going to be a long-term thing."

I'm saying it to remind myself as much as I am for my sister's benefit.

A flash of movement catches my eye. Jamie's at the doorway to the dining room. And the hurt on his face makes me realize he's heard me.

My stomach hollows.

Shit.

"I was just saying how you're planning to go to London at the end of the year to do your OE," I say quickly, trying to pump enthusiasm into my voice. It sounds more artificial than the fake flowers at the center of the table. "Have you and Kelsey booked your tickets yet?"

Jamie comes and takes the empty seat opposite me. "No, we haven't." He doesn't meet my eye.

"Do you know what countries you want to travel to?" Larissa asks.

Jamie shakes his head. "I haven't thought much about it yet."

"If you get a chance, definitely go to Spain," Larissa says.

We discuss traveling and our favorite countries in Europe. Jamie's not as enthusiastic as I expect him to be.

In fact, he gets quieter and quieter as the evening goes on.

At the end of the night, Larissa offers Stella to stay the night, which gives Jamie and me an unexpected bonus night together, but Jamie doesn't seem as ecstatic as I am at the prospect.

I say goodnight to Stella, who barely tolerates my hug before she runs off with her cousins.

Jamie thanks Larissa and Harry for the meal, and we head outside together.

“Your place?” I ask as we walk out to the footpath.

“Yeah, okay,” Jamie says.

We climb into the car. I pull onto the street. Larissa only lives a five-minute drive from Jamie’s place, and Jamie says nothing for the first minute. Which is so unlike him that I send anxious glances his way.

Jamie stares out the window, watching the streetlights go past.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Not really.”

“What’s wrong?”

He’s silent for a few more seconds before he speaks. “It doesn’t make me feel great when I hear you talking enthusiastically about the prospect of me leaving.”

I gulp as I brake for the traffic lights. “I was trying to be supportive.”

Jamie’s jaw is tight. He continues to stare out the window. “Do you seriously think I’m going to pack my bags, say, ‘hey, thanks for the fun,’ and jump on a plane without a second thought?”

My heart starts to pound.

“I thought you were planning to leave.” My voice is low.

“That was before.”

I almost don’t want to ask the next question. My shoulders stiff, I force it out of me. “Before what?”

He looks straight at me. “Before you.”

And there it is. My breath leaves me in a whoosh because I realize this is exactly what I’ve been both fearing and hoping for in equal measure.

The lights change, and I press my foot to the accelerator. Emotions war inside me. It's like my conscience is waging an epic battle with my desire. I feel like Jamie has just offered me something incredible, but it would be selfish to accept it.

I clutch the steering wheel, digging my fingernails into the leather.

"You're young, Jamie. I don't want you to change your plans for me."

There's silence between us.

I pull into his driveway, switch off the ignition, and turn to face him.

When he meets my gaze, the look on his face is fierce. "Fuck it, Tim. I'm not letting you do this. I'm not letting you play the *you're too young* card like I'm not an adult who can make up my own mind. Like I don't know what I'm feeling. I deserve better than that." Jamie's breath comes out jagged. "You know what? The crazy thing is, you're the one who's taught me I deserve better than that."

"Jamie, you deserve everything." My voice is choked.

Because this beautiful man is forcing me to confront the truth I've been trying so hard to avoid.

This is not just us having some short-term fun, as much as I've wanted to cling to that idea.

This is us falling in love.

"Jamie," I say softly.

There's so much hurt in his eyes that it gashes my soul.

Seeing his hurt has the truth pouring out of me in a torrent. "I would be so happy if you stayed. I honestly didn't think this would happen again for me." I run a hand through my hair. "But I really, really don't want you giving up your plans for me."

"Isn't that ultimately my choice?" he asks.

He's right. It is his choice. And I need to respect him like I would any other adult I'm in a relationship with.

I nod slowly. “It is your choice, and if you choose to stay because of me, because of us, well...” I swallow. “It would probably be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“I wouldn’t be doing it for you. I’d be doing it for me,” he says, his eyes not leaving mine. “I can’t imagine traveling would ever make me as happy as you make me.”

The sincerity in his words causes air to flee my lungs.

“You make me happy too,” I say. “And I think what we have together is special.”

Jamie’s face relaxes. “It is special,” he says.

Seeing the relief on his face clinches something inside me. And it makes me realize the truth.

I am so far gone for this man.

Chapter 17

Jamie

When we get inside my house, I shake with relief.

Tim wants me too. I've told him I'm planning to stay. He's happy for us to continue long-term.

I can't believe I challenged him like that. But I'd been so hurt by the casual way he talked about me leaving, and when he asked me what was wrong, I'd taken the risk and told him the truth.

And it had definitely paid off.

"You want to go straight to bed?" Tim asks once we're inside. I nod wordlessly. I feel weirdly raw after our conversation and want nothing more than to have Tim pressed against me.

We head to the bathroom together.

I love how Tim now has a toothbrush in my house and we have this little domestic routine of getting ready for bed like we've been together for years, not months.

And it appears I find domestic routines sexy because the sight of Tim standing in his boxers and my old T-shirt, bare feet, washing his face, has my cock perking up.

"You okay there?" Tim asks as it appears I've paused midway through brushing my teeth to ogle him in the mirror.

"Just contemplating the wonder of mirrors," I say.

Tim snorts. "You're imagining us having sex in front of the mirror, aren't you?"

Oh, holy fuck.

My cock, already half-hard, instantly firms at the thought, which the thin cotton of my boxers does little to disguise.

Tim sees my predicament and chuckles.

“This is the only big mirror in the house, and Kelsey will be home soon,” I say, regret in my voice. As supportive as Kelsey is, if she comes home and can’t use the bathroom because we’re in here fucking, she’ll lose the plot.

Tim gives me a wink. “We’ll have to schedule that for another time.”

Happiness inflates inside me until I can barely breathe because this thing with Tim doesn’t have an expiry date anymore. We’re free to make plans together for the future, even if it is only fun sexscapades to get up to.

We climb into bed. Tim’s face is only a few inches away from me, his stunning eyes deep and dark in the low light.

This is pillow talk. The space for whispered confessions.

And before I close the distance and kiss him, I find myself dredging up my insecurities from earlier in the evening.

“Your family thinks I’m too young for you, don’t they?”

Tim hesitates. “They’re right in that you’re at a different life stage to me. I’ve got a child. I’ve been married.”

I grimace. “I’m definitely amateur status compared to you when it comes to relationships.”

“You told Jenna about one past relationship...” Tim trails off, but I can see the curiosity on his face.

“Yeah.” I swallow hard. I’ve been thinking for a while I should tell Tim about Pat, but it’s hard. It’s not exactly something I’m proud of.

“You want to tell me about it?” Tim asks. He reaches out to brush his fingers down my side, his touch featherlight.

“I don’t want to change your opinion of me,” I whisper. “Because I made some mistakes, mistakes I really regret.”

“Jamie, we’ve all made mistakes,” Tim says.

“I doubt you’ve made a mistake as big as I did.”

Tim strokes up my arm. “It’s okay, Jamie. You can tell me.”

I take a deep breath. “Well, I told you how I was messed up after my dad died, right?”

“Right.”

“There was this guy...his name was Pat. I met him at the gym I worked at. I sensed he was attracted to me.” I bite my lip for a few seconds before I continue. “I’ve always had an incredibly in-tune gaydar, but this time it probably worked too well because I flirted outrageously with him. I’m pretty sure he would have never approached me otherwise.”

Tim frowns. “Why wouldn’t he have approached you?”

“Because he was closeted.”

Tim’s eyebrows fly up. “Oh, I see.”

“He was quite a bit older than me. In his mid thirties, and I was the first guy he’d ever been with.”

Tim waits patiently for me to continue. There’s no judgment in his gaze, and my heart swells with so much love for this man.

“It was...intense.” That word doesn’t feel strong enough to describe how things were with Pat. For a second, an image of Pat’s dark eyes flashes into my mind. The way he used to look at me sometimes like he wanted to consume me.

“He came from this religious family who would never accept that he was gay, and he worked for his family company. So I was this big secret.” I can hear the hurt that still lives deep inside me leaching into my voice. Tim obviously notices because he gives my arm a quick squeeze.

“I was dumb. In the beginning, I thought the whole clandestine thing was sexy. I loved that I was the first guy he’d ever been with. I was fucking flattered that I’d been the one to tempt him enough to act on his impulses.” I release a

shuddering breath. “So we fucked around for a couple of months. At first, it was just about the hot sex, but gradually, he started to talk more to me, and we messaged a bit. Some nights he’d call me, and we’d talk for hours.”

I still remember standing outside the gym while on break, talking to Pat. How the fact that he’d been thinking about me and decided to call was the highlight of my day.

“And I don’t know, maybe it was because I was feeling lonely or something. I was living in this flat with these other guys from the gym, but they were kind of assholes, you know? The type of guys who were into doping and tearing other people down to make themselves feel better about themselves.

“And Pat...he just seemed so different. He was more... refined, I guess. Older and more educated than the guys I hung out with.” I swallow hard. “But I started to really fall for him until I discovered the other reason he wanted to keep me a secret.”

“What, another reason besides being closeted?”

“Yeah.”

“What was it?”

“He was married. He had a wife and kids.”

Tim blinks. “What?”

“Yeah, I know.” My throat feels choked, but I force myself to continue. “I started to get suspicious because he’d only message me at certain times and was cagey about the details of his life. Eventually, I asked him point blank. And he confessed.”

“What did you do?”

“I kicked him out. Immediately. Told him it was the end of everything. I couldn’t fuck around with a married guy. I just couldn’t. My mum cheated on my dad before she went to Australia, and I remember how much that devastated my dad, and I didn’t want to do that to his wife.”

Tim scans my face. I think he can tell it’s not the end of the story.

“What happened?”

“He bombarded me with messages, begging me to reconsider.” I duck my head. I can’t look at Tim when I tell him this part. “So I agreed to see him again. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind in person, but we ended up back in bed.”

“You were nineteen, Jamie.” Tim’s voice is soothing.

Guilt swells inside me. “It happened twice more. Once, he turned up at the gym at closing time. Once, he came to my flat. I was so fucking lonely without him.”

It’s difficult to think about that time in my life. When I was still devastated about my dad, feeling lost and alone in the world. Having my relationship with Pat disintegrating, the one thing I’d been clinging to, I was so torn. I knew it was wrong to be with him, but I also didn’t want to be without him.

“Kelsey has this theory that I was attracted to him because he was older, and I was looking for a father replacement.” I run my hand through my hair.

“How did it end?” Tim asks.

I huff a bitter laugh. “This is where it turns completely fucked up. A woman turned up at the gym, saying Pat had asked her to tell me it was over between us. She demanded to have my phone, deleted his number and all our messages, and said if I ever contacted him again, he would file a complaint with the police about harassment.”

“Seriously?” I can hear the disbelief in Tim’s voice.

“I know. It’s a fucked-up ending to a fucked-up story, right?”

The most fucked-up thing was even if I did want to contact Pat—end things on my own terms—I didn’t know how to. I didn’t even know his last name.

He’d shared so little of his life with me.

“I wonder now whether the woman who showed up was actually his wife? Maybe she’d discovered that he was having an affair with me, and that was her way to get rid of me?”

“For months, I kept waiting for him to turn up at the gym because it didn’t feel like a proper ending, you know? I couldn’t believe he’d just...vanish like that.

“And I’d look for him everywhere. Like anytime I came to Auckland, I’d be scanning the crowds, looking for him.”

I’ve always wondered what I’d do if I ran into him with his wife and kids. How I’d act. Whether I’d confront him with the truth or pretend I didn’t know him.

“But you’ve never seen him again?” Tim says.

“No. Although the other day, when I was coming out of the gym, I thought I saw someone who looked like him across the road. That happens sometimes. I catch glimpses of people who superficially look like him, and I think it’s him, but it never is.”

Tim seizes up. “Do you think he’d try to track you down?”

I shrug.

“I used to want to see him again. I used to think I wanted to have one last conversation with him, have some closure on the whole thing. But now, I don’t think I ever want to see him again. Having this with you has made me realize exactly how fucked up the way he treated me was.

“In some ways, I’m grateful for the whole shitshow because it made me take a look at myself, and I realized how disappointed Dad would be with what I was doing with my life. So I got a job at a better gym, got away from those guys who were dragging me down, and stopped trying to heal myself by fucking everything with a pulse like I had been before Pat. But I was pretty screwed up about it at the time.”

“It sounds like a really messed-up situation,” Tim says quietly.

I take a deep breath. “I realize now how he didn’t see me as real. I tried so hard. I wanted us to be together in a proper relationship, but I was always just some fantasy guy he got to fuck before he went home to his real life.

“And I wasn’t real with him either. I was so scared he would leave and never come back that I was never honest with him about how I felt. In the end, that’s exactly what he did anyway.”

“Did you love him?” Tim asks.

My breath catches in my chest, but I know I have to answer honestly.

“I thought it was love at the time.” I raise my gaze to his. “But now I know it was just infatuation. Because it turns out real love feels quite different.”

Tim swallows.

“I love you too.” He says the words quietly, but I can hear the seriousness in them.

A warm glow starts inside me, and I can’t help the smile overtaking my face.

Tim’s lips curl into a smile too.

And suddenly, all the painful memories of Pat, all the hurt I’ve been reliving, fades. It no longer matters as much that Pat discarded me like a piece of trash. What matters is this incredible man is in my bed, telling me he loves me.

He leans forward to kiss me, his mouth warm and soft. I let myself drift on the sensations of the kiss. This is not one of the usual fierce and demanding Tim kisses. This is sweet and tender. This is the kiss of someone I love and who is in love with me.

Our kiss deepens blissfully slowly, not in a rush to move it along to the next place but lingering at each stage, savoring it.

I part my lips a little, and his tongue slips inside, the kiss deepening further. Tim turns onto his back, arms splayed out at his sides. I move on top of him, running my fingers down his arms, feeling his hair-roughened skin. When I reach his hands, he takes them, intertwining his fingers with mine.

I love the feel of his chest against mine, our skin rubbing against each other. He pulls me tighter to him, his hands tracing over my back.

I almost whine when he pulls back from me. But all my frustration dies with the next words out of his mouth.

“Do you want to fuck me?” he asks.

My breath hitches. “Really?”

“Yep.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Completely.”

He reaches out to cup my cheeks so I can't look away from him. “I want you. I want to feel you inside me.”

I'm squirming away from him, rummaging in my drawer for lube so quickly that Tim laughs his deep chuckle.

My hands shake as I produce the lube.

Shit, this feels like my first time because, in a way, it is. It's my first time getting to make love to the man I love.

Getting to kiss him again until we're both breathless and panting.

Getting to kiss down his body and take his cock into my mouth as I finger him.

Then getting to sink into the sweet heat of his body. Oh, holy fuck. It's like a religious experience, feeling his body cramp around my cock, knowing I'm inside Tim.

Tim groans, but definitely not in pain. I lean on my elbows and look down at him. He's staring at me with a look of pure ecstasy. “Oh god, yes, Jamie,” he says. “You feel amazing.”

“So do you.” I lean down to kiss his lips and start to move inside him. He wraps his legs around my hips, his hands sliding up my back, his mouth locked to mine. My strokes are deep and strong and slow. He's so hot and tight around me, and I can already feel my balls tightening.

I bury my face into the crook of his neck.

“Are you close?” I grit out.

“Just let go, Jamie,” he says.

And so I do.

I thrust harder and harder, going so deep that my balls slap against him. My orgasm builds. I look down at him, and he's biting down on his lips, his whole face flushed, his incredible eyes wide with what looks like wonder.

And seeing Tim like that sends me over the edge and suddenly I'm coming so hard and deep inside him in the most intense orgasm I've ever had.

Oh, holy shit. Holy, holy shit. Who knew sex could be this good?

I slowly pull out and collapse on the bed next to him.

I'm aware Tim's stroking himself, and I would honestly help if I wasn't so boneless, but I don't have the energy to do anything but raise my gaze and watch as he spills all over his stomach.

Shit. That's so hot.

He moves forward to kiss me.

"I'm sorry I didn't get you there," I say when he pulls away.

"Are you kidding me? Getting to see you like that is the best thing that's happened to me in years." Tim kisses me again. "And I didn't end up orgasm-deprived."

"I promise you'll never be orgasm-deprived when I'm around."

He grins at me. "I plan to hold you to that promise."

Once I can feel my legs again, I retrieve a cloth from the bathroom.

"This is the least sexy part of sex," I comment as I hand him the cloth, then climb into bed.

"I think the cleanup is the least sexy part of anything," Tim says.

I laugh. "Very true."

I snuggle in next to him, and his arms wrap around me.

“That was incredible,” he whispers to me.

“It was more than incredible,” I whisper back.

He brushes light circles on my back, and I relax, feeling the rhythmic thud of Tim’s heart beating under his skin.

I don’t think I’ve ever been happier than I am right now.

It’s like Tim knew that I usually topped Pat, knew that was the one thing he and I hadn’t done together that I’d done with Pat, and now he’s succeeded in completely obliterating those memories. Everything Tim and I have done together means so much more than what I did with Pat.

Because he treats me so well. Because he loves me.

This relationship with Tim has finally shut the door on that whole mess.

Pat’s in the past. And that’s where he can remain.

Chapter 18

Tim

Jamie is staying.

I'll be going about my normal routine, doing things like taking chicken nuggets out of the freezer for dinner or wiping down the counter, when the thought will hit me and I'll start randomly smiling.

Jamie's staying, and there is no end date for our relationship. We've fallen in love, and every moment we spend together seems to deepen the emotion between us.

I still feel guilty that he's sacrificing going overseas to be with me because I know he may never get the opportunity again. But I'm determined to respect that he's an adult capable of making his own decisions. Luckily, Kelsey was pretty understanding when he told her he's planning to stay, which was a weight off his mind.

I can't help but marvel at how crazy it is that I get to have this again. This wild, uncontrollable joy of having found someone who gets you on a soul-deep level, whose very existence makes you smile.

I'm thinking about how lucky I am when Stella and I arrive on Friday night at the restaurant where we're meeting Jamie.

"Jamie!" Stella rushes to him because it's becoming increasingly obvious that Jamie completely outranks Stella's boring old dad when it comes to who Stella gets excited about spending time with.

Jamie unfolds himself from the booth to stand to greet her. He gives her a high five, which she returns with such gusto that Jamie winces slightly, shaking out his hand.

“Wow, that’s a power high-five you’ve got going on there.”

Stella smirks in satisfaction. “Do you want one with the other hand too?”

“Okay.”

She hits his other hand with such force that he staggers back, clutching it.

He looks over at me, grinning. “What are you feeding this kid?”

My heart melts at how they light up around each other.

“Just the normal childhood diet of protein shakes and steroids,” I say.

Jamie laughs as he comes forward and brushes a quick kiss over my cheek. “Hey, you,” he says.

“Hey.”

“Do you mind sitting in a booth? There are a few free tables if you’d prefer to sit there instead.”

“No, we love sitting in booths, don’t we, Stella?”

Stella’s already climbed into the booth and is scanning the kids’ menu.

I sit opposite her, and Jamie slides in next to me.

He picks up two paper straws from the condiments console.

“Hey, Stella, you want to be a walrus with me?” He wedges two of the straws in his mouth. She giggles as she looks at him.

For a second, she looks so much like Rick that pain stabs through me.

It’s followed by a pulse of anger.

Not directed at Jamie but at the universe.

Because it should've been Rick here playing games with his little girl.

I don't resent the fact Jamie's here playing with Stella. In fact, it just makes me love him more, but he's taking a place that, by all rights, belongs to Rick. Rick, who'd poured through the surrogate profiles with me. Rick, who'd looked at me with shining eyes at that first ultrasound appointment, where the swirling blobs on screen materialized into something that looked like a baby. Whose hands had shaken so much the first time he held Stella, I worried he would drop her.

"You all right?" Jamie's beside me, looking at me with worried eyes. The straws fall out of his mouth as his face creases into a frown.

"Just having a Rick moment," I manage.

I love the fact he knows me well enough to just move over in the booth and press his body into mine, placing a kiss on my temple.

And a ray of sunshine pierces through my pain and sadness.

How lucky am I that I found this man? And okay, it's not the same as what I had with Rick. It's never going to be the same, but it's wonderful in new and different ways, and I should embrace that too.

Rick was there from the beginning with Stella and went through all those stages of pre-parenthood and early parenthood with me

But getting to see Jamie bonding with my daughter is pretty special too.

We joke around during dinner. Stella and Jamie have a competition about who has the longest french fry, holding their fries up against each other as a measure.

After dinner, she runs off to play in the indoor playground.

"I'm sorry you lost the fries contest," I say.

He winks at me. “Size isn’t everything.”

I snort, and he grins, but then his smile fades.

“So, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something,” he says, fiddling with the spoon.

“Fire away,” I say.

I can see Jamie’s anxious about whatever this is, so I put my hand on his arm to diffuse his tension.

“There’s nothing you can’t talk to me about,” I say.

Jamie’s teeth worry his lower lip. “It’s just...you don’t invite me over to your place. Is it because of Stella?”

Shit. He’s right. It would be so easy to blame this on Stella, on wanting to protect my daughter.

But Stella knows Jamie is my boyfriend, and I want her to grow up knowing what a healthy relationship looks like. If Rick hadn’t died, she would have another three years of memories of jumping into bed with us in the mornings, seeing us kiss and cuddle and argue and do everything a couple does together.

“No, it’s not that,” I say. “It’s just...easier...to be with you at your place. There’s none of the memories.”

Can I imagine having Jamie at my house? In the bedroom I shared with Rick? Having Rick stare out from our wedding photo on my dresser as I make love to another man?

“I get it,” Jamie says. And, of course, he gets it because he has to be the most understanding person on the planet.

“Maybe I should move house.” I’ve contemplated that a few times over the years, but now the idea feels more concrete, possible. I could find a cozier place where Stella, Jamie, and I could make our own memories. It’s too soon to talk to Jamie about moving in, but I can see a time down the track when we could live together as a family.

“You don’t need to move house,” Jamie says. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

This man. He's giving up his travel plans and staying in the country for me. He deserves everything I can possibly give him.

I think about what he told me about Pat, about how he'd been so afraid of spooking Pat that he hadn't pushed for what he wanted in the relationship.

"It is a big deal," I say quietly. "And I want you to talk to me about this. Sorry, I know it must be difficult sometimes, being with me with all my history."

Given the flare of jealousy I had when Jamie told me about Pat, I can't imagine what it's like for him when I talk about Rick.

Jamie shrugs. "Yeah, sometimes it is. But I don't want you to stop talking about Rick. He was an important part of your life."

"He is a big part of me," I say. "But it's not a competition between you. And I don't want to pretend everything was always perfect between Rick and me. We fought sometimes."

"What did you fight about?"

I think back. Rick and my arguments seem so pointless now.

"His long hours mostly. He got a promotion about a year before he died, which meant he had to travel more, and I resented that."

Rick had been so excited when he got the promotion. It came with a hefty pay raise, and he was all about setting us up for the future. But now, I look back on it with a different mindset. If we'd known it was his last year with Stella and me, would we still have done things the same?

Because it turned out that Rick was never going to get a chance to live the future he'd worked so hard to set us up for.

"What would Rick have thought of me, do you think?" I can tell by his voice how nervous Jamie is to ask the question.

I try to mentally put Rick and Jamie in the same room together. Rick would have liked Jamie, I'm sure, because it's

impossible not to like Jamie, but I'm not sure if he'd have taken him seriously. Rick gravitated toward people who were the movers and shakers in the world, so he might have dismissed Jamie because of his age and job title.

"He would have liked you, for sure," I say. "But you're very different people. I like that. I like how what we've got together is not just a replica of what I had before."

It's true. I haven't got myself another version of Rick.

In fact, in some ways, Jamie and I have a more equal relationship than I had with Rick. Maybe it is the age thing. Rick was those few years older than me, and we'd met when we were young, so I'd naturally deferred to him without realizing it. Rick was also a more forceful personality than Jamie, someone with strong opinions on most things.

Jamie is more easygoing and laid-back overall. There's a more vulnerable side to him as well, one that brings out a protective instinct I never had with Rick.

"You're going to think I'm stupid or deluded, but I like to think..." I stop but then plunge on. "One part of me, the stupid romantic part, likes to think that Rick sent you to me. That he's watching from somewhere and wants Stella and me to be happy again."

Jamie regards me seriously. "The ad for the Southlake job did come up randomly when I wasn't even searching for a new job."

Affection surges through me. I love that Jamie hasn't dismissed my ridiculousness, that he's trying to make the facts fit into the narrative I want.

Isn't that what we all do in life? Try to desperately make the facts fit the story we want to tell ourselves.

We want to find someone prepared to share that same story with us.

"Maybe dead husbands work through the medium of the internet," I say with a smile.

Jamie smiles back. "Hey, it's always a possibility."

I have such a surge of love for him that it makes my next sentence easy to say. “Why don’t you come over tomorrow and hang out with us? Stay the night?”

Jamie eyes me warily. “Are you sure?”

“I’m completely sure.”

* * *

The next morning, before Jamie is due to arrive, I do something I’ve been meaning to do for a while. I take Stella to visit Rick’s grave.

I haven’t wanted to make visiting the cemetery a rostered pilgrimage, something that Stella and I do out of obligation.

I’m still slightly skeptical about whether the cemetery, with its perfectly manicured lawns and neatly tended flower beds, has any extra connection to Rick than other places on earth. He’d never come here when he was alive. We have no memories of being here together.

Part of me wishes I’d been more unconventional, had kept his ashes to scatter somewhere that actually had meaning to us, maybe on the beach near his childhood home or his favorite golf course.

But it’s nice to have one place for us to visit.

On the way there, I broach the subject I need to talk to Stella about, my stomach fluttering with nerves as I push the words out of my mouth.

“So, Jamie’s coming over later, and he’s going to stay the night.”

“Like a sleepover?” Stella asks.

“Yes, kind of like a sleepover. He’ll be sleeping in my bed, and he’ll be sleeping over sometimes from now on. Are you okay with that?”

She shrugs. “Sure. Sleepovers are fun.”

I pull up in the car park and take a deep breath.

Choosing a place to lay Rick to rest was one of those decisions I made on the fly after he died.

From the moment the police knocked on my door to tell me about the accident until the day of his funeral, I'd been in a state of shock, wrapped in a cloak of disbelief that this was happening. Part of me believed I'd stumbled into an incredibly vivid dream, and at any moment, Rick would wake me up with his usual good-morning smile. The affectionate one that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

It was only after the funeral, when we'd lowered the box containing Rick's ashes into the ground and placed dirt on top of it, that I'd fully grasped my new reality.

Stella and I hold hands as we walk to Rick's grave. In her other hand, she carries the small bunch of flowers she collected from our garden. I'd given her the job this morning, my heart squeezing when I saw how solemnly she'd taken the task.

I tried to keep it together when I noticed some of the flowers were the red geraniums by our front door that Rick himself planted just a few months before he died.

He could have never guessed that Stella would put them on his grave one day.

After she places them next to his headstone, she leans into me, her body warm.

"I miss Papa," she says.

I plant a kiss on her forehead. "I know. Me too, honey."

We stay by the grave for a while and, as normal, I share some of my favorite memories of her papa with her: how he loved taking her for bike rides with her perched behind him in her infant seat, the first drive home with her from the hospital after she was born, when he drove so slowly I was sure he would get a ticket, but he refused to go faster because of our precious cargo.

How her favorite movie was *Frozen* when she was two, and Rick and I had perfected a duet of "Love is an Open Door" to make her giggle. Rick normally didn't like to do

anything silly, but seeing him prancing around singing was one of my favorite memories of him. It illustrated exactly how much he loved his daughter.

Eventually, I peter out of memories, and Stella and I sit there in silence, peacefully, the smell of freshly cut grass and the feeling of spring sunshine on our faces.

“You want to leave me for a moment so I can talk to Papa?” I ask eventually.

“Okay.” She bounds off toward the patch of lawn, and for a moment, I just marvel at the long-limbed grace of the daughter Rick and I created.

I turn my attention back to Rick’s grave, running my hand over his name on the headstone.

“So, I wanted to talk to you,” I say in a low voice. I drop my hand away, scratching my nose awkwardly. “Because...I... ah...met someone.” And then I can’t help laughing at myself because it seems like the worst line ever, especially when you’re talking to your dead husband. I continue, “And you might already know that because I really, really want to believe you sent him to me. And there’s some stuff, like the fact he loves ‘Blue Moon,’ that makes me think maybe you did.

“Or maybe there’s no bigger power that controls the universe, and I’m just crouched here talking to a slab of volcanic rock with some carbon atoms that once made up my husband buried in a wooden box.” I rock back on my heels.

“He’s gorgeous, Rick. And he’s kind too. I think you would have really liked him. I think you would have liked how happy he makes Stella and me.” My voice hitches.

“And I’m sorry, okay? Part of me will always be sorry that you’re not here, but I can’t change that, and I’m sick of feeling guilty when I’m happy and it doesn’t include you.

“This doesn’t change how much I love you. Nothing will ever change that. But I’ve learned there’s room in my heart for someone else. I really think you would’ve been happy for me. For us.”

There's nothing else left to say to him.

I stand up, dusting off my hands before I think of one last thing.

“And if you sent him to me, good job.”

There are no messages from Rick as I walk across the manicured lawn away from his grave.

What do I want? The clouds shaped out in letters, ‘Be happy, Tim?’

Butterflies flying toward me in formation, spelling out ‘Congratulations on your new love?’

I spot Stella a few rows away, talking to a lady I've seen a few times when I've come here. I'm pretty sure she comes here every day if the perfectly tended grave in front of her is anything to go by. There's not an inch of the space that isn't blooming with flowers, not a single twig or blade of grass out of place. The amount of love and grief on display makes my heart twist.

“Hello,” I say as I approach.

The woman's face creases into a multitude of lines. “Hello. Beautiful day, isn't it?”

“It's stunning,” I agree.

“Daddy, look at the pansy she gave me.” Stella holds up a violet pansy.

“Did you say thank you?”

“I did.”

I smile at the lady, who smiles back. Then I put my arm around Stella's shoulders as we walk out of the graveyard.

It might seem stupid, but I feel a weight lift off me as we pass through the gates.

It's fine that I didn't get a message from Rick.

Today wasn't about getting a message back.

It was about the process of telling.

And about giving myself permission to be happy.

Chapter 19

Jamie

I park my car outside Tim's house.

It feels like a big moment. The first time I've been here. The first time Tim has invited me to stay the night.

It was nerve-wracking talking to Tim about spending time at his place, but I'm so glad I did. Tim has taught me so much about relationships and how you have to be prepared to discuss what you need.

I blow out a breath and climb out of the car.

Tim's house is a large villa on a decent-sized section. It's flashier than I expected, with a perfectly manicured front lawn and large white rose bushes on either side of the veranda, flanked by red flowers.

I feel nervous as I walk up, but suddenly Tim's standing in the doorway, a welcoming smile on his face, like nothing makes him happier than the sight of me coming up his path.

"Hey, you." He kisses me when I reach him, lingering long enough for me to appreciate his warm lips.

My inferiority grows as he leads me along the polished floorboards to the large designer kitchen. This house looks like something that could be in one of those design magazines.

This isn't the house I envisioned him and Stella in. It makes me realize exactly how much he slums it at my place every week.

I'd assumed from the fact Rick was an investment banker that he would've earned well, but assuming it and having it

thrust in my face are two different things.

It's not a competition, I remind myself. I'm not competing with Tim's dead husband.

"Drink?" Tim asks.

"That would be great, thanks."

Tim fusses around in the kitchen, getting me a Coke, using the ice machine on the fridge to fill the glass before pouring the fizzy frothiness over.

He hands me the glass. "So, I was thinking I could invite some friends over for lunch tomorrow if you're okay with that?"

"Definitely."

He scratches the back of his neck. "I haven't been very social for the last few years, but I thought it's about time to change that."

"I would really like that," I say quietly.

My heart ricochets around my chest because I recognize what this is.

This is Tim letting me fully into his life.

"Jamie!" Stella comes hurdling into the room, almost skidding with her sock feet on the wooden floor. "Do you want to see the friendship bracelets I'm making? I can make one for you."

"I would love for you to make me a friendship bracelet," I say to Stella.

Stella makes me a red-and-green friendship bracelet out of embroidery thread. That she's remembered they're my favorite colors causes me to smile.

Then we play a game of Uno while Tim cooks dinner.

After dinner, Tim and I clean the kitchen while Stella reads to us from her joke book.

"How does a tree get on the internet? They log on."

“Why do Christmas trees have trouble sewing? They can’t stop dropping their needles.”

“Why don’t you see hippos hiding in trees? Because they’re really good at it.”

“I’m sensing a theme to your jokes here, Stella,” I say eventually.

“You reckon she’s just leafing through the book looking for tree jokes?” Tim asks.

I groan loudly. “You really had to branch out to think of that one, didn’t you?”

Tim laughs as he puts down the dishcloth. “Right, kiddo, time for you to go to bed. Say goodnight to Jamie.”

Stella doesn’t just say goodnight to me. Instead, she gives me a hug. Having those small arms around me, squeezing me, makes my heart give a matching squeeze.

“Goodnight.”

I have to clear my throat to answer her. “Goodnight.”

Tim heads off down the hallway to help her brush her teeth and tuck her into bed while I riffle through the book Stella’s left on the kitchen counter.

What happens to trees on Valentine’s Day? They get sappy.

Yeah, I totally feel a kinship with those trees right now.

Tim comes back out a few minutes later.

“It’s such a lovely evening. Would you like to have a nightcap out on the deck?” he asks.

“Sure.”

The French doors off the living room open to a large deck with an outdoor lounge suite.

Clutching the glass of whiskey Tim’s poured me, I settle on the couch. Tim takes a seat next to me.

I sip the whiskey. I’ve never been a big spirits fan, mainly because my budget has never extended to anything but the

cheapest stuff that tastes like paint stripper. This is different, smooth with an almost caramel taste.

It's a cool evening but not too chilly, yet I use the excuse to cuddle closer to Tim. He doesn't object.

"I didn't realize you like whiskey," I say.

"Rick was a big whiskey connoisseur. He got me into it," Tim replies.

"Oh. Right."

I take another gulp of my drink, trying to tap down the feeling of inferiority that seems determined to overtake me tonight.

I swallow the last of it, putting the glass down at my feet. Then I tip my head back to look at the stars.

"Remember star gazing together at Hot Water Beach?" I ask.

Tim finishes the last swallow of his drink before he replies. "I remember."

He puts the whiskey glass at his feet too.

"You seemed so sad," I say.

"I guess I was," he says.

"Do you still feel like you described that night, how we're so small and insignificant, and it's difficult to see the point of it all?" I ask.

"Sometimes," he admits.

I take his hand, lacing our fingers together.

He turns to face me. "But I don't feel like that when I'm around you. You keep the bleakness at bay. You help me remember what happiness is."

Fuck.

There's no way I can't kiss him right now.

We kiss sweetly, almost chastely to start, just warm lips and slight pressure.

Then Tim runs his tongue along the seam of my lips, and I open for him, and Tim's tongue is in my mouth, where it belongs. We both taste like caramel whiskey.

"We should go to bed," he breathes.

"I'm totally on board with that plan."

I move our joined hands to my groin, just in case he needs evidence of how on board I am, and Tim gives a low moan.

"Okay, let's go," he says huskily.

As we head back through the house, I grab the duffel bag I brought.

My footsteps slow when we reach Tim's bedroom door.

This is the room he shared with Rick for years.

The room is decorated in muted colors, the focal point being an enormous bed.

"My bathroom is just through there." Tim nods in the direction of the ensuite door, and I grab my sponge bag and head quickly to the bathroom, trying not to make it look like I'm fleeing the bedroom.

There are two basins in the bathroom. I've never seen this feature outside of TV or magazines.

I hesitate. Which basin is the one that belongs to Tim? Am I just supposed to use the one Rick always used? How will Tim feel if he comes in and sees me standing where Rick used to stand?

Shit. I really am overthinking this.

I turn on the faucet of the left-hand basin.

Tim doesn't say anything when he comes in just as I finish brushing my teeth.

I slip into the bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed. It feels too presumptuous to lie back and make myself at home.

There will always be some degree of awkwardness in sharing this space with Tim for the first time.

When he returns from the bathroom, he stops at a large set of drawers, and suddenly, there's a small clang.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Just a photo."

My brain connects the dots as it's pretty easy to imagine what photo Tim has on top of his drawers.

Rick.

I hadn't even noticed a photo there.

I'm grateful Tim thought about it. I don't need the performance anxiety of having Tim's cute dead husband watching from the corner as I have sex with Tim.

I think of the picture of Rick I saw on Tim's Facebook page and imagine his brow quirked up in a mocking expression. *Is that the best you can do? He used to moan so much louder than that when he was with me.*

It's just a bedroom. It's just a bed.

It's stupid to feel like I'm competing with Tim's dead husband and the memories they formed here together.

Tim seems to understand what I'm feeling because he sits next to me, reaching up to cup my face.

"This is our story, Jamie," he says.

Then his lips are on mine, and my mind is wiped free of all the insecurities and doubts. Tim is right. This is about us, no one else. The story of Tim and Jamie.

And the story is taking a pretty dirty turn right now because our kiss quickly turns wild and frantic.

I can never get enough of the contrast between how mild-mannered Tim is most of the time and the way he kisses me like he's a man possessed. It's like he's marking me as his territory, branding his mouth on mine.

His fingernails sink into my scalp, pulling me closer to him.

I push him so he lands on his back. We're breathless, panting hard.

My eyes fall to his cock. I crawl down the bed, tugging his underwear down his legs. I trace the contours of his pale thighs, following the dark trail of hair. My mouth follows my fingers, nuzzling against Tim's balls. His cock twitches. I draw his cock into my mouth, and he groans, which makes me groan. The taste of him is incredible, salty and musky. I love sucking him off. I love the feeling of him in my mouth. I love the feel of him shuddering and sighing as he loses himself completely in what I'm doing.

I love that I'm the one with him right now.

I slide my mouth down his shaft and then back up, lightly tracing my teeth around the swollen head. Tim is moaning almost continuously now.

"Oh God, that feels so good."

I pull off him with a wet pop, then move up to straddle him. Tim reaches up to touch my chest, his eyes burning with lust.

"You have to fuck me," I gasp.

"Whatever my man needs," he pants.

"Where's your stuff?"

He nods at the bedside table. "Top drawer."

I refuse to let thoughts of anything from the past enter my head as I reach over and grab the lube from the top drawer.

I straddle his hips again, and he wraps his hand around my cock while I grind against him. His mouth is on mine, and he's kissing me, his tongue in my mouth. We're tasting each other, invading and claiming. His hand reaches between us, and he strokes our erections together.

"Tim," my voice is hoarse.

"On your knees."

I'm off him, obeying him so fast it's probably a world record.

I feel the soft breath of his laugh against my skin.

His fingers skim my skin, cupping my ass.

My body tenses with anticipation.

Then there's a light touch of something slippery on my hole, which feels so good. I groan, rocking back against his fingers, wanting more. Tim thrusts two fingers inside me, and the sensation almost makes me come, but then he pulls them out again.

What the fuck? I want more.

"I need you," I moan.

Suddenly Tim's behind me, pushing his cock into me, one stroke, and then another, and suddenly, I'm impaled, held in place as Tim groans a curse.

Holy shit.

I'm his. I'm his. I will never be anyone's but his. I'm begging him for more, more, more. And he's giving it to me, fucking me so hard I have to grip the headboard and brace myself against it.

He leans forward and bites gently on my shoulder, following it with a kiss. His beard scrapes against my shoulder. It's like being inside me isn't enough. He wants to leave traces of himself everywhere.

And I'm fine with that.

He suddenly withdraws, and I whine, but he's tugging at my hip, pulling me back, his breath hot on my ear.

"Turn over, beautiful. I want to see your face."

I immediately oblige, scooting back and turning over.

Tim growls and covers me, his mouth on mine, his fingers tugging my nipples. I'm so close to orgasm I can't even think. I just want to feel.

"Please," I whisper against his mouth.

I don't know what I'm begging for, but Tim seems to know.

His cock slides back into me.

Both of our breaths hitch. We just fit together, like our bodies are made to interlock.

I hook my legs around him.

He thrusts into me before taking my cock in his hand and jerking me off.

The world falls away. There's only Tim. I spiral, tumbling and falling into the most amazing orgasm. I'm still coming, still coming, impossibly hard, as Tim thrusts into me one last time and cries out, his cock pulsing inside me.

I'm cradling him, pulling him close as he collapses against me, his cock still inside me.

We don't talk. We don't need to.

We hold each other. His head rests on my chest, his fingers softly stroking my arm.

Sex between Tim and me is always scorching, but this is on another plane of existence.

Maybe it's because we've both lost people we loved, so we don't take anything for granted. We don't automatically assume that the person we love will always be there.

And it adds an extra edge to our sex life that I've never had before.

The idea that you leave nothing unsaid.

* * *

I wake up the next morning to find Tim already awake. He's lying propped up on one arm, watching me.

"Good morning." My voice is rumpled with sleep.

"It is a very good morning," Tim agrees.

I shuffle closer to him, reaching out my arm to run a hand along his rib cage and down to the smooth, soft skin of his waist. "I'm so glad it gets your seal of approval."

His eyes gleam. “I’m thinking there’s a way you can make it even better though.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“It involves your lips on mine.”

I move even closer. “That doesn’t sound like a very original concept.”

Tim laughs. “So we’re grading my come-on lines for originality now, are we?”

I grin, and he grins back. Then we obviously both decide at the same time that while joking around is fun, there are better things we can do with our mouths right now.

But we’ve barely settled into the kiss when we hear footsteps coming down the hallway.

Tim pulls away from me abruptly. “Are you okay for a visitor?” he asks.

“Sure.”

The footsteps stop outside the bedroom door. “Dad?” Stella calls through the door.

“Just a sec, honey.” Tim gets up from the bed.

I quickly rummage around for boxers and a T-shirt to put on.

Tim does a quick check to make sure I’m decent before he goes to unlock the door.

Stella peeks inside.

But she doesn’t seem to balk that I’m in her father’s bed.

“You want to come for a cuddle?” Tim asks. She nods. Tim slides back into bed, moving close to me, letting Stella slip in next to him. Stella cuddles up to him, her dark hair a stark contrast to the bedsheets.

And even though all the fun times I had planned with Tim are now totally off the agenda, I don’t mind.

I remember this from when I was a kid, climbing into bed with my parents, that feeling of complete security when tucked

under the covers with them.

Stella's quite a wriggly snuggler, it turns out, and after a few minutes of her elbowing Tim, she finally sits up. "Can we play kittens and puppies?"

"Sure."

"Do you want to be a kitten or a puppy?" she asks me.

"Um..."

Tim raises a meaningful eyebrow at me. "Do you prefer meowing or barking?"

"Wow, I don't think I've ever been asked that question. Probably meowing."

"Then you get to be a kitten," he informs me.

"Okay."

It turns out my job as a kitten is to meow, pretend to wash myself, and hiss when Stella and Tim, who are the puppies, get too close in their frolicking.

I haven't laughed so hard in ages.

Eventually, Stella the puppy gets hungry.

"Can we have waffles for breakfast?" she asks Tim.

"Sure.

"I'll get out the ingredients." Stella leaps out of bed and takes off down the hallway.

Tim flops back against the pillow and sends an apologetic glance in my direction. "Sorry, our morning got slightly derailed."

"Are you kidding me?" I stretch lazily in bed. "I get off with you all the time. How often do I get to play kittens and puppies?"

Tim's eyes soften. "It's nice to know where our sex life ranks on your priority list."

"It's still somewhere ahead of food and oxygen," I say.

Tim continues to stare at me for a few heartbeats.

“I love you.” His words are almost abrupt.

Shit. This feeling in my chest. I don’t know if my rib cage can expand enough to contain it.

“I love you too,” I say, leaning forward to brush a light kiss over his lips before I pull back. “Now, I believe I was promised waffles?”

Tim makes waffles for us under Stella’s strict supervision.

It appears this feeling inside me isn’t going anywhere. In fact, it feels like it staged a takeover of all my organs, and they’re humming with happiness.

With Tim, I not only get a partner, but I also get a family. Something I haven’t had since my dad died.

Even though this is so new, it feels natural. Tim and I tease Stella about how she puts both chocolate and caramel syrup on her waffles.

And when I make an incredibly cheesy joke about waffles being pancakes with abs, he leans over and kisses me in front of Stella, leaving me breathless and with a lingering taste of chocolate sauce.

As the morning progresses, my feelings of contentment and happiness fray at the edges and my nerves grow. It’s one thing for me to win over Stella, who is such a great kid. Tim’s friends are a completely different scenario.

“So, tell me about your friends who are coming,” I say as Tim puts together a quiche for lunch.

“I think I’ve already told you I grew up with Cam. He’s married to Hannah, and they’ve got two kids, Blake and Anika. He’s a great guy. You’ll really like him.”

“Right.”

I swallow the ball of nerves in my throat. “So, Cam’s the guy who was your best friend growing up?” I ask quietly.

Tim seems to pick up on my anxiety. He gives my arm a squeeze. “Cam and Hannah are my friends. They will be

happy that I'm smiling again."

"So I need to make you smile, do I? Damn, I should have brought my clown costume over."

"Like you need a costume to act like a clown." He wraps an arm around me, and I lean into his embrace, enjoying his scruff against my neck.

"I think it'll be impossible for them to miss how happy I am," he says. "If they do, they need some serious work on their observational skills."

His lips find mine in a sweet kiss.

There's the sound of footsteps on the wooden floor, but Tim doesn't stop kissing me.

"Are you kissing *again*?" I can tell without looking that an eye roll has accompanied Stella's words.

I stiffen, but Tim just chuckles as he pulls away.

"Get used to it, kiddo," Tim says.

"I don't get why you like kissing," Stella says.

Tim opens his mouth to speak. I recognize the look on his face.

"You're about to tell us the biological basis for kissing, aren't you?" I say before he can get a word out.

"It's actually quite interesting," Tim says.

I really want to kiss him again. I want to kiss my biology-nerd boyfriend.

"You'd better tell me then. I don't think my life will be complete without knowing now," I say.

"Well, the theory is it evolved from the result of mouth-to-mouth feeding between mammal mothers and their offspring, but there's also the fact that you can pick up important mate selection information from kissing, such as whether your potential mate is healthy, their genetic compatibility, and their fertility."

"So, you're assessing me every time we kiss?"

“And you’re assessing me right back to check if we’re compatible.”

A grin overtakes my face. There’s no way we can conclude from our kisses that we are anything other than made for each other.

“It’s still gross,” Stella informs us.

“You might change your mind about that one day,” Tim says mildly.

But we’re distracted from our conversation by a car door slamming out front.

A smile springs to Tim’s face, and he heads to the front door.

I follow him, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans as I join Tim on the porch.

An attractive woman walks up the pathway, followed by two preteen kids.

My gaze drifts to the guy coming up the footpath.

And my mouth goes dry. Because he looks familiar.

What the hell?

It’s Rick.

Tim’s husband, Rick. The same guy I saw in the photo with Tim on Facebook.

My heart starts to pound.

What the hell? How can Rick be here?

My mind races through crazy scenarios. Rick wasn’t killed in the car accident. He’s been suffering from amnesia and has suddenly regained his memories.

He’s turning up now to reclaim his husband.

Tim walks down the path to greet them, then returns to the porch with an eager smile. My stomach is still churning, and I reach out to touch the porch railing to steady myself.

“Hey, this is Cam and Hannah. Guys, meet my boyfriend, Jamie.” The pride in Tim’s words would usually cause a flush of happiness to race through me, but right now, I’m disorientated.

Cam. He’s not introducing him as Rick, and while he’s smiling at him, he’s definitely not looking at him the way I imagine you’d look at a long-lost husband.

Cam sticks out his hand. “Hi, nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too.” I shake his hand and then Hannah’s, trying to regain my composure.

I run through what Tim told me about Cam. They went to high school and university together. He was his best man.

Best man. That explains the photo I saw on Facebook of Tim and him standing at the altar.

I got it wrong. I saw the picture of Tim and Cam standing together and assumed it was Rick.

My shoulders relax, and the panic that’s wrapped itself around my chest eases.

It’s just a case of a simple mix-up.

Rick isn’t coming back to claim Tim. I’m not going to lose him.

* * *

We eat quiche for lunch. Cam and Hannah are nice people. They’re smiley and friendly toward me and make every effort to include me in the conversation.

Tim was right. His friends just seem happy to see him happy.

And I hope they attribute part of that happiness to me.

There’s one awkward moment when they start discussing songs they listened to at university, and I have to admit that I was still in primary school when they were released.

The age difference has never bothered me, but I know Tim worries about it.

I still feel a bit nervous when I head to the bathroom because I'm now out of earshot. Will Hannah and Cam question Tim about what he's doing with a guy my age? Maybe they'll suggest he should go for someone older and more mature?

Shit. I really need to stop my imagination from going into overdrive sometimes.

The main bathroom is occupied by one of the kids, so I head to Tim's ensuite instead.

I stare at myself in the mirror as I wash my hands at one of the sinks. It's okay. Tim loves me. I love him.

I straighten my shoulders and try to smile on the way out. I manage a grin-grimace.

As I come back through Tim's bedroom, I notice the photo frame laying face down on the top of the drawers. The one Tim turned over last night so we weren't watched by his dead husband.

I stop dead, staring at it.

I can't help the curiosity overtaking me. What did Rick look like? All this time, I've had the wrong vision in my head, imagining Cam and Tim together.

What was the guy Tim had fallen in love with and married actually like?

The metal of the frame is cool under my touch.

I pick it up and flip it over so I can see the photo.

And my breath slams out of me as if I've been hit by a two-ton truck.

I gasp, trying to draw breath into my lungs. My skin tingles.

I blink frantically, trying to get the picture in front of me to change to something else. Anything else.

But the image remains the same.

No. Fuck no. No. No. No.

My problem isn't seeing Tim standing in another guy's embrace or seeing the radiant happiness on both their faces.

My problem is that I recognize Tim's husband.

Only I knew him by a different name.

Pat.

Chapter 20

Jamie

Pat with his arms around Tim.

Pat smiling with love at Tim.

Shock ripples through me, and the photo frame slips out of my grasp. It bounces on the plush carpet but remains face up, Pat and Tim's smiles on display for the world to see.

My knees buckle, and I stagger to the bed, sinking down onto it, my breath coming in frantic gasps. The pressure in my chest makes me wonder if I'll ever be able to draw a complete breath again.

How? How is it possible?

How can Pat be Rick?

My mind goes to crazy scenarios.

Did Rick have an identical twin? But I would know that, right? According to Tim, Rick only had one sister.

Unless he has a doppelgänger.

For a second, I cling to that idea, but then reality slams into me.

Pat stopped contacting me three years ago. Exactly around the time Tim's husband died.

Oh, holy fuck.

My mind swirls. I drop my head into my hands, massaging my temples as if I can rearrange the facts.

How can I know for sure?

The woman who came to see me, the person who deleted Pat's contacts from my phone...fingers fumbling, I get my phone out of my pocket and Google Gabby Beauford.

A law firm's website comes up immediately. I click on her profile

Any last fantasy that this is some kind of mistake, that Rick had an identical twin given up at birth that no one knows about, dissolves in an instant as I stare at the photo of the professional-looking woman with her hair tied neatly in a bun.

It's her.

The woman who came to see me, who broke up with me on Pat's behalf, is Rick's sister.

My stomach recoils.

There's no doubt that my ex-lover and Tim's dead husband are the same person.

Fuck. I need to get out of here.

My hands trembling, I grab my duffel bag and stuff my things inside. When I go into the bathroom to grab my sponge bag, the full weight of it hits me.

Pat once stood in this bathroom with Tim getting ready for bed like I had last night. Pat, who'd fucked around with me and come home to Tim.

No. His name was Rick, not Pat.

He'd lied to me from the start.

He'd told me he was closeted, that I was the first guy he'd been with. When all that time he'd been married to Tim.

I feel dizzy, breathless, my stomach clenching.

I have to get out of here.

When I enter the living room, Tim is smiling at something his friends have said.

His smile instantly fades when he sees me. "What's wrong?"

This man. This wonderful, caring man. Who, after only a few months, knows me so well he can see straight through the mask I've plastered on my face.

"I'm not feeling well," I say.

Isn't that the truth? I don't think I've ever felt this sick in my life.

"Let me drive you home," Tim says. I knew he would do that. He'd leave his friends to make sure I got home okay. Because he's the kindest man in existence.

And I had an affair with his husband.

Bile rises in my throat.

"You stay here. I'll be fine." I summon a smile to give Cam and Hannah. "I'm so sorry."

"Hope to see you again sometime," Hannah smiles at me.

Tim's forehead creases. "Are you sure?"

I force a smile. "Yes, definitely."

Tim still looks doubtful, but I tear my gaze away from his and collect my hoodie where I've left it on the lounge suite.

My hands shake, and I wrap my hoodie around them so Tim can't see me trembling.

He walks me to the door and gives me the sweetest smile.

I can't breathe under the weight of that smile.

"I hope you're not coming down with something," he says. "But don't worry, if you are, I make a mean chicken soup."

Fuck. I need him to stop being so nice. I need him to stop being so *Tim* right now. Or else I'll lose the plot. I don't know what form it will take, whether it will be hysterical sobbing or maniacal laughing, or a mixture of the two, but I do know for sure that I'll have to explain why I'm having a meltdown on his doorstep.

"Thanks for last night." He leans forward to kiss me, but I dodge out of the way.

I can't kiss him. I don't deserve Tim's kiss.

The hurt on his face cuts at me.

“Don’t want you to get sick,” I mumble.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.” There’s that special Tim smile again that normally sends tingles of happiness down my spine. But right now, it just causes nausea to rise up inside me.

“Besides, if you’re sick with something contagious, I’m pretty sure I would have caught it last night.”

Before I can move, his lips brush gently against mine.

This is not a kiss of possession but one full of all the love and affection between us.

“So, I’m really glad you stayed the night,” he says when he pulls back.

I swallow hard. “Yeah.”

“Lots more sleepovers in our future,” he says with a smile.

“Yep.”

It appears monosyllable words are the only thing I can manage right now because if I attempt more, I’m worried the gush of truth will pour out of me.

“Bye.” I turn away abruptly. I try to steady my steps as I walk down the path, make it look like I’m not fleeing.

“I’ll message you,” he calls after me.

I’m in my car and driving halfway down the street when I realize I didn’t say goodbye to Stella.

Stella.

Oh, holy fuck.

I think of her strong eyebrows and dark curls, and suddenly, I remember Pat’s eyebrows and curls. How the fuck did I miss the fact she looks like my ex-lover?

I’ve slept with both of her fathers.

The thought makes my stomach churn.

You never told me about her. How could you not tell me about Stella? How was your incredible daughter not at the top

of your list of things to talk about?

And how could you do that to Tim? You had the most amazing man pledge his life and love to you, and you betrayed him.

Pat let me believe he was closeted.

He lied. What he should have said was, *I'm not closeted. I'm married to the most incredible man on the planet. And my lying, cheating ass does not deserve to breathe the same air as him.*

I think of the way I tempted Pat, how I so blatantly came on to him, and self-disgust ripples through me.

I'd been so confident I was irresistible.

But he should have fucking resisted me.

* * *

I arrive home and stumble through the door. Kelsey is standing in the kitchen, looking critically at the contents of our fridge. She must have been in that position for a while as it's beeping irately at her.

She closes the door when she sees me, her eyebrows flying up. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

Tears prickle my eyes, and I press the heel of my hand into my eye sockets, trying to push my tears into submission.

"Shit, Jamie, what's happened?"

"Pat," I manage to get out.

Her brow creases. "What about Pat? Has he made contact with you? He's not trying to slither back into your life, is he?"

I laugh, a twisted, bitter sound that doesn't contain an ounce of humor. "He can't come back into my life. He's dead."

"What?"

I gulp down a deep breath. “He’s dead. He died three years ago.”

As I say the words, I wonder if I should feel some sadness about the news that my ex-lover is dead. But any lingering feelings for Pat have been eclipsed by what the news of his real identity means for me. Now I’ve gone and fallen in love with his husband.

Kelsey’s face reflects her shock. “How did you find that out?”

“He’s Tim’s dead husband.”

Her eyes bulge. “What?”

I sink down on the couch, my head dropping into my hands. I stay like that for a few moments trying to control my breathing, but it still comes in labored gasps.

“You’re telling me that Pat, the wanker who fucked you around, was married to Tim at the time?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god. What did Tim say?”

I raise my head from my hands to look at her. “He doesn’t know.”

Kelsey blinks at me. “What do you mean he doesn’t know? How did you find out then?”

“I saw a photo of them together. Their wedding photo.”

Kelsey’s mouth is gaping open. “Holy shit, Jamie.”

“I love him.” My voice cracks, splintering. Exactly how my heart feels like it’s splintering into a million pieces. “I love him so much.”

“What are you going to do?” Kelsey asks. She comes and perches on the side of the couch, staring down at me with the same look you’d give someone who you’d just given a terminal diagnosis to.

“I don’t know,” I answer her honestly.

I'd been selfish once before. I ignored the niggles I'd had about Pat, and even after I discovered he was married, I allowed myself to be swept up by him again, choosing my own feelings over the betrayal of Pat's nameless, faceless wife.

It turns out it hadn't been a wife. It had been a husband.

And his husband is now the furthest thing from being nameless and faceless to me. Instead, he is the man I love more than anything.

I glance down, realizing my hands in my lap are shaking again.

What could I say to Tim?

Hey, Tim, you know how we've always marveled at how much we've got in common? Well, guess what? I've just discovered another major thing we have in common.

Or...

Funny story, Tim. You know how I told you about hooking up with a married guy? Well, it turns out he was married to you. Small world, huh?

"Are you going to tell him?" Kelsey asks.

"I can't tell him. It will destroy him."

As I say the words, I realize that's the most important thing.

Telling him will shatter his memories of his husband, Stella's father, eight years of his life with Rick.

And I can't do that to the man I love.

Tim's love for Rick is an essential part of who he is. I can't do anything to change that.

But how can I be with him and keep this knowledge to myself? Every moment I spend with Tim without telling him will feel like a lie.

There's only one solution.

My chest feels like it's been stamped on, but I force the words out of my mouth.

“I’m going to have to leave.”

“What?”

My mind races, and words spill out of me as I desperately come up with a plan.

“Tim’s already worried about me giving up my plans to go to London, so I’ll tell him I’ve thought about it more and decided I want to go after all.

“And then hopefully he’ll move on and find someone else to be happy with”—my voice catches because the idea of Tim with someone else is hideous—“and he’ll never find out the truth.”

That’s the most important thing to me right now. Protecting Tim from the truth.

Chapter 21

Tim

Something is going on with Jamie.

At first, I think it's my imagination. When I see him on Monday at the staff meeting, he looks tired and stressed. He sends me a message telling me he can't make lunch because he's too tied up sorting out everything for the tournament week coming up. Which, fair enough, will be a really busy week for him.

But he hardly responds to my messages on Monday night, and Tuesday follows the same pattern.

It seems ridiculous to be a thirty-four-year-old guy, obsessing that my message shows it has been read but Jamie hasn't replied.

It reminds me how inexperienced I actually am at this dating game.

I'm hanging out for Wednesday when, hopefully, we'll go to soccer training and things will get back to normal. But when Jamie comes across the field, he gives me an awkward smile that doesn't reach his eyes. He sticks his hands in his pockets, looking away from me as Scott talks.

My mouth dries.

Shit. It's most definitely not my imagination.

Jamie keeps his distance throughout practice.

After practice, as we head to the changing rooms, I come up next to him.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you much this week. Everything okay?”

He gives me a smile, but it seems forced. “Just a really busy week.”

“You coming to the pub now?”

He meets my eyes briefly before his gaze skitters off. “Yeah, I’ll come.”

He changes next to me, but there’s none of our usual banter and flirty looks.

My stomach churns.

And while he sits beside me at the pub, he spends most of the time talking to Seb and Declan.

As we finish the last of our drinks, I can’t bear it anymore. I hate this uncertainty welling inside me.

I nudge him with my shoulder. “You want to come back to my house tonight?” I ask.

Jamie fiddles with a coaster on the table before raising his gaze to mine. “Yeah, okay.”

The relief flowing through me is overwhelming.

On the drive home, I clutch my steering wheel tightly, digging my fingernails into the cover.

Did staying over at my house last weekend change his mind about something? I thought it had gone well, but maybe it had drilled in the reality of dating an older man with a child. Maybe he’s doubting whether he’s up for being a stepparent long-term. Maybe he’s decided he’s better off with someone his own age.

Something just doesn’t feel right.

And how not right things are between us becomes apparent when we get inside my house. Because instead of instantly reaching for me like normal, Jamie hangs back a few feet from me, caution on his face.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask inanely, like we haven’t just been at the pub. “Maybe a whiskey?”

Jamie sticks his hands in his pockets and looks awkward. “No, I’m fine, thanks.”

I take a deep breath. “You want to tell me what’s going on with you?”

He meets my eyes with his beautiful ones that look strained and tired.

“I don’t know how to say this,” he says.

My heart is in my shoes. Fuck, I so wish I wasn’t right. Is this Jamie breaking up with me?

“Just tell me,” I say, my voice low.

“I’ve decided I want to go traveling after all.”

Whatever I was expecting out of Jamie’s mouth, it wasn’t that.

“Oh. Okay.”

He scuffs his foot along the carpet, looking at his shoes. “It’s just that I feel I’ve already missed out on so much of being young, and I really don’t want to have any more regrets.”

He swallows, looking away.

My hurt and disappointment diminish when I see Jamie’s distress. See how much this conversation is costing him.

“Hey,” I say softly. “Hey, Jamie, it’s all right. You’re allowed to choose what’s right for you.”

He looks up at me, his beautiful eyes bright with tears. “I don’t know if I can do the long-distance thing either. I don’t think that would be fair to either of us.”

A bit of my heart breaks off at his words.

I swallow. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, and it honestly sounds like the weight of the world is in those two words.

“Jamie, please don’t apologize to me. You don’t owe me anything.”

He wipes his eyes. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Do you always have to be this nice?”

I chuckle out a half-laugh, but it doesn’t have any real humor. “I’m sorry if my bastard tendencies aren’t strong enough for you.”

“I really, really want you to be a bastard to me right now.” But the way he says the words aren’t injected with his usual jokey manner. Instead, it sounds like he really means them.

Does he need me to make this easier for him? He looks so tormented.

“Jamie, part of me is glad you’re going,” I say.

He blinks. “You’re glad?”

“Yes. I had such a great time living in London and traveling around Europe. I love thinking back to those years. I don’t want you to miss out on that.”

As I say the words, I start to convince myself. I can be selfless and happy for Jamie. I can focus on what he’s gaining rather than what I’m about to lose.

“And maybe, maybe when you come back if we’re both still single...you just never know how life is going to pan out.”

“Yeah, you never know,” Jamie echoes.

He tries to smile at me, but it fails to progress past a mild upturn of his lips.

“When are you planning on leaving?” I ask.

“I talked to Annie, and she said they could find a replacement next term. So I’ve booked to go in the last week of the school holidays if I can get a work visa in time.”

My eyebrows fly up. The school holidays are only a few weeks away.

“So soon?”

Shit. The words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to think them through.

Jamie runs a hand through his hair. “I figure if I don’t go soon, I’ll start to doubt myself, and I’ll never get on that plane,” he whispers.

A lump rises in my throat. “It’s a nice time of year to go as well, as you’ll get the end of the summer.”

Jamie sticks his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You’re going to have such an amazing time.” Maybe if I concentrate on this, I can reduce my disappointment.

I go to my bookshelf and grab the photo album from when Rick and I did our OE.

“Try not to laugh too much at my haircut,” I say as I hand him the photo album.

Jamie opens the album and flips through. He pauses on a page.

I look at the one that’s caught his attention. It’s Rick and me at the Leaning Tower of Pisa, us on either side pretending to lick it. We’re both laughing at each other.

Jamie puts the photo album down on the couch next to him.

“I can’t stay tonight,” he says abruptly. “I’m not feeling that great, and I just remembered I told Annie I would be at school early tomorrow.”

My forehead creases. “Right.”

Jamie stands, and I follow him over to the door. Things still don’t feel right between us. I open my mouth to say something, but suddenly Jamie is kissing me. His kiss starts off ferocious, as intense as his kisses have ever been. There’s so much feeling in this kiss that one part of me starts to relax. Okay, so Jamie’s leaving, but from this kiss, it feels like he’s going through the same emotions I am about the prospect. For some reason, that makes me feel slightly better.

And our kiss gentles down to something sweeter, and when he pulls away, he rests his forehead against mine for a moment.

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” he whispers.

“Okay,” I say back just as softly.

I close the door behind him, my mind trying to process it all.

Jamie is leaving.

I bite my lip so hard it hurts.

Maybe this thing with Jamie was only ever destined to have a short life span.

I think of the experiment I do with my classes when we burn a piece of magnesium ribbon. Its flame is beautiful, bright, and intense, but it only lasts for a short period of time.

Maybe when I look back on it, I’ll realize Jamie came into my life to teach me I was capable of love and happiness again. That there was the possibility for me to love after Rick.

I pick up the discarded photo album on the couch and flick through the photos of Rick and me having fun together.

I’ve always liked the idea of Rick sending Jamie to me, but would he have done it if he knew I would fall in love with him but not get to keep him?

“This better be part of a divine plan,” I say to Rick now.

As usual, there’s no reply.

Chapter 22

Jamie

I'm in agony.

Trying to keep my distance from Tim for the next week almost kills me.

Telling Tim that I'm leaving was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. The look of disappointment on his face...

But it's better that I see disappointment on Tim's face than the devastation if he learns the truth.

You could just not tell him, a little voice says in my head. Tell him you've changed your mind, continue your relationship with him, and hope he never finds out.

Even as my traitorous brain thinks the words, I know I can't. Just spending time with him now feels dishonest.

Last week, after he showed me those photos of him and Rick together, I couldn't even stay the night. There was so much guilt inside me that I was scared I'd blurt out the truth.

I know I've made the right decision.

If only it didn't hurt so much.

The next Wednesday night at practice, I take Scott aside and tell him I'm going to have to quit the team in a few weeks because I'm going on my OE.

He doesn't say anything to the team at practice, but once we get to the pub, he brings it up.

"So, Jamie, when are you actually leaving?"

Next to me, I feel Tim's shoulders stiffen.

I look into my beer. "I'm booked to fly out on August the twelfth."

"Where are you going?" Declan asks.

"I'm doing my OE, basing myself in London, then will look to do some traveling from there once I've earned enough money." I try to pump enthusiasm into my voice but fail miserably.

"You going to go on a Contiki tour?" Scott asks.

I shrug. "Maybe."

"I highly recommend doing one. Good times." He grins.

Some of the other guys chime in about their travel experiences. Seb sits across from me, quiet as usual.

"What about you, Seb? You ever been to London?" I ask.

"No, but I'm going for the first time in a few months for a conference," Seb says.

I raise my eyebrows. "Look me up when you get there. We can go for a beer."

I'm fairly sure I will be desperate for any slice of home by then.

Surprise crosses Seb's face, but he brings out his phone. "Sure. What's your number?"

I recite it, and Seb puts it in his phone.

When I look at Tim, there's a crease between his eyebrows as his gaze ping-pongs between Seb and me.

Shit. Is he thinking I'm looking to hook up with Seb? That I'm counting down the seconds until we'll officially be over and I can be on the lookout for other guys?

The idea that I'd ever want anyone else besides Tim is crazy.

But my stomach drops when I look around the table, noticing how many of our teammates are following this

conversation. Tim will officially be single in a few weeks. Will someone here ask him out?

The thought makes me want to hurl.

Who the fuck am I to say that Tim isn't allowed some fun? He deserves as much fun as he wants. He deserves to fall in love with one of these great guys, someone who has never betrayed him, someone he can have a simple, uncomplicated relationship with and live happily ever after.

I drain my beer in one gulp, but it doesn't do anything for the nausea that's set up camp in my stomach.

As everyone stands to leave, Tim turns to me.

"So, tonight?" There's a vulnerability on Tim's face like he's waiting for me to decline. After last Wednesday, I fobbed him off on the weekend because I couldn't bear to build more memories and fall even more in love with him knowing I have to leave.

From the look on his face, I realize I made the wrong decision.

I'm hurting him.

I'd prefer to hurt myself than ever hurt Tim.

"Sounds good, but my house, okay?" I can't handle being in Tim's house that he shared with Rick.

Relief overtakes Tim's face. "Sure."

I drive back to my apartment, Tim following me in his car. He's silent as I unlock the door.

It's only when we're inside that he turns to me, placing a tentative hand on my cheek. "Jamie," he says.

I kiss him, and it feels like coming home. It feels like comfort, like a warm bath on a cold night, like all the things Julie Andrews described in her song.

I can't believe I have to give this up.

We kiss all the way to my bedroom, our lips fused together.

Tim pulls back. His glasses are slightly askew, his lips already a bruised red, hair messed up from where I've been running my hands through it.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"I want you to fuck me so hard I'll remember it forever," I say.

Tim blinks at me. "Shit, Jamie, you can't say things like that to me."

I grope for his cock because I need to stop talking. Maybe if I can keep this about the physical act of sex, I can stop it from hurting so much.

But it's Tim and me. There's no way it can ever just be about the physical.

Because he kisses me again like I'm his reason for everything, and I match his intensity. Tim and I have always burned at the same temperature in bed.

And this is a burning, scorching inferno where every touch lights another fire.

I'm impatient through the prepping, telling him I'm ready far too soon because all I want is Tim inside me where he belongs.

I meant what I said. I want to feel him forever.

When he thrusts inside, I close my eyes so he can't see the tears that instantly prickle. It's not from the burn, although that is at the border of pleasure-pain, every nerve ending alight.

I wrap my legs around him, urging him deeper and faster, wanting to feel him in every corner of my body. He braces himself on his arms as he pounds into me, and the angle means he's sliding against my prostate with every thrust.

"Jamie," he groans. "Fuck."

I can feel the tension building in his body, like he's coiled up inside.

"That's it," I say.

He fucks me faster, and I'm clinging to him because I want to keep him inside me. Maybe if I hold him tight, I can keep him here forever.

Tim is giving himself to me completely, giving me everything he has like he always does. And I'm taking every inch of it, burning it into my mind.

He snakes a hand between us and jerks me off, and when he leans down to kiss me, I feel that telltale tingle at the base of my spine.

"Fuck," Tim moans as I clench around him and come apart, writhing, contracting around him as he thrusts into me once, twice, three more times. On the last thrust, he buries himself deep and pulses inside me. It's like I'm filled with him, branded by this man.

Tim collapses on top of me, his face buried in my neck.

I feel his rapid breath on my skin.

After a minute, he pulls out gently, flopping onto the pillow next to me, those brilliant blue eyes fixed on me.

"Damn, Jamie, are you trying to ruin me for all other men?"

"You've seen through my master plan." I try to say it lightheartedly, but my voice snags on the words.

"Seriously, though..." Tim's voice contains only wonder, and he can't stop touching me, stroking down my skin. "That was amazing."

"It's always amazing with you," I reply.

And he's kissing me again, and we kiss and kiss. It's going to be one of those nights where we never get enough of each other, where we exhaust our bodies trying to tell each other how we feel.

And the only thing that will get me through this night is the thought that by leaving, I'm protecting him.

I can sacrifice my own heart if it means I'm saving his.

Chapter 23

Tim

The next three weeks pass far too quickly.

Jamie continues to withdraw from me, and I let him. I know this is what we need to do, to wean ourselves off each other.

It turns out my addiction to Jamie is intense.

My fingers twitch to message him, and I find myself picking up my phone, constantly wanting to tell him about little things that happen during the day. I stop myself.

Because that will only hurt us both.

I go to his house on Wednesdays after practice, and we continue to have incredible, epic sex, but every encounter has a bittersweet tinge. We're in countdown mode, even if we don't want to admit it.

It turns out that counting down the seconds until your heart breaks isn't that much fun.

"Can Jamie come over this weekend and play?" Stella asks on the last day of term.

I open the pantry cupboard so I can hide my expression until I get it back under control.

"Jamie's going to be leaving soon. He's busy getting ready to go."

Stella frowns.

"Hey, did I tell you Gran and Grandpa invited you to go to Gisborne for the second week of the school holidays?" I ask.

Stella's face brightens. "Will they take me to the beach?"

"I'm sure they'll take you to the beach lots of times."

Stella's face brightens at the thought of adding to her shell collection, and the conversation thankfully moves past Jamie.

I don't greet the arrival of the school holidays with my usual enthusiasm because, at the end of this, Jamie is leaving. He won't be coming back to school.

We have a farewell morning tea for him in the staff room on his last day. It takes everything I have to stay upbeat and smiling as everyone wishes him well. Annie makes a lovely speech, and he's presented with a Southlake hoodie to take with him overseas.

I'm determined to keep up this front, not to show the cracks I'm feeling deep inside.

I'll worry about the bleakness I sense in the shadows waiting for me after he leaves.

At the moment, I'm trying to collect memories.

Jamie's triumphant smile after scoring a goal in our soccer game. The way Jamie interlinks his fingers with mine when I'm inside him, the little quirk of his mouth when I say something to make him laugh.

On the last Wednesday he's here, he comes to soccer practice even though he's not playing in the game this weekend.

The soccer team is a reminder of the impact Jamie has had on my life. It's one of the many ways Jamie's helped to make me happy over the past few months.

"Are you okay with staying the night at my place? I have contractors coming tomorrow morning to see me about the roof," I ask at the end of practice.

"Yeah, sure." He looks uncomfortable, but he gives me a tight smile. For some reason, Jamie seems reluctant to spend time at my place recently, but I've been just as happy to go to his flat. Spending time with Jamie has been all that matters.

As I drive home, I think about the contrast between Jamie's and my life.

Jamie's about to go overseas and meet so many new people and have many new experiences. While excitement in my life is getting my roof tiles sprayed for moss and lichen.

Adulting. I'm not sure it's an experience I would recommend.

When we get inside my house, roof tiles are the last thing on my mind because Jamie is on me instantly, and there's something desperate about the way Jamie kisses me.

I match his desperation because this is one of the last times we'll be together, and how the hell am I going to survive without this? Without him?

My face is wet, and when I pull back from the kiss, I can see it's because of the tears trickling down Jamie's face.

I kiss one of his tears gently, his cheek soft against my lips.

"Hey, it's okay," I say quietly.

He takes a wobbly breath. "I don't know if I'm making the right decision. Leaving you is so hard." His voice shakes.

Then don't go. Stay.

But I tamp down my selfishness. This is not about me. This is about Jamie.

"Jamie..." I let out a deep breath. "I will never forget our time together. You got me looking at the stars differently, and I'll never be able to thank you enough for that."

"Oh my god, Tim." Jamie's wet eyelashes clump together. "Please don't thank me. Please." His voice is so cut up, and I can't do anything but close the distance between us and kiss him again.

Stay.

I refuse to let the word leave my traitorous lips, even though my heart beats with it.

I refuse to do anything that will tie a twenty-two-year-old to me, tether him at a point in his life when he should be flying free.

I refuse to be another Pat in his life, only thinking of myself, not putting Jamie first.

Jamie deserves to be put first in every situation.

The safest way to keep from saying anything is to occupy my mouth by kissing him.

But Jamie and I can never just be content with only kisses.

It quickly progresses to more, us stumbling to the couch because my bedroom feels like an impossible distance right now.

I'm worried my body is saying everything I'm refusing to utter with my mouth.

Kissing down his stomach.

Stay.

Worshipping his cock with my mouth. I sense he's getting close when Jamie tugs at my hair.

"I need you inside me," he says.

If that's what he wants, then that's what I'm going to give him.

I fuck him slowly and deeply. It's not our usual frenzy, but something slower and more intimate, where I cup my hand around his face, staring into those incredible eyes as I move inside him.

Stay with me. Forever.

After we've both come undone, I'm overwhelmed with emotions, a mixture of sadness and love. Two such pure, basic emotions in human existence.

Somehow they coexist inside me as Jamie cuddles into me, and I try to hold on to this moment for as long as possible.

* * *

The next morning, Jamie and I wake up together, our limbs tangled, not knowing where one ends and the other begins.

I school my face. I don't want to show Jamie how much my heart is breaking. It's not fair to him to have to see that.

Eventually, we make it out of bed, and I rummage around for ingredients to make him a smoothie.

Everything is bittersweet because I know this may be the last time I'll see Jamie with his rumpled morning hair, barefoot in my kitchen. We communicate in quiet voices like we're in a funeral home.

As I finish getting out the ingredients from the fridge, there's a knock at the front door.

Oh yeah, the roofing guys. They're earlier than I expected.

But it's not a roofing contractor standing on my doorstep.

"Surprise," Gabby says with a wide smile.

"Gabby!" I force cheerfulness. "I thought you weren't due home for another week."

"I decided to skip Singapore and come straight home." She looks past me eagerly. "Where's Stella?"

"She's visiting my parents for a few days. She'll be back tonight."

"Oh."

The blender starts in the kitchen. Gabby peers past me.

"Do you have a visitor?" she asks.

I rub the nape of my neck. "Umm...yeah. My boyfriend is here."

She raises one eyebrow expectantly, and I have no choice but to issue the invitation I know she's waiting for.

"Do you want to come in and meet him?"

Gabby follows me through the living room toward the kitchen.

I brace for the introduction because, out of everyone, introducing my boyfriend to Gabby will be the hardest. Even though Jamie's leaving soon, he replaced Rick in my heart and my bed, and I understand why that will always be hard for Gabby to see.

Jamie's pouring his smoothie into a glass as we come into the living space.

I glance at Gabby, about to make the introductions, but she's stopped, staring at Jamie. Her eyes widen and her head snaps backward like she's been struck.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Chapter 24

Tim

I stare at Gabby.
What?

Why is Gabby swearing at Jamie?

I glance past her to find him staring at both of us, slack-jawed, utter shock on his face.

I instantly move forward to protect him from Gabby's misguided wrath.

"This is my boyfriend, Jamie," I say, trying to get the conversation back on track.

But my introduction doesn't do anything to diminish the anger and shock currently rampaging on Gabby's face.

"He's your boyfriend?" Gabby's eyes narrow as she continues to stare at Jamie. "Are you some kind of psycho? What the hell do you think you're doing, tracking him down?"

Why does she think Jamie tracked me down?

Jamie doesn't defend himself. He drops his gaze, and his expression is...what? It takes me a moment. Then I recognize it. Guilt.

"Jamie?" I say.

He lifts his gaze to mine. "I'm sorry," he says to me. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

Gabby turns to me, and she must process the bewilderment on my face because she blanches.

“He doesn’t know?” She almost whispers the words.

“Know what?” I ask.

“Oh, fuck,” Gabby says.

I look at her in shock. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Gabby swear before. And now she’s sworn twice in close succession.

She retreats to the couch, sinking into it, putting her head in her hands.

My brain tries to connect the dots, but I’m coming up empty. Gabby and Jamie. Gabby and Jamie...how on earth do they know each other?

I look over at Jamie.

“I don’t get what’s going on here,” I say slowly.

His beautiful face is twisted into such pain that I take a step toward him to comfort him.

He puts up a hand to stop me. And he’s not just unhappy now. It’s almost...grief on his face.

He takes a deep breath, and it comes out in a shuddering gush.

“He was Pat.”

“Who? What about Pat?”

“Rick.”

I startle at my husband’s name falling from Jamie’s lips.

Jamie’s eyes don’t leave mine, and they’re filled with anguish.

“Pat was Rick,” he says.

The words should have meaning to me, but somehow, they don’t.

I mean, I understand the individual components of that sentence. Pat, the closeted guy who screwed him over so badly, and Rick, my dead husband, Stella’s father, and Gabby’s

brother. But I can't get them to work together in a way that makes sense.

Pat was Rick. Pat was Rick. Pat was Rick.

He's telling me they're the same person.

It hits me like an asteroid.

Rick was Pat.

I let out a noise I didn't even know I could produce. It's a guttural noise dredged from deep inside me.

"No," I manage, and my voice is a plea, an appeal that I've somehow got the meaning wrong.

One look at Jamie's face, and I know my interpretation is correct.

Bile rises in my throat, choking me.

I stumble into the kitchen and make it to the sink as my stomach clenches. I retch as if getting rid of the contents of my stomach can purge the knowledge that is now part of me.

Rick cheated on me. With Jamie.

This can't be happening.

"Tim." Jamie's by my side. He reaches out to touch my arm, then stops himself.

He's afraid to touch me.

I stare at his hovering hand.

Jamie's hand. That beautiful hand touched my husband. That beautiful mouth kissed Rick. My Rick.

What had Jamie told me about his relationship with Pat?

It was mainly hot sex in the beginning.

I gag again.

"Oh my god, Tim." He puts his hand on my back.

I instinctively shrug him off.

Jamie flinches, dropping his hand to his side.

“Did you know?” My voice is raw, and I manage to raise my eyes to him.

His eyes don't leave mine. “I found out the first weekend I stayed here. When I saw the photo on your dresser.”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, trying to process it. That weekend when I'd been so happy, so excited about Jamie and my future together.

And he'd kept the secret from me.

Everything that had happened between us since then had been built on a lie.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Jamie bites his lip. “I didn't want to hurt you.”

The breath drains from my lungs. I try to force enough in to power through my next question.

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long were you fucking my husband?”

Jamie recoils like I've punched him in the stomach.

“How long?” I repeat my question.

“Six months.” His voice was low. His gaze flicks from me to the counter and then out the window.

Six months. Half a year.

He probably told me this detail when he previously talked about Pat, but I didn't pay attention because it was something from Jamie's past, something that had little relevance to me.

Pat was Rick. Pat was Rick.

Now it has extreme fucking relevance to me.

I try to fill my lungs properly. In. Out. In. Out.

Jamie rakes his hand through his hair. His hand clenches, and he tugs almost violently at the strands. “It's my fault. I seduced him. I thought he was closeted, so I ignored his reluctance and kept hitting on him.”

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t accidentally fall on your cock, Jamie,” I say angrily.

Jamie flushes, and seeing the color rising on his face causes rage to tear through me.

What the fuck is he thinking?

For a second, I want to wrench open his brain and take out the memories containing intimate moments with Rick, reclaim them because they shouldn’t be his.

He shouldn’t know what Rick looked like naked. What it felt like to kiss him. He shouldn’t know about that little crease Rick got on his forehead when he came. Only I’m supposed to know those things.

I wrap my arms around myself.

“Rick loved you so much, Tim,” Gabby says desperately.

Gabby. I’d almost forgotten she was here.

I snap my eyes to her. She’s still sitting on the couch, looking as upset as I’ve ever seen her. She’s got one of the lime-green cushions on her lap. The cushions Rick and I chose together. The ones I’d kept as a reminder of how much fun we had with each other. Although, apparently, Rick had also needed to look for fun outside of our marriage.

“How do you know about this? Did Rick tell you?” I demand to know.

Gabby nods miserably.

I’m trying desperately to fit the pieces together into a picture that makes sense.

Gabby recognized Jamie. She’d met him before.

I stare at Jamie. “Wait, you said a woman came to break up with you.” I spin to face Gabby. “That was you? Did you break up with Jamie on Rick’s behalf?”

Gabby just stares at me mutely.

The pieces of the jigsaw slot together into the most horrific picture possible.

“Fuck, they were still together when he died, weren’t they?” I swivel to face Jamie again. “You were fucking him until his death?”

Jamie looks like he wants the ground to swallow him up. “We weren’t together properly, but um...the last time I saw him was the twenty-eighth of April.”

The day before he died.

“You didn’t tell me.” Jamie shoots a glance at Gabby. “I didn’t know he died.”

A memory floats into my mind: Gabby taking Rick’s phone after the police gave it back to me, telling me she’d deal with messaging anyone who contacted him. At the time, I’d been grateful. I had no idea she’d been cleaning up after her brother, desperately removing all traces of his affair so I wouldn’t find out.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” I hardly recognize my own voice. It’s throbbing with so much anger.

Gabby’s shoulders hunch together. “I was trying to protect you,” she says in a low voice. “I didn’t think...I didn’t think it would do anyone any good for the truth to come out.”

“I would have fucking liked to have known the truth! So I wouldn’t have spent the last three years mourning my cheating husband. So I wouldn’t have fallen in love with my dead husband’s lover!”

Jamie flinches again.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so, so sorry.”

My anger drains out of me as quickly as it arrived.

Suddenly, I have no strength left in my legs.

I stagger into the living room and collapse onto a chair, heaving as I try to force air into my lungs. My shoulders are tight, my chest is tight, and my whole body feels like it’s collapsing in on itself.

“Tim...” Jamie’s followed me. He hovers near me, but I can’t look at him. I can’t look at the beautiful face Rick once

gazed at too.

“I think you should go,” Gabby says to Jamie.

I drag my eyes up to Jamie’s face. He’s pale, stricken. He stares at me pleadingly, but I honestly don’t know what he wants me to say.

Stay. Stay and tell me about the hot sex you and my husband used to have with each other.

I hunch into myself even further, closing my eyes, trying to blot out the world. I want to shut down my brain. I want this knowledge to leave me and never come back.

“I’m sorry.” This time his words are only a whisper.

I hear the sound of Jamie’s footsteps, the front door opening and closing, and still, I keep my eyes clenched shut.

“I’m so sorry,” Gabby says quietly.

How often in our lives do we say sorry? We offer it up like a prayer as if it will absolve our sins.

But there are some things a simple word will never be able to undo.

Chapter 25

Jamie

So, that happened.

I knew it would be awful if Tim found out the truth, but nothing could've prepared me for the reality.

The expression on Tim's face will haunt me for the rest of my life. That moment when he realized Rick had cheated on him, that I'd slept with his husband.

My arms and legs are still shaking when I arrive home.

Kelsey's sitting on the sofa reading through a magazine. She takes one look at my face and tilts her head. "What happened?"

I drop my keys on the counter. They land with a dull thud. "Tim found out."

"Fuck. How?"

"Rick's sister came over and recognized me."

Kelsey's eyebrows scrunch together. "How did he react?"

"How do you think he reacted?" I rub my forehead. "Surprisingly, the fact we've both screwed his husband was something he didn't think we could potentially bond over."

I slump down on the couch next to her. "I'll never forgive myself for doing that to him."

I wipe the tears trickling down my cheeks.

"Oh, Jamie." Kelsey wraps her arms around me. She's not a huggy person, so there's a certain stiffness in her embrace,

but the fact she's attempting it makes my tears flow even faster. I've never felt so ashamed. I hurt the nicest, kindest person I've ever met. The man I love.

"Now that he knows, do you have to go?" she asks as she pulls away.

I crease my forehead in confusion. "What?"

She just looks at me for a few heartbeats. "Well, that's what made you want to leave so soon, right? You wanted to protect him from the truth. Now he knows, do you still want to leave?"

Do I still want to leave?

The thought of staying here, of seeing Tim's devastation close up, of continuing to cause him pain, makes me sick to my stomach.

I think of the venom in his voice.

How long were you fucking my husband?

I can never unhear that.

"If I leave, at least he won't be reminded of me all the time," I say.

"It's not your fault. You didn't know Rick was married," Kelsey points out.

"I knew at the end," I say. "Those last few times we were together, I knew."

Kelsey's gaze remains steady on mine. "And you were trying to end it with him. It's always messy at the end of a relationship. You can't keep beating yourself up about it."

Kelsey's trying to make me feel better, but I don't deserve it.

Because there's something Kelsey doesn't know, something I've never admitted to anyone.

After I found out Pat was married, I wanted Pat to leave his wife and family for me. That's partly why I slept with him again. I justified it in my mind because I thought he was

closeted. I thought that by being with me, he would be living his true life.

But it doesn't change the basic fact.

I tried to steal Tim's husband from him.

* * *

The next morning, I stumble out of bed. I hardly slept, and it's not because I'm flying out to a new life in London tonight.

Kelsey regards me over a mug of tea at breakfast. "So, what last New Zealand things do you want to do today? Fish and chips on the beach? Eat hokey pokey ice cream and watch *Lord of the Rings*?" Her voice has forced joviality.

I grimace. "I have to see Tim."

Kelsey purses her lips. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I can't leave without saying goodbye," I say.

"It's only going to upset you."

"Well, I deserve to be upset, don't I?"

I repack my backpack, delaying the moment I face him.

By early afternoon, I know it's now or never.

I park outside Tim's house and use the walk to his front door to calm myself. But I can't help thinking about the first time I came up this path, the day before I discovered the truth. When I simply worried about Tim's fancy house and whether I was good enough for him.

After I discovered the truth, it became blatantly obvious I'll never be good enough for him.

I knock on the door.

Tim answers, and my heart clenches when I see him.

From the dark circles under his eyes, it looks like he got about as much sleep as I did.

His lips turn up at the corners like he's got an automatic smile function that engages when he sees me. But I know the moment he remembers, when reality slams into him.

His smile fades.

"Jamie," he says. His hands hover awkwardly next to him like he's unsure whether he should touch me.

I want him to touch me. I crave to touch him, kiss him.

If anything else was causing him to be so upset, that's what I'd do. I'd hug him until he felt better. I'd try to kiss his pain away.

But I'm helpless in this situation because I'm the cause of his agony.

I did this to Tim, and I will never forgive myself.

"I've just come to say goodbye," I say.

Tim bites his lip and nods tightly, looking down at his doormat.

He can't look at me. I can't look at him. I can't bear to see his hurt.

I remember how after camp, I wanted to cheer him up, to make him less sad, and maybe I did for a while, but now I'm leaving him with less than nothing.

I've stolen the good memories of his husband.

When he raises his gaze to mine, I'm shocked by the lifeless look in his eyes. It's as if the light that exists inside Tim has been extinguished.

I have never felt more self-disgust.

"I'm so sorry for everything. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you."

Tim stares at me with those dead eyes.

"I know," he says finally.

Well, that's something, I guess.

I had a tiny nugget of hope that now the truth is out, Tim might say it doesn't matter, that our love for each other will get past this.

But one look at his face and I know the truth.

It matters.

It matters too much.

My throat constricts. "Well, bye then."

"Goodbye." Tim's voice is barely above a whisper.

I turn to leave. I'm halfway down the path when I hear Tim's front door close.

Chapter 26

Tim

I shut the door on Jamie and stumble to the couch, burying my head in my hands.

Just breathe. Just make it through this next breath. Then the next.

This is how I coped after Rick died, when I thought I'd lost the love of my life.

What a fucking joke.

Rick had fucked Jamie. I can't get the image out of my mind. It spools through on repeat like a badly edited porn film.

Only in this film, the plot line is the most screwed-up one imaginable. My dead husband and my new boyfriend together.

Because I've slept with both of them, my imagination overachieves at providing details of what they would've looked like together. How hot it would have been in the bedroom between them.

Jamie's blond hair and Rick's dark curls mingling together when they kissed. Rick's paleness against Jamie's smooth, bronzed skin. Jamie's beautiful hands running across Rick. Rick touching his incredible body in return.

I know intimately how beautiful Jamie's body is, and now I have to think about how my husband used to leave him in Whangarei and drive back to our home.

Where I, with my then thirty-one-year-old body that had never been anywhere near the realms of gorgeous and hadn't seen much exercise since Stella was born, would greet him

with complaints about school and mundane life crap while his head would be full of thoughts about Jamie's beautiful mouth and beautiful hands and beautiful cock...

My stomach heaves, and I dry-retch. I clamp my hands over my mouth to stop it from becoming something of substance.

The most fucked-up thing is that part of me wants all the information. I yearn to know where and when and what happened in choreographic detail.

Would Jamie tell me if I demanded to know? I'm sure he would, but do I really want that knowledge? Which would be worse, the fantasy version or the concrete details I would be unable to forget?

More than the where and how, I have to know the why. Why had he started something with Jamie?

I stand on shaky legs. I have to do something. Anything to stop me from going insane.

I go into the kitchen and get out cleaning stuff. The harsh smell of ammonia fills my nostrils. I'm halfway through removing the cutlery from the cutlery drawer so I can scrub it out when I realize angry cleaning is what I used to do after I argued with Rick. I huff a bitter laugh. We'd never had an argument on this scale.

Fuck. I so want answers.

Even Jamie can't provide me with the full truth because Rick never told Jamie about me.

From what I know, there's only one person alive who talked to Rick about it.

Gabby.

My stomach fills with bitterness just thinking her name.

She's had three years to tell me. Three years where she watched me grieve and didn't say anything. I understand it placed her in an impossible situation, but surely she owed me the truth?

I have a weird feeling creeping into my stomach as I scrub the inside of the drawer.

Something doesn't sit right about Gabby knowing.

Why would Rick have told Gabby? I mean, they were close, but I can't imagine he enjoyed telling her he was cheating on me. He never liked admitting he was wrong about something.

Unless...

Gabby is an expert in family law.

My stomach hollows. Oh god, please, no. Please don't tell me there is another level of betrayal to this.

Fingers shaking, I throw the cloth in the sink, grab my phone off the counter, and call Gabby.

She answers the phone immediately. "Tim."

I don't bother with any niceties. "Was Rick thinking of leaving me for Jamie? Is that why he told you? Was he getting advice about how custody of Stella would work?"

In the silence that follows, I hear Gabby swallow.

"Yes." Her voice is barely more than a whisper.

Fuck. I didn't think it was possible to be more devastated but never say never.

I drop my gaze to the spotless sink. The stainless steel reflects back a garbled version of me.

For a minute, the only sound between Gabby and me is my choked breathing.

"He was infatuated, Tim. He lost his mind for a bit, okay? He thought it was love, but I could tell it wasn't genuine. It was only lust."

"I see." My mouth feels dry.

"Even though he thought he loved Jamie, he still loved you so much. He loved you and Stella and your family together."

"Was there ever anyone else? Did he cheat on me with anyone else?"

“No.”

“Are you sure?” My voice is full of disbelief.

She doesn't hesitate before answering. “As sure as I can be. He was so torn up over this, Tim. He was in real agony. He kept saying he didn't know what was wrong with him, that he knew he had the most incredible husband and daughter, yet he'd fallen for Jamie, and it threatened to destroy everything.

“I carried on telling him he had to stop, but he said it was like an addiction.”

An addiction.

Hadn't I thought that at some point in the last few months? That I was addicted to sex with my hot new lover. That I couldn't get enough of him.

It turns out Rick and I shared something else in common.

Rick thought he'd loved Jamie.

Had Jamie loved Rick in return?

What had Jamie said?

I thought it was love at the time, but now I know it was only infatuation. Because it turns out real love feels quite different.

Jamie told me that the first time we said I love you to each other. How fucked up is it that when Jamie told me he loved me, he'd been comparing what we had to his feelings for my dead husband?

But he admitted what he felt for me was more than he'd felt for Rick.

And now? Now it appears I'm feeling slightly competitive with my dead husband over who Jamie loved the most.

I scrub my hand over my face.

“I've got to go,” I say abruptly.

I end the call, and the vinyl protests under my shoes as I pace the kitchen.

But as fast as I walk, I can't stop my brain from looping faster.

What had I been doing the moment when nineteen-year-old Jamie batted those beautiful eyelashes at my husband? At school teaching teenagers how to light Bunsen burners? Shopping for groceries? Looking after our daughter?

What had I been doing when they had their first kiss?

When they first fucked?

When he'd first considered leaving me for Jamie?

A knock on my front door breaks this incredibly healthy line of thought.

I seize up. Is it Jamie again? Can I bear to see him?

Seeing his beautiful face is a reminder that Rick also looked at the same face and decided to cheat on me. Decided to forsake our marriage vows for a fling with a teenager.

I pad down the hall, running a hand over my face, trying to compose myself.

I open the door hesitantly.

Larissa is standing on my porch.

"Hey," she says quietly.

I can tell from the look on her face that she knows.

"Did Gabby call you?" I ask.

Larissa bites her lip, nodding. "Yes."

"Great. So you already know about the fucked-up love triangle I'm apparently in with my dead husband and my boyfriend?" I rake my hands through my hair.

Larissa steps inside and wraps her arms around me. "I'm so sorry, Tim. I'm sorry this happened to you."

I let her hug me for a few seconds before I pull back from her.

"It really is the situation that keeps on giving, you know? I think of another angle, and the fucked-up rating grows

exponentially. Do you know that before he died, Rick was thinking of leaving me for Jamie?”

Larissa sucks in a breath. “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Well, it’s true. If he hadn’t died, there’s a chance I still would have met Jamie, only he would have been my husband’s new boyfriend.” I laugh out a sharp, bitter laugh. “And he would have been Stella’s stepparent. Hey, I guess Rick knew what he was doing because Jamie’s great with Stella, right? So, well done, Rick. Great choice for an affair partner.”

Larissa moves past me, heading toward the kitchen. “Tea?”

I trail after her. “I’m not sure tea will do anything to change this situation.”

Larissa’s already reaching for the switch to boil the kettle. “I figure tea might be a better choice than alcohol.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say.

As the kettle hisses and whines, I try to pull myself together. I sit at the wooden kitchen table, staring at the grain, trying to calm my chaotic thoughts.

“I’m so embarrassed,” I say quietly as Larissa presses a mug of tea into my hands. “Embarrassed for grieving for Rick so much, for thinking I had such a perfect marriage when it turns out he’d spent the last six months fucking someone else.”

“There’s nothing embarrassing about having loved your husband,” Larissa says as she settles down into the chair across from me. “There’s nothing embarrassing about having trusted him.”

“I spent most of last night replaying those last six months before he died, and there were signs, you know? He was away for so many extra business trips that I thought was just to do with his promotion but must have been him sneaking off to Whangarei whenever he could to screw Jamie. And he stopped talking about having another child together... The signs were there. I was just too stupid to see them. I was so secure in us.”

“Rick did love you, Tim. Anyone could see that.”

“Yeah, he loved me until a nineteen-year-old propositioned him.”

I take a sip of my tea. It’s too hot and scorches my tongue.

“That’s the crazy thing. I shouldn’t be judging him so harshly for falling for Jamie because I fell for him too!”

Larissa blows on her tea before taking a sip. “You fell for him in very different circumstances,” she points out. She’s right. I fell for Jamie when I was a grieving widower mourning the man he’d had an affair with. No matter how many different ways I phrase it, it doesn’t reduce the fucked-up rating.

“I’m having to rewrite everything in my head,” I say. “Part of what I’ve mourned since Rick died is the future we missed out on. Having more children together. Growing old together. But now, I don’t know how much of that is actually true.”

What would my life be like today if that truck hadn’t swerved and Rick hadn’t died? Would his affair with Jamie have been a blip in our marriage, one he confessed to me after it ended, that we got counseling about and moved past?

Or would he have left me for Jamie? Would I now be single and bitter, trying to tamp down my resentment for the sake of Stella as Rick flaunted his relationship with his beautiful new lover?

The idea of Rick, Jamie, and Stella together as a family unit gouges something in my heart.

“It feels like I’ve lost him all over again,” I whisper. “Because the Rick that I knew, well, the Rick I thought I knew, he’s so different from how Jamie described him, and I never thought he’d cheat on me. So now I’m mourning the loss of that person because I don’t know if he ever existed.”

Larissa’s blue eyes met mine, her gaze steady. “You knew Rick, Tim. Of course, you knew him. What happened with Jamie doesn’t change that.”

“He hurt Jamie. Jamie was at a vulnerable place in his life when they met, and Rick made it worse by how he treated him, and that’s not the Rick I knew.”

Larissa raises her eyebrow at my words, but I know they're true.

I'm sure Rick looked at Jamie at the beginning and saw a hot nineteen-year-old. He hadn't seen the boy whose mother had abandoned him as a child, a young man who'd lost his dad at sixteen. He hadn't seen the hurt Jamie carried within him.

Rick liked things neat and ordered. He would have desperately tried to keep Jamie in that small self-contained box of a nineteen-year-old out for some fun, even as he got to know the real Jamie.

I can only imagine how conflicted he'd been when he realized there was more to Jamie than what he looked like. When he fell for him properly.

I tighten the grip on my mug. "For the last three years, I've had this idea that I'd lost my soulmate. Since meeting Jamie, I've felt so guilty about being happy again. That seems absurd now when I've learned my supposed soulmate was off fucking a teenager he picked up at the gym." There's anger in my voice, but underlying it is a bedrock of sadness.

I stare down at the cup in my hands. Despite the heat leaching from it, I'm cold inside. Empty.

Will I ever get over this?

Chapter 27

Jamie

London is enormous. It's busy. It's chaotic and colorful and everything I always imagined it to be.

I have a job at a comprehensive school, doing the same work I did back in New Zealand. I quickly learn that teenagers are the same the world over. They are as addicted to their phones. They laugh at the same jokes. They have the same excuses for losing gear.

I also work part-time at a local gym in the evenings. I have to keep busy. It gives me less time to think.

Less time to be reminded that I don't want to be here.

I want to be with Tim.

And Stella.

And be a family.

My life boils down to this basic truth.

I thought it would be easier to be away from him, away from the reminders of our time together, but it's not.

I'm about to be reminded of Tim again because Seb messaged me yesterday, saying he's here for his conference and asking if I want to catch up. I'm willing to bet a week's wages I won't make it through this conversation without Tim's name coming up.

I arrive at the Crow and Horn pub Seb suggested in his text message. My chest is so tight it's difficult to breathe.

“Hey, Jamie.” Seb waves from a booth on one side of the pub, and I head over to him, weaving my way through the dark wooden tables full of noisy patrons.

“Hey.”

He sticks out his hand, and I shake it.

When our handshake breaks, Seb pushes his glasses back from where they’ve slid down his nose. My heart aches at the same gesture I’ve seen Tim do so many times. Fuck. How do I turn nearly everything I see into a reminder of Tim? It’s a talent.

Seb settles back into the booth and gives me a shy smile. “It’s weird hanging out in a pub that’s not The CrossBar,” he says.

“Yeah.” Memories of The CrossBar flood back: Tim pressed against me, that secret smile he used to give me, how we’d drink our beer quickly so we could run off and spend the night together.

I close my eyes as if that will squeeze the memories out.

When I open them, Seb looks at me with concern. “Are you okay?”

I swallow hard. “I’m fine. I’ll go grab us a drink. What do you want?”

“A pint of cider would be great, thanks. Whatever they’ve got on tap.”

I head to the bar and place my order, using it as a chance to get my emotions under control.

When I make it back to the table with a pint of cider for Seb and a pint of beer for me, Seb’s mucking around with his phone.

“So, how’s the team going?” I ask as I set down our drinks.

Seb puts his phone aside. “Good. We won our last two games. We lost a close one to the Rovers...” Seb gives me a rundown of their last few games. I listen, and sure enough, it

doesn't take long for him to mention the name I'm both eagerly anticipating and absolutely dreading.

"And Tim scored a great goal from outside the circle. Even the opposition clapped."

His name slices through me like a knife.

I try to rustle up a smile but fail.

"That's great. And he's...all right, is he? Tim, I mean."

Seb stares at me for a few seconds before he replies. "I don't know Tim that well, but I get the feeling he's not doing great at the moment. He seems...sad."

The lump in my throat almost stops me from swallowing my beer.

"He's going through a tough time."

"I'm sure it's been hard on both of you, you moving away," he says quietly.

I take another mouthful of my beer. Somehow, despite it being a sweet ale, it leaves a bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

"No, it's not me leaving. Something else happened." I suddenly have an urgent, desperate need to talk about it. And so the story comes tumbling out. How I discovered Pat was Rick and how Tim learned the truth when Gabby showed up.

Seb blinks. And blinks some more.

"Oh my god, that's so messed up," he says when I finish.

"I know," I say miserably.

"So Tim broke up with you when he found out?" Seb asks.

I play with a coaster on the table. "Well, we never actually officially broke up, I guess, but we were always going to break up when I came over here."

Seb frowns. "But I thought you said you decided to leave because you didn't want Tim to discover the truth?"

"Well...yeah."

His frown deepens. “Did Tim say he wanted things to end?”

“No. Not exactly. He couldn’t even bear to look at me. He couldn’t touch me.” There’s a layer of agony in my voice as I think of how Tim flinched away from me.

Seb takes a sip of his cider, his forehead remaining crumpled.

“He was in shock, I’m guessing. Which is understandable, but are you sure he wants your relationship to be permanently over?”

It’s my turn to blink. I’ve never really thought through the alternative.

I’d been the one to push Tim away when I discovered the truth. I’d been so convinced what I’d done was unforgivable.

“Do you think he’d want to be with someone who had an affair with his husband?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Only Tim can answer that question, but you two always looked so happy together. So in love with each other.”

“We were happy,” I whisper. “And we did love each other.”

I still love him. I don’t think anything can ever change my love for Tim.

“I’m the last person you should ever take advice on your love life from, but it sounds to me like you ran away from him before he could break up with you.”

I snap my gaze up to Seb.

Is he right? I’ve been feeling so bad and so guilty, but am I also scared? Scared to see the full extent of the damage I’d caused to the man I love. Scared to watch his love for me fade, scared to be rejected by the only man I’d ever fallen for?

Seb’s phone beeps. He looks at the message, gnawing on his lip before looking up at me. “Sorry to do this, but I’ve got to head off.”

I pick up my glass and quickly drain the rest of my beer. “That’s fine. And thank you. I really appreciate you listening to the whole saga.”

“No worries. Relationships can be complicated sometimes.” Something in Seb’s expression makes me think he’s talking from personal experience.

I put down my glass and stand. Seb does the same. We make our way through the pub.

The cold here is a shock, given it’s only early autumn, but I’m realizing London has quite a different climate from Auckland. I shiver into my jacket.

“Thanks for everything, Seb. Enjoy the rest of your time in London.”

“Thanks.”

“You walking to the tube?” I ask.

“Ah, no, I’m good. Someone is picking me up.”

Just as he’s saying that, there’s the throaty purr of an engine as a Ferrari pulls up to the curb next to us.

My eyebrows fly up. Shit. It appears fancy European cars stalk Seb no matter what city he’s in.

There’s a faint tinge of pink on Seb’s face. “Um...this is my ride here.”

A handshake feels too formal, given everything we’ve talked about tonight. So I pull him in for a quick hug.

“Thanks for everything, man,” I say.

“Take care,” he replies softly. “I’m rooting for you guys.”

“Thanks.”

Seb opens the door to the Ferrari. I duck my head to wave goodbye to him, and I catch a quick glimpse of the driver before Seb shuts the door.

Surely that can’t be...?

The driver of the car looks like Marcus Johnson, the most famous person New Zealand’s has produced in recent years, an

internationally famous model and actor.

The door closes as the car pulls into the busy city traffic.

I don't spend much time dwelling on what the hell a quiet university professor from my soccer team in Auckland is doing hanging out with one of Hollywood's most eligible bachelors because I'm busy trying to process our conversation.

I walk to the nearest underground station. It's past rush hour, so I actually get a seat on the tube, which is a minor miracle for this part of London.

As it clangs and rattles toward my stop, my thoughts clang and rattle with the same ferociousness.

Is Seb right?

When I get to my flat and reach the safety of my bedroom, I send Kelsey a message. *You awake?*

Just got home from the night shift.

I press the button to video call her.

Kelsey answers on the first ring, giving me a big smile. "Hey, how's it going over there? You getting the city ready for my arrival?"

"Uh...yeah."

Her smile fades. "What's up?"

"I just saw one of the guys from my soccer team. He knows Tim, and I told him the whole miserable story."

"Okaayyy." Kelsey strings out the word, her forehead still furrowed.

"Do you think I ran away before Tim could break my heart?" I ask.

Kelsey's eyebrows fly up. "Shit, Jamie, it's early to be having this kind of emotional discussion." She blows out a breath, ruffling her fringe, and I can almost see her mind working. "Um...maybe? You definitely didn't seem keen to hang around and see where things were when the dust settled."

I can see Kelsey warming up to the theme. “You’ve been left in the past, right? First, your mother, then you could say your dad and Rick left you, although it wasn’t by their choice. So maybe subconsciously you wanted to be the one doing the leaving this time.”

“I just can’t see how we can get past the Rick factor,” I whisper.

Kelsey pauses. “Do you want to try?” she asks eventually.

“Of course I want to try. I love him.” My voice hitches. “But I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me.”

“Have you given him the chance?”

Silence is my answer.

“I think you’ve been beating yourself up so much over what happened, and you’re so scared of seeing him hurting, that you kind of did run away.”

My breath rushes out of me.

Are Seb and Kelsey right? Did I flee to protect myself? To avoid Tim being the one to leave me, I decided to preempt things by being the one to leave first.

It seems crazy that I left to reduce how much I would get hurt since all I’ve done since I’ve left Tim is hurt.

* * *

I hardly sleep that night. The next morning, my mind spins as I head to work.

With my mum and dad, with Pat, there was nothing I could do about losing them.

But is it possible I don’t have to lose Tim?

I imagine being with Tim again. Imagine touching him. Kissing him, laughing with him, sharing our lives.

Surely it’s worth the risk of more heartbreak when the reward is I might get Tim forever?

I'm so deep in my head that I miss my stop.

I get off and head back in the direction of the school. The terraced houses of London are so different from New Zealand, and it reminds me how far away from home I actually am. I've never come this way before, so I follow Google Maps, trying to make sure I'm taking the fastest route.

A signpost catches my eye. I stop abruptly. What the hell?

No matter how many times I blink, it doesn't change the sign in front of me proudly proclaiming 'Cold Blow Lane.'

I snort.

Then I hold up my phone and snap a picture.

There is only one person on the planet I want to share this with.

Before I can second guess myself, I send it to Tim.

Then, I follow it up with a message.

I don't think about what I'm going to write. I go for the fundamental truth that pounds through me with every beat of my heart.

I miss you every single minute of every single day.

Chapter 28

Tim

It's Friday night. I made it through another week.

That's my mission at the moment. I'm in survival mode like I was after Rick died.

In some ways, this is harder. The grief when Rick died was simple. I mourned the loss of my husband, my co-parent, my best friend.

This grief is more complex.

I pick Stella up from her after-school program, and we battle Auckland traffic to make it home.

"Lunchbox out," I remind Stella as we come in the door. She obediently retrieves her lunchbox from her bag.

"I drew this for you at school." She produces a crumpled picture from her bag. "It's a picture of when we went to the beach and collected shells," she says as she hands it over.

I stare at it.

There are three figures on it. Stella, me, and Jamie.

"I remember." My voice is light, although my heart is heavy.

I stare at the drawing Stella has done of Jamie. She's advanced beyond stick figures recently, so Jamie has a proper torso and head and carefully drawn arms and legs.

Besides the light-colored hair, it doesn't look anything like Jamie though.

Who could actually draw Jamie realistically? Even the greatest artists in the world wouldn't capture how completely beautiful the man is.

"Can we put it on the fridge?" Stella asks.

I can't really say no to her, not when all her drawings normally have a stint there.

"Sure."

She uses her favorite frog magnets to secure her drawing on every corner.

I try not to let my eyes drift to Stella's picture as I cook dinner and wash the dishes.

After dinner, Stella and I watch one episode of *Spirit*, her current favorite TV show. I get a feeling I'm going to be badgered about getting her a pony sometime in the future.

And then it's bedtime.

I check Stella has changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth properly before giving her one last hug.

As I return to the living room, my phone beeps with a message.

Jamie's name flashes across the screen.

My heart beats faster. It's a picture of a street sign saying Cold Blow Lane.

I can't help the smile that automatically springs onto my face.

Then my phone beeps with another message.

I miss you every single minute of every single day.

Jamie. Oh my god. Jamie.

A choked sob escapes my throat.

I grip my phone tighter until the edges cut into my flesh.

I've been so focused on the past, Rick's betrayal and Jamie's part in it, that I haven't thought of Jamie in the here and now.

I stare at his words, at the raw emotion behind them.

It's Friday morning in London, and Jamie is near a funny-named street, thinking of me.

Missing me.

When Jamie left to go to London, I wasn't necessarily glad that he'd gone, but part of me was...relieved.

I hadn't wanted the daily reminder of the man who'd had an affair with my husband, of my stupidity and foolishness that I hadn't realized what had been going on.

But for the first time, I think it through from Jamie's perspective.

He loved me.

His decision to go traveling—I squeeze my eyes shut—had come after he'd discovered the truth about Rick, when he decided not to tell me.

Why hadn't I realized that before?

Had that been him, in a screwed-up way, trying to protect me?

Memories flood my mind of Jamie. Of what we had together.

His smile, his laugh, the way he looked at me, the way he touched me. Of the simple, straightforward happiness I had whenever I was with him.

I loved him.

I still love him.

I stare at the message again. Staring at it doesn't change the words.

I miss you every single minute of every single day.

Oh, Jamie. I touch the screen as though touching his words can bring him to me.

* * *

The next day is Stella's friend Harriet's birthday party. I drop Stella off and drive aimlessly around the streets.

The message from Jamie is still on my phone. I've checked it constantly, just in case the words suddenly disappear.

But they never change.

I haven't responded to it. I really have no idea what to say. Somehow saying *I miss you too* feels insufficient. It feels like it should be followed up with something more profound, but do I know what profound message I want to send Jamie right now?

I get a start when I realize the street I'm driving on is familiar.

Apparently, my subconscious has given my aimless driving a purpose because I'm by the cemetery.

I haven't been to Rick's grave since I discovered the truth, but now I feel compelled to visit him. To offload what's swirling in my mind.

I park my car and stride purposefully across the lawn toward Rick's grave.

My feet slow as I recognize the woman visiting the grave a few rows from Rick.

I'm suddenly aware I'm not carrying flowers. No gifts to decorate his gravestone. It's a far cry from the grave she's tending with its fresh flower pinwheel turning in the light breeze.

I feel like a delinquent griever.

"Hey," I say awkwardly.

The woman looks at me, her face creasing into a smile. "Where's your little girl today?" she asks.

"She's at a birthday party."

She smiles and nods. "Probably a better place for a little girl than the cemetery," she says.

"Yes. Definitely."

“Are you visiting your wife?” she asks.

“My husband, actually.” I take a deep breath. “I’m furious with him. And he deserves to know it.”

She doesn’t take the involuntarily step back that she probably should after the confession that I’ve got serious beef with my dead spouse and have come to the cemetery to have it out with him.

Instead, she just gives me another lovely smile.

“I argue with Walter all the time,” she says in a confiding tone. “And do you want to know the best part?”

“What’s that?”

Her eyes twinkle. “He can’t argue back.”

I can’t help a surprised laugh at that.

“I call it the silver lining,” she continues.

“I guess there’s got to be one, right?” I say.

We exchange mutual, understanding smiles, then I continue on the few rows to Rick’s grave.

I stand there, arms crossed, legs apart, feet planted firmly in the grass. Without thinking, I’ve gone into my combative stance, bracing myself for an argument.

“It’s me, but if you pay any attention to what’s happening on earth, I guess you’ve been expecting me, right?”

“I can’t believe you fucking did that. I can’t believe you cheated on me.” The voice bubbling out of me is coated with so much pain and anger I almost don’t recognize it.

There’s a pain in my chest, and I rub it before I continue, “And with a nineteen-year-old as well. Seriously, Rick? What the hell were you thinking? I know he’s stunning, but I resisted him for weeks because of my loyalty to your memory.”

It appears I’m trying to point score against my dead husband when talking about our shared lover.

I take a deep breath to calm myself before I continue. “And you know what the worst part is? The worst part is I’m

so angry at you because of the way you treated him. How fucked up is that? You left his beautiful heart scarred even more, Rick, and you had no bloody right to do that.

“And I know it was probably because you were so messed up about the fact you were cheating on me, but it still doesn’t actually make it right.”

My words fade off into silence. I hear the noise of a lawnmower somewhere in the distance, filling the void.

When Rick and I argued for real, there were never any pauses, with both of us spilling words out of our mouths, desperate to make our point, to make the other listen.

But this is not Rick and me arguing for real. We will never argue again. I will never get the answers I so desperately want.

As I’m thinking that, a movement catches my eye.

It’s a butterfly, a beautiful, large monarch. It appears out of nowhere, flitting across the top of Rick’s gravestone.

I watch as it hovers around the words carved into granite for eternity.

His name.

The date of his birth.

The date of his death.

The message at the bottom: *Beloved husband of Tim, father of Stella.*

The words that sum up his life.

My breath catches in my throat.

Is this butterfly a message from Rick? What message do I want to hear from him? *Sorry? Forgive me? I always loved you?*

But as I watch the butterfly hovering, I’m reminded of going to the butterfly house with Jamie and Stella. Jamie telling butterfly jokes to entertain her.

How I felt that day when I was falling in love with Jamie without realizing it.

The butterfly flaps toward me, and I instantly take a step away.

“I don’t want a message from you. I want Jamie,” I say angrily.

The words seem to linger in the air.

And it crystallizes a truth that is now so obvious. So blatantly, blatantly obvious.

Rick is dead. The past is gone. Nothing can change it. There is only the future left.

And I cannot handle my future without Jamie.

* * *

I drive straight home, galvanized into action.

I open my laptop. I make some phone calls. Then I pack.

Jenna arrives as I’m packing.

“What the hell are you doing?” is her opening line.

I don’t raise my head from where I’m throwing things into the suitcase. “Can you look after Stella or not? Otherwise, I’ll ask Larissa or Gabby.”

“You’re seriously doing this?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to London to see Jamie?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think it’s slightly overdramatic?”

“I need to talk to him face-to-face.”

“And say what?”

“That I love him and what happened between him and Rick doesn’t matter to our future.”

I glance up from my suitcase to find Jenna blinking at me.

“You honestly think you can be with the guy who had an affair with your husband?”

“Yes. It’s the only way I get to be with Jamie, so yes.”

Jenna bites her lip. “I think you’re making a mistake,” she says quietly. “This will always be a shadow hanging over your relationship. I honestly don’t think you and Jamie will work out long-term. You’ll cause each other so much pain.”

I laugh with the wild freedom that comes from having faced the worst possible scenario and made it out to the other side, where I can clearly see what matters.

“Well, ultimately, it doesn’t matter what you think because I know Jamie, and I know me. And we belong together.”

The suitcase shuts with a thud as if to punctuate my words.

Rick may or may not have ultimately chosen Jamie over me. He might have ended our marriage and started a proper relationship with Jamie. Or he may have stayed with me.

We will never know.

But one thing is for sure.

I am not letting Rick’s memory, and the mistakes he made while he was alive, stop my happiness now.

I am choosing Jamie.

Chapter 29

Jamie

Tim doesn't respond to my message.

As the hours turn into a day and then another, my mood slumps.

What did I expect?

I miss you too. I don't care that you slept with my husband. I don't care that you ruined my memories of my marriage. I still want you.

I'm deluded if I think one text message can fix everything between us.

What can I do? I check my phone a million times the next day, willing it to beep with a message, but it stays blank.

Maybe I need to call him? A text message is really a coward's version of communication. I should FaceTime him so I can look him in the eyes as I tell him my truth.

Tim, I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. I would do anything for us to be together again.

My stomach clenches, thinking the words. Am I brave enough to actually say them to Tim? Face his rejection?

I arrive at the dingy flat I share with six other New Zealand and Australian guys. They all seem great, but I haven't taken any of them up on their offers to show me the London nightlife. It's so far from where my head's at.

I'm not working at the gym tonight, so an evening of staring at my blank phone awaits.

Frank, one of my flatmates, charges down the stairs as I open the front door.

“There’s a delivery for you in the living room,” he says.

My forehead scrunches. Delivery? I haven’t ordered anything.

I trudge up the stairs and into the flat.

I freeze.

On our tatty, saggy, stained couch is Tim.

He stands when he sees me, pushing his glasses back, his brilliant blue eyes not leaving mine.

I gape for a moment because how is this happening? How is Tim here in my grimy London flat when he should be seventeen thousand miles away in New Zealand?

But my body gets it together faster than my brain, and I close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around him, hugging him tighter than I’ve ever hugged anyone.

Tim. He’s here.

Tim hugs me back just as hard. From the moment I feel his arms around me, that clenched part inside me relaxes. Relief pulses through me, so powerful it almost buckles my knees.

I let out a choked sob.

“Hey.” Tim strokes down my back. “Hey, it’s okay.”

I shake my head because nothing, nothing about this situation has ever been okay.

“Oh, Jamie.” He pulls me even closer against him.

My breath comes in ragged gasps against his shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Tim pulls back so he can study my face. “What, a man can’t fly for twenty-four hours as a grand romantic gesture?”

My eyes prickle at his words. “I thought you didn’t like grand romantic gestures.”

“I did a small romantic gesture too. Just to cover all bases.” He lets go of me to reach into a carry bag on the couch. Tears threaten again when he produces a wrapped egg sandwich.

There’s a knot in my throat. “I hope that hasn’t come all the way from New Zealand,” I manage to get out.

“Don’t worry. I got it at Tesco around the corner.”

The egg sandwich blurs. I turn away, pressing the heels of my palms into my eye sockets, trying to suppress my tears.

“I can’t believe you came all this way,” I say, my voice wobbly.

When I raise my gaze to his, I find his eyes intent on mine. “I’ll find you anywhere,” he says softly. Then he winces slightly. “Sorry, that sounded way less stalkery in my head.”

I choke out a laugh because how amazing is it that Tim is here? How amazing is it that he came all this way to see me?

My whole body shakes, little tremors coming straight from my heart.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to come for you,” he says.

“I’m sorry I left.”

We stare at each other before he lifts his hand, cupping my face with his palm.

I can’t help myself. I lean in to kiss him.

It’s only when my lips rest against his that I realize it’s our first kiss since he found out about Rick.

Shit. Is kissing me going to remind him I once kissed his husband?

But Tim’s mouth opens beneath mine, and it becomes so familiar and so...right that I forget about that.

Other people aren’t relevant to this kiss. This kiss is between Tim and me and no one else.

It’s sweet and tender and shimmers with love.

Oh god, I’ve missed kissing Tim so much.

But, like always, our kiss doesn't stay in the sweet and tender category for long.

His tongue touches mine, and it's like a spark, igniting our kiss so fast it's surprising we don't leave scorch marks on the floor.

Tim's fingers grip the back of my neck, pulling me closer as he takes over my mouth, claiming complete control.

Our bodies rock together, and I feel his cock swell to a rigid line in his jeans, and I moan because it's Tim. It's Tim, and he's here, and he wants me. I thought I'd lost this forever.

He pulls away, his pupils dilated, black swallowing the blue. "Please tell me you have your own room."

I'm panting slightly already. "I have my own room."

I grab his hand and tug him down to my small bedroom. There's not enough room for much more than a double bed, but that's all we need.

I'm barely inside with the door shut when I'm stripping down, pulling off my track pants, hoodie, and T-shirt in frantic movements, removing my clothes as fast as possible.

It's not until I'm completely naked that I realize Tim's just standing there watching me, not making any move to take off his clothes.

Fuck.

Is this when it becomes too real for him? When he gets stuck on what happened in the past?

He raises his gaze to mine, and the blatant heat in his eyes makes my shoulders unclench.

"Jamie," he says my name reverently.

He takes off his glasses, putting them on my bedside table, then comes forward to touch me, sliding his hands up my chest as he kisses me again.

I kiss him back, my hands frantic as I tug off his shirt, reaching for his soft skin, running my hands through the sprinkling of hair on his chest.

I kiss down his jaw and throat to the crook of his neck. I pause there for a few seconds, inhaling the scent of the man I love.

Tim rocks his hips forward, and the thick length of his erection still trapped inside his jeans presses against me.

“I think we need to release your cock from his prison,” I say.

“I’m all for a prison break,” he gasps.

I laugh as I pop the button on his jeans. Then I bend down and pull them off in one quick motion. But I don’t give him a chance to step out of his jeans before I’m tugging down his boxers and taking him into my mouth.

“Fuck. Jamie,” he moans as he tips his head back.

I release his cock from my mouth. “Good idea. Let’s put a pin in that for later.”

Tim drops his chin down to look at me, and there’s so much love in his expression it makes me dizzy.

For a few seconds, we just smile at each other.

Then I snap back with the program and take his cock into my mouth again, swallowing it deep in my throat.

Tim groans. He lets me worship his cock for a minute before he tugs at my hair.

“I want to kiss you,” he says.

I stand, and Tim’s mouth is back on mine, crushing my lips with a blistering kiss that feels like he’s attempting to permanently fuse our mouths.

Tim leaves his jeans and boxers in a puddle on the floor, and we stumble the few steps to my bed, making it to a horizontal position without stopping kissing.

We can’t stop touching each other, hand stroking down chests, around to backs, fingers digging in because we’re holding on to each other so tightly.

It appears neither of us has the patience for prepping because Tim moves on top of me, his cock rigid and rutting against mine.

Still kissing.

Always kissing.

And this is going to be enough, just us grinding together.

I wrench my mouth away from his.

“Tim,” I moan.

“I got you,” he says.

And we’re frantically kissing again, our kisses electric with urgency, our hips roiling against each other. Suddenly Tim rolls off me, pulling me with him until he’s on his back, and I’m straddling him, my knees on each side of his waist, my hands on his chest.

“Oh god,” he moans, his eyes closed.

I can feel his erection slide along my crack as I rock against him.

I lean forward and claim his mouth again, our tongues working together as I move up and down his shaft, grinding against him.

“Jamie,” he moans. My cock feels like it’s going to burst as I match his rhythm, thrust for thrust.

Tim flexes his hips, and the friction is incredible. I rock faster, and the motion is too perfect to bear.

I shatter first, my orgasm ripping through me, my cock pulsing as I come.

Then Tim buries his head between my neck and shoulder, his teeth lightly grazing my skin as he adds to the stickiness between us.

Our breathing slows gradually. I feel Tim’s heart fluttering in his chest.

He shuffles so he’s lying more on his side, his weight off me. He’s still pressed against me at every point our body can

connect, like puzzle pieces locking in place for eternity.

He keeps running his hands over me like he can't believe he's touching me.

There are only a few inches between our faces as we gaze at each other.

I need to update Stella and tell her green isn't my favorite color anymore. It's the blue of Tim's eyes.

"I still can't believe you came for me," I whisper.

"I came because no two people belong together like you and me," he whispers back.

I lean forward to kiss him softly, sweetly, as though by kissing his lips, I can capture his words.

When we finally withdraw, I say the words throbbing through me, that are now such a fundamental part of who I am.

"I love you."

Tim smiles, his eyes crinkling in one of those magical Tim smiles. "I love you too," his voice is quiet. "In fact, falling in love with you is the easiest thing I've ever done."

A lightness fills me, so light it's a miracle I don't float off the bed.

"I'm so sorry about Rick," I say. My words are quieter than a whisper, but Tim hears me because his shoulders stiffen and pain flashes across his face. For a terrible heartbeat, I think I've ruined everything.

But then he fixes me with an unrelenting stare. "Jamie, it's not your fault."

The words pour out of me, riddled with guilt. "I seduced him. I know you probably don't want to hear the details but what I told you is true. I was the one who chased after him. I thought his reluctance was because he was closeted, so I kept pushing and pushing. I did everything I could to get him to sleep with me."

Tim's brow furrows. "Jamie, you need to stop feeling guilty. Regardless of what you did, it was ultimately Rick's

choice to cheat on me. He's the one who made the vows to me. He's the one who betrayed them."

Misery clogs my throat, making it hard for me to push the words past them, but I persist. "I think, deep down, I did know something wasn't right. I suspected for months that he was in a relationship before I asked him directly. But I didn't want to push too hard because I was so lonely, and I didn't want to lose him."

Tim looks down, biting his lip, but then his eyes are back on mine, that blazing, vivid blue. "I love every part of you, Jamie. That includes any mistakes you've made."

His words don't make me feel any better. Because there's one more thing I need to tell Tim, and it's horrible. But I don't want any secrets between us. I need to rip off the bandage, let the wound gush, and hope it's survivable.

"Right at the end, I really wanted him to leave his wife and family for me. That's partly why I slept with him after I found out." I can't hold Tim's gaze as I say the words. I look past him at my blank, badly painted wall instead.

I can feel Tim sucking in a sharp breath. He lets it out in a juddering sigh.

"According to Gabby, he was contemplating that," he says finally, his voice quiet.

I snap my eyes back to his. "What?"

"Apparently, he was thinking about leaving me for you. He asked Gabby for advice about how custody of Stella would work. That's why she knew about you."

My breath whooshes out of me.

Oh my fucking god.

I can't imagine how hurt Tim was when he found that out.

The fact that this man could discover that and then find it within himself to come across the world to be with me is beyond belief.

For a second, fear swamps me. We love each other, but will love be enough going forward? Will he be able to look at me and just see the man he loves, not the man his husband considered leaving him for?

My stomach clenches. “Do you think... Do you think we can get back to the way things were before?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think we could make this work, Jamie,” he says.

“I guess it is a long way to come for a quick hookup,” I say.

Tim laughs softly, and I smile. Tim laughing has to be the best sound in the world.

His smile fades, and he regards me seriously. “I’ve lost one person I loved, and I refuse to let that happen again. So I’ll wait. When you finish your OE, I’ll be waiting for you. If you want me.”

I have to swallow hard to get past the lump in my throat. “Of course I want you. I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“And I’m going to work hard to forgive Rick,” he says. I can see from the way his forehead scrunches that it’s hard for him to say those words.

My eyebrows fly up. “You are?”

“I need to, for Stella’s sake. And for my sake too. I spent eight years of my life with him, and I loved him. I don’t want to be bitter and twisted when I think of our time together.”

I stare at him. “You’re incredible.”

He lets out a shuddering breath. “And I know the way Rick treated you was awful and he doesn’t deserve your forgiveness. But I’m hoping... I’m hoping we can put Stella first. She deserves to grow up hearing good things about her father and how much he loved her. Because he really did.” His voice wavers at the end, and I hug him tighter.

“I can definitely put Stella first,” I say quietly.

“I’m not saying it won’t be difficult sometimes,” he says. “Because I’m sure it will.”

“We can handle difficult,” I say. “We can handle anything as long as we’re together.”

He gives a brief smile, but his eyes remain locked on mine. “For us to work, you also need to forgive yourself, Jamie. That’s really important. Promise me you’ll forgive yourself.”

I blink at him, but he’s gazing at me with such intensity that the words slip out of my mouth automatically.

“I promise.”

This is a gift Tim is giving me. To reframe everything that happened between Rick and me. He’s letting me forgive myself because the person I hurt the most has forgiven me.

As his grip around my arms tightens and he kisses my forehead, I realize how precious this gift actually is.

It would be so much easier for Tim to be with someone else and not be constantly reminded of his husband’s betrayal.

The fact he’s here means he must love me as much as I love him. That he feels exactly like me—that life will never be right unless we’re sharing it with each other.

He settles back on the pillow, his head a few inches from mine, and smiles at me.

I can’t help but smile back.

We lie like that for ages, dopey smiles on our faces, until we hear the noise of my flatmates out in the living room. It must be after five o’clock now.

“We should probably get up,” I say grudgingly.

“Yeah, probably.”

Tim attempts to pull away from me and then laughs because the stickiness between us has dried into something that feels like cement.

“We might be stuck together permanently,” he comments.

“I’m happy with that concept,” I say.

He laughs, and I feel his chuckles radiating through me.

I stare down at where we're joined. "You reckon this is a secret adhesive humanity hasn't yet discovered?"

"I'm sure humanity has thoroughly investigated the properties of this particular substance," he says.

It's my turn to laugh.

Then he's kissing me, and I'm lost in the perfection of kissing Tim.

"I'm here for five days," he says when he pulls back to rest his forehead against mine. "Maybe we'll have to do some more investigating."

Chapter 30

Tim

I'm busy adding another layer of wrapping paper to Stella's pass the parcel when my phone beeps.

I pick it up and check it. A huge grin breaks out on my face. It's a picture of Jamie beside a town sign called Orgy.

Jamie's traveling around Europe for three months before he comes home. He's currently in France, and he's been bombarding me with all the funny place names he can find. I've accused him of planning his itinerary to find as many of these places as possible. He claims the French have dirty minds, and they're everywhere once you start to look.

"Make sure you do lots of layers," Stella instructs as she comes over to inspect the progress I'm making with the pass the parcel. "Miriam had twenty layers for her party."

Eight-year-old girls' birthday parties are a competitive sport, a fact I'm just learning.

I send Jamie a quick message back. *Don't have too much fun.*

Then I put down my phone and turn my attention back to wrestling with sticky tape and wrapping paper.

I've just finished the last layer when there's a knock at the door.

Stella looks up from where she's concentrating on her best handwriting for the labels on the goody bags.

"Who's that?"

“It must be one of your aunties arriving early,” I say, standing. “Which is good, as they can help blow up the balloons.”

I swing open the door.

I blink. Then I blink again.

But nothing changes the sight of Jamie on my doorstep. He’s here. Not in France contemplating orgies.

He looks tired, but he’s sporting a super-large Jamie grin.

“Jamie!” Stella charges straight past me to collide with Jamie. Apparently, my newly minted eight-year-old is much faster on the uptake than I am.

“Happy birthday!” He swings her in his arms while I stand there gaping.

“What...? How...?” It appears I’m not going to get fully structured sentences out of my mouth for a while, but it doesn’t matter because Jamie has finished hugging Stella and steps forward to hug me, pressing our bodies together.

And I’m finally convinced I’m not hallucinating because I know my brain cannot conjure up Jamie’s exact scent. Trust me, I’ve tried.

I breathe him in.

His eyes are gleaming when he pulls back. “Well, you flew around the world to surprise me, so I figure it’s only fair if I return the favor. Otherwise, you’d have bragging rights, and we can’t have that.”

“I’m all for mutual bragging rights,” I say as I pull him against me again. I kiss his warm lips and allow myself a fleeting taste of Jamie before I reluctantly draw back. We haven’t seen each other for two months. It’s far too dangerous to kiss him properly when I have a dozen eight-year-old girls plus various family members arriving for a party in half an hour.

“But...you just sent me a photo from France,” I say.

“When I was traveling last month, I stored up a whole lot of place names to send to you. All part of throwing you off the scent.”

“Well, consider me sufficiently thrown. I’d make a terrible bloodhound.”

Jamie laughs softly, curling around me again, pressing his forehead to mine.

For a second, we remain like that, merged together. After two months of talking on the phone, constantly messaging, and hours of FaceTime conversations, I don’t think I will ever get enough of touching Jamie in the here and now.

“Dad, we’ve got to finish blowing up the balloons,” Stella reminds me as she dances back to her goody bags.

I pull back from Jamie. “I hope you’re ready to help us prepare for a party.”

“I can help with the balloons. I’ve been complimented before on my blowing technique,” he says in a low voice as he follows me through to the living room.

I laugh, and he raises an eyebrow. “I have an impressive lung capacity,” he informs me.

“I see.”

We grin at each other.

And I find it difficult to stop grinning as Jamie and I set to work on the balloons. A wide smile isn’t exactly the most efficient lip position for blowing up balloons, but I find it hard to care. My heart is expanding more than any of the balloons.

It’s only when there’s another knock on the door that my grin fades because I guarantee this will be Gabby or one of my sisters. Gabby’s and Jenna’s reactions when I returned from London and informed them my and Jamie’s relationship was continuing were lukewarm at best.

I open the door.

It’s Gabby.

She gives me a tentative smile. She's still hesitant whenever she's around me, and I suspect she's concerned about whether I will reduce her access to Stella after discovering the truth about her part in Rick's deception.

I'm not going to lie. I was incredibly angry at her for a few weeks.

Gabby's instinct was to protect Rick.

Jamie's instinct when he found out the truth was to protect me.

My instinct is to protect Stella.

Like I said to Jamie, Rick will always be Stella's father. Gabby's an important link to Rick, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that.

I think it's only fair to warn her now about the situation she's about to walk into. "Jamie's here. He came home early."

Gabby pauses. She swallows. "Oh, right."

She looks even more hesitant as she comes in, pursing her lips so they almost disappear as she enters the lounge where Jamie is trying to tie a string of balloons together.

Jamie rocks back on his heels when he sees Gabby. "Oh hey."

I can only imagine what his full greeting might be.

Hello, sister of my dead lover who ended our relationship but failed to inform me he was dead.

Yep, in the realm of awkward interactions, this one is a goody.

"Hello," Gabby says. She looks at him. "So, you're back for good, are you?"

Jamie straightens his shoulders. "Yes, I am."

Gabby gives a brisk nod, then looks away. "Okay."

Jamie and I have continued talking about everything in the last few months, covering all kinds of awkward topics like my changing and conflicting feelings toward Rick. It really felt

like I had to go through the grieving process yet again, mourning not only Rick's death but my delusions about our relationship.

We've also talked about Jamie's feelings as he rehashed his affair with Rick, processing the lies Rick told him and his death.

And I know he totally accepts that what's best for Stella is at the core of every decision we make.

"Are you any good at blowing up balloons?" he asks Gabby now.

Surprise filters across Gabby's face.

"It has been said a few times over the years that I have a lot of hot air," she says finally.

Jamie gives her one of his charming grins. "Hot air is very welcome."

Gabby lowers herself awkwardly onto the couch and blows up balloons, helping Jamie tie them and hang them around the room before the first guests arrive.

Jenna plasters on a smile when she arrives and sees Jamie, but as the afternoon progresses, her smile becomes more genuine.

I refuse to feel self-conscious about our relationship. So, when I want to slide my hand around his waist and pull him closer to me, plant a kiss on the side of his forehead, I do.

When I want to snort out my ginger beer at the funny dance moves he pulls out when he joins in playing musical statues, I do.

Jenna stands next to me, watching Jamie as he directs a game of candlesticks on the lawn. "He's great with kids."

"Yeah, he is."

"You must be happy he's back," she says.

"I'm beyond happy," I say.

Jenna gives me a smile. “I’m glad. You deserve beyond happy.”

At the end of the party, Stella’s tired but grinning.

She flops on the lounge floor to show Carlee her presents as Larissa, Gabby, Jenna, Jamie, and I all flit around tidying up the mess.

I finish vacuuming up some spilled popcorn. When I turn off the vacuum cleaner, I find Stella tugging on my shirt.

“Can I look at the photos from when I was a baby?” she asks.

I push my glasses back from where they’ve slid down my nose and force a smile. “Of course you can.”

It’s been our ritual over the last few years to get out the photo album of her as a baby and look through the photos of the day she was born. Rick and me holding her, bringing her home from the hospital.

I find the album for Stella and give it to her.

She settles on the floor, and I perch on the edge of the couch overlooking her.

She opens the album to the first page. It’s a photo of Rick and me holding up a printout of the first sonogram image, both of us beaming.

My heart clenches as I see the happiness on our faces.

I’ve been working hard, and I’ve reached the point where I can think of Rick and not feel the sting of betrayal.

Rick was flawed, like all of us. He made mistakes, but his mistake with Jamie wasn’t the sum of his life or our relationship. I can see that now.

Gabby comes over and stands so she can see the album too.

“I remember taking that photo,” she says.

“Jamie,” Stella calls, turning the page to the next photos.

Jamie wanders over to us, immediately slotting in next to me, leaning his body into mine.

He looks down and sucks in a sharp breath.

The page is now open to a picture of Rick holding Stella the day she was born. He's shirtless on the couch, and Stella's wearing only a nappy so they can do the important skin-to-skin bonding.

It's my favorite-ever photo of Rick. I can't get past the awe on his face as he cradles her.

"That's my papa," Stella says, looking up at Jamie.

Jamie manages to give her a smile. "I can see that. You look a lot like him."

Stella beams proudly. I grab Jamie's hand, giving it a squeeze. He squeezes back.

"Tell the story about how Papa almost dropped me when he first held me," Stella demands.

So I tell my daughter one of the stories that forms part of the narrative of who she is while everyone else smiles and laughs in the right places.

As I tell the story, I keep a tight hold of Jamie's hand.

Chapter 31

Jamie

Eight months later.

“Jamie,” Stella’s voice is a whisper in my ear.
“Mmmm?” I stretch out in the delicious warmth of the bed.

“Jamie, you need to get up.”

I stretch out, automatically reaching for Tim, but his side of the bed is cold and empty.

I open my eyes, blinking blearily. “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s getting ready. We’re going to the beach to see the sunrise!”

I yawn. Living with a family of early risers isn’t fun sometimes. I stumble around the bedroom with half-closed eyes, gathering clothes and trying to remember how to dress.

I stumble out into the kitchen area of the unit, where Tim is putting on his puffer jacket.

“You ready, sleepyhead?” Tim places a kiss on the side of my forehead. I turn to kiss him properly, a soft, lingering press of our mouths against each other.

Tim’s smiling when he pulls away.

“This had better be a spectacular sunrise,” I grumble, and his grin grows wider.

“I’ve sent a special request to the sun for you,” he says.

I’ve left my sneakers outside, so they’re cold as I toe my feet into them.

The three of us are silent as we walk through the empty street to the pathway that leads to the beach. This early, it's completely deserted, such a contrast to yesterday afternoon when we came here to show Stella the miracle of Hot Water Beach. She'd absolutely loved digging her own hot tub in the sand. Well, she hadn't actually done much of the digging herself, but she'd been an active project supervisor as she directed Tim and me on exactly where she wanted us to dig the hole.

It's the first time university and school holidays have aligned and allowed us to get away with Stella, and Tim and I were in total agreement about where to come.

I'm an official student now, training to be a Physical Education teacher. It's challenging, but I'm lucky to have Tim to talk to whenever I need.

I flick a glance at him as the path opens onto the beach. He's got a slight frown on his face, his beanie pulled low over his forehead, cheeks pink from the cold. I feel such a rush of love for him that it almost makes me stumble.

I moved in with him and Stella six months ago when Kelsey left to travel. When I'd offered to pay rent, Tim refused.

"I don't have a mortgage so I don't need you to pay rent. Rick worked hard to set our family up financially. And I think it's right..." He'd swallowed hard before changing tack slightly. "I'm...happy...after everything...that you get to benefit from that too."

These Rick moments happen occasionally, and we talk them through. It's uncomfortable sometimes. I've learned not to flinch from them because every time we've dealt with one, it's just made us closer and our relationship stronger.

I had my own showdown with Rick at the cemetery after I came home, where I stood there and talked to his headstone.

"So, Patrick Beauford, I bet you didn't expect to see me here. But guess what? I found out who you really are." My jaw

tightened and I scuffed my hand over my face, trying to work out exactly what I wanted to say to him.

“You lied to me and treated me like shit.” My voice was ragged, still torn by the hurt I felt every time I thought about Rick and the lies he’d fed me, the lies that had nearly destroyed everything.

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly out of my nose, trying to calm myself before I continued. “But you know what? You taught me what I did and didn’t want in a man, and maybe that’s why I was so attracted to Tim in the first place. His honesty and integrity. So I guess I should be grateful to you, because Tim and Stella are the best things that have ever happened to me.”

I leaned forward to trace the outline of the lettering on his grave. Not his name, but the words underneath. Beloved husband of Tim, father of Stella.

When I spoke again, my voice was calmer, gentler. “I’m going to be the best role model to Stella that I can be. And I’m going to be a PE teacher, because you know what, just because you couldn’t imagine me as a teacher doesn’t mean I won’t make a great one. And it will be another thing Tim and I will have in common.

“I love him so much, and I’m going to continue to love him every day that he’ll let me.”

I think about those words I said to Rick now as we reach the beach and I see how close another day is to dawning.

The sun glints over the horizon and light seeps into the landscape, turning the beach from monochrome gray to a colored version.

The tide is far out, leaving an expanse of wet sand.

Tim grabs my hand as we walk up one of the sandbanks heading toward the water.

There’s something written in the sand below that I can just make out in the growing light.

I blink rapidly, checking my eyes are working properly.

But nothing changes the words written there.

Marry me?

I turn to look at Tim, my eyes wide.

For everything we've discussed in our relationship, we've never talked about marriage. I've thought what happened with Rick would make him gun shy about getting married again, that he'd want us to be boyfriends, partners, but wouldn't be keen on taking that next step.

I shouldn't have underestimated him.

Because the love in his eyes reminds me exactly how beautiful this man's heart is.

"Would you like to become an official part of our family?" he asks.

My eyes blur, and I have to drop Tim's hand to wipe them.

A feeling overtakes my body.

Complete and utter joy.

When I look up, I realize Tim is still waiting for an answer.

"Shit. Yes," I reply.

"Language," Stella tuts reprovably.

I send an apologetic look to Tim because swearing in front of Stella is something we try hard to avoid.

Stella grabs a stick and goes to the words in the sand. She draws a smiley face under them.

"Does the offer stand even though I swore in front of your child?" I say in a low voice.

"Yeah, it definitely still stands."

He kisses me then, his lips cold at first but soon heating up.

He puts a hand up to the side of my face, and we kiss and kiss until I sense through my eyelids that the surrounding sky is lightening.

Then we pull back so we can sit on the cold sand and watch the sunrise together. The ball of orange sets the sky and the ocean alight as well.

There is something about the dawning of a new day that always feels like a miracle.

I feel Tim pressed up by my side, and I can't help thinking about how happy my father would be to see me now, knowing I'm going to have a family of my own.

Stella races back to us across the beach, her sandy hands full of shells.

"Let's go home and have waffles," she says.

Epilogue: Tim

One year later.

It's a sunny Saturday afternoon, and the most beautiful man in the world stands at the altar waiting for me.

Stella skips as she escorts me down the aisle.

I resist the urge to join in her skipping, but it's difficult because skipping honestly feels like the most accurate gait to match the feeling in my heart today.

Jamie's wearing a crisp white tux showcasing his golden skin and looks so breathtakingly handsome as he waits for us.

I keep it dignified for most of the walk up the aisle but can't help my steps speeding up as I near him, so Stella has to quicken her skipping to keep up with me.

I meet Jamie's eyes, and he's laughing, and I laugh too, rays of absolute auditory sunshine, because, oh my god, I'm about to marry this man, the most gorgeous person I've ever met, inside and out.

He crouches to give Stella a hug. "Thanks for delivering your dad safely to me."

My heart squeezes.

I once deluded myself into thinking Rick sent Jamie to me.

When the truth came out, it became the most ludicrous concept on the planet. The idea that Rick would orchestrate his husband meeting and falling in love with his secret lover.

But now, as I watch Jamie crouched down, Stella smiling as she whispers something in his ear while Jamie gives a solemn nod, the concept revives in my head.

What if Rick loved the three of us so much that he was okay for memories of him to be tarnished if it meant we'd all get to be this happy?

It's the most fantastical idea I've ever conjured.

But that's the thing about being the one left behind. I get to spin whatever narrative I want.

However, today isn't about Rick.

It's about Jamie and me.

It's about us standing at the altar, gazes locked, as we pledge to honor and love each other above all others for the rest of our lives.

It's about the official photos, where Jamie and I have our arms around each other, grinning goofily like the lovestruck fools we are, while the photographer clicks away and Stella does cartwheels on the lawn in the background.

It's about the speeches, where we get to tell our story, a story that includes Hot Water Beach, soccer games, curried egg sandwiches, and two damaged hearts somehow finding a way to repair together.

After the speeches, the party starts in earnest.

Members of the Rainbow Rascals soccer team, Southlake High staff, Jamie's friends from university, and my family mingle. This is what a wedding party should be. Us surrounded by all the people in our lives that we care for.

Jamie and I circulate among the guests. When we get to our soccer team, Scott makes a big deal of scanning Jamie and me up and down.

"I'm trying to see where they've attached the ball and chain," he says.

"We're saving the chains for our wedding night," Jamie replies with a wink, and Scott rolls his eyes.

Declan and Seb both laugh as well.

I run my thumb over my wedding ring. I've been doing it almost constantly since Jamie slid it on during our vows.

It's shiny and solid and feels so right on my hand. I can't help thinking about all the different mate-choice displays in the animal kingdom. For humans, exchanging wedding rings is one of our rituals, going back to ancient Egyptians who exchanged rings made from braided reeds and hemp. It's a simple band to convey a simple yet important message. I am Jamie's. He is mine.

Seb's phone beeps, and his laughter trails off as he opens the message. His face drains of color.

He abruptly stands. "I'm so sorry. I've got to go."

Jamie frowns. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, it will be," he says. We all watch as he cuts his way through the crowd in the reception room, his stride urgent.

"Whoever knew a university professor could be such a man of mystery," Declan says.

I don't have much chance to contemplate Seb's abrupt departure because Jenna's tapping me on the shoulder.

"It's time for your first dance," she says.

I glance at Jamie, and he grins back at me.

"So, husband, would you like to dance?" he asks.

"Yes, husband, I would very much like to dance," I reply.

Jenna crosses to talk to the band, who immediately changes from the generic background music into the first chords of "You Raise me Up" by Josh Groban.

And I press my body into Jamie's, letting him guide me around the dance floor.

"That's some excellent dancing skills you've got going on, husband," I say.

"You're not too bad yourself, husband," Jamie replies.

"Are we ever going to get sick of this joke?" I ask.

His eyes twinkle as he grins at me. “Maybe in about twenty years.”

“We’re going to annoy a lot of people with it in the meantime.”

He leans forward, his breath hot in my ear. “I don’t care.”

We dance together and then with other people as they join us on the dance floor. Jamie dances with Stella and then my mother.

I dance with Larissa and my nieces and even convince Gabby to come for a twirl.

She’s stiff in my arms to start with but relaxes as the song progresses.

“I think we danced together at your last wedding too,” she says.

My breath hitches. “Yes, I think we did.”

And we are both silent for a moment, remembering.

“I was watching the ceremony today trying to imagine what Rick would say if he could see it,” she says eventually.

I huff a laugh. “If the afterlife exists, and he hasn’t been paying attention to what’s happening on earth, and he glanced down today, he might have had one hell of a shock.”

“I think he would have liked the fact you’re both so happy,” she says softly.

There are a few heartbeats of silence between us.

“I like to think that too,” I reply.

Suddenly a hand taps Gabby on the shoulder.

“Can I reclaim my husband?” Jamie asks.

Gabby steps back. “He’s all yours.”

Jamie gives me a bright smile as I turn to him.

“Do you want to come and see the stars with me?” he asks.

“Of course.”

Jamie's hand is warm in mine as we slip through the crowd of our friends and family to the deck, which gives us a great view of the night sky. The stars are twinkling and bright against the black canvas of the sky.

I pull Jamie into my arms and kiss him, which is as dazzling as any star.

Then my new husband and I stand cuddled together as we admire the immense splendor of the heavens.

We may only be two tiny dots in the scale of the cosmos, small and insignificant in the vastness of space and time.

But we are incredibly significant to each other.

And that is more than enough for me.

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A note from Jax:

Thanks for reading Jamie and Tim's story. I really hope you enjoyed it.

After writing this story I got slightly obsessed with the idea of what Rick would have thought of Jamie and Tim's relationship, so I played around with this idea in a bonus epilogue called 'The Dream'. It's written from Rick's perspective and also gives glimpses into Jamie and Tim's happily-ever-after.

It's available for free to my newsletter subscribers. If you already subscribe to my newsletter you can download it [here](#).

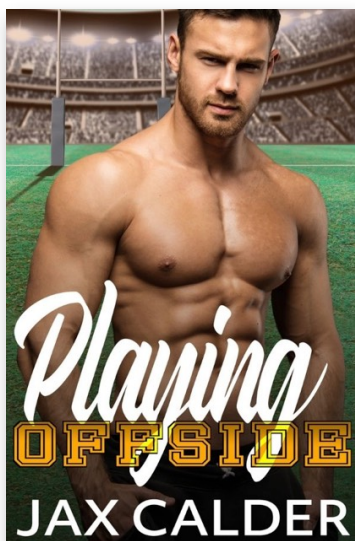
If you want to join up to my newsletter to read this scene (plus get access to all my other exclusive bonus stories and scenes) you can subscribe either via my [website](#) or [Bookfunnel](#).

* * *

If you feel like something light and fluffy after reading this, don't miss my novella [The Anonymous Hookup](#), which gives you Lane and Sam's story. It's a fun and steamy story full of happy coincidences that might leave you believing in the concept of fate.

Also by Jax Calder

[Playing Offside: A Rivals to Lovers Sports Romance](#)



Aiden Jones, aka the Ice King, is one of the best rugby players in the world. And he's not about to surrender his starting spot in the New Zealand squad to Tyler Bannings, the cocky loudmouth who just joined the training squad. But when they end up rooming together at training camp, the heat between them threatens to melt even the Ice King. Now Aiden's falling for the same guy who's plotting to take his spot. But all's fair in love and sport, right?

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or Buy NOW](#)

[Playing at Home: A MM Manny Romance](#)

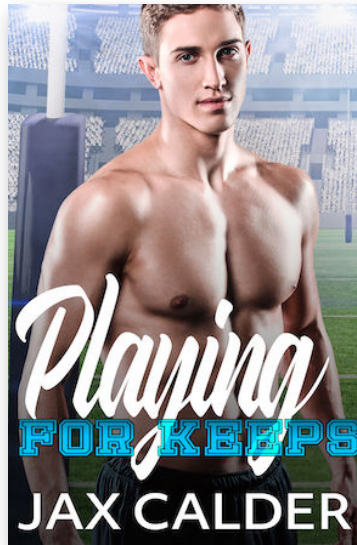


Jacob Browne has never lived up to being the heroic idol his father was on the rugby field. And now he's failed off the field as well with the breakdown of his marriage. When his ex-wife hires a manny, it feels like the ultimate kick in the guts that another guy gets to spend more time with his kids than he does.

But when he actually meets Austin, the connection that grows between them forces Jacob to reconsider what it truly means to be a hero.

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or Buy NOW](#)

[Playing for Keeps: A Friends-to-Lovers Sports Romance](#)



Falling for your former best friend? Never a good idea.

Luke Hunter has returned to New Zealand, determined to make the national team. So what if one of his new teammates is the person who shredded his heart? Luke's moved past that, and he's happy now. There is no way he's falling back under Ethan's spell.

But it turns out no matter how good you are at evading the opposition, there's one thing you can never escape—and that's the love of your life.

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or Buy NOW](#)

The Other Brother: A YA/New Adult MM Romance



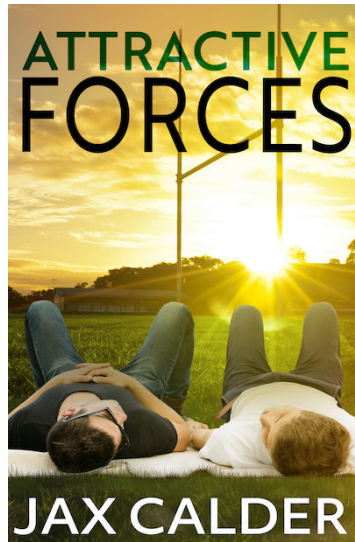
Ryan has had seventeen years of being compared to Cody, part of his toxic fractured family, so you'll forgive him for some epic eye-rolling when it comes to Mr Perfect. Although not related to him by blood, Cody has always been annoying background noise in Ryan's life.

One summer changes everything. It's the summer when circumstances collide, and they end up spending time together at Cody's family's beach house. It's the summer they become friends. And then more than friends.

But can their relationship survive when summer ends?

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or Buy NOW](#)

[Attractive Forces: A Nerd/Jock YA/New Adult Romance](#)



Everyone thinks I rule Heath Valley High School. All they see is the captain of the champion rugby team, the guy who has everything.

But I have a secret I'll do anything to keep.

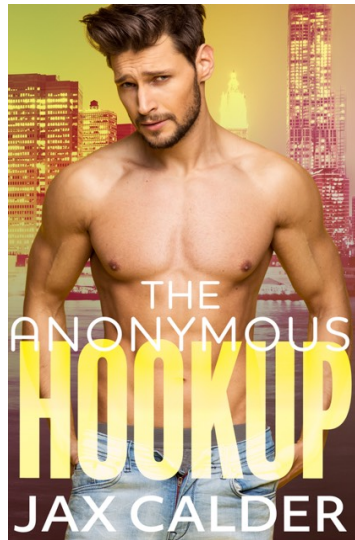
I've never stopped to think about what it costs me to keep my sexuality buried.

Until I need a chemistry tutor, and Jake Stenton waltzes into my life.

But is the attraction between Jake and me more powerful than the external forces trying to rip us apart?

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or BUY NOW](#)

[The Anonymous Hookup: A Heart-warming MM Novella](#)



I've never been a strings-free sex type of guy, but when my best friend encourages me to have my first ever anonymous hookup, I figure, why not? One night of steamy sex with a stranger and then I'll focus back on recovering from my toxic break-up.

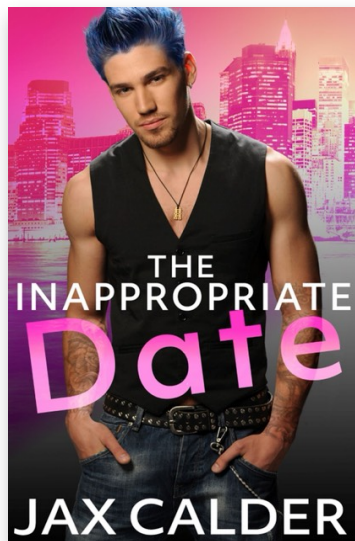
Only I'm not prepared for how incredibly hot the sex is.

Nor am I prepared to run into him again.

Because it turns out my anonymous hookup might not be so anonymous after all...

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or BUY NOW](#)

[The Inappropriate Date: A Heart-warming Short M/M Novella](#)



Hunter has always been a good son. Unfortunately, his mother struggles to handle the fact he's bisexual. When she warns him not to bring someone inappropriate to his sister's wedding, Hunter decides to find the most inappropriate date possible.

Blue Hair. Tattoos. Most definitely male. There's more chance his mother will learn to moonwalk than approve of Adam as his date. But appearances can be deceiving.

And Hunter is about to learn this lesson along with the rest of his family...

[Read on Kindle Unlimited or Buy NOW](#)

About the Author

Jax's stories are all about light-hearted conversations and deeply-felt connections. She lives in New Zealand with her family and a wide assortment of animals. She's a rabid sports fan, a hiking enthusiast and has a slightly unhealthy addiction to nature documentaries. She is also a massive fan of M/M romance and enjoys both reading and writing it.

Jax is an extrovert living a writers' introverted life where she spends WAY too much time in her own head, so she'd love to hear from you in whatever way you want to connect with her:

You can hang out on Facebook in her authors group Jax's Crew...

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/jaxcaldercrew/>

Or follow her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [BookBub](#) or [Goodreads](#)

And don't forget to sign up to her newsletter via [BookFunnel](#) or her website www.jaxcalder.com/newsletter

Also, feel free to email her at any time, she'll always respond: jax@jaxcalder.com