

ROSALIND JAMES

A RUGBY ROMANCE

A circular arrangement of black silhouettes of rugby players in various poses, including running, kicking, and tackling, positioned around the text 'A RUGBY ROMANCE'.

just FOR ME

ESCAPE TO NEW ZEALAND: BOOK FIFTEEN

JUST FOR ME

ESCAPE TO NEW ZEALAND, BOOK 15

ROSALIND JAMES

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Luke Armstrong doesn't want to be a pioneer or an inspiration. He just wants to be a prop.

What's it like to be the first All Black to come out while he's still playing rugby? Luke has spent over thirty years not wanting to find out, but hiding has become so hard. He's a man who doesn't get tired, but now, he's soul-weary.

Hayden Allen knows that if you keep that smile on your face, they won't know they've hurt you. Never let them see you sweat, that's his motto. What happens, though, when everything you've never realized you needed shows up bang in front of you?

Every man has his limits. And even the strongest man can fall.

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Explore More

A Kiwi Glossary

Also by Rosalind James

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Blues, Crusaders, Highlanders, All Blacks, Racing 92, and other teams mentioned in this story are actual rugby teams, and New Zealand is a genuinely beautiful place full of wonderful people. However, this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ESCAPE TO NEW ZEALAND:
PAST CHARACTERS
APPEARING IN THIS BOOK

Marko Sendoa, Nyree Morgan. JUST SAY (HELL) NO (Bk 11). Marko is a blindside flanker (No. 6) for the Auckland Blues and the All Blacks; Nyree is a painter.

Rhys (Drago) Fletcher, Zora Fletcher. JUST COME OVER (Bk 12). Rhys is the coach of the Auckland Blues and a former All Black (flanker); Zora is a florist who was married to Rhys's late brother. She is also Hayden Allen's sister. Zora has one son, Isaiah Fletcher; Rhys has one daughter, Casey Fletcher.

Kane Armstrong, Victoria Gibson. JUST SAY CHRISTMAS (Bk 13). Kane is a lock for the Canterbury Crusaders (and Luke's brother); Victoria is a prosecutor in Auckland (and Nyree's closest friend).

Grant Armstrong, Miriama Armstrong. JUST SAY CHRISTMAS (Bk 13). Grant is the former coach of the Otago Highlanders and Luke and Kane's father; Miriama is Nyree's mother.

*Carefully consider, what prevents you from living the way you
want to live your life?*

- The Dalai Lama

NOWHERE TO RUN

THERE'S no elegant way to walk out on somebody with an enormous striped ginger cat in your arms. Unfortunately, Hayden Allen only realized that later.

He hadn't been able to wait for the lift. Instead, he walked fast up the stairs of the flash Wynward Quarter apartments and knocked at the door, feeling the excitement rise in him like bubbles in a glass of champagne. It wasn't tickets to Tahiti, but maybe it was even better, because it was personal. Anyway, it was too soon for anything like that. He knew it was too soon. Two and a half months—too soon.

He couldn't help it, though. He had a hopeful heart. Broken too many times, but he kept coming back for more. This time, though ... this felt like it could be the real thing.

He stood in front of the apartment door and willed his heart to slow, shifting the cat in his arms, because the thing must weigh about ten kG and was carrying around another half its weight in fur. Maybe this was a stupid idea.

Harden up. It was a brilliant idea. You just have to execute. Get out of your comfort zone and take a leap. He rang the bell. And waited.

And waited.

Julian had said he'd be staying home tonight when Hayden had mentioned he'd be working late. The plan had seemed perfect.

Wait. Obviously, Julian wouldn't come to the door if he wasn't expecting anybody. But he didn't always lock the door,

did he? Should he check?

Julian could be mercurial, especially lately. One day loving and affectionate, the next distant. Hayden had thought, *Give him space. It's a lot. It feels like a lot to you, too.* Now, he tried the handle. Unlocked. Still, he hesitated. Was that too much, walking in?

Not with a gift, surely.

He pushed the heavy door open. He'd been right, he realized with outsized relief. There was music coming from the speakers in the lounge, the sultry, bluesy stuff Julian favored when he was relaxed—or randy—and the smell of something delicious wafting in from the open ranch sliders.

It was going to be all right. It was going to be *better* than all right.

He kicked off his shoes with some difficulty—no hands—and headed out there, noticing the bottle of wine in the ice bucket on the kitchen bench along the way. Dinner and wine? That worked.

Julian was on the balcony, facing away from Hayden, dressed in shorts and T-shirt as usual, his lean body elegant even while tending to the oversized barbecue that was among his prize possessions, or, as he would say, “The one thing New Zealand does well, other than sheep, sailing, beaches, and a casual dress code.” A pristine white yacht pulled out of its slip in Viaduct Harbour below, the sky was the serene blue of late spring, the drifting white clouds were reflected in the water that slapped against the quays, and the scent of grilling meat made Hayden’s mouth water. As did the glass of white wine at Julian’s elbow.

Julian had the best nose for wine Hayden had ever seen—and he used it. He could polish off a bottle by himself and only become sharper, his wit more cutting. Taste too sophisticated for Auckland, maybe, which made sense, because he was British. British, with a glamorous flat, a glamorous boat, a glamorous life, a way of looking down his aristocratic nose that thrilled Hayden ridiculously, a thorough knowledge of music, the ability to order the best food in three languages, a

case full of classic books that he'd actually read, and the quickness of brain to converse wittily about all of it.

Jane Austen's version of an accomplished lady, in fact.

A plate of scallops breaded with dukkah waited on the metal benchtop, ready to be grilled at the last minute, but it was the paper packet with its white label that caught Hayden's eye. First Light wagyu beef tenderloin, and the sizzle of the filets on the steel was making his mouth water. That and the asparagus ready to go onto the barbecue with the scallops.

He was already tapping Julian on the shoulder when it registered. Scallops and First Light wagyu? To eat dinner at home? Alone?

Julian had excellent taste, though. Excellent, expensive taste.

Julian turned with a smile that lit up his electric-blue eyes, the chiseled cheekbones and the shine of his blonde hair, as always, making Hayden's heart beat faster. And then the smile left his face as if it had never existed. "Hayden. Dear boy. This is a surprise. Thought you were working late. Did you text me?"

"Wanted to surprise you." Hayden shifted the cat in his arms. The ginger tabby had been purring all along, and now, he decided to vocalize. The sound that had charmed Hayden at the shelter, full of chirps and varied tones. "With this," Hayden added. "Cat. For you. Like you wanted."

Julian stared at the animal, then said, "It's not the best time. I've got friends coming, as you said you were working. How about tomorrow instead?"

"Oh." Hayden was aware of the cat's weight, dragging at him. The thing was still talking, probably about scallops. Hayden hadn't had dinner yet—he hadn't even thought of it—and his stomach was telling him it was past seven-thirty. He was starved, in fact, and he didn't know when you fed cats. What if he was starving the cat, too? He had a bag of food in the car. Should he go get it? Clearly not.

He'd been right. It was too soon. Too much, and too soon. He'd been stupid.

“Babe?”

The sound came from behind them. From inside those ranch sliders.

It was one of those moments frozen in amber. Hayden turned, feeling like his head weighed twenty kilograms, and saw him. Tall, muscular, and fit as hell. Crisp dark hair, brown eyes, drop-dead handsome.

Hayden recognized him. First, because he was an actor on *Courtney Place*, New Zealand's favorite soap. Well, New Zealand's only soap, but who was counting. And second, because he was Julian's ex, whose photo Julian had shown him early on, telling him how he'd burnt the physical copy and broken the frame for good measure. “Burnt the deep-blue cashmere/merino/silk jumper he bought me, too, the one that matched my eyes, and sold the skis, which was all mad,” he'd told Hayden. “But, heigh-ho, you know I have to have my drama, and I didn't want any reminders of the possible love of my life. Totally forgetting about the glory of that fabric blend, of course. The skis, now, I could live without. So much effort. He was such a materialistic boy, though, and to be brutally honest, there wasn't much happening under the looks. Whereas *you*, my darling, are all about what's real, aren't you? A wee bit earnest and boringly sincere, maybe, under *your* lovely looks, but then, you *are* a Kiwi.”

“You didn't have to hang onto the reminders,” Hayden had said, pulling him close and ignoring the brittleness. “I'm here now, and I'm real. *And* boringly sincere.”

He was real, all right. Really stupid. All he could say was, “What? Oh. Are you—”

The bloke put an arm around Julian. “Mmm, lovely steaks. You *said* you had a surprise.” He yawned and added, “Lovely nap, too,” then asked Hayden, “I don't know you, do I? Trevor Makiri-Jones. Julian's partner.” He eyed the animal in Hayden's arms. “D'you always travel with a cat? Odd.”

“But I’m—” Hayden started to say as the cold enveloped him.

Julian said, “I can explain.”

Trevor said, “Explain what?”

Hayden said, through the buzzing in his head, “I don’t know. That he’s been cheating on me? What’s the explanation for that?”

Julian didn’t say the “explaining” thing again, or maybe he’d never said it to Hayden, because he told Trevor, “We were taking a break, or that’s what you say now. What it *really* was, though, was breaking up. How did I know that you wouldn’t be bugging off again this time? That *is* your pattern, do admit.”

“Wait.” There was ice where Hayden’s blood should be, and more of that prickling buzz. In his arms. In his hands. He could still feel the cat, but that was the only thing anchoring him here. “You weren’t cheating on me. You were cheating on *him*. We’ve been together two and a half months,” he told Trevor. “It wasn’t a fling.”

I brought him a cat, he wanted to say, but that was stupid. Everybody could see the cat.

“So you see, I wasn’t cheating on you,” Julian told Trevor, still ignoring Hayden. “We were on a break. As noted.”

“Not three weeks ago, we weren’t,” Trevor said. “That’s not a bloody break, that’s overlap. And I’m sorry, but what the hell is the story with the cat?” He sneezed into his shoulder, then did it again. “I’m allergic, and I’m on the call sheet for tomorrow. Can’t be dashing and dangerous with a red nose, can I? Also, I clearly need to be breaking up, or at least having a fight, and whoever you are, toy boy, you’re in the way. Two and a half months isn’t a relationship. It’s a fling. Sorry. You’ve been flung.”

“No!” Julian said. “Don’t go.” Again, not to Hayden. “Give it a minute. Let’s discuss. And then make up, because you know you’ll want to make up. If it weren’t for breaking up

and making up, we'd have no relationship at all. That's our spice, and you know it."

Hayden wanted to make a statement. A declaration. A denouncement, possibly. His vision was blurring, though, and he was drowning. He could never get angry at the right time. Why couldn't he get angry? All he felt was humiliation. He said, forcing the words past the tightness in his throat, "Apparently I just got myself a cat. Either that, or it's back to the shelter with him, but he's an awesome cat. I'm pretty awesome, too. You're missing out on me."

"I'm sorry," Julian said, not sounding nearly sorry enough. "But I told you—Trevor's the love of my life. Look at him. Look at his *life*, then look at yours."

"I'm a lawyer," Hayden said, hearing how stupid it sounded.

"Looking at contracts for people with actual money? Really too dull for words, darling. And I meant an *elegant* cat, maybe a temperamental Siamese with some suggestion of pedigree, not some stripey ginger you got from the SPCA. You're so middle class. Such a striver. Which is lovely, of course, but not for me. Stay," he told Trevor. "I've made this fab dinner. Stay and eat it with me, and we'll talk it out. I was vulnerable. I was *hurting*. You know how I am."

No graceful exit, then, just a walk back down the stairs, because there was a couple at the lift—holding hands, then coming close for a kiss—and Hayden couldn't be around happy people tonight.

He got back to his car somehow, even though he couldn't even remember which floor of the garage he'd left it on and had to walk all the way around three floors searching for it, pressing the button on his key and trying not to panic. When he recognized it at last, he had to lean against it for a minute. His boring, middle-class, silver Mitsubishi sedan, which he'd bought used, because new-car prices in New Zealand were mad. He wasn't even a striver. He was just ...

Dull, apparently. He'd never thought he was dull. Was he hopelessly, pitifully mistaken?

No. You're not. You can't be. It's him, not you. Are you basing your self-esteem on the opinions of cheating Poms now? And their shallow soap-star boyfriends?

The pep talk wasn't working.

An older woman stopped and asked, "All right?"

"What?" He stood up again. "I—I'm fine. Sorry. Fine."

"You're white as a sheet, love," she said. "Sweating as well. Having any chest pain?"

Yes, he wanted to say. "No," he said. "Thanks." And opened the car door.

He didn't have a cat carrier, so he put the cat on the passenger seat. This morning, he'd had a partner and no cat. Now, he had a cat and no partner, and he was so hungry, he was lightheaded with it. Or maybe that was grief. He couldn't even tell what he was feeling.

He laid his head against the steering wheel and breathed. In and out. In and out. Hoping the woman had left, and that she wasn't ringing the ambos at this moment. *That* would be embarrassing. What would you say? "Sorry, not dying, just heartbroken again?" Half of him wanted to laugh at the idea.

Not like it hasn't happened before, he told himself. But where some men grew calluses, it felt like he lost a layer of skin every time, and now, every nerve was exposed and screaming.

He'd been so *stupid*. And he wasn't somebody anyone could love.

Stop it, he tried to tell himself. *It's a bump. That doesn't mean it's you. Maybe you should ring the ambos. Always one hot one, with ambos.*

It didn't feel like a bump, though. It felt like a hole ripped straight through his heart. Like he couldn't do this anymore.

He felt a soft tap on his face and turned his head. The cat was standing on the center console on his hind legs, one snow-white paw on Hayden's shoulder, the other tapping at his cheek.

“Reckon it’s you and me, George,” he told the cat. He didn’t know where “George” had come from. It just had. “Two blokes with nowhere to go.” His throat closed at the thought, but he kept talking. That was what he had. Talking, and being funny. He’d be funny again. He had to be. “Guess we’re going there together.”

LUKE ARMSTRONG WOKE UP HURTING.

Yes, it was Monday morning, and yes, he’d played a rugby match last night, and yes, he was a prop, which meant his job was as much about collisions as any demolition derby driver—or any demolition derby *car*—which meant he always hurt.

This hurt was different, though.

He rolled out of bed and stood up, forcing himself to feel his bare feet planted on the floor, to look out the window and take in the day. The rooftops of Paris were shrouded by drizzle this morning, the beads of moisture collecting on the glass, the swallows that swooped in acrobatic flight during the long summer evenings long departed for North Africa in search of warmth.

Luke knew how they felt. He wasn’t relishing being out there himself today.

He made his way over the ancient floorboards to the bathroom with its black-and-white tile, ducking his head through the low doorway. Five minutes later, after sluicing his head with cold water and then doing it again when the first time didn’t work, he was in the kitchen making coffee and cooking a pan of eggs to fuel him for the trek to the practice facility. The hardest journey of the week, when every cell of your body was screaming for rest.

He’d been playing rugby almost as long as he could remember, and he was used to hurting, used to going on when he didn’t think he could. That was his world. That was his life. So that wasn’t why he was still standing here, staring in the

mirror at red-rimmed eyes. It was because ... he couldn't do this anymore.

Thirty minutes until he had to be out the door. He downed a couple of paracetamol, washed them down with two glasses of water, pulled on track pants, then opened the refrigerator, hauled out the seven bottles of strong, dark *Bière de Noël* that remained there, opened the tops one at a time, and poured them down the sink, watching the liquid gurgle away in a foaming chocolate river.

So he'd broken up, or, rather, been broken up with. It had been more than two months, and it was time to quit wallowing. Time to either choose to be alone, or start the whole cautious process of finding somebody again. Always careful. Always hiding.

He could be lonely, though. He could be in pain. He knew how to be both of those things. He'd had practice.

What he couldn't be was pathetic, and drinking alone was pathetic. Drinking was starting to feel pathetic, full stop.

Eggs. Toast. Coffee—too much of it. Trainers. Jacket. Checking his bag by rote for the mouthguards and gear that would be there, because they were always there, because he always cleaned and packed them the night before. Even when he'd been drinking ... much too much. Out the door and down the stairs, worn in the center by the passage of centuries of feet, and out into the courtyard, his legs like lead. He'd feel better once he'd got stuck in with the boys, and better than that once he went for some physio.

Or at least he'd know he hurt. Lately, he was beginning to go numb. He could play rugby hurt. He didn't know how to play it numb.

He was halfway to the practice facility when it hit him. He had to pull off into a side street, through the mad traffic, and sit, after a hasty check of his watch. He had eighteen minutes. Three minutes to work through this. Four at the outside.

His stepsister Nyree was getting married in less than three weeks, and he'd made no plans to be there, just gone along in

this ... fog. She was marrying Marko Sendoa, though, which meant that Luke's father, Grant Armstrong, would be filthy. It was no secret that Grant loathed Marko, or that the feeling was mutual, despite Marko having played for him for years. Marko was playing for the Blues now, and that would've made Grant even filthier. Luke knew all about that. He'd left the Highlanders himself twelve years ago so he wouldn't have to play for his father anymore.

He couldn't leave Nyree to face Grant alone. Not at her wedding.

He couldn't go on like this.

He couldn't keep running. He'd run to Christchurch to play for the Crusaders. When that hadn't been far enough, he'd run to Racing 92, all the way to Paris. Nearly ten years ago, and what was he doing? Still running.

Nowhere to run anymore. He'd run out of world, and he'd run out of excuses.

Time to turn and fight.

NOWHERE TO HIDE

IT'S NOT every day you meet the man of your dreams while painting bunnies.

Hayden wasn't actually painting bunnies, of course. It just sounded funnier. He didn't have the skills for bunnies, according to Nyree Morgan, the artist who was transforming this formerly white-walled bedroom on Auckland's Scenic Drive into a little-girl version of a magical wonderland for the benefit of one Casey Fletcher, Hayden's newly-discovered niece-once-removed and the reason he'd taken the day off work to help.

It was all hands on deck, because Nyree was meant to be marrying Marko Sendoa on Sunday, which was exactly four days from now, and she'd gone overboard in her enthusiasm for this bloody mural, which Casey apparently absolutely needed for her first Christmas with her new family. Casey was about to be Hayden's step-niece, and his sister Zora's problem was Hayden's problem, because there was no other way his life worked.

Also, Nyree was pregnant, in addition to the imminent-bride thing, and her energy apparently didn't match her enthusiasm anymore. So he was helping.

He was a good brother, and a good uncle. He hoped. He'd been there for Zora and her son Isaiah at their hardest times, and Zora'd been there for his. Zora didn't need him that way anymore, though, because she had Casey's dad, Rhys. Zora had found a way to get loved back.

Hayden? Not so much, other than George the marmalade cat. But he was here for Zora anyway. Old habits died hard.

All he was really doing, of course, was painting the blades of grass *around* some bunnies. Blades that Nyree had helpfully pre-drawn onto the wall with colored pencils, so he'd know which shade. It was paint by numbers, was what it was. Artistically, Hayden was apparently eight years old.

He was thinking about all that, because you had to think about something when you were sitting on the floor painting blades of grass, and bunnies and little girls were a better spot than most. Besides, Nyree was concentrating too fiercely for conversation.

He wasn't the only one helping today. There was some New Zealand rugby talent around that, as always, made Hayden feel seriously undersized, not to mention desperately unfit, including Nyree's enormous stepbrother, Kane Armstrong. Kane played for the Crusaders, and Rhys Fletcher, the owner of this bedroom, was the coach of the Blues, but love conquered all, apparently. Especially as Nyree's own stepfather, and Kane's father, was the former coach of the Highlanders, which meant that three of the five New Zealand Super Rugby teams were more-or-less represented here today.

Of course, Grant Armstrong hated Nyree's fiancé, Marko Sendoa, and vice versa. On the other hand, Rhys Fletcher, the aforementioned homeowner, was Marko's coach now—and Hayden's soon-to-be-brother-in-law—so ... here Nyree was. Here Hayden was. Here they all were.

It was all very incestuous and tortured, before you even got into the fact that Zora was *also* marrying her late husband's brother, who'd *also* been a rugby player. New Zealand was a small country, but not *this* small.

He was thinking that, and then he wasn't. Somebody else had walked into the room, somebody big and stolid and unsmiling and *still*, and Nyree was talking.

“Everybody who doesn't know him—wait, the rugby boys will know him, obviously, so it's only Hayden—this is Luke. Armstrong. My brother. Well, stepbrother. Son of my stepdad,

again obviously, but we can't hold Grant Armstrong against anybody, or I'd have to hate Marko, since he played for him for yonks. Also my mother."

"And you'd have to hate me," Kane said. "I played for him myself, *and* was raised by him. That's exposure. Hi, Luke. Sorry I didn't ring you yesterday. I was—"

"Yeh," Nyree said, a little absently, since she'd begun to paint what seemed to be a fairy riding a bird, sketching in a pointed chin, a wide forehead, with a few swift strokes. Nyree could make anything have a personality. "But you're both OK anyway despite the parentage. I'd give you a cuddle, Luke, but I'm too painty. Do my trees over there on the other wall, please, since you actually have talent."

"Oi," Kane said mildly, because Kane said most things mildly. Hulking as he was—Hayden didn't think he could count as high as Kane was tall, and at this moment, he was painting clouds onto the ceiling without a ladder—Kane didn't radiate much but good humor off the pitch.

Unlike Luke. Hayden couldn't get a read. He could get gooseflesh, though, and it was happening.

He wasn't attracted to rugby players, possibly because rugby players weren't attracted to him, and he refused to be that needy.

Normally.

No.

"Well, he does," Nyree said, painting in the suggestion of feathers on the bird's blue wings. "He's got fingers like sausages and knuckles like ping-pong balls, but he used to draw wicked cartoons of our weird family to make me laugh when I was an awkward teen, with the specs and the brace on my teeth and all. Oh—Luke, Hayden." She jerked her chin in Hayden's direction and kept painting her bird. "Zora's brother. Lawyer. Luke's a rugby player."

"You could say that," Kane said.

Hayden couldn't just sit here cross-legged and stare at the bloke like the dimmest lawyer ever to be admitted to the roll

of barristers, could he? “Why could you say that?” he asked.

“Plays for Racing 92,” Nyree said. “Paris. Tighthead prop. That’s the front row. Also captain for England for the internationals. Here for the wedding, and missing two matches for it. That’s loyalty, eh.”

“Captain the last two seasons, that’s all,” Luke said, the first time he’d opened his mouth. “Doesn’t mean I will be again.”

“Right,” Nyree said. “After you won the Six Nations last year? The European Championship,” she told Hayden.

“Excuse me,” he said. “That much rugby knowledge, I have. I’m Zora’s brother, remember? I also know that a prop’s in the front row, thank you very much. I *am* a Kiwi.”

Luke wasn’t looking at Hayden, and he seemed not even to have heard him. Had he been that obvious? Please, no. Luke was looking away, though, so probably yes. In fact, he picked up a brush and began studying the outline of trees that Nyree had sketched onto the end wall as if they fascinated him. One mangled, deeply cauliflowered ear was glowing red, though, and the color was creeping up the back of his thick neck, too, all the way to the edge of his close-cropped dark hair.

Oh, bloody hell. He *had* noticed. Hayden wanted to laugh, it was so squirm-worthy. On the other hand, he was also pathetic, so maybe not so much on the laughing.

Luke was the size of a boulder. He was the size of a *tank*. His voice seemed to come from all the way from his barrel of a chest, quiet and deep and powerful as the waters of the Waiau River, born in the harshness of the Southern Alps and flowing to join some of the coldest waters in the world.

At least that was how he seemed to Hayden, and he couldn’t get his breath, even though, yes—pathetic. Luke’s thighs were the size of tree trunks, his forearms corded with muscle and sinew. His nose had been broken much more than once, and he had a scar over one eye, another on his cheek, and, Hayden was sure, heaps more under his neatly-trimmed scruff of dark beard. Even his *hands* looked strong, and

Hayden knew they would be. A prop's job was to hang onto his man in the front row of the scrum and push against the opposite line like a freight train. A prop didn't do any kicking, and he almost never carried the ball. All the guts and none of the glory, but when he tackled a man, that man went down.

Hayden kept painting grass, wishing that his usual cheerful line of chat hadn't deserted him, that his body wasn't tingling, that his very scalp wasn't prickling. He hoped nobody was watching. He hoped nobody could see.

"And I don't know whether I'm meant to say," Nyree went on, painting furiously but precisely on her bird, "but the secret's out to half the New Zealand rugby world since Luke turned up unexpectedly at our hen-and-stag night and spilled it, and anyway, secrets block my painting chi. Last chance to stop me, Luke. Three, two, one—everybody, Luke's gay. If you wanted to tell Kane privately, sorry and all that. But you're not here for long, and you never tell anybody anything, and he needs to know now, I reckon, so he has time to absorb before you leave again. Come to think of it, the gay thing is probably *why* you never tell anybody anything, and why you never stay long, either. How have you kept that secret? Why haven't you told us before?"

Everybody stopped painting. Everybody but Nyree, that is, who'd moved on to another bird, this one clutching a tiny envelope in its talon.

"I ..." Luke said, then stopped. "I don't know what you want me to say. That I told my oldest mate the other night and it got so awkward that I had to leave his house, and he doesn't know how to be my mate anymore? That I know more of that's coming my way? I knew it wouldn't be easy. I knew not everybody would accept it. And I said it anyway, so here I am. Out."

Hayden couldn't be silent anymore. "You tell yourself," he said quietly, "that it's practice for the tough ones, but it turns out they're all tough ones. And if you're a rugby player ..."

Luke didn't answer. He said, "Right. Trees. Painting." And then stood there and didn't, until he turned around again and

looked. Not at Hayden, and not at Nyree, who wasn't painting anymore, either. He looked at Kane.

His brother.

Kane said, "I'm sorry, bro. I didn't know that was what you wanted to talk to me about. So you wouldn't have to say it in front of everybody."

"Yeh," Luke said, and that was all. The moment stretched out, and Nyree said something, but Hayden wasn't listening. He was watching Luke. And Luke was still watching Kane.

Hayden knew about your sibling who was there for you when your parents weren't. He knew how much it mattered. He held his breath and thought, *Please. Say the right thing. Nobody deserves to be hurt like this.*

"I don't know what to say here," Kane finally said. "What the ... the protocol is." Which didn't sound good.

"There's no protocol," Hayden said, because somebody had to say it, and he was the one who knew how. "There's just telling the truth, and asking for the truth. It's what you don't say that puts up the barricades, and it's too hard to get over those barricades."

Kane said, "Then I guess ... it's that I can't see you any differently. Still my brother, aren't you. Still the one who taught me how to be a man. Maybe a decent man. The only one who taught me that."

Luke's ears were redder than ever now, and he stared at his brother, mute, like he couldn't believe it. Like he couldn't hope for it.

Kane went on, still slowly, "That's why you never stick around. It's why you went to France, and why you stayed there. Why it felt like you didn't want to ... to know me anymore. I thought it was like Mum and Dad. That we weren't meant to share, or to say. That we were meant to be OK alone. Strong, like they said."

Luke said, "I didn't ... I couldn't ..." And stopped. He was still holding the paintbrush, but his hand was shaking. He looked at it as if he couldn't believe it, then put his hand out.

For support, maybe, but his hand must have touched wet paint, because it jerked back, and he said, “Sorry, Nyree. I didn’t ...”

His legs were shaking now, too. He crouched down, dropping the brush, and put a hand over his eyes. His body turned away. Hiding.

Hayden knew about hiding.

Nyree was there, then, her movements quicksilver. Crouched beside him, her pregnant belly against his side, her arms around him. “You’re my brother,” she said. “And I love you. Nothing will ever change that. *Ever.*”

Luke’s entire body was shaking now, and he must be crying, but he was still hiding his face, so Hayden couldn’t see. Hayden would bet that he hadn’t cried for years. For decades. Now, he couldn’t help it, because when that dam broke, there was no holding back.

Kane was there now, too, though, on Luke’s other side. Holding on. Saying, “Bro. It’s OK. I love you. I always will.”

Hayden had his own problems expressing emotion, possibly. Which was why he normally didn’t.

He cried a little anyway.

Well, it was a touching moment.

COLD AS THE RIVER TYNE

LUKE COULDN'T BELIEVE he was crying.

He didn't cry. He. Did. Not. Cry. He was crying anyway. In front of Nyree. In front of Kane. In front of ... some young player named Tom, which wasn't as bad, because he didn't know him. But in front of somebody else, too. Zora's brother, Hayden, who was still sitting on the floor, painting blades of grass that were probably suitable for tiny mice to peek out from, by the look of things here. When Luke had come in and Hayden had turned to look at him, Luke had stopped breathing for a second.

His eyes were brown. *Bright* brown, if that was a thing. Amber, maybe, and full of life. His dark hair was cut high and tight, his jeans were cut close and stylish, and the sleeves of his blue-checked shirt were turned up two careful turns from his wrists, revealing some muscle. He looked like the kind of perfect that made Luke's tongue feel too big for his mouth and the rest of his body feel equally outsized, and made him completely aware that he wasn't good-looking and never would be.

He could almost hear René's voice, on that last terrible evening, in his restaurant kitchen, still wearing his white smock and checked trousers. Sitting, as always, over a late meal and yet another glass of wine, but with a sharpness hanging in the air and no ease at all. His final words were still easy to recall, because they may as well have been burned into Luke's heart. "You are like a bear. A big, scarred, *hairy* bear who can never be elegant, who cannot even converse. The so-

entertaining *histoires* ... you cannot tell them. Even the boring small talk, you cannot do. And the hair that grows everywhere but on your head. The ears, the nose, the *face* ... how can I look at them anymore? How can I *touch* you? With wine, yes, maybe, but it only gets worse. You aren't thirty-five yet, and I'm *forty-five*, and yet you look older. It is just too much."

"I—" Luke started to say. *I wax*, he wanted to say. *Every month. And you said you liked it that I was strong.* But you didn't explain, because you couldn't make somebody think well of you.

You couldn't make somebody love you.

"And it is even more than being ugly and hairy and battered," René said, taking another swallow of wine. "You are a coward. Yes, I said it. A coward. We can never go anywhere together, I can never tell anyone your name, not even my family, not even my friends, and why? Because you are afraid. Here I am, facing the world as I was made, while you, who are so tough, who are so brave and strong, are still hiding. You hide behind us, behind those like me. You let us face it for you, so you can keep your position, so the people cannot say, 'We don't want to watch a rugby player who is having sex with other men. Get him off this team. Get him away.' You hide, and you make me hide, too. You are a coward, and I cannot be with a coward anymore."

Maybe Luke wasn't a coward now. Except that he must be, because he was scared in a way he'd never been at school or out on the paddock in the toughest test match of his life. In a way he'd only ever felt when he was injured. He could handle any pain, any fatigue. Handle it, and rise above it. He couldn't handle being helpless, and he couldn't handle people seeing him that way.

He was pretty sure Hayden was gay, too. What he'd said ... he had to be gay, didn't he? And handsome and charming, with good hair, and he *could* tell the *histoires* and entertain the room. You only had to look at him to see it, but what did it matter? What did any of it matter, now?

Maybe he could never have made a good impression, but he could have done better than this, because he was still crying. It was summer in New Zealand, and the room was full of people and paint, but he was cold, and he was alone. Hot with embarrassment and tears, and cold anyway. As cold as the river Tyne. As cold as winter in the north of England.

As cold as his mother's house.

He didn't want to think about this. He wanted to think about anything else, but here it was, because he'd told his mother already, and she hadn't wanted to know. Now he was back in New Zealand and had told heaps more people. He was stripped bare, his secret out there for everyone to see. Out there for the rugby world to see. Out there for his *dad* to see. He'd torpedoed his life, and he was panicking.

He couldn't be tough anymore, and he couldn't remember a time when he hadn't known how to be tough. Not in primary school, where he'd learned to fight. Not at home, where he'd learned to shut up, and not at the boarding school he'd been dropped into at age nine, where he'd learned four things. One, that knowing how to fight was still a good thing, no matter how posh the school was, if you were nine and a New Boy, or if you just couldn't stand to watch other kids being tortured. Two, that being good at sport was even better than knowing how to fight, and Grant Armstrong's sons were always going to be big, strong, and good at sport. And as Grant was a rugby coach, what Luke was best at was rugby.

He'd tried to make that cricket instead, so he'd have his own thing that his dad couldn't touch, but the more he grew, the broader he got. He could go hard, and he could even go fast, but he couldn't go fast enough for cricket. Mostly, he could lift heavy things and get stronger, and he could stand solid and hit his man harder than anybody else, and he liked to. That wasn't cricket. That was rugby. Not the flash parts, sidestepping like a gazelle through the tacklers and across the chalk, being lifted by your mates and slapped on the back because you'd scored the try. The parts you did in the dark places, the parts that took nothing but grunt. He'd been a

hooker, and then he'd been a prop, and a prop was what he'd stayed. A life in the front row, and the body and face to match.

Four things. Thing Three, that there was a name for what he was, and it was shameful. And Thing Four. That he was on his own.

Even in a rugby squad, that band of brothers, he was alone. He had a secret, and he couldn't let down his guard, or the one place he shone, his one spot of safety, would be gone.

And his dad would find out.

All of that, maybe, was why, on that first day of school, when his mum had stopped the car in front of the forbidding brick building, with its tower and arched windows that looked like the scariest kind of church, he hadn't thought about how his parents were getting divorced and his dad was going back to New Zealand. He hadn't thought that he was scared about that, and scared to be here. There was no point in it and nobody to care except Kane, and Kane couldn't know he was scared, or he'd feel even worse. So Luke had turned and said to his brother, who was only six and sitting there curled into himself, the tears running down his cheeks, "I'll see you at half term."

"Don't leave," Kane said, turning an anguished face to him. Kane hadn't learned yet that you couldn't say things like that. "Why can't you still go to school with me? Why can't you stay *home* with me?"

"I will go to school with you," Luke said. "Soon as you're nine. You'll come here and be with me."

"But that's *long*," Kane said.

"Stop blubbing," their mum said. "Nobody wants to see that. If you have to cry, cry in bed."

Luke wanted to do something, to say something, but he didn't know what to say. Kane was too soft sometimes, yeh, but that was because he was kinder than any of them, and more loving, and wasn't that meant to be a good thing, even if it made you soft? Luke's Year Four teacher had said it was good to be kind and thoughtful, but his parents didn't care

about that, and how would he know which was right? He didn't know what to do, so he just said again, "I'll see you at half term."

"Aren't you scared?" Kane asked.

"No," Luke lied. "This is where I have to go, so I'm going." And he did. He got out of the car and walked up the stairs, through the knots of other boys, the tearful mums, the proud dads, and didn't think anything at all.

He'd kept his promise, though, as long as he could. He'd looked after Kane once his brother had come to join him three years later. Kane hadn't had nearly as much coaching from their dad, other than a short visit to New Zealand every year at Christmas and a longer one in August, but he had more natural talent than Luke. At rugby, and at cricket, too. Luke still worried about how soft he was, but sport would help with that. Eventually.

Besides, Luke was there. He wasn't going to let anyone bully his brother, and every boy in school knew it. He might only be twelve, but he didn't care about pain. Most boys did care. When their nose got bloodied or they got hit in the ribs, they stopped. Luke didn't stop.

That was what he thought for a term, anyway. Until his mum collected the two of them for Christmas and told Luke in the car on the way home, "That's it for you, then. You're off to En Zed."

"What?" he asked.

"That was always the plan," she said. "You stay here until you're twelve, and then you go to your dad, so he can make a man of you."

Luke didn't say, *I'm not a man. I'm a boy*. No point. He said, "You didn't tell me that." His voice cracked, because the dread was hollowing out his belly, tightening his throat, but he kept his face as expressionless as he could, so she wouldn't see. You couldn't keep from feeling bad, but you could keep other people from knowing.

"Of course I did," she said. "It was always the plan."

“No,” Kane said. Just one word, and this time, he didn’t cry. He’d learned. But his face had gone pale, his hands gripping the seat.

Luke asked, “When?”

“After the New Year,” his mum said. “The New Zealand term starts at the end of January, but Dad’ll need some time to get you kitted out, and you’ll need to be able to shift for yourself once his season starts and you’re in school. You’ll have to start the school year over again, of course, but that’s good. Make you a bit older when it’s time for First XV selection.” The rugby squad that would compete for the national secondary schools championship. That was years and years away, and every boy who played rugby wanted to be on that squad and most would never get there, but it didn’t matter. His dad believed in planning. He believed in discipline. He believed in structure. And he believed that all those things would make his sons elite rugby players, because they *were* his sons.

Luke had discipline, and he had structure. That didn’t mean he had to like this. “Why am I going?” he asked. “Why should I? Why should Kane? Dad doesn’t want us.”

His mother glanced at him sharply, probably shocked. Luke didn’t care. He knew he had to go, but why shouldn’t he tell the truth first? Why shouldn’t he *ask* for the truth?

“Of course he wants you,” she said. “He wants to coach you, for one thing.”

“He’s got a coaching job,” Luke said. “Let him coach them.”

“You’re his son,” she said. “You’ve got his name.”

“I’ll still have his name whether I play rugby or not. What if I’m rubbish? Do I have to change my name?”

She stared at him once more, for long enough that he got a bit worried about her driving, but got herself under control again, of course. “Nonsense. You won’t be rubbish. You’ll do your best.”

He wished he could say, *I won't, though*. But rugby was what he was good at, and anyway, you needed a place at school where you fit, especially when you didn't fit at all inside. He said, "So that's it, then?"

"Yes," she said. "That's it. You'll come here for Christmas every year, and you and Kane will spend the August holidays in New Zealand as always, as that's when Dad's season ends, and he'll make you an All Black."

"What if he doesn't want to be an All Black, though?" Kane asked.

"Of course he does," their mum said. "He's a Kiwi, isn't he?"

"Not really," Kane said. "We live here, not there. And you're English."

"In rugby," she said, "being a Kiwi is better. Why wouldn't you want your dad's coaching? You're lucky to have it."

Luke didn't know how to explain. He didn't know what to do. So when they got home, he did what he always did. He did his press-ups, he did his sit-ups, and most of all—he ran. Through the fog and the rain and the cold, past houses with their Christmas trees lit up even in the daytime against the gloom outside, the smoke curling from their chimneys. Luke tried to imagine the storybook families inside and couldn't quite do it. They'd play board games together, maybe, and drink hot cocoa in front of the fire, and maybe ... read books? Throw a ball for a dog? Do ... baking, possibly, and make special dinners? He wasn't sure. In his family, you were mostly either outside, training or being out of the way, or in your room, doing your schoolwork, or if you couldn't be either, shutting up. That was what he knew, and what Kane knew. Which may have been why Kane ran with him, doing his best to keep up, and why Luke slowed his pace for his brother. Running was what they did together, and this was the time they had left.

On the last day, the coldest yet, with the damp hanging in the air like streamers, he took Kane on the bus so they could run on the path beside the nearly-freezing river Tyne. He

didn't quite know why. Maybe because it *was* the last day, and he felt like they had to do something.

Kane said, "If we kept running, would we get all the way to the North Sea?"

"Reckon we would," Luke said. "If we kept running."

"I think we should, then," Kane said. "We should get on a fishing boat and escape. We could be the crew."

"We don't know how to fish, though," Luke said. "And you're nine."

"You could look older," Kane said. "Because you have muscles. And I'm tall. I could look older, too. I could say I'm thirteen."

Luke wasn't sure what to say. After a minute, he said, "Thirteen wouldn't be old enough. And it'd be cold."

"Oh," Kane said. "Maybe it would be an adventure, though."

Luke had to smile. "Maybe."

Another few minutes with their breath coming out in puffs, their feet pounding against the tarmac, doing their best to outrun the cold. Finally, Kane said, "If you said you wouldn't go. If you refused to get on the plane. You could stand your ground. Dad's always saying to stand our ground."

Luke said, "It's not happening. We have to face it. It's not. We're kids, and that means you have to go where they tell you. In three years, though, you'll be in Dunedin with me. We'll be in school together again, for years this time, and when we're done with it, we'll be able to choose for ourselves. One thing I can tell you, though. When I'm grown, I'm not playing for Dad."

"How, though?" Kane asked. "If he says you have to?"

"Because," Luke said, "I'll be a man."

Now, he was a man, and he wasn't playing for his dad. He was back in New Zealand, though, and he wasn't sure what it meant.

How much would his dad care what he was or what he did, at this point? Luke hadn't even lived in the country for more than eight years, and he *had* been an All Black—for two seasons before he'd left the country—and Kane still was one. Kane wasn't playing for their dad, but he was here and doing the name proud, wasn't he? Besides, it wasn't just the two of them anymore. They weren't their dad's last hope.

Well, they were the only sons, so probably they *were* the last hope, from Grant's point of view. But maybe it wouldn't matter as much now, especially since their dad wasn't coaching anymore.

You know it'll matter. Grant wasn't coaching because he'd been passed over once again for the All Blacks, and because the Highlanders hadn't renewed his contract this time. Luke didn't know what Grant thought about that, because he hadn't been home for yonks, but he could guess. "Bloody soft," Grant would say. "Drew Callahan? He knows how to be a skipper, he knows how to play the game, but as a coach? A 'player's coach.' What's that? Coddling them, is what. Understanding them. I don't need to understand them. They need to understand *me*. I have a system. It's been proven to work. All they have to do is commit and dig deep. If they won't, that's not my fault. Heaps more fish in the sea, boys willing to work hard, gagging for a chance at Super Rugby."

So, no, Grant wouldn't be taking any of it philosophically, even though he was sixty and rugby wasn't the only thing in his life anymore, because he had, astonishingly, remarried three or four years after Kane's arrival in En Zed, and that marriage had changed almost everything. Everything but Grant's nature.

Miriama Armstrong, Luke's stepmother, was a petite, pretty, gracious Maori lady with a core of steel. She'd made a warm, colorful home for all of them, and somehow, she'd wrapped Grant around her finger in a way Luke's practical, stoical mum, a better match in every way, had never managed to do.

They'd had a daughter, Kiri, who was a teenager now and all right. Shut down a bit, like Luke and Kane, around their

dad, not to mention her mum, who could give Grant a run for his money when it came to pushing her children, but who wouldn't be?

Nyree, that was who.

Miriama's daughter, the fringe benefit or the forced addition—Luke had a feeling Grant saw her more as the latter—had been awkward and a little clumsy back then, at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. She'd had a brace on her teeth and specs perched on her nose, and had been plump, too, which Luke was sure had horrified his father. Nothing Grant had ever said had made Nyree disciplined, orderly, or good at sport or maths—or shut her up or changed her mind, either. She'd laughed and she'd cried, and she'd always, always talked back. She'd emoted all over the shop, in fact. Luke had been astonished, but he couldn't say he'd learned much, because he'd been nearly out of the house by then, and anyway, it was too late to change. He was who he was, and that was that. But he'd liked her. He still did. Somebody had to talk, he reckoned, or the world would be a pretty boring place.

He thought about Nyree, her outsized life force, and her own surprising upcoming marriage to Marko Sendoa, a hard man amongst hard men, while he painted trees, because he didn't want to think about any of the rest of it. About what had happened with his mate, Matt, especially, when Luke had tried to tell him. How appalled he'd been, and how quickly his mind had seemed to fly back to all that nakedness in the changing sheds, all that grabbing in the scrum. It hadn't gone well, and Luke had only just started telling. The fellas at Nyree's hen party had seemed OK, and so had Marko, but what would they think if they were asked to play with Luke now?

Was he being brave at last, or just stupid and self-destructive? Why had he come out with this now, when he had absolutely no idea what he was going to do if the worst happened and he was out of the game? Why hadn't he waited until he'd retired, at least? He'd never had many mates, but at least he'd had a team. At least he'd had parents, such as they were.

What would he be if he had none of it?

Stop it, he told himself, going on doggedly with the trees. You didn't stay at the top level in international rugby without some emotional equilibrium. He'd always had that, even as a kid. He'd done what he could to make his life work out, and he'd learned to live with the parts that didn't. His parents hadn't been much on loving kindness, but they'd cornered the market on stoicism, and it had rubbed off.

If he didn't have stoicism anymore, though. If the raw places hurt too much to hide ... what would he have then?

He didn't know, so he painted trees and didn't talk.

Eventually, he'd find out. And then he'd deal with it. No choice.

OBVIOUSLY GAY

IT HAD GONE SIX, but Hayden was still painting blades of grass when Zora came in to announce, “Twenty minutes until pizza. Marko phoned and said he was collecting it on the way over. Seems unfair that the two of you have to do the painting *and* buy the pizza, but Marko insisted, and since pizza is Casey’s favorite and it was Rhys’s turn to cook anyway, events snowballed.”

“I’ll just do this next bit first,” Nyree said, which Hayden could have predicted. Nyree was a woman on a mission, even if that mission was painting fairies. At the moment, she was painting a mouse peeking out of Hayden’s grass, which had been inevitable.

“Marko said you’d say that,” Zora said. “He says he’ll take the brush out of your hand again, and carry you downstairs in front of everybody if he has to. He’s getting you one with veggies and cheese, though. I’m supposed to tell you that.”

Nyree laid down her brush. “Because I’m not allowed to eat cured meats. He’ll also have them put pesto sauce on it, just so I *won’t* be able to resist. And he absolutely *would* carry me downstairs, or make me think he was about to. Is it bad that I like that about him?”

“Not to me,” Zora said.

Hayden gave an exaggerated sigh, because he needed to perk up here and be entertaining, not think about a rugby player who’d barely looked at him. Again—less pathetic yearning, more sparkle. “Not to me, either. One can only

dream. Not about Marko,” he told Nyree, “so no worries. I’m not attracted to people to whom I’m not attractive, and probably vice versa, if I could work out the implications amidst the paint fumes. I should print that first part on a T-shirt, though. It’d save *so* much explaining. I’m saying it out loud, since we’re discussing the subject. Now hear this. I don’t want your man—that’s for you and Zora, Nyree—and if you *are* a man, I almost certainly don’t want *you*. I’m more selective than that, thank you very much.”

There. That should do it. He could be attracted. That didn’t mean he was putting himself out there to be rejected again.

“What’s wrong with cured meats?” Tom asked.

“Risk of listeria,” Nyree said. “Ask Marko for the full list of things I’m meant to eat and not eat, and he’ll tell you. He gets a bit boring about it, in fact. Folate, beta-carotene, Omega-3 fatty acids, protein grams, choline ... I didn’t know choline existed, much less that it was a thing.”

“It’s in eggs,” Luke said.

“I know,” she said. “How do *you* know?”

He shrugged. “I have to know. I have to stay big, but fit. It’s my job.”

“Oh,” Nyree said. “Well, obviously. You do a good job at it, though. Staying big.”

“Yes,” Hayden said. “You do.” Which he shouldn’t have said, but—no. He was being insouciant. That was a French word. It meant, “Showing a casual lack of concern.” Which was perfect in all ways.

Kane said, “I’ll pass on pizza. I have a date.”

Hayden waited to hear Luke say he was leaving, too, but he didn’t, so he couldn’t feel *too* uncomfortable, could he? Of course, he was here for Nyree, and she’d made it clear she wanted him, so that was good. And as there was nobody kinder than Zora, that was good, too. Coming out wasn’t easy, and she knew it.

When they'd washed up and gone downstairs onto the deck, overlooking about a hectare of green fern trees and palms and the calm blue waters of Manukau Harbour far below, and were letting the warm breeze take away the stiffness and the smell of paint, Nyree said, "This is a very good house. Like you're out in the bush, but comfortable. A bit different from Paris, Luke. Feels so much more ... remote."

"True," he said. "But you're right. Comfortable."

"Do you have a house in Paris?" Rhys's daughter Casey—the bunny-lover—asked. "Like in *Madeline*? Is it covered with vines?"

"It's a book," Rhys said when Luke looked confused.

"I have a flat in Paris, yeh," Luke said. "That's where I live. No vines, though."

"Because he plays for Racing 92," Zora's son Isaiah told his cousin. "I *told* you."

"You said France," she said. "Paris isn't France."

"Yes, it is. Paris is the capital of France." He sighed. "It's good that you're going to be in Year Three next year. You need to learn more things."

"Oh," she said. "I thought Paris was very fancy, though." She looked at Luke doubtfully, and he smiled.

Oh, no. He was every daddy fantasy Hayden had ever had, *and* he was kind? He should have said no to pizza. His waistline did not need pizza. He also didn't need to do any more yearning.

"It is," Nyree said. "Paris is magical, even in the rain. *Especially* in the rain. There's no place in the world that looks better in gray than Paris. The buildings are colored cream, the silvery light glistens off the river in a way that makes your heart heal, and the streets are made of stone."

"Well, some are," Luke said.

"Luke's flat doesn't look one bit like you might think, either," Nyree went on, ignoring him. "The front doors of the building are arched and painted blue, and the stone above them

is arched, too. Luke's flat is at the very top, up five flights of very old stairs, and the wood of the banisters and the red stone tiles on the landings have been rubbed smooth by hundreds of hands and feet over hundreds of years. Imagine all those people with their secrets and their joys, going up and down those stairs, living their lives."

Casey had stopped eating and was staring at Nyree in awe. "Inside," Nyree went on, "there are huge, dark oak beams going across the ceiling all through the main room. Six of them, with nicks on them from where somebody shaped them a long time ago, and white plaster between them, and shiny wood floors that have been walked on and polished and loved, over and over again, that look like a craftsman did them who lived only to make beautiful floors, because he laid out the wood in the shape of fish bones. There's a kitchen with black-and-white tiles on the floor, set like diamonds instead of a draughts board, just because it's more beautiful, and a tiny black-iron-railed balcony off the dining room that you get to through a pair of French doors with curved tops and curving black metal handles. The glass between the panes is wavy and thick, because it's so old, and it makes everything outside look a bit wavy, too, like a painting. There's just enough room out there for a little round table and two chairs, and there's a perfect view across the tiled roofs of more cream-colored buildings where more people have lived for hundreds of years, and between them, you can see the branches of trees in a tiny park. In the summer, the swallows fly over the roofs. Their wings are a dark blue, bright as jewels, and pointed at the ends, and so are their tails, and they swoop and dive like ..."

"Like fairies?" Casey asked.

"Exactly like fairies," Nyree said, and Hayden could practically see the swallows getting painted onto that wall. She had, what, two days to finish this mural, and she was still adding things on?

Elite rugby players were some of the most disciplined people on the planet, and Nyree's stepfather was a rugby coach. She was marrying an elite rugby player, too. None of it seemed to have influenced her much.

“You’ve seen my flat once,” Luke said. “When you tear a ligament in your knee, the stairs aren’t quite as nice, the kitchen’s pretty small and the bath is smaller, and you have to duck through a doorway to get to it or you hit your head. You have to stand in exactly the right place to see the park, and some people would say that it doesn’t have storage space. But I like it all the same.”

“Sounds good, though,” Hayden said. “Are you secretly sophisticated, Luke?”

“No,” he said. “I just like it.” His face went wooden, so, again, he’d seen.

No more flirting, Hayden told himself. He told himself that heaps. It usually didn’t work. He couldn’t seem to turn it off. And if the fella was this hot? He *really* couldn’t turn it off.

Never mind. He was insouciant.

“It sounds very fancy and very expensive,” Casey said. “You can still make your apartment pretty, but you can only have a view if it’s expensive, because views cost extra.”

“That’s probably because French rugby pays better,” Isaiah said. “It *does*,” he said, when Zora looked at him. “New Zealand rugby only pays about five hundred thousand dollars a year even if you’re an All Black for a long time, unless you’re a very *top* All Black, and French rugby can pay two *million* dollars a year. That’s four times as much.”

“I don’t get paid two million dollars a year,” Luke said.

“But you’re the captain for England, too,” Isaiah pointed out. “When you play on an international side, you make even *more* money. If you win a championship, you get more than that. That’s why Uncle Rhys is so much richer than my dad was, because my dad wasn’t an All Black very much and Uncle Rhys was always one. Also, Uncle Rhys is a coach, and coaches get paid the most of all. Maybe you’ll be a coach later, and then you’ll *really* have a lot of money. Then you could have a bigger flat where you don’t have to duck your head.”

“We’re not going to talk any more about what Luke gets paid,” Rhys said. “As it’s not very interesting. Beer. Hang on.”

He went inside for it.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hayden said. “Of course, I’m a lawyer, so I have an excuse, but I find money pretty interesting. *Not* having it can get interesting, hey, Zora.”

“It can,” she said.

“Being poor isn’t interesting,” Casey said, “because you can’t do as many fun things when you’re poor. You can do fun things that don’t cost money, though, so it can still be interesting that way. You’re supposed to say ‘broke,’ though, not ‘poor.’ ‘Broke’ sounds better, like you might be richer later on, so you just need school lunch for now. That’s what my mommy said when she was alive.”

“True,” Hayden said. “Though in New Zealand, you say ‘skint.’ Means you’re waiting for payday. And, of course, you can be broke no matter how much money you make. All you have to do is spend more than you make, and hey presto, you’re broke. Or skint. Or both. Also, Isaiah, you could consider this important detail. Rugby doesn’t last that long. If you’re a lawyer, your career can last until you’re seventy. Longer, if you like, and you’re getting more experience all the time, hence better compensated. That means ‘paid more,’ Casey. Whereas in rugby, you’re done when you’re thirty or possibly thirty-five, if you’re very lucky. After that, you have to find something new to do. Coach, maybe, like Isaiah says. Buy a restaurant, hang your old jerseys behind glass on the wall, and probably go out of business. Very unstable industry, restaurants. Or you could talk about rugby on TV. That always seemed like a good job.”

“Depends how well you talk,” Luke said. “You could do it, I reckon.” Hayden laughed in surprise, and then wondered if it was an insult. Luke’s face had lost the wooden look, though. His eyes were warm, in fact, and fixed on Hayden, and he lost his breath again.

His hopeful heart, turning toward that warmth and strength like a sunflower turning toward the sun.

Or maybe Luke was amused because Hayden had just implied that he was bound to fail dismally as soon as he

retired. Which could be soon, now that he'd come out, because had any active player ever come out?

No. Whoops. Not too tactful, but Luke still looked amused, so maybe he just thought Hayden was charmingly clueless. hilariously rude. Something like that.

"A scientist is more like a lawyer," Casey said. "You can be a scientist until you're old, because scientists in movies always have white hair, and kind of crazy hair. That's good, Isaiah, since you want to be a scientist. You don't like to brush your hair, either. Except that I don't think scientists make very much money, and you want to make lots of money. That's the bad part."

"You have to be a scientist and also invest," Isaiah said. "I think buying houses would be the best for investing, because people need houses to rent, and Auckland doesn't have enough. You should probably invest," he told Luke. "If you have extra money from playing rugby in France."

Luke actually smiled. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"Do you speak French?" Isaiah asked. "Because it's *France*," he told Casey. "And they speak French, not English."

"I do," Luke said. "My French is pretty good after eight years, actually."

"You don't talk very much," Casey said. "So maybe you don't need to know too many words." And Luke smiled some more.

Definitely hot, strong, and kind. Hayden was going to be lost here pretty soon.

Get it together, he told himself. *Have a drink or something.*

"Fair point," Luke said, just as Rhys came out again with the beer and held a bottle up to him. "No, thanks," Luke said. "I'm good with water." And Hayden thought, *Wait, what?*

"Keeping up your fitness, eh," Rhys said, sitting down and offering one each to Marko, Tom, and Hayden. Hayden found himself waving it off, which annoyed him, but he couldn't

help it. He was a mirrorer. It was science. You had mirror neurons in your brain that responded the same way whether you did a thing, or watched somebody else do a thing. He had empathy. Why was that bad?

Or he was just an impossible people-pleaser, which *was* bad. He was going with the mirror neurons.

“Maybe you’d like to mention your giving up to some of the boys at the wedding,” Rhys said. “My players, anyway, though we’ll give Marko a pass as he’s getting married.”

“Cheers,” Marko said. Almost the first time he’d said anything. He’d mostly just sat there looking dark and amused. Well, he was a flanker, like Rhys had been, and flankers tended more toward action than words. Bashing the other fella and poaching the ball, seemed to be the idea. Fierce, you could call flankers. Or hard men.

Luke was different. Strong and solid and deliciously brooding, yeh, but without as much of that ... edge. Of course, what did Hayden know? Nothing, that was what.

“I’m not drinking much these days,” Luke said.

Hayden assessed him. “No?” He wouldn’t have said it if he hadn’t wanted to talk about it, would he? He didn’t go around spilling his guts, it was clear.

“No,” Luke said.

“Why not?” Casey asked.

“Because I’d been drinking too much,” he said.

“Oh,” Isaiah said. “Because you’re an alcoholic.”

“Isaiah.” Rhys’s voice was quiet, but it was firm. “No.”

“Your family’s here, though,” Casey said, “because Nyree is your family. She can do a nintervention, if you’re an alcoholic. I saw it on TV.”

“*Casey Moana.*” That was Rhys, and Casey looked startled. She probably didn’t hear that voice much, or see that face. Hayden had only seen it on TV himself, and he’d never heard the voice. “Both of you,” Rhys said. “Luke doesn’t need

an intervention. Even if he did, that would be his business, and maybe his family's business, but definitely not ours. And you don't tell somebody that he's an alcoholic," he told Isaiah.

"But he *said* ..." Casey began.

"It's OK," Luke said. "Good to hear, maybe, for kids. I'm not an alcoholic, because I can still have a beer without wanting more. I just don't want one. I decided to see what it felt like to be sober all the time, and I found out I liked it better."

"Rugby players always drink beer after games, though," Isaiah said. "My dad used to drink heaps after games, I think."

"That wasn't really my problem," Luke said. "I was careful after games."

Ah. So as not to lose his head under the influence and say or do something he shouldn't, Hayden would bet. Other blokes could be wild and stupid and get themselves into trouble, and nobody would think much of it. Using the wrong pronoun, though ... much too easy, and catastrophic.

"Drinking too much can happen in all sorts of ways, though," Luke went on, which Hayden wouldn't have expected. "Like if your partner's a chef. Chefs work long hours and tend to drink wine—sometimes heaps of wine—to wind down at the end of the night, and you might be keeping them company. Wine's not really the best way to wind down, but I only found that out once I stopped trying to do it that way."

And there was Hayden's heart, dropping straight down again. *That* was why Luke had come out. Not because he was opening his heart, or whatever stupid thing Hayden had thought. Because he had somebody he couldn't bear to hide anymore. Which was good.

"A chef is a cook," Casey told Isaiah. "But in a fancy restaurant, with a tall hat, like in *Ratatouille*."

"I know," Isaiah said.

"Does she have a hat?" Casey asked. "The chef?"

“He’s a man,” Luke said, and his ears went red again. “Yeh. The restaurant had a Michelin star. That’s a big deal. Means it’s in the guidebook, and he had a hat and the checked trousers and white smock and all. Got to look the part, eh.”

“Oh,” Isaiah said. “Your partner was a man? Does that mean you’re gay? You don’t look like a gay person. Not like Uncle Hayden.”

Now, both Rhys *and* Zora said, “*Isaiah*,” in stereo, and Hayden laid his forehead against the table and groaned.

“Gay means ...” Isaiah was telling Casey even as Rhys and Zora said it, and Casey said, “*I know*. We had it in school. It means boys go out with boys, and girls go out with girls, and it’s OK. Except you’re supposed to say LGTBQ, and some other letters.”

“LGBTQ plus,” Isaiah said. “You got the letters backwards.”

“There isn’t one way people are gay,” Tom said, absolutely unexpectedly. He’d spoken up even less than Marko, but then, what was he, twenty-one? At his coach’s dinner table, and sitting with England’s captain? “Not one way they look. You may think there is, because you see some people who you’re sure are gay—LGBTQ—and you assume they’re ...”

“Representative of all gay individuals,” Hayden said. “Like me. *Obviously* gay. What an entertaining day this is proving to be.”

“But Tom’s right,” Zora said. “You don’t know about all the people who *aren’t* obvious, since you don’t go around asking everybody their sexual orientation. Because you’re more polite than that.”

“Well, if you’re Isaiah and Casey, you do, apparently,” Hayden said. “Anybody else want to come out? Anybody who isn’t obvious, that is? No? Good. I’m oddly exhausted. And I have a meeting at eight o’clock tomorrow, so ...” He stood up. Enough fruitless yearning and weirdly desolate heartbreak, and definitely enough pretending to be insouciant. “Cheers for

the pizza, Marko, and for the company, everybody. Hope you get it done tomorrow, Nyree.”

“What?” She sat up and blinked. She’d fallen asleep on Marko’s shoulder, apparently. “Oh. I’ll come back in the morning and finish up. I’ve had so much help today, I can do it. Kane said he’d come back.” She looked the question at Luke, and he nodded. “Good,” she said. “Two’s all I can keep busy, Tom, so I’ll just bother my brothers. Thanks for all your help. After that, I’ll sleep all day Friday, and I’ll still have Saturday morning to pack for the wedding. Heaps of time. Casey’s room has turned into a bit of a group project, that’s all, and group projects can be brilliant.”

“Yes, they can,” Hayden said, “and I painted the blades of grass. Remember that when you see it, Casey. And ... I’m off.”

Definitely time to go.

STRONG AS OAK

AS USUALLY HAPPENS, Hayden's exit sparked a general exodus, and five minutes later, he was standing in the driveway with Luke and Tom as Marko and Nyree climbed into Marko's car, at the back of the queue, and reversed out of the driveway. Luke's car was next, but he hesitated a moment, and Hayden thought ...

He wasn't sure what he thought.

Now, though, Luke said, "Well ... I'm off myself," and put a hand on the door.

Hayden thought, *Good. Only answer.* And instead of saying, "Well, goodbye!" he said, "We could go have a drink if you like, toast your big day. Nonalcoholically, of course, which makes it an even more blameless idea. I don't feel like going home yet anyway. It's still light out, and barely seven-thirty. Whenever I'm with Zora and Rhys, I feel like I've aged thirty years, like I'd better run out and buy a spectacularly unsuitable convertible in a desperate attempt to hold onto my vanishing youth. Why is that?"

Tom was looking between the two of them, and Luke looked frozen, like he had no idea how to answer that. Hayden thought, *At least I was insouciant,* tried not to feel rejected, and said, "Or not, of course. Whichever."

"No," Luke said, the color rising into his cheeks again, and Hayden thought, *Clearly not insouciant enough.* Luke added, though, "I mean—sure. That would be good."

To celebrate coming out, obviously, or at least to come to terms with it. To talk things over, maybe, except that Luke didn't seem like the chatty type.

Oh, well. You had to look out for each other, didn't you? Not like the rest of the world would do it. Hayden said, "There's a place near Britomart that's surprisingly quiet. That could work. It's called Caretaker, and I've heard they do nonalcoholic as well. Not a gay bar or whatever you're imagining," he added hastily, "so no worries, no more coming out required."

"Sounds good," Luke said. "I'm staying at a hotel in Viaduct Harbour. I'll park and walk over, meet you there."

VIADUCT HARBOUR AGAIN. No escape, it seemed.

Just because he's staying there, Hayden thought, doesn't mean he's anything like Julian. And tried to believe it. But when he'd sat in the deep murk of the basement bar for fifteen minutes, then twenty, he started losing faith. He didn't even have Luke's number, and Luke didn't have his. If he stood Hayden up, that didn't mean he was rejecting him. It just meant it was too much right now.

Or that he was rejecting him.

He wanted to put his head down on the table again. He clearly *was* too fragile to be going out, however casually. He was fit company for George the cat, and possibly a movie.

Or, of course, wine.

No. Luke had been right about the wine. Drinking alone and sad—no. It should be George and the movie, or even better, the gym. If he went home now, packed his kit, and went to the gym, he could be home by ten. The gym was definitely better. He'd go right now. He'd just—

The dim doorway of the place darkened even more, and then somebody approximately the size of a tree was wending

his way among close-packed tables and chairs with surprising grace, his eyes fixed on Hayden's.

The forehead-on-table thing was probably a bad idea right now. Also hyperventilating.

"Hi," Luke said when he'd pulled out a chair and sat. And smiled.

"Hi," Hayden said, and, because he wanted to babble on, something about being glad Luke had come, or possibly about the cat, he told Luke instead, "So you know—they don't do regular drinks so much here. You say what you enjoy—sour, sweet, bitter, and so forth—and they make you something special. An adventure, is the idea."

"Ah," Luke said. "An adventure." And looked at Hayden again.

OK. Not so good for the hyperventilation issue. Hayden held it together, though, and when they'd given their orders to a server who vanished into the gloom again the same way he'd swum into view, went on, "You've been living in Paris, so the darkness and cramped quarters will be a feature, not a bug. Or not. I don't really know, other than films. I've been to Paris once in my life, on my gap year. Got bedbugs in a hostel and itched for days, and saw the Eiffel Tower and the Mona Lisa. I'm one step removed from reading *Madeline* for my knowledge. Never read *Remembrance of Things Past*, much less remembering the title in French. I read *The Three Musketeers* as a kid, though. Does that count?"

"Probably," Luke said. "I never read the Proust one myself. Started it once, and got about a hundred pages in before I gave up. Seven volumes of tormented introspection. No, thanks."

"Tormented introspection," Hayden said. "Good one. Did you read it in French?"

"Yeh," Luke said. "Maybe I'm not as dumb as I look, eh. Though, like I said—only a hundred pages." And smiled.

This was too hard.

Hayden looked at his water glass, picked it up, and set it down without taking a drink. "I need to say something."

Luke's smile vanished. "No worries. I know."

Hayden looked up, startled. "What?"

"That it's just a drink," Luke said. "No worries."

Hayden shook his head. "Wait. Start again. This is awkward." He tried to laugh, but for once, he couldn't. He also couldn't think how to be insouciant. "What do you think I'm saying?"

"That you ..." Luke stopped, then went on. "That you don't want me to think this is more than a drink. Never mind. You don't need to say it. I look at my face in the mirror every day."

Their drinks came, and the second the server had left, Hayden said, "Wait. You think I'm not attracted to you? You can't even tell? Geez, this is rough." He blew out a breath. "Why are the things I want always so rough?"

Luke looked at him, then down at his hands, which he'd laid flat on the tiny table as if he were about to push off and sprint for the exit. Those were scarred, they were enormous, and Nyree was right about his knuckles. Hayden thought about that, because he didn't want to think about what he'd just said. "I know why it's tough for me," Luke said. "I'm not going to say 'rough.' I'm not rough. If that's what you're after, it's not me. I know how I look, but I'm not that guy. I'm never going to be that guy."

"Oh." Hayden had no idea how to react. No idea what to do. He'd been flooded with dread, and now, he was flooded with something else. "That's good," he managed, "if we're going there. Going to say that, I mean." He took a sip of his drink, tried once again to laugh, and said, "Right. I'm going to say what I need to say, and then we can finish our drinks and you can walk out, and I'll know that at least I told the truth, instead of going along with ... whatever. That I wasn't desperate."

Luke's hand came out to cover his, and Hayden stared at it some more and tried not to feel the warmth and the safety of it. You weren't safe because a man touched your hand, and he knew it. "It's OK," Luke said. "We don't have to see each other after tonight. Whatever it is, you can say it."

The cold was rushing in again, drowning Hayden. "Got it," he managed to say. "No, thanks. That's a no."

"Wait," Luke said, pulling his hand away. "What?"

"What I wanted to say," Hayden said, "was that I can't tell whether you've got somebody already. The chef with the wine. That I couldn't tell if he was the present, or the past. I wanted to ask Nyree, but I didn't want to be that guy, scared to ask the truth, scared to *tell* the truth, so I thought I'd ask you instead. I'm telling you that I don't want to be your ... your prize for coming out, some fella you'll never have to see again. I'm not going to be cheated on again, and I'm not going to be cheated *with*. If it doesn't matter, I don't want it. I know I don't look ..." He hauled in an unsteady breath. "Serious. I know I don't *seem* serious. That doesn't mean I'm a toy. That doesn't make me anybody's temporary entertainment."

"Hayden." Luke had his hand over Hayden's again. "I'm not with somebody. I'm fairly spectacularly *not* with somebody, in fact. The chef is in the past. I'm not pretty, and I know it. I'm not quick or clever, and there's nothing flash about me except my flat and my pay packet. I'm strong as oak, though, and I'm steady as hell. And I don't cheat. I don't hurt, I don't lie, and I don't cheat."

Hayden tried to say something, and he couldn't. "So come on," Luke said. "Let's go somewhere quieter, where I can see you and you can see me, and we're not shouting out our deepest secrets. Because I want to kiss you."

Hayden had an elbow on the table, his hand in his hair. "It's not this easy," he managed to say. "It's never this easy."

"Yes," Luke said, and that voice was deep, it was strong, and it was sure. "It can be. It is."

HAYDEN PULLED into a parking garage in the Wynward Quarter, using a passcard to do it, and Luke wondered why and decided not to ask. If Hayden had brought Luke home with him ...

No. Don't go there. Hayden hadn't made any conversation, beyond, "This is me," when they'd come to the car. Nervous, Luke thought, and the tenderness that had welled up in him when Hayden had put his hand in his hair back in the bar was right here again.

Hayden needed somebody strong. Somebody kind. Strong was the one thing Luke knew how to be. Kind, he wasn't so sure about. He reckoned he'd do his best.

Hayden found a carpark, turned the car off, and sat there like he didn't know what to do next. Luke thought, *He wants to know he's not a toy. What do I do about that? Not jump him, that's sure.* "Maybe we could sit a bit, eh," he decided to say. "Maybe turn on the radio."

"Oh." Hayden turned the key, switched on the sound system, and fiddled with the dial.

His hand was shaking.

"Here." Luke put his hand over his. "I can do it, if you like."

"You can't know the stations. You don't even live here."

"But I can still find music," Luke said, and he did. An alternative station, it had to be, maybe the university's, playing something reggae-inspired, with that upbeat, relaxed vibe. He asked, "OK?"

Hayden said, "Sure. I like that you asked. Shows patience, consideration, and so forth. All admirable qualities." Making conversation, obviously, because he was so clearly nervous.

What now? They both had their seatbelts off, but Hayden wasn't moving. Luke finally said, "We don't have to do

anything tonight, you know.”

A long pause, and Hayden said, “You know, your gentleness is pretty devastating.”

Luke said, “When your job is being a hard man, you lose your taste for it as recreation, maybe.”

“Hopefully not completely,” Hayden said.

Luke smiled. Hayden would always bounce back, he was guessing. “Never mind. I think I know what you like. And if I don’t ... you can tell me.”

Hayden put his face against the steering wheel. “OK. I give up. This is too bloody much. I may *be* in Paris. If you get any better, they’re going to put you in a film. Please. Come on. Kiss me.”

Luke said, “If you’ll peel your face away from that steering wheel, I will.” Feeling sure again. Feeling strong.

Hayden sat up. Not fast. Slowly, like he didn’t dare to breathe. Luke knew how he felt. He put his hand against Hayden’s cheek, pulled him closer, and kissed him. Gently at first. Carefully, exactly because he didn’t want to be careful. He held back, and holding back was a buzzing thrill. Hayden’s mouth under his, and then Luke’s other hand around his head, too, to hold him better.

Heat. Power. Desire.

Hayden’s hand, finally, on Luke’s shoulder, and then his other one, and he was moving into Luke, starting to breathe hard, and Luke couldn’t be quite as gentle now. He kissed Hayden harder, felt the edges of that perfectly-cut hair under his hand, felt Hayden’s mouth opening under his, and burned.

Five minutes went by, because the song changed. Then it changed again, and Luke saw the steam on the windows out of the corner of his eye and got a jolt of fear. You didn’t call attention to yourself. You didn’t court discovery.

Wait. He’d already been discovered.

He couldn’t shake the unease, though. Which meant, maybe, that it was time to go. He pulled back and said, “Give

me your number, and I'll text you tomorrow. We could have dinner, see where we get. No pressure. Sound OK to you?"

"Yeh," Hayden said on a breath.

Luke should have gone, but he kissed him once more, because he couldn't help it, then said, "I'll text you," and got out of the car.

His legs were steady. His mind wasn't. His mind was thinking, *Bloody hell. And, Tomorrow. And, Be careful with him.*

It was standing in the tunnel, bouncing on your toes, rolling your shoulders, preparing to run out onto the field, centering yourself so the hammering of your heart, the pulsing of the blood in your veins didn't overwhelm you. It was knowing that you'd be hurting, and you'd be sweating, and by the end of eighty minutes, your legs would have that tremble in them, all the way down deep in the muscle, because you'd given it all you had, and you'd left everything out on the paddock.

It was being ready to play the game full-tilt, flat to the boards. Win or lose.

It was living.

STAKEOUT IN THE PARKING GARAGE

HAYDEN DIDN'T DRIVE AWAY AT ONCE. He couldn't manage it. He sat there, his hands on the steering wheel, and stared at the concrete wall ahead.

Wow.

Maybe he should get out of the car and walk around a while. He could text Luke and ...

No. What was he, seventeen years old?

A tap on the window made him jump, and then it made his heart pound.

When he turned his head, he didn't see somebody almost as broad as he was tall, with biceps that looked like he was smuggling snakes under there, coming back to say that he couldn't possibly wait until tomorrow.

He saw, in fact, Julian.

He rolled the window down. He could do that, because the car was still on, the radio still playing soft and low. "Hi," he said, and couldn't think of anything else to say.

Julian had crouched down to look into the car, which meant his head was centimeters from Hayden's. He didn't say hello. He said, "Come out."

Hayden thought, *Why?* He actually had his hand on the door handle, that was how used he was to thinking Julian was fabulous and that he was lucky to be with him, but he took it away and asked, "Why?"

Julian sighed. “Because I want to talk to you, obviously.”

“Maybe I need to get home to my cat.” Hayden’s head was still seriously turned around, and he wanted to let it stay there. He wanted to think back over every minute of tonight, not marinate in disasters past. Possibly go to the gym after all, if this leaping energy didn’t settle soon.

Tomorrow, he thought, and got a kick of mingled lust, anticipation, and, possibly, fear. The kind of adrenaline rush that said there was no choice.

Julian said again, “I need to talk to you. Get out of the car.”

Hayden got out, because Julian wasn’t going anywhere, and he couldn’t exactly back out and run over his foot, could he? Or sit in the car while Julian tapped on the window, because that would be a ridiculous scene, and he wasn’t much for drama anyway.

“Right,” he said, when Julian had backed up out of the space to make room and Hayden had slammed the car door. “I can’t wait. Groveling apology? Cutting remarks about my life that you failed to think up the first time around? Let’s have it.”

“Why are you parking in my garage?” Julian asked.

Hayden laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Did your family buy it, then?” He could have said, *Because I’m a thrifty Kiwi, and I bought a bloody expensive monthly pass to visit you that still has two days to run*, but why should he?

Julian looked down his aristocratic nose. He wasn’t far off two meters tall, another fact that had once made Hayden swoon. Now, Hayden was noticing that he was possibly a bit ... weedy. Julian didn’t do much working out, because, he’d said, “Horses, racing shells, and possibly a bit of boxing at school, dear boy. Those are the only necessary pursuits of an English gentleman. At least one who inherited the Lumley physique, don’t you think? I’m not sweating like a navvy just to fit in with the latest trend. They’re the ones who want to look like *me*, but you know— *L’habit ne fait pas le moine*. The habit doesn’t make the monk,” he’d translated for Hayden’s

benefit. “The monk is made of what lies within.” He’d laughed as he’d said it, though, and added, still laughing, “Which is bloody pompous, of course, but there you are, I *am* bloody pompous. Or confident. We’ll call it that, shall we?”

At the moment, though, Julian wasn’t saying that. He was saying, “You know what I’m talking about.”

“No,” Hayden said, “I find I can’t imagine. Other than the groveling apology. I can just about imagine that.”

“You’re stalking me.”

“I am?”

“You know you are.” Julian sighed again. “Look, dear boy. It was awkward, we’ll both admit, but you need to face facts now. I’m with somebody else, and you need to move on. It was terribly nice, but it’s over.”

“Uh-huh.” Hayden had leaned against the car now and folded his arms. He should be trembling at the confrontation, but somehow, he couldn’t. “How’s that going, then? Still blissful? Everything you’ve ever dreamed of? Did he replace the cashmere jumper yet?”

“We’re going to Fiji in the new year, actually,” Julian said. “Since you ask. Trevor wants to sail there, as he’s got a break from work. Lovely adventure, don’t you think?”

Hayden had to laugh. “In that boat? It’s over a thousand nautical miles to Fiji. Ten-day sail at the best of times, with nowhere to stop, and we’re still in the midst of cyclone season. You’ll either drown or get blown off course and die of thirst.”

“I can sail.” Now, Julian’s voice was stiff. “And Trevor’s learning. And we’d buy a bigger boat, obviously.”

“You can sail in Waitemata Harbour,” Hayden said. “Maybe up the coast a bit.”

“And you’d know better?” Julian asked.

“Well, yeh, I would. Enough to know I’m not sailing to Fiji, anyway. Also enough to know that I’d go stark raving mad after ten days on a boat that size, and likely cannibalize

my partner if things went pear-shaped and the stores ran out. And when Trevor says ‘we,’ he means ...”

“He has money,” Julian said.

“Boat money? Really? Saved up, then, has he? Or is he spending it as fast as he’s earning it? While he’s on a ‘break from work’? I know a little something about fellas who get into a lucrative line of work and piss it all away. I wouldn’t count on his half.” Hayden was doing exactly what Isaiah had been rude for doing—talking about how much money people made. He also didn’t need to be having this conversation, but he found he didn’t much fancy scuttling away, either, as if Julian had wounded him.

“At least he’s not dull,” Julian said. “At least those ‘fellas’ he knows aren’t rugby players, with all their brains in their hands and feet.”

Now, Hayden was the one sighing. Also regretting that he’d engaged. “It’s been lovely catching up, of course, but honestly, a *tiny* bit dull. I need to go home to my cat. George gets lonely. Also peckish. Past his teatime.”

“I’m sorry if your life isn’t exciting without me,” Julian said. “I’m sorry you haven’t found anyone. That doesn’t mean you can come here and lurk in the shadows like this. If Trevor finds out, it’ll scare him.”

The hilarity was rising in Hayden’s throat. “Which would be the point of stalking, if I were stalking. And I thought he was so strong and fit and exciting. I’m sure I’ve seen him having a stoush with somebody on TV. That all for show, then? He can’t throw a punch? Can’t even take on a lawyer?”

“I’ll ring the police,” Julian said.

“Do that,” Hayden said. “Please. Ring them now, so they can explain the nature of my offense to me.”

“You’re a *contracts* lawyer,” Julian said. “Not a criminal one. You don’t know.”

“You’re right,” Hayden said. “Not about the law, because I do know that, but that I fail to understand your predicament or the threat I pose, other than poking holes in your sailing

dream. Dim, I reckon. But, fun as this has been ...” He opened the car door, rested his hand on the top of it, and turned for a last word. “I really do need to go feed my cat.”

FINE FOR PENGUINS AND BONOBOS

LUKE DIDN'T SLEEP well that night, either. For a different reason than the desolation of the night before, when he'd realized that even his best mates might not want to be his mates anymore.

No, it was Hayden.

He was a man who compartmentalized. There was no other way to live his life and play his game. He didn't fall head over heels. He didn't walk around in a fog. He couldn't afford to.

Hayden was bursting through all his compartments. *Because you're not playing*, he tried to tell himself, and knew it was a lie. *Because you have to see Dad this weekend*. Maybe, but at two in the morning, with his body about to levitate off the bed from sexual tension?

No.

The next day, he filled in the details on a rocky cliff while Nyree painted in swooping blue swallows, then, the second the cliff was dry, added gnomes digging for gemstones. While he painted, he thought about tonight.

Someplace flash. Someplace absolutely high-end. The kind of place he'd never been with a partner, because it would look romantic. The thought made his breath catch and his stomach seize up, but he knew he'd be doing it anyway. In fact, he went outside during a break in the action, found the right place, and made a booking.

That was that. Time to put this out of his mind and paint.

He managed it for an hour or so, until Rhys knocked at the bedroom door.

Nyree said, “Go see who it is, will you, Luke? But do *not* let those kids in. There’s no peeking.” She was painting like fury now, a smear of blue on one cheek, that deadline approaching fast. Not looking much like a woman getting married in ... three days.

Luke opened the door. Rhys. That was good. He wasn’t going to have to tackle Casey, anyway. Nyree called out behind him, “Whoever it is—you’re not allowed to see.”

Rhys smiled, and Luke stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Rhys said, “How’s she going?”

“Oh, you know,” Luke said. “Says she’ll be done in an hour.”

“Will it be today, you reckon?” Rhys asked, which showed that he understood Nyree’s flawed sense of time.

“Yeh,” Luke said. “Because I don’t see Marko putting off the wedding for this wall. But not in an hour.”

Rhys said, “Casey wants to have an unveiling party tonight, for her bedroom and Isaiah’s. Nyree painted his ceiling.”

“Oh.” Luke wasn’t sure what else to say.

“And she wants to invite everybody,” Rhys said. “You and Kane, for two, and a few more. Zora’s parents, and Hayden, of course. Finn Douglas, too, and his family.”

“Oh,” Luke said again, but he could feel the flush creeping up his neck. Zora’s parents would be Hayden’s parents, too. He’d never met parents. Not in his life experience. But they wouldn’t have to know, right? Not like he and Hayden had to announce anything. Not that there was anything to announce anyway. He’d be Nyree’s brother, that was all.

That was when the second half of Rhys’s announcement hit him. Finn Douglas, currently coaching at the Blues with Rhys. Luke had only played with him on the All Blacks, but

he knew one thing for sure. Playing with him, like playing with Rhys, was heaps more comfortable than playing against him. Finn was a South Islander, like Luke himself, born to a farming family, a bit rough around the edges, and as hard a taskmaster in the gym as Luke. Not exactly the type to embrace different forms of sexuality.

And his family. “What family?” he asked Rhys. Stalling, he knew.

“Wife,” Rhys said. “And four kids, with the fifth coming any day. Anyway—this is meant to be an invitation, one you can pass along to Kane as well—and tell Nyree, obviously. I warn you, Zora’s working like mad on Nyree’s wedding flowers, so the kids and I are in charge of this party. Sausage rolls are likely to feature heavily.”

“Oh.” Luke hesitated, and Rhys asked, “What?”

Nothing to do but say it. “I was going out with Hayden tonight. After this.” Luke stared straight ahead and didn’t think. Not about Finn Douglas, especially. Finn had been what Luke himself had aspired to be, back in those early days. A hard man. A disciplined man. A team man.

A straight man.

Harden up. A mantra that normally never failed, but was getting more difficult all the time. He could make his body do almost anything. His mind, though ... his mind didn’t want to go there.

“Ah.” Rhys scratched his nose. “OK if I invite you both anyway? Can you go out after? If not, say so. The kids will want Hayden to be there, but you could leave straightaway, if you like, and avoid the sausage rolls.”

Luke smiled just a bit. “Nah. If it won’t be fraught, with the parents and all.” *And Finn*, he didn’t say.

“Mate.” Rhys put a hand on Luke’s shoulder, and Luke felt the weight of that hand. That Rhys wasn’t afraid to touch him the way he’d have done before, after a match. “It’s my house,” he told Luke. “Mine and Zora’s. We invite who we like, and if anybody doesn’t like it, they can bugger off.”

Luke had to smile a bit more now. “Even her parents?”

“Especially her parents.” Rhys grinned, a pirate’s smile. “You have no idea. But you’ll find out.”

HE DID.

Not right away, not with all the excitement over the rooms. Isaiah’s, first, which was painted like the night sky. The colors glowed nearly purple in some places, and for some reason, Nyree’s friend Victoria, who was dating Luke’s brother Kane, was playing the cello for this, something soaring, poignant, and powerful. Russian, Luke would bet that was. It sounded Russian, like every pleasure came with the promise of pain. Like life was beautiful, and it hurt.

Luke listened to the aching melody, looked at the swirling purple clouds and the dots of silver stars above, and thought of the first time he’d seen the Aurora Australis. On a school trip, that had been. There’d been a boy named Quentin Furman on that trip, and Luke had longed for Quentin, a skinny, brainy, quick-witted kid with a flashing smile, with every hopeless fiber of his fifteen-year-old being.

Quentin would never feature on any rugby squad. He’d never even feature on any *soccer* squad, because, he said, sport was boring. He was brilliant at maths, though, and Luke, who wasn’t too bad at maths himself, could only watch in fascinated wonder as Quentin grasped the concepts and found the solutions almost without need of a calculator.

The way he’d smiled, too, when the teacher, Mr. Hereford, had asked him to show his work.

“I can’t show my work,” Quentin had shot back, bold as brass. “My work’s in my head.”

“Step by step,” Mr. Hereford said. “That’s how we do it. Shows that you understand the concepts.”

“I don’t even *know* step by step,” Quentin tried to explain.

“Then find a way to know it,” Mr. Hereford said.

Luke never talked in class if he could help it, but somehow, he was saying, “If his hand knows what to put down, isn’t that the same way your feet know what to do in rugby?” Because Mr. Hereford was also his rugby coach. “They know what to do because you’ve trained them, but you can’t break it down and say how you know. You just know.”

“Was I speaking to you, Armstrong?” Mr. Hereford asked.

“No, sir,” Luke said. “But—”

“Then why does this concern you?”

“Because he’s right,” Quentin said. “Do you stop him out on the paddock and tell him to diagram his moves? Ask him how many kGs per square meter of force he’s exerting in the scrum?”

“That’s enough from both of you,” Mr. Hereford said. “Let’s move on.”

Luke had felt himself flushing, but Quentin had looked back at him and grinned, his floppy hair hanging over his forehead, his eyes dancing, and Luke had been so confused.

On that weekend, outside their hut on that school trip to the rugged coastline of the Catlins, where they were meant to be recording their sightings of sea lions and yellow-eyed penguins, the cold Southland night had swirled with light. A vivid neon green near the dark horizon, shading to hot pink, to purple, and then the colors fading to the deepest blue, the pinpricks of stars showing through in the thin air down here at the bottom of the world. The boys laughed and joked around him, and beside Luke, somebody said, “We should walk down a bit farther, get a better look without these arseholes. Take it in, maybe.”

Luke didn’t have to look to know it was Quentin. His heart was beating so fast, he thought it must be visible even in the dark. “Sure,” he managed to say.

The dark. The cold. Sitting on a rock, feeling Quentin’s warmth beside him, even though they weren’t touching. Not wanting to breathe, not wanting to move, for fear he’d break

the spell and it would be over. Staring at those glowing, pulsing lights and wishing for courage.

Finally, Quentin spoke. Not in his usual quick, sure fashion, his voice moving up and down the register, lively as a bird's, in a way Luke never managed. In a voice Luke hadn't heard before. "Thanks for coming to my rescue the way you did."

"Uh ... when?" Now, Luke was sure Quentin could tell. Panic. Desire. Confusion.

"In maths class." Luke felt Quentin shift, saw his arm move, heard the *plink* of a small stone hitting a bigger one. "Nobody's done anything like that for me before. Not a rugby player, especially."

"Oh." Luke wasn't sure what to say. "It wasn't fair," he finally decided on. "You can't help being brilliant, I reckon."

"Neither can you."

"I'm not brilliant. Last thing from it."

"You're good at everything," Quentin said. "Sport, and maths, and history. Probably the rest as well, but I don't know. I haven't seen."

"I just work hard." Luke knew it was lame. He didn't have anything else, though. "I don't have ... talent. Not the fizzing kind. Not like you."

"Luke." Luke jumped at hearing his name. "You do have that. What, you think it's all quick feet, quick talking? That's what the world thinks is brilliant. What if they're wrong?"

Luke didn't say anything. He couldn't.

"What if people like you," Quentin went on, "are just as important? Doesn't there have to be a ... a foundation for things?"

Luke could see him out of the corner of his eye. Staring straight ahead, the same way Luke was. "Reckon that's what I am," he said. "A foundation."

“Also,” Quentin said, “I think you want to kiss me. Of course, I could be horribly wrong, and you could beat me blind for saying it. I’m going to stand up now, ready to run. I’ll deny I said it, too.”

“I don’t—” Luke managed to get out over the sound of the blood in his ears. “I can’t— Don’t go. Please. Don’t go.”

Quentin had moved away before the next school year. Luke hadn’t cried. It was just another way life changed, he’d told himself, lying in bed dry-eyed, staring into the darkness, seeing those Southern Lights dancing across the sky despite himself. Another thing you had to move on from, because you were made wrong.

He hadn’t kissed anybody else for more than four years, and even then, only when he was on tour, in some big foreign city where nobody knew his name and nobody cared about rugby. And still, every single time he’d done it, he’d expected the walls to come crashing down on him.

Now, he looked around him as the music played. Zora and Rhys, standing together, Rhys’s big arm slung over Casey’s shoulders, his other hand holding Zora’s. Kane, watching Victoria play her cello as if he’d found what he’d always been looking for. Zora and Hayden’s parents, their dad, Craig, a tight-lipped, stiff-backed sort of fella, and their mum, Tania, deliberately gracious. A bit like Grant and Miriama, in fact. Not as extreme, maybe, but Luke recognized the species. And then there was Finn Douglas, his arm around his pregnant wife, his toddler son held in one big arm, his older daughter too cool for this, his younger one all in.

All these families. And three people standing a little apart, standing with nobody. Isaiah, who would always stand apart, who would never be sure where he fit, because, like Quentin, his mind didn’t work like everybody else’s. It worked faster and more logically, and it took leaps. And Hayden, his cheerful side in full display tonight, with a brittleness to him that hurt Luke’s heart. And, of course, him.

After that came more of all of it. Casey’s room, and the buzzing fairies, the upside-down winged horses flying onto the

ceiling, the mining dwarves and bunnies and mice and trees and witches. Casey climbing up on her bed and bouncing there, unable to contain her joy.

It was all pretty good, even if Luke had only painted the trees. A successful Christmas present, he reckoned, for a little girl whose mum had died, a Maori girl who hadn't known what that meant, who'd come across the world to a dad and a family she'd never met and a life she'd never imagined.

Who needed to know that somebody still loved her.

Rhys and Zora had given her that, and that was something, wasn't it? That was kindness. More important than brilliance, possibly. Luke didn't know much about parenting other than what he'd seen up close, but this way seemed better to him.

He hadn't had a chance to talk to Hayden. He'd barely had a chance to say hello to him, and he still hadn't when they went upstairs. Rhys was pulling sausage rolls from the oven, Finn's wife Jenna was taking a quiche and salads from the fridge, and there was talking and busyness and moving tables and chairs out on the deck, and dishes and cutlery and glasses and things to drink. And Hayden, taking a seat across from his parents, while Luke hesitated until Hayden looked up at him and said, "Come sit by me."

It was Quentin on the rocks again. It was the hopelessly exciting, impossible wonder of that first, awkward kiss, those first tentative touches, and the Aurora Australis in the night sky.

"OK," Luke said, and did. And still, Hayden practically vibrated with tension. Rhys was looking at the two of them speculatively, and Luke tried to tell himself, *He already knows. He's said it's OK with him*, but he couldn't quite get there, because something was off. Something was wrong.

Finally, when everybody was tucking into their dinner, Rhys told Hayden, "You've sacrificed a fair bit of your time to us this week, mate. I remember when you'd have had something to say about our general dullness. What happened to that?"

“Uncle Hayden doesn’t think we’re boring,” Casey objected, her hand wrapped around another sausage roll. The sausage rolls had been her idea, no surprise. “He helped paint my room, so he wanted to come and see.”

“Of course he doesn’t think you’re boring, darling,” Tania said.

“Or maybe,” Hayden said, still with that tension in his body but the usual smile on his face, “it’s all good, because for once, I brought a date. Well, I met my date here. Close enough.”

Luke went still, but he could see Kane looking up, the alert expression on his face.

“Oh?” Hayden’s mum’s smile looked pasted on, and his father wasn’t smiling at all.

“Luke and I are going out after this,” Hayden said. “Which is, yes, a fair bit of public announcement for *very* early days, and yet here I am announcing anyway. I’m going out with Luke. He is my date tonight. That noise you hear is the closet door banging behind him. Also behind me, possibly, in a way. Huh. Who knew? I’ve never brought a date around my parents, much less a boyfriend, and I’m over thirty. Isn’t that odd?”

“You know we love you, darling,” Tania said, her social smile still firmly in place. “But you don’t need to tell us about it, surely.”

“Not the time or the place,” Craig said. “I’m amazed you don’t know that. Social skills, the teachers always told us you had. Verbal skills. Girls’ things, because you were rubbish at science and worse at sport, but here you are, not using any of them.”

“And yet,” Hayden said, “I find, astonishingly, that I choose this time and place. You’ll have to get used to it, I suppose.”

“Bloody wonderful.” Craig muttered it to Tania, but Luke heard him perfectly. “Not just one rugby player in the family,

or even two rugby players. We're all the way to three now. Jesus Christ. Next we'll have *his* brother."

The last sentence fell into one of those sudden lulls you got in a gathering. Finn's head went up, all the way at the other end of the table, as if he'd sensed it, and Kane's face darkened.

Zora said, "I heard that, Dad." Her voice was tight. "You can't say that."

"No," Rhys said. "You can't. Not in our house, and not just because I was a rugby player myself. Tough to tell them that, was it?" he asked Hayden.

"Well, yeh," Hayden said, "since you ask. Also, I'm drinking lemonade in order to be supportive. Very little liquid courage in lemonade."

"You aren't supposed to talk about people, Grandad," Casey said. "And being gay, or LBTG ... LBG ..."

"LGBTQ Plus," Isaiah said. "It's normal."

"Well, not quite *normal*, darling," Tania said. "But that's all right, because we all love Uncle Hayden, don't we? Anyway!" She clapped her hands. "Who wants dessert? I think I saw some yummy cookies in there."

"Yes, it is, Nana," Isaiah said. "For example, there are two male penguins in New York City who are mates. Once they even tried to hatch a rock like it was an egg."

"Which would be," Craig said, "unproductive, reproductively speaking. Unsustainable. And occurring as an exception. Abnormal by definition."

Finn's older son Harry, who was probably twelve or so, was frowning and pushing up his specs like a professor about to impart important knowledge. "Heaps of bonobos have bisexual behavior, though. There was a study that said seventy-five percent, which makes it *not* the exception."

"Which would be more significant if we were bonobos," Craig said. Arguing with a twelve-year-old. Not his best look.

"Bonobos are the most related to humans of any animal, though," Harry said, absolutely unfazed. "We share 98.7

percent of our DNA with them, so it's *very* significant. Also, there are male giraffes who do homosexual behavior sometimes. And female—a kind of antelope. An African antelope. And sheep right here in New Zealand, because some rams would rather mate with other rams than with ewes, even when there are ewes around. There are heaps of other examples, too, but those are the main ones I remember. If you like, I can look all of them up and email you the results.” Veering dangerously close to disrespecting your elders, but Finn wasn't objecting.

“*Harry*,” his sister Sophie said. “How do you even *know* all that?”

“Because he knows things,” Isaiah said. “Especially about animals. Knowing things is good. It makes you more logical.”

“The main thing,” Harry said, “is that it's true. It's data. It's *evidence*, and besides—what happens in science is what's supposed to happen, not what you thought would happen. That's the whole idea of science. You can't pretend not to notice things just because they aren't what you wanted to find.”

Zora said quietly to Luke, “A bit more than you were expecting tonight?” With a smile that said she got it.

“Yeh,” he said, starting to smile himself. “But good.”

Hayden put his arm around Luke's waist like a declaration and said, “Yes. Good. Sorry, Dad, but I came out a long time ago, and it's time for me to finally *be* out. I'm tired of hiding, especially from you, and I can't do it anymore. Zora loving Rhys isn't shameful. Look at her. Look at *them*, and the kids and all. How can you think there's anything wrong with them being together, just because she was married to Dylan first? Dylan is dead. Sorry, Isaiah,” he added.

“That's OK,” the boy said. “I know he's dead.”

“And there's nothing shameful about my life, either,” Hayden went on. “I may not have won a Nobel prize or whatever you imagined for your son, and I may have girl qualities—thanks for the misogyny, but I'd call them lawyer

qualities—but I haven't done so badly, have I? Here I am, supporting myself, got my flat and my car and my job and all, and I haven't developed a drugs problem or been ignominiously sacked for my embezzlement issue yet. I haven't loved the person you'd have wanted me to, and neither has Zora. Does that make us defective?"

"You don't want me to answer that," Craig said.

"Well, yes," Hayden said. "I find I do want that. I think it's time."

CAVUTO NERO, SIXTEEN DOLLARS

BY THE TIME he walked out with Luke fifteen minutes later, Hayden's legs were practically shaking.

Not that much else had happened. His dad had said again, "Not the time or place," Victoria had jumped in with a question for his mum about clothes for the wedding, and nobody else had said anything about it.

Other than Rhys and Zora, who'd got up to see Luke and Hayden out. Zora had given Hayden a cuddle and said, "I know what kind of brother I have, and it's exactly the kind I want. I'm lucky to have him, too."

Hayden had choked up a bit at that, but Rhys was shaking his hand, then Luke's, and saying, "Well, for once it wasn't me putting their backs up. Cheers for that," and giving his pirate's grin again. "Also, I hope you're going out someplace brilliant. I'd say glass of wine, but ..."

"Yeh." Luke was looking so stolid, it was as if he were carved from wood. "Sober's still better."

"Speak for yourself," Hayden said, and tried to laugh.

"YOU CAN GO on and have a glass of wine," Luke said when Hayden had parked in the Wynward Quarter garage again and Luke had parked beside him. "Or two. Won't bother me. Like I said—not an alcoholic, just making a choice. At least I hope

so. Giving up hasn't been too hard, though, so I don't think I can be."

"Is anything too hard for you, though?" Hayden asked, trying to shake off the jitters. "Doesn't seem like it to me."

"Heaps of things feel too hard," Luke said, starting to walk with that absolutely upright posture Hayden had almost never seen on anybody else. Like he didn't have to slouch along, to be cool. Like he was sufficient unto himself. "They don't turn out to be too hard, though, long as I keep moving."

"Admirably mentally healthy," Hayden said, keeping pace with him. Out onto the pavement now, where Luke turned right, not left. Which was good, because Julian's flat was about fifty meters to the left, and Hayden didn't need another angsty confrontation tonight. "Admirably optimistic."

"Which you are as well," Luke said.

"Well, I pretend to be," Hayden said. "Fake it till you make it. Where are we going, exactly, if I can make so bold as to ask?"

"Oh." Luke stopped dead. "Should I have consulted? Sorry. I went ahead and booked. Esther, in the QT Hotel. Sound OK?"

"More than OK," Hayden said, "but ..."

"If it's about the money," Luke said, starting to walk again, "I asked you. Means I'm paying. First time I've ever done that, actually, because it makes it look like a date."

"But then," Hayden said, "it *is* a date. Out in the open and all." He wouldn't have called himself "steady," still. In fact, he was fizzing. "But you don't have to pay for me. Crass to mention it, I know, but I *am* a lawyer. I don't make international rugby money, but I do all right. Which doesn't mean anybody's taken me to Esther's. Well, a client for lunch once, but we won't count that. We'll pretend it's my first time."

Luke shot a look at him, but all he said was, "Good," then, after a moment, "So if it's not the money, what was that about?"

“What was what about?” Hayden couldn’t remember.

“The way you were just then,” Luke said. “Like there was something wrong with this. About the place, or me asking you, or whatever. I wanted it to feel ...” He hesitated. “Romantic. I don’t normally get to be romantic. I’ve never given somebody, uh, romance.”

So what have you given them? Hayden wanted to ask it, and he didn’t. He wanted to *know* it. “That I was wondering,” he said, “if that was where you were staying.”

“No,” Luke said. “Thought that could be pressure. I’m staying back there near the garage, at the Sofitel.”

“Also pretty flash,” Hayden said.

Luke shrugged one big shoulder. “They had a room. I wanted to find someplace fast.”

“So French rugby really *does* pay better.” Hayden was getting his sparkle back, somehow. “And here I thought you were just impossibly hot. Didn’t realize I could do some gold-digging as well.”

This time, Luke smiled, but when Hayden went on to say, “And you got a room there when your mate turfed you out,” the smile left his face.

“Yeh,” he said. “I did.” He stopped in front of enormous glass doors. “This is it.” Holding the door for Hayden. Romantic again, or something.

They didn’t talk while they walked across to the restaurant, or while they were being seated, either. The place was Kiwi-flash, which meant that the kitchen was open, a wood-fired pizza oven was glowing hot, the banquettes were sleek and modern, the hanging lights were some kind of trendy thing that looked like lobster buoys, and the floor-to-ceiling windows took in the view of the Viaduct. Hayden picked up the menu and, whatever Luke had said, gulped a bit. He’d thought at first, *Oh, lovely. Scallops with black pudding and pumpkin? Chargrilled Mangonui snapper filet with taramasalata and salmon caviar? Yes, please,* and then had realized that those two dishes alone added up to about seventy-five dollars, and

then there were the vegetables, which could easily add another thirty. And who knew what they'd charge for water?

Help.

He said, "I'm not all that hungry, actually. The linguine looks good." And only twenty-nine dollars. You couldn't tell him that Luke was normally a big-spending sort of fella. He looked more like a meat pie and, yes, a beer.

Luke looked up in surprise. "What, after working all day?"

"I sit to work. And I *did* have a sausage roll. Also lemonade."

Luke set the menu down and studied Hayden comprehensively enough to make him want to squirm. "You think I'm gobsmacked by the prices, regretting asking you. I live in Paris. Also, I was with a chef for over two years. Got half my dinners out for free, if you want to look at it like that, so I came out ahead there. And I don't like bad food. But here's the real question. Why can't you believe that I wanted this to be special?"

"Uh ..." Hayden wanted to run his hand over his hair. Instead, he sat still.

"Because nobody's ever treated you like that, maybe," Luke went on slowly. "Nobody's ever treated me like that, either. We could try treating each other better. It's a thought."

"Oh," Hayden said. "All right, then. But I do want to hear about you coming to stay at the hotel."

Luke didn't smile, but Hayden thought he might be trying not to. "That the pound of flesh, then?"

"Well, yeh," Hayden said, "or it's a way to make me feel slightly less raw when you ask me why my dad was such a dickhead."

Now, Luke's smile was real. "Order first, you reckon?"

When the air left Hayden's body, he realized how tense it had been. "Yes," he said. "Order first. And if it's really all right with you to pay much too much for all this—what's

cavuto nero when it's at home? Or do I blindly order it and hope for the best?"

"It's kale," Luke said. "The dark kind."

"Well, they could just say that," Hayden said, "but then they probably couldn't charge sixteen dollars for it."

No wine, but he didn't need wine, not tonight. He was floating, suspended in a bubble of deliciousness that started with the just-caught, tender bites of scallop cooked with chile and lime, and drinking fizzy water, but not too much, so it wouldn't wash the taste away. Looking at Luke opposite him, his face relaxed for once, as he ate Cloudy Bay clams with sherry and peas. Not requiring Hayden to sparkle, not asking him to dance for his supper. All right with just being here, while patrons came and went around them, the bar got a little louder, and the laughter rose and wafted out through the open windows.

"You wanted to know about my mate, the other night," Luke finally said.

"Yes," Hayden said, "if you want to tell me. When I came out ... but we're not talking about me. We're talking about you."

Luke shrugged again. "I'm probably happier if we talk about you, but all right. Met him at the Crusaders when we were twenty-two or so, young blokes without much of a clue, making more money than we'd dreamed we could, hoping it would all last."

"But your dad was your coach before that," Hayden said. "You must have known you'd make it."

"Doesn't mean what you'd think. Not that you'll be good enough, it doesn't. I was in the First XV at school, yeh, but so were hundreds of other fellas. And I only wanted to do it if I ..."

"What?" Hayden asked.

"If I kept loving it. I couldn't stand to do it because it was what my dad wanted, and at the same time, it was what I'd worked for since I was a kid."

“For your chance to shine,” Hayden said.

“No,” Luke said. “For my chance to get away and live my own life. Which I did, which is why the Crusaders.”

“And the fact that you were gay ...”

“Yeh. Well.” Luke pushed a clam around, then seemed to make a decision and stabbed it. “I didn’t share that. With anybody. Reckon I hid it a bit too well, with how shocked Matt was the other day. I tried to tell him it wasn’t like that. That naked bodies don’t mean the same thing to you in the changing sheds, that grabbing his jersey in the scrum and having him grab mine was just rugby, not foreplay. Maybe I should’ve told him that I never fancied him. I have a thing for —” He stopped again.

“A thing for what?” Hayden asked. “Mashed potato? Small feet? What?”

Luke smiled. “For blokes like you, I guess. Clever. Good-looking. Talkers. And I guess ... thinner. Matt was a prop, too. No beauty contestants in the front row, and I don’t much fancy kissing somebody’s ear if it’s as mangled as mine. And mostly, that there has to be spark coming back, or nothing catches fire. I can look at a fella and think, ‘Yeh, he’s fit,’ but if there’s nothing coming back, it doesn’t ... catch.”

“But he didn’t believe you,” Hayden said.

“Maybe he would’ve if he’d listened a bit longer. Made some awkward jokes, laughed a fair bit, and then I went off to bed and so did he. I could hear some talking from in there, though. Him telling his wife, and her being shocked. So in the morning, I got up before they did, left a note, and found a room.”

“You don’t think ...” Hayden began slowly.

“What? I know what I heard from him. I know what I *saw* from him.”

“That he may just have needed some time,” Hayden said. “If it’s been that long—surely he knows you better than that.”

“Dunno,” Luke said, “and I wasn’t keen on waiting around to find out. He hasn’t sent me so much as a text since, though.”

“And you’re wondering whether you can keep playing,” Hayden said, “once people know.”

“Well, yeh.” Luke finished his clams, and the waiter came by and whisked the plates away. “Time will tell, I guess.”

“Right,” Hayden said. “Well, I’ve got nothing that juicy. Just, you know, garden-variety parental angst and so forth. As you saw.”

“When did you come out?” Luke asked.

“Do you really want to do this?” Hayden asked. “Tell these stories?”

“Well, no,” Luke said. “Not right now. I want to ... hear about your sister, maybe. Hear about the kids. Be entertained, possibly.”

“With tales of fairies and bunnies,” Hayden said. “And of Casey Moana and Isaiah.”

Now, Luke was smiling for real. “Worse things to talk about than fairies and bunnies. Tell me about them. About Casey and Isaiah, and why Casey’s got an American accent. They’re funny kids, eh. Expressive, you could say. Tell me about Zora. I know about Drago—Rhys. No need to tell me about him. One of those players who tells you who he is by what he does out on the paddock. Rugby’s a bit like golf, I reckon. You can tell heaps about a man by how he plays golf. Whether he cheats when he thinks nobody’s watching. Whether he gets narky when he has a bad round, if he blames the caddy or the wind or nothing at all. I haven’t played golf with Drago, but I’ve played rugby with him.”

“With him, or against him?” Hayden asked.

“Both. One of them’s easier. So go on. Tell.”

Hayden did. The restaurant turned down the lights and changed the music, because it was late enough for that now. The snapper melted on his tongue, and eventually, so did the

burnt Basque cheesecake with marmalade and chocolate sorbet—eighteen dollars. He'd suggested sharing, and Luke had said, "Nah. I'm having apple tart. Eat what you like and leave the rest." So Hayden talked and somehow managed not to eat every bite of that impossibly rich, creamy cheesecake, and Luke listened and laughed a bit sometimes and looked thoughtful other times, and Hayden felt ...

Heard. Seen.

Known.

No wine at all, and he was melting, buzzing, by the time they walked out. Luke hadn't touched him, hadn't said anything remotely romantic, and Hayden was more aware of the bulk of him, the heat coming off his body, the size of his hands and the scars on his face, than he'd been since he was a kid. He was having some trouble breathing again, in fact, because that was the Sofitel ahead of them, and the parking garage beyond it.

The deciding moment. He didn't know Luke, not really, so why did it feel like he did? Why did he know that whatever choice he made tonight, it would be OK? And what *did* he want to choose? He couldn't even say.

Outside the doors of the Sofitel now, and Luke saying, "Want to take a bit of a walk?"

Hayden let out his breath. "You cannot imagine how much I want to do that."

Luke smiled. "Let me run up for a hoodie, then. Bring you one as well? It'll be cooling off a bit, down by the water."

"Yes," Hayden said. "Please."

"Five minutes," Luke promised, went inside, and strode toward the lifts.

Hayden wouldn't go in, he decided. More consistent messaging. *If you want to be special to somebody, feel like you're special. Act like you're special.*

Of course, Luke was only here until Christmas, and then he was leaving. For *France*. Where he lived. What was that,

twenty thousand kilometers? The only rational choice was to grab this good thing right here, right now, to soothe his aches and try to soothe Luke's. If he was so breakable that he couldn't even manage short-term anymore, if he was going to weep and play Sam Smith songs on repeat when Luke left, he really *was* going to end up alone with George.

But it felt wrong. That was all. It felt wrong, and he didn't want to rush. He wanted to savor. He wanted to be desired, not as a distraction for tonight, but for himself. He wanted to want it so much that he felt like he couldn't wait, and he wanted to wait anyway.

So he waited amongst the late-evening strollers. Hands in the pockets of his dress trousers, scuffing absently at a rough edge of the red-brick footpath with his shoe, trying not to anticipate, and failing.

"Oh, bloody hell." The voice came from behind him, and Hayden stiffened. Not Julian's voice this time. Trevor's.

Hayden didn't want to turn. He turned anyway. It was the two of them, each with two heavy carrier bags. Coming back from doing a shop at Countdown, obviously. Cozy. Domestic.

He thought about saying, "Hi," but he didn't. He just stood there. For once, he wasn't going to try to deescalate. He was just going to wait and see what developed.

He did take his hands out of his pockets, though, in case something happened. They looked like something was going to happen.

Not that he'd be much chop at fighting, whatever he'd told Julian. He'd be rubbish at fighting, he was fairly sure. He'd never even tried. He was pretty good at running away, but he didn't feel like exercising that talent tonight, so it might be fighting anyway. Kicking, he reckoned. Grabbing the other fella and pulling him close so he couldn't land a hard blow. And, when necessary, curling up on the ground with his hands over his head. That, he definitely knew how to do.

Julian said, "That's it. I'm calling the police." And then just stood there, because his hands were full of grocery bags.

Finally, he set them down, upon which they promptly fell over and spilled out mandarins and potatoes and avocados, a bunch of bananas sliding out with them. The rounder fruit and veg rolled all over, and Hayden wanted to laugh, and also considered whether you could do any damage by hitting somebody with a potato. Alas, probably not.

Julian ignored the rolling veg, clearly going for an “I meant to do that” vibe, and, yes, he was pulling his phone from his pocket.

A fella walked by, looking at his own phone, and stepped on the avocado. He stumbled, swore, scraped his shoe, covered with green goo, against the bricks, and said, “You may want to pick those up.”

Everybody ignored him.

Trevor said, “We shouldn’t call the cops. We should kick his arse instead.”

“Oh?” Hayden asked. “Have you learnt to do that, then? I heard I scared you. And as I’d hardly scare a twelve-year-old girl ...”

Yes, Trevor was advancing, his fists balled up, and Hayden thought, *Right. Kicking’s going to have to do it, because I have no idea how to punch.* Meanwhile, Julian was talking urgently into the phone. Something about a stalker, and a threat.

Which was when Luke came out of the double doors.

RUINING THE CASHMERE JUMPER

A FEW THINGS happened after that.

Trevor took a swing at Hayden, aiming straight at his nose, and Hayden somehow managed to twist away so the blow landed on the side of his head. Which *hurt*. He staggered, and then did what he'd thought of before, which was still the only thing he could think of. He stepped into Trevor and grabbed him by the shoulder. Or, actually, by the jumper. *Cashmere*, he thought. *So soft*, even as his head rang and pulsed with pain. Trevor pushed back and tried to wrench away, then slapped Hayden across the face, which hurt *more*, while Hayden hung on for dear life, because it was, yes, still all he could think to do.

They staggered around together like that, and Julian said, "What the hell. Do stop, Trevor. The police are coming. Let them handle it."

Trevor didn't answer. That was because he was levitating backward. *That* was because Luke had grabbed him by the back of the jumper and was literally holding him up off his feet. Trevor's legs were kicking, and he was yelling. Something like, "Get the fuck off me!"

Which was when Julian dashed in, grabbed the *front* of Trevor's jumper, and then stepped on a potato. *Agrias*, they were, unfortunately extremely oval. Julian's leg went out from under him, he yelped, and Luke let go of Trevor's jumper and stepped back.

It was like a ballet, if the dancers were extremely clumsy and the choreographer was rubbish. Julian's arm flailed, he let go of Trevor's jumper, his *other* arm flailed, and he stepped on the bunch of bananas with the leg that wasn't already in the air. The bananas squished, his foot slipped, his entire body twisted, Trevor grabbed for him, and the two of them went down together, bang-crash, straight onto the pavement in a pile of assorted fruit and veg.

Hayden said, "Pity you never ... thought of another reason I'd be lurking. And that the reason can beat both of you at once." And laughed. Possibly hysterically. Also held his head and thought, *I was in a fight. I fought.*

Well, he'd held on, anyway. He hadn't run, and he hadn't dropped and cowered. He was counting it.

Luke asked, "Are you all right? Let me feel the head."

Hayden said, "I'm not sure if I'm excited or sick. Or sick and excited." Then he decided, because he turned, staggered, and vomited into the gutter.

Brilliant, he thought dazedly. *This is attractive. Also, all that lovely food.*

Luke had a hand on his back, fortunately or unfortunately. By the time Hayden managed to stand again and was wiping his mouth with his hand, wishing Luke weren't standing quite so close, Luke had his mobile out and was talking.

"I don't care that it's been phoned in," he was saying. "Or about the police. I need an ambulance. Got a TBI here. Hard blow to the side of the head, over the ear. Dizziness. Vomiting. Ambulance."

Hayden said, "You're terribly ... capable." And tried to laugh.

"Don't talk," Luke said. "Sit down."

Hayden would have, but Luke had turned and was running faster than Hayden would have credited from a man his size. He was grabbing Trevor again as he legged it for Julian's place, and once more, Luke had the back of Trevor's jumper. This time, he practically dragged him over to the others.

That's cashmere, you know, Hayden would have said if he weren't still in "gaspig" mode. He still, somehow, wanted to laugh. Probably silk as well. Probably cost six hundred dollars. He's going to hate that.

Julian had been picking up the fruit and veg—more of it now, since both he and Trevor had dropped their bags. There was also a carton of eggs leaking yellow goo onto the bricks. Now, he whirled and said, "Take your hands off him, you barbarian," like Prince William objecting to a scene unbecoming to royalty. "We're leaving," he decided to add, as the two-toned wail of a police siren approached.

"No," Luke said. "You're not." He grabbed Julian as well, not seeming to care that Julian topped him by half a head. Julian swung an arm, and Luke swung him around. The blow landed on Luke's shoulder, and he said, "You'll have to do better than that, mate, to bring me down." Sounding ... almost amused.

The police car had stopped, and two officers got out, a woman and a man. Hayden could see that, because he'd staggered over to lean against the hotel window, his hands on his knees, feeling sick again. A couple at a table inside were staring at him, he noticed. He wanted to wave at them in an insouciant sort of way, but he didn't have the energy.

The older cop, a woman, asked sharply, "What's going on here?"

"This one punched my mate here," Luke said, jerking his chin at Hayden.

"Which one?" the cop asked.

"This one," Luke said. He lifted Trevor again and shoved him toward the cop. "All yours."

"Excuse me," Julian drawled. "Would you lot kindly ask this fellow to unhand me?" Sounding like a nineteenth-century novel, and Hayden thought, *What if he's actually an imposter? Is this really how the upper crust talks, or is he an international con artist? I have no idea. No, not possible.*

What, in Auckland? Not exactly the second home of the jet set. He'd be in New York City, or maybe Palm Beach. Pity.

“And who are you, sir?” the woman cop asked Julian. The male cop had hold of Trevor, was snapping cuffs on him. Good.

“I am an innocent bystander,” Julian said. Luke had let go of him, and he straightened his clothes and attempted to assume his usual superior air. “Or, rather, the victim of a stalking. My friend and I came upon this person, the one against the wall, whose name is Hayden Allen. He’s been stalking me recently, and here he was, doing it again. It’s honestly been rather frightening, and my friend, who is possibly a bit rash at times but whose intentions are, obviously, excellent, attempted to ... to push him out of the way.”

“With his fist,” Luke said. “In the side of the head.”

“I’m not a ... stalker,” Hayden managed to say. He was still feeling sick, and now, Luke was there, lowering him to the pavement, where he wanted to put his head between his knees but didn’t. “I was just ... waiting for my own friend.”

“Twice?” Julian said. “I don’t think so.”

“As I’m staying here, at the Sofitel,” Luke said, “I *do* think so.” He went over to the double doors, picked something up from the ground, and brought it over. “I was just collecting a couple of hoodies, as it’s getting colder. Put this on,” he told Hayden, then, when Hayden didn’t move fast enough, helped him do it.

“Luke Armstrong, aren’t you?” the male cop asked. “There can’t be two men with that face, not to mention the rest of it, but you’re in the wrong country. Missing a match, I’m thinking.”

“Well, yeh,” Luke said. “I am. Back in En Zed for my sister’s wedding. My mate here was waiting for me, like I said, not stalking anybody. The tall one has delusions of grandeur, I reckon.”

“Excuse me,” Julian said. “I live about a hundred meters away, and I’ve caught Hayden hanging around here twice now.”

“Last night,” Hayden told Luke. “In the parking garage.” His head really did hurt, and all he wanted was to lie down. He was never going to be a rugby player.

“Ah. When I’d just left him,” Luke told the cops. “Again, not stalking.”

“Who are you, exactly?” the female cop asked. “Luke who?”

“Armstrong. Captain for England,” the male cop said. “Plays in France as well, though he’s a Kiwi. Grant Armstrong’s son, but not quite a traitor, I guess.” Which was a joke, apparently. “There was only ever going to be one winner here.”

“Rugby?” she asked. “Or ...” She looked at Luke speculatively. “Well, yeh. That’s got to be rugby.”

More two-toned wailing, and now, the ambulance was pulling up, two ambos jumping out.

“Over here,” Luke told them.

Hayden said, “Honestly, I don’t need the fuss. I just need to go home and lie down.”

Luke ignored him. “TBI, I think,” he told the ambos. “Got hit in the side of the head, right here.” He pointed to the spot. “Vomiting, dizziness, weakness.”

One of the ambos probed gently with his fingers, and Hayden let out a gasp. “Let’s get you to hospital, then, mate,” the other man said. “Looks like you’ve been hit here on the cheekbone as well.”

“Wait,” the female cop said. “We’ll need a statement.”

“Get it at the hospital,” Luke said. “From both of us. He’s not going anywhere for a while, and I’ll be with him.”

“You can’t just let him walk away!” Julian said, losing some of his aristocratic cool. “He *attacked* us!”

“Which one did?” the female cop asked. “The one your friend hit? Or the one who was holding both of you up at once by the jumper while you hit *him*?”

“Yeah, nah,” the male cop said. “You’re not on the pavement, and you don’t need the ambulance. That’s not attacked. If Luke Armstrong attacks a man, reckon he stays attacked.”

NOT HOW WE DO A FIRST DATE

“THIS IS POSSIBLY,” Hayden told Luke, “the most embarrassing episode of my life. It’s got competition, but still.”

Where was he while making this confession? On a gurney in a wailing ambulance, that was where, with an ambo beside him and Luke sitting on a bench opposite.

“Why?” Luke asked.

“Why? *Why?* Let’s see. Because I stink of vomit, just to get that one out of the way. Because I’ve just been bashed again, but this time with extra drama and humiliation. Because you ruined your evening coming to my rescue, and now you’re going to be spending it in hospital. Oh, and possibly because you got hit yourself, and it was my fault.”

“First,” Luke said, “I’ve stunk of vomit more times than I care to think about, and even when I didn’t, somebody else always did. Second, you didn’t ruin my evening, and I’ve spent heaps of time in hospital. Heaps of time visiting mates in hospital, for that matter. And hit? You call that hit?” He laughed. “Nah, mate, that wasn’t ‘hit.’ Who was that bloke?”

Hayden glanced at the ambos. “Tell you later.”

“What, because we’re gay?” Luke had a spot of color high up on each cheekbone, but he was sitting solid, hands on his knees. The way, Hayden imagined, he’d sit on the bench waiting to go into the game, if he ever did sit on the bench. Hayden was guessing it didn’t happen often. “I came out. People are going to know I’m gay.”

“That’s right. You ... you did.” Hayden was getting another wave of prickly sweat, and with it, another wave of nausea. “Going to be ... sick again,” he managed to get out, and the ambo held an expandable blue plastic tubular thing for him to retch into while Hayden thought, *Good thing I don’t fancy you, mate, or I’d be even more humiliated than I already feel.*

The ambulance was still turning corners and wailing, so they weren’t there yet. Hayden wondered dimly where they were going, hoped it wasn’t his dad’s hospital, and decided he didn’t care. He just wanted to lie down on a bed that didn’t move.

It was the hospital, then. Yes, his dad’s, Hayden saw as he was wheeled into it with Luke following behind, but orthopedic surgeons didn’t tend to work all hours, so his dad was likely to be at home and to stay there, nursing his grievances at the sad preponderance of rugby players in his kids’ lives and possibly wondering where he’d gone wrong. Or, more likely, wondering where Hayden’s mum had gone wrong.

After that, there was a CT scan, a bit more retching, some more cold, prickly, clammy skin and the feeling of the ground dropping away from under your stomach, and Luke sitting by the narrow bed in the ED, wiping Hayden’s forehead and mouth one more time with a facecloth, then handing him a plastic cup with ice chips.

Hayden said, “You can go home. Honestly. This is too dull for words. Also, I wasted all that fabulous dinner.”

Luke said, “Shut up. And give me your hand.”

“What?” Hayden would have sat up and stared at him, but he didn’t feel like it.

“Your hand,” Luke repeated. “Give it to me.”

Hayden did it, possibly because Luke was one of those commanding fellas. Which, all right, was possibly attractive. Luke took it, laid his fingers and then his thumb across the inside of his wrist, then began to rub the thumb in a circle.

“Uh ...” Hayden said, “I’m not feeling all that sexy at the moment. Can’t believe you’re finding me attractive, either, no matter how much rugby you’ve played.”

Luke smiled a little. “Acupressure. For the nausea.”

“Oh.” Maybe it was helping, or maybe it just felt nice. Soothing, possibly. “I’m trying to remember the last time anybody held my hand.”

“Hasn’t happened much to me, either,” Luke said. “Never in public.”

“Other than your mum,” Hayden said. “Which was a long time ago, in my case. I’m over thirty, despite my youthful physique. Don’t look too closely around the eyes.”

“Not my mum,” Luke said. “Not that I recall.”

“Oh.” Hayden considered that. “Pretty bleak, then, your childhood.”

“Yeh. Pretty much. So who was that? Both of them.”

“The tall one was my ex. Who was cheating on me with the other one.”

“Ah. The reason you’re a bit touchy on the subject.”

“And it’s even worse than that,” Hayden said, because why not? “I wasn’t even the main attraction. I was the side piece, as it turned out. What’s that thing they say? Everybody should get to be the star in their own life? Not so much that time.”

“Never mind,” Luke said. “You can be the star in my show. I’m not much for shining.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hayden said. “I thought you did pretty well back there. Holding up both of them at once ... that was good. I’d have swooned, except, you know, I was already swooning.”

“Fella’s a wanker,” Luke said, and Hayden had to laugh.

“The other one’s on TV,” Hayden said. “The one who hit me. Soap star.”

“Ah,” Luke said. “Fancies himself.”

Which was when the two police came in, which meant Hayden had to make his statement. Which was fine, until they got to the part about why.

“The tall one was a partner,” he said reluctantly. “An ex.”

The cop stayed stoical and wrote it down. Well, he’d probably figured it out. Hayden wasn’t exactly butch, and Julian had practically written the book on “effete.” The cop said, “You may want to apply for a protection order, then.”

“He wasn’t the one who hit me,” Hayden said. “That was the new partner. Anyway, I’m a man. As you see.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the female cop said. “It’s called intimate partner violence, not violence against women. Hurts just as much for a man to be bashed. No sex-linked gene for pain.”

“Oh,” Hayden said. “Well, no, thanks. I doubt they’ll bother me again.”

“The one who hit you has been charged anyway,” she said, “as there was damage, and we have witnesses.”

“Did you recognize him?” Hayden asked. “Or did he tell you who he was? I’ll bet he told you who he was.”

“No,” she said. “He wasn’t keen on telling us who he was.”

“*Courtney Place*,” Hayden said.

“Oh.” She digested that. “I don’t watch the soaps. Probably be good for his image.”

“As long as they don’t mention the ‘gay’ bit,” Hayden said. “As we’re being open here.”

“The other one told us who *he* was,” the male cop said. “Related to Lord Somebody, he says.”

“Wanker,” Luke said.

The female cop didn’t smile, but the male one did, a bit. “He continues to say you were stalking him.”

“Yeh, well, I wasn’t,” Hayden said. “I was waiting for a mate, like I said. Him.” He’d have jerked his chin at Luke, but

his head still hurt, so he jerked a thumb instead. “I know him through my sister,” he added. No reason the “gay” part had to come into this where Luke was concerned. There was coming out, and then there was being sucked into the midst of a gay love triangle. In public. In New Zealand, the smallest, most curious place in the world. Worse, in New Zealand *rugby*, the ultimate home of manly men.

“Better to wait for the police,” the woman said, “than take matters into your own hands. Sir.”

“Which was why,” Luke said, “I didn’t hit either of them. I held onto them instead and waited for the police.”

“Better to let them go,” the woman said, “and tell us later. As they were known to the victim.”

“Yeh, nah,” Luke said. “I’m not much for letting things go.”

“Noticed that,” the male cop said. “All the same,” he added hastily at a look from the other one, “good that you left it to us.” He finished writing on his clipboard. “Well, that’s about it. If you’ll just read these over and sign.”

Luke read over his and signed his name. Hayden tried, but his eyes didn’t want to focus. Luke must have noticed, because he said, “I’ll read it to you.”

The female cop said, “We’ll ask that he read it himself. Procedure.”

Luke said, “Not with concussion. I’ll read it.” And did.

HAYDEN LAY BACK against that rubbish flat ED pillow when the cops had gone, looking white and exhausted. “They’re going to wonder whether you’re gay,” he told Luke, apparently thinking that he still had to be witty and charming. “I wasn’t sure how to create a diversionary smokescreen. Possibly beyond my capabilities at the moment.”

“I noticed you trying,” Luke said. “When you said the thing about knowing me through your sister.”

“Well, yeh,” Hayden said. “Best I could do. D’you think the doctor’s coming back soon? And this is so not the way to do a first date. Fairly uncomfortably vulnerable, in fact.”

The doctor walked in just then and said, “No brain bleed visible now, but you’ll want to keep an eye on your symptoms. If they don’t improve within the next couple of days, and definitely if they get any worse, ring your GP to arrange more tests. If it’s bad, come back here. A bleed can develop over time.” He handed over a paper. “Things to watch for. Do you have somebody to stay with you tonight? It would be better.”

“Oh.” Hayden didn’t glance at Luke. He extremely pointedly didn’t glance at him, in fact. “I can ask my sister.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Luke said. “I’ve had a fair few TBIs, know what to watch for.”

“I can—” Hayden said, and stopped.

“Good,” the doctor said. “You can go home, then, but take it easy for a few days.”

“No worries,” Hayden said. “I’m a lawyer. I just sit and type.”

“Maybe not tomorrow,” the doctor said.

“But I—” Hayden began.

“Not tomorrow,” Luke said. “Eat. Drink. Rest. Monday’s soon enough.”

“You sound like you know,” the doctor said.

“I should,” Luke said. “And I do.”

THE DADDY OF YOUR DREAMS

THEY TOOK an Uber to Hayden's place. It was in a modern apartment block off The Strand, with what Luke guessed an estate agent would call a "sea view": shipping cranes, stacked containers under security lights, and a behemoth of a car carrier unloading its endless stream of cheap, used compacts, which were rolling, *rattle-clunk*, *rattle-clunk*, *rattle-clunk*, down the ramp. He guessed it still counted, though, because the dark void behind the ship was surely Waitemata Harbour, and beyond it would be Rangitoto, Auckland's iconic volcanic-cone backdrop.

The apartment also had a marmalade cat in it, who came running up the second the door was open, talking and meowing for all he was worth. The cat began rubbing himself against Hayden's ankles, then started walking toward the kitchen alcove, looking back all the way and talking some more.

"George," Hayden said, with what Luke was guessing was about the last of his energy. "And it is not pathetic that I have a cat. I like him. Just now, he wants his tea. He has dry food, but he likes the canned kind best. High maintenance, possibly. A cat of refined tastes."

"He can wait a few minutes," Luke said.

"He's—" Hayden said.

"Where's the bedroom?" Luke asked.

"Flattering," Hayden said, "but possibly overly optimistic."

Luke said, “Never mind. Got to be over there,” and walked that way, hoping that Hayden would follow him. Fortunately, he did.

“The view reminds me a bit of Newcastle,” he told Hayden, once Hayden was finally sitting on the neatly made bed in the minuscule bedroom, which had no view at all, or even any windows, but did have an enormous framed poster of *Rent* hanging over the bed like a defiant two fingers up the bum of New Zealand masculinity.

“You’re meant to think it’s flash,” Hayden said, not lying back in the way Luke could tell he wanted to, the way Luke wished he would. “I’m thinking that comparison may be insulting. It has a sea view and a lovely deck.” The marmalade cat jumped into his lap, and Hayden’s hands closed on it. The cat butted his head up under Hayden’s chin, and Hayden took a deep breath and may have blinked back a few tears.

“I noticed,” Luke said, wishing Hayden would start getting undressed. “Nice kitchen as well. And excellent lobby.”

Hayden sighed. “I know. Not much character, possibly. I’ve got pictures hung and all, though, d’you notice? I’ve decorated in stylish black and white and all that. Also, it has a pool and a little gym. And a carpark. And I can walk to work. I’ve kept thinking I should try to buy a place, but—” He trailed off, and Luke thought he knew why. *Because I thought I’d be with somebody, and we’d choose it together.* Hayden was hopeful, apparently. Luke had always assumed he was on his own.

“Speaking of that,” Luke decided to say, “I’m going to get you settled here and feed the cat, and then I’ll go back for your car. No need to pay that overnight bill.”

Hayden closed his eyes and swore. “I have a monthly parking pass, but ... what time is it?”

Luke looked at his watch. “Eleven-fifteen.”

“Oh, bloody hell.” Hayden looked exhausted at the thought. “I *had* a monthly pass. Runs out at midnight. I

thought—good, because I wouldn't be tempted to spend the night.”

“Ah. The pass was because of the wanker.” Luke didn't touch the other part, but he filed it away. *Vulnerable, like you thought. Possibly like you.*

“Yeh,” Hayden said. “That's his garage. OK, that'd be good, if you're sure you don't mind. Otherwise, who knows, Trevor may decide to key my car. Or burn it. It would be beneath Julian's dignity, but Trevor? He could very well set it on fire and do a dance around it. Have you noticed that this is all my fault? Odd, but there you are. You go on, if you don't mind, and I'll feed George, then take a shower and climb into bed. I have a couch, if you like, but really—you don't need to stay, *or* to get the car. I'm fine. Just tired, and my head hurts. You got me home, so—thanks.”

That was heaps of talking for somebody in Hayden's shape. Luke considered. “On second thought, we could just leave it there for now, and I'll get it in the morning.”

“And pay the bill,” Hayden said. “I told you—I'm not a toy. I pay my own way.”

“You're bloody stubborn,” Luke said.

“Don't sound so surprised.” Hayden was still sitting up. “I need to brush my teeth. Take a shower. Burn these clothes. Get over my humiliation. We could have breakfast, if you like.”

Luke smiled. “I've definitely changed my mind. Car can wait. He won't key it. He knows that if he does, I'll find him and do him over, and I won't care. I live in France, and they're not going to extradite me over a spot of easily healed revenge. Let's get you out of these clothes and into the shower.”

“I can—” Hayden began.

“Nah, mate,” Luke said. “You can't. I'm going to unbutton your shirt now. Don't get excited, because I'm not.”

“Geez, thanks,” Hayden muttered, but he let Luke do it. When Luke started on the trousers, though, Hayden put his hand over Luke's. “I'll do it. And I'll get into the shower, too.

By myself. If you'll feed George—" He blinked. "Well ... I'll be grateful."

Luke wanted to say, *Who made you think that nobody would want to help you?* He didn't say it, because he was pretty sure he knew the answer. His parents. Men. Life. Hayden was nothing like him, and he was everything like him.

He went back to the kitchen and found the cans of cat food in a cupboard. The shower began to run, but the cat must have heard the can opener anyway, because he came running in so fast, he practically skidded to a stop in front of his dish, where he sat like a dog ready for his dinner and let out a few impatient meows as if to say, "I'm waiting here, mate." Luke put the dish down, and the cat put his paw on its edge and looked up at him.

"You can eat it," Luke told him. "I don't want it." The cat eyed him suspiciously, then bent his head and took a nibble before jerking bolt upright again and checking for an attack from the rear.

"Seriously," Luke said, "your horrible food is safe from me." Upon which the cat meowed and resumed his dinner, and Luke looked out a carton of eggs, finally ran a loaf of bread to earth in the freezer, made two cups of tea, and fixed a plate. The shower had stopped. Good. He took the plate and one of the mugs of tea into the bedroom with the cat padding behind, still talking up a storm as if he had Things To Say.

Hayden looked up, startled. He was standing in the middle of the room, hair wet, in a pair of sleep pants, holding a T-shirt. Luke was being nurturing—he hoped—but still ... Hayden looked *good*. Slim and strong. He may have made Luke's mouth water a bit when he pulled on that shirt.

Abs. He had abs himself, but they were a bit ... buried. By necessity, but still. Didn't mean he didn't appreciate the hell out of them on somebody else.

Nurturing, he reminded himself. "Brought you something to eat," he told Hayden. "Easy on the wonky stomach."

Hayden eyed the plate. “I don’t eat bread. And, yes, it was in my freezer, and I may also have had pizza last night. We’re glossing over that unfortunate episode. A moment of weakness.”

Luke set the plate down on the bedside table. “It’s Vogel’s soy and linseed, not a French pastry. Six grams of protein, heaps of fiber, the good kind of carbs, and no added sugar or preservatives. I’d eat it every day and twice on Sunday if I could get it, and I’m about as careful of my diet as it’s possible to be. Also, you didn’t get much out of that dinner.”

“Sausage roll, though,” Hayden said, but Luke could tell he was weakening.

“Doubt the sausage roll stuck, either,” Luke said. “I saw how much came out.”

Hayden groaned and sat on the bed again. “Thanks for reminding me. I needed that.” The cat jumped into his lap again, and he clutched it and kept on looking white and exhausted.

“Get in there,” Luke said.

Hayden tried to glare at him. It didn’t work. “If I’d wanted somebody to boss me around, I’d have invited Rhys over.”

“Yeh, well, you didn’t,” Luke said. “You invited me.”

“Not exactly,” Hayden said. “As I recall, you invited yourself.”

Luke sighed. “Get in bed. Eat your eggs. Turf me out in the morning, if you like, once you tell somebody else that you’ve had a TBI, so I don’t have to worry about you dying alone.”

Hayden got himself under the duvet, but of course, he had one more parting shot. “Who knew that the hot rugby player of my dreams would be so bloody maternal?” He picked up his mug of tea, which was at least a start, and the cat crawled onto his stomach, curled up, and got stuck into purring like he was motorized.

“That’s not maternal,” Luke said. “That’s the daddy of your dreams.”

“Fine,” Hayden muttered. “Be irresistible. If I ask you to sleep with me, can it be because I find you sexually enticing, not because I want somebody policing how much of my eggs and toast I eat?”

Luke smiled. One of the weirdest days of his life, and it kept taking yet another odd turn. All the same, it was better than most any day he’d had for months. “You need a cuddle?”

“Yes,” Hayden said. “All right? Bloody *yes*.”

“Then that,” Luke said, “is what you’ll get.”

HE TOA TAUMATA RAO

SO IT HADN'T BEEN EXACTLY the way Hayden had imagined his first few days would go with a man too good to be true.

It had been better.

Weirdly.

He hadn't done any more vomiting, for one thing. Always a plus. He'd fallen asleep surprisingly fast despite his headache, with the aid of a few Panadol. And, it must be confessed, with the aid of a bulky man in bed beside him, dressed in boxer briefs and T-shirt, whose body radiated more warmth than any beach.

First, though, Luke had given him the Panadol and told him to drink a glass of water. Hayden had objected, but only because he'd felt it was required. He'd been dozing even while Luke was in the shower, and once he'd come out, all thick thighs, chest, and biceps, and crawled in beside Hayden?

Yes, he'd fallen asleep. A waste of their first night, or the best first night ever. Hard to decide.

When he woke, Luke wasn't in bed, and neither was George. On the other hand, there was a lovely smell of bacon frying. Hayden thought, *I should get up. It's probably late. Also, I don't have bacon. How can I be smelling it?* But then he fell asleep again.

He woke to the pressure of somebody else on the bed. George, who'd jumped onto his chest and butted his head up under his chin, but somebody else, too. Luke, sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in rugby shorts and a different T-shirt

—a navy-blue one with the Adidas logo, exactly the same sort of thing Rhys wore, probably because he'd got it for free—saying, “Want to get up, or have breakfast in bed?”

“Now that,” Hayden said, “is what you'd call a hard question. I want to get up, or I should. What time is it?”

“Nine, about there,” Luke said.

“*Nine?*” Hayden sat up too fast and had to hold his head. “I need to phone the office.”

“Go on and do it, then,” Luke said. “And then have breakfast.”

“How are you dressed differently?” Hayden asked. “How do we have bacon?”

“Went to the hotel and changed. And bought bacon. At Countdown, in the Wynward Quarter. Know who I saw there?”

Hayden forgot about his head, and about the office, too. “You're joking.”

“Nah. Well, they lost their eggs and half their fruit and veg last night, didn't they.”

“What did they do?”

Luke smiled. “Scuttled out like they were the rats and I was the cat. Very nice. You going to do that restraining order?”

Hayden felt, somehow, better than he had for months. “I think I already have one.”

They went for a walk to the Wintergarden at the Domain after breakfast, strolling along the track beneath pohutukawa trees decked out for Christmas in their brilliant red candles of blossom, then looking at orchids and banana trees in the hothouse and a riot of pink and purple lupine in the seasonal greenhouse. After that, they had a coffee at the café, sitting in the shade of an umbrella amidst the cabbage trees, palms, and beds of yellow iris bright as the sun, and watching a mother duck followed by seven fuzzy babies swimming after her, the last duckling in line straggling a bit until the mum quacked her hurry-up order. All of it lazy and slightly guilty, like bunking off school, only better.

“I’m meant to be drafting a contract for Fonterra,” Hayden said, not wanting to drink his latte, because the barista had done a swan on it in foam and it was too pretty to destroy.

Luke raised his eyebrows and took a bite of date scone, upon which he’d slathered a truly astonishing amount of butter. “Thirty percent of the world’s dairy exports, and the biggest company in En Zed. Your firm does their work, eh.”

“I know why *I* know that,” Hayden said. “How do *you* know that?”

“I’m a South Islander.”

“Not now, you’re not.”

“Close enough. So your firm does their work, and you do their contracts.”

“Well, this one, anyway. Not the senior partner, of course. Just assigned to draft it up.” Hayden felt a little shy. Nobody ever thought his work was interesting. Well, they had a point—it *was* mostly commercial contracts. He couldn’t help it, though. He liked the precision of contracts, the way you had to use all your skill to get them exactly right. Possibly like accountancy, and very few people thought accountants were sexy. You never heard of accountant fetish wear, for example.

“Mm,” Luke said. “Sounds to me like you’re somebody there all the same. But then, I knew that.” He ate another bite of scone, and Hayden watched abstractedly as the yellow butter—New Zealand butter, churned from the milk of cows that grazed all year round in lush pastures—he knew that because of the Fonterra contract, but it would be hard to miss if you had eyes and looked around you—melted and pooled over the flakes of rich pastry, studded with hefty chunks of date.

Why were the things you wanted most always so bad for you?

Luke must have seen him looking, because he held it out and said, “Have a bite.”

“Oh. No. Thanks.”

“Why not?” Luke asked.

“Uh ...” Hayden couldn’t catch hold of his thoughts. They would be there, nearly in his grasp, and then they’d skitter away again. It was extremely disconcerting. He had focus. He had analytical skills. That was nearly *all* he had. He clutched the edge of the wooden table, felt its solid warmth under his hands, and fought down the sudden panic.

“What?” Luke asked, his eyes sharpening.

“Nothing. I’m fine.” Hayden took a sip of coffee, then remembered the swan and got a painful wrench. Because of his *coffee*.

There was Luke’s hand, over his again. “What?”

“My brain’s not working too well.” Hayden tried to laugh, and found himself letting go of the edge of the table. Somehow, his hand turned, and now, Luke was holding it. In public. In Auckland. The courage of that moment ... something tore loose inside Hayden’s heart. He felt the tears welling up, and couldn’t stop them.

“It’s all right.” Luke’s voice was deep as the sea, strong as the tide. “It’s a TBI. That’s what they do. That’s why you’re giving that clever brain of yours a rest.”

“Does it ...” Hayden had to take a breath. “Come back?”

Luke smiled, just a little. “Well, so far. Least I don’t seem too stupid yet. Course, I’m not a brilliant contracts lawyer, just doing some pushing and shoving in the front row.”

“And captaining England.” Hayden had control of himself again. “As a prop. Are props captains? Isn’t your head usually ...”

Luke smiled some more. “Up somebody’s bum? Nah. You’re thinking of the third row. Dunno why, but I am. Have a bite of scone, or tell me why you won’t.”

“If my brain is Swiss cheese,” Hayden said, trying to make a joke of it, “all I’ve got is my lithe body and pretty face.”

“Ah. You think that’s why I like you.”

“Well, yes. It generally is. Could this conversation be a little more squirm-worthy? Expose my unaccustomed vulnerability a little more? This is our third day, or possibly our fourth, depending how you count. We’re meant to be in a fog of lust, not talking about me getting fat and stupid.”

This time, Luke actually laughed, which was something, at least. Of course, he was laughing at Hayden, so ... “Nah,” he said, the white scars around his eyes crinkling with the skin as he kept smiling. “I’m in a fog of lust, no worries. How about you?”

“Well, yes,” Hayden said. “I can’t think, of course, and I can’t move my head very fast, which makes me unsuitable for recreational pursuits, but what’s left of my brain is definitely —”

He broke off, because a kid was standing at the table. Nine or ten, about Isaiah’s age, with an expression on his face like Casey’s habitual one. Determination, you’d call that. He had an extremely round head. “Hello,” Hayden said, and Luke slipped his hand out of his and half-turned to the kid.

Who wasn’t looking at Hayden. He was looking at Luke. Fixedly. “My mum says you can’t really be Luke Armstrong,” he said, “even though we *live* in England, and I’ve watched you heaps, and I said you were. She says maybe you’re some other rugby player, but probably not, because you’re eating scones, but *I* said—”

“Well, yeh,” Luke said, “I am. Scones and all. You’ve got a discerning eye, eh.”

The boy blinked pale-blue eyes. “A what?”

“You’re a good spotter,” Luke said. “Your mum doesn’t know I’m a Kiwi, maybe.”

“But you’re not really,” the kid said. “You were born in England. In Newcastle, which is still England, even though it’s not London. I’m from London. But your mum is English even if it’s Newcastle, which is why you can play for England, even though you’re usually in France. Why do you play in France if you’re English?”

“I like France,” Luke said. “But my dad’s a Kiwi. If you know all that, you must’ve heard.”

“He is a *bit*,” the kid said. “Not for ages, not when you were born. Why didn’t *he* stay in England? Lots of rugby players from New Zealand play in England. Some do from South Africa, too. Some do from Australia, even, though my dad says they’re not usually as good as the ones from New Zealand and South Africa. But not you.”

“No,” Luke said solemnly. “I don’t. It happens, eh. I’m guessing you play as well, as much as you know about it. What’s your position?”

“Loosehead prop,” the kid said. “Because I’m a bit fat.”

Luke nodded and didn’t smile, though Hayden thought he wanted to. “Good choice. Working on your running and your strength, too?”

“Yeh,” the kid said. “But *I* think I should just work on my eating, so I can get bigger and push people over better.”

“Got to run, too, even if you’re a prop,” Luke said. “And you can push people even better if you add some muscle.”

“OK,” the kid said dubiously, as if this might be some trick designed to keep him from rugby glory. “But *you’re* a bit fat, too, and I saw you pushing a lorry tire down a field. Turning it over, like, which the man said meant you had ‘incredible strength and fitness.’ That’s what he said, even though you’re —”

“A bit fat. And eating scones,” Luke agreed. “On a bit of a holiday, is why.”

“But it’s the middle of the *season*,” the kid said, looking scandalized.

“Well, that’s the beauty of being a prop,” Luke said. “You’ve got room for a scone or two. Now, if you were a halfback, had to sprint around the paddock the whole game barking like a terrier, scones would be out of the question.”

The kid nodded. “That’s why I’m glad I’m a prop. Cake is my favorite.”

“Want a photo,” Luke asked, “before you go back to your mum?”

“Yes, please,” the boy said. “Because otherwise, my dad will say it wasn’t really you, and I must have imagined it. He’s always saying that. I don’t know why, because I’m not good at imagining.”

This time, Luke *did* smile, and said, “Go get your mum’s phone, then, and we’ll do one. And then I need to get back to my scone. Otherwise, my mate here will scoff it all.”

WHEN HE’D DISPATCHED the kid, whose name was Roger—a prop name if he’d ever heard one—Luke turned back to Hayden and said, “You never did tell me why you wouldn’t eat a bite of my scone.”

Hayden said, “Well, obviously, because I long to be a terrier sprinting around the paddock like a madman and barking orders at everyone, and Roger says they can’t have scones.” Making it light again, as if the vulnerable moment hadn’t happened.

“Think he’ll like me as much when he finds out I’m gay?” Luke asked. He tried to make it light, too, but it wasn’t easy.

“I don’t know,” Hayden said. “Why did you decide to do it? Why didn’t you wait, at least until you retired?”

Luke looked down at the remains of his coffee, swirled them in the porcelain cup. “Dunno, really. I just couldn’t hold it in anymore. I couldn’t lie anymore. It was making me numb. Separating me from myself, I guess.” He tried to smile, and couldn’t. “Makes me sound like I’ve got some kind of mental illness. I’m pretty sure that’s what my dad will say.”

“Ah.” Hayden was the one eyeing him much too closely now. Luke much preferred that the vulnerability stay on the other side of the table. If he could have sex with Hayden, it would be easier. He’d be in control then. Gentle, because he tried hard to be gentle, but in control. As it was ...

Hayden went on, “Day after tomorrow. On the other hand, it’s going to be a big wedding, and your brother will be there. Zora and Rhys, too. And Nyree, of course, though she’ll be a bit busy. How was Marko about it when he found out?”

Luke shrugged. “Hard to tell what Marko’s thinking. If he had a real problem, though, he’d say so. Not a very devious fella, Marko.”

“What’s he like to play against?” Hayden asked. Possibly steering the conversation away from the shoals. Hayden wasn’t devious, but he was ... tactful, Luke guessed. Socially skilled. Something like that. Something he wasn’t.

“Like you’d imagine,” Luke said. “Battering ram. Heaps of mongrel in his game. Tackles like a bloody locomotive, and is none too gentle about it.”

“So he and Nyree are ...”

“Well suited,” Luke said. Yes, definitely a better topic.

At that moment, Hayden’s phone rang. He was pulling it out of his pocket when *Luke’s* phone rang. Luke looked at it.

Marko. Speaking of the battering ram.

He couldn’t help it. He got a lurch of the stomach, like it was flipping over, and not in a good way. Marko didn’t want him there. Afraid it would spoil the day if his dad got wind of the gay thing. Which was fair. More than fair. It was Nyree’s day.

And if it was Marko who had the problem?

Luke would do what was best for Nyree, he guessed. He’d make an excuse. He’d go back to Paris. His life wasn’t here, and his family was ... a bit fractured. That was all right. He was used to it, and everyone lived in the world alone, as far as he could see. They just pretended they didn’t.

Harden up. Be a man. Hayden was talking to somebody, being bright and cheerful and funny again, like he wasn’t concussed and hadn’t been bashed. Luke was willing to bet nobody but him would ever know.

More than one way to be strong, he guessed.

There was a Maori thing his stepmother Miriama had used to say. “He toa taumata rao.”

Courage has many resting places.

He answered the phone.

CHANGE OF PLAN

MARKO SAID, “Change of wedding plans, mate,” and Luke thought, *Here we go*, and tried not to care.

It was his *sister*.

That’s why you have to take it.

Oh. Marko was saying, “My grandmother’s pretty crook. Down in Tekapo. That’s—”

“I’m from Otago,” Luke reminded him. Tekapo. Barely a dot on the map in southern Canterbury, but a wilder, more scenic place it was hard to find. The Mackenzie Country. The high country, in the shadow of Aoraki Mount Cook, beside a glacial lake of an astonishing cloudy turquoise. Barren, some would say, but a place where your soul could find peace if you were a quiet man. An Otago man, and somehow, his dad notwithstanding, Paris notwithstanding, he was still that.

He thought about that, because he wasn’t sure what was coming next.

“Oh. Right.” Marko laughed. “Sorry. Of course you are. Things are a bit fraught at the moment. Anyway—the flash wedding in Northland’s out, and we’re doing it at my parents’ instead, so my grandmother can be there. Much smaller group, obviously, mostly family, and whatever we can cobble together for the rest of it. Hoping you can still come, because it’d mean a lot to Nyree. It’ll mean last-minute bookings, of course, and we don’t know yet where everybody will sleep. Not going to be much accommodation available just before

Christmas, so it's likely to be a tent. Fair warning. Sheep farm, also, though you won't have to sleep with them."

"OK," Luke said. He was standing at the edge of the patio, looking at the ducks on the pond. A mum, followed by her babies. Calm on the surface, and paddling like mad underneath. A bit like him.

"Good," Marko said.

"What can I do to help?" Luke asked.

Marko exhaled. "Round up the drink, maybe. My mum will have the food sorted, she says. She'll borrow chairs from every neighbor around, and my family do music, so we're good there. I haven't rung Kane yet, but Nyree's probably talked to Victoria, as she's the maid of honor. Not sure, honestly."

"I'll ring him," Luke said. "We'll bring the drink. Just tell me what time the thing starts, and how many people. Beer, wine, champagne, fizzy stuff, water. About like that?"

"Yeh. Thanks," Marko said.

"Your grandmother OK?"

Marko exhaled. "Not sure. Pneumonia, and she's old. I didn't know what to do, tell you the truth. Nyree said, though ..." He stopped, and Luke thought his voice might not be entirely steady when he went on. "That what matters is that we get married with the people we care about around us. That the rest of it was just a party."

"Nyree's all right," Luke said.

"That's why I'm marrying her," Marko said, which made sense.

Luke hesitated, then said it. "Only thing—I was thinking I might come with Hayden, as you gave me a plus-one. If you don't have room, though—"

"Long as you don't mind sharing that tent," Marko said. "But I assume that's OK." Not sounding fussed about it.

Harden up and say it. “My dad could hear about me, one way or another, and I don’t want to spoil your day. Koti James knows, and he’s your best man, I hear. Kane, too, obviously, though he’s not going to talk. But if it’s small, there’ll be no avoiding Grant, and who knows what Nyree will decide it’s good to say.”

Marko actually laughed. “You’re not wrong. Never mind. He can choose which one of us to hate more, that’s all. Spoilt for choice, eh. Also, Kane *will* be there, and Rhys and Zora are still coming. Zora’s doing the flowers. Again, smaller scale, but Nyree wants flowers.”

“Yeh,” Luke said. “She’s a colorful person.”

“Too right. So that’s reinforcements, possibly, as Rhys Fletcher may be the only man who can shut Grant up. He shut Hayden’s dad down pretty well the other night, and he’s an arrogant bastard.”

“Grant doesn’t much care if there’s an audience,” Luke said. “Or that it’s an occasion.”

“Mate,” Marko said. “I played for him for almost ten years. He can’t be worse than I’ve already seen. Anyway, who bloody cares? It’s my wedding day. Nothing he does is going to spoil that.”

WHEN HAYDEN RANG OFF, Luke was still on the phone, his back turned. Hayden couldn’t read that back, and when Luke rang off and walked toward him, he couldn’t read his face, either.

“Interesting news,” Hayden said, as soon as Luke sat down again. “Seems I’m going to be a wedding celebrant. Fortunately, I know how.”

Luke stared at him. “What?”

“Nyree and Marko,” Hayden said. “Oh—wedding’s changed. It’s going to be in Tekapo.”

“I know,” Luke said. “Just got off the phone with Marko. But you’re—”

“Yeh,” Hayden said. “A celebrant. Hopefully I can remember my lines by then. Or even read. Otherwise, you’ll have to hiss my cues at me like a prompter in a bad grammar-school play.” He felt a bit giddy. That could just be concussion, of course.

“Why are you a wedding celebrant?” Luke asked.

“Because when the law changed, not everybody would marry the queer folk. I realize I’m not exactly an advert for wedded bliss, but I *am* a lawyer, and I do have some friends, so I decided I could marry them. Well, not *marry* them, but officiate. I’m not a polygamist, no worries.”

He was babbling. That was because Luke was looking ... some way he couldn’t tell. “And I realize it’s your sister,” Hayden went on, “and that you care that somebody does it right. But I’m pretty good at marrying people. I think I believe in it, though I don’t know why I should. Astonishing, really. Anyway, Nyree told Zora they didn’t have anyone to do it when she rang to ask her about bringing flowers down there, and it’s in two days. And just because I seem frivolous—”

“Hayden.” It was a bit abrupt, and Hayden’s head jerked up, which hurt. He put a hand to it as Luke went on. “No. It’s just ... I was hoping you’d come, I guess. I’m surprised, that’s all.”

“Taking a date to a wedding is normally a big step,” Hayden said. “We’ll excuse ourselves from that. No expectations here. I’ve married heaps of people. Hasn’t made me take the plunge yet.”

Luke smiled. “Nah. But you’re going to be sleeping in a tent this time. That may be new.”

LUKE AND HAYDEN didn’t have head-banging sex that night, either. Hayden still looked bloody fragile, and by three o’clock

that afternoon, Luke sent him off to take a nap.

Half of him thought, *What do you think you're doing here, mate? It's about a week until Christmas, and that's when you're leaving—for the place you actually live. And if you want a discreet fling, you're in the wrong place.* But his heart wasn't listening. He'd never been good at being anyplace but where he was, and where he was just now was ... here. So he turned some music on low—Paris jazz, the smoothest thing you could possibly listen to, and the most romantic, too, for his money—read his book some more, and eventually, as Hayden slept on, pulled out some more of the groceries he'd bought that morning in a completely unaccustomed and unreasonable moment of foolish hope, and set to work. Because, for one thing, every time he came back to New Zealand, he remembered the things he liked about it, and one of them was food.

Why should he be comfortable here? He'd lived his life in thirds: first England, then New Zealand, then France, and most of his time in New Zealand had been with his dad. And all the same, there was something about it he liked. The mountains, maybe. The humor. The fact that you could wear shorts to a restaurant.

He gave up thinking about it, because thinking about feelings wasn't his best thing. Instead, he made a protein and fruit smoothie to tide him over, and then he caramelized onions, cubed and roasted four different colors of kumara—New Zealand had the best veg in the world—had to do with the soil, he guessed—and, when the cubes had been through their own caramelization in the oven, whisked together tahini, wholegrain mustard, olive oil, maple syrup, sea salt, and a bit of juiced orange into a dressing.

Hayden came out of the bedroom at last, still looking tired in that way you did when you were recovering from a head injury, and Luke said, "Ten minutes till dinner. You could find us a movie, maybe." While Hayden did it, looking like that was about the limits of his powers, Luke coated his four salmon filets—one for Hayden and three for him—in a mix of spices and seared them in a pan while he tossed the cooled

kumara and caramelized onions with the dressing and two bags of tender, tiny-leaved rocket with just enough kick to it. He toasted and buttered a few slices of that Vogel's bread, because his calorie counts had been pretty low today, arranged two plates and one mixing bowl—his salad wouldn't fit on the plate—and brought it all over to the coffee table.

“Shocking to the French,” he told Hayden, “eating in front of the TV, but I may be an uncultured fella. You ate fish last night, so I thought you might like this.”

Hayden put a fork through the blackened crust of the salmon, uncovered the tender pink flakes beneath, and sighed. “I may've died after all last night. You'd better be bad in bed, because otherwise, you're too good to be true.”

Luke smiled. “You may find out. Although there's a tent in our future.”

“Yes,” Hayden said. “The tent. You could kiss me tonight, though. I could even touch you at last. We could be gentle, I guess. Go slow. What d'you think?”

“I think,” Luke said, “that it'd be good to go slow.”

They went, in fact, *very* slow. That was because Hayden fell asleep before the movie was over. Which meant another night with Luke's arm over Hayden's chest and Hayden pulled up close against him.

Hayden went to sleep right away. Luke lay awake and ached, and tried not to think about Sunday.

A BAD IDEA ALL AROUND

HAYDEN WOKE EARLY. At least there was that, he thought as he sat up in bed and his head didn't actually swim. It didn't feel *good*, but he could form a somewhat coherent thought. Which was, *Where'd he go?*

No smell of bacon this morning, and no sign of a living soul in the apartment except George, who was, at the moment, *not* draped over Hayden's head like a hat. That was because Hayden had dislodged him when he'd sat up, which George had protested loudly just before he'd jumped off the bed and trotted off. After a minute, he came back, meowing like he had a knot in his tail.

"You can wait five minutes," Hayden told him. "You're about one kG away from qualifying as a sumo wrestler." Upon which George let out a series of grumbles that clearly translated to, *I am a starving wraith of a cat, and I'm calling the SPCA.*

"I hate to tell you, but you're going to be alone for nearly two days starting tomorrow," Hayden said. "Nothing but water and kibble. I'm expecting a picket line of cats out on the pavement." He did, though, go into the kitchen and open a can of food. He was possibly a sucker. Also, he was trying not to wonder where Luke was. *Letting you sleep, that's where. Off living his life, which he has every right to do. If you get needy and clingy, you know he'll be gone. Insouciant, that's you.* He could be insouciant now that his head was better.

He hoped.

George was already scoffing the disgusting mixture—trout, the smelliest and his favorite— when Hayden saw the note.

Meeting Kane to work out. Back around 11. I fed the cat.

LUKE WAS FEELING BETTER. More settled. Not because he'd had a chat with his brother, because he hadn't, but because they'd done what they always did instead, which was go for a run up every hill around, including three times fast up and down the steps to Mount Eden, feet flying. Agility was important.

Unfortunately, now that he wasn't nine, Kane was faster. Either that, or Luke had got unfit as hell in a few days. Afterward, though, they ran back to Les Mills in Britomart and started stacking weights on barbells, and the Earth was back on its axis again.

This was more like it. Three sets of kettlebell jumps, power cleans, clap push-ups, and much more, followed by minutes of side and front planks, and this time, it was Luke setting the pace. Always his preference. After that, it was on to pullups with a weight chained to the belt around your waist, and then the bench press. When Luke had added the last weight to the bar, locked it down, and was lying on his back, Kane asked, "How long have you been benching a hundred ninety kGs?"

"A while," Luke answered. "Ready?"

"If you are," Kane said, which was what passed for banter between them, and spotted him.

Luke was on his third set, pushing hard through the final reps, when Kane asked, "You meeting Hayden here?"

Luke focused. Three more. Up fast, down slow, with Kane's big hands hovering just under the bar, but no worries. If your arms weren't shaking, it wasn't hard enough, that was

all. When he'd finished and Kane had slotted the bar again, Luke sat up, wiped his head with a towel, and asked, "What?"

"Because he just went past," Kane said. "Shove off. I need to do mine."

Luke stood up, but said, "He can't have done."

"Why not?" Kane asked. "Looked fit enough to me. Vic goes here, too. She doesn't like it, but she goes. Does some sort of weird class that's ballet, but not, and uses the elliptical machine and maybe the recumbent bike. Very slowly. Heaps of people work out even though they hate it. Odd, but there you are, people can be odd. Odd that they don't like it, or odd that they do it anyway, whichever. Now, Nyree ... I don't think she's ever met a barbell. Seems to suit Marko OK, though, and he's a pretty fit fella."

Luke wasn't listening. He was at the door, looking down the passage. A couple of women in spandex, holding water bottles, but no Hayden.

Of course it wouldn't be Hayden. He had concussion. He went back into the weight room, full of the clank of iron and the grunts of men who thought making noise meant everybody would be impressed.

Kane asked, "You spotting me, bro?"

"In a minute," Luke said. "Why did you think it was him?"

"Because it *was* him."

"You've seen him twice."

"Yeh, so I know what he looks like. Why, isn't he meant to be here?"

"No," Luke said. "He's not."

Kane had sat up on the bench, finally, because Luke wasn't coming back. A fella who'd been grunting loudly nearby for no discernible reason hovered as if to say, "You planning on getting on with it anytime soon, mate?" Possibly he didn't like the thought of asking that of the two of them, though, because he went over to the squat rack instead.

“Bro,” Kane said, ignoring him, “I’m not saying I’m good at relationships, because I’m rubbish, but I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to be jealous. Controlling is a thing. A *bad* thing, especially if you’re that much bigger and stronger. You could ask Vic. She has opinions about the subject. Prosecutor, you know.”

“I’m not—” Luke stopped, because Hayden hadn’t shared with anyone about the TBI, which meant he wouldn’t want Luke to. “Never mind. Right. I’ll spot you for this, and then I’m going to wrap it up.”

It was all he could do to do it, and then to spend the time to rack the heavy weights again. Kane said, “Want to go for a coffee?”

“What? No.” Luke was nearly out the door.

“Oh. OK.” Kane hesitated, then said, “You’re being odd. I’m saying that, because we’re trying to share, or something. Be brothers, I guess.”

“Right, then,” Luke said. “Come with me. I’ll probably be going for a coffee with you after all, because that can’t have been Hayden.”

Except that it was. Luke found him in one of the brightly lit, mirrored rooms where they did classes. Classes always seemed odd to him, full as they were of happy shouting, bright chat that would take your focus away from the matter at hand, and people dressed to impress for an activity that was only about getting fit, but they were always full anyway. No surprise that the world wasn’t run by his rules.

This particular class was led by a slim bloke in tiny shorts—that was a look—and a singlet, who was standing up on a riser, a little microphone at his mouth to allow him to be heard over the pumping music. He had a barbell over his shoulders and was doing lunges while making jokes, which was fine. The thirty or so people in the class—half of them men, but let’s say mostly men more like Hayden than Luke—were following along, laughing at the jokes and making their own. Also fine, except that one of them *was* Hayden.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Luke said.

“What?” Kane asked.

Luke was already opening the door. Kane came in with him, but Luke barely noticed.

The instructor said, without missing a beat on his lunges, “Grab a spot at the back, boys.”

Luke ignored him, too, and walked between the rows of lungers. No point trying to be inconspicuous, because Hayden was in the front row, and anyway, neither Luke nor Kane was built for subtlety. Luke got there and said, “Stop. You’re done.” Forcefully, maybe, because the music was loud. These people might be getting strong, though he was dubious, with those rubbish weights, but they were also risking hearing damage.

Kane was still with him, for some reason, which probably made too much of both of them for this space. Bit cramped anyway, with everybody lunging forward and back holding those bars. Unsafe, really.

Hayden stopped lunging, at least, and said, “What?”

“Contraindicated,” Luke said. “After concussion. Also stupid.” He shouldn’t have said that part, he realized instantly. He needed to dial it back, but he’d practically had to carry Hayden to bed last night, and that ambulance ride hadn’t been the most relaxed time of his life, either.

The instructor was ignoring them and going on to squats now. “Pump it up!” he was urging. “Let’s get those bootys *toned!*” Not something you heard in a rugby training session very often. Neither was the “Whoo-hoo!” from the class that followed it. Very little “whoo-hooing” in Luke’s everyday existence.

Hayden was starting to do squats now, the bar over his shoulders. No hope for it. Luke reached out, plucked it off, and set it on the floor.

Now, the instructor *did* say something. What he said was, “*Excuse me,*” in perhaps the gayest tone ever.

The man next to Hayden said, “Butch boyfriend, honey,” and kept squatting.

Hayden said, “This is not all right. I’m working out. I read an—”

“Yeh, no,” Luke said, then added, “Come outside, and I’ll tell you why not.” You were meant to talk things over. Right. He’d do that.

Another man was edging in from the other side. “I’m not saying I could take you,” he told Luke, “but I’ll have a go. If we all piled in ... Come on, you lot.” He looked around and bellowed it into the sudden silence, because the instructor had switched off the music. A little knot of men, sporting the kind of grooming that told you they were probably not the straightest arrows in the quiver, crowded around, and somebody pushed Luke in the back, or tried to. He felt it, he just didn’t move.

Kane said, “Oi.” Mildly, but he also put a hand out and was probably pushing back, and since Kane had a hand the size of a rugby ball, that would be some push.

The instructor hopped off the platform and hustled out. Calling for security, Luke guessed. This was even more stupid than the stoush amongst the fruit and veg, because this time, he was the one starting it. He also had the feeling the cops would be here soon. Again.

He ignored everybody else and told Hayden, “You’re hurting yourself.”

“I read a thing,” Hayden said.

“A thing?” Luke asked. “What thing?”

“I read a thing, too,” the man who’d objected first said. “About abusive partners.”

Kane said, “Luke? Abusive?”

“Honey,” the man told him, “take several steps back.”

“Hang on,” Kane said. “I’m sure we can—”

Luke was still ignoring him. “What thing?” he asked Hayden.

Hayden was turning red now. “It *said* that exercise was good for ... you know. What happened. After a couple of days of recovery.”

“After *what* happened?” the objecting man asked. “The mind doesn’t exactly boggle, because we can all see, but—you know, sweetie,” he told Hayden, “you can say no. Yes, he *looks* lovely and fierce, but is he, really? If he hurts you? And the other one, too? I know they say there’s no correlation of size with, well, *size*, and everybody *thinks* they want it, but when you come down to brass tacks ...”

Luke was sure he was so red by now, his head was about to burst into flames. Kane looked gobsmacked. Getting an education, Luke guessed.

“He has concussion!” Luke said, because there was no other way out of this.

“Oh, sweetie,” the objecting man said. “No. Not if he hits you in the *head*.”

“I did not,” Luke said through his teeth, “hit him in the head. Somebody else did.”

“The article said,” Hayden told him, “that moderate exercise after two days of rest was helpful in regaining cognitive function. It’s been almost two days, and the wedding is tomorrow! I can’t be stupid for it!”

“You’re never *marrying* him,” the objecting man said. “Gurl, it’s intervention time.”

“No,” Hayden said. “I’m marrying two other people. I mean, I’m not *marrying* them, but I’m—”

Luke said, “The article probably said that an individualized, progressive sub-symptom-threshold aerobic exercise program was helpful in regaining cognitive function and returning to play. That means a treadmill. A *monitored* treadmill. I’d have been happy to help you with that. All you had to do was ask.”

“I’m doing an aerobic exercise program!” Hayden said. “All right, also some strength training, but it *is* an individualized, progressive program, because it’s my program that I’ve worked up to. I’m not an idiot.”

“A treadmill,” Luke repeated, “or a stationary bike. This is too much. Is your head hurting?”

“Well, yes,” Hayden said, “a bit. But—”

“Was it hurting when you started?” Luke asked.

“Well, no,” Hayden said. “Not as much. But I’ve been pushing it a bit, so—”

Security was here. Brilliant. Luke could tell, because it was a man in a black T-shirt with “Security” printed on it in white, in case you’d missed the overdeveloped upper body. He’d skipped a fair few leg days, Luke noticed, which meant he’d go over like a ninepin the moment you gave him a push. Power came from the lower body.

“We’re just going,” Luke told him. “He’s been overdoing it, that’s all, after his injury, and as I’m his, uh ...”

“Trainer,” Kane said. “We’re his trainers. Saw him in here and had to pull him out. Contraindicated. With his injury.”

“You can *not* disrupt my class,” the instructor said from behind the security bloke. “I don’t care *who* you are.” His shorts really were short. Also red. He added, “People pay for this. People *plan* for this. *I* plan for this.”

“Right,” Luke said. “Apologies. We’ll just put this bar back and go.”

“I think you’d better leave, mate,” the security guard said. A bit late, but Luke reckoned he had to earn his money. He wasn’t trying to grab Luke, but then, that would’ve been a bad idea.

“Yeh,” Luke said. “I agree. Cheers. Talk to you about it at home?” he asked Hayden.

“Fine,” Hayden said. “I’m searching for a witty comeback, but I don’t have one, so ... fine. Let’s go. But I will note that I’m desperately embarrassed, so cheers for that.”

“Yeh, sorry,” Luke said. “I should’ve thought, probably.”

“You think?” Hayden asked.

“You too, mate,” the security bloke told Kane.

“Yeh,” he said. “I’ve had my workout anyway. Sorry,” he told the room. “Carry on. Looks like, uh, heaps of fun. The music, and the, uh, shouting and all. Great class. We’re just going.”

“Aren’t you—” the security guard started to say. Not to Luke. To Kane.

“No,” Kane said. “Never met the fella. I get that a lot, though.” And fled.

A HARD BARGAIN

“ALL RIGHT,” Hayden said, when they were out on the pavement again. Time to assert himself. “Why? That’s my regular Saturday morning class, for your information. My support group, you could say. The crème de la crème of queer Auckland, we like to think, and are they ever going to have questions. Also, I think you just outed yourself,” he told Kane.

Kane looked startled. “No, I didn’t. I said we were your trainers.”

“Excuse me,” Hayden said. “Nobody is going to believe that.”

“Oh.” Kane digested that for a moment. “Good thing I don’t live in Auckland, then.”

Hayden wanted to tell him that Christchurch wasn’t exactly halfway around the globe and that Kane wasn’t exactly anonymous, given that he was probably pushing six foot eight, had biceps like young trees, and wore black-rimmed specs, but he didn’t. He was still embarrassed as hell, he was narky, and he was confused. When Luke had snatched that barbell away ... he didn’t know what he’d felt.

They hadn’t even slept together!

Kane said, “Well, I’ll be shoving off. See you at the airport tomorrow.”

Hayden didn’t say goodbye. Neither did Luke. He was still looking like a baffled and enraged bull. Possibly mostly baffled, but how could you tell? Luke said, when Kane was gone, “Your place, or my hotel. Choose.”

“No,” Hayden said.

“No?” Definitely a baffled bull.

“You can’t just haul me out of there and expect me to go with you! Where’d you go to relationship school? *No.*”

“Oh.” Luke seemed to consider that. “OK. What do we do, then?”

Hayden sighed. “My place. I need home turf.”

“OK.” Luke set off, then, seeming to realize Hayden wasn’t with him, turned back. “Not good to walk?”

Hayden put both hands to his head. Not because it hurt, though it did, a bit. Because he wanted to laugh, and he also wanted to scream. “You are not in charge here,” he informed Luke.

“Oh.” Luke considered that. “Reckon I’m used to being in charge.”

“I noticed.”

“Right,” Luke said. “I wait for you to start walking, or what?”

“Well,” Hayden said, “that would be one idea.”

Luke did it. You had to give him credit. He didn’t talk, though. Not all the way up Beach Road, not through the lobby, not up in the lift, not down the passage to the apartment door. By the time Hayden was putting his key in the lock, he was so wound up, he was shaking.

They went inside, George came pelting up, meowing as if he’d been alone for days, and Hayden dropped his workout bag and said, “*Say something.*”

Luke said, “I thought I was meant to not be in charge.”

Hayden was sweaty. He was hot, because it had been sunny out there, and the class had felt extra hard. He was also nervous. Luke had sweated, too, because the back of his T-shirt was soaked, and his biceps and thighs were pumped like he’d blown them up. He was giving off pheromones and

testosterone like he'd cornered the market, and he didn't look nervous at all.

Hayden gave it up, stepped into him, pulled down his head, and kissed him.

Luke stood stock-still a second, and then his bag hit the floor. Half a second after that, both arms were around Hayden, his tongue was in Hayden's mouth, and he was backing him up against the wall.

Oh, yeh, Hayden thought with what was left of his brain. *Do me like that.* And then he stopped thinking, because Luke's mouth was at his ear, then his neck, and Hayden's hand was under Luke's shirt, feeling the valley of his spine, the muscle that rose on either side. If he hadn't been against the wall, he'd have been on the floor, because his knees were shaking.

Luke's hands were on Hayden's shirt, he realized dimly, and then his shirt was over his head. Luke was kicking off his shoes, and Hayden thought, *Oh,* and started to do the same, but he couldn't, because Luke was backing him through the flat, kissing him all the way.

Oh. Bloody. *Hell.*

BE GENTLE, part of Luke's brain was trying to tell him, but his body wasn't getting the message, because he had Hayden on the bed, was pulling off his shoes and socks, his shorts, then yanking off his own clothes. Something may have ripped in there, because there was a sound like fabric giving under his hands. He'd been sweating like a bull, and he couldn't care, because he was over Hayden, hands and mouth greedy, and Hayden was holding on, gasping, and then, when Luke found a brown nipple, rising into him and calling out.

He was restless. He was selfish. His hands wanted to be everywhere at once, and his mouth and tongue had a mind of their own. He was grabbing, stroking, kissing, and he needed more. He needed this body, and he was taking it.

Trying to slow down, trying to be careful, and failing. His mouth around Hayden, and Hayden's hands in his hair, clutching. The sounds he made, and the way his body tightened under Luke, and all it was doing was pushing Luke higher, ripping away more of his self-control.

He'd meant it to be slow. He'd meant it to be careful. Loving. Caring. Tender. All those good things. Unfortunately, Hayden's skin was soft as silk on the insides of his biceps, his thighs were lean and lithe, he had those abs, he smelled like vanilla, and by the time Luke turned him over and found that his back was even better and he had an arse like a peach ... all he wanted to do was to touch and kiss all of that while Hayden writhed and moaned under him.

And then to fuck his brains out.

So that's what he did. He barely managed to get the condom on.

Holy *shit*.

HAYDEN WASN'T sure he could breathe. He could be dying, in fact, because his legs were shaking, his heart was pounding, and he felt like he'd just been hit by a truck.

"Holy shit," he finally managed to get out. Luke was still over him, pressing him into the mattress, and he was being crushed in the most delicious way.

"Yeh." Luke rolled off him, then pulled him into his arms. "All right? Your head?"

Hayden tried to laugh. It wasn't easy. His *stomach* muscles were shaking. It was like the aftermath of the most intense fitness class ever, the kind where you felt like you'd have to crawl home. "I'm not even sure I'm still alive."

"Bloody hell." Luke's hand was on Hayden's head, stroking his hair back with a hand that was surely shaking, wasn't it? Was that possible? He was kissing Hayden again, wrapping himself around him, and it was like being

surrounded by all the power and all the comfort in the world.
“What did I do?”

“I’m fairly sure,” Hayden said, that laughter still flooding him, “that you did just about everything.”

“Sorry. I snapped. Not an excuse, I know. I just—I’m sorry.”

Hayden was flooded, somehow, with tenderness, and now, he was the one holding Luke’s battered head in his two hands, kissing his hard mouth. “Did you notice me telling you to stop?”

Luke’s whole body went rigid. “You did?”

“No. That’s the *point*. I didn’t. Are you saying this was outside your normal pattern? That I shouldn’t expect this every time?”

“Yes. Of course not. I mean ... bloody hell. Yes, you shouldn’t expect that, and no, that’s not me. I was rough, when I meant to be gentle. I’m careful. I know I’m strong, and I ... I don’t even know why that happened. *How* it happened.”

“Well, I like to think it’s because I’m irresistible,” Hayden said, “and if you don’t stop apologizing, I’m going to lose my lovely buzz. That would be a pity, because I think you just rocked my world.”

Now, Luke went still for a different reason. “It was all right?”

“Well, I may have lost the use of my legs,” Hayden said, the bubble of hilarity rising, “but what a way to go.”

“I didn’t even take a shower,” Luke said.

“No. You didn’t. And neither did I.”

“Yeh,” Luke said, “but you smell good.”

Hayden laughed out loud. “So do you. You can stop worrying now. And if you *can’t* stop worrying ...” He kissed Luke right on his battered ear. “You could take a shower with me.”

They did, and that was good, too. Kissing and touching and stroking, languid now, and so satisfied. When they were under the duvet, the blood running through Hayden's veins like warm, thick honey, his body wanting nothing but to fall asleep, he forced himself to say, "We didn't talk about your attitude in there. At the gym." Communication was fundamental, after all.

"Oh." Luke went still again, which Hayden had decided was Luke's way of saying, "I am having powerful feelings." He was pretty sure he was right, because that was *all* Luke said.

Hayden said, "I'm thinking that was concern."

"Well, yeh. It was. I couldn't believe it. I saw you in there, and I ... I couldn't believe it. But maybe I shouldn't have done it like that."

"Well, no," Hayden still wanted to laugh, but he was oddly touched, too. "I'd say that wasn't the best approach."

"OK. What should I have done instead?"

That brought Hayden up short. "That's your response? No defensiveness? No explanation of why your way was the only reasonable solution?"

"I'm a sportsman," Luke said. "Can't afford to ignore coaching, not if I want to get better."

Hayden had to kiss him again then, didn't he? And to run his hand down his arm, because, hello, *muscles*. "All right. I'm trying to think what a better way would be. I know there was one, because I was in the middle of a class. A class you interrupted pretty comprehensively, and I may never be allowed back. You could've waited for it to be over, of course, and told me later. There's that option."

Luke considered. Hayden could *feel* him considering. "I could've, but I did think you were hurting yourself. Didn't feel safe."

"And I could ask you why you're qualified to judge for me, but, of course, you *are* qualified to judge. So inconvenient."

Luke laughed, the first time Hayden had heard it all day. “Sorry, but you’re right. I am. That was dangerous, and I felt like I had to stop it. Also, because you brought it up—I didn’t go to relationship school anywhere. Pretty obvious, I’d have thought. Rough as guts, in fact.”

Hayden thought it over. “How about this, then? And by the way, this is the most bizarrely adult fight I’ve ever had with a lover. You could have come in—possibly *without* your brother, because that was over the top, though my friends are thrilled to bits, I’m sure, by the testosterone excess and the general levels of drama—touched me on the shoulder, and asked if you could talk to me outside.”

“Thought that was what I did.”

“I think it was more like, ‘Let’s go. You’re out of here.’”

“Oh. Well, maybe. Right. Got it. Polite request next time.”

“Yes. No commanding.”

“None?” Luke could be smiling, and Hayden had to smile back, didn’t he?

“Well, all right, in bed,” Hayden said. “But that’s all.”

Luke sighed. “It’s a hard bargain. But I reckon, on consideration ... I’ll take it.”

EVERYBODY FRONTS UP

LUKE COULDN'T REMEMBER an afternoon as relaxed as that one. The most productive thing they'd done, beyond his making coconut, lime, and sambal grilled chicken with coconut rice for dinner, watching another movie with Hayden, and *not* having sex again, because Hayden had concussion and Luke had already done too much—which he reminded himself about pretty sternly during that movie, when Hayden was in his arms and he was touching that soft skin again—was to take the short walk to Sephora.

Yes, the makeup store, which Luke didn't even recognize for what it was until they were standing in front of it. He'd assumed from the name that it was a flash clothing store, or possibly someplace you'd buy a wedding present. Makeup wasn't something he'd been much aware of in his life. He looked at the window display, made up of enormous photos of bottles of scent and women wearing astonishing amounts of cosmetics, and said, "Uh ... this is new for me." While telling himself, *You can broaden your horizons*, and hoping he actually could.

If he can want a rugby player, and not the pretty kind, you can want somebody who wears ... whatever this is going to be.

Hayden said, "Yeh, well ... concealer. I need expert advice. No thanks on the questions tomorrow." Proving what Luke had suspected—that he wouldn't want anybody to know about the bashing he'd got.

Weakness. Vulnerability. Shame. Nothing you wanted to share.

“I realize it’s awkward for you,” Hayden went on, “unless there’s something you *really* haven’t told me. No possible good explanation for why you’d be buying makeup with a man, especially a man as fabulous as me. You can wait outside instead and look butch.”

Luke smiled. “Nah. New experiences are good. I’m coming in.”

“All right,” Hayden said. “Then I’m going to be queenly here. Watch my smoke.” And went through the glass doors, head held high, fully here and, yes, fully fabulous.

He toa taumata rao.

Courage has many resting places.

THE NEXT DAY, he put the coming encounter with his dad out of his mind as much as he could and focused on researching what was good value in wine and beer and champagne before buying out half the stock of the Christchurch Liquorland. He and Kane made more than a few trips to wrestle all the boxes into the rental SUV, and then Luke got behind the wheel and drove them through the flat, uninteresting expanse of the Canterbury plain, two lanes of tarmac as straight as a die, then took the turn. Straight and flat some more, and then a rise to the land at last, and the line of snow-capped mountains in the distance coming closer. The Southern Alps, and Luke couldn’t have described the state of his heart.

A bend in the road, and they were there. The cloudy blue-green of the enormous lake, seeming as always lit from below, backed by line after line of jagged peaks, the wisps of clouds trailing across their snow-clad summits, the sky above a cerulean blue. The tiny stone Church of the Good Shepherd on the shore, built like a hope and a promise by the people who’d first settled this inhospitable place. And the lupins, glorious in their height, their pinks and purples and oranges, bursting out along the shores in a riot of color. After the dullness of the journey, the pale dun tussocks of the Mackenzie highlands

broken by nothing but the occasional flock of grazing merino, the Easter-basket extravagance of it was nearly too much to take in.

“A good day for it,” Kane said. “A good place, too. Better for Marko, maybe.”

Nyree and her mum were from Northland, originally, lush and green and surrounded by the sea, edged by kilometer after kilometer of golden beach. That was where this wedding had been meant to happen, about as far from this place as it was possible to get, but that was all right. Nyree was the lupins and the lake, that was all, and if you were marrying somebody, maybe that happiness, and *their* happiness, were enough.

Luke thought about that, and then he thought about unloading boxes of drink and bags of ice and setting up a beverage station on one of the folding tables covered with mismatched, cheerful tablecloths, all set around the edge of a cleared space in front of a big, rambling house overlooking the lake and backdropped by the Alps. Meanwhile, Zora and Rhys fastened flowers to a homemade arbor, Hayden went over to help, and Luke’s father, who’d barely acknowledged his sons so far, directed people in setting up more tables and rows of chairs, barking orders like the rugby coach he still wished he was. Luke opened wine bottles, carried glasses, and poured drinks with Kane, working against the clock until, barely an hour later, they went into the house and he took his turn in an old-fashioned bathroom, changing out of T-shirt and rugby shorts and into dress trousers and a collared shirt before giving himself a last careful shave around his beard.

It wasn’t much of an improvement, but it was the best he could do.

It was a wedding, then. Everybody sitting in those rows of mismatched chairs, borrowed from every farm around, and Marko standing in front of the arbor with his best man, frowning ferociously, staring at the kitchen door, and looking, as usual, barely tamed. Hayden standing in the center, impossibly slim and handsome, the bruise not visible under the careful makeup, looking serious and maybe nervous. A stillness to the moment despite the breeze, like the day was

holding its breath, and Victoria playing the cello. More of that sadness, possibly, along with the joy, because that was the way cellos sounded, and because Marko's grandmother was lying on a deck chair in the front row, looking like the wind could blow her away.

Everything passed, and so did everybody, the good and the bad together. Made it more important to live your life the way you wanted, maybe, because now was all you had, and if you weren't yourself, who were you? If nobody knew you, and you couldn't even know yourself ... how could you live an entire life like that? Why *should* you live an entire life like that?

He was so tired of hiding.

Nyree, then, coming out at last on her grandmother's arm in an ivory gown that clung to her pregnant curves, and Marko's face changing in a way that almost hurt to see. And Luke thought, *That's all right, then.*

She got there, Hayden began to talk, and it was even better, because he'd been right. Hayden was good at this.

"These rings," Hayden finally said, "in their infinite circle, represent your marriage, and the love that's greater than the sum of you. They symbolize the bond you share and the trust and faith you give each other, world without end. When you look at these rings on your hands, be reminded of this moment, and the infinity of your love."

Marko's voice, repeating after Hayden, and then Nyree's, as they slipped the rings onto each other's hands, Nyree having a bit of trouble sliding the thing over Marko's rugby-battered knuckle and Marko having to help her, which gave everybody a much-needed laugh. "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love," they told each other, "with this promise, offered freely and unreservedly: to love you today, tomorrow, always, and forever."

Hayden again. "You've made your promises today in front of all those who love you best, and have sealed your vows with the exchange of rings. Therefore, by the power vested in me as a wedding officiant of Aotearoa New Zealand, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Looking like he meant every word of it.

Looking like the triumph of hope.

LUKE WISHED he could kiss Hayden, afterward, and tell him he was proud. He wasn't good with words, but he could have managed that. Not the time or the place, though, for revelations, whatever Marko had said.

He was just thinking it when his father and stepmother approached. "Lovely wedding," Miriama said, practically glowing, petite and pretty and gracious as always, reaching out to give Luke a cuddle.

Luke gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Yeh, it was good. They're well suited, I think."

"Huh," Grant said. He glanced at the water glass in Luke's hand. "And you don't have a beer."

"No." Luke felt himself going stolid, going inside himself, the way he always had. "Seemed best. I'm all good."

Grant frowned, or maybe you'd say that his bushy gray eyebrows drew even closer together than they normally were. They slanted down his face in a perpetual V-shape, putting the exclamation point on his habitual expression. "You're staying here tonight, surely. No need to cut off the drink for that. I got the tents sorted around the back. Enough for everybody. Who are you bunking in with?"

Luke wished he did have a beer, and was glad he didn't. This was a test, he guessed. Another first to get through without alcohol. He said, "Hayden Allen. The celebrant."

Kane had materialized from somewhere to stand beside him, and so had Rhys, though he was keeping back. Drago had always looked like he was watching from the coaching box even when he was playing. Judging, you could call it, or measuring, bringing his calm and his focus with him. He looked that way now.

Had the two of them been keeping an eye on him all along, waiting for this? Luke hoped not. This day was meant to be Nyree's.

He caught sight of Hayden, then, talking to Marko and Nyree, saying something that made Nyree laugh out loud. He glanced up, caught Luke's eye, and stood hesitating. Questioning. Luke jerked his chin at him. *Come on.*

Just in case this was it.

He'd been an All Black. Briefly. He'd stood on the field and done the haka, laying down the challenge to his opponents, affirming his bond to his brothers. For nearly a decade more, he'd played for England and had faced that challenge. Everybody had a different approach to the most fearsome intro in rugby. Some smiled, a dickhead move that tended to backfire. Some glared. Luke, though, had stood with his arms over the shoulders of his teammates and let the challenge sink into him. Outwardly impassive, but absorbing his opponent's energy, letting it fuel his own rush of adrenaline, ready to turn it back on him once the whistle blew.

Hayden headed over, approaching from behind Grant even as Luke's dad said, "Not a good idea. Fella's a ..." He glanced at Miriama. "He's queer as a three-dollar note."

"True," Hayden said with his disarming smile, slipping around Grant's back, plucking Luke's water glass from his hand, and taking a long drink. "Probably why I'm such a good dresser." He handed the glass back to Luke. "Thanks. I was parched. Good job on the ceremony, didn't you think?"

Bravado, you could call it. Luke called it what it was. Courage, or something more than that. Mana. He said, "Yeh. It was. I was proud." And told his dad, "I'm bunking in with him because I'm queer as a three-dollar note myself. Although not as good a dresser."

He couldn't help it. It just came out.

The whistle had blown.

A FEW SECONDS PASSED. Miriama stood there, looking shocked and probably horrified, her eyes darting to Grant. Grant just stood there, and Kane had edged that much closer.

Grant said, finally, when Luke didn't—what? Laugh and say he was only joking?— “Pardon?”

“I'm gay, Dad,” Luke said.

“But you're so ... *tall*,” his stepmother said. “And so ...”

“Ugly,” Luke said. “Yeh, I've heard that one.”

“You're not ugly,” she said. “Of course not. You're just ...”

“Strong,” Hayden said quietly. “Yeh, he is. That's why I love him.” Luke looked at him, startled, and Hayden shrugged and said, “Seems I can be brave, too. Too soon? Oh, well.”

“No,” Luke said. “Not too soon. Me too.” He cleared his throat, took a breath, and said it again. “Me too.” Feeling like that fella who'd been pushing the boulder uphill forever, but had finally been allowed to let it go. Feeling like he could fly.

“Yes,” Miriama said, ignoring that. “Strong. That's what I meant.” Grant, on the other hand, looked like he *had* heard it, and like he still couldn't believe it.

“Well, my goodness,” Miriama said next, and gave a little laugh. “I need some time to let that sink in. Maybe, darling, we should go sit a minute and do that,” she suggested to Grant, which was about as likely as that Grant would let the skipper give the pre-match talk in the sheds.

“If you are—that,” Grant said as if he hadn't even heard his wife, “why tell everybody about it? Why spoil Nyree's wedding with it?”

“He's not spoiling it.” That was Kane. “That would be you. Still time to back off, though.” His big frame was nearly shaking with tension, but he had a hand on Luke's shoulder, his fingers gripping hard, and Luke felt him the way you felt

your mate's solid body beside you in the scrum and knew he was right there with you. That he'd front up today, and next game, and every game after that. That he'd never quit.

"You knew." Grant's hard gaze landed on Kane. "And you did nothing."

"No," Kane said. "I did something. I told him I loved him. He's my brother. He's a good one. Why wouldn't I want him to be happy? Why wouldn't I want the same thing for him that I've got? To be able to bring the person he's fallen in love with to Nyree's wedding?"

"When did I ever tell you life was about being happy?" Grant asked.

"You didn't," Kane said. "That's why I said it."

Grant's voice was rising. "You aren't saying this to anyone outside the family," he told Luke. "You aren't sharing it with anybody in rugby. You'd never hold up your head again."

"Too late," Luke said. "I already did."

"He shared it with me," Rhys said, "for one." He was beside Kane now.

"And you're telling me you wouldn't show him the door pretty smartly, if he was one of yours," Grant said.

"That's what I'm telling you," Rhys said. "New Zealand Rugby's committed to diversity. I got a memo about it. You probably did too."

Grant's face had gone brick-red, and the eyebrows were practically standing up on their own. "And is France? Is England? Who's going to be willing to strip down in the sheds with him? Who's going to be packing down with him in the scrum? Would you?"

Rhys shot a measuring look at Luke, and Luke stared back at him and tried to breathe. Rhys asked, "Grabbed anybody's bum in the showers so far, mate?"

A gasp from Miriama, and a bark of a laugh from Kane. Luke's jaw relaxed a fraction, and he said, "Not yet."

“They’re pretty safe, you reckon?” Rhys asked.

“I reckon so.”

Grant said, “PC crap. You know what this is as well as I do.” His finger was out now, nearly stabbing into Rhys’s chest. “It’s signing his death warrant in rugby.”

“If it is,” Rhys said, “I’d say that’s his risk to take. Whatever you think, whatever you feel, don’t you think he’s felt it and thought it already?” He asked Luke, “How long have you known you were gay, would you say?”

“Since I was five or six,” Luke said.

Miriama gave a little moan, and Grant said, “Not possible.”

“Yeh, Dad,” Luke said. “Possible.”

Another voice. Nyree’s. Marko was with her, and their half-sister Kiri, too. “Luke?” she asked. “Mum? What’s going on?”

Miriama opened and closed her mouth, then said, “Luke is, ah ... having a word, darling. It’s a bit fraught at the moment. No need to worry. Five minutes.”

“Five minutes?” Grant said. “Five *minutes*? Five minutes before you leave, is what it is,” he told Luke. “Spoiling your sister’s wedding, spouting this rubbish.”

“No,” Nyree said. “Luke’s not leaving. I don’t want you to leave, either, or Mum, and if you have to, I’ll be sorry.”

“Darling,” her mother moaned. “No. Your beautiful day.”

“My day’s still beautiful,” Nyree said. “My day’s *more* beautiful. Everybody in it is telling the truth. That’s beautiful.”

“The truth isn’t beautiful,” Grant said.

“Depends how you look at it,” Nyree said. “My truth is, and here it is. Luke is gay. Kane’s in love with Victoria. I’m married to Marko bloody Sendoa, forever and ever. Maybe none of that is what you’d choose for us, but you’re not the one who gets to choose.” She told Kane, “Though you’re

probably doing all right so far, even though you're not a Highlander. Still in the South Island, so that's something."

"Cheers," he said. "But I may make a move to the Blues, because ... there's Victoria. Could want a chat," he told Rhys.

"Oh, bloody hell," Grant said.

"Yeh," Nyree said. "That's three of us, then. Who knows? Maybe Kiri won't disappoint you. What do you think?" she asked her sister.

Kiri said, "I don't know. But I don't want Luke to leave." Brave of her.

Nyree told Grant, "Maybe I know how you feel, a bit. I've got all sorts of dreams for this baby in my belly. I feel like I know who she is. The truth is, though—I don't really know her at all. She'll show herself to me, and to Marko, bit by bit, and I'll only have two jobs. To teach her, and to love her."

"Easy to say," Grant said. "When you don't know anything about it."

"Not easy at all." That was Rhys again. "I do know something about it, and I can say. Not easy at all, and the only choice there is. What are you going to do otherwise? Throw your son away?"

"Throw both of your sons away," Kane said. "We're a package deal."

"I did my best for you," Grant said. "All I ever did was my best."

"You did, Dad," Luke said. "And so have I."

A long moment, stretching out forever, and Nyree said, "And then you paid for me to go to Uni, even though I never studied anything worth learning, so who knows, hey. Change is possible."

"That's true," Miriama said. "And Nyree's grateful, darling. So am I."

"Anyway," Nyree said, her cheerfulness possibly forced and possibly not at all, "if you want somebody to do what you

say, I reckon you should get a dog. Words to put on top of the wedding cake. Or, in this case, the pavlova.”

SEEING STARS

HAYDEN DANCED WITH LUKE. He could tell it was Luke's first time ever from the stiffness in his body and the hesitation in his normally sure movements, and something in Hayden melted a little more at that. Marko's family were playing the tango, though, guitar and violin and flute and more, and Marko and Nyree were teaching the rest of the group the dance. Anyway, at this point, *everybody* knew they were gay, so—no time like the present. Seize the day, and all that.

There was coming out, though, and then there was dancing the tango with your male lover in front of his rugby-coach dad, while said dad drank yet another beer and looked like his head would explode, and also like he was wondering whether it was still called infanticide if the kid was in his thirties.

Luke didn't talk much afterward, just helped clear up the detritus of the day, rinsing out the astonishing number of bottles and carrying them to the bin, hauling tables and chairs, then getting into Marko's dad Ander's ute with Marko's little sister to return the many borrowed items to the neighbors. When Ander said, "No worries, I'll do it tomorrow," Luke said, "Nah. I may as well. You'll have the sheep to take out, and I haven't had any drink."

Marko's dad looked at him, long and slow, and Luke didn't flinch, though Hayden thought he might want to. Finally, Ander said, "I'll say thanks, then."

Luke said, "Nyree's my sister. Least I can do." Which was practically a declaration from Luke, and was probably

masking what he was really feeling—a strong desire to be out of here.

By the time Luke got back, the hills and the few scraps of cloud overhead had turned a brilliant orange and the lake was glowing like a sapphire. Luke found Hayden sitting on the patio, sat down beside him with yet another bottle of fizzy water, and said, “Nice out here. Sunsets are always better in the mountains, not sure why. Nearly nine-thirty, too. Close to the longest day of the year.”

“Yeh.” Hayden stretched out his legs and took in the view some more. He’d found a jumper, because there was a bit of nip to the air now, but Luke was still in his shirtsleeves, seeming unbothered by cold. “The sunsets are more brilliant up high because the air’s thinner, which means more colors of the spectrum can make it through. Also no air pollution.”

“You know some things,” Luke said.

“No. Isaiah knows some things, and he tells me. He texted me while you were gone and told me that the Mackenzie Basin is a Dark Sky Reserve, so I should make sure to look at the stars, especially since it’s a new moon and not going to be cloudy. He also says we’re having a geomagnetic storm, which means solar winds and a greater chance to view the Aurora Australis, except that it’s summer, so, alas, probably not. I shouldn’t try to take photos of the stars, he says, just observe, because observing is better anyway.”

Luke said, “I agree about that one. I was just thinking that today, that living is better.”

“Than dying?” Hayden asked. “Well, yeh.”

Luke smiled. “Than not paying attention, I meant. Living in the, uh ...”

“The moment,” Hayden said. “I wonder how much I do that.”

“I do it in rugby,” Luke said. “No choice. Not always otherwise.”

“Well,” Hayden said, “maybe we should try to do it tonight.” Feeling a little shy again. He’d told Luke he *loved*

him. He'd always calibrated that, before. Six months was the absolute minimum, and it had been more like six *days*. This whole thing was like careening downhill on your bike without brakes, and Hayden wasn't much of one for careening.

"We should," Luke said. "Upside of being in a tent, maybe. You can stick your head out and see the stars."

"I'll go get ready for bed, then," Hayden said, choosing his words carefully and feeling his tongue go thick, as if he'd been drinking instead of relentlessly sober all day, "since there may be a bathroom open now. There was a general exodus a while ago. I get the feeling there may be some sex happening in there, though it's tactless of me to say it. The tango *is* a bit sexy."

"Very sexy," Luke said, "and my first time." He looked straight at Hayden. "Glad it was with you."

IT WAS NEARLY TOO dark to navigate by the time Hayden came around to the back of the house. That was how quickly night had fallen. Luke was, fortunately, standing outside the tent, which meant Hayden wasn't blundering around knocking into things, especially since he couldn't hear more than a murmur of voices from a couple of the tents, so most people were probably asleep and wouldn't have appreciated his waking them. Their tent was small, one of those two-man deals in which you could just about sit up and that was all.

"How long has it been since I've been in a sleeping bag?" Hayden asked, when they'd crawled in. "I am an urban animal."

"It's been a wee while for me, too," Luke said. "Here. Let's unzip one and put it on the bottom, then put the other one on top. Cozier, eh."

"Right," Hayden said. "OK." Getting that tongue-too-big feeling again. But when he was lying on his back with Luke's big body pressed up close and warm beside his, and they both

had, yes, their heads stuck out of the end of the tent and were watching the night sky transform, he forgot it.

At first, it was only a few stars. As they watched, though, the sky darkened and more and more appeared. Not just pinpricks of light, but whole ... whole *waves* of them, or clouds of them, some bright and some dim, blazing in the night like a million candles, turning the sky as much purple and blue as black. “The Magellanic Clouds,” Hayden told Luke, who’d said precisely nothing so far, “there, around the Milky Way. Not actually clouds, but whole other galaxies, very far away. Again, Isaiah.”

“Mm,” Luke said. “I don’t know the stars that well, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. I like them, though.”

“Want me to tell you?” Hayden asked. “The constellations and all?”

“Yeh,” Luke said. “That’d be good.”

“Jupiter and Saturn,” Hayden said, pointing. “There in the southwest, that very bright spot. They look like they’ve merged, but of course they haven’t, it’s just their position right now. The Great Conjunction, they call it. Rare, so we’re lucky. And Mars. You can see that it’s a bit red. And Orion in the north.”

“The Hunter,” Luke said.

“Betelgeuse, the red supergiant, in there, and Rigel, that one’s a bit blue. You can actually see the colors down here, at least I’m pretending you can. The Southern Cross, helping you find your way south and back home again. And the constellation Carina, there. That’s meant to be the keel of a ship, and the bright star is Canopus, the helmsman, steering the ship. Sailing through the night sky.”

“That’s nice,” Luke said. “A nice thought.”

“I’m never sure, though,” Hayden said, “if it’s better to look for the patterns you know are up there, or just to ... to look at all of it for yourself.”

“Something to be said for that,” Luke said.

Hayden shivered, and Luke said, “We can scoot back inside and zip the tent up. Warmer, eh.”

“Yeh,” Hayden said, feeling ridiculously shy again, but comforted, too. Luke was possibly the most noticing person he’d ever met, and definitely the most solicitous. Well, other than the other day, but he’d take that, too.

When the stars were zipped away, they fell silent, only their breath audible in the silence around them. Hayden finally said, “I was proud today. Of you. Proud of you.”

“Same,” Luke said. “Of you.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“The wedding. That was nice. Did you write that?”

“Some of it.” Shy again. “The part about the rings—I wrote that.”

“It was nice. And it sounded like you believed it.”

“Well, good,” Hayden said. “That was the idea.”

Luke found his hand under the sleeping bag, and laced his fingers through Hayden’s. And Hayden took a breath.

Get out of your comfort zone. You want your life to be different? Make it different.

“Could we try something new?” he asked.

“Well, yeh,” Luke said. “Probably. But—tent.”

“What, in case I scream?” Hayden tried to laugh. It wasn’t easy. “I want to ... I want to touch you. And hold you, and kiss you, and do some other things. Basically, do the things I want, the way I never do. Though—consent, of course. It’s hard to ask, but dancing, today ... how I feel ... how I feel about you ... I want to.”

And held his breath.

RIGHT, Luke thought. *Right*. He said, “Uh ...”

“Or not,” Hayden said, “if you’re not comfortable.”

“Could be hard for me to keep quiet,” Luke said, trying to make a joke. His heart was, suddenly, beating like it was the eightieth minute and you were making that last, desperate defensive stand. *Ka-boom. Ka-boom. Ka-boom.*

“Oh,” Hayden said. “OK, then.” And shifted, infinitesimally, away.

“But,” Luke said, “I’ve got some self-discipline, control over my reactions and so forth. Maybe good to put them to the test.”

At first, it felt weird. And wrong. Hayden lying over him, kissing him—that was OK. Hayden’s tongue in his mouth, though, his hands in Luke’s hair. Hayden’s mouth traveling slowly over his cheek, to his ear, his hand stroking Luke’s face. Then he was kissing his ear as if he didn’t know how mangled and unappealing it was. Luke felt it, because the tissue was sensitive despite its appearance, and it felt good, but Hayden couldn’t *want* to ...

He said, “I can get those fixed once I stop playing. I know they’re not—”

“Shh,” Hayden said into his ear, his voice nothing but a warm breath. “You’re meant to be disciplined. And I love that you’re strong and a bit ... battered.”

You do? Luke wanted to say, but Hayden was kissing his neck now, there below the edge of beard, and that felt *good*. Hayden kissed like he had all day and all night, his mouth seeking out new spots, testing for a reaction, and Luke shifted under him and breathed harder. His hand was under Hayden’s T-shirt, running over his skin, and he wanted ...

“Not your turn.” It was another of those breaths again, and Hayden had hold of Luke’s shirt now, was shoving it slowly up as he moved his body down. Kissing every centimeter he uncovered, even though Luke was too big and his skin was nothing like soft. Hayden’s hand stroking over his side, up his ribs, Hayden’s mouth on every one of those ribs, moving up to his chest. Pulling the T-shirt over Luke’s head, then going back

to his neck. His chest. His ribs. His belly. All of it too slow, and Luke needed to get there. He needed to get there *now*.

Shifting again, his hand around Hayden's head, and Hayden taking that as an invitation to touch him more. Hands on his forearms, his biceps, his triceps, as if he were memorizing him, as if he wanted to know. A mouth on that softer skin at the side of his bicep, a tongue licking along his upper arm.

Luke *couldn't* be feeling this much, not with the way people normally touched his body—beating on it—but he was anyway. He was hauling in deep breaths, trying hard not to make a sound, nothing but the metallic, pulsing melody of crickets around them, but so many people asleep.

Or awake.

Hayden's hands, finally, on the waistband of his sleep pants, pulling them down. Slowly again, until they were all the way off. Luke had his hands on Hayden's waist, gripping hard, and Hayden asked him, his voice thrillingly low in the dark, "Want me to take my clothes off?"

"Yeh," Luke said. It was just about all he could manage.

"Then I will," Hayden said. "Because I want to please you tonight."

It was that, and it was also torture. Luke couldn't decide which. When Hayden was naked over him, though, his hands stroking down Luke's huge, tree-trunk thighs like he loved them, which wasn't possible—that was pleasure. And when he whispered, "Turn over," that was a thrill that ran down his body like vinegar hitting your stomach, making the buzz run through every nerve pathway and straight to the cramp, releasing the knot, making you gasp.

He turned over.

More touching, then. More kissing. Hayden's hands on his back, his mouth in the hollow of his spine, moving down. Luke wasn't beautiful, last thing from it, but Hayden touched him like he was, lingering at the base of his spine, just under the tailbone, that exquisitely sensitive spot you never got used

to. His hand between Luke's legs, feather-light touches on his inner thighs, so close and nowhere close enough.

Oh, God. He couldn't. He *couldn't*.

Up on his elbows, then, because he had to feel that hand. The sensation that was somebody behind you, pressed up close, not knowing where their hand or their mouth was going next, and Luke was gasping.

He could control his voice. He couldn't control his breath. And when Hayden whispered, "OK for me to do this?" and he felt the first slippery touch of lube ...

It wasn't that he'd never done it, but he'd never done it like this. Never with so much vulnerability, and knowing he'd agreed to it. He managed to say, "Yeh," and that was all.

It wasn't anything like the way he'd done it. It was so much better. Slow and easy, and with Hayden touching him, holding him. Hayden's hand sliding down his side, and Luke's own hands fisting in the fabric of the sleeping bag, pulling hard, holding on. Completely unable to control his breath anymore, lost in the sensation.

Hayden's movements faster now, more urgent, and Luke's hands were gripping harder, the tension winding up, then winding higher until it was too much, and it was too late. He was spinning, tumbling, burying his face in his fists to keep the groans inside.

Rising higher, then higher still. Going into the darkness, and seeing stars.

Lost. Shattered. Broken.

Gone.

SOMETHING WOKE HAYDEN, and at first, he couldn't figure out what. He was lying with Luke, arms and legs tangled together, and had come slowly up from fathoms-deep sleep to ... something.

Oh. Morning, he thought, because there was some light. It didn't *feel* like morning, though. He disentangled himself carefully from Luke, trying not to wake him, fumbled for the zips at the bottom of the tent, slowly undid them, and stuck his head out into the chill on hands and knees.

At first, he couldn't sort out what he was looking at. Dawn, but it didn't look like dawn. It looked like ...

Luke's voice, then, coming out of the quiet dark. "What is it?"

"Come see," Hayden said.

Luke beside him, head and shoulders emerging from the tent. "Oh," he said.

"It's the Aurora," Hayden said, "isn't it?"

"Yeh," Luke said. "I've seen it once before." His head disappeared into the tent, and Hayden thought, *That's all?* and tried not to be disappointed. He hadn't been going for sweet and sensitive, even though Luke was, surprisingly, some of both, and those things called to him as hard as the strength did. He'd been going for butch, though, clearly, and that was what he'd got.

Be careful what you wish for.

Just as he was thinking it, Luke appeared again with the pillows in one hand, hauling up the sleeping bag with the other. "Here," he said. "Let's watch."

They were quiet, then, looking at the flickering light overhead. A band of bright pink on the lower part of the horizon, with a strip of neon yellow at the bottom and a fade to blue-violet at the top. And more. Vertical lines coming down through the color like those solar winds were touching the earth. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before. It was magic.

Luke said, "Only other time I saw this was on the first night I kissed a boy."

Hayden went still. "Oh?" he said, and hoped that was just prodding enough.

"Yeh," Luke said. "I was fifteen. It was terrifying."

“Yeh,” Hayden said. “I get that.”

“I know you do. That’s why I told you.” And after a minute, “Thanks for that, earlier. I’ve never done anything like that. I mean, I’ve *done* that, but I’ve never been ...”

“Vulnerable,” Hayden said. Right now, Luke felt nothing like that. His arm was around Hayden, and Hayden’s head was on his shoulder. He felt strong as oak. Strong as *rock*.

“Yeh,” Luke said. “Reckon you know more about this than I do, though. Could be I’ve been a bit ... limited in my, uh, expression.”

“You can need somebody,” Hayden said, “and still be a man.”

He couldn’t see Luke’s face, but he could feel his sigh, all the way from his considerable depths. “Yeh,” he said. “That. Thanks.”

SPLINTERS

IT WAS the day before Christmas Eve, and they were having dinner with *Hayden's* parents this time. That was the problem with the holidays. It was so hard to get out of things. How did you nurture the tender shoots of your new love in this kind of rocky territory?

When his mum had invited him and said, “Zora and the kids are coming, too, of course. Just a lovely, casual family meal before Christmas,” Hayden had asked, “How about Rhys?”

“Oh, he’s coming, too,” she said. “Six-thirty Friday. I know I don’t have to tell *you*, darling—you always dress so beautifully—but a teeny hint to your sister ...”

“Yeh,” Hayden said, “probably not happening. And actually, I have Luke with me.”

“Oh.” There was a little silence. “Still?”

Breathe. “Well, yeh. He’s my partner. Did I not mention that?”

“Of course you should bring him, then,” she said. Not the most heartfelt invite he’d ever received. He wanted to say no, that they were going to ... Waiheke, maybe, for the evening, because it was an island and you couldn’t get back until the ferry ran—or possibly that he’d heard he might be kidnapped that day—but when he suggested it to Zora, she said, “Please, no. And leave me there all alone?”

“Well, not *all* alone,” Hayden said. “You’ll have, oh, three other people with you. Including Rhys bloody Fletcher, with

mana up to the eyeballs.”

“Without you, though,” she said. “You can always think up something light and funny to say that makes everybody laugh, just when I’m about to lose my temper. Please come. Maybe it’s better anyway. Mum and Dad *should* be inviting your partner, and if they’re finally doing it, isn’t that good?”

“Right,” Hayden said glumly. “I’ll be there.” When he invited Luke, Luke just looked at him measuringly, then said, “OK,” and went on folding laundry on the bed, lifting George off the pile and not commenting on the orange cat hair he’d be wearing on his T-shirt tomorrow. He’d given up his hotel room, because he hadn’t used it once, and that had felt ... well, it had felt fine. Hayden had gone to work every day, Luke had gone to the gym and done whatever other heroic activities it took to maintain all that strength—flipping truck tires down a field was entirely possible—and cooked dinner, and then they went to bed, and, well ...

He could go weak in the knees from Luke looking at him from across a room, or from Luke’s thigh pressed against his at a dinner table. As was happening right now, inconveniently.

Intensity. It was a thing. Urgency. Desire.

He’d fallen so hard.

It was better than noticing that his dad wasn’t looking at either of them. Hayden and Luke could probably hold a least-popular-child competition. It would be a battle. Meanwhile, he’d just sit here, look at Luke’s biceps, and have sexual fantasies. Much better plan.

His mum asked, “Would you pass the beetroot salad, please, Hayden?” He did. There was heaps left. His mum was what you’d call a rigorous dieter.

“So, kids,” Hayden said, rousing himself, because conversation wasn’t exactly sparkling here, “decorating is tomorrow? With cocoa, maybe?”

“Yes,” Casey said. “We have to decorate, because the next day is Christmas, and Nana and Grandad and you are coming to our house for Christmas tea.”

“And we cleaned the house today,” Isaiah said, “so Nana can’t say that the guest toilet is dirty. I vacuumed.” Zora choked a little, and Rhys did some almost-smiling at that one.

“Dad is taking Isaiah and me fishing tomorrow morning, too,” Casey said, “so we can catch fish for our barbecue on Christmas. If we don’t catch any, we’re going to have hamburgers and sausages instead. Hamburgers aren’t very Christmasy, and fish isn’t very Christmasy either, except you eat different things in New Zealand. Decorating makes it more like a party, though, even if you have hamburgers. It makes it so you can wear pretty clothes and give each other presents and be all happy.”

“Including Luke, I hope,” Zora said. “Please, Luke. Please come, if you’ll be here.”

“Your own parents want you to come to them, surely,” Craig said. Ah, yes. The welcome committee was out in force tonight.

Luke looked like he didn’t know how to answer that, so Hayden did. “Luke’s volunteered to spend his Christmas with me, so we’ll take that invitation. Catch another fish for him, will you, Isaiah? Keeps me from going through yet another Christmas tea as the lonely-but-making-the-best-of-it single uncle.”

“But you *are* the single uncle,” Isaiah said. “That just means you aren’t married, and you’re not married.”

“It means you’re not in a relationship that you’re talking about,” Hayden said. “I’m in a relationship now, and I *am* talking about it. Luke and I are flying to Paris on Christmas evening, in fact. Announcement. *More* announcement. That’s *my* Christmas present. Isn’t it a good one?”

“That’s wonderful,” Zora said. “That’s amazing. Make it an early Christmas tea, then? Call it noon?”

“Well, yeh,” Hayden said, “if you don’t mind.” He could tell he was too tense, was smiling too hard. “This year, I find I’d quite like to come. Astonishing what love will do, hey, Zora.”

“And then Paris,” she said, smiling at him and looking a bit misty-eyed.

“Yes,” Hayden said. “And then Paris.” He sighed. “I love how that sounds. Like a book title. *And Then Paris*. It won’t be quite *Christmas in Paris*, but close enough. Spontaneous. Romantic. Of course, I’ll be the only one on holiday, as Luke will go straight in to work again, but never mind. I think I can manage to entertain myself. In Paris.”

“I’ll make time for you,” Luke said. “After training, I’m all yours.” He smiled at Hayden, and Hayden took his hand under the table, because that was some declaration, especially in this crowd.

“It’d be close enough for me, too,” Zora said. “Boxing Day in Paris works.”

“Probably be raining,” Craig said. “Why on earth would you miss out on summer?”

“Because,” Hayden said, “I’m tired of being single, so is Luke, we’ve found each other and it’s pretty special so far, so why not make the most of it? Because I want to go to museums and look at shop-window displays in the Rue Saint-Honoré and eat in fabulous restaurants. Because I want to walk beside the Seine after dinner, being in love and holding Luke’s hand. And, possibly, to know that nobody’s going to think that’s an invitation to bash us.”

“They can think it,” Luke said. “They’re welcome to try it, too.”

“I don’t think they’ll try it, mate.” That was Rhys, of course.

“Why would somebody bash you?” Isaiah asked.

“Because they’d be holding hands,” Craig said.

“Ah,” Hayden said. “Asking for it, you mean.” He was, suddenly, furious, but still trying for Funny Hayden. It probably wouldn’t be wise to alienate *both* sets of parents in the same week.

“If there are people out there who’ll bash you if you give them a reason,” his father said, “you’d be wise not to give them one.”

“Would I, though?” Hayden asked. “Would I really? I’m not sure. I find myself eager to see.”

“Do people hit you for being gay, you mean?” Isaiah asked. “Why?”

“Yes,” Hayden said. “They do. I don’t know why. Jealous of my fabulousness, maybe. I’ve had a tooth out. Been knocked down and kicked while I’m on the ground, too. *That* hurt.”

“That isn’t fair,” Casey said. “You can’t help it if you’re gay.”

“I didn’t know that,” Zora said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was embarrassed,” Hayden said. “Why do you think? I was humiliated. That’s the point. Also,” he went on, shaking it off, because he was *not* telling them about that ambulance ride—there was gay-bashing, and then there was bashing by gays, and he wasn’t sure which was worse—“Luke is playing again almost as soon as we’re back, and the next week, too, and I want to watch.”

“I’ll be on the bench,” Luke said. “For the first game, anyway, as my match fitness will be questionable, just off the plane. You may get to see me play thirty minutes, though.”

“That’s all right,” Hayden said. “I’ll watch you on the bench. I just realized—I’m a rugby WAG. Who knew? They’re going to have to come up with a new word for me.”

“What’s a WAG?” Casey asked.

“Wives and girlfriends,” Isaiah said. “Like Mum was. Uncle Hayden will be a wife and boyfriend, he means. Wait, a husband and boyfriend. A HAB.” He laughed.

“Can’t wait,” Hayden said. “Paris Racing scarf, d’you reckon, Rhys? Pale-blue and white stripes? Fetching.”

“Very fetching,” Rhys agreed, that smile lurking again. “Good on ya,” he told Luke. “Good to have somebody in the

stands. Is that a first?"

"Yeh," Luke said, the color creeping into his ears and cheeks.

"And after that," Hayden said, "in more announcing, in July, when Luke's season is over, I'm going back for two wonderful weeks. July in Paris? *That's* a time anybody would want to be there, and then, Luke *won't* be playing. Music festivals. Roses and roller coasters in the Parc Bagatelle. The palace gardens at Versailles, and the Cabaret at midnight. I'm going to make him be a tourist with me, because I want to see absolutely everything."

"You could go to the top of the Eiffel Tower," Isaiah said.

"We could," Hayden said. "We definitely could."

"Getting a bit ahead of yourself, surely," Craig said.

"Am I?" Hayden glanced at Luke, feeling his spark dimming. His dad had that effect. "Maybe."

"No," Luke said. "Or maybe—why not get ahead of ourselves? In rugby, at least, you plan to win. You don't plan for what you'll do if you lose. Reckon that's not a bad outlook. You could even learn a bit of French, Hayden. You've got seven months until July."

"Not always much stability in these relationships, from what I know," Craig said. "To say the least. I wouldn't buy your ticket if I were you."

Luke's ears were going red again. "He can buy his ticket."

"Dad," Zora said. "No."

"Could be we'll have to prove you wrong," Hayden said. "What will you say, I wonder, if Luke comes back here once he retires? Will you still be telling me we're bound to break up, maybe cite some study you read about it? I'm curious. Is it that we'll get bored with each other? I'm not going to get bored, and I'm not boring, either."

"No," Luke said, smiling a little now, and otherwise looking like a very large and extremely well-grounded boulder. "Safe to say you're not boring."

“Give the ones you love wings to fly, roots to come back, and reasons to stay,” Hayden said. “That’s the Dalai Lama. That’s what I want. That’s what I think I’ve got. Finally. Luke’s got wings to fly already, and I’m going to do my best to make those wings beautiful. I’m going to do my best to give him a reason to stay, too.”

“I don’t know about the Dalai Lama,” Luke said, “but I know that I’m coming back to New Zealand at some point. Decided that this week.”

Hayden felt his knees going weak again, for a different reason this time. “You are?” They hadn’t talked about the future, not beyond July, for obvious reasons. That it was too soon. Much too soon. Far too soon.

“Yeh,” Luke said. “I am. I like it here. I fit here.”

“Well, not entirely,” Craig said.

Luke turned his head and stared at him, and Hayden wouldn’t have wanted to be at the other end of that stare. “How don’t I fit?”

“Well, obviously,” Craig said.

“Obviously what?” Luke asked. “Because I’m half English and we beat the All Blacks last meeting? Yeh, that could give them pause, but if the boys could have a beer with us afterward anyway, reckon the rest of the country may forgive me, too.”

“He means because you’re gay,” Isaiah said. “New Zealand isn’t just for straight people, Grandad. It’s for everybody. If you’d learned the anthem in Maori, you’d know, because that’s what it says, but I guess you’re probably too old.”

“How come?” Casey asked. “Dad’s old, and he knows it in Maori.”

Rhys smiled, and Isaiah said, “Uncle Rhys isn’t *old* old, though, not like Grandad. He’s only about forty or fifty or something. Plus, he’s Maori, like us, so of course he knows how to sing it in Maori.”

“Forty-one, actually,” Rhys said, the smile fully in evidence now. “Cheers for the ‘fifty’ idea. Of course, I did find a gray hair the other day, so decrepitude could be just around the corner.”

Tania shot Craig a meaningful look down the table, and he didn’t go on to defend his age-spotted, memory-losing self. Luke did go on, to Hayden’s surprise. “I’m keeping my apartment, though. An apartment in Paris is never a bad thing. I could want to walk with you by the Seine, too,” he told Hayden. “In winter. In summer. Anytime.” And Hayden thought, *Thanks. In front of my dad, too. And you’ve got mana to burn, mate. If your dad can’t see that, if my dad can’t see that, I can, and I do. I want you so much, I don’t know how I’m going to say goodbye to you.*

“So if it’s not that,” Hayden decided to ask his father, because this was rubbish and he was, suddenly, so tired of it, “What? Is it me that’s bound to cheat, or Luke? And why, exactly? Because all men cheat if they can, unless women are keeping them from having their fun, so how would *two* men be able to resist? I can resist. Let me tell you, I can resist. Maybe some men can’t. I can.”

Maybe not perfect on the “light and cheerful” thing. Casey and Isaiah were sitting still now, their eyes going between Hayden and Craig as if they were watching a tennis match.

Craig said, “If things are so much better in Paris, maybe you’d rather stay there.”

A frozen moment that seemed to stretch out forever, and then a crash that reverberated through the room and made everybody jump.

“Oh, no,” his mum said, her hands over her mouth. “Oh, *no*. My Royal Copenhagen Full Lace serving bowl! How could I have knocked it off like that? How could I have *been* that careless? Don’t get up,” she told the kids. “Porcelain splinters, and you aren’t wearing shoes. Craig, could you help? I’m sorry, everyone, but ... I may be going to cry. My beautiful, beautiful bowl. It was a wedding present. Can you just ...”

“I’ll get it,” Rhys said. He was on his feet already.

“I’m sorry,” Tania said. “But please, just ... go on home, all of you. I need a bit of time.” She tried to laugh. “Never mind. I’ll be all good by Christmas, and Casey and Isaiah—we have something very special for each of you. Just wait and see. Go do your decorating, and *don’t* send me photos. I want to come in and be surprised. We are going to have the very *best* Christmas, all together. And please, Luke—do come. It wouldn’t be Christmas without Hayden, and we want you, too. Of course we do.”

“I’m sorry, Nana Tania,” Casey said, her big eyes troubled. “I’m sorry you broke your bowl, and that you’re so sad. It’s extra sad to be sad at Christmas time.”

“Oh, my darling,” Tania said, “thank you. And never mind.” She dabbed at her eyes with her festive holly-and-ivy cloth serviette, took a breath, and let it out again. “A bowl is just a thing, and things don’t matter, not really. We’ll have our Christmas together, and it will be lovely. I’ll have a wee cry for my bowl tonight, and then I’ll let it go and be happy I’m with my family. *All* my family. Aren’t I lucky?”

NOT QUITE HALLMARK

THREE DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, and Hayden was in the stands in a domed stadium that was still managing Arctic levels of cold, or maybe that was just his pampered summer-in-New-Zealand body. He hunched into the folds of his pale-blue-and-white-striped Racing 92 scarf and wondered whether he was indeed in the WAG section. Yes, everybody around him was good-looking and extremely chic, but as most people in Paris were extremely chic and most of them were good-looking, that didn't tell you much.

The reason he wasn't sure whether he was in the right place was that he hadn't met anybody, because Luke had so far not come out here. Not that he actually *knew* Luke hadn't told people, but he hadn't said anything about it to Hayden and there hadn't been a fuss, so he probably hadn't. Of course, they'd only been here a few days, and Hayden couldn't read French to know whether there'd been a fuss he didn't know about, but he was assuming.

Had it been worth it to come? Absolutely, despite how cold he was right now, and despite the fact that he wasn't getting to see much of Luke. Luke left the apartment at some ungodly hour of the morning when Hayden was just coming out of his twelve-hour-time-difference jet-lag coma. Luke brought him a flat white first, though, from the kind of espresso machine full of stainless steel and dials, which was, hello? Pretty bloody wonderful—and came home again at close to six in the evening seeming about the same as always, not like somebody who'd abused his body all day. After that, Hayden produced whatever non-French meal he'd managed to come up with in

his visits to the neighborhood shops, and they ... well, hung out and ate dinner and watched a cookery show, or an architecture one, which Hayden pretended to follow, and Hayden always fell asleep, exhausted from his day of exploring and the aforementioned jet lag, and possibly that bloody concussion, plus the attempt to understand a language he definitely did not know. Then they went to bed, which was thrilling as can be, every time.

That strength. That *body*.

So far, there hadn't been anything you'd call "nightlife." Luke had said, when Hayden had asked, "I don't really do nightlife. Not suited for it, I guess, and there's training, and ..."

"You might say the wrong thing," Hayden finished for him. "Or look at some cute boy too long."

"Yeh." Luke had been packing his kit for the game at the time, as calm and focused as a hunter in a duck blind—yes, New Zealand reference, but that was what Hayden had. "I'll be with the boys for a bit after the game tonight, too. Home around eleven, twelve, like that. I have my day off on Wednesday, though, if you'd like to do some tourist things. Good time for museums, midweek in January. The Impressionist one in the Musée d'Orsay is nice, and just across the Seine, so we could take a walk through the Jardin des Tuileries first. The Musée des Arts Décoratifs is meant to be good, too, in the Louvre complex. Art Deco, Art Nouveau, like that. You'd probably like it."

"Sounds extremely gay," Hayden said.

Luke smiled. "Probably. I've never been. We could go to a bistro afterward, if you like."

"Suits me," Hayden said, wanting to say instead, "When you come out, you won't have to worry about saying the wrong thing," but biting his tongue. This wasn't up to him, and if Luke was willing to go to a decorative-arts museum with him, that was a step, right? "And I get to watch you play."

So far, he was getting to watch everybody else play, because Luke was still on the bench. It was Racing 92 against Pau, whoever they were, and Racing had six points on two penalty kicks, while Pau had 15 on two tries, a missed conversion, and a penalty. Both the tries had been scored in the first half, though, and it was now ... Minute 54. Twenty-six minutes to go, and play was back and forth, back and forth. Men running with the ball, passing the ball, getting tackled hard, until somebody spilled the thing or kicked it away and possession changed, or until the referee blew the whistle and there was a scrum, for some unknown reason. After that, there was a scrum reset, because the structure kept collapsing, the referee pawing with his foot on the grass and having a stern French word as the big screens replayed the reset, as if you cared. Meanwhile, Luke was sitting on the bench in an oversized jacket, hands on his knees, watching like there'd be a quiz later. Occasionally, the substitutes would take a wee jog around the edges of the field to stay warm, but that was the limit of the Boyfriend Activity thus far.

Hayden's mind may have drifted. First to the impossible beauty of Luke's apartment, which was more like Nyree's description than Luke's, no surprise. The herringbone wood flooring. The high ceilings with their dark beams. The huge, multipaned, arched windows, and the marble fireplaces in lounge and bedroom. The balcony with its wrought-iron railing, and the modern-but-cozy kitchen and bath done in white and cobalt blue, all of it somehow harmonizing with the ancient diamond-patterned black-and-white floors and plaster walls. And the view over the rooftops to the park. It was the best apartment in the world, no question.

And then, of course, there was Paris. His feet hurt, that was how much he'd walked. It had rained today, and he hadn't even cared, had just gone to the Picasso Museum, which was close to Luke's place, because that was the kind of ancient-but-flash neighborhood Luke lived in—Le Marais, it was called, and it was fabulous—looked at pictures of people with their eyes in odd places, then decided that was enough culture and refreshed himself by exploring the five floors of the men's store at BHV Marais, the incredible department store housed

in another of those old domed mansions. Being a good little bougie gay boy in Paris.

Fendi, Moncler, Givenchy, Gucci, and Valentino, all under one roof. Imagine that. He'd bought Luke a Fendi wool scarf with an elegant geometric pattern in beige and chocolate brown. It had cost so much, he'd had to shut his eyes to pay for it, but it was masculine, warm, and gorgeous, and Luke deserved to have somebody do something special for him. Hayden was willing to bet it hadn't happened often.

He could have gone to Notre Dame after that. It was just across the river. He could *see* it. He'd gone up to the fifth floor for a coffee and croissant instead. That had been a pain au chocolat, and it had been buttery, flaky, decadent, and incredible. He'd eaten it slowly, looking out over those historic slate rooftops and white-stone buildings some more, and thought, *Early dinner tonight, by myself, because Luke will be getting ready to play. Fish and veg and that is all. And no chocolate croissants tomorrow!* A very cute fella had brought his own coffee over and slid into a chair opposite him at the long table, too, which had been flattering and definitely wouldn't have happened at Notre Dame, so there you were.

They hadn't been able to communicate that well, but Hayden didn't really want to communicate. He felt off the market in a way he never had. It was very odd.

It hadn't even been three *weeks*.

Oh. Game. He checked. Still nothing happening.

So what had happened on Christmas? Not the fireworks he might have been expecting. Fireworks of an entirely different kind.

He'd been startled, despite Casey's promises about decorations and dressing up, when he'd seen Zora. She was normally more the shorts and T-shirt type, to their mother's dismay, which meant that just about the second Hayden walked through the door, he was taking her by the upper arms and standing back for a good look. "I think I know who's been a good girl," he said, "because Santa *so* clearly loves her."

Zora was laughing as Casey said, “That wasn’t Santa. It was my dad. He gave her the earrings for Christmas, and he gave her the pearl necklace before. The earrings are real pearls and real diamonds. They’re *really* fancy. Even though Auntie Zora usually isn’t fancy, she likes being fancy sometimes.”

“And she already had the dress, of course,” Hayden said. “A wee bit sleeveless, a wee bit ruby-colored, and a wee bit form-fitting. Very nice.”

“Because red is for Christmas,” Casey said happily.

The doorbell rang, and Hayden couldn’t help stiffening. He’d had to think long and hard about coming today. Why should he sign up for this, and more to the point—why should Luke? Neither of them needed any more of it.

Rhys said, calm as ever, “Ah. That’ll be your parents, Zora. Come on, kids. Time for everybody to practice their ‘Merry Christmas.’”

The three of them headed for the stairs, and Zora blew out a breath. Hayden said, trying for casual and funny, since he *had* come and couldn’t exactly rush for the exit now, bowling over his parents along the way, “I can’t decide on my bet.”

“What bet?” Zora asked.

“Whether she says something first about the unsuitability of diamonds for daytime, or Dad goes straight for Luke. Tell me we’re not having hamburgers, at least. I don’t think I can take this day on hamburgers.”

“We are having,” she said, “fresh-caught kahawai with baby spinach, Thai curry sauce, and lime, on a bed of forbidden rice. Thanks to Rhys.”

Hayden opened his eyes wide. “*Very* elegant. Oh, wait. I’m not just hearing ‘Mum’s horribly healthy salads arriving’ down there. I’m hearing excitement. Christmas is for children,” he told Luke. “I’m reminding myself of that.”

“You know,” Zora said, “if they say anything, that won’t be all right. Not with me, and not with Rhys. It’s not happening again in our house.”

“You could hold my hand,” Luke said.

“Yeh, right,” Hayden said.

“No,” Luke said. “I mean you could hold my hand.”

“Oh.” Hayden thought that one over a minute. “Maybe I could. Statement, eh.”

“Stand your ground,” Luke said.

Movement on the stairs, and their parents were there. Their mum looked ... different. Dressed as beautifully as always, and her hair as perfect as always, so that wasn't it. Like she'd been crying, or had been emotional, either of which was hard to imagine. She came into the room fast and said, “Hayden. Darling. Merry Christmas,” kissed his cheek, then turned to Luke, kept the smile on her face, and asked, “May I kiss you as well?”

His face worked, and he didn't say anything for a minute. Finally, though, he said, “Yes.” And smiled. And when Tania kissed his cheek, patted the other one, and said, “Merry Christmas,” Hayden thought, *Well done, Mum*. And hoped.

His foolish heart.

His dad was there too, then, giving Zora a kiss and Rhys a shake of the hand, then offering Hayden a brief cuddle and pat on the back and putting his hand out to Luke. Luke hesitated for a bare second, then shook it. Craig cleared his throat and said, “Merry Christmas. I think I may not have been ... entirely hospitable the other night.”

“You think?” Hayden asked. He wasn't making a joke about this. He was done making jokes.

“Also,” Craig went on, the words clearly pulled out of him, “I may have sounded ... disappointed. I've done some, ah, thinking. And I'm proud of you, of course, Hayden.”

He ran down, then glanced at Tania, who said, “I think what your dad's trying to say, darling, is that we're both very proud of you. In your work, and in the person you've turned out to be. And that what we want most is for you to be happy.”

“Yes,” Craig said. “Of course.”

“Thanks, Mum. And Dad. Uh ... Merry Christmas, I guess.” It wasn’t exactly a Hallmark Christmas movie, but it probably passed for “heartfelt emotion” in his family.

His mum must have said something to his dad. Could she actually have enough emotional intelligence to know that Hayden had been a heartbeat away from walking out and not coming back? Not possible, but *something* had happened. Cautious optimism was the order of the day, he decided, and leave the Hallmark movie scripts for somebody else’s family.

“What happened?” Casey asked. “Is somebody mad?”

“No,” Hayden said. “Nobody’s mad.”

Christmas presents, then. Christmas tea, and pulling crackers and plum pudding out on Rhys and Zora’s gorgeous deck. And finally, absolutely unexpectedly, Zora asking him, “D’you think you could do the wedding celebrant thing one more time before you go?”

“What?” Hayden asked. Luke’s head came up, too.

“Rhys told me that a wedding is the only thing he wants for Christmas. And he *did* give me diamond and pearl earrings, so ...” She was laughing, but maybe a little teary, too.

“It’s what I wished!” Casey said, bouncing in her chair, her eyes round. “I got the wishbone in the Christmas pudding, and I wished and *wished!*”

Hayden said, “Of course I can. You know me, always ready to oblige. You’d need a license to make it official, though.”

“I have a license,” Rhys said. “I put the house as the alternative venue, as I’ve been wishing for quite a while myself.”

“You’re really terrifyingly competent,” Hayden told him, and Rhys smiled.

“You’re supposed to get married in a church, though,” Casey said. “And send fancy invitations first with special handwriting.”

“No, you’re not,” Isaiah said. “There aren’t any rules like that. People get married in all sorts of places. The beach, and a hot-air balloon, and on the top of a mountain on the snow and ice, after they’ve climbed up it with ropes and crampons and everything.”

“No, they don’t,” Casey said. “You have to have lots of people at a wedding, and they sit in chairs with ribbons on them and are very dressed up. And the bride has to have a white dress and fancy flowers, and Auntie Zora has on a *red* dress. I don’t think they let you get married if it’s not a white dress.”

Isaiah sighed. “You don’t need the chairs *or* the people. Or a white dress. Gay people can get married now, and men don’t wear a white dress, so how could you have to have it?”

“Oh,” she said. “But don’t you *want* a white dress?” she asked Zora.

“When you get married for the second time,” she said, “sometimes you don’t wear a white dress, or do it with a big crowd. It’s better if it’s just the people you love most, and here we all are, so it’s perfect.”

“Plus she’s getting married to my dad’s brother,” Isaiah said. “Which is all right, because it’s not *her* brother, so it’s OK for them to have sex even though he’s my uncle. But heaps of people think it’s not all right, and Uncle Rhys is very famous and very rich, so it might be in the newspaper again if they did a big wedding with a white dress, and people might not be nice.”

“Oh.” Casey considered that. “OK. And we did decorating and we’re all wearing pretty clothes, so maybe it’s all right. Except you’re not very fancy,” she told Luke.

“No,” he said. “I’ll stay out of view if there are any photos, how’s that?”

“Nah, mate,” Rhys said, and he was laughing. “We’re not planning any photos, and we don’t care how anybody looks. This is a Kiwi wedding.”

It had been, too. And there'd been that time before it, when Zora had asked to see Hayden in the bedroom where she'd been getting ready, and he'd sat beside her on the bed and asked, "Is this about the service? If you'd told me ahead of time, I could've—"

"Yes," she said. "Partly. But I wanted to tell you that you're not some last-minute choice. The wedding idea was last-minute, but you're the only choice I could have made. When Dylan was dying and I was so tired that I could barely put one foot in front of the other, when the money was gone and I was so worried, you were always there. When you came over to cut my grass every week and take Isaiah to Kelly Tarlton to see the sea turtles, or to the planetarium ... you're the best brother ever, and the best uncle, and I need to tell you that today. Also, cheers for being as unacceptable as me, of course. We're in this together, hey. The two of us." The tears were sparkling on her lashes, and she gave a little laugh and pressed her fingers to her eyes.

"Oi." Hayden put up his hand, fist out. She bumped it with hers, and then they took hold of little fingers and shook. Their secret handshake, which they hadn't done since they were about ten. Hayden was getting a little choked up himself, to tell the truth.

"Geez. You're crying now?" he asked her, grabbing a tissue from the bedside table and doing some careful dabbing at her eyes. "You're wrecking your makeup. And same here. Who's had my back at every hideous family dinner?"

"Don't let Dad get to you," Zora said. "Though I think Mum must have said something."

"I think so, too. Only possible explanation. Think she broke her bowl on purpose? It looked that way to me."

"Hard to imagine," she said, "but if she did—" She tried to laugh. "That's love, eh."

"The Royal Copenhagen Full Lace serving bowl?" Hayden said. "Yeh, I'd say so. And—service? Ideas?"

“Yes.” She reached over to grab a piece of paper. “This is what we want to say.”

Hayden sat, now, in the chill and the noise and the smell of bad beer—rugby stadiums were all the same, even in France—and remembered the look on his sister’s face when he’d prompted Rhys with the words, when the moment was so pure that it hurt your heart.

“With this ring I thee wed,” Rhys had pronounced with the conviction of a man who knew exactly what he’d found and that it was forever, as he slid that ring home. “With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

Better than anything Hayden could’ve written, even if it was five hundred years old. Well, once they’d taken out the “obey” part, anyway.

It had taken Rhys more than forty years to get it right, even though he *was* terrifyingly competent, so maybe there was hope. Maybe you didn’t always end up alone with your cat. Who was being looked after by Rhys and Zora this week, and hopefully not eating Casey’s bunnies.

Wait. Minute 66, and still nothing happening, but a big, bulky man in blue and white stripes was trotting off, and somebody else was trotting on. And the crowd was clapping, because it was Luke, and he was a star. An unlikely, battered, locked-down star who’d never look for the spotlight, who only wanted to do his job.

There *was* an Aussie on the team, and a South African, and even an American. There was also a Kiwi. Hayden stood up, not caring how it looked, raised his hands over his head, and applauded.

That’s my man, he said in his head to nobody. *And he’s everything.*

THE MAN

LUKE HATED THE BENCH. Whenever he was riding the pine, he was like a sheepdog in the back of the ute, panting hard, tail wagging like mad, every fiber of his being longing to get out there amongst it.

Fifteen to six didn't matter. Fourteen minutes left didn't matter. What mattered was this moment right now, when he was taking his place in the scrum, getting his body centered and low, so he could drive up into his opposite number. The scrums up to now had been rubbish, and he needed to fix that.

"Come on, boys," he told the others. "Let's get it right." The scrum was all about cohesion.

Crouch. Bind. Set. His mantra since the age of eight. All the angles of force in the scrum came through the tighthead prop. He was the cornerstone of the whole structure, and that was the way Luke liked it.

He didn't have to look to know when the ball came in. He felt the moment, and he drove up under the loosehead with all his might and felt him giving way, clearing space for Racing's hooker to get the ball with his foot and send it back. And just like that, they had what they'd needed most: time and space for the Number Eight to get the ball away to the halfback, for the backs to get into position, for the game to open up.

After that, it was all his jobs, which amounted to two words: domination and intimidation. The one place he didn't feel too big, because being the biggest was the point. Hitting the ruck to help out his teammate, smashing his opponent and

driving him off the ball, moving fast, keeping his legs going, driving forward.

Power comes from the lower body.

Lifting in the lineout, hoisting the tallest man on the team high into the air to catch the ball, then setting him carefully down again, the reason you pushed all that tin in the gym. And finally, when the first-five kicked out a long penalty in the seventy-second minute that crossed the touchline inside Pau's 22 ...

The maul. Henri Jaconde had the ball, was turned backward to the opposition, his legs driving, moving. Luke was beside him, bringing the power on one side while the loosehead drove on the other, and the rest of the forwards piled in behind even as Pau drove back at them with all their strength.

It was like pushing a concrete wall, but you pushed anyway, because that was your job, and this was your team. His ear being jammed painfully into his head, his entire body straining, and his legs moving. Moving. One step. Two. Five. A locomotive on the track, driving on.

Power comes from the lower body.

Behind him, he could hear the shouts from the halfback, a little Aussie who was running both his legs and his mouth, as halfbacks did. As Aussies did. Luke didn't need encouragement. He just needed to push, so he did.

Again, when the ball went back, hand over hand, to the halfback, he felt it and disengaged, running in support so he'd get to the breakdown fast, his legs still fresh, his chest heaving. The backs ranged out now, running their lines eight meters from the tryline. Trying it on in the middle, and the halfback yipping again.

A chance at the left, and they were taking it. Smooth, now, that they were free to play their game. A bullet shot from the halfback's hands, in and out of the winger's, the one Pau would have counted on to take it in. Off to the Number Eight instead, the big man running the tramlines just inside the field

of play, putting his head down and his arm out. In and out of one man's grasp, the other bouncing off from the force of that fend. Over the line, diving, sliding, and Luke could feel the grin on the man's face behind the mouthguard, the joy of it. He was thumping him on the back himself, then trotting back to get set for the conversion.

A tricky kick from the corner. The first-five, a South African with the funniest technique you'd ever seen, clasping his hands together, wriggling his hips, looking up at the posts, down at the ball, then at the posts again, until you wanted to scream at him to get on with it.

But when he kicked the ball, it went through. The flags went up, and it was 13 to 15 with two minutes to play, and Racing would get the ball again on the kickoff.

One more chance.

Now or never.

HAYDEN WASN'T THINKING about Christmas anymore. He wasn't thinking about chocolate croissants or shopping or Picasso paintings with weird eyeballs.

He was just watching. Hands clenched together, breath coming hard.

His brother-in-law had been an elite rugby player, and his new brother-in-law was an elite rugby coach. It wasn't that he'd never watched the game. It was just that he'd only watched the exciting parts: the lithe, nimble backs, passing and kicking and running, shifting direction on a dime, looking so athletic.

The forwards were a different story, and Luke was a whole different *book*. Impossibly strong, because they were doing a scrum again, on defense this time, and Racing was pushing Pau backward, then driving them off the ball. One person as the fulcrum of that lever. The one who'd taken two weeks off,

had flown for twenty-four hours a couple of days ago, and had sat on the bench tonight for almost seventy minutes.

The backs must have picked up that new resolve, too, because after a game of dropped passes and missed opportunities, they were firing. Passing and catching and running, being tackled and getting up to pass and catch and run again. Meter by meter, down to the 10. To the 22. And getting nowhere.

None of that passing and catching now. Too risky, as the hooter sounded for 80 minutes. As soon as Racing lost possession, that would be the game. Instead, the forwards held on. One of them carrying the ball, getting tackled, and another picking it up and trying his hand, probing the line for a break that wasn't there.

One minute. Two minutes. Three. Still nearly ten meters out, still doggedly trying. The crowd on its feet, roaring, and Hayden's clasped hands at his mouth.

Yet another Racing forward running with the ball now, straight at the opposition, trying to run them over. Two of them grasping him, shoving him back.

Held up. That was the word. Held up. Any second now, it would be over.

Wait. Luke, his hands clutching the jersey of the ball carrier, shoving, reversing the opposition's momentum. Two more Racing players joining him, bodies bent nearly double. Another maul, and Luke leading the charge.

It was flipping the truck tire down the field. It was raw power.

Shoving. Shoving. Shoving. Bodies straining, muscles standing out on forearms and thighs and calves. You could see it. You could *feel* it.

Five meters out. Four. Three. Two.

Over the line.

Hayden only knew he was crying when he tasted the tears. Stupid. Ridiculously emotional, over a rugby game, but it

wasn't the game. It wasn't even the win.

It was the man.

EASY COME, EASY GO

LUKE HAD THOUGHT it would have happened already. He'd been back from New Zealand for ten weeks, and he'd told about half of the All Blacks while he was down there. Some of those boys were playing in France now, going for the money at the end of their careers, so why hadn't they talked?

He knew why. Mateship. Loyalty. He appreciated it, but if it wasn't going to come out naturally, so he could confirm it and take the heat ... what was he meant to do here? Hold a press conference? Talking at a press conference was his least favorite thing. He had to do it as England's skipper, but he was rubbish at it. The thought of using it to say he was gay ...

Yeh. No.

He could have told his team, but he wasn't playing for Racing at the moment. He was in the midst of the Six Nations international competition, which meant he *was* playing for England. He was the captain, he was responsible, and this would be nothing but a distraction. A huge one, when they least needed it.

All this rationalization. He felt like a coward, and he'd never been a coward. What was the right thing? Only one more test match to play after this week's match in Rome, and it was against Scotland. Not England's toughest competition, you'd think, based on the record, but the rivalry was there all the same, fierce and deep. They'd be playing for the Calcutta Cup, the oldest trophy in rugby, and Scotland lifted for it every time. The score would be low, the battles brutal, and there

would be a fight or two afterward. Not amongst the players. Amongst the supporters.

This time, they were playing the match in Edinburgh. How much more of a fight would there be if he'd come out by then? If his coming out meant England lost? He could take anything for himself, or he hoped he could. He couldn't put that on his team.

Do it after the end of the Racing season, he told himself. It was only three more months.

He sat on an anonymous bed in a Rome Marriott, which looked exactly like all the other hotel beds and all the other hotels in his life, focused on the exercise book in his hands, ran through his points for tomorrow's Captain's Run, and tried not to feel lonely.

He didn't get lonely. He was used to being alone. He'd been alone ever since he could remember, or at least since he'd been sent away to school. Ever since Hayden had gone home two months ago, though, there'd been an emptiness in his flat, in his life, that he hadn't known since that first day at school. Nine years old, walking away from his brother and into the cold.

The tears on Kane's face, not understanding.

Hayden's face at the airport, saying goodbye. Hayden trying to be funny and clever, smiling and smiling and smiling. Not touching and not kissing, because Luke couldn't. It was too public. He'd just stood there, arms at his sides, until Hayden had walked away. He'd kept standing there until Hayden was lost from view in the security queue.

Hayden hadn't looked back.

Wait. In this situation, Hayden was Luke. Wasn't he? Standing tall and walking away, because there was no choice. Because this was where he had to go right now, and this was what he had to do.

Leave. And be alone.

He closed his exercise book. He should go for a walk. He was in Rome, after all, and the evening would just be getting

started out there. He should put on his jacket and Hayden's scarf, the most elegant piece of clothing he'd ever owned, and take in the city. Or he should ring Hayden, if he was lonely and missing him. Eight at night here meant eight in the morning there.

What would he say, though? Ask for comfort, when he was being a coward and Hayden knew it? Lately, there'd been pauses between them. Silences. Too much distance, and Luke couldn't tell what was on the other end of the line, but he suspected it was disappointment. Maybe disillusion. Hayden never asked him if he'd come out yet, why he was faffing about like this, but Luke could feel him wanting to, and he didn't know how to answer.

It was only a few months until July, when Luke would be done playing for the season and Hayden would come visit again, but it felt like he was standing in a long, cold, dark tunnel, unable to see the light. Unable to see the end.

He'd take a walk.

“How come you never bring a date to dinner anymore, Uncle Hayden?”

That was Casey, who was working hard on twirling spaghetti around her fork. They were out on the deck again for this Friday-night dinner, because the day was glorious. Blue sky, blue sea, warm sun. Hayden put a smile on his face and said, “Luke's in France, remember? Well, actually, he's in Rome at the moment, preparing for heroics with England.”

Casey stuffed a round ball of spaghetti the size of a clementine into her mouth, then chewed on it determinedly like a squirrel deciding to eat all the nuts at once. When she gulped down the mouthful at last, she asked, “How come?”

“How come what?” Hayden asked.

Rhys said, “Napkin, Casey.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you have Bolognese sauce all around your mouth and chin,” Rhys said. “Which is from Italy, by the way.”

“Because Rome is in Italy,” Isaiah said. “It’s very historical there. And they speak Italian.”

“I *know*,” Casey said.

“You probably didn’t,” Isaiah said. “But that’s OK. People don’t like to admit they don’t know something. You’d think they’d speak Latin, because that was what they spoke when they started Rome, but they don’t. That’s kind of weird. It’s the same people, but they changed the language.”

“You could look it up,” Rhys said, and when Isaiah stood up, added, “After dinner. And tell us the answer. Got to be a reason, eh.”

“Why do you always have to *know* things?” Casey asked.

“I don’t know,” Isaiah said. “I just do. It’s good to know things. It’s information.”

“OK,” Casey said. “Then how come Luke doesn’t come visit you, Uncle Hayden? Dad goes away for rugby, but he always comes home.”

“You have to go where you live, in rugby,” Isaiah said. “You can’t just go to another *country* when your team’s training.”

“But Dad goes to other countries all the time,” Casey said.

“Because the team’s playing there,” Isaiah said. “You don’t get to choose where you go. Unless your partner’s having a baby or something, you have to stay with the team all season long. If you’re an All Black, or playing for England like Luke, you have to stay for the test matches, too. It’s almost all the time.”

“Oh.” Casey considered that while she twirled more spaghetti and Rhys said, “Start with a tiny bit, maybe, so you look a bit less like a snake eating a goat.”

“Spaghetti is hard,” she said.

“Yeh,” Rhys said. “But tasty, eh.”

“OK,” Casey said. “Then Uncle Hayden could go visit Luke, because he’s not a rugby player. He could fly on a plane. You can lie down like on a bed,” she told Hayden. “It has scary toilets that make a very loud sound, but you can’t get sucked into the hole, so it’s OK to go in them. And they give you cookies, too, and when Dad and I went, they let me see the front of it where the drivers sit.”

“The pilots,” Isaiah said. “In the cockpit.”

Casey ignored him. “So why can’t you go?” she asked Hayden.

Zora wasn’t saying anything, but she was looking at him with too much compassion, like she knew. She couldn’t, because he hadn’t told anyone. He couldn’t stand to. That Luke didn’t call enough, and when Hayden called him, it was awkward.

He’d been so *sure*.

He said, “Well, I’m working, for one thing. Those contracts aren’t going to draft themselves.”

Isaiah said, “People take holidays, though.”

“Yes,” Hayden said “And I’m taking one. In July. More than two weeks.”

“Oh.” Casey considered that. “When Dad’s gone, though, I’m very sad, and I miss him very much. But when he calls me and reads me a book, I feel better. Maybe you could call Luke and read him a book, if he’s sad. I think he might be sad. Dad always says he misses me and Isaiah and Auntie Zora when he’s gone, because rugby can be kind of lonely, so Luke might miss you, too.”

Wait. If Luke was sad? Luke?

“You can need somebody,” Hayden had told Luke that night in Tekapo when they’d been watching the lights of the Aurora dancing in the dark sky, “and still be a man.”

What had Luke said? Something like, “Yeh. That. Thanks.” Which wasn’t much, but he’d meant it. Hadn’t he?

He roused himself and asked, “What book would you recommend?”

Casey considered. “*The Kissing Hand*,” she decided. “That’s the best book for missing somebody. It’s kind of a baby book, but it’s nice. I’m seven, so I don’t need baby books now, but I still like it, even though it’s about raccoons and I’m not a raccoon. So I think a grown-up might like it, too, if they were sad.”

“Rugby players don’t read books called *The Kissing Hand*,” Isaiah said. “Ew.”

Rhys smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. Rugby players need kisses, too.”

“Not on their *hands*,” Isaiah said.

Rhys took Zora’s hand and kissed her palm, then closed her fingers around it. “There. That’s how I feel leaving. Like I want your mum to feel that kiss, just like the raccoon kid does.”

“But you’re not the one getting the kiss,” Isaiah said, “so it doesn’t count.”

Zora’s hand was still in Rhys’s. Now, she lifted his and kissed his palm. “No,” she said. “Rugby players need love, too. And so do men. When I say goodbye, I want Uncle Rhys to think that he can press his hand to his cheek and know that somebody loves him more than life.” She laughed and dabbed her eyes with her napkin. “Sorry, Hayden. We’re a bit goopy, possibly. He’s got another road trip coming up, and it’s a long one, and Casey’s right. I miss him, every time.”

How much does he care, Hayden wanted to ask, if he won’t even come out? How much can he possibly miss me if I’m still a secret, and he’s OK with keeping me that way?

Rhys and Zora had kept it secret, though, hadn’t they? Rhys had done that for Zora, Hayden was sure, because he’d known what people would say, and he hadn’t wanted her to face that.

But what if that’s not it? What if that’s not why?

Then you need to know. Harden up and find out.

He looked at his watch. Six-thirty.

This is madness. You don't have to be desperate. Insouciant, that's you. Easy come, easy go. It doesn't mean you'll never find love. Just another one that didn't work out.

He couldn't manage it.

ANESTHETIZE MY HEART

HAYDEN HAD NEVER BEEN SO tired.

Pro tip, he told himself as he sat in the hotel lobby, nursed his fourth coffee, and tried not to (A) fall asleep, and (B) bounce off the walls from all the caffeine he'd consumed over the past ... however long it had been, because his brain couldn't compute the numbers. *Don't take a thirty-hour night flight to Rome on the spur of the moment—with a three-hour layover in Dubai, and not in the kind of seat that makes into a bed—after a very bad night's sleep, a full day of work, and a general sense of impending doom, and if you do, have somebody there to shepherd you in your daze of fatigue and incomprehension.* He'd been able to find out via Rhys where the team was staying—through some sort of international rugby fraternity, apparently, because the information had taken his brother-in-law about five minutes to gather—and had taken a taxi there. So here he was. In Rome, at Luke's hotel.

Except.

It was after five by the time he got through customs, through the mad Roman traffic—his first time here, but he was at once too blurry-eyed and too caffeinated to appreciate it—and arrived at the hotel, and when he got there, they wouldn't tell him which was Luke's room. Well, of course not. He should have foreseen that. The bloke at the desk was looking distinctly shirty, in fact, and Hayden had to book a room to keep him from turfing him out. There weren't any regular ones left, so it was a suite. By the time he'd done that, the game was

about to start, and he ... well, he was here, and he needed to watch Luke play.

This was ridiculous, he told himself more than once on the taxi ride to the stadium. He could have just *called*. But it didn't feel like it. It felt urgent. Or wildly extravagant to the point where New Zealand would be rescinding his passport for insufficient Kiwi thriftiness. Or both.

He found the ticket booth after some searching. He'd learned a bit of French—his over-hopeful heart again—but he definitely didn't know Italian. He'd missed most of the first half of the game, but he watched the second. The score at the end was 33 to 6, and England had the 33, but Hayden didn't care about that. Instead, he watched Luke, was thrilled by his strength and his skill and his heart, and so incredibly proud, too, and wondered yet again, *Is this the stupidest romantic move in a lifetime of stupid romantic moves?*

He remembered Rhys saying to Luke, though, "Good to have somebody in the stands. Is that a first?" And the way Luke's ears had gone red, answering.

Didn't everybody need somebody to care? Was it so wrong to want to be that for a man?

After the game, he went back to the hotel. He ended up walking, because there were no taxis, and he wasn't able to sort out how else to get there. The walk took an hour, but he thought, *He'll be with the team for a couple of hours anyway*. He knew the drill by now. Besides, he needed to move to stay awake.

By the time he made it back, it was eleven. He ate dinner in the bar, facing the lobby, and then got a coffee.

Any time now.

After an hour and another coffee, he moved into the lobby, because he was falling asleep where he sat, so he needed to be where Luke couldn't miss him.

He stayed awake until one, scrolling mindlessly on his phone, his heart beating hard every time a group came through the doors. It was a Marriott, and a big one, so there were heaps

of groups. At one-thirty, he got another coffee. Fortunately, Italians seemed never to go to bed.

He started wondering, though. He couldn't help it. Luke had said, sometime in there, that he'd found his partners overseas, times when the team was playing in some country where soccer was everything. Places where he could be anonymous.

He's out with the team. He's gay as can be, and he's straight as a die. He can't lie if he tries. That's why you fell in love with him.

I'm strong as oak, Luke had said, that first night in the car, and I'm steady as hell. And I don't cheat. I don't hurt, I don't lie, and I don't cheat.

It's one-thirty in the morning, and you've seen English rugby players come in for a couple of hours now. It was hard to mistake them, and none of them was Luke.

And Luke had been distant on the phone lately. Face it. Hayden was hopeful, but he wasn't *that* stupid, was he? Luke wouldn't have to be cheating. He could just be ...

Done.

His eyelids were like sandpaper now, his limbs heavy and aching. He shifted in the chair, then shifted again. The last thing he remembered thinking was, *If you don't matter to him enough after all, if he can stand to lose you, if we're looking at goodbye here ... you need to know. Not in July. Now.*

How did you anesthetize your heart?

THEY'D WON THE GAME, which was no surprise, but it hadn't been easy. It never was, whatever the scoreboard said or what the public thought. Luke had gone out with the boys afterward, had watched some of them get stupid and some of them hook up, and was working now on getting the worst of them back to the hotel. Business as usual, but for some reason, his body was dragging.

He was fit. He'd prepared well, same as always. He knew how to lift to meet the moment, no matter what was happening in his life, so why did his entire body feel pummeled tonight?

Get over it, he told himself. He'd be on the plane in the morning and headed straight to Scotland, and it would all start again. That was his job, and that was his life. He'd signed up for it with his eyes open almost fifteen years ago, and he still loved it. He'd get some sleep here and some on the plane, and he'd be fit to go again.

So he was lonely and felt like nobody knew the man he was. He ought to be used to that.

George Conley, the blazingly fast young winger who'd earned his first cap on this tour and had scored his first international try tonight, stumbled getting out of the taxi, and Luke caught him by the arm and hauled him upright.

"Check out the talent," George said, the moment they went through the hotel's revolving door. Luke looked. Four or five young women with shiny hair, short skirts, and high heels, heading into the bar. "Another beer," George decided, attempting to veer off that way. A few of the other boys were in the bar, Luke noticed. Well, he couldn't round up everybody. He wasn't actually a sheepdog.

"You're legless, mate," Freddie Pritzker, the centre, told George. "You try to talk to them, you're likely to piss yourself. They'll laugh, is what they'll do."

"I'm no worse than you," George slurred, which was very nearly true. "A bloke gets to celebrate."

"We're on the bus at seven," Luke said, "and it's past two already. You miss that bus, and there'll be no next game for you." New caps were all the same. "There'll be girls in Edinburgh," he decided to add.

"Faw," George said. "Scottish girls. They don't have hair like that. Don't have—"

"Nah, mate," Freddie said. "You listen to the Skip. Boring, but he's right. You can't miss the bus. I've had one or two too many myself."

More like five or six too many, but Luke wasn't saying it. He'd get them to their rooms, and if they went out again after that and made asses of themselves, well, he'd have done his—

He stopped. George kept going, tripped over his size 14 feet, tried to turn around with middling success, and asked, "What?"

Luke hadn't had a drink tonight. Nothing but fizzy water with lime. But he felt legless himself, like his head and body weren't working together.

Hayden was asleep in one of the big chairs in the lobby. Not looking perfect for once. His shirt was ruffled, and so was his hair.

Luke couldn't process it. He couldn't work it out. He'd texted with him ... when? Thirty-six hours ago? He told Freddie, "Get George up to his room."

"Not sure I can, mate," Freddie said. "Not sure I remember which is *my* room."

"Five twenty-four," Luke said. "George is 513. Here." He grabbed a pen from his jacket pocket and wrote the numbers on the back of Freddie's hand.

Freddie blinked at them. "I don't— You can't—"

Freddie was twenty-three, George wasn't even that old, and Luke was the skipper. This was his responsibility.

He didn't care. He pushed the button for the lift, shoved George inside, pressed the button for 5, and stepped out again, telling Freddie, "Between the two of you, you should be able to read a room number."

The doors closed on Freddie's astonished face.

STAND YOUR GROUND

WHY WAS Hayden's bedroom so noisy? And so bright? He needed to get up, turn out the lights, and turn off the telly, but he couldn't open his eyes. He'd just ...

"Hayden." Oh. There was somebody here. Also, he was cold. He grabbed for the duvet to pull it up, but couldn't find it.

"Hayden."

His eyelids struggled to open and finally made it. When they did, he blinked. This didn't make sense. It was bright, and loud, and somebody's impossibly broad body was in front of him, blocking the view.

Somebody wearing an elegant beige-and-brown wool scarf with a geometric pattern. A Fendi scarf.

He woke up.

LUKE HAD BEEN SO TIRED, his legs had felt encased in concrete. Now, he couldn't feel them at all. He knew he was smiling, even though he couldn't feel his face, either, and he was reaching down for Hayden, pulling him to his feet.

He was aware that a few of the boys were straggling out of the bar. The part of his brain that had been in charge for thirty-three years tried to say, *Let go of him fast. Why are you*

touching him? You're saying hello to a mate, that's all. Stand back.

His body wasn't listening, because Hayden was blinking, then saying, "I realize this is unexpected. Should have asked if you wanted me here, probably. Oh, well, I didn't. Apparently, I'm impulsive. Or desperate, though I'm trying not to go with that. I just—"

Luke kissed him. His arms around Hayden like they'd never let go, and Hayden's around him like this was what he'd hoped for and hadn't dared to think was possible.

Or maybe that was Luke.

The voice came from behind him. English, and slightly drunk. "Oh, shit." And another one. "That's never the Skip. What the hell?"

He didn't pay any attention, because he couldn't care. He was laughing, then kissing Hayden again, because he was everything he'd wanted to see for two months now. He was the morning light coming through the window and the swallows returning in the spring. He was hope, he was joy, and he was holding Luke like he needed him just as much.

"Let's go," Luke said. "My room."

"I have a ... suite," Hayden said, still blinking, still so good-looking, he made Luke's hands feel clumsy. "I had to get a suite. They wouldn't let me sit here otherwise."

"I have to be on the bus at seven," Luke said. "My room."

Three of the boys were waiting for the lift. Luke was holding Hayden's hand, and he didn't drop it. He said, "My partner. Hayden Allen. Came over to surprise me." No choice anymore, and still, the huge black moth that was his secret flapped its leathery wings in alarm.

"Oh," Trevor Martin said, then glanced at Henry Osandu. Henry, the explosive blindside flanker and enforcer, had been playing with Luke for six seasons now. The third bloke, Oscar Findley, didn't say anything, just stared.

Henry pressed the button for 5, and the lift doors closed. “Hi,” he said to Hayden. “Henry.” And put out his hand.

Hayden dropped Luke’s hand to shake Henry’s and said, his voice a little unsteady, a little giddy, “This probably comes as a surprise.”

“Well, yeah,” Henry said, and grinned. “A bit. He’s so bloody ugly, I just figured he couldn’t get a girl. Didn’t realize he wasn’t looking for one.”

The lift stopped and the doors opened. Henry put out a big hand to hold them open and asked Luke, “Do we keep this on the DL? Or what?”

Luke took a breath. *Still time to back away*, the black moth hissed in his ear, its claws clutching at his skin. *Don’t be stupid.*

“Not a secret,” Luke said. “I’ll tell the boys myself, on the bus.”

Henry said, “Right, then.” He turned to walk down the hall with the others, then turned and came back. The others came with him, because Henry had some mana. “Far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t change anything. You’ve been a follow-me skipper from the start, because nobody picked you for your speeches, and I don’t see why I should stop following you now. No business of mine who you sleep with.”

“But—” Oscar said.

“But what?” Henry asked, fixing Oscar with his don’t-fuck-with-me stare.

“Well,” Oscar said, and faltered. “Well,” he said again, “in the sheds and all, like.”

“What, that he’ll see you naked?” Henry said. “I think that ship has sailed, mate. And I imagine he’s been averting his eyes pretty smartly, because if he’s an ugly bastard, you’re worse. Props.”

“Still,” Oscar said. “It’s a lot to overlook.” He glanced at Trevor, who nodded slightly, gulped, and looked uncomfortable.

“Mate,” Henry said. “Look at his partner. Anybody like that on our squad? Anybody close?”

“Well, uh,” Trevor said, “Dan Foster’s pretty good-looking.” The first-five. They were always good-looking. Something about that “running the boys around the paddock” thing. Cool, calm, and good-looking. Luke was thinking that, because he was sweating, and he didn’t know what was coming next.

A door opened, and somebody said, “Oi, you lot. Shut up. Trying to sleep here.”

“Skip’s telling us he’s gay, though,” Oscar said, possibly because he had more than a few under his belt himself.

“He’s what?” the man asked. Alex Stewart, that was, and now his roommate, Max Matthews, was crowding out behind him, wearing only a pair of rugby shorts, saying, “What’s going on?”

Oscar explaining, and more doors opening. Two-thirty in the bloody morning, and all Luke wanted was to take Hayden back to his room and do what most rugby players wanted to do after the match, but possibly even more so. And say all the right things and hear all the right things, too, but mostly—

Well, yeh. It had been a long two months.

It was also the worst nightmare of his life, coming true. Like dreaming you were naked in class, then waking up and realizing it was happening.

Hayden said, “You could hold my hand.”

“Yeh, right,” Luke said.

“I mean,” Hayden said, “you could hold my hand.” When Luke looked at him, Hayden grinned a little crookedly and said, “Stand your ground.”

“Oh. Right.” Luke did it. It felt ... bizarre. He was standing in a hotel corridor amidst most of his teammates, in the middle of the night, holding a man’s hand.

Definitely his nightmare. And also the right thing, because it was Hayden’s hand, and his hand was solid ground, the only

thing anchoring Luke here. But he had no control, not even his superpower of shutting up and walking away. There was nowhere to hide anymore.

A buzz of talk. More and more men standing around barefoot in shorts and singlets, the newest arrivals being filled in by the others, and Luke in the middle of it, silent. What did you say?

Finally, Henry put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, long and loud, and everybody shut up. He said, “Right. What did you think, when he never had a girlfriend?”

Everybody looked at each other, and Henry asked, “Has he ever made a move on any of us?”

“Well, no,” Oscar said, “but how do we know he won’t?”

“I won’t,” Luke said. “Sorry, but I’m not exactly tempted by you lot.”

Some laughter at that, and Henry said, “He’s our skipper. He makes the right calls, and nobody empties the tank more out on the field. Not the chattiest bloke, but that doesn’t bother me.”

“Yeh,” somebody said from the back of the group, “but do you want to take a shower with him?”

Henry waited a moment, and Luke thought, *This is it, then*. When Henry went on, though, he said, “You know my little sister, right? Aisha? Plays Sevens?” They nodded, and he said, “She’s a lesbian. Married to a woman. You don’t know that, even though it’s no secret, because her teammates aren’t bloody idiots, and they aren’t worried that she’ll grab them in the showers because she can’t resist their fat, hairy arses. So they go out and play the game instead of spending their time obsessing about what kind of sex she has. I don’t want to think about what kind of sex any of you have, so I don’t do it. None of my business.”

“But you’re Nigerian,” Oscar said.

“I’m English,” Henry said, with the kind of flat stare that would make most men take a step back.

“Well, but your parents,” Oscar persisted, possibly because of the drink.

“What, they should’ve tossed her out?” Henry asked. “Because they’re from Nigeria? I don’t think they’re the ones with the problem here. If anybody has anything to say about my sister,” he went on, folding his arms and giving them all the benefit of his hardest look, “they can say it to me. And if you want to say anything about the Skip, too. Here’s your chance. Come on. Say it to me.”

Some muttering, some shifting of feet. And somebody else stepping forward. Dan Foster, the first-five, who actually *was* good-looking and charismatic and all of that, saying, “This is a load of bollocks.” Luke’s heart sank, and he felt sick. Then Dan went on. “Luke’s our skipper, full stop. Who thinks he’s not a good one?” He looked around. Nobody spoke up. “Then what’s the problem?” Dan asked. “Last I looked, it was 2023. And I’d like to get to bed. I ran about ten kilometers tonight, because the Italians can’t tackle for shit, but they run like bloody greyhounds. I’ve got a new baby and a two-year-old at home, and this is my one chance to get some sleep.”

Time to stop standing here like a poleaxed bull. Luke was the captain, at least for now. Time to act like it. “Right,” he said, raising his voice so everybody could hear it. “That’s enough for tonight. Break it up. Go to bed, and I’ll see you on the bus.”

He tried not to hold his breath, waiting to see if they’d do it.

They did. All but Henry, who waited until they were gone, then asked Luke, “All right?”

“Yeh,” Luke said. “Thanks.” He tried to think what else to say, and couldn’t.

Henry nodded. “When are you telling Coach?”

“At the airport, I reckon,” Luke said. “When I can have a quiet word. And if that’s it, if it’s over ...” He put out a hand and tried to keep the emotion from showing. It had never been harder. “It’s been an honor.”

Henry took it and gripped hard. “Nah, mate,” he said. “The honor’s mine.”

HAYDEN SAID, when Luke had stalked in his absolutely upright way to his room, betraying nothing, “And I thought it was hard for *me* to come out.”

He was feeling a little shaken, honestly. That had been *intense*.

Luke let the door shut behind them and said, “We could talk about that. We could talk about you flying here and why you did it. Or I could kiss you.”

Hayden said, “Uh, well, uh ... let’s do that.” Heart pounding, breath catching. It was the look on Luke’s face.

Luke stepped into him and did it.

It wasn’t their first time, but that was how it felt. Lips and tongues and breath coming hard. Clumsy hands unfastening buttons, and shirts pulled up by eager hands. Luke’s jacket dropping to the floor, Hayden’s shirt, and still, Luke kissing him, his mouth avid and hard.

Hayden could hardly stand up.

He was naked, then, and Luke was still wearing his trousers. His trousers, and Hayden’s scarf. Hayden said, as best he could with Luke’s hands on his chest, his back, his sides, Luke’s mouth at his neck, “You wore the ... scarf.”

Luke stopped kissing his neck, stepped back, and looked at him, and Hayden forgot to breathe. Then Luke took the scarf off, put it over Hayden’s head, and pulled him in by it.

Bloody *hell*.

He’d never been touched with so much possessiveness. He’d never lain on a big white bed, had a man’s mouth all over him, and been flooded by so much desire, all he could do was put his hands up over his head and surrender to it.

Heat. Passion. Desire. He couldn't ... he couldn't ...

He was making too much noise. He knew it, and he couldn't stop himself. When it got to be more than he could bear, he stuffed his fist into his mouth and bit down on it to try to quiet himself.

Luke stopped. His hand at the back of Hayden's neck, gentle now. "All right?" he asked, not sounding like himself, either. Sounding gruff, nearly strangled, and Hayden realized, somewhere in the dim recesses of his mind, that this meant as much to Luke as it did to him.

"Y-yeh," he managed to say. "Just ... I love you." He was crying a little now. He couldn't help it. The emotion ... it was too much. "And I'm ... being loud."

Luke wasn't just touching the back of his neck now. He was kissing it, his hand stroking down Hayden's arm. "Nah," he said. "Not too loud. Want me to slow down?"

"No," Hayden said. "No. Please. *Please.*"

"All right," Luke said. "Then hang on."

Hayden did.

IT TOOK Luke a surprisingly long time to get his heart rate back to normal. That was love, maybe, because it bloody well wasn't fitness. When Hayden was in his arms and they were lying, spent, amidst twisted sheets, he managed to say, "I have to be on the bus in about three hours." And laughed, because that was how this felt.

He'd never been giddy in his life, but he was giddy now. The black moth that had held him down for so long loosed its clutching claws, flapped its leathery wings, hissed one last time in his ear, and vanished. Right or wrong, whatever happened next, he was free.

He was here. He was himself. And he was free.

He said, “I love you. It’s not enough to say, and I’m not good with words anyway. But I love you. I didn’t know if you ...” He stopped, then forced himself to go on. “I felt like a coward. I didn’t know if you’d want a coward.”

Hayden stirred and turned, and now, his hand was on Luke’s face. “I came because I had to know how you felt. What you wanted. I had to know if you felt the way I did. And you could never be a coward. Never.”

“I didn’t come out,” Luke said.

“Well, yeh, mate,” Hayden said, and he was laughing. “I think you did. How does it feel?”

Luke didn’t know what was going to happen. It could all be over. There’d be press, and the hell that was social media. He wouldn’t read it, but he’d know it was out there. There was his Racing team, too, and the whole thing to go through again. And there was no other answer.

“Awesome,” he said. “It feels awesome.”

THE AULD ENEMY

LUKE DIDN'T WANT to wake Hayden, as tired as he'd looked and as little sleep as they'd got, but what option did he have? It was past six-thirty, and he needed to be downstairs in twenty minutes. He couldn't just sneak out without talking to him.

He settled for sitting on the edge of the bed and kissing Hayden's forehead. A gentle awakening, he hoped.

Unfortunately, Hayden shot up like a cork, and his forehead banged hard into Luke's nose. Hayden exclaimed and held his head, and Luke didn't exclaim and held his nose. Bleeding a bit. That was awkward. He grabbed a couple of tissues, leaned forward, and pinched his nostrils shut, and Hayden said, "I broke your *nose*. Sorry. Sorry. What ... ice. I should get you some ice." He jumped out of bed and grabbed the ice bucket, which was interesting, as he was naked.

Luke said, still holding his nose, "You didn't break it. A bit of blood, that's all. You'll make life exciting for me if you go out there like that, though. Imagine the chat on the bus." He wanted to laugh, but it was hard to laugh with a bloody nose, so instead, he smiled. "You could tempt a few of them, too, because, bloody hell, but you're good-looking."

"Yeh, right," Hayden said distractedly. "Where are my clothes? You're bleeding so *much*."

Luke put out the non-pinching hand and pulled Hayden down to sit on the bed beside him. "I'm used to it. How's the head?"

"Oh." Hayden felt it. "A bruise, maybe, that's all."

“This relationship has been pretty hard on you,” Luke said. “Physically.” And smiled some more.

“Ha,” Hayden said, but he’d lost the frantic look, at least. “Physically’s the least of it. You’re dressed already. How long do you have?”

“Fifteen minutes or so. I wanted to ask, though—” Luke hesitated, not wanting to put it out there, not wanting to ask for anything. This was already better than anything he’d ever had. What was he thinking, demanding more?

“What?” Hayden asked. Still naked. Still so bloody beautiful, and his heart ...

“Not sure what your plans were,” Luke said cautiously. “When you came.”

“I think ‘plan’ may be generous,” Hayden said. “I just came.” He yawned. “Sorry, but if we’re going to have a deep and meaningful conversation, I need coffee.”

“Oh.” Luke got up and went into the bath and came out with a cup. “It’s not too bad.”

“Thanks.” Hayden took a long swallow. “So. What were we saying? Oh. Wait.” He got up, then came back with a wet facecloth and gently sponged Luke’s upper lip and chin. “How does it feel now?”

There was a lump in Luke’s throat. He cleared it as best he could. “If you were planning on being over here for a bit, we could get you a room in Edinburgh. No partners allowed in mine before the match, and I’ll be working, of course, but ...”

Hayden said, “Oh. I’m ... it’s Monday morning in New Zealand. At least I think it is. I need to go back anyway, because I didn’t clear this with anybody. I need to ring up soon, in fact. It was possibly impulsive. Or call it what it was. Mad.”

“Oh. Right. OK, then.” Luke glanced at his watch and tried not to feel disappointed. Or desolated.

“It would be harder if I were here anyway,” Hayden said, “because I’m thinking you may get some press.”

“Yeh,” Luke said. “I think that’s fair to say.” *When did you get so soft?* he asked himself. *When did you start caring what strangers thought of you?*

“But,” Hayden said, then stopped.

“What?” Luke asked.

“I’m trying to be brave,” Hayden said. “Braver, anyway.”

“I think you were that,” Luke said.

“So I’m going to say,” Hayden went on, as if he hadn’t heard him, “that if you’re asking that because you *want* me to come with you ... if it would help, maybe, support and all that. Or, you know, love. Then ... I can ring my senior partner and explain. Not sure *how* I’d explain, but I’ll think of something.”

Luke had forgotten about his nose. Mistake, because two big globs of blood fell onto his white button-down, team-required travel shirt. He pinched it shut again and said, “If there’s a money issue, I could make that up.”

“Luke.”

“Oh,” Luke said. “Sorry. You’re not a toy and all that. Got it.”

“No.” Hayden’s hand was on Luke’s chest now. “I’ll go out on a limb for you. You just did it for me, didn’t you?” He was trying to smile, to be bright and funny, but it wasn’t quite working. “I’m good at my job, and I’m tired of dancing around my life, trying desperately to be ... to be acceptable, sure that if I take one false step anywhere, I’m out. Out of my family, out of my relationship, out of my job. If we want this, if it’s worth it—let’s go for broke. Let’s stop protecting ourselves and do it. Flat to the boards. What do you say?”

“I say,” Luke said, and decided, to hell with the shirt. He put his arm around Hayden and kissed him, blood and all. “I say—I’m in.” He laughed. He had to leave, but this time, leaving didn’t have to hurt. “I say—if you want that?” He kissed Hayden again and promised it. “I’m your man.”

ANOTHER SATURDAY NIGHT FOR HAYDEN. Another stadium, not even domed this time. The stands were covered, but the wind was whistling. He didn't care. He *was* in the WAG section this time, because he'd actually met them.

"You're welcome," Madelyn Osandu, Henry's wife, had told him yesterday, when he'd met a few of them at Harvey Nichols to go shopping, which you tended to have to do if you'd flown across the world without so much as a change of clothes, and then been in the papers over and over again, possibly not looking as fabulous as you'd like as the first-ever rugby HAB. You had to represent, after all. Madelyn had gone on, "Though you're better dressed than most of us. You're the one getting the press this time, so that's something, instead of me copping it for not losing the baby weight yet."

Since they were being followed by about eight photographers at the time, she was right. Hayden hadn't done any interviews, and neither had Luke, but that hadn't stopped anybody from commenting, or the photos from appearing, either. The ones from Wednesday, Luke's day off, when they'd gone to Edinburgh Castle and walked down the Royal Mile—Hayden couldn't help it that he'd never been much of anywhere and wanted to be a tourist—and held hands, had been especially popular. Or disgusting, repellent, and "against nature."

Oh, well. Not like it was news that heaps of people in the world shared Hayden's dad's view of things.

"I can't say I think much of this scarf," Hayden told Madelyn now, wrapping the thing an extra time around his throat as they watched the teams finish their extremely enticing groin stretches and other manly displays and trot off the field. "Red and black. Basic as. English rugby needs a new designer."

She laughed. "Never mind. This is the last match, then it's back to French chic."

“Nah,” Hayden said. “I have to fly home tomorrow. Back to work, eh.” If he still had a job. His senior partner hadn’t been best pleased with his sudden absence. The firm was stuffy. Law firms tended that way, but big commercial firms *especially* tended that way. Bad enough to be gay. Worse to be ...

Well, notorious.

They’d thought it was Luke’s career that would suffer. Ironic if it turned out to be Hayden’s.

“Oh, what a pity,” Madelyn said. “I would’ve come over to Paris to shop with you. Sacrifice, but there you are.” She laughed again, then sobered and said, “My son Duncan asked me about you yesterday. Well, about Luke, mainly.”

“Oh?” Hayden asked cautiously.

“Yeh,” she said. “He’s seven. He wanted to know if gay people can play rugby, and I could say, ‘Well, of course they can. There’s our skipper doing it. That’s why you’re asking, isn’t it?’ And he said, ‘I guess so.’ That’s going to mean a lot to kids. Especially teenagers.”

“I see that,” Hayden said. “Not sure Luke ever wanted to be a poster boy for anything, though. He hasn’t been enjoying this.”

“Somebody had to be first, I guess,” Madelyn said. “Sorry if it’s been dread. It’ll be worse tonight, fair warning.”

“What do you mean?” Hayden asked.

“Watch,” she said, “and you’ll see. Never mind. He’s tough, and they’re all used to copping it over something, especially when Scotland plays the Auld Enemy. He can take it.”

Easy for you to say, Hayden thought and didn’t say. We’re tired of taking it. And why should we have to?

LUKE HAD RUN out of a thousand tunnels in his career. He'd run out at the head of his team dozens of times, too. He knew about hostile crowds and hostile stadiums.

It had never been like this.

They ran out to a rousing hail of boos, as full-throated as 67,000 voices could manage. Which wasn't unheard-of, but this was worse. He could hear, somehow, some individual words in the midst of that yelling, or he thought he could. He did his best to ignore all of it and lined up facing the stands for the anthem. At the end of the row, because he was the skipper, with Henry's arm around his shoulders and his arm around Henry's waist, since Henry was the next-most-senior player on the squad. If Henry wasn't comfortable with it, he didn't say anything.

The crowd did. "God Save the King" began to play, and the boos increased, drowning out the music. And then came the hail of drink cups. Murrayfield was a dry stadium, so beer wasn't the reason. It was Luke.

All you had at the end of the day, though, was your refusal to be cowed. If he hadn't backed down when he was nine and some twelve-year-old was beating him in the toilets, when his nose was bloody and he'd been kicked in the head, he wasn't backing down now. He didn't think, *I'm putting the team under the pump*, because there was no point. The anthems ended, and he jogged to his spot and braced for the kickoff. England were receiving, and that was all that mattered right now.

The ball was in the air, spinning high under the lights. Trevor Martin, the lock, who hadn't looked Luke in the eye all week, was backpedaling, then backpedaling some more, and Luke was running with him, behind him.

The ball was coming down. Too high, still, even as Trevor ran backward to get it. Misjudged. Luke saw his moment, reached for Trevor's waist, and lifted him overhead.

He felt Trevor overbalancing, reaching too far, then going arse-over-teakettle, headfirst and backward toward the ground, and Luke stiffened every muscle and held on.

It barely took a second, and he felt every fraction of it. When Trevor's feet were in the air, and when Luke started pulling him in the other direction. When Luke's arms came back to vertical and he could see Trevor's feet again. When he was planting his feet and bringing the big lock's 105 kG down slowly. Slowly. Not letting him fall.

Trevor's feet on the ground, the ball in his arms. Trevor hitting the line, and Luke right behind him, adding his weight. The crowd singing *Flower of Scotland*, willing their team on. Trying to get under Luke's skin, but he didn't need to let them.

The earth had shifted on its axis, and he was in the right place again. Doing his role. Anchoring his team. Pressing on.

No moment but this one. No purpose but domination.

He was here, and he was strong. That was enough.

HAYDEN WAS HAVING a hard time breathing. They weren't even three minutes into the game, and England was driving, the backs with the ball now, handing it off. Down the field, playing like men possessed. Like it wasn't the beginning, but the end. Like they had something to prove.

The big screen overhead was showing it, of course. And then switching off to show that lift. How Luke had, somehow, held somebody up whose entire body weight was pulling him backward, and then lifted him overhead again and set him down.

How?

How?

Beside him, Madelyn was saying, "How did he do that? How ever did he do that?"

Hayden finally came up with the answer. "Because he had to."

Around him, the noise swelled. The crowd was on its feet, the Scots singing and the English singing back. *Swing Low*,

Sweet Chariot being drowned out, then rising again.

Scotland finally getting it together, stiffening their line. Repelling the backs, and then repelling them again, until it was the forwards taking their turn, the same way he'd seen it happen before, bashing into the opposition like the most brutal game of Red Rover ever.

Hayden had been rubbish at Red Rover. On purpose. In his opinion, if other kids wanted to brutalize him, he wasn't going to line up for the chance, and he wasn't going to dislocate his arms trying to stop them, either.

He had not been popular on the playground.

This was different. He was on his feet along with everybody else, watching Luke drive his team on. As if he was prepared to leave it all out there, and he'd do anything it took.

One player after another taking the ball. The singing louder now, the Scots emptying their lungs. The Scottish line holding. Holding.

Luke didn't carry the ball much. Hayden knew that. He didn't expect it. Luke was that fella just behind the ball carrier, helping him on, securing possession for the next attempt.

Two, three, four more attempts, and then a break in the line. The tall fella, the one Luke had lifted earlier, who'd been on the lift in Rome with them and hadn't said anything, just looked horrified, smashed his way through and drove on with Luke behind him.

Eight meters out. He was going to score. He was going to ...

Players closing in fast from both sides.

He passed the ball to Luke.

A player driving hard at Luke, going for his upper body, and Luke plowing straight through him. Another one grabbing at his jersey, and Luke's legs never stopped.

Three meters. Two. A player coming so fast, he looked like he was flying, diving from behind for Luke's ankles, grabbing hold, hanging on.

It was like watching a totara fall in the forest, its roots holding as long as they could, and then the long, slow, inexorable crash to earth. Luke was falling. He was going to come up short. He was going to ...

Luke strained. Stretched. Took another step even as he was being pulled down by the ankles.

I'm strong as oak, and I'm steady as hell.

The field nearly shook as he went down.

Over the line.

MEN SURROUNDED HIM. Henry, pulling him to his feet. Trevor, grabbing him around the waist and lifting him. Hands slapping him on the back even as Luke tossed the ball away and attempted to get back into position for the conversion.

“Settle down, lads,” he shouted. “Get back. Let’s move.”

“Mate,” Henry said, jogging beside him. “Take the moment.”

“What moment?” Luke said. “We’ve barely started.”

“Nah, mate,” Henry said. “We’re going to win it. Thanks to you.”

A MURMURATION OF SWALLOWS

IT WAS WELL after eight in the evening on a late-July day, and the sun was slanting low over the varied, centuries-old rooftops of Montmartre to the west, the bulk of the Louvre to the south, the black iron tracery of the Eiffel Tower beyond. Hayden was leaning against a balustrade in the dome of the basilica of Sacré-Cœur, looking out through an arched window at a smaller dome below, fashioned by a master out of nearly white, fine-grained travertine limestone, with Paris spread out below him like a feast.

Luke didn't tell him what he was looking at. Not like Hayden on that night with the Aurora Australis. Not needing to explain, to put this experience into a box. Content to let it soak in.

They'd gone to Assemblages for dinner, near Luke's flat, had sat against a white-filmed wall of ancient brick while waiters came and went on wood floors nearly as old as the ones in Luke's flat. Hayden had eaten duck and Luke had eaten everything but the menu, the lights had been low and the atmosphere relaxed and, yes, romantic. In fact, the only problem was ...

Well, yeh. The only problem was that Hayden flew home tomorrow. All evening long, as he was chatting and laughing and Luke was giving him that barely-there smile, he'd thought, *I can't do this. I can't*. Which meant that when they'd finished at last and Luke had asked, "Want to walk up to Sacré-Cœur and get the view? It'll take a while to get there, but it's nice," he'd answered, "Yes." And couldn't think of what else to say.

Hand in hand, then, on cobblestone pavements flanking impossibly narrow streets, past mortared stone buildings of gray and cream, past sidewalk cafes and motor scooters parked together like a school of fish. Luke getting stopped, then stopped again, by young people with startling hair, girls and boys both, and asked for photos. He told Hayden, after the third time, "I never wanted to be famous."

"Odd, isn't it," Hayden said, "that you didn't get there by being a rugby captain, or not exactly."

"Yeh," Luke said. "For my sex life. There's a startling development." And grinned.

It took an hour to walk to the basilica, and then there were the three hundred steps up a winding spiral staircase to the dome. Luke went first, but turned back and checked on Hayden so many times that Hayden got a bit narky about it.

"If you ask me how I'm going one more time," he said, trying and failing not to make the words come out in gasps, "I'm going to tell you to go up there alone."

Luke smiled. "Right, then. I won't ask. But if it's too much ..."

"Yeh," Hayden said, thinking, *What is this? Thirty floors? There isn't enough aerobic conditioning in the world.* "What will you do? Carry me?"

"I could," Luke said, and he was grinning now.

Hayden forced his feet on. "I know you could. Stop telling me so. I'm feeling desperately unfit."

"Nah," Luke said. "I can't write a contract, so there's that."

"Ha," Hayden said, and wondered a little wildly, *Has anybody ever had a heart attack trying this? They must've done. Especially if they're trying to keep up with an international rugby forward.*

When they got to the top, though, it was worth it. Only a few people up here, braving the admission fees and the climb. The breeze blowing through the open arches, ruffling Hayden's hair. The swallows swooping over the roofs with

their narrow, pointed wings and long, pointed tails, exactly the way Nyree had painted them.

Hayden said idly, “There’s a rain cloud out there. We could get wet, walking home.” That was a surprise, as clear as the day had been, only a few faint wisps of cloud showing even now in the evening sky.

“That’s not a cloud,” Luke said. “That’s a murmuration.”

“Is it locusts?” Hayden asked, trying to make out what he was seeing. “Or what?”

“It’s swallows,” Luke said. “Symbol of love and marriage, here in France. The Chinese say they’re born of the tears of the gods. I should’ve told Nyree that. She’d have liked it.”

A dark wave against the deep-blue sky, changing shape as if it were made of liquid, flowing like sand through an hourglass. An oval, then a funnel, growing larger and larger, and Hayden couldn’t breathe.

“How many are there?” he asked quietly.

“There can be a hundred thousand or more,” Luke said. “We got lucky.”

“How do they know what to do?” Hayden asked. “How do they choreograph that?” It was a ballet, if a ballet were made up of tens of thousands of pieces flowing like a single entity. Like a hundred thousand birds in one body.

“Dunno,” Luke said. “Reckon they fly with their neighbor. Sometimes, teamwork’s better.”

Hayden hummed, and they watched in silence as the birds formed and re-formed, as they flew upward in a column, then rushed down again and spread into a thin oval. Finally, Luke said, “You’re going home tomorrow.”

Hayden’s hands tightened on the stone balustrade. “Yeh.” He tried to think of something funny to say, and couldn’t. It was another black wave, of desolation this time.

“I’m turning thirty-four,” Luke said.

“I know,” Hayden said. “Wish I could be here for your birthday.”

“There’s a time,” Luke said, his eyes still on the swallows, “when you have to hang up the boots and find something else to do. I’ve hung on a year too long, maybe. Thinking this was all I have, that it’s all I am.” He turned, finally, and looked at Hayden, and there was so much in his eyes. Sorrow, and weariness, and something else.

Caution. And, maybe ... hope.

Hayden couldn’t slow his heart. He couldn’t catch his breath. “It’s not all you are,” he said. “You’re a beautiful soul.” He tried to laugh, but couldn’t. “Sounds odd, but you are. I don’t think you know half of what you are. Half of what you can be.”

“Maybe I don’t,” Luke said. “But I’d like to find out.”

“So ...” *Harden up*, Hayden tried to tell himself, and couldn’t. “What are you saying?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Luke said, “about what’s next. I want to take some time, then decide. Isaiah wasn’t right about the two million dollars a year, but he wasn’t too far off. I’m thinking, maybe ... build some luxury houses. Something like that. Something I can do with my hands, as my hands are the part of me that works the best. Them and my back, anyway. I know what looks good, too. What makes people happy, I think.”

“Oh?” Hayden wanted to hear the rest, and he didn’t.

“And the other thing I know is ...” Luke had that flush mounting on his cheeks, his ears, and Hayden realized he was nervous. A wave of tenderness flooded him, and he thought, *He’s like me. He’s so much like me.*

“I know,” Luke went on doggedly, “that I want to ... I need to see what we have together. If we’re in the same place. If we’re willing to give it all we’ve got, and if that’s enough.”

“I can ...” Hayden had to stop and take a breath. “I’d like that. In fact ...” He tried to laugh. “It’s all I want.”

Luke's smile started slowly, then grew. "Yeh?"

"Yeh," Hayden said.

"The question is," Luke said deliberately, "where."

"Oh. Where." Hayden thought, *You have to tell the truth. You have to be yourself.* "I can't work in France," he forced himself to say. "Or in the UK. Law's very ... region-specific. That's all law is, in fact. I want to be with you, too, but I like what I do. I know it's not exactly glamorous, but it suits me, I've trained hard for it, and I like it."

Luke was smiling again. "Well, you see, that's why I'd be moving there. To En Zed."

"Oh." Hayden sagged against the balustrade and tried to catch his breath. "OK, then."

"But no worries," Luke said, "I'm going to ask you something hard anyway. Does it have to be Auckland, or ..."

"It's not a big country," Hayden said. "And I don't think I'm that picky." He felt like he was climbing those stairs again, because his heart was galloping. "But I'm a *bit* picky. I don't want to live in ... Gore. Invercargill. Hamilton, for that matter. Bulls, where you have to name your business some awful pun, or you don't fit in. What would I call my law practice? 'Feas-i-bull?' 'In-del-i-bull?'"

Babbling again.

Why was it so hard to believe?

Why was it so hard to hope?

LUKE SHOULDN'T BE LAUGHING, but he was anyway, even though he was also more nervous than he could ever remember being in his life. "Cheers for the list of duds. I was thinking, more ... could we travel around a wee bit, maybe? See what appeals to us? D'you think you could ..." He looked down at his hands. *Fingers like sausages*, Nyree had said, *and*

knuckles like ping-pong balls. It was true. He was no prize, in so many ways.

“I probably can,” Hayden said, “if you ask me. I’m flexible. There’s my sign, for when we move to Bulls. ‘Flex-i-bull.’ Course, it makes me sound like I’m running a yoga studio.”

He was joking, but he probably wasn’t, inside. Luke knew that brittle look. He took Hayden’s hand and asked. “D’you think you’d want to quit, too? You’ve said that they’re a bit hidebound there, at your work. Pretty buttoned-down. Maybe we could try something more ... casual. Have a life. Or a lifestyle, maybe.”

“The gay lifestyle,” Hayden said, still trying to joke. “I’m still trying to figure out what that is.”

“I think,” Luke said, “that it’s being together. Being happy. Being ourselves. Living somewhere beautiful and relaxed, and maybe with more than farmers around, so they may not be quite so shocked by us. Someplace where you can still wear shorts in a restaurant, though.” He smiled, and wished it were steadier. “Want to toss everything else aside with me and try to find it?”

Hayden took a breath, and then he smiled as, behind him, the swallows soared. “Yes,” he said. “What’s life, after all, if it’s not an adventure? And what could be better than taking that adventure together?”

EPILOGUE

LUKE HAD NEVER IMAGINED he'd have a wedding day, much less a flash one.

He and Hayden—and George, the marmalade cat—had settled on living in Wanaka, in the end. In his opinion, the most beautiful place in the world, in his home soil of Otago, pretty cosmopolitan for New Zealand, and with a healthy population of rich people needing both luxury homes and contracts. All good, and living with somebody who loved you—*really* loved you—was even better.

And still, on the early-autumn day when he'd got down on one knee on the shores of Lake Wanaka at sunset with the Southern Alps ranged in the background, he'd asked the question with his heart in his throat and nothing in him believing he could be this lucky.

But Hayden had said yes.

Luke had suggested, when they'd got around to discussing the actual “wedding” part, which took some time, because he'd had to be giddy for a while first, “Keep it small and simple, probably, so there's no fuss.”

Hayden had looked at him searchingly. At least Luke thought that was what it was, though Hayden could just have been enjoying his crème brûlée with passionfruit pulp and mango and coconut gelato. They were in Bistro Gentil at the time. Modern French cuisine with New Zealand meat and produce—what could be better? Especially if you didn't have to pretend it wasn't romantic.

“Is that really what you want,” Hayden asked, “or what you think your parents would want?”

So—searchingly, not just excellent crème brûlée.

“I don’t know,” Luke admitted.

“You don’t want to invite your rugby teammates?” Hayden asked. “Our friends here? Have a party, with dancing and all, now that we know how to do the tango? Admit that you were created just for me?”

“Well, yeh,” Luke said. “But ...”

“How about if we embrace it?” Hayden asked. “Go on and be, you know, out and proud. Ask some of the big queer mags if they’d be interested in sponsoring it, maybe. First major international rugby player to come out while he was still playing, getting married with his teammates from three countries cheering him on? That’s a story. Also much cheaper.”

Luke had to smile. “I know I’m marrying a Kiwi now, anyway.”

“Family’s the people who want you,” Hayden said. “Not the ones who don’t. If your parents think our big, glam gay wedding is disgusting and rubbing people’s nose in our fabulous gayness and they’ll never be able to show their faces again, or if my dad thinks so, isn’t that their loss? You know Nyree and Kane and Zora will be there. So your dad won’t drive a few hours from Dunedin. So we never spend Christmas with your family again, or with my parents, either, though my mum’s going to put her foot down about that, it’s pretty clear, and drag my dad along whatever he says. Don’t we want to have Christmas, and our wedding, too, with the people who actually love us? Loving somebody isn’t accepting them only if they live the way you want. If we ...”

“If we what?” Luke asked. He wouldn’t say he was comfortable, exactly, but he was riveted. Hayden had that effect on him. It was like his world had opened up. Like you’d got specs for the first time and could see all the colors and the leaves on the trees.

Now, Hayden was the one who wasn't looking comfortable. "Well, I want to say it, so I'm going to say it. What are we, if we're not honest?"

Luke covered Hayden's hand with his. "Some people have said, since I came out, that I've got mana. I don't have half the mana you do. Go on and say it."

"If we ever want to have kids," Hayden said. "Adopt, use a surrogate, whatever. Isn't that what we want to show them? Would we only love them, accept them, if they turned out to be queer?"

Luke sat stock-still. "No," he said.

"No?" Hayden rocked back a bit, then rallied. "OK, then. Just an idea."

"I don't mean—I don't mean *no*," Luke said. "Not that I don't want to do that. Maybe I'd want to, if I knew how. If I thought I could love a kid right, and have a ... a happy home. I mean, no, of course I wouldn't only love them if they played rugby, or loved the right person, or were as clever and beautiful as you, or whatever you're thinking. Though I think that if we go for surrogacy, we should use your sperm." He tried to smile. It wasn't easy. "They'd be prettier, anyway."

"But if they had yours," Hayden said, "they'd be strong. Never mind, we don't have to decide now. OK, then. Back to this glamorous wedding that's going to set the world alight." Trying to be brisk, to be funny, as if he'd opened his heart too fully.

Luke loved him so much, it actually hurt. He remembered that cold, rainy Christmas, when he'd run through Newcastle with Kane, day after day, unable to visualize life in New Zealand with only his dad for company, the bleakness in his heart matching the weather. He'd tried to imagine what happy families did at home, how they spent their time, and failed. Now, he knew. "I want to do what makes you happy," he said. "If that's a big wedding, that's what I want. And I'd like to dance with you." He could see it, suddenly. He could see the photos, and the emails from teenagers, the ones that said, "Thanks for letting me know it's OK." The ones that told him

those kids didn't feel so alone anymore, because there was a rugby star who was like them.

Now, he stood beside Hayden in front of the lake and the mountains on a warm December afternoon, two years to the day after they'd met, under a floral arbor that Zora and Rhys and the kids had spent the morning decorating, all crimson, white, and gold. Everything about them saying, "We're here, we're doing this, and we aren't one bit ashamed to tell you so." Wearing charcoal trousers and a white dress shirt so fine, you could pass it through his wedding ring, looking at Hayden wearing the same thing, and not worrying about how many rugby players were watching him do this, or that his parents weren't happy, even though they'd come. Just grateful that the people he cared about most had decided they wanted to be here.

He was getting married to the love of his life.

Pretty awesome, really.

SOMETIMES, you couldn't be insouciant.

The celebrant started to talk. Hayden knew what he was going to say, because he'd written the service, with help from Luke. They'd written their own vows, too, so he knew his already, though he didn't know what Luke had done. Something simple, probably. He knew what their rings looked like, brushed platinum from Tiffany, each boasting a discreet, inset baguette diamond, and he knew what the inscription inside his said.

To H from L. Love you forever.

And still, his cold hand shook in Luke's.

The day was warm, the sun glorious, the lake sparkling blue beneath the mountains, the videographer recording for posterity and somebody else paying for the whole thing, and still, his hands were cold.

Luke looked at him, and Hayden wondered how he'd ever thought Luke was guarded, because there was honesty in that look that made his knees tremble. Luke told the celebrant, "One sec."

Wait, Hayden thought in a sort of daze. *What?*

Luke said, low enough that the crowd of two hundred-plus couldn't hear him, "We've got this. I just need you to hold my hand, and we'll do it together. OK?"

"Yeh," Hayden managed to say. "OK." And was grounded again.

The celebrant's words, going by in a kind of dream, Hayden's vows, which he somehow dredged up from memory, and then Luke's.

"I promise to love you," the big, bearded man opposite him said, the flush rising all the way to his cauliflower ears. "To hold you when you need me, and to let you hold me when I'm the one who needs it. I promise to walk with you until the end. I promise to care more about you than I do about myself, and to give you everything I have until the day I die."

Hayden thought, *Oh, my God. I cannot believe this is happening. I can't believe you're mine.* And then Luke went on, a twist of a smile around his mouth, his hand around Hayden's like he'd never let go. "I told you this once before, and I'm going to say it again. It seemed to work pretty well the first time, and you know I only have so many words, so here it is. I'm not quick or clever, and there's nothing flash about me and never will be. I'm strong as oak, though, and I'm steady as hell. I don't hurt, I don't lie, and I don't cheat. I stand solid, and where I stand, I stay. That's a promise."

You could call that a vow.

Hayden had always had a hopeful heart. Finally, the hope was justified.

Finally, the hope was here.

EXPLORE MORE

- [Luke's kumara salad with caramelized onions and citrus dressing](#) (Kumara are sweet potatoes/yams)
- [The Fendi scarf Hayden gives Luke](#)
- [The Royal Copenhagen Full Lace Serving Bowl!](#)
- [*The Kissing Hand*](#)
- ["Beast" Mtawarira lifting his man over his head, Sharks rugby.](#)
- [Highlights of Italy v. Ireland in Rome, 2023.](#) (No rugby game is ever easy, no matter the teams' records.)
- [Paris viewed from the top of Sacre-Coeur](#)
- [A murmuration](#)
- [Bistro Gentil, Wanaka](#)
- [Rippon Hall wedding venue, Wanaka](#)
- [Hayden & Luke's wedding rings](#)

A KIWI GLOSSARY

A few notes about Maori pronunciation:

- The accent is normally on the first syllable.
 - All vowels are pronounced separately.
 - All vowels except u have a short vowel sound.
 - “wh” is pronounced “f.”
 - “ng” is pronounced as in “singer,” not as in “anger.”
-
- **ABs:** All Blacks
 - **across the Ditch:** in Australia (across the Tasman Sea). Or, if you’re in Australia, in New Zealand!
 - **advert:** commercial
 - **agro:** aggravation
 - **air con:** air conditioning
 - **All Blacks:** National rugby team. Members are selected for every series from amongst the five NZ Super 15 teams. The All Blacks play similarly selected teams from other nations.
 - **ambo:** paramedic
 - **Aotearoa:** New Zealand (the other official name, meaning “The Land of the Long White Cloud” in Maori)
 - **arvo, this arvo:** afternoon
 - **Aussie, Oz:** Australia. (An Australian is also an Aussie. Pronounced “Ozzie.”)
 - **bach:** holiday home (pronounced like “bachelor”)
 - **backs:** rugby players who aren’t in the scrum and do more running, kicking, and ball-carrying—though all

players do all jobs and play both offense and defense.
Backs tend to be faster and leaner than forwards.

- **bangers and mash:** sausages and potatoes
- **barrack for:** cheer for
- **bench:** counter (kitchen bench)
- **berko:** berserk
- **Big Smoke:** the big city (usually Auckland)
- **bikkies:** cookies
- **billy-o, like billy-o:** like crazy. “I paddled like billy-o and just barely made it through that rapid.”
- **bin, rubbish bin:** trash can
- **binned:** thrown in the trash
- **bit of a dag:** a comedian, a funny guy
- **bits and bobs:** stuff (“be sure you get all your bits and bobs”)
- **blood bin:** players leaving field for injury
- **Blues:** Auckland’s Super 15 team
- **bollocks:** rubbish, nonsense
- **boofhead:** fool, jerk
- **booking:** reservation
- **boots and all:** full tilt, no holding back
- **bot, the bot:** flu, a bug
- **Boxing Day:** December 26—a holiday
- **brekkie:** breakfast
- **brilliant:** fantastic
- **bub:** baby, small child
- **buggered:** messed up, exhausted
- **bull’s roar:** close. “They never came within a bull’s roar of winning.”
- **bunk off:** duck out, skip (bunk off school)
- **bust a gut:** do your utmost, make a supreme effort
- **Cake Tin:** Wellington’s rugby stadium (not the official name, but it looks exactly like a springform pan)
- **caravan:** travel trailer
- **cardie:** a cardigan sweater
- **chat up:** flirt with
- **chilly bin:** ice chest
- **chips:** French fries. (potato chips are “crisps”)
- **chocolate bits:** chocolate chips

- **chocolate fish:** pink or white marshmallow coated with milk chocolate, in the shape of a fish. A common treat/reward for kids (and for adults. You often get a chocolate fish on the saucer when you order a mochaccino—a mocha).
- **choice:** fantastic
- **chokka:** full
- **chooks:** chickens
- **Chrissy:** Christmas
- **chuck out:** throw away
- **chuffed:** pleased
- **collywobbles:** nervous tummy, upset stomach
- **come a greaser:** take a bad fall
- **costume, cossie:** swimsuit (female only)
- **cot:** crib (for a baby)
- **crook:** ill
- **cuddle:** hug (give a cuddle)
- **cuppa:** a cup of tea (the universal remedy)
- **CV:** resumé
- **cyclone:** hurricane (Southern Hemisphere)
- **dairy:** corner shop (not just for milk!)
- **dead:** very; e.g., “dead sexy.”
- **dill:** fool
- **do your block:** lose your temper
- **dob in:** turn in; report to authorities. Frowned upon.
- **doco:** documentary
- **doddle:** easy. “That’ll be a doddle.”
- **dodgy:** suspect, low-quality
- **dogbox:** The doghouse—in trouble
- **dole:** unemployment.
- **dole bludger:** somebody who doesn’t try to get work and lives off unemployment (which doesn’t have a time limit in NZ)
- **Domain:** a good-sized park; often the “official” park of the town.
- **dressng gown:** bathrobe
- **drongo:** fool (Australian, but used sometimes in NZ as well)
- **drop your gear:** take off your clothes
- **duvet:** comforter

- **earbashing:** talking-to, one-sided chat
- **electric jug:** electric teakettle to heat water. Every Kiwi kitchen has one.
- **En Zed:** Pronunciation of NZ. (“Z” is pronounced “Zed.”)
- **ensuite:** master bath (a bath in the bedroom).
- **eye fillet:** premium steak (filet mignon)
- **fair go:** a fair chance. Kiwi ideology: everyone deserves a fair go.
- **fair wound me up:** Got me very upset
- **fantail:** small, friendly native bird
- **farewelled, he’ll be farewelled:** funeral; he’ll have his funeral.
- **feed, have a feed:** meal
- **first five, first five-eighth:** rugby back—does most of the big kicking jobs and is the main director of the backs. Also called the No. 10.
- **fixtures:** playing schedule
- **fizz, fizzie:** soft drink
- **fizzing:** fired up
- **flaked out:** tired
- **flash:** fancy
- **flat to the boards:** at top speed
- **flat white:** most popular NZ coffee. An espresso with milk but no foam.
- **flattie:** roommate
- **flicks:** movies
- **flying fox:** zipline
- **footpath:** sidewalk
- **footy, football:** rugby
- **forwards:** rugby players who make up the scrum and do the most physical battling for position. Tend to be bigger and more heavily muscled than backs.
- **fossick about:** hunt around for something
- **front up:** face the music, show your mettle
- **garden:** yard
- **get on the piss:** get drunk
- **get stuck in:** commit to something
- **give way:** yield

- **giving him stick, give him some stick about it:** teasing, needling
- **glowworms:** larvae of a fly found only in NZ. They shine a light to attract insects. Found in caves or other dark, moist places.
- **go crook, be crook:** go wrong, be ill
- **go on the turps:** get drunk
- **gobsmacked:** astounded
- **good hiding:** beating (“They gave us a good hiding in Dunedin.”)
- **grotty:** grungy, badly done up
- **ground floor:** what the U.S. calls the first floor. The “first floor” is one floor up.
- **gumboots, gummies:** knee-high rubber boots. It rains a lot in New Zealand.
- **gutted:** thoroughly upset
- **Haast’s Eagle:** (extinct). Huge native NZ eagle. Ate moa.
- **haere mai:** welcome (Maori; but used commonly)
- **haka:** ceremonial Maori challenge—done before every All Blacks game
- **halfback:** rugby back (No. 9). With the first-five, directs the game. Also feeds the scrum and generally collects the ball from the ball carrier at the breakdown and distributes it.
- **hang on a tick:** wait a minute
- **hard man:** the tough guy, the enforcer
- **hard yakka:** hard work (from Australian)
- **harden up:** toughen up. Standard NZ (male) response to (male) complaints: “Harden the f*** up!”
- **have a bit on:** I have placed a bet on [whatever]. Sports gambling and prostitution are both legal in New Zealand.
- **have a go:** try
- **have a nosy for... :** look around for
- **head:** principal (headmaster)
- **head down:** or head down, bum up. Put your head down. Work hard.
- **heaps:** lots. “Give it heaps.”
- **hei toki:** pendant (Maori)

- **holiday:** vacation
- **honesty box:** a small stand put up just off the road with bags of fruit and vegetables and a cash box. Very common in New Zealand.
- **hooker:** rugby position (forward)
- **hooning around:** driving fast, wannabe tough-guy behavior (typically young men)
- **hoovering:** vacuuming (after the brand of vacuum cleaner)
- **ice block:** popsicle
- **I'll see you right:** I'll help you out
- **in form:** performing well (athletically)
- **it's not on:** It's not all right
- **iwi:** tribe (Maori)
- **jabs:** immunizations, shots
- **jandals:** flip-flops. (This word is only used in New Zealand. Jandals and gumboots are the iconic Kiwi footwear.)
- **jersey:** a rugby shirt, or a pullover sweater
- **joker:** a guy. "A good Kiwi joker": a regular guy; a good guy.
- **journo:** journalist
- **jumper:** a heavy pullover sweater
- **ka pai:** going smoothly (Maori).
- **kapa haka:** school singing group (Maori songs/performances. Any student can join, not just Maori.)
- **karanga:** Maori song of welcome (done by a woman)
- **keeping his/your head down:** working hard
- **kia ora:** hello (Maori, but used commonly)
- **kilojoules:** like calories—measure of food energy
- **kindy:** kindergarten (this is 3- and 4-year-olds)
- **kit, get your kit off:** clothes, take off your clothes
- **Kiwi:** New Zealander OR the bird. If the person, it's capitalized. Not the fruit.
- **kiwifruit:** the fruit. (Never called simply a "kiwi.")
- **knackered:** exhausted
- **knockout rounds:** playoff rounds (quarterfinals, semifinals, final)

- **koru:** ubiquitous spiral Maori symbol of new beginnings, hope
- **kumara:** Maori sweet potato.
- **ladder:** standings (rugby)
- **littlies:** young kids
- **lock:** rugby position (forward)
- **lollies:** candy
- **lolly:** candy or money
- **lounge:** living room
- **mad as a meat axe:** crazy
- **maintenance:** child support
- **major:** “a major.” A big deal, a big event
- **mana:** prestige, earned respect, spiritual power
- **Maori:** native people of NZ—though even they arrived relatively recently from elsewhere in Polynesia
- **marae:** Maori meeting house
- **Marmite:** Savory Kiwi yeast-based spread for toast. An acquired taste. (Kiwis swear it tastes different from Vegemite, the Aussie version.)
- **mate:** friend. And yes, fathers call their sons “mate.”
- **metal road:** gravel road
- **Milo:** cocoa substitute; hot drink mix
- **mince:** ground beef
- **mind:** take care of, babysit
- **moa:** (extinct) Any of several species of huge flightless NZ birds. All eaten by the Maori before Europeans arrived.
- **moko:** Maori tattoo
- **mokopuna:** grandchildren
- **motorway:** freeway
- **mozzie:** mosquito; OR a Maori Australian (Maori + Aussie = Mozzie)
- **muesli:** like granola, but unbaked
- **munted:** broken
- **naff:** stupid, unsuitable. “Did you get any naff Chrissy pressies this year?”
- **nappy:** diaper
- **narked, narky:** annoyed

- **netball:** Down-Under version of basketball for women. Played like basketball, but the hoop is a bit narrower, the players wear skirts, and they don't dribble and can't contact each other. It can look fairly tame to an American eye. There are professional netball teams, and it's televised and taken quite seriously.
- **new caps:** new All Blacks—those named to the side for the first time
- **New World:** One of the two major NZ supermarket chains
- **nibbles:** snacks
- **nick, in good nick:** doing well
- **niggle, niggly:** small injury, ache or soreness
- **no worries:** no problem. The Kiwi mantra.
- **No. 8:** rugby position. A forward
- **not very flash:** not feeling well
- **Nurofen:** brand of ibuprofen
- **nuttled out:** worked out
- **OE:** Overseas Experience—young people taking a year or two overseas, before or after University.
- **offload:** pass (rugby)
- **oldies:** older people. (or for the elderly, “wrinklies!”)
- **on the front foot:** Having the advantage. Vs. on the back foot—at a disadvantage. From rugby.
- **op shop:** charity shop, secondhand shop
- **out on the razzle:** out drinking too much, getting crazy
- **paddock:** field (often used for rugby—“out on the paddock”)
- **Pakeha:** European-ancestry people (as opposed to Polynesians)
- **Panadol:** over-the-counter painkiller
- **partner:** romantic partner, married or not
- **patu:** Maori club
- **paua, paua shell:** NZ abalone
- **pavlova (pav):** Classic Kiwi Christmas (summer) dessert. Meringue, fresh fruit (often kiwifruit and strawberries) and whipped cream.
- **pavement:** sidewalk (generally on wider city streets)

- **pear-shaped, going pear-shaped:** messed up, when it all goes to Hell
- **penny dropped:** light dawned (figured it out)
- **people mover:** minivan
- **perve:** stare sexually
- **phone's engaged:** phone's busy
- **piece of piss:** easy
- **pike out:** give up, wimp out
- **piss awful:** very bad
- **piss up:** drinking (noun) a piss-up
- **pissed:** drunk
- **pissed as a fart:** very drunk. And yes, this is an actual expression.
- **play up:** act up
- **playing out of his skin:** playing very well
- **plunger:** French Press coffeemaker
- **PMT:** PMS
- **pohutukawa:** native tree; called the "New Zealand Christmas Tree" for its beautiful red blossoms at Christmastime (high summer)
- **poi:** balls of flax on strings that are swung around the head, often to the accompaniment of singing and/or dancing by women. They make rhythmic patterns in the air, and it's very beautiful.
- **Pom, Pommie:** English person
- **pong:** bad smell
- **pop:** pop over, pop back, pop into the oven, pop out, pop in
- **possie:** position (rugby)
- **postie:** mail carrier
- **pot plants:** potted plants (not what you thought, huh?)
- **pounamu:** greenstone (jade)
- **prang:** accident (with the car)
- **pressie:** present
- **puckaroo:** broken (from Maori)
- **pudding:** dessert
- **pull your head in:** calm down, quit being rowdy
- **Pumas:** Argentina's national rugby team
- **pushchair:** baby stroller

- **put your hand up:** volunteer
- **put your head down:** work hard
- **rapt:** thrilled
- **rattle your dags:** hurry up. From the sound that dried excrement on a sheep's backside makes, when the sheep is running!
- **red card:** penalty for highly dangerous play. The player is sent off for the rest of the game, and the team plays with 14 men.
- **rellies:** relatives
- **riding the pine:** sitting on the bench (as a substitute in a match)
- **rimu:** a New Zealand tree. The wood used to be used for building and flooring, but like all native NZ trees, it was over-logged. Older houses, though, often have rimu floors, and they're beautiful.
- **Rippa:** junior rugby
- **root:** have sex (you DON'T root for a team!)
- **ropeable:** very angry
- **ropey:** off, damaged ("a bit ropey")
- **rort:** ripoff
- **rough as guts:** uncouth
- **rubbish bin:** garbage can
- **rugby boots:** rugby shoes with spikes (sprigs)
- **Rugby Championship:** Contest played each year in the Southern Hemisphere by the national teams of NZ, Australia, South Africa, and Argentina
- **Rugby World Cup, RWC:** World championship, played every four years amongst the top 20 teams in the world
- **rugged up:** dressed warmly
- **ruru:** native owl
- **Safa:** South Africa. Abbreviation only used in NZ.
- **sammie:** sandwich
- **scoff, scoffing:** eating, like "snarfing"
- **selectors:** team of 3 (the head coach is one) who choose players for the All Blacks squad, for every series
- **serviette:** napkin
- **shag:** have sex with. A little rude, but not too bad.

- **shattered:** exhausted
- **sheds:** locker room (rugby)
- **she'll be right:** See “no worries.” Everything will work out. The other Kiwi mantra.
- **shift house:** move (house)
- **shonky:** shady (person). “a bit shonky”
- **shout, your shout, my shout, shout somebody a coffee:** buy a round, treat somebody
- **sickie, throw a sickie:** call in sick
- **sin bin:** players sitting out 10-minute penalty in rugby (or, in the case of a red card, the rest of the game)
- **sink the boot in:** kick you when you're down
- **skint:** broke (poor)
- **skipper:** (team) captain. Also called “the Skip.”
- **slag off:** speak disparagingly of; disrespect
- **smack:** spank. Smacking kids is illegal in NZ.
- **smoko:** coffee break
- **snog:** kiss; make out with
- **sorted:** taken care of
- **spa, spa pool:** hot tub
- **sparrow fart:** the crack of dawn
- **speedo:** Not the swimsuit! Speedometer. (the swimsuit is called a budgie smuggler—a budgie is a parakeet, LOL.)
- **spew:** vomit
- **spit the dummy:** have a tantrum. (A dummy is a pacifier)
- **sportsman:** athlete
- **sporty:** liking sports
- **spot on:** absolutely correct. “That's spot on. You're spot on.”
- **Springboks, Boks:** South African national rugby team
- **squiz:** look. “I was just having a squiz round.” “Giz a squiz”: Give me a look at that.
- **stickybeak:** nosy person, busybody
- **stonkered:** drunk—a bit stonkered—or exhausted
- **stoush:** bar fight, fight
- **straight away:** right away

- **strength of it:** the truth, the facts. “What’s the strength of that?” = “What’s the true story on that?”
- **stroppy:** prickly, taking offense easily
- **stuffed up:** messed up
- **Super 15:** Top rugby competition: five teams each from NZ, Australia, South Africa. The New Zealand Super 15 teams are, from north to south: Blues (Auckland), Chiefs (Waikato/Hamilton), Hurricanes (Wellington), Crusaders (Canterbury/Christchurch), Highlanders (Otago/Dunedin).
- **supporter:** fan (Do NOT say “root for.” “To root” is to have (rude) sex!)
- **suss out:** figure out
- **sweet:** dessert
- **sweet as: great.** (also: choice as, angry as, lame as ... Meaning “very” whatever. “Mum was angry as that we ate up all the pudding before tea with Nana.”)
- **takahe:** ground-dwelling native bird. Like a giant parrot.
- **takeaway:** takeout (food)
- **tall poppy:** arrogant person who puts himself forward or sets himself above others. It is every Kiwi’s duty to cut down tall poppies, a job they undertake enthusiastically.
- **Tangata Whenua:** Maori (people of the land)
- **tapu:** sacred (Maori)
- **Te Papa:** the National Museum, in Wellington
- **tea:** dinner (casual meal at home)
- **tea towel:** dishtowel
- **test match:** international rugby match (e.g., an All Blacks game)
- **throw a wobbly:** have a tantrum
- **tick off:** cross off (tick off a list)
- **ticker:** heart. “The boys showed a lot of ticker out there today.”
- **togs:** swimsuit (male or female)
- **torch:** flashlight
- **touch wood:** knock on wood (for luck)
- **track:** trail
- **trainers:** athletic shoes

- **tramping:** hiking
- **transtasman:** Australia/New Zealand (the Bledisloe Cup is a transtasman rivalry)
- **trolley:** shopping cart
- **tucker:** food
- **tui:** Native bird
- **turn to custard:** go south, deteriorate
- **turps, go on the turps:** get drunk
- **Uni:** University—or school uniform
- **up the duff:** pregnant. A bit vulgar (like “knocked up”)
- **ute:** pickup or SUV
- **vet:** check out
- **waiata:** Maori song
- **wairua:** spirit, soul (Maori). Very important concept.
- **waka:** canoe (Maori)
- **Wallabies:** Australian national rugby team
- **Warrant of Fitness:** certificate of a car’s fitness to drive
- **wedding tackle:** the family jewels; a man’s genitals
- **Weet-Bix:** ubiquitous breakfast cereal
- **whaddarya?:** I am dubious about your masculinity (meaning “Whaddarya ... pussy?”)
- **whakapapa:** genealogy (Maori). A critical concept.
- **whanau:** family (Maori). Big whanau: extended family. Small whanau: nuclear family.
- **wheelie bin:** rubbish bin (garbage can) with wheels.
- **whinge:** whine. Contemptuous! Kiwis dislike whingeing. Harden up!
- **White Ribbon:** campaign against domestic violence
- **wind up:** upset (perhaps purposefully). “Their comments were bound to wind him up.”
- **wing:** rugby position (back)
- **wobbly; threw a wobbly:** a tantrum; had a tantrum
- **Yank:** American. Not pejorative.
- **yellow card:** A penalty for dangerous play that sends a player off for 10 minutes to the sin bin. The team plays with 14 men during that time—or even 13, if two are sinbinned.
- **yonks:** ages. “It’s been going on for yonks.”

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