

Playing
AT HOME

JAX CALDER

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Cover design by R.Bosevski of Story Styling Cover Design.

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Jacob

I was a healthy twenty-seven-year-old, a professional rugby player who ranked among the fittest in my team. I worked out nearly every day. I ate a healthy diet.

Yet somehow, this two-minute conversation with my ex had catapulted my blood pressure into the needs-to-be-heavily-medicated range.

“You’ve done what?” I asked, just to make sure I’d heard her correctly.

“I did what I told you I was going to do,” Matilda said, loading dishes into the dishwasher. “I hired us a new nanny.” Her triumph was unmistakable, her voice full of more glee than a show choir’s. Given she was an actress, it was an indictment of her talent that she couldn’t hide the I’ve-just-pulled-one-over-on-you vibe a bit better.

I struggled to keep my voice even. “You failed to tell me you were considering hiring a man.”

She straightened up from loading in the last plate. That she was anywhere near the dishwasher should have been my first clue something would go wrong in this conversation. Matilda’s manicures didn’t mix well with dirty dishes; she usually left that kind of menial housework to the nanny. Perhaps she felt she would gain some earth-mother vibes from the task to help her as she broke the news to me.

“I asked if you wanted to interview the final candidates with me, but you said you trusted my judgment.” Now her

eyes, too, were full of triumph.

One of Matilda's constant complaints was that I second-guessed everything about her parenting—*You fed them ice cream for breakfast? Actually, I don't think Bridgerton is an appropriate Netflix show for girl time with our three-and-a-half-year-olds*—so, in a show of good faith, I'd agreed to let her handle the nanny-hiring process. We were using a reputable agency, so I knew the candidates would be excellent. I'd been out of the country playing rugby when she scheduled the interviews, and the time zones made joining by video impractical. Besides, the most important criteria for the nanny was how Matilda felt about them. I could get along with anyone, whereas Matilda was far more particular about who she let into her inner circle.

“Anyway, you're being sexist. Men are just as good at looking after kids, aren't they?” she continued, raising a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

Another statement loaded with hidden meaning. This was why any discussion with my ex was like wading through Tolkien's dead marshes. A single misstep and you could end up being pulled to your doom.

It was an established fact that Matilda had struggled with becoming a parent more than I had. To be fair, a twenty-one-year-old *It* girl who'd grown up as the darling of the country, a child actress on New Zealand's hit prime-time soap for many years, was never going to find it easy when unexpectedly lumped with colicky twins.

I knew she blamed my overenthusiastic sperm for the fact we'd accidentally gotten pregnant with not one but two babies, despite her being on the pill. I'd never pointed out that because our twins were non-identical, it meant she had produced two eggs, and therefore *she* had to take part of the blame.

Since the twins were born, I'd been the more hands-on parent, the one who had dealt with broken sleep, nappy changes, and teething. We'd hired a full-time nanny, Judith, a grandmotherly type, so anytime I wasn't there, Matilda still had support. Even after we separated five months ago, she

insisted on keeping Judith full-time, despite the fact I'd argued that I could look after the girls by myself on my designated weeks.

But to be honest, having an extra set of hands around was useful. Things had gone smoothly until Judith announced she was retiring. Hence the hunt for the new nanny.

Or nanny, as it appeared we now had.

I blew out a breath. "I know men are just as good as women at looking after children."

It wasn't sexism or toxic masculinity that had me rebelling against the idea of a guy spending so much time with my kids. No, it was plain, old-fashioned, run-of-the-mill jealousy. A male nanny felt like a threat to me in a way Judith hadn't.

I already hated how much time I spent away from the girls, hated the milestones I missed, along with those small, everyday moments that on their own might seem insignificant but added up over time. But as a professional rugby player, I didn't have much choice.

The idea of another guy spending more time than me with Lily and Eloise didn't sit comfortably. The nanny would know my kids better than I did.

"Austin's amazing. He was a celebrity nanny in London. His last job was for a famous footballer's kids, and he comes with impressive references."

Okay, so maybe fucking with me wasn't Matilda's only motivation. She tried to live an Instagrammable life, so having a "celebrity nanny" fitted right into that. I'm sure bugging me was just an added bonus. The icing on the cake.

"And you should have seen him with the girls. He was so good with them, way better than all the other candidates."

That irrational jealousy flared again, and I had to work to tamp it down.

But Matilda had the trump card, and she played it now. "And you want what's best for the girls, right?"

“Of course I do.” I ran my hands through my hair, looking out the window to where the Pacific Ocean brooded under a heavy sky.

I turned back to Matilda. “There’s a trial period in his contract, right?”

Matilda smiled like the cat who had not only gotten the cream but had piled it on a scone along with raspberry jam and was about to take an enormous bite.

“You’re going to love him,” she promised me.

Austin

This was it. My new job.

Pulling up in my old rusty Volvo outside the multi-storied mansion perched on the Sumner cliffs, I felt like Maria in *The Sound of Music* when she first turns up to the von Trapps' home.

And okay, this wasn't a forbidding Austrian mansion, but no matter how many opulent homes I worked in, someone like me who'd grown up in a run-down two-bedroom house would always be slightly intimidated by displays of wealth.

I took a deep breath and got out of my car. I wasn't about to break into song to buoy my confidence, because only my gran and the neighborhood dogs had ever found my singing voice attractive.

Besides, I was confident. I was a good nanny. This was a good family. It was all going to be fine.

Squaring my shoulders, I walked past the perfectly manicured lawn up to the impressive bright red door and rang the bell.

The door opened, and my new boss Matilda gave me a big smile. "You're here! Welcome, welcome, welcome!"

I blinked at the effusive greeting but couldn't help returning Matilda's beaming smile. All my residual doubts vanished at the sight of her beautiful face lit up as if nothing had ever made her happier than my arrival on her doorstep.

“Now that’s an impressive welcome.” I stepped inside and put my bags down on the polished stone floor of the entrance. “You should be a professional welcomer. Maybe the airport should hire you to greet tourists when they arrive in New Zealand.”

Matilda giggled. “I’m just so excited you’re here. The girls have talked nonstop about you since they met you.”

Speaking of her daughters, two small faces peered around the doorway.

I crouched on all fours. “I’m going on a bear hunt. I’m looking for a Lily-bear, and an Eloise-bear. Are there any of those bears around here?”

It was a continuation of the game I’d played when I met them at my interview, and sure enough, they both giggled hysterically.

This was one of the reasons I loved working with kids. They laughed at your lines as if you had the comedic talent of Sacha Baron Cohen, Conan O’Brien, and Tina Fey combined.

Lily bravely came out.

“I’m Lily-bear,” she told me solemnly.

“Do you know what little bears need? Bear hugs!”

I gave Lily a hug, and Eloise moved close to me, not quite touching.

Then they wanted to ride on my back, which I’d let them do last time as well. Although at my interview we’d been in the living room, and now my knees were experiencing firsthand the difference between stone floors and carpet.

“That’s enough, girls,” Matilda said, just as my kneecaps were contemplating going on strike. “We don’t want to break Austin on his first day.”

The girls obligingly climbed off my back. These were such good kids.

“Are you waiting until the second day to break me?” I asked Matilda as I stood up.

“I was aiming for at least a week.” Matilda grinned. “Why don’t you girls go and finish your coloring while I show Austin to his room.”

The girls scampered away, and I grabbed my bags and followed Matilda up a flight of stairs and down the hallway to the spare room that was going to be mine.

She’d shown me the room at my interview, and it was stunning, like the rest of the house, with a kick-ass view of the Pacific Ocean that stretched from the bottom of the cliffs to the horizon, blue and inviting.

Incredible room. Great kids. Awesome mum. I’d known at the interview, after only a few minutes of talking to her, that Matilda and I were going to go together like Forrest Gump’s peas and carrots.

“My room is down the end, and Jacob’s is just across the hall.”

Jacob. The dad.

Unease elbowed at the happiness inside me, trying to clear some space for itself.

That was the only unknown in this whole setup. I hadn’t met half of the parenting team yet. Normally I would have never taken a job without meeting both parents, but Matilda had wanted a quick decision. I’d had three other job offers but hadn’t clicked with any of the other families like I had with Matilda and her kids.

It was the same kind of satisfying click you felt when you put on a seat belt or slotted in the last puzzle piece.

And although my gut instinct had done an appalling job of guiding me recently, I’d decided to give it one last shot to prove itself.

“I think I explained in the interview that the kids stay in the house while me and my ex swap around weeks,” Matilda said.

“Yeah, I think that’s a great way to do it,” I said.

“They’re used to Jacob being away for rugby or me being away with work, so the separation doesn’t seem to have affected them at all.” Matilda sounded slightly defensive.

“I’m sure you’re handling it in the best way possible,” I said soothingly.

“Well, we’re trying anyway.” Matilda gave a brittle smile.

My stomach lurched.

The last thing I needed was to be in the middle of another toxic breakup. I’d already been there and had a whole stack of commemorative T-shirts with slogans like *This shit gets really ugly* and *Run while you still can*.

Matilda had told me it had been a mutual breakup and she and Jacob were happily co-parenting the kids with 50/50 custody.

And she hadn’t scowled when she talked about her ex, or said nasty things, or called him a bad parent, or any of the other red flags I’d been looking for.

I tried to quell my discomfort as I quickly unpacked. I didn’t have a lot of stuff, having had to compress my life into two bags when I’d come back from London in a hurry.

I took my toiletries through to the guest bathroom. A masculine brand of shaving cream greeted me as I opened the cabinet. That’s right, I was sharing a bathroom with Jacob. I knew from my tour of the house at my interview that Matilda had an en suite in the master bedroom, and the kids’ bathroom was downstairs, so only Jacob and I would be using this one.

Oh God. My friend Krista had given me a brand of body wash called Bits n Ball Wash as a joke for my birthday. I flinched as I put it into the shower next to Jacob’s stuff. Mental note: buy a generic brand of body wash before changeover day with the ex.

How weird was it that I’d never met the guy yet now knew he used a body wash with a cedarwood and bergamot scent? What exactly was bergamot anyway? I was pretty sure Jacob wouldn’t appreciate me sniffing him in a quest to find out.

Once I'd finished unpacking, I wandered downstairs. At the bottom, on the opposite wall, there was a big family portrait that had obviously survived the separation purge. It was a candid shot of the family in a real moment, rather than in staged poses. Eloise was pulling a face, and Lily was laughing at her.

I stopped and stared at Jacob in the picture.

I knew what he looked like, of course. I wasn't a big rugby fan, but everyone knew the Browne family. Jacob's father, Roger, was a legend not only in his home region of Canterbury but throughout New Zealand.

And yes, I'd done my necessary Google stalking before accepting the job.

He was good-looking in a generic, rough rugby player way. Kind of like if Vin Diesel and Daniel Craig had had a lovechild. Light brown hair, square jaw, nose that looked as if it might have been broken once or twice, hazel eyes.

Seeing such a large, tough guy looking down at his daughters with a gentle smile brought a lump to my throat.

Yeah, I didn't need to start thinking that one of my new bosses was cute. That, as I knew too well, was a recipe for disaster.

My throat tightened, as it did every time London crept back into my mind. I pushed it out with a mighty mental shove.

New beginnings. Everything that had happened to me was a learning experience. I was moving on. No way would I ever make the same mistake again.

Following the sound of giggles to the kitchen, I found the twins drawing in their coloring books at the table, Matilda nowhere to be seen.

I sat down next to Eloise. "Can you tell me about your picture?" I asked, trying to make sense of the blue and green scribbling.

Eloise hunched over her book.

“She’s drawing the ocean,” Lily informed me.

“Oh, I see.” I pointed to a bright orange blob. “Is that a fish?”

Eloise rewarded me with a shy smile. “Shark,” she said.

Matilda came into the kitchen, dressed in tight jeans, ballet flats, and an oversized green sweater, sunglasses perched on her head. She grabbed her keys from a rack on the wall above the bench.

“I’m just popping down to the café to catch up with a friend. Call me if you have any questions.”

I tried to keep my eyebrows from shooting up, but I’m pretty sure they still made it halfway to my hairline before I managed to wrestle them down.

Most parents weren’t as laidback about leaving the kids with me so soon after I’d arrived. But hey, it was a sign that Matilda trusted me, right?

“Sure. Have fun!” I said.

I eyed the twins as Matilda left the room. Some kids could get upset when left with a stranger. But they continued their drawing and didn’t seem perturbed by their mother’s departure.

After a few minutes, Lily looked up at me. “Can we have a princess party?”

“Pincess party,” Eloise agreed, the “r” sound missing from “princess”. I’d noticed at the interview her speech was not as clear as Lily’s.

“Sure, I love princess parties,” I said. “What will we need?”

“Tiaras and fairy wings,” Lily said.

“You’ll have to show me where you keep all your tiaras and fairy wings.”

The girls led me to the family room off the kitchen, which looked as if it doubled as a playroom. Lily opened a cupboard to reveal a whole lot of dress-up gear.

“Is there a tiara for me too?”

She handed me the largest tiara, which glittered with lots of different colored rhinestones. I put it on, and it embedded in my curls.

The girls chose tiaras for themselves, and I helped them attach their fairy wings.

“Can we have some princess food?” Lily asked.

I fired off a text to Matilda, checking there were no food issues I should know about. She replied instantly saying they were fine with anything.

Back in the kitchen, I opened the pantry. “How about I teach you girls how to make my special princess bread?”

My princess bread was just a modified scone mixture, but the girls didn’t need to know that. It was a fun recipe to bake with kids.

I spotted a container of flour balanced precariously on top of another filled with brown sugar on one of the high shelves.

Stretching up, I got one hand on the container, but when I tugged, the lid slid off and it started to topple.

Damn.

Scrambling, I grabbed at the container but my fingertips just brushed the edge as it tipped.

I slammed my eyes shut as flour particles rained down on my head and body.

Oh shit.

After a few seconds, when it felt as if the worst was over, I cautiously opened my eyes to assess the damage.

It was like I’d been flour-bombed. Flour caked my whole body, the bottom of the pantry, and the floor. Had it been filmed, it could have been my contribution to the ‘easiest ways to make a mess in seconds’ YouTube compilation.

I glanced at the girls, who were watching me with wide eyes.

“Oh dear, that’s not good,” I said.

“No, it’s definitely not good,” said an unfamiliar voice.

I jerked my head up.

Two hundred pounds of gorgeous rugby player stood in the doorway, staring at me in all my flour-covered, fairy-winged, tiaraed glory.

Jacob

Okay, so the new manny was ridiculously good-looking.

Even covered in flour, with a tiara perched on his head and fairy wings falling off one arm, you couldn't miss that fact. With dark curls, large blue eyes, and chiseled cheekbones, he looked like an elvish warrior transported here from Middle Earth.

Suddenly Matilda's motives for hiring him became even more questionable. She wasn't looking to hook up with the manny, was she?

"Daddy!" Lily threw her arms around my legs as if she were trying to cut off my circulation.

"Hey, Munchkin." I scooped her up and gave her a kiss. Eloise had sidled up to me too, pressing her warm body into my leg. I gave her shoulder a squeeze and then turned and stared at the manny.

"Where's Matilda?" I couldn't help sounding accusing, like I suspected the guy had already murdered her and disposed of her body down the incinerator.

"She's gone to meet a friend."

"What, and she just left you? On your first day?"

The manny eyed me, as if he wasn't sure if the question was a trap. "It's fine," he said finally. "We were just having a princess party, weren't we, girls?"

“A princess party. Right.” Despite my best efforts, my voice was still steeped in suspicion.

“Anyway, it’s nice to meet you. Jacob, right? I’m Austin. I wasn’t expecting to meet you until Saturday.” He came around the kitchen counter and offered his hand.

I bristled at his words. “Matilda and I have an open-door policy. Either of us can drop by and see the kids at any time,” I said, voice cold as I gave his hand a brief shake.

“Oh, okay, that’s good to know.”

I pulled my hand away and realized it was now smeared with flour.

Austin’s gaze followed mine, and he winced.

“Oops, sorry! Here, let me get you a cloth.”

He scrambled around to the sink and grabbed a cloth. He turned on the tap to wet it, but apparently he’d not yet learned our tap was high pressure. The jet of water hit a plate in the sink and sprayed back up, blasting Austin in the face, and soaking the front of his T-shirt.

He staggered back, blinking, his face full of water, and blindly groped for a hand towel and wiped his face.

He looked down at himself, covered in water and flour, and gave a snort of rueful laughter. “Oh my God. I am a capable professional, I promise you.”

I bit my lip, but I couldn’t hold back a grin. “Don’t worry. I did that every day for a month when we first moved in. I still do it at least once a week.”

A smile quirked his lips. “Slow learner?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Hey, we’ll see how long it takes you to learn.”

“I might keep a tally chart on the fridge,” he said.

I realized we were smiling at each other. Austin broke his gaze from mine and glanced down again at his T-shirt. “This might be a teachable moment about how to make glue.”

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up?” I suggested.

He hesitated. “Are you okay to watch the girls while I have a shower?”

I gave him a flat stare, my humor disappearing in an instant. “I’m their father.”

He blinked. “Yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean...okay, I’ll just have a quick shower.”

After Austin left, I started to clean up the kitchen, trying not to brood over my instinctive territorial reaction. I shouldn’t get into a pissing contest with the manny, even though a part of me wanted to. I had to look at the bigger picture. This was who Matilda had chosen to look after our girls, and from first impressions, he seemed nice enough. And hey, if Matilda got on well with him, that was one less stress in my life. Even though our last nanny had been the most gentle, grandmotherly type possible, Matilda had still managed to get offended by something Judith said or did on a weekly basis, often requiring my intervention to smooth things over.

My thoughts darkened. As long as she didn’t get along too well with Austin. My ex had enthusiastically thrown herself back into the dating scene since we’d split, and I was okay with that as long as nothing she did impacted the girls.

And surely she had better sense than to hook up with our manny.

Although sometimes it seemed that common sense and Matilda were only passing acquaintances.

“Austin was going to make us princess bread, but healthy, for our party,” Lily informed me as I scrubbed at a spot of glazed flour on the bench.

“Was he? Well, I don’t know the recipe for Austin’s princess bread, but how about I get you guys some crackers and cheese instead?”

When Austin came back into the room, he was dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt, his hair damp.

I felt my stomach tighten. He really was gorgeous. There was no other way to describe him.

Noticing other guys' attractiveness was something I'd learned to bury deep, deep down. I never dwelled on what it meant. Navel-gazing wasn't a good pastime, because there was some serious lint and other shit that could get trapped in there. A whole lot of unpalatable stuff you didn't want to examine too closely.

Lily looked up from where she was mashing two crackers together to make a cracker sandwich.

"Who's your favorite princess?" she asked Austin.

Austin cocked his head. "Are you talking about real life princesses or princesses from movies?"

"Movies."

"Well, it depends on how I'm choosing." He sat at the table between Eloise and Lily. "If I'm going for the nicest person, then I think I might go for Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*."

I liked how much consideration he gave to his answers.

"But if I'm going for who's the most capable, then probably Mulan," he continued.

"Rapunzel's just as capable," I pointed out. "She has healing hair, plus she's handy with that fry pan."

Austin's eyebrows shot up to his hairline, and he regarded me for a moment. "True," he finally conceded. "But we're ignoring the fact that Merida is lethal with her crossbow."

I wasn't about to be out-Disney-princessed by the manny. "Moana's the one who outsmarts the giant crab. Plus she has great navigational skills."

Austin pursed his lips as if he was trying to suppress a smile. "What about Raya from *Raya and the Last Dragon*? I'd like her next to me in a dark alley."

I let some of my amusement play out on my face. "When are you planning to be in a dark alley with a Disney princess?"

“You never know how life might pan out,” he shot back with a large smile.

Shit. Austin’s smile. He was good-looking enough without it, but when he flashed those dimples, I couldn’t look away.

“Daddy, who’s your favorite?” Lily asked.

I blinked, shifting my attention to her.

“Ariel,” I said.

Austin let out a chuckle.

“I’m a sucker for a sweet voice.”

Actually, that wasn’t far from the truth. I’d first met Matilda after she’d sung the national anthem at a New Zealand versus England rugby match. She’d astonished the whole country because although she was well known for her acting skills, few people had realized she also had an amazing set of pipes. Afterwards, I’d sent her a message on social media telling her how great she’d been, and she’d sent back a flirty message, and everything had progressed from there.

Five years later, we had two kids and a pending divorce. Ours was not an epic love story destined to survive through the ages.

“Right, guys, now you’ve had snacks, what’s next for our princess party?” Austin asked.

Lily’s little face scrunched up in her serious-thinking mode. “Dancing,” she finally announced.

“Sounds great,” Austin said easily.

Eloise held out her hand to me. “Daddy, dance?”

“No, remember Daddy doesn’t dance,” I said.

Austin quirked an eyebrow. “Never?”

“Nope. Never.”

“That’s probably good. I wouldn’t want to show you up.” Austin’s eyes gleamed with some unspoken joke.

I understood the joke once he’d synced his phone with the speakers in the living room and started dancing with the girls

to Katy Perry's "Firework." Because it turned out Austin was a truly terrible dancer.

Perhaps he was trying to be deliberately bad in an attempt to coax me into it. But then, that level of incoordination had to be difficult to fake. He moved with complete disregard for the actual music, arms and legs flailing around with careless abandon.

Lily and Eloise didn't seem to care, joining in with the complete unselfconsciousness that I'd only ever seen before in children, and now, Austin.

Austin's face was flushed as he twirled Lily around. He glanced at me. "Sure you don't want to dance?"

A part of me itched to join them. I could imagine how Lily and Eloise's faces would light up if I did, and there wasn't much I wouldn't do to make my girls happy.

But I'd grown up in a family where the men most definitely didn't dance around the room to Katy Perry, and I just couldn't make myself stand up and join in.

So I shook my head and stayed on the couch, watching my kids and the manny have fun. And trying hard not to think about how cute Austin looked as he danced atrociously.

Austin

I loved to dance. But I'd never claimed to be a *good* dancer. When I went clubbing, my friends usually left some space around me so they could stay out of range of my flying limbs.

Jacob watched from the couch as I danced with his daughters. It was a bit unnerving to start with. But when I glanced at him, I could tell he was wrestling back a smile. It looked as if Jacob found my dancing technique as amusing as everyone else did.

My heart seemed determined to keep up the same fast-paced rhythm as the dance track. I pretended to myself it was the physical exertion of dancing that was making my heart race, and nothing to do with the gorgeous rugby player watching me.

And I didn't want to start thinking about how my insides had melted into a giant pot of goo when I'd watched him interact with his daughters. How many fathers could give a full rundown of Disney princesses? I doubted it was a subject that ever came up in the rugby locker room.

My mission here was to convince the guy I was a responsible adult capable of looking after his kids. And while I'd stumbled out of the starting gates, hopefully I was back on course and making up good ground now.

"You sure you don't want to dance?" I asked again as Pharrell Williams's "Happy" came on.

“Nah. I’m too intimidated to be on the same dance floor as you.”

I tipped back my head and laughed. Despite his stoic exterior, I’d seen flashes of Jacob’s sense of humor. Which was good. Once he relaxed and trusted me with his daughters, we’d hopefully get along fine.

We were halfway through “Happy” when I heard the front door open.

Matilda walked into the living room with a large grin that wilted when she noticed Jacob on the couch.

“Oh, hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he replied.

I grabbed my phone and turned the music down, but it only highlighted the uncomfortable silence.

“We had a princess party, and Austin’s been dancing with us!” Lily told her.

Matilda plastered on a bright smile. “Wow. That sounds like fun.” She flicked a look at Jacob. “I was just catching up with Gina over coffee.”

“Right,” he said. Then he cleared his throat. “Not my business.”

Yeah, we were right in the center of an awkward zone between exes right now.

“Mummy, can you dance with us?” Lily asked.

“Sure I can.”

“I’ve got to get going anyway,” Jacob said, standing up. “I’ve got a training run tonight.”

“Who are you playing this week?” Matilda asked politely.

“We’re up in Wellington to play the Tornados on Friday night.” He glanced at me. “I should be back for changeover on Saturday, unless my flight is delayed.”

“It’s okay, Austin can look after the kids if I need to leave before you get back,” Matilda said.

Jacob gave her a pointed look. “Yeah, you obviously trust him.”

“I was voted most trustworthy by the class of ’14,” I said, because I’d obviously decided that inserting myself into an awkward conversation between exes was top of my to-do list for today.

They both turned and stared at me with equal looks of confusion. But a distraction arrived in the form of Eloise wrapping herself around Jacob’s legs.

“Don’t go, Daddy,” she said in a plaintive voice.

Jacob’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. And I felt a pang of sympathy for him. If Eloise was breaking my heart slightly, what did hearing those words do to him?

He leaned down to deposit a kiss on her head. “I’ve got to go to practice, Munchkin. But I’ll see you on Saturday, okay? Then it’s a whole week of Daddy.”

“And Austin,” Lily piped up.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s a whole week of Daddy and Austin. In the meantime, you can practice your dancing.” His gaze slid to me. “All of you.”

Did I just get handed a burn by the rugby player for my dancing talents? It appeared I had.

Jacob gave the girls one last kiss each then sent Matilda and me a forced smile before leaving the room.

Eloise’s lower lip trembled, and I could see tears welling in her eyes as we heard the front door shut behind him.

“Shall we dance to “Happy” again?” I asked brightly.



That evening, Matilda seemed content to stand back and let me handle most of the dinner and bedtime routine.

She, at least, was enthusiastic about my presence. She complimented the pasta bake I’d whipped up and marveled at

how I managed to get the girls to eat their vegetables by arranging them into smiley faces.

As soon as Lily and Eloise were in bed, I slipped off to my room to make a quick call.

“Hey, Gran, it’s me.”

“Austin!” Somehow my grandmother always made me feel as if hearing from me thrilled her more than if Burt Reynolds or Clint Eastwood had called her.

“How are you?” I asked gently.

“Oh, you know me, I’m muddling along. What about you? You had something going on, didn’t you?”

I held my breath; I could almost hear the gears grinding in her mind.

“New job, that’s right,” she said at last. “How’s it going?”

I swallowed. “It’s good. The kids are terrific. They’re twins, almost four years old, but non-identical. I can already tell they’re quite different in personality...” I prattled on for a bit then Gran told me about her bridge club and the conversation she’d had with her neighbor about trimming the hedge dividing their properties.

That was the thing about me and Gran, we could talk for hours.

“Now, how’s your new job going?” she asked.

My heart began to race.

“It’s going good,” I said slowly.

“And what age are the kids?”

Fear climbed my throat. This was what I had worried about. What had got me on the plane to move from London back to New Zealand. These lapses in memory from Gran in which she’d repeat herself or forget what she’d already asked.

I’d broached the subject tentatively when I’d arrived home from London, but she’d dismissed me with a laugh. “I’m just getting old, Austin. You wait until you’re my age.”

Gran had raised me since I was three. And I was pretty sure she'd looked after me even before then, given my mother had been in and out of rehab before killing herself while driving under the influence.

"There's two girls. They're three, turning four in a few months." I spoke in a slow, clear voice, as if clarity and speed were going to make a difference to her remembering this time. I was deluding myself.

"Oh, that sounds like fun," Gran said.

"Yes. It's lots of fun."

I heard a rustling noise and looked up to find Matilda standing in the doorway.

"Anyway, I've got to go. I'll talk to you in a few days, okay?" My voice wobbled slightly.

"Sure, Austin. Love you."

"Love you too," I said before pressing end.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," Matilda said.

"No, it's fine."

"I just wanted to say please don't feel like you have to stay in your room after the kids go to bed. You're welcome to hang out wherever you want in the house. And I'm happy to see where our Netflix tastes overlap, if you like?"

I managed to rustle up a smile. "Sure, sounds good."

Actually, I felt like being by myself so I could digest what Gran's memory loss meant and what I should do next about it. But I trailed after Matilda to the living room and plopped down on the couch next to her.

Matilda had a bottle of red wine open and a glass already filled.

She waved in the direction of it. "Do you want some wine?"

"I'm fine for now, thanks." I was more of a beer person.

Matilda raised an eyebrow. “So, was that your girlfriend you were talking to?”

“Uh...no, it was my grandmother.”

“Do you have a girlfriend though?”

I sucked in a breath. It was none of my employer’s business whether I was in a relationship or not, but this was one of the issues with being a nanny. You were technically an employee, but you also lived in the same house as your employer and looked after their children.

There was no way you could care for kids and not get emotionally attached. Well, at least not if you were doing your job properly. And that often spilled over to an emotional connection with their parents.

Blurred lines had caused me to get burned in the past. In fact, I still had the scorch marks all over my heart.

I could already tell Matilda was the type of person who ignored boundaries, which was something I would have to manage carefully.

She was still watching me, waiting for my answer with a small smile. And was there a hopeful look in her eyes? I needed to shut that down fast.

I’d never had a problem sharing my sexuality. If someone had a problem with it, that was their issue, not mine. And I really didn’t see Matilda as the homophobic type.

“No, I don’t have a girlfriend. And if I did have a significant other, they’d be a boyfriend, not a girlfriend.”

Matilda’s eyes widened. “You’re gay?”

“Yep, I am. I know, gay nanny. I’m just a walking cliché.” I said the words lightly.

“Oh wow, I didn’t realize.”

“Well, I got the tattoo removed from my forehead recently. And I stopped dropping into conversation how much I like men, so it’s harder for people to detect now.”

Matilda giggled slightly bashfully. “Sorry. It’s just that with some people you can totally tell...” She trailed off at the look on my face. “I’m going to shut up now.”

“That might be a good idea.” I grinned to show there were no hard feelings. Because Matilda was right, some people’s sexuality was easier to guess than others. But the sooner the world reached a point where people stopped worrying about who loved whom and just accepted everyone, the better.

“But no boyfriend then, huh? And you didn’t leave one behind in London?”

“No.” The word was the most definitive to ever come out of my mouth. Matilda blinked at the abruptness. “Definitely no boyfriend.”

“That’s awesome. We can go manhunting together!”

“Um...yeah. Maybe sometime.”

“Oh, you’re going to be so much more fun than Judith!” she exclaimed, almost bouncing up and down in her seat. “You should totally hit on my ex-husband. I’d love to see his face if a guy hit on him.”

I blanched. Jacob was already iffy about me. I was not going to add that into the mix.

“No way. Not happening. I’m a professional, remember?”

Matilda pouted.

“Which are the good clubs in Christchurch now?” I asked. “It’s ages since I’ve been out here.”

“There’s a few decent ones. Not as good as Auckland, but it still can be fun.”

This was the thing about Matilda. She reminded me of an enthusiastic golden retriever. She’d get her teeth into a particular toy, but you only had to throw another to distract her.

“So, are you dating at the moment?” I asked.

“Yeah, a bit. I’m just enjoying getting out and meeting people. It’s fun being single again.”

“How long since you and Jacob split up?”

“Just over five months.”

“You seem to get on okay,” I said. I was fishing, but I wanted to know exactly how things stood between them.

She wrinkled her perfect nose. “Yeah, we do. I mean, it’s hard sometimes, but Jacob’s always been about putting the kids first.” She took a sip of her wine, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “We say it was mutual, but really, it was my call to end it.”

I blinked. “Why?”

She shrugged. “It was like Jacob was going through the motions of being a husband, but he didn’t really see me, you know?”

“Right,” I said slowly.

“I just don’t think Jacob’s capable of loving someone completely, like I need to be loved. I mean, he loves the girls like that, I guess, but I don’t think he’s capable of loving a woman like that. I always felt he was holding part of himself back.”

I felt a flash of sympathy for Jacob. Even I could tell, in the little that I knew of him, that he was solid and dependable. But I couldn’t imagine he was the most demonstrative guy in the world.

“Our whole relationship was conducted at warp speed,” she continued, tucking her legs up on the couch. “We’d only, like, known each other for six months when we accidentally got pregnant, and most of that was long distance because he was in Christchurch and I was in Auckland. And then suddenly we were having twins and he proposed, and it was all such a whirlwind. I think I got caught up in the fantasy and suddenly I was plonked into this picture-perfect life with a husband I hardly knew.”

I could so easily imagine it happening. And how the reality of two kids and a husband who was away a lot playing rugby turned out not to be as glossy as she’d expected.

Gran had scolded me when I'd told her I'd broken up with my first boyfriend, Jonathan, because I was bored. She'd said our generation had been spoiled watching movies and TV shows, and we all believed we deserved to have a glittering love story but needed to accept that life and love had its mundane moments too.

At seventeen I'd dismissed her, but now, at the grand old age of twenty-five, I totally understood what she'd been trying to say.

Matilda was still talking about the breakdown of her marriage. "I think part of the problem is his family, you know. His dad is the hard man of New Zealand rugby, so Jacob was raised not to show his emotions. My therapist says that Jacob's one of those people who reveals how much he cares by what he does, not what he says. What is it, the different love languages or something like that? But anyway..." She flicked her hair over her shoulder. "I realized I needed someone who spoke the same love language as me, someone who could give me more than what Jacob could."

"Is Jacob dating again?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He's just focusing on the girls and his rugby. He's always been on the fringe of the New Zealand team, but this year he hasn't been playing as well in the Supreme Rugby competition. And he's under a lot of pressure, you know, because of his family."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

"Anyway, enough about me. What was it like to work for Brett and Katie Harris?"

My stomach tightened hearing Brett's name.

"I signed a non-disclosure agreement, so I can't talk about it," I said lightly.

Matilda pouted. "That's a shame. I wanted all the dirt."

"All I can say is I hope working for you is less drama-filled than working for them."

I really, really hoped that. Because I had a horrible feeling that I was going to be dealing with issues with Gran, so the last thing I needed was drama in my working life.

“It will be,” Matilda promised. “Jacob and I are committed to being a drama-free zone.”

Jacob

While I was in Wellington, I tried to push all thoughts of the new manny out of my head and focus only on rugby. But for some reason, Austin flashed into my mind at random times.

Like tonight when we'd gone into town after the game because some of the boys wanted to go clubbing. Seeing people on the dance floor reminded me of Austin's ridiculous dancing, the way his smile had lit up his face as he unselfconsciously mutilated every move he attempted.

I sipped on my beer, staying glued to my seat in the booth. Aiden Jones, our first-five, sat beside me. He was never a talkative guy, and tonight he seemed more interested in whomever he was messaging on his phone than having a conversation with me.

Which was fine. I wasn't in the mood to talk. I'd had another average game to add to a string of average games and was brooding over what I could do to halt my slump.

"You want another drink?" Ethan came over, his face sweaty from carving it up on the dance floor.

"Nah, I think I'm going to head back to the hotel soon," I said.

Ethan shook his head, looking between Aiden and me. "I don't get you two. You're both single. Neither of you has a face that repels the ladies. You could be getting a whole lot more action than you currently are."

I felt Aiden tense next to me, but when I glanced over at him, he was stashing his phone in his pocket and looking at Ethan with a neutral expression.

“We can’t all be the party boy like you, Lewis,” he said in his dry voice.

Ethan Lewis was the unofficial social coordinator of the Marauders, the guy you could guarantee to be in the thick of the action telling jokes.

He was a young single dad with a son around the twins’ age, and from what I could tell, he was a devoted father when he was looking after his son. Maybe that was why he felt the need to live it up large when he got the chance.

Ethan looked at me. “You sure you don’t want another?”

“Nah, I get my kids back tomorrow. Want an early night. Need all the energy I can get.” I stood up.

“I’ll come back with you,” Aiden said as he got to his feet as well.

We pushed through the crowd, getting the usual slurred praise and hearty backslaps from the half-drunk patrons. Aiden’s rugby prowess meant that even people who didn’t follow rugby closely still knew who he was. And unfortunately, my fame due to my father and being married to Matilda transcended rugby as well.

“We really are lame,” I commented after we’d left the nightclub.

Aiden just shrugged. He’d always been one of those guys who kept his distance from the rest of the team, except for our prop Zach, whom he was close friends with. Although this year he seemed to be making an effort, having invited the boys over to watch NBA games at his house a few times.

Aiden’s phone beeped, and he pulled it out to check it. Whatever he saw there caused a smile to flash onto his face. I blinked. Aiden Jones wasn’t usually the smiling type. He noticed my scrutiny and slid his phone back in his pocket.

“Your dad’s biography is going to be released soon, isn’t it?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah, in a few months.”

“Should be an interesting read.”

“Yeah, definitely.” I tried to keep my voice neutral.

Rugby fans had been waiting for decades for my father to reflect on his career and legacy. He’d truly been one of the giants of the game, a hero in an era where rugby was everything in New Zealand culture.

As we stepped around one of the many drunken louts that lined Courtenay Place, my stomach hollowed at the thought of all the media attention that was coming.

My dad was a good guy, and he’d never placed pressure on me to follow in his footsteps.

But despite his best efforts, growing up as the son of a hero hadn’t been easy.

I had to brace myself for another round of the world comparing me to my father and finding me lacking.



I arrived home late afternoon the next day, an Uber dropping me off. For a minute, I felt the ridiculous urge to knock on the front door so I didn’t surprise Austin.

It was stupid. This was my house.

Instead, I opened the door noisily and shut it behind me with a bang, coming into the hallway and dropping my bag on the tiles.

“Daddy!” Lily cried, running into the entranceway. She was in socks, and her momentum meant she slid into me.

I crouched down and folded her into a hug, breathing in the strawberry scent of her hair. Eloise came in behind, sneaking her body next to Lily’s so I could cuddle her too.

Shit, I'd missed my girls. It was crazy when it had only been a few days since I'd seen them.

Austin came into the hallway, a cautious smile on his face.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." I gave the girls another squeeze and straightened up. "Matilda already left?"

"Yeah, about half an hour ago. I think she had...ah... dinner plans." He scratched his nose.

"Oh. Right."

Did Austin feel awkward telling me that my ex was out on a date? How much had Matilda confided in him? Knowing her, she'd be on a mission to turn the manny into her new BFF.

The sooner Matilda found someone else, the better as far as I was concerned. As long as he was a good guy who treated the kids right.

At least Matilda going on a date meant that she wasn't trying to seduce Austin.

"So, the girls are just doing some coloring while I cook dinner," Austin said. "I'm making meatballs, if that's okay?"

"Sure, that's fine. I'll just go have a quick shower."

"Okay."

While I showered, I noticed Austin's stuff in various places around the bathroom, including an interestingly named body wash. I smiled at that.

But I resolutely made sure no thoughts of Austin lingered in my head as I washed myself.

When I came back downstairs, he was serving up dinner.

"Something smells good," I said as I sat down between Lily and Eloise.

"It's my grandmother's secret recipe." Austin spooned some beans onto the girls' plates.

I quirked an eyebrow. "Secret recipe?"

“Yep. I had to beg for years and then pass a series of cooking tests once I turned thirteen to prove I deserved to be trusted with it.”

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Did you have to swear on the Bible that you wouldn’t share it?”

“Not the Bible, that’s not a strong enough vow for my gran. I had to swear on a pile of Julia Child and Delia Smith cookbooks that I’d only pass the recipe on to direct biological descendants.”

I snorted at that, and Austin broke into a large grin. “Actually, I think she only taught me because meatballs were my favorite and I used to hassle her to cook them all the time.”

“I guess that’s fair enough.”

Austin flashed me another smile before leaning over to cut up Lily’s potatoes and gently remind her to eat her vegetables. A curl fell into his face, and he pushed it away absentmindedly. He really was ridiculously good-looking. I looked away before he could catch me staring, focusing instead on serving myself.

Despite our easy banter, or maybe because of it, I began to feel awkward.

I wasn’t used to having another guy at the dinner table with me and the girls. It had been so much easier with Judith; we’d made polite conversation about the kids and her grandchildren and there hadn’t been this...charged atmosphere.

For some reason my mind drew a blank when it came to making conversation with Austin. So we talked mainly to the girls instead of to each other. Austin happily took the backseat and let me do the parenting, only chiming in with support occasionally.

And after dinner, he stayed in the kitchen doing the dishes while I built a block zoo with the girls in the living room.

At seven thirty, Eloise started to yawn, and even Lily’s endless energy seemed to be flagging.

“Come on, girls. Time to get ready for bed,” I said.

Lily eyed me. “Are *you* putting us to bed?”

My shoulders tightened. “Yes.”

“But Austin promised to tell us more of the story!” Lily said in the voice of the ultimately betrayed.

Austin came into the living room, his eyebrows rising when he saw the standoff between Lily and me.

“Apparently your storytelling skills are required for bedtime.” I tried to sound casual, but the words had to struggle past a lump in my throat.

Austin threw me an apologetic look before crouching down to Lily’s height so he could look her in the eyes. “How about Daddy helps you brush your teeth and gets you into bed, and then I’ll tell you more of the story?”

“Deal,” Lily said.

I frowned at Austin as the girls trotted off to the bathroom. “Deal?”

“I know. I don’t know where she picked that up from. She’s been using it all the time in the last few days.” Austin grinned.

My heart panged. This was the price I paid. This was what I missed out on. All these small moments with my girls that I could never get back.

In fact, right now, I was literally paying for another guy to know my daughters better than I did.

I followed the girls down the hallway to the bathroom and helped them brush their teeth. Lily tended to be haphazard with her brushing, but Eloise took the whole thing seriously, as if she was going to have her teeth examined at the end.

After they’d finished, they climbed into their beds. Lily’s duvet had Tinkerbell on it, while Eloise’s had frogs. I sat on the edge of Eloise’s bed and brushed the hair off her forehead.

Austin poked his head in the door. “Ready for the story?”

Lily sat up eagerly, her eyes wide and bright. “Yes!” She wriggled her legs under the duvet like she always did when she was excited.

Eloise turned her head so she could watch Austin as he sat on the end of Lily’s bed and began telling the story. It was about a band of interstellar pirate dragons. They were obviously a fair way into the saga as the dragons had just arrived on a new planet.

We all listened to Austin as he described the hazards that awaited the dragons on the new planet. Eloise almost stopped breathing as the dragons attempted to navigate around a swamp that threatened to suck them into another dimension.

But when he reached the point where the two main dragon pirates found a cave, he paused to ask, “Who do you want to be inside, a giant troll who collects fairies or a goat with a fake leg?”

“Giant troll,” Lily said.

Eloise nodded solemnly in agreement.

The dragon pirates ended up having a tea party with the giant troll while the fairies did a hip-hop dance to entertain them.

And I discovered it was really, really difficult not to like a guy who made my girls giggle so much.

Finally, he finished up with the sound of some ominous footsteps outside the cave, promising he’d tell more of the story the next night.

Seeing Austin give Lily a good-night hug so naturally caused my throat to tighten. He reached over to tousle Eloise’s hair gently before retreating from the room. He knew my girls well already.

I leaned down and gently kissed Eloise on her head. Lily had snuggled down under her covers, and I pressed a kiss on her cheek.

“Night, Daddy,” she whispered.

“Night, Munchkin.”

I exhaled deeply as I walked down the hallway. It was obvious the girls already adored Austin. I needed to put my petty jealousy aside and focus on what was best for them. For my daughters' sake, I needed to try to make him feel comfortable in our home.

Austin was hovering in the kitchen when I got back.

“You want a beer?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment. “Yeah, sure,” he said finally.

I got two Steinlagers from the fridge and handed him one. In the living room, I took the couch and Austin perched on the edge of one of the leather chairs.

I studied him as he sipped from his beer bottle. What was it about him that made him so good-looking? His high, slanted cheekbones made his face look as if it had been sculpted by one of the great masters. And his large eyes, framed by dark lashes, were such a bright blue. His mouth was slightly too wide for his narrow face but somehow, combined with his other more delicate features, it just made him more interesting than guys who were conventionally good-looking.

He caught my eye, and gave me a puzzled smile.

Shit. I'd been staring.

I lowered my gaze to the coffee table. “The girls really loved your story.”

“Thanks. I'm pretty sure J.K. Rowling isn't too concerned about me stealing her storytelling crown though.”

I chuckled. “I don't know...I think you're underrating yourself. I can't believe you made it up on the fly.”

Austin stretched back. “My gran used to do that, make up all these wild and wonderful stories for me. I loved it.”

It was the second time he'd mentioned his grandmother tonight. “Does your gran live locally?”

“Yeah, she does.” He took another swallow of his beer. “She raised me actually.”

“So you're a Christchurch boy.”

“Born and raised in Spreydon.”

I knew the area. It was a working-class suburb close to the inner city. Austin’s chin had a slight defiant tilt that I understood. Christchurch had a vein of snobbery; people judged you by what suburb you grew up in and where you went to school.

“So, how long did you live in London?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is this an interrogation?”

I felt myself flush. “It’s just nice to know some stuff about the guy who’s spending so much time with my kids.”

Austin’s expression turned sympathetic. “Yeah, I get it. Feel free to ask me anything.”

“Anything?”

“I’m an open book. But I warn you, it’s not exactly a gripping read. Born and raised here, did an early childhood education degree because I like working with kids, went over to London for a few years because that’s where you can make the big money as a manny.”

“And why did you come back?”

Despite his assertion that he was an open book, something in his face closed down.

“I got sick of it and missed home,” he said.

I squinted at him. What had happened in London? Was there something the manny wasn’t telling me?

“And you worked for a celebrity football player over there?” I prodded.

“Yeah, him and his wife. They had two kids, Ruby and Felix. Ruby was six, and Felix was just a few months older than the girls.”

Although Austin delivered all this information in a normal voice, something about the tense set of his shoulders put me on guard. Matilda had checked out his references, hadn’t she?

I tried to keep my suspicion out of my tone. “Did you enjoy working there?”

Austin picked at the label on his bottle. “Yeah, I did. The kids were good. But Brett and Katie split while I was working for them, so it was a fairly tense working environment for a while.”

Right.

“So you already have experience dealing with parents who are split up,” I said.

“Yes, and it’s totally manageable. As long as we have clear lines of communication.”

Yeah, communication wasn’t my strong suit, as Matilda had told me on many occasions. But I would do anything for my girls.

“I especially need you to tell me if I tread on your toes,” Austin continued, raising his gaze to mine. “You’re the girls’ dad, and I completely respect that. But I’m not a mind reader, so I need you to tell me if I do anything that bothers you. Like tonight with the story. If you want bedtime to be solely a dad thing, then let me know.”

Fuck, he said he wasn’t a mind reader, but it was like he’d picked through my brain and discovered all my reservations about having a nanny.

“I don’t mind if we share the bedtime routine,” I said slowly.

He nodded. “I can totally do sharing. But let me know if anything crops up that bothers you, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed.

I watched him from the corner of my eye as he took another gulp of beer.

Okay, so Austin seemed like a professional, capable guy who was sensitive enough to consider my feelings and was fabulous with the girls. But I was going to reserve final judgment until I’d seen him in action some more.



Sunday was Austin's day off, so I took the girls to my parents' house for Sunday lunch with the family. My parents had only recently returned from a trip to Australia, and it had been a few weeks since I'd seen them.

As always, I found myself straightening up to my full height as I knocked on the front door of their large house in the leafy suburb of Fendalton.

My mum opened the door with a warm smile.

"And here they are! How are my angels?" She bent down to give Lily and Eloise hugs.

"Am I included in that angel category?" I asked.

"Oh, you'll always be my angel, darling." Mum gave me a hug too. "Come in, come in. Jen and Sam have just arrived with the boys."

The girls skipped ahead down the hallway. I smiled as I heard the babble of excited voices that meant they'd found their cousins.

I followed to the little sitting room off the kitchen, where my parents seemed to spend most of their time rather than in the two other lounges. It was bathed in sunshine.

"Jacob." Dad stood up to shake my hand.

"Hey, Dad. Good trip?" I asked as my hand was engulfed in his strong grip.

"Yes. We had a good time."

Although he was in his sixties, my father was still the same imposing figure from my childhood, six-foot-four in height with a ramrod straight back. He was the guy who'd captained New Zealand, who'd famously played half a game of rugby after breaking his collar bone.

The only change in him was his eyebrows, which grew more unruly every year. My dad was definitely not of the

generation that had embraced manscaping.

I greeted Jen, my sister, with a hug. Even though there were eight years and our sisters Grace and Adriana between us, Jen was the one I was closest to.

“Hey, Jacob.” Sam, Jen’s husband, gave me an easy smile and a handshake. Sam was pushing thirty-five and just starting to get smile lines around his eyes and a few speckles of gray in his beard. He was still a good-looking guy though.

“Hey, Sam.” My smile was at the tighter end of the spectrum, and I dropped his hand as soon as I could.

I always felt slightly awkward around Sam. Jen had started dating him when I was a young teenager, and for a few years I’d followed him around like an overenthusiastic puppy.

My family had joked about how I’d hero-worshipped him, but they hadn’t understood the full extent of things.

I hadn’t wanted to be like Sam, I’d wanted...more. I’d wanted Sam to look at me like he looked at Jen.

And hey, if thoughts of him in his board shorts at the beach had snuck into my head when I was enjoying a bit of quality alone time, whose business was it?

No way could Roger Browne’s only son be gay. It wasn’t in the realm of possibility.

And I wasn’t gay. I found girls attractive, too.

In the years since, I’d written the thing with Sam off as a weird adolescent thing, a combination of hero-worship and teenage horniness.

I was mostly attracted to women, anyway. Or was that because I let myself be attracted only to women?

Austin slipped into my head. I’d definitely noticed he was attractive.

“So, what’s new in Jacob’s world?” Jen asked as I sat on a chair.

Maybe because Austin was already in my head, he was the first thing that jumped out.

“We’ve got a new nanny.”

“What’s she like?” Mum asked.

I cleared my throat. “Actually, we employed a guy.”

My mother blinked. “A man?”

“Yeah. It was Matilda’s choice.”

“Oh, I see.” My mother had a tendency to be judgmental, which my sisters complained about frequently. She was more restrained with me—a fact my sisters also complained about—and she had never criticized Matilda to my face, even after we split up. But the way she tightened her lips into a straight line now told me how she felt about the situation.

Weirdly, I felt defensive of Austin. “He’s actually great with the girls. They really like him.”

“Well, that’s what is most important.”

“Yes, it is.”

I glanced at my father. His bushy eyebrows were clumped together like they always were when something perplexed him. Dad had grown up in an era when things were simple and straightforward and there was a clear distinction between men’s and women’s roles.

“I don’t think your father changed a single nappy, and I had four kids in eight years,” Mum said. “Of course, things were different back then.”

“Back in the dark ages.” Jen shot Mum a grin.

“I still believe there are some things men are better at, and some things women are better at,” she said.

I shifted in my seat.

“I don’t think everyone in modern society agrees with you there, Mum,” Jen said lightly.

Mum shrugged. She had her opinions, and she wasn’t changing them. Despite the fact she’d never warmed to Matilda, when I’d come over to tell them we were separating, she’d taken the news hard. I knew she’d been worried about

the impact of it on the girls, but her question, “Have you done everything you can to make it work?” had just made me feel worse about the situation.

My father had sat there, saying nothing, as I floundered with my answer. The whole experience had left a nasty aftertaste in my mouth. Like I’d added to my parents’ disappointment in me by failing in my marriage.

“So, who are you playing next?” Jen, the natural peacemaker in the family, changed the subject to the most common topic in our house. Rugby.

“The Stallions.”

“That should be a good game.”

“Yeah.”

“And when do they name the squad for training camp?” she asked.

“After the Supreme Rugby competition finishes.”

“Lionel Keil and Matu are having good seasons.” Dad named two guys competing for the same position as me.

His words caused a pit to open in my stomach. “I know.”

He didn’t have to spell it out, I already knew my form so far this season meant I might miss out on the New Zealand team. It would be a kick in the guts if that happened. I’d made the team for the past three years, and while I’d never been a starter, I’d been a solid bench warmer and had gotten some decent minutes in a few test matches.

This season, my play seemed to be going backward rather than forwards. But shit, I’d had a whole lot of other stuff happening in my life, so it wasn’t surprising rugby hadn’t been my main focus.

“It’ll help if we make the semis,” I said.

“Greens are having a good season. Bannings is playing really well.” As always, my father came alive talking about rugby.

“Yeah, and the Tornadoes are tough to beat too.”

“I like the look of that Tuala kid,” Dad said.

“Yeah, definitely.”

We continued to talk about rugby through lunch. Sam coaxed my father into telling some stories from his glory days while I tried not to stew on how my family would react if I missed out on the New Zealand team this year. My parents tried hard not to put any overt pressure on me, but they couldn't hide the reality that they wanted me to succeed.

By the time he was my age, my father had been the legendary captain of New Zealand, spearheading the team to record tour wins in South Africa, with a content, happy wife at home raising his family.

Whereas I was struggling to make the wider New Zealand squad this year, let alone be a starter, and was currently in the midst of divorcing the mother of my children.

Would I ever live up to the man my father was?

Austin

The next week saw me simultaneously trying to prove to Jacob that I was good at my job while trying not to tread on his toes by overstepping any boundaries.

It required the combined balance of a tightrope walker and a gymnast on the beam.

I'm not sure if he was like this with every nanny, or if the fact I was a guy made it worse. But there were times when the girls would turn to me for something and I'd see his jaw clench.

I got it. It must be hard to have another guy encroaching on your territory.

Especially for a guy like Jacob who was obviously an incredible dad.

I'd spent enough time with other families to be able to identify the real thing, the gold nugget among the fool's gold.

So many dads were what I called glory parents. They happily participated in the fun stuff, cheering from the sidelines of the soccer game, giving piggybacks at the park. But they weren't there for the gory stuff, the tired, whining child right before dinner, the sick child calling out in the middle of the night.

But Jacob was there for everything.

Jacob knew the name of every character in Peppa Pig and SpongeBob. He listened attentively when Lily spent over ten

minutes describing the dynamics at her doll's tea party, and even asked insightful follow-up questions.

He enthusiastically followed Eloise outside when she found a beetle to show him, and then hunted around for more beetles in the woodpile and even punched holes in the lid of an ice cream container so she had somewhere to keep her new friends.

And now it was Friday evening, and although there was a rugby game on the TV between the Greens and the Clansmen, he'd muted it so he could concentrate on building a fairy tree house out of LEGO bricks for the girls. His creation was getting more and more fantastical as he added extra platforms to the original design, turning it into a sprawling monstrosity.

"I'm not sure that tree house is going to meet the building code," I commented from where I was tidying up the puzzles the girls had completed earlier.

"Are you dissing my LEGO-building prowess?" Jacob's expression was playful.

I held up my hands in a gesture of innocence. "I would never do something like that."

"Really? Because it seemed like you were mocking my creation."

"Mocking, no. There might have been a slight critique of the structural soundness, I admit."

Jacob looked over at Lily and Eloise, who'd been watching the interaction as if it were the most fascinating game of ping-pong ever.

"I think Austin just volunteered to build another tree house for you girls. He's going to show us how good he is at construction."

I couldn't help laughing. "I don't know if that's exactly what I was saying."

Lily clapped her hands excitedly.

Jacob tilted his head, a smirk on his face. "Are you scared your LEGO-building skills aren't up to it?"

I scoffed. “Are you kidding me? What do you think I learned in my early childhood education degree? It wasn’t all about children’s brain development and language skills. No, siree. We also learned valuable skills in LEGO-building and how to use a Nerf gun for maximum soakage.”

Jacob chuckled, and hearing the low vibrations of his laughter caused a matching quiver in my stomach.

This was the other thing about him. I’d been right when I’d suspected he had a great sense of humor under his stoic exterior.

Ignoring the way Jacob’s laughter made me feel, I surveyed the LEGO pieces scattered around the living room. The girls were expansive builders, and it looked as if they got that trait from Jacob.

“You’ve got all the tree house bits,” I said.

“Making excuses already?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Right, you’re on.”

For the next half hour, I was on a LEGO-building mission. I found green and brown platforms, tracked down bunches of flowers from one of the other kits, and bargained hard with Eloise for the ladder off her fire truck.

“You’re going down, Browne,” I said, adding a bunch of flowers to one of my platforms.

“You’re seriously smack-talking LEGO building?”

I shrugged. “If you can’t handle the heat, get out of the fire.”

I could see Jacob was trying to suppress a grin. “I thought the sledging from the Australian rugby team was bad, but you’re taking it to another level.”

“Don’t mess with the best, ’cause the best don’t mess,” I retorted.

Jacob lost his battle and the grin overtook his face.

Attraction swooped through me, uninvited, stealing my breath away.

Jacob was gorgeous no matter what expression he wore, but when he was genuinely smiling, cheeks puffed out, laughter lines crinkling the skin around his hazel eyes, he was devastating.

“You better have the game to back up your talk,” he said.

“Oh, I do.” I concentrated on adding the last bunch of flowers. “Ta-da! And here we have it. An Austin tree house original.”

Jacob shuffled over on the carpet to examine it.

“Not bad,” he conceded. “I like the hot tub.”

“Every tree house needs a hot tub.”

He squinted. “You don’t have a crane for lowering things off the side like mine.”

“No, but mine has a slide. I’ll just slide things down.”

Amusement danced in his eyes. “Slides only work one way,” he pointed out.

“You can slide things up a slide. It just requires a whole lot of pushing.”

Jacob chuckled. “I concede, you are a LEGO genius.”

“Thank you very much for your acknowledgment of my skillset.” I spoke in a formal tone, which had Jacob chuckling again.

Eloise sidled closer to me. “Can I play?”

“Of course.” I slid my tree house creation across the floor to her.

“Daddy, look at mine.” Lily crawled into his lap to show him the house she’d just created.

I had to glance away. Because it was cuteness overload, seeing Jacob tenderly asking Lily questions about what room was what in her house.

Not crushing on my new boss. Not crushing on my new boss.

But damn, it was hard to obey my own instructions.

After we'd cleaned up the LEGO kits and got the kids into bed with another storytelling mission, I puttered around cleaning up the debris from the day's play. I always tidied up throughout the day, but it was incredible how much mess two little girls could make. Maybe I should enter them into Guinness World Records. Surely there was a messy almost-four-year-old category.

As I was finishing up, I discovered an empty ice cream container on the bench. It was the one Jacob had made into a home for Eloise's beetles. But now it was empty.

I walked back into the living room, frowning. Jacob was on the couch, scrolling through his phone.

"Do you know what happened to the beetles?" I asked.

Jacob looked up. "I snuck them back into the garden. Eloise's pets generally don't have a high survival rate, and I felt sorry for the little guys."

I blinked at him. "You felt sorry for the beetles?"

"Yeah, well, they might have family waiting back in the woodpile for them."

"Remind me, isn't your job to, like, crunch people for a living?"

Jacob snorted, eyes crinkling again. "Yeah, my job is to crunch people, not beetles."

"Oh, right. Lucky beetles." I flopped down on the couch.

Jacob looked at me sideways for a few seconds. He put his phone down on the coffee table. "I'm going to grab a beer. You want one?"

The only time Jacob had offered me a beer was on the first night, and that had led to a mini interrogation. On all of the nights since, I'd retreated to my room as soon as the girls were in bed. Unlike Matilda, Jacob hadn't seemed eager to spend more time with me, and I hadn't wanted to push anything.

But it felt like things were starting to thaw between us now.

Jacob was still waiting for my answer, one eyebrow cocked.

“Yeah, a beer would be great, thanks,” I said.

“Coming right up.”

I deliberately averted my gaze so my traitorous eyes didn't linger on Jacob's broad shoulders or tight ass as he left. While he was getting the beer, I gave myself a stern talking to. It was stupid to lust after my straight boss, especially when he still seemed to resent my presence in the house.

But hell, there was something impossibly sexy about a man who was so tough and stoic on the outside yet so gentle with his daughters. Add to that the flashes of humor, and it wasn't surprising my libido had decided to remind me it still existed.

Jacob was back a minute later, handing me a bottle of Steinlager.

When I reached out to grab it, his fingertips brushed mine, and it was like an electric shock had charged up my arm.

God, I needed to get a grip.

I tried to hide my reaction as I shakily took a sip.

“Thank you. I could get used to being served like this,” I said.

“I can actually picture you in a past life, sprawled over the pillows being hand-fed grapes by the serving wenches.” Jacob settled back in the chair.

I chortled. “I was Cleopatra in a past life, can't you tell?”

Jacob's eyes twinkled. “I did think there was a resemblance.”

I was grinning back before I could stop myself. Yeah, great job of tamping down my crush.

Jacob picked up the remote. “What do you want to watch?”

“Anything. If you want to watch another rugby game, I’m happy with that.”

He looked at me skeptically. “Are you a rugby fan?”

“Not really.” Now was probably not the time to admit that the thing I liked most about rugby was the hot men in tight shorts.

Jacob flicked through a few channels before settling on *LEGO Masters*.

“This seems appropriate for us.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. Let’s see how the amateurs do it.”

And so Jacob and I drank two bottles of beer each and watched *LEGO Masters*. As we talked and laughed, analyzing the different creations and coming up with our own judging commentary, Jacob seemed to unwind even more, and some of the tension I’d felt all week faded away.

Things with Jacob should work out okay. As long as I managed to keep a lid on my attraction to the guy.

Jacob

My next week away from the girls was tougher than usual. We traveled to Brisbane to play the Queensland Cardinals, and while I tried to focus on rugby, I couldn't help my mind drifting, wondering what the girls were up to.

Before the game, I tried to FaceTime Matilda so I could talk to them. But she declined the call, sending me a quick follow-up message.

Sorry, I'm out.

Irritation flashed through me. She knew I liked to talk to them before they went to bed. And because of the time difference, after the game would be too late.

My ex-wife must have picked up the vibes I was sending her way, because a second later my phone buzzed.

Why don't you FaceTime Austin's phone instead?

Good idea. I hadn't used Austin's number for anything but a few texts, checking how the girls were doing, but now I pressed call.

Austin answered immediately, his smiling face filling up the screen.

"Hey, Jacob, how's Aussie?"

Suddenly I felt self-conscious. "Good. Hot."

"You want to speak to the girls?" he asked.

"Yeah, that would be great."

“Girls, Daddy’s on the phone.”

There was an excited screech in the background and the noise of footsteps.

Austin made a mock scared face. “It’s like being charged by a herd of stampeding elephants.”

I laughed out loud at that.

And then suddenly Lily had the phone, excitedly telling me about the bubble mixture they were making and how they were going to blow the biggest bubbles ever. And then Eloise was pushing her way onto the screen, and I managed to coax a few words out of her, although, as always, she seemed more interested in pulling faces into the camera.

An ache built inside me as I talked to them, and intensified when I realized the time.

“I better get going. Got to get ready to go to the stadium.”

“What do you say to Daddy?” Austin prompted.

Lily leaned forward so I had a close-up of her nostrils “Good luck!” She yelled the words so loudly that her voice filled my hotel room.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

I ended the call, echoes of Austin and the girls’ laughter still in my ears.

Ethan bounced into the room then, his usual happy-go-lucky smile on his face.

The good thing about Ethan as a roommate was that he was so social he was hardly ever here, which meant it was like rooming by myself sometimes.

Ethan took one look at me, and his smile faded. “You okay?”

I cleared my throat. “Just finished talking to my kids. You know how it is.”

Ethan nodded, his face turning serious. “I talked to Theo earlier. Char’s been teaching him to ride a bike. I don’t know why, but I always thought that would be something I’d do with him.”

“I get it,” I said.

Ethan contorted his face into a wry smile. “Still, we’ve got it easy compared to previous generations, haven’t we? I bet when your dad went on tour, he was away for months.”

“Yeah.” To be honest, I only had brief memories from those times. It was before the era of FaceTiming, so we only had the occasional staticky phone calls. I would try desperately to think of things that had happened at school that I could talk to him about.

One of my clearest memories was of going to Christchurch Airport when my father was about to return from a tour in the British Isles. He’d been captain of the New Zealand team and had led them to a grand slam over England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

I must have been around five, and I’d been trying to keep up with my sister’s longer legs but had tripped over and scraped my knees on the pavement outside the airport.

I’d blubbered over it until one of my uncles cuffed me around the head.

“Come on, kid, harden up. You don’t want your dad to see you crying, do you?”

My phone beeped, cutting through the memory.

Austin had sent me a photo of Eloise blowing an enormous bubble. Behind her was Lily, eyes wide with wonder.

Biggest bubble ever. Has to be a world record!

My chest tightened.

I wanted to be there. I wanted to be home.

Instead, I had to go and play a game of rugby.

It turned out to be a tough, gritty game that ended with us grinding out a win. Which kept us on track for a semi-final

berth.

Once again I'd failed to do anything noteworthy. At least I hadn't screwed up. But another solidly average game wasn't going to help my chances in making the New Zealand training camp.

I tried to imagine my father's face if I missed out, the disappointment he'd try so hard to conceal.

When I arrived home the next day, Matilda was in the entranceway, about to leave. She was smiling, talking to Austin, but stopped when she saw me. "Oh, hi."

"Hey." I gave Austin a brief smile. Shit. I shouldn't feel awkward coming into my own house.

"Daddy!" Lily launched herself into my arms like a rocket, followed by Eloise.

I hugged the girls, and my awkwardness eased.

Caught up in greeting them, I only caught the tail end of Matilda and Austin's conversation

"Promise me you'll stay away from the guacamole." Matilda used the teasing voice of an in-joke. I recognized the tone from the early days of our relationship. Austin laughed that easy laugh of his, and something stabbed in my stomach.

It felt a little like envy. Was I envious because Matilda didn't speak to me like that anymore? Or because it was obvious that she and Austin got on well?

I should be relieved about that. A happy Matilda made my life a whole lot easier. I glanced at them from where I was kneeling on the stone tiles. But there weren't any longing looks between them to indicate something else was at play.

I only cared because I wanted a settled and harmonious home for my girls, right?

Matilda turned to the girls, who were still clinging to me. "One last hug?"

Lily went to Matilda, but Eloise remained buried in my arms until I coaxed her over to her mother.

Matilda gave a slightly brittle smile. It was the same smile she used to produce when we were out together and got interrupted by her fans. "I'll leave you all to it."

"See you later," I said, straightening up.

The door closed behind her, and silence settled in the entranceway. Even the girls were quiet for once.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other before looking at Austin. "So, how's it all been going?"

Would it always be like this when I arrived home after a week away? Even when my relationship with Matilda had been going well, there'd always been a period of adjustment when I returned from an away trip.

And Austin had to switch between working for Matilda and working for me. Which I knew must be quite different experiences.

But Austin's smile was bright as he replied, "The week has been great. Lily has a painting for you. And Eloise found some snails she wants to show you."

"I'm getting my picture," Lily said as she raced off, Eloise on her heels.

"I convinced Eloise to keep the snails in a bucket in the garden, so fingers crossed they've managed to escape," Austin said to me in a low voice.

I chuckled. "Here's hoping."

It turned out a few of the snails lacked basic survival instincts and had stayed in the bucket, so I had to exclaim over them and then go into the kitchen so I could admire Lily's painting. She pointed to the stick figures in turn. "That's me and Mummy and you and Austin."

"Where's Eloise?" I asked.

"She was sick that day."

"Oh, right." I glanced at Austin, only to find him grinning at me. A warm feeling started inside me.

I quickly looked away, glancing to where the casserole steamed on the counter. “Another one of your gran’s recipes?”

“Yep. My entire repertoire is Gran’s recipes. If it’s edible, it came from Gran.”

There must have been something magical in Austin’s gran’s recipes, as the girls gobbled down every bite.

I’d promised them they could watch an episode of *PJ Masks* if they ate everything on their plate, so after dinner I turned the TV on and came back into the kitchen where Austin was already doing the dishes.

“I can’t believe they ate everything. They’re normally such fussy eaters.”

“There’s a whole carrot and zucchini grated into the sauce as well.”

“That’s some serious subterfuge.”

“I’m an expert at disguising vegetables. It’s a manny trick.”

“Clearly. The NZ rugby nutritionists could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Most people could,” he quipped back.

I realized we were smiling at each other again. It seemed to be our default thing, that we always end up grinning together.

Distracted by Austin’s smile, I forgot about the tap’s high pressure and turned it on too enthusiastically. The water bounced off a stack of plates in the sink and hit me square in the face.

Oh shit. I turned the tap off and risked a glance at Austin. His lips were pinched into a firm line, and I had a strong suspicion that was the only way he could stop himself from laughing.

“Here.” He offered me a towel.

“Thanks.” I wiped the water off my face.

He tilted his head. “You just did that to make me feel better about what happened the first time we met, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, that was all about protecting your ego,” I replied. “No incompetence on my part whatsoever.”

“Is now the time I should mention that I haven’t done it again since that first time?”

“Obviously you’re an extremely fast learner. Either that, or I’m extremely slow.”

He regarded me with amusement. “Yeah, I’m not sure which option I should be gunning for.”

I chuckled at that.

Why was this so easy with Austin? To banter back and forth, to bounce off each other, to make each other smile and laugh?

I couldn’t remember ever having such a quick... connection with someone before. Matilda and I had shared a sense of humor, but it hadn’t been like this. It hadn’t been so effortless.

Had Austin noticed it too? Or was he like this with everyone? Maybe it wasn’t an Austin and me thing, it was just a him thing. He was bright and funny and charming. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had the whole world under his spell.

We finished cleaning up the kitchen, continuing to joke and banter but luckily with no other catastrophes.

We’d just turned the dishwasher on when Lily came out to announce the episode had ended. She took her timekeeping role very seriously.

“Right, brush teeth time,” I said.

“And then story time?” Lily turned to Austin with a look of expectation.

“Dad might want to make up some of the story too.” Austin shot a glance at me. I appreciated the fact he was trying

to include me, but the thought of being put on the spot and having to be creative made my heart skitter.

“I’m not sure my creative skills are up to it,” I hedged.

“Please, Daddy?”

Shit, I was really going to have to learn how to say no to Lily’s big eyes and pleading tone before her teenage years.

“Okay. I’ll try.”

Yeah, the triumphant look in Lily’s eyes made me realize that she completely owned me in that exchange.

After the girls had brushed their teeth and were tucked up in bed, Austin started the story, talking about two frogs who lived in a pond and were best of friends, although Freddie was naughty and always doing things that got him and Freda into trouble, like sinking lily pads and holding illegal dragonfly races.

My mouth felt strangely dry when it was my turn, but luckily the girls were an easy audience, giggling as I described Freddie and Freda going to visit a forbidden swamp after escaping their minder, and running into a gang of catfish there.

It wasn’t until I was partway through that I realized the tale had morphed into *The Lion King*, only with frogs. Oh well, I was running with it.

“And then Freddie came back, and he had to battle his Uncle Scab for control of the pondlands.”

A glance at Austin revealed he had pressed his lips together to stop himself from laughing.

“But even though Scab had the support of the mean and nasty catfish, together Freddie and Freda managed to defeat them all, and they all lived happily ever after.”

“That’s a good story,” Lily told me solemnly.

“Thanks. Now you snuggle down, and I’ll see you guys in the morning.” I gave them both a kiss and then trailed after Austin down the hallway and into the lounge.

“I hate to be the one to say it, but I’m pretty sure you had some copyright infringement going on there.” Austin gave me a smile as he sat on the couch.

“Only if it’s reported to Disney,” I retorted.

“I’m willing to keep quiet in return for payment.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Do you accept beer as payment?”

“Usually I only deal in gold bars, but I’ll accept beer this once.”

I went out to the garage and rummaged in the spare fridge where I kept my spare beer.

Austin’s eyebrows hunched together when I presented him with a bottle of Export Gold. “I thought you usually drank Steinlager.”

“This was the closest thing to gold I could find.”

Austin tipped his head back and laughed.

I tried not to pay attention to his elegant neck. To the way how, after he stopped chuckling, his lips wrapped around the beer bottle and his throat worked as he swallowed.

All things I really shouldn’t be noticing about the manny.



The next day was a beautiful day, and Austin suggested going down to the beach to grab an ice cream with the girls.

Sumner village was a popular spot on a warm day, and the queue for the ice cream shop was long.

I loved living in Sumner. I’d come here a lot as a kid with my family on hot summer days, and it had always had a holiday vibe for me.

When Matilda and I had been looking to buy a house together when she was pregnant, I’d suggested Sumner as a location, and luckily she’d liked the idea. It was on the

opposite side of Christchurch to my family, but sometimes having some distance was a good thing.

There was one downside about going out in public, and I was reminded of it as we queued for ice cream. I tried to ignore all the sideways glances and double takes. I was a big guy who naturally stood out in the crowd. I also played rugby for the local team, and for New Zealand, and my father was a national hero. Being recognized came with the territory of being me.

While we waited, Austin entertained the girls by discussing what different ice cream flavors they wanted. Lily was going for goody-goody gumbdrop, while Eloise wanted a rainbow flavor.

“What about you, Jacob?” Austin asked.

“I normally just have vanilla.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to veto that one,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re vetoing my choice of ice cream?”

He shook his head at me. “Life is far too short for vanilla ice cream.”

“I didn’t realize you were the ice cream police.”

“We’re an undercover operation. Very covert. But we’re always on the lookout for crimes against ice cream.”

I huffed out a laugh. “And vanilla is a crime against ice cream?”

“It is when, deep down, you’re not a vanilla kind of guy,” Austin said.

My breath left me in one fell swoop. For a second I couldn’t breathe.

Why had I always had vanilla ice cream? Because that’s what my father always had.

Austin’s grin faded as he took in whatever he saw on my face.

“I’m just kidding around. You can have whatever flavor you want,” he said softly.

“Nah, you’re right. I should be more adventurous,” I managed to get out. I looked down at the girls. “What do you reckon, girls? What ice cream flavor should Dad choose?”

The rest of the wait in the queue was spent with Lily and Eloise debating intensely about what type of ice cream I’d like the most.

I ended up having to have two scoops, one mint chocolate chip, one orange ripple, because Lily and Eloise couldn’t agree. But both were good.

“Not sure how this fits my nutrition plan,” I said.

Austin’s gaze dropped down the length of my body. “You look like you do okay.”

My cheeks heated, and there was visible color rising in Austin’s face too.

Was that weird? But Austin was just pointing out the obvious, right? I mean, I was a professional athlete. I did keep myself in good shape.

We walked toward the beach, the girls running ahead on the pathway.

I tried not to let my gaze linger on the way Austin’s tongue flicked out to lick his ice cream. Because I was fairly sure I wasn’t usually so interested in other people’s ice cream eating techniques.

“Jacob!” My attention was pulled away from Austin by a grinning guy approaching me from the other direction. My stomach sank. Chris Walker. A guy I’d gone to high school with.

“Hey, Chris.” I obligingly stuck out my hand, and Chris gave it a hearty shake.

His eyes slid to Austin.

“This is Austin. He’s my girls’ nanny.”

“Nice to meet you.” Chris gave a perfunctory head nod. He didn’t seem particularly interested in meeting Austin. He turned back to me, eyes gleaming. “I heard you and Matilda split.”

“Yeah, a few months ago now.”

“Tough luck, mate. What did that Speights beer ad used to say? It’s a hard road finding the perfect woman.” Chris laughed at his own joke, while I tried to rummage up a smile.

“Yeah, well, we’re still friends, you know, for the sake of the girls.” I nodded to where Lily stood, listening with flapping ears. Eloise had squatted down to examine the ants on the pavement. Thankfully, Chris got the message and swerved into another conversation lane.

“Heard your old man’s biography is coming out soon. That should be a good read.”

“Yeah.”

“And rugby’s going well?”

“It’s going okay.”

“Tough game the other week against the Tornados.”

“Yeah.”

Realizing I was in danger of being labeled the world’s worst conversationalist, and also aware that Austin was observing this, I summoned up some basic manners.

“How are things with you?”

Chris rattled on about his real estate business and what a killing he was making, while I tried to nod in the right places. God, he was a douche bag.

Luckily, his phone rang.

“Oh shit, I’ve got to take this. But hey, good to see you, mate. We should catch up properly sometime.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I don’t know if Chris heard me. He’d already turned away to take the call.

Austin waited until we'd taken another ten steps toward the beach before he nodded a head back in Chris's direction. "Friend of yours?"

"A fake friend," I said.

"Fake friend?"

"You know, one of those guys who liked saying he was my friend but actually didn't give a shit about me."

The words left a nasty, bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

Austin blinked. But Chris was typical of a larger problem I'd had growing up. People who wanted to be my friend just because of my famous father. It was probably one of the things that had attracted me to Matilda, if I was being honest. She was famous in her own right, more famous than me. I knew she wasn't with me because she wanted the attention.

"Lots of people wanted to be the friend of Roger Browne's son," I explained as we stepped off the pathway onto the beach.

"That's tough."

"Yeah, it sucked. I could never tell who actually liked me for me."

Austin's eyes were the same bright blue as the ocean, and they seemed almost as deep as he watched me now.

We reached the edge of Cave Rock, the large rocky outcrop that divided Sumner beach. The girls immediately started digging in the sand. I sat on one of the rocks to watch them, and after hesitating for a second, Austin sat next to me.

"Did it get better as you got older?" he asked.

I shrugged. "A bit. But even now, the rugby stuff can get in the way, you know? People like being seen with New Zealand rugby players."

Why was I telling him all this? I'd never talked to anyone about this before.

Austin bit his lip, contemplating my words. "I can't pretend to know what that feels like, I actually didn't have

people queuing up to be friends with me because of my deadbeat mum,” he said finally. “And as for my dad, hell, he could be anyone. He could be that guy over there for all I know.” Austin pointed to a large balding man with three chins who was walking past.

“I can see the family resemblance.”

Austin knocked his shoulder into mine, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to nudge him back.

He stared out across the ocean. “Gran made up for it though. She was better than two parents.”

“I’m glad you’ve got her.”

He looked at me. “Yeah, me too.”

“I guess I shouldn’t moan about what a tough time I had with my two-parent family and famous father, right?”

“You can complain about whatever you want, Jacob.” His eyes didn’t leave mine. “Just because I didn’t have the ideal childhood doesn’t diminish what you went through.”

“It’s not like I suffered.” I took a deep breath. “My old man’s a good guy. It’s just...I have big shoes to fill.”

“I can imagine.”

Austin and I sat in silence for a few minutes. But it was a companionable silence. The girls continued to dig away happily in the sand. Seagulls shrieked, squabbling over the remains of an ice cream cone. The sunshine sparkled on the ocean and hit my skin, warming it up.

And Austin’s shoulder was still lightly touching mine.

As soon as I realized that, my breath hitched. Because now it felt as if all the nerve endings in my arm had lit up where he brushed against me.

I felt him swivel his head, so I turned to meet his gaze. I swallowed. Our faces were so close I could see how his eyelashes curled slightly at the ends.

Heat flooded my body.

“Right, I think it’s time to cool off,” Austin said, lurching away from me to reach down and rustle in his bag.

I blinked a few times. “Are you seriously going in?”

“I love to swim.”

“You should have told me. I can turn on the heaters in the pool at home if you want.”

Austin stopped to look at me. “Your pool is heated?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I definitely want to try that out at some point. But right now, I’m happy enough to slum it in the ocean.” He pulled out a large beach towel and wrapped it around his waist.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m changing.” He bent down and tugged his jeans off from underneath the towel, producing them like a magician as I watched, fascinated. “I brought the girls’ stuff, so they could have a paddle too if you’re okay with that.”

It felt like I had sand in my throat as Austin pulled off his shirt. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“You’re not coming in?”

“I didn’t bring my board shorts.”

“Just go in your boxers.”

I snorted. “Not happening.”

He tilted his head to one side. “Is swimming like dancing? Another thing to add to my list of things I must convince Jacob to do?”

“No, I like swimming. I’m just not an exhibitionist.”

“Shame.”

His tone was light, and I couldn’t read his meaning. Did he think it a shame that I wasn’t going swimming, or that I wasn’t going to strip down to my boxers?

But I didn't have time to focus on that, because at that moment he unwrapped the towel to reveal himself in just his board shorts. My mouth went dry.

He was lean but had enough muscle definition to show he wasn't a couch potato.

His chest was smooth, and a small trail of hair led from his stomach to the waistband of his board shorts. His nipples were pink against the light brown of his skin. His shorts only came to mid-thigh, and his legs were slender but muscular like the rest of him.

As he bent down to get out the girls' stuff, I struggled to get moisture back into my mouth and my heart rate under control.

Okay, okay, so I found my manny hot. I found a guy attractive.

So what?

Just because I was an equal opportunities appreciator of attractiveness didn't mean I would ever actually *do* anything about it.

Austin

Over the next month, I settled into a routine.

Matilda weeks were fine. She flitted in and out of the house, going to coffee dates or yoga or the gym or meeting her girlfriends for drinks.

I took the girls to kindergarten and picked them up, played with them and cooked dinner, and put them to bed. Matilda was affectionate with the girls but happy to take a backseat and let me do all the practical stuff. In the evenings, when she wasn't out, we bonded over watching *Married at First Sight* and laughing at the Tinder profiles of the guys queuing up to date her.

But Jacob weeks...Jacob weeks were when my stomach fluttered as if I had a butterfly party going on in there. And not a polite tea party. This was a full out rave complete with flashing lights and disco dancing.

Jacob weeks were when we tried to outdo each other in our LEGO creations, when we made up joint stories for the girls at bedtime, when we watched TV together after the girls were in bed and laughed about the things Lily and Eloise had said and done.

Would I ever get sick of watching his closed, brooding face change into a smile whenever I cracked a joke?

It was like the first daffodil opening in springtime. Like the sun coming out after a week of rain and creating a whole lot of rainbows.

Okay, I had it bad.

But it felt as though every conversation I had with him, every minute I spent with him, I found more to like about Jacob Browne.

And while it was okay to like my boss—hell, I liked Matilda too—the fact Jacob was fast becoming front and center in my brain had warning alerts screaming in every language known to man.

Because I'd been here before. I could write an essay on why it was a bad idea to get emotionally attached to your boss.

But knowing that didn't seem to be stopping me from repeating the mistake.

I'd deliberately scheduled Sunday off even though it was a Jacob week, hoping that spending less time with him would help me get this crush under control. Jacob was planning to take the girls to the Margaret Mahy Playground, an amazing kids' paradise in the central city, named after one of New Zealand's most famous children's authors.

But I hadn't figured on the fact that a certain almost-four-year-old wouldn't be too happy that I wasn't accompanying them to the playground.

"Why aren't you coming?" Lily had really perfected the whine.

"I've got to visit my gran. You know how you go and visit Nan and Pop sometimes and they're always happy to see you? Well, my gran likes to see me too."

Lily stuck out her lower lip. "Who's going to push me on the swings?"

"Daddy's good at pushing you on swings." *After all, Daddy's a professional athlete with incredible biceps that I struggle not to drool over on a daily basis.*

"He doesn't spin us," Lily said darkly.

"What's this?" Jacob came into the kitchen.

“I’m just explaining to Lily that I’m going to visit my gran today while you take them to the playground.”

Lily crossed her arms and stomped her foot. I had to wrestle back a smile because we definitely didn’t want to reinforce this kind of behavior. But she was all kinds of cuteness when she was throwing a strop.

I could see from Jacob’s face that he was struggling with the same dilemma.

“Lily, that’s not how we behave.”

“I want Austin to push me on the swings.”

Jacob swiveled to look at me. For a second, I was worried he was offended that Lily wanted me over him. But the vibe I’d gotten from Jacob that he resented my presence in the girls’ lives had disappeared over the last few weeks. And sure enough, his lips quirked up at the corners.

“Is my swing-pushing technique not up to scratch?” he asked mildly.

“We can’t all be good at everything, Jacob,” I said, in a jokey sanctimonious tone.

“Clearly *you* are if you’re superior to me in swing-pushing technique.”

“Well, I *am* a professional manny.”

Jacob huffed out a laugh. “Another thing you learned in your early childhood degree? Swing Pushing 101.”

“It was actually part of the Playground Techniques course. We studied all of the playground apparatus in-depth.”

“Let me guess, your final assessment was an obstacle course around all of the playground equipment?”

“Oh totally. We actually had to do it with Rambo-style rolls between each piece of equipment. It was challenging. But I think the fact I wore full camo with war paint gave me an edge.”

Jacob erupted into full-scale laughter, and I couldn’t help but join in.

This. This was why my ridiculous crush on Jacob wasn't going away anytime soon. Because I'd never met someone before who got my offbeat sense of humor and just ran with it, who made these small moments in life so much fun.

Lily made a little huffing noise, which made me realize that Jacob and I were still grinning at each other, caught up in each other's gazes. Oops.

Jacob broke our stare and glanced down at Lily. "Why don't you try showing me what Austin does differently, and I'll see if I can change my swing-pushing technique to be like his."

"Deal," Lily agreed.

"And if that doesn't work, I can give your dad some swing-pushing lessons next time we're at the park together," I said cheekily.

Jacob's grin was back and he aimed it at me. I tried to quell the ridiculous flutter that started in my stomach as a result of being on the receiving end of that smile.

"Have fun at your gran's," he said to me.



A few hours later, I decided "fun" wasn't exactly my go-to word for the day.

While it was nice to see Gran, the list of jobs waiting worried me. It was reaching the point where Gran seemed to be struggling to cope with living on her own.

I studied her as I came back into the kitchen after setting up mousetraps under the house. She hummed to herself as she bustled around making lunch. The smell of corned beef and carrots filled the house. Gran was of the generation for whom Sunday lunch meant a cooked meal complete with meat and three different vegetables.

I frowned. Had she always hummed like that?

There seemed to be other small changes in Gran when I looked closely. Her hair was messy at the back as if she'd failed to brush it properly this morning. There was also the fact that she'd told me the story about the man who mowed the lawn twice already.

She glanced up, saw me standing in the doorway, and broke into a big smile. "Lunch is almost ready."

"Smells great."

I helped her carry the plates into the dining room.

Although the table was small, I had to still brush up against the wall to reach my seat. Forget swinging a dead cat, you wouldn't be able to swing a dead mouse in here.

The whole place was tiny, but it was the house I'd been raised in. It was home.

Gran had worked in the cafeteria of the local high school for over thirty years, a job she'd enjoyed, but there had never been much money, especially after my grandfather had died in a work accident when he was forty.

I knew Gran blamed his death for my mother's spiraling into the world of addiction.

Gran had never had much of anything, and from what I understood, any savings she had managed to accrue, she'd spent on expensive rehab programs for my mother.

"So, anyone special in your life?" Gran asked as I squeezed into my chair.

Why did Jacob creep into my mind when she asked that question?

"No. I've only been back a few months. What do you take me for, Gran? Do you think I move that fast?" My tone was lighthearted.

"It would be nice for you to settle down. Find someone who appreciates you."

"It's not my top priority. I'm just trying to settle into my job."

“Are you enjoying it so far?”

“Yeah, it’s great. The girls are awesome, and the parents are really nice too. Remember, I think I told you that my boss is Roger Browne’s son.”

I felt bad describing Jacob that way now. Because he was so much more than just the son of a legendary New Zealand rugby player.

“Oh, I think you did tell me that.” Gran spooned some carrots onto her plate.

“Before we eat, it’s selfie time,” I said. It had always been a joke between us, that I’d rope Gran into doing a selfie with me every time we were together.

I held out my phone so I could get a good view of us, plus part of the meal she’d cooked for us.

“You need to smile, Gran. Go on, tell a funny joke.”

“I don’t know any funny jokes. I only know dirty ones,” Gran retorted, a twinkle in her eye.

I chortled. “Please don’t tell me any dirty jokes, Gran. I don’t think I need that trauma.”

She laughed, and I took the photo.

Then we tucked into the meal.

After lunch, I continued to plow my way through the list of jobs. I changed the batteries in her smoke alarms, fixed a drawer handle in the bathroom, and stained the wood of the tiny deck in her backyard.

But no matter how many self-help plumbing videos I googled, the leaking tap in her kitchen defeated me. And the fuse in her musty-smelling garage kept blowing out every time I tried to fix it.

I came back inside, brushing cobwebs out of my hair. “I’m going to have to concede defeat, and we may have to pay someone to fix the tap and the fuse.”

“That’s okay, Austin. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

I wrapped Gran up in a hug. “Anything for you, Gran.” That special Gran smell filled my nostrils. She’d always smelled of a combination of talcum powder and lavender, and that hadn’t changed.

But had she always felt this small in my arms? I remembered when Gran had been the giant in my universe, as large and ever-present as the sun. Now she seemed shrunken and frail.

She insisted on walking me to my car. The grass on her front lawn tickled my ankles as I walked across it.

Gran frowned at it. “Did I tell you about the lawnmower man and how his lawnmower got stolen from his shed?”

A chill went up my spine. “Yeah, you told me, Gran.”

“He says he should be able to get a new machine by next week, so he’ll be over to cut it then.”

I forced a smile. “Well, let me know if you want me to cut it before then. I’m sure I could borrow a lawnmower.”

Gran stood on the sidewalk as I climbed into my car. Even when I reached the end of the road, I could still see her in the rearview mirror, standing there, waving.

All the responsibility I felt settled like a lead cape on my shoulders.

Because this was how it had always been. Just Gran and me. For a brief moment an alternative scenario crept into my head. The scenario where my mother had lived, where she hadn’t been a slave to drugs and alcohol, where Gran, her, and I had been a team of three against the world.

After my mother had died, Gran had done everything she could to give me a great childhood. But she hadn’t been able to wipe away the...loneliness that came from being an only child raised by an elderly caregiver.

And now I felt that loneliness more acutely. My worry for Gran wasn’t a burden I could share with anyone.

Jacob was cooking dinner when I arrived, the girls quietly coloring at the table.

My heart gave a squeeze. How ridiculous was it that I'd missed the girls after only a few hours away from them? Being a nanny was always a balance between caring for the family and protecting your heart.

My gaze brushed past Jacob. Yeah, I didn't really want to think about how much I'd missed him too.

I made my voice bright. "Hey guys, how was the park?"

Unfortunately, my question triggered a competition between Lily and Eloise over who would tell me about their trip to the playground.

Eloise normally wasn't such a talker, but she really wanted to tell me about playing in the water fountains, which bugged Lily, who wasn't used to taking the backseat to her sister in any conversation.

Jacob gently chided Lily to let Eloise talk, which sent Lily into full meltdown mode, so she was sent to time-out. Then Eloise got angry at Jacob for telling Lily off, so she was sent to a separate time-out.

"And welcome back to the Browne family," Jacob said wryly as we heard the girls' bedroom door slam.

"They're just tired," I said.

He regarded me with amusement. "They're just being brats. Anyway, how did your day off go?"

"I spent most of it doing odd jobs around Gran's place. I think the house is getting too much for her." I gnawed at my bottom lip.

"Did you get everything done?"

"Most of it. I'm not much of a handyman. I may need to hire someone."

"What still needs fixing?"

"The kitchen tap and the fuse for the garage."

He tilted his head as he regarded me. “I can look at both those jobs if you want.”

I snapped my head up to look at him. “What?”

“I could go and see if I can fix the tap and the fuse. I like doing things with my hands.”

I couldn't help glancing at Jacob's hands. His strong, capable hands. Hands that threw a rugby ball and tackled his opponents with force yet could be so gentle when he tucked his daughters into bed at night.

I hadn't known I had a hand fetish, but Jacob's hands were proving I did.

I hesitated. “I don't want to put you to any trouble.”

It felt wrong asking Jacob to do something like this for me. He was my boss. I hadn't expected my complaining about not getting the jobs done to lead to his volunteering to help.

“It's not any trouble.” He looked at me. “Did you try replacing the fuse wire?”

“Yeah, but it blew out every time I switched it back on.”

“You might be using the wrong type of wire. I'll check it out.”

“Okay,” I said, relenting.

“I'll go straight after dinner, if that won't be too late for her?”

“No, should be fine. And that's really nice, thank you.”

God, Jacob was such a great guy. Which I should be grateful for, given how much time I spent with him. But it would have been easier on me if I could find some flaw in the guy so I didn't like him so much.

When Jacob went down to talk to the girls, I took over the dinner preparations while calling Gran to tell her to expect Jacob on her doorstep in an hour or so.

“He's going to try to fix your kitchen tap and look at the fuse in the garage.”

“Oh yes, the garage light stopped working the other day. Did I tell you?”

My heart thudded. “Yeah. I tried to fix it today, remember? Jacob will hopefully be able to tell if we need an electrician or not.”

“Okay, dear. That’s fine.”

I ended the call, took a deep breath, and turned my attention back to cutting up vegetables. This was a simple task that I could accomplish and control.

I’d just finished cutting up the broccoli and started on the cauliflower when Jacob returned, the girls trudging ahead of him like sugar addicts on their way to the dentist.

“What do you say to Austin about your behavior?” Jacob prompted.

“Sorry,” Lily said.

I didn’t think the word had ever been spoken with less genuine sentiment. I struggled to suppress my smile.

Jacob had high standards for the girls’ behavior, which made my job so much easier. But he also was smart enough to know when to stop pushing. He was such a great dad. Yeah, not finding any flaws in his parenting, that was for sure.

“Go play with your LEGO until dinner,” he instructed them, and they scampered off.

“You didn’t have to finish cooking. Technically it’s your day off,” Jacob said as he came over and stood next to me.

My heart failed the basic instruction not to beat faster in response to Jacob’s proximity. “It was difficult, the broccoli fought hard, but I managed to wrestle it under control so I could chop it up,” I said.

Jacob chuckled. “Why did I just get this image of you in a cage fight with broccoli?”

I laughed at the vision too. “Have I ever told you my ultimate broccoli joke?”

“You have an ultimate broccoli joke?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Um, I’m not certain about that, but sure, let’s hear yours.”

“What do you call broccoli when it becomes a ghost?”

Jacob eyed me suspiciously. “What?”

“Cauliflower.” I made a *ba-dum-tss* action to accompany my awesome joke.

Jacob groaned. “Promise you’ll never tell that joke again.”

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep.” I plucked a piece of raw carrot off the counter and put it into my mouth. “If you’re really lucky, sometime I’ll tell you my other vegetable puns.”

“I can hardly wait,” he said dryly, but his eyes crinkled in that special Jacob smile.

I gave up pretending I had any control over my heart rate.

After dinner, Jacob went to Gran’s house while I busied myself getting the girls ready for bed. I still felt guilty that Jacob was giving up his time to help my grandmother.

When I finally had Lily and Eloise settled and emerged from their bedroom, my cell phone was buzzing.

“Hey, Gran.”

“Your friend has just been here,” she said. “What a nice young man.”

“Yeah, Jacob’s great.” The words felt sticky in my mouth.

“He looked familiar somehow.”

“Ah...yeah. He’s a rugby player. Roger Browne’s son.”

“Oh, the one who married that actress.”

“Yes.”

Alarm lurched inside me. It appeared Gran had no memory of our conversation this afternoon.

But her next words distracted me. “He seemed very fond of you.”

I blinked. “What?”

“You should have seen his smile when he went through the photo albums.”

“You showed him the photo albums?” My voice rose.

“Well, he was looking at the photos of you on the mantelpiece, and I offered to show him photos of you growing up. He sat there for ages poring over them.”

Jacob had spent ages looking at photos of me as a kid? Really?

“Did he fix the tap and the fuse?”

“Oh yes, the garage light works perfectly now. And the tap stopped dripping.”

I hung up, trying not to think about how there was something innately sexy about someone who was so capable.

Instead my mind went to all the photos Jacob would have seen in the albums. God, how embarrassing. And Gran said he’d spent ages looking at them? He’d probably only pretended to be interested to be polite.

At the sound of his car pulling into the garage, I wandered out to greet him.

“So, I hear you had a hot date with some photo albums,” I said.

Jacob stopped. “News travels fast.”

“Between my gran and me, it definitely does.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I saw the photos on her mantelpiece and had to see if that hair was a one-off or if you actually did rock that much of an Afro.”

Okay, so it appeared I’d uncovered Jacob’s motivation for looking through the photo albums. Weirdly, disappointment spread through me. I tried not to let it show as I arched an eyebrow. “Are you dissing my past haircut choices?”

He grinned at me. “Perhaps.” He hung his keys on the hook. “The girls get off to bed okay?”

“Yeah, they wanted you to give them a hug when you came home, but they’re probably out to it already.”

“I’ll go and check.”

As soon as Jacob left the room, I reached for my phone. If Jacob wanted to play the embarrassing childhood moments game, then it was on. Google was my friend right now. Jacob had been in the limelight his entire life, so there should be some ammunition on the internet I could use to even the score.

As expected, a quick search revealed a whole lot of photos of a young Jacob.

But I wasn’t expecting the lump that grew in my throat as I scrolled through them. He’d been so serious as a kid. There was an old magazine article, with a staged family photo, that had been published when Jacob was nine. His three older sisters and mother were all smiling, but Jacob was mimicking his father’s posture, arms crossed over his chest, eyebrows set in the same fierce curve as Roger’s.

I traced my fingers lightly over the image of Jacob. He’d grown into his ears. His nose was straighter in the picture than it was now, so it had obviously been broken at some point in the intervening years.

I scanned the article. It talked about Roger’s retirement, full of superlative praise for a sensational career that had seen him regarded as one of the most outstanding players New Zealand had ever produced, known internationally for his toughness. I mean, the guy had apparently played one game with a broken finger, and another time he’d broken his collarbone and kept on playing.

In his retirement, Roger’s looking forward to spending more time at home with his children, including his son Jacob, 9, who is a promising rugby player himself. Perhaps we haven’t seen the last of the Browne name in New Zealand rugby.

I’d read some of this stuff before, when I’d got the job, but somehow it was different now, knowing Jacob as I did.

Knowing how he struggled in the shadow of his father's legacy.

I heard Jacob coming and quickly stashed my phone in my pocket. Hassling him about his childhood appearance had fallen off the list of things I wanted to do.

"Thank you so much for doing all of that for Gran. I really appreciate it," I said.

Jacob's smile faded. "She was a bit confused. She offered me a cup of tea three times."

"Yeah, her memory is a bit sketchy at the moment. She keeps telling me she's having a senior moment."

"Have you talked to her doctor?"

I blew out a breath, which ruffled a few of the curls on my forehead. "I've talked to her about going to a doctor, but she's pretty resistant. She says it's just part of getting old."

"I think it might be beyond the realm of normal aging." Jacob's voice was gentle, but it was like a slap in the face.

"You're right." I buried my face in my hands. "I've been trying to avoid thinking about it."

"I think you should book her in for an assessment. Get her memory loss checked out. There may be something they can do."

"I'll talk to her GP, see what she recommends."

Jacob seemed to understand that I didn't want to talk about it anymore. He picked up the remote and switched the TV on to *LEGO Masters*.

As I tried to immerse myself in the program, a little voice in my head pointed out that Gran wasn't the only situation I was trying to avoid dealing with.

There was also the fact that my uncontrollable crush on my boss was growing and there didn't seem to be anything I could do to stop it.

Jacob

It was a Tuesday night, and Austin and I were cooking dinner. We often cooked together now. Funny how Matilda and I had given up trying to do that early in our relationship because we'd always bumped into each other and gotten irritated.

But with Austin and me, it was like it had been choreographed. We worked together seamlessly. It was the same when we played with the girls. We subbed in for each other effortlessly. I'd never been so...in tune with someone else before.

Tonight, as we cooked, we traded vegetable puns. Austin had been right—he had an arsenal of terrible puns. Which had triggered a Google race, where I tried to match him to find the absolute worst vegetable joke possible.

“What’s the fastest vegetable? A runner bean.”

“What is green and goes to camp? A Brussels scout.”

“What vegetables are the enemy of sailors? Leeks.”

We couldn't even pretend our bad jokes were for the benefit of the girls, because a) most of the puns would go over their heads and b) they weren't even listening to us. They were doing a puzzle at the table and having their own conversation.

But somehow listening to Austin's laugh had become one of my favorite things to do.

I didn't want to dwell on what the hell that meant.

Austin's phone buzzed just after he'd told a truly awful pun about a turnip. His grin was still lingering as he answered. "Hey, Gran."

I left the sink where I was rinsing spinach to take over stirring the cheese sauce. He threw me a grateful smile and walked to the other side of the island counter.

"Oh, that's good. And what did they say...?" He chewed his lip while he listened. "Uh-huh. And did they suggest what may be causing the memory loss?" A frown overtook his face. "What will that tell them?"

When he hung up, I asked, "Everything okay?"

His brow was still furrowed. "Yeah. Gran went to her GP today."

"Did it go okay?"

"The doctor did a whole lot of blood tests and referred her to a specialist to test her memory."

"What kind of blood tests do they do for memory loss?"

"I think they rule out some of the stuff that can cause memory loss, like thyroid issues or vitamin deficiencies." He brushed a curl from his face as he came back round the counter. "I might need some time off to go with her to the specialist."

"Of course. Anything I can help with."

He gave a half smile, but it didn't reach his eyes as he turned on the tap to finish rinsing the spinach.

I had an overwhelming urge to touch him, and I'd already taken a step toward him before my brain caught up to my body and I applied the brakes to my feet.

What the fuck?

I couldn't go crossing boundaries with my manny just because I wanted to cheer him up. I lurched back to the stove and gave the cheese sauce a vigorous stir, feeling slightly light-headed. Was that because I had come close to

embarrassing myself, or because of the thought of getting to touch Austin?

“So, is your game away next weekend?” Austin asked.

He obviously wanted to change the subject, and I embraced the chance with both arms. “Yeah, last game of the season is in Aussie next weekend. Now we’re out of running to make the semis, it’s just a dead rubber match.”

It was also my last chance to impress the selectors if they were bothering to watch. But I didn’t say that.

“And they’ll name the New Zealand team soon?”

“After the final.” I kept my gaze on the thickening cheese sauce.

Not making the team wouldn’t be the end of my world. I knew it from a logical point of view, but it was hard to convince my gut of that.

I was twenty-seven. If I missed out this time, the chances of making it back into the team next season would be reduced unless I had an exceptional Supreme Rugby season.

Somehow, with the looming publication of my father’s autobiography, it was even more important to me to still be in the New Zealand team this year.

But had I done enough?

Only time would tell.



“Where’s Austin?” was Matilda’s first question when she came in the front door.

“Gone to visit his gran.”

With the girls also out at a playdate, it was, for once, just Matilda and me at hand over time.

I had gotten used to having Austin there every time I interacted face-to-face with Matilda. Somehow, his presence

seemed to smooth any friction between Matilda and me, keeping things calm and civil.

Matilda looked good, dressed in a soft pink sweater and faded jeans that clung to every curve. But then, Matilda always looked good. She was a beautiful woman. As I watched her now, putting her handbag on the counter, I wondered why I hadn't managed to keep my wife happy. What had I lacked as a husband?

Should I have tried harder?

When she'd first suggested splitting up, I'd felt as if I'd been hit by a head-high tackle I hadn't seen coming. I'd immediately asked what I could do to change her mind, prepared to do anything to prevent the girls ending up in a broken home. But I couldn't forget the sense of relief that flowed through me when she said she didn't want to try counseling and just wanted to separate.

It was the same sense of relief I'd felt when I was ten and was forced to be the king in our school play because I was the biggest guy in the class. I was not a natural actor. A tree could have delivered my lines with more expression.

As I'd read my last line in the final production, a lightness had engulfed my entire body. The performance was over. I could relax.

Matilda's bracelets jangled as she brushed hair out of her eyes. "The girls been good?"

"No issues."

"You've got your last game next weekend, right?"

"Yeah. In Sydney."

"Are you okay if I ask Jen to babysit next Saturday night?"

My eyebrows knitted together. "Why, where's Austin going to be?"

"Austin and I are going out together."

My breath left me. It felt as if I'd been kicked in the guts. This is what I'd worried about right from the start. Matilda

starting something with our ridiculously good-looking manny.

But now my guts were clenching not just because of my concern about the instability for the girls if Matilda started something with Austin. This was a whole other level of distress.

Hell. I scraped my hands through my hair.

Could I really blame Matilda for being attracted to Austin? No. Not when I suffered from the same affliction.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” The words came out half strangulated.

Her forehead rumped. “Why isn’t it a good idea?”

“I mean...I just don’t think it would be good for the girls...if you and Austin...”

Matilda’s frown morphed into a smirk. “Are you worried about me and Austin? Seriously?”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea to get involved with our manny, that’s all.”

Matilda’s smirk remained. “I think you’ll find I’m lacking one major thing that Austin looks for in a partner.”

“What’s that?”

“A dick.”

My eyebrows flew up, and Matilda giggled.

“Oh my God, you should see the look on your face right now.”

I tried to keep my breathing even. “Austin’s gay?”

“Well done, I’m glad you managed to put those clues together.”

Fuck. My stomach was auditioning to be a somersault performer right now. At the same time, my heart raced harder than if I’d just played a full eighty minutes of a hard game.

Matilda’s smile faded. “What’s wrong? You’re not homophobic, are you?” Her eyes narrowed. “You can’t be.

You're fine with Beth and Charlotte." She named her cousin and her cousin's partner.

No, my physical reaction had nothing to do with the fact Austin was attracted to members of the same sex as him.

It was because the fact that I found him so attractive wasn't quite as innocent anymore.

Yeah, I wasn't exactly about to tell my soon-to-be ex-wife that.

"I'm not homophobic. What Austin does in his private life is his own business."

"I totally agree. And that's why I'm going to help him find someone," she said. "I'm going to take him to the gay-friendly nightclubs and be his wingman. He deserves to have some fun. Hopefully he'll manage to pull someone."

My stomach twisted as I considered that possibility.

Of course he'd pull someone. Austin was gorgeous and charming and funny and sweet...yeah, that feeling inside me, the one that made me clench my teeth, it felt like...jealousy. And more than just mild jealousy. This was a fiery burn in my gut as I imagined Austin smiling at another guy.

Which I was fairly sure wasn't what I was supposed to be feeling right now.

Austin

Jacob's sister looked a lot like him. That was the first thing I noticed when she arrived on the doorstep to babysit the girls on Saturday night.

It was weird seeing Jacob's hazel eyes staring out at me from a feminine face.

I recovered from my surprise and stuck out my hand. "Hi, I'm Austin, the manny."

"I'm Jen, Jacob's sister."

"Nice to meet you."

"You, too."

Jen ventured inside just as Matilda came into the entranceway, still fastening one of her dangly earrings.

"Hey, Jen, thanks for babysitting."

"No worries."

Jen's gaze moved from me to Matilda and back again. We were both dressed for a night on the town. I'd put on a tight blue shirt to match my eyes and had tried to gel my curls into some kind of submission, which was always a legendary battle.

"The girls are already in bed," Matilda told Jen.

I waited for her to give instructions, but she just picked up her keys and raised her eyebrow at me in anticipation.

Okay, I couldn't just leave without saying something.

“Eloise has had a sniffle for the last few days,” I blurted out. “I gave her a lemon honey drink before bed, but if she wakes up, she might need some paracetamol to settle her back down. And she’ll need to have her dinosaur stuffed toy to get back to sleep. If you can’t find it, it often falls off the side of her bed against the wall.”

Jen gave me a smile. “Okay. Thanks for that. You two have a great night.”

“Call me if you need anything,” Matilda said.

“Will do.”

“Jen’s a very capable babysitter, she’s got three kids of her own,” Matilda said as we climbed into her red Audi convertible. “She’ll be able to handle the girls if they wake up.”

“Yeah, okay.”

My overprotectiveness was a flaw, and one that I’d tried to tamp down. It had annoyed some of my past employers because it came across as if I didn’t trust them with their own kids.

Matilda was pretty relaxed when it came to the girls, though, and she didn’t seem offended as we zipped through the suburbs toward the city. It was a twenty-minute drive, and Matilda spent most of it telling me about the new show she was auditioning for.

“It’s filming in Auckland, but they promised me they could schedule most of my stuff on alternative weeks, so I should be able to manage commuting. And it’s scheduled in Jacob’s off-season, and you know what Jacob’s like, he’ll be really happy to have a few solid weeks with the girls.”

I gulped. Jacob having a few solid weeks with the girls meant he would also be having a few solid weeks with me.

“It’ll be so good to get back to some serious acting,” Matilda continued. “I really feel like I’ve lost some of my identity without it, you know? I mean, I’ve done some small roles and voice work since the girls were born, but it’s not the same as getting your teeth into a real meaty role.”

“I can imagine. So what’s the character like?”

“She’s a bit of a self-centered airhead. I know, I know, it’s going to be hard for me to get into character, right?”

I huffed out a surprised laugh, and Matilda giggled.

This was the thing about Matilda. She did have some self-awareness about what a princess she could be. And a self-deprecating sense of humor, which showed she didn’t take herself too seriously.

I liked her. I genuinely did. She was spunky and fun to be around. I could see why Jacob had fallen for her.

It also turned out she was a whiz at parallel parking, squeezing her car into a small space which meant we parked right outside The Jaunt, the most popular gay bar in Christchurch.

It had been a beacon for me in my teenage years, one of the few places where I could let my guard down and feel comfortable in my own skin.

As one of the only bars left standing after the Christchurch earthquake in 2011, some of the old-timers griped that it had been swamped by straight people. But it still retained a queer vibe, as evidenced by the weekly drag shows and the pride flags everywhere.

We ordered drinks from the cute barman, and as we walked over to find a free table, we were stopped twice by fans of Matilda’s who wanted a selfie.

The celebrity thing still confused me. I didn’t understand why strangers wanted to have a photo with someone they’d seen on TV. What would they do with the photo? Show it to all of their friends?

Here’s proof I happened to randomly be in the same place as someone famous, and I intruded on their life to immortalize that fact.

At least Matilda’s fans were polite and respectful. I’d noticed lots of the people who stopped Jacob felt they had a right to offer up opinions on his team’s performance.

Especially in the last few weeks, after the Marauders had failed to make the semifinals for the Supreme Rugby competition.

Luckily New Zealanders tended not to be too pushy overall. There was a joke that the seven degrees of separation between people didn't apply in New Zealand; it was more like two. And as a small country, we were used to running into our celebrities, so it didn't become a big deal.

England had been a whole other story.

When I'd worked for Brett and Katie Harris, they'd been continuously stalked by the paparazzi. The tabloid newspapers over there would do anything for a scoop. I'd once caught a reporter climbing a tree to see over the fence and another going through their trash.

Matilda slid a glance at me. "You look completely hot. The boys of Christchurch are not going to know what hit them."

"I'm not looking to hook up with anyone." I needed to establish that fact early in the evening, before Matilda started trawling for men for me.

Matilda pouted as if I'd told her there was going to be a chocolate shortage for Easter. "Why not?"

I swallowed, directing my gaze to the dance floor, trying to work out what to say.

Well actually, Matilda, I'm slightly concerned that my reluctance to hook up with anyone is related to your ex, and that I'm slowly and agonizingly falling for him, and I'm going to end up with another smashed heart.

"I'm not really looking for a relationship right now," I muttered.

Matilda tilted her head. "When did your last relationship end?"

Shit. Something I wanted to talk about even less than my crush on Jacob.

"That depends on what you mean by relationship," I hedged.

“Sounds like a story.” Matilda grinned in anticipation.

“Not really. I had something casual going on in London. But it ended.”

I took a drink of my rum and coke, the bubbles fizzing in my nose.

Casual was a word that covered all manner of sins. But wasn't that what Brett had said to me at the end? *You knew this was only a casual thing, right?* Those words had become ingrained in my brain, replaying at inconvenient times.

The only problem with the term casual was that both parties needed to agree on that definition at the start.

Yeah, thinking about Brett, about what a complete and utter fool I'd been, wasn't the best recipe for having a good night out.

Fortunately, Matilda's attention span wasn't that long, and now she'd spotted herself in the reflective glass of the table.

“What do you reckon about my fringe? Do you think I should grow it out? I think it makes my forehead look really small.”

I gave her a look. “You know the stereotype about gay guys being really good at fashion? It doesn't apply to me.”

“So you don't have an opinion about my fringe?”

“You're a beautiful woman, Matilda. You'll be beautiful with or without a fringe.”

She preened then threw me a grin. “I like the fact I can believe you when you say that because I know you don't want to get me into bed.”

“I definitely don't want to get you into bed.”

Your ex-husband, however...

I tried to slam on my mental brakes, but I couldn't stop a vision of Jacob lying in my bed, grinning that gorgeous grin of his.

Heat and longing surged inside me, so strong I almost flinched.

I downed the rest of my drink quickly.

“This dance floor looks too tame. Let’s go liven it up.”



Matilda and I arrived home just after eleven.

I’d driven, as I’d stopped drinking after my first glass. I’d always been a lightweight when it came to alcohol, but having a mother who had died due to her addictions had made me extremely careful around drugs and alcohol.

Jen looked up as we came into the living room. “Did you have a good night?”

“It was great,” Matilda said.

“How were the girls?” I asked.

“Great. They didn’t stir once.” She nodded at the TV. “I’ve just been watching Jacob’s game.”

“How’s he doing?” I came forward so I had a better view.

“He’s having a good game.”

“Oh, there he is!” I couldn’t hide the delight in my voice when the footage showed a wide-angle shot that featured Jacob. I perched on the edge of the couch, leaning forward.

I could pick Jacob out so easily, even with fourteen other men on the field wearing the same colored jersey. The familiar broadness of his shoulders that narrowed down to his waist.

God, he looked hotter than scorching. Whoever invented tight rugby shorts deserved an award for their services to humanity.

He caught the ball now and ran straight over two defenders, as if he were a harvester plowing everything in its path.

“Go, Jacob!”

When I turned to share my excitement with Jen, I found her watching me, her forehead furrowed.

“That’s a good thing, right? He did good.”

Her forehead smoothed out. “Yeah, he did good.”

“Right, I’m going to bed,” Matilda announced from the doorway. I guess she’d watched Jacob play enough rugby that it wasn’t a novelty like it was for me.

“Thanks for a great night.” I gave her a quick smile then turned my attention back to the TV—and Jacob.

It was a strange feeling to see the man I knew so well on this different stage. There was a close-up of his grim, determined face as they reset for a scrum.

“He looks so fierce,” I said to Jen. Then the camera zoomed in even more. I took a closer look. The mud on Jacob’s face was tinged with red. “Oh God, is that blood? He’s *bleeding*?” My voice went up an octave in the space of two words.

“It’s okay. It’ll just be a scratch. They’ll send him to the blood bin soon,” Jen said.

“The blood bin? That sounds like some kind of medieval torture chamber.”

She smiled.

And sure enough, Jacob jogged off the field to the sidelines.

“So, you’re not a big rugby fan then,” Jen said.

“Nah, I mean, I watched a few New Zealand games growing up, but my grandmother didn’t really care much about rugby.”

“In our family, you didn’t get a choice.” Her words seemed loaded down with extra meaning.

“I can imagine.”



Jacob was due home from Sydney the following evening. I tried to ignore the fact that all day I'd constantly checked my watch, waiting for the minutes to tick down to his arrival.

Finally, at seven o'clock, the front door opened. Lily and Eloise ran out to greet him, and I had to stop myself joining them. I'd already dressed the girls in their pajamas, and the sight of Jacob carrying a twin under each arm as he came into the kitchen set my heart fluttering.

"Hey, welcome home." I tried to keep a lid on the happiness flooding me, but I'm pretty sure some bubbled over into my smile.

Jacob returned it, although his was faded around the edges.

I frowned. He looked tired.

He took the girls into the lounge and gave them cuddles on the couch. I let them have their space, although one part of me longed to follow, to watch the fountain of adorable that was Jacob when he interacted with his daughters.

Giggles floated from the room while I scooted around tidying up all the mess we'd made during the day.

Just as I was putting the last books back onto the shelves, Jacob, Lily, and Eloise appeared in the doorway.

"Story time!" Lily said excitedly.

It had become a habit in Jacob weeks for us to tell a bedtime story together. We'd created this whole saga featuring a Kaka and a Kea, two New Zealand native parrots. I loved how seriously Jacob took the whole thing, his forehead creasing as he concentrated on telling his part.

Jacob tended to have Kaka and Kea learning important life lessons. In my parts, the characters zoomed around being naughty, dive-bombing unsuspecting residents and creating all kinds of mischief and mayhem.

Today, I started by telling how Kaka and Kea decided to play a prank on the neighborhood and swap around everyone's mail. And then Jacob took over, and they learned the error of their ways and apologized to everyone.

"Nice moral to that tale," I said after we'd hugged the girls good night and headed down the hallway to the living area.

"Thanks."

"Seriously, the people who wrote the Bible could have used your tales as inspiration."

I expected Jacob to laugh or banter back, but instead he just gave me a tight smile as he brushed some hair out of his eye.

"Oh my God, you've got a cut." I stepped closer to peer up at it, lifting my hand automatically, wanting to touch him. "Is that why you had to go to the blood bin?"

Jacob stopped still. It was almost like he'd stopped breathing.

I froze too, realizing how close I was standing to him. I dropped my hand and almost tripped in my haste to scramble back.

Jacob cleared his throat. "You watched my game?"

I injected lightness in my voice to cover the weird moment. "Yeah, I did. I haven't watched a rugby game in years. I hope you appreciated the sacrifice."

He smiled again, but it still didn't reach his eyes.

Concern flooded my stomach. This wasn't my normal Jacob. Something had been off about him since he'd arrived home.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't everything be okay?" He avoided my gaze as he went to the kitchen and rummaged around in the pantry for a bowl. "How was your night out with Matilda?"

"It was fine," I said cautiously. Was this the reason for Jacob's skittishness? Did he not like the fact Matilda and I had

gone out together?”

“You guys have fun?” There was still tension in his voice.

“Yeah, I mean, it was good to get out, you know.”

“Right.”

An awkward silence settled over us.

“Jacob, you can be honest with me. Does me socializing with Matilda bother you?”

“No. I mean, you can do whatever you want in your spare time.” He folded his arms across his chest. “And I’m sure Matilda was keen to show you a good time.”

“Yeah, we went to a nightclub and danced a bit.” I deliberately threw that in, setting up the chance for him to hassle me about my dancing, reset things back to the normal jokey banter between us.

“So, no boys catch your eye then?”

His tone was casual, but I could see the tautness in his face. My stomach dropped. So this was what was behind his weirdness.

I’d wondered many times if Jacob knew about my sexuality. I hadn’t wanted to hide it, but it wasn’t the easiest thing to drop into conversation.

This is what I’d been worried about. Jacob getting all weird with me.

God, this sucked.

“I don’t go for boys. I go for men.” I’d meant it as a joke, but as soon as the words left my mouth, I realized exactly how far they were from what this conversation needed.

Because Jacob froze, and an odd stillness settled in the air between us.

He cleared his throat. “Right. Okay.”

Shit. Should I address the rainbow-colored elephant in the room?

“Are you okay with that? That I date men?”

Jacob's eyes flew to mine. "Yeah, of course."

"I'll never let my social life get in the way of my job." I said the words carefully.

"I know you won't." He gave me the world's worst attempt at a smile.

I studied his tight shoulders and clenched jaw.

Was it homophobia? Uneasiness with my sexuality? He was a rugby player, after all. It was a hyper-masculine environment where I'm sure homophobic insults were tossed around without a second thought.

Or maybe he was looking at our interactions in a different light now and realizing I had a crush on him?

The thought made my mouth dry.

He opened the freezer, stopping short when he saw it was filled to the brim with tubs of ice cream.

"Oh yeah, I bought some ice cream for you." I felt stupid now, exposed, especially in light of Jacob's awkwardness.

"It doesn't look like you bought 'some' ice cream. It looks like you've got enough to set up your own stand."

"I found this great range that has all these weird and wonderful flavors. I wanted to tempt you away from vanilla forever."

Shit. Those words seemed to have a double meaning now that Jacob knew I was gay.

But Jacob's mouth had twisted into a real smile. He pulled out one of the tubs.

"Miso and maple syrup." He raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. "I didn't come up with the flavors. I just decided your palate was going to be the guinea pig to try them."

"Just mine?"

"I guess I could be persuaded to have a spoonful. All in the name of science, of course."

“But of course.” He grinned at me, and got a few more tubs out of the freezer.

“It seems you’re in the mood for a lot of ice cream,” I said.

“Well if I’m going to leave the world of vanilla behind, I might as well have a good range to sample from.”

He got out a spoon and opened the first lid.

Why had I ever thought watching Jacob lick ice cream off a spoon was a good idea?

He closed his eyes. “Oh, that’s good.”

“Yeah?” My voice came out as more of a squeak. The type a mouse might make if it was incredibly aroused.

And now I was thinking about aroused rodents. Thanks, imagination. At least it was a good way to keep my libido under control.

“You try some.” He pushed a tub toward me.

I tried to keep my hand from shaking as I got out a spoon.

Was it my imagination, or was Jacob watching my mouth as I took a spoonful of the goat cheese and blueberry flavor?

Despite the ice cream melting in my mouth, it felt drier than the Sahara Desert.

I swallowed, my gaze not leaving Jacob’s.

Was something throbbing in the air between us?

Yeah, not thinking about throbbing now.

I let out a shaky breath and glanced back down at the ice cream. “So, Jen was telling me you’ve only got one more game to go.”

“Yeah.” Jacob’s voice was husky. He cleared his throat, and when I ventured another look at him, his forehead had creased into a frown. “The New Zealand training squad should be announced soon.”

“Do you think you’ll make it?”

Jacob shrugged. “I’m on the verge. It probably comes down to me or Lionel Keil. He’s had a great season for the Clansmen. It just depends which way the selectors want to go.”

Shit. Jacob hardly ever talked about the pressure he was under with his job. I hadn’t thought about how nerve-wracking it must be waiting for a decision that was outside of your control.

Jacob dug out another spoonful of ice cream and frowned at it.

“But my Uncle Alfie is on the selector board, so even if I am selected, there’ll be speculation I’m only there because of who I’m related to.”

“That must be hard.”

“It is what it is. I’ve had that my whole rugby career.” He gave a strained smile. “Unfortunately, I’ve never been good enough to silence the critics, one of those players that everyone knows automatically belongs in the squad.”

“Being a professional sportsperson looks so glamorous from the outside, but from what I’ve seen, the reality is actually quite tough,” I said. I’d seen that side of it a bit with Brett Harris and football in the UK. But I definitely wasn’t injecting Brett into this conversation.

“Yeah. I mean, I shouldn’t complain. I get paid lots of money to play a game I enjoy. But there’s a lot of pressure.”

“I don’t think I could cope with that kind of pressure. That’s why I never became a professional sportsperson. Well, that and my utter lack of any sporting talent.”

Jacob flicked me a smirk. “If your dancing is indicative of your coordination, then I’m inclined to agree with you.”

My heart lifted. I don’t think I’d been so happy to be insulted, ever.

“Are you hassling my dancing again?”

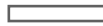
Jacob’s grin lit up his face. “Is it a day ending in a ‘y’?”

I looked down at the ice cream, trying not to let my happiness and relief show on my face.

I loved the way Jacob and I could rib each other. I loved how easy it was to talk to him, how we could switch between light stuff and deeper stuff so easily.

And Jacob hassling me about my dancing meant the dynamic between us was back to normal.

Thank God.



Three weeks later, there was nothing lighthearted about my mood as I waited for the specialist to talk us through the results from Gran's tests.

I fidgeted with my phone as we sat in the waiting room. I'd tried to push this appointment out of my mind, but now it had arrived, my nerves had flared up and were playing havoc with my stomach lining.

How many times had I been to the doctor's with Gran? As a little kid, sitting on the chair next to her, swinging my legs impatiently. As a sulky teenager slumped down beside her, probably thinking I was too cool for any form of medical treatment.

Gran smoothed out a wrinkle in her trousers. She was wearing her best pair, and I could see the crease she'd freshly ironed that morning.

"All this fuss about nothing," she muttered.

"Well, it'll be nice to know it's nothing, won't it?" I said brightly.

A male doctor aged around forty came out into the waiting room wearing a scowl.

"Gwen Baker," he said.

I tried to read the doctor's body language as we followed him into his office. The straight set to his shoulders, his stern

strides. Maybe he was having a bad day. Maybe he had a sore arm from playing golf (he looked like the type who might play golf).

After we'd taken a seat, his gaze drifted from Gran to me, as if he wasn't sure which one of us to address. He ended up aiming his gaze somewhere between us.

"I'm afraid it's not good news."

My breath caught in my chest.

"Your cognitive tests indicate a significant decrease in memory function compared to what we'd normally see in someone your age," he continued, finally letting his gaze settle on Gran.

"What does that mean?" I whispered.

"It means the tests are consistent with a diagnosis of early-stage Alzheimer's. Now, there are medication options..."

He began to talk through the medications available and the different stages as I struggled to get my bearings. It felt as if the ground beneath my feet, which I thought was solid and indestructible, was nothing but a mirage.

I glanced at Gran and saw my own fear mirrored in her eyes.

We were silent on the walk from the hospital to the carpark.

It wasn't until we were in the car that Gran rocked back and forward slightly, her hands clutched tightly in her lap.

"I don't want to forget who I am," she said quietly.

My heart broke, but I kept my voice upbeat.

"Don't worry, Gran. I'll always be here to remind you. There's all the medications the doctor mentioned that will slow it down. And we've been talking about the house being too much for you now, so it's probably a good time to look at going into a rest home. You'll have someone else to do the cooking. And you'll have people to play cards with all the time."

I kept up my bright, breezy chatter as I drove her home.

As I pulled up outside the house, I felt, for the first time, a stab of fear about leaving her here alone.

“Do you want me to come in?”

She unbuckled her belt. “Actually, I just want to be alone for a bit.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

She gave me a look. “Don’t be silly, Austin. I’m just as capable as I was yesterday.”

Well, actually Gran, you’ve got a degenerative disease, so you’re probably not.

“I’ll call you in the morning, okay?” I said.

“Okay.”

I watched her walk up to her front door, carefully clutching her key, and something inside me broke.

I had to get away from here. I didn’t want her to look back and see me losing the plot.

I pulled out of her driveway and made it halfway down her street before my chest tightened to the point where I couldn’t breathe. I had to pull over, taking deep gasping breaths in an attempt to fill my lungs.

Tears blurred my vision, and I impatiently wiped them away. Because an overwhelming need had overtaken me.

I wanted to get home. I wanted to see Jacob.

For some reason, that was all I could focus on. Getting home and seeing Jacob. I didn’t know why that was so important, I just knew that’s what I needed right now.

Jacob.

Jacob

“Daddy, look!” Eloise triumphantly dumped a squirming worm into my lap.

“Oh, he’s...” How did you describe a worm? “Interesting. Do you want to go find a bucket to put him in?”

Eloise scooped up her new favorite pet just as my phone shrilled loudly from where I’d set it down on our outside table.

Dusting my hands together to get rid of the dirt, I headed over to pick it up.

My stomach immediately hollowed when I saw who was calling.

Coach Wilson.

It was going to be about the training squad. Had I made it?

How the hell would I front up to my father with the news if I hadn’t?

I picked my phone up with the same care I would handle a venomous snake. “Hello.”

“Hey, Jacob.”

“Hey, Coach.” I didn’t bother making small talk. We both knew why he was calling.

Luckily Coach Wilson wasn’t one for small talk either. “I’m ringing to let you know you’ve made the squad.”

I pressed my palm to my eye. “Thanks, Coach.”

“It’ll be good to have you at camp for another year. But heads up, you’ve got a bit of ground to make up to get back to where you were last year.”

My throat went dry. “Sure thing, Coach.”

“See you next week.”

“Yeah. See you then.”

My hands were shaking as I put my phone back on the table.

I let out a deep breath. Thank fuck.

“Who was that?” Lily asked.

“That was just the coach telling me that I made the New Zealand squad.”

Lily’s face immediately darkened. “Are you going away?”

I reached over to ruffle her hair. “Only for a little bit, Munchkin.”

Of course, making the squad for training camp was only step one. If I made the cut for the team, then I would be going on the trip to the Northern Hemisphere, which meant I’d be away for more than a little bit. I tried to push that thought out of my mind. First things first.

“Can we watch some *Peppa Pig*?” Lily asked.

“Okay. Only one episode though while I ring Nan and Pop.”

“It’s a deal,” she said.

“You’ll have to wash your hands first,” I said, eyeing Eloise’s grubby palms.

I followed the girls inside and supervised the handwashing before setting them up with Netflix in the lounge.

Then I retreated to the living room to call the people I knew would be happiest with the news.

“Jacob?” My mother’s voice was eager as she picked up. “Is this about the team?”

“Yeah. Coach Wilson just called to say I’m in the squad.”

“Oh, Jacob! That’s wonderful news.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll get your father. He’ll want to hear this from you.”

I fidgeted with the cushion on the couch as I waited for my mother to track Dad down.

There was a shuffling noise, and then my father’s slow, deep voice was on the other end of the phone. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah.”

“Well done.”

“Thanks.”

“Did he say who else they’re taking at number eight?”

“Nah, but he said I’ve got some ground to make up at training camp to make the final team.”

“You’ll do the work. You always do.

“I’ll try.”

“Be interesting to see who else has made the squad.”

“Yeah. Guess we’ll just have to wait for the announcement,” I said.

That was about the extent of my usual conversations with my dad.

“Hang on a sec. Your mum wants to talk to you again. But congrats, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

There was shuffling again, and then Mum was back. “Jen told me she met your manny the other night.”

My throat tightened. “Oh, okay.”

“She was impressed with him. Said he seemed really competent.”

“Yeah, he’s great with the girls.”

My mother paused. I knew her well enough to know there was something else she wanted to say, so I waited. Sure enough, she spoke again.

“Are he and Matilda an item?”

“What? No.”

“Oh, I just wondered because they went out together. And Jen said he was really good-looking...”

Austin was incredibly good-looking. There was no denying that. And his looks were only the tip of his attractiveness.

“Yeah...I think they’re friends. But they’re not dating.”

“Are you positive? Because that could make it very awkward if he’s working for you. And confusing for the girls.”

“Yep. I’m sure they’re not dating.”

Should I tell her that Austin was gay? But was it my news to share? Austin had seemed relaxed talking about it, but he hadn’t actually volunteered the information to me in the months I’d known him. Besides, my mother could be old-fashioned. I didn’t want her judging Austin before she met him.

And there was the fact that the news still unsettled me, and I didn’t want my ultra-observant mother picking up on that.

“Oh, that’s okay then,” she said. “I was a bit worried after I talked to Jen.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

We finished up our conversation, and I ended the call. Then I stared out over the ocean. It was a deep green today under the scattered clouds. Amazing, how the color could be so different depending on the day.

Austin had said it was like the ocean changed its clothes depending on its mood, which had led to a big discussion with the girls about what color the ocean would wear when it was happy.

I really liked how Austin brought everyday magic into the girls' lives. And mine.

Speaking of Austin, there was the sound of his car pulling into the driveway.

It was insane how knowing I was about to see him again made me feel as if I'd been injected with adrenaline.

I walked out to greet him, but my smile died when I saw the look on his face. His default happy expression had warped into something I almost didn't recognize. Complete devastation.

Something inside me lurched. "What's wrong?" Then I remembered where he'd been, and a chill went up my spine. "What did the doctor say?"

"It's Alzheimer's." Austin whispered the word, but it didn't stop the force of it slamming into me, making me feel as if I'd just been tackled.

"Oh no."

"She..." Austin trembled, visibly swallowing. "She's going to forget me. She's all I've got, and she's going to forget me."

The empty look in his eyes caused my breath to rush out of me.

I reached him in a few steps, stretching my arms out and pulling him to me.

His shoulders shook as his body curved into mine.

Shit, what could I say? What could I do to take away his pain?

"It's okay," I said, then felt like a fucking idiot. Because in no realm was this okay. It was never going to be okay.

Austin's hand came up to rest tentatively on my waist, his body still trembling with suppressed sobs.

Damn, I wanted to do anything to make him feel better.

“Shh.” I used the same soothing noise I made when one of the girls was hurt, and pulled him even closer.

Some part of my brain clocked exactly how good it felt to have him this close. But I pushed the thought away. This was about comforting Austin.

He lifted his face. Tears trickled down his cheeks. I reached out to wipe one away, and he leaned into my palm.

Shit, the look of pain on his face cut me deeply.

I reacted automatically, focused on nothing more than doing whatever I could to get that look off his face. I bent down to press my lips to his forehead in a soft kiss.

It was only when the feel of his warm skin against my lips registered that I realized what I was doing.

Oh, holy shit.

I jerked away, staggering back a few steps. I glanced at Austin. His mouth had fallen open, his eyes widening as he looked at me in astonishment.

The exact same astonishment that was inside of me.

My stomach lurched.

Oh fuck. What the hell did I just do?

Austin

OMG, what just happened?

I'd arrived home, my sole focus on finding Jacob. I didn't know why. I only knew I needed him.

He'd been standing in the living room, and I'd managed to tell him what had happened, and then suddenly, he was right there, pulling me to him. And for a second, everything seemed less bleak. Jacob hugging me made me feel better. Made me feel not so alone. How could I feel alone when I had the strength and solidity of Jacob supporting me?

It had started out as just a normal hug, and then the emotions I'd been trying to keep a lid on had started to leak out.

He tried to soothe me, and I made the mistake of looking up at him, my vision blurry through my tears, but I could see those gorgeous hazel eyes staring at me with such concern.

And his hand was on my face wiping away my tears, and I leaned into it, as if I could soak up some of his strength, absorb some of his...Jacobness...to help me through this.

Then his lips were on my forehead. Just a whisper of a kiss. Gentle as a feather.

It wasn't until he leaped away as if I were poisonousness that my brain came back online.

My gorgeous, straight boss, who was fast becoming one of my best friends, had just kissed me.

Oh my God.

Jacob's expression was somewhere between horrified and terrified. Yeah, I didn't really love that part.

For a few seconds we just stared at each other. My breath came in ragged gasps.

"I'm sorry...I'm not...I mean...shit..." Jacob clawed his hands through his hair.

I took a deep breath. Before, I'd needed Jacob. Now, he needed me. He was freaking out, and he needed me not to freak out too.

Jacob, who came from a family and worked in an environment where you didn't ever kiss another guy. Even on such an innocuous place as the forehead.

"It's okay. You were trying to comfort me. I appreciate it." My voice came out calm despite the turmoil inside me.

"Yeah..." he said.

We stared at each other for another few heartbeats before he cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry about your gran. If there is anything I can do, let me know."

"Thanks."

The grief inside me flared up, swamping my confusion over what had just happened with Jacob.

I kept trying to act as if nothing weird had happened, concentrating on Gran instead. "I need to look for the best retirement homes, somewhere she can get the care she'll need."

"I can help you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to." His eyebrows shot up, as if he'd surprised himself with his words.

"We've finished," Lily announced as she and Eloise came wandering out of the lounge.

Shit. The girls had been that close the whole time? What would have happened if they'd come out when Jacob was holding me? That would have generated some questions that would be awkward to answer. Although I guess Jacob could have just said he was comforting me. Which was what he'd been doing, right?

I turned my attention to Lily and Eloise, glad for a distraction, to fuss over them as I organized their afternoon snack.

"I can sort it," Jacob said, watching me. "You go and relax, okay?"

I retrieved a bottle of milk from the fridge. "I want to keep busy," I said as I poured them a glass each.

"Okay."

I made the girls cheese sandwiches, trying to concentrate on nothing more than the feel of the bread under my fingertips, the solidness of the knife in my hand as I cut them into star shapes. For some reason, star shaped sandwiches just tasted a whole lot better than regular ones.

As the girls ate, I realized I could still feel the point on my forehead where Jacob had kissed me. My skin tingled, and I rubbed the spot where his lips had met my skin, then found Jacob's gaze on me.

His eyes were dark and troubled.

I dropped my hand away and turned my attention back to the girls. "Right, how about after your snack we go outside and hunt for some bugs?"

"Yay!" Eloise said.

Lily screwed up her nose. "Only if I can do it wearing my Elsa costume."

"It's a deal," I said.

"So, you're a master dealmaker too, now, are you?" Jacob asked me.

"She lured me into it," I said.

Jacob chuckled, but it wasn't his normal, unrestrained laughter. Instead, it was dipped in tension.

What had been behind that kiss? Comfort? Kindness? Something else? For a second, my brain seized on the something else option. The idea that after kissing my forehead, Jacob's mouth could have drifted down to mine.

The idea that maybe, just maybe, Jacob wanted to kiss me properly.

But as I saw the way he was biting his lip now, the crease of his forehead, I wrestled my thoughts back into the PC range.

I couldn't handle it if things turned strange with Jacob on top of what was happening with Gran. I needed his friendship right now.

I had to do everything I could to make this less weird between us.

Jacob

In the week leading up to training camp, I tried to dial back the awkwardness between Austin and me, but it was difficult.

The problem wasn't Austin.

The problem was me.

Austin had obviously filed the whole incident into the things-Jacob-does-when-he's-comforting-someone category. Because he was his usual self, joking around about our LEGO challenges, making terrible vegetable puns.

But I couldn't help tensing up every time I interacted with him.

I was his boss. And I'd kissed him.

Okay, it had been a small kiss on the forehead, a non-sexual part of the body. And it had happened in the context of me comforting him. But I was very aware that in my life I'd kissed my daughters. I'd kissed Matilda and other women I'd dated. I'd kissed my mother.

That was the grand sum of people I'd kissed. And they were all female.

And why, after that one kiss, which barely qualified as a kiss, was I obsessing over it like I'd never obsessed over any kiss before? Replaying every detail. How his large blue eyes had shone with tears as he'd stared up at me. The smooth feeling of his skin under my lips. The way his breath had hitched, and the soft, shaky exhale of air as I pulled away.

I followed Austin's lead and tried to ignore it. But there was still a level of awkwardness I couldn't get past.

Like tonight. We'd just finished getting the girls to bed—Kea and Kaka had been away on a ski trip and learned a valuable lesson about planning—and we headed back into the lounge.

It was pouring outside, a southerly front whipping up the country, bringing the type of rain and wind that had weather forecasters issuing warnings to farmers. For me, though, the rain hammering on the roof just increased the potential coziness of the scene. Austin and me together in this little bubble of warmth and light. Yeah, I wasn't going to let my mind dwell on that.

Austin plopped down on the couch, and I deliberately sat on the chair, keeping a good distance between us. Space was a priority when it came to Austin and me at the moment. I turned the TV on to some random reality show but didn't pay any attention to it as I glanced at Austin.

“How's all the organizing for the move going?”

Surely his grandmother's move was a safe topic.

And I had an active interest. That night after I'd kissed him, I'd spent the evening in my room, distracting myself from what had happened by making lists of retirement villages that had dementia units. I'd then found all the reviews I could and come up with a top ten ranking of ones he should check out with his grandmother. When I'd handed him the list the next morning, his eyes had softened in a way that had immediately made me turn away from him.

Austin had spent all of his free time checking out the different options, until he'd found Bluehaven, which both he and his gran liked. Luckily they'd had an unexpected vacancy, and with the support of his grandmother's GP, Austin had managed to get her a priority slot. She was due to move in a few weeks.

Austin gnawed on his lip now. “The organizing is going okay. It's hard for her to downsize, and I've still got to book

moving trucks and sort those logistics. The quotes are horrendous.”

“You want some help with anything?”

“Nah, it’s okay, thanks.”

It had occurred to me that Austin wasn’t good at asking for help. Was it because of what had happened to him when he was a kid? Had he had to rely on himself too much? I thought about the skinny kid with the wild hair from his gran’s photo albums. A lump formed in my throat. Growing up, I’d had my sisters, my parents, my extended family, my father’s status, and my family’s comfortable middle-class lifestyle to insulate me from the harsh realities of the world. Austin had only ever had his gran.

“Seriously, I can help with the move. In fact, I’ll rope in some of the boys from the team, save you paying for movers. We’ll make short work of it.”

“You don’t need to do that.” Austin fidgeted with the edge of the couch cushion. “You’ve already done so much to help me.”

“It’s the least I can do,” I said. “Let me help, okay? Team management loves this kind of shit, when the team gets involved with the community.”

Austin’s gaze latched on to mine. “That would actually be amazing, thanks. I’d really appreciate it.”

Having all of his attention focused on me suddenly made me uncomfortable. I shifted in my seat and looked outside. The noise of the rain on the pergola was picking up. “I wish this bloody rain would stop.”

“We’ll have to call Noah soon and ask him to build us an ark.”

“An ark? That sounds like our next LEGO challenge to me,” I said.

Austin threw me a playful grin. “You’re on. Tomorrow you’re going down.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“How did Noah see the animals in the ark at night?” Austin asked.

“I’m almost scared to ask.”

“With flood lighting.” Austin flashed his usual smile—the one he produced when he knew he’d made a terrible, terrible joke. Something that felt a lot like affection washed through me.

“Do all mannies have such a horrendous sense of humor, or did we just get lucky with you?” I asked.

“You just got extremely lucky with me.”

We *had* gotten extremely lucky. I knew it. He was fantastic with the girls, funny but firm. They adored him. And he managed Matilda so well. She hadn’t complained once about him, which was a miracle, up there with Noah managing to fit two of every animal onto his ark. That was another reason I had to try to get things between Austin and me back to normal.

“The girls are going to love building arks tomorrow,” I said.

Austin just grinned at me. “Sure, let’s pretend we’re doing it for the girl’s sake.”

I chuckled. But my laughter was short-lived when I heard a dripping sound.

It was the sound of a homeowner’s nightmare.

“What’s that?”

Austin’s brow creased. “What’s what?”

“That dripping.”

I scrambled to turn off the television so I could hear properly.

The silence revealed the unmistakable sound of water dripping.

Austin and I both ran to the window. He fumbled to turn on the outside lighting, and we both cursed when we saw the water gushing off the edge of the guttering.

“Shit. I think the guttering by the patio is clogged,” he said.

“Then I better unclog it.”

Austin’s eyes widened. “You can’t go up on a ladder in this weather.”

“I’m going to have to. Otherwise it might start leaking down the internal walls.”

“I’ll hold the ladder for you.”

“There’s no point in both of us getting wet.”

But I could see from the look on his face that he wasn’t budging. Which was how we ended up both getting into jackets and venturing outside.

The night was feral. Torrential rain flew almost horizontally, drilling into my face like icy needles, numbing my skin. The wind snatched the jacket hood off my head as I made for the garage to retrieve the ladder, and the rain quickly saturated every bit of me that was exposed and trickled down my neck.

Austin was by my side, looking like just as much of a drowned rat as me. Together we carried the ladder and propped it against the side of the house as the wind and rain continued to rage.

“Be careful, Jacob.” There was not a trace of Austin’s usual humor in his voice. I started to climb the ladder, and he looked at me as if I were going off to war.

Of course I was going to be careful. New Zealand training camp was about to start. I couldn’t afford to get injured right now.

The aluminum rails were slippery as I climbed, so I focused on my footing.

When I reached the top, I ventured a quick look down. Austin was clutching the bottom of the ladder, his face turned up, eyes not leaving me.

I removed handfuls of old leaves and other gunk from the guttering, my fingers thick and numb from the cold. Once the blockage was removed, the water started to flow again.

Rain still hammered my face, but I edged backward down the ladder, slowly, carefully.

Almost there.

I relaxed too soon.

It was on the third to last rung that I slipped. One foot skittered out, and suddenly I was falling backward.

Fuck.

But hands caught me around my waist, breaking my fall. Austin was a slimmer guy than me, but I felt the strength in him as my body slammed into his. His arms wrapped around me, and for a second our bodies pressed up against each other. My knees had buckled slightly, so our faces were equal height. He was so close, his hair slicked to his skull, his face covered in water droplets. His lips were parted slightly and his warm breath skimmed my face, such a contrast to the cold night. His chest rose and fell rapidly. My own breath rushed out of me. I felt winded in a way that had nothing to do with my fall as I stared at his full lips. How easy would it be to lean forward and claim them with mine?

Shit, that was a dangerous thought to have.

“Thanks.” My voice felt as wobbly as my legs as I straightened up.

Austin released me, and I felt the absence of his touch immediately.

I turned and staggered back into the warmth of the house, Austin close behind.

“Holy hell, that was unpleasant,” he said. He pulled off his jacket to reveal his sweater, which was partially soaked through. We were both shivering.

“You go and have a shower to warm up,” I said.

“You can go first.”

For a crazy moment I imagined offering to shower together. Then I shook myself. “I’ll use Matilda’s shower.”

Austin’s teeth were chattering. “Okay.”

Walking through the master bedroom that Matilda and I used to share was weird.

After I’d moved my stuff into the spare room, Matilda had redecorated, painting everything a light pink and adding cushions to the bed. Even the master bathroom was more feminine than it had been when we’d shared it.

But I didn’t really care about the décor right now.

The warm water was bliss on my skin, slowly defrosting it.

As I started to warm up, I couldn’t help my mind slipping to thoughts of Austin, currently naked in the shower I normally used.

I could only too easily imagine him in there, soaping down his long, lean chest.

I replayed the feeling of having his arms around me. Which led to replaying what it had felt like to hug him properly, to brush my lips against his forehead. But my imagination didn’t stop at a replay. Instead, I imagined kissing down his neck, reaching that place where it curved into his shoulder. Kissing him there, having him squirm under my lips.

My hand found my cock, and shit, that felt good. But in my imagination, it wasn’t my hand that was stroking fast, it was Austin’s slender fingers wrapped around me as I claimed his mouth and kissed him properly.

And suddenly I was shuddering through my release.

I leaned against the side of the shower, panting, as the full realization of what I’d just done hit me.

I’d just jerked off to thoughts of my manny.

Oh, holy fuck.



New Zealand training camp.

For once I was glad to leave home.

Of course, Austin had no way to look inside my brain and see that I'd jerked off while thinking about him. But still, every time I looked at him, I couldn't help thinking about the Austin in my imagination and what we'd done together.

But even at training camp, I couldn't escape him. Because Austin messaged me like normal, and I messaged him back eagerly.

I *needed* these little snippets from Austin. I needed the photos he sent me of the girls playing, and the funny stories of things they'd said and done.

I found myself returning over and over to one particular photo in which he and the girls were holding up a poster they'd made saying *Good Luck, Daddy*. Just seeing my girls and Austin grinning out at me took me to my happy place. Which I needed, because training camp was intense this year.

I hated the press coverage that suggested I'd only made camp because of my famous last name and the fact my uncle was on the board of selectors. I was determined to prove everyone wrong.

I gave every training drill 110 percent, and whenever we had spare time, I hit the weight room, pushing my body hard.

I was rooming with Tyler Bannings, a young Greens player who came across as a cocky loudmouth at first but was actually decent once you got to know him. We had discovered a mutual love of the show *Vikings* and started binge-watching the latest season together the few times I'd hung out in our room.

On Wednesday afternoon we'd just had another intense tackling session, but I still wasn't satisfied, so I headed straight to the weight room afterwards.

I did a few reps on the leg press, but my thighs burned like they'd been lit on fire. It was a serious inferno where my quadriceps were the fuel.

I pulled up, puffing through the pain. Okay, maybe I was pushing myself too hard straight after a session. A bit of lightweight arm conditioning might be a better idea right now.

I'd just reached down to pick up a kettlebell when I felt the first ominous pull on my shoulder.

Pain shot down my arm as if I'd been branded with a red-hot poker.

Fuck.

Clutching it, I walked over to Jo, the head of the physio team.

“What have you done to yourself, Jacob?”

“Just a strain I think.”

Shit, I hoped that was all it was.

Jo examined my shoulder and ended up agreeing with my assessment.

“Ice it for half an hour at least. Let me know if it's still hurting after that.”

“Sure. Okay.”

Rather than hang out in the weight room and be reminded of all the training I couldn't do, I trudged back to my room, cursing my stupidity.

I couldn't believe I'd done this to myself.

My father was famous for playing half a game with a broken collarbone, while I'd just been laid low grabbing a kettlebell.

Just what I needed when I had to be at the top of my game.

The room was empty when I arrived back. I grabbed my phone, but I didn't have any new messages from Austin. Damn, I could have used some distraction right now.

I'd just propped myself up on my bed, putting the icepack on my shoulder, when Tyler emerged from the bathroom dressed only in a towel.

Oh good, at least he was someone to talk to. The words spilled out of my mouth. “You’d never believe it. After all the hard-core training I’ve been doing, I managed to strain a muscle leaning down to grab one of those kettlebells. Stupid, eh?”

I waited for Tyler to agree with me, or maybe mock me a little, but he stopped at the foot of my bed and looked at me with a weird expression.

“Um...listen, man...” he began.

I frowned. What was up with him? Tyler was normally a smooth operator, someone with a cheeky smile and a quick comeback. I’d never seen him look as freaked out as he did right now.

“What’s up?” I asked.

But he didn’t answer, just stood there, staring at me, a frown creasing his forehead. Okay, this was starting to veer down weird street.

“You want to go grab some food?” Tyler finally asked, sounding strung out.

“Physio said I needed to ice this for at least half an hour,” I replied. Whatever was up with him, I was going to act like things were normal.

I got to my feet, making sure I held the ice pack against my shoulder. “Listen, I’m going to take a leak. Then we can chill out and watch some more of that *Vikings* show if you want.”

I stumbled my way toward the bathroom, only to stop short when the door opened and Aiden Jones strolled out.

What the hell?

I blinked, making sure my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me. “Jonesy.”

“Hey, Jacob, how’s it going?” Aiden acted like his emerging from my hotel bathroom was an everyday occurrence.

“Ah yeah, I’m okay. Just did a number to on my shoulder in the weights room.”

“Make sure you follow Jo’s advice, or you don’t want to deal with the consequences.”

“Oh yeah, I’m definitely doing that.”

Aiden gave an eyebrow flick as he went past Tyler. “See you later, Bannings.”

Tyler didn’t reply.

What the hell? Why had Aiden been in our bathroom? And Tyler had come out wearing only a towel... Oh, holy shit.

I turned to stare at Tyler, just in case there was another explanation I was missing, but judging by the fact he was blushing to the roots of his hair, I was fairly sure I’d gotten the interpretation correct.

“Uh...so...” I felt like I should say something, but after I opened my mouth and started, I realized I had no idea what.

“Yeah, um...this didn’t happen, alright?” Tyler said.

“Shit no. I mean, I won’t say anything...”

Despite my assurance, Tyler still looked freaked out. I just stood there dumbly as he threw on some clothes and left.

The door shut after Tyler with a bang, leaving me trying to process what the hell had just happened.

Aiden Jones and Tyler Bannings. Together.

It blew my fucking mind.

I’d played with Aiden on the Marauders for years and had no clue he was gay. I mean, he’d always been a guy who’d kept himself buttoned up tight and slightly removed from the rest of the team. But then, he was one of the best rugby players in the world, nicknamed the Ice King, so you didn’t exactly expect warm fuzzies from him.

For the first time in years, his starting position in the New Zealand team was under threat. From none other than Tyler Bannings, the kid with the cheeky grin and oodles of talent.

The same guy he'd just been hooking up with.

Were they together? In a relationship? Or was it just a one-time thing? Two guys blowing off some steam at training camp?

My mind thumped through the implications.

There had never been an openly gay New Zealand rugby player. It was understandable. Professional rugby was tough enough, and it was a hyper-masculine environment. No one wanted to create extra problems for themselves.

My mind raced through what I could say to Tyler to reassure him when he came back.

Don't worry, Tyler. I'm definitely not going to out you to anyone.

In fact, maybe I should chat to you about the fact I accidentally kissed my manny and jerked off to thoughts about doing more with him. What do you think that means?

But saying those words to a teammate, even a teammate I'd caught hooking up with a guy, was never going to happen.

I was going to have to figure it out for myself.

Austin

“Make sure you don’t drop that,” Gran said to Ali Manu and Ethan Lewis as they picked up her couch.

Not being a rugby fan, I’m not sure if Gran fully appreciated that she had half the Marauders rugby team helping her move.

Instead, she was fussing around making sure they weren’t breaking anything.

“Don’t worry, Gwen. I’ve threatened them that if they drop anything, they’re paying for it,” Jacob said, sending me a small grin from where he was carefully loading all of Gran’s pot plants into a cardboard box.

“He seriously did,” Ethan puffed as they carried the couch past us. “And he warned us to be on our best behavior.”

“Sadly, this is Lewis’s version of his best behavior,” Ali said.

I snorted. Ethan Lewis was the Marauders backup halfback, and he came across as a livewire, constantly cracking jokes and looking for opportunities to pull pranks. But I noticed he’d been the one who put the kettle on to make Gran a cup of tea when she seemed flustered, and he’d sat at the table listening attentively when she launched into the long story about how the house had sold in only three days after going on the market.

Jacob went to lift up Gran’s rocking chair, a wooden beast that I knew weighed a ton.

“You need any help with that?” I asked.

His arm muscles strained as he lifted it by himself. “Nah, I’m all good.”

If we’d been at home, I would have insisted on helping so he didn’t re-injure his shoulder, but I didn’t want to challenge him in front of his teammates. With them, Jacob acted slightly...different. More macho, more of the stoic exterior I’d observed when I first met him. I felt weirdly shy around Rugby Jacob.

I was also incredibly grateful for his help. It wasn’t even a Jacob week, yet here he was helping Gran move.

The residents and staff at Bluehaven, Gran’s new retirement home, weren’t as oblivious to the star status of her moving crew. Moving everything into Gran’s new unit took twice as long as it should have as the Marauders players were constantly stopping to sign autographs and take selfies.

Jacob handled all the elderly people fussing around him with a gentle smile, which warmed me up from the inside, until I got close enough to hear that most of them were waxing lyrical about the highlights of his dad’s career, rather than his own.

Finally, we finished unloading the last items from the moving truck.

I eyed our helpers as I sidled up to Jacob. “Are you sure I can’t pay them for their time?”

Sending the Marauders players away with just a box of beer after all their hard work seemed wrong.

“Nah, I told you, this is the kind of community stuff the Marauders management laps up.”

“Yeah, but it’s like...four hours of their day they’ve given up.”

Jacob eyed me with amusement. “Don’t worry, Austin. They’re professional rugby players. None of them are on the poverty line.”

Oh yeah. I hadn't thought about the fact that most of them probably made the average New Zealand annual income every time they ran onto the field.

There were lots of backslaps for Jacob and a few for me too as his teammates left. Then Jacob and I headed back to Gran's empty house to pick up the stuff I couldn't bear to take to the Salvation Army.

I was quiet in Jacob's pickup truck. A few boxes were waiting for me on the kitchen bench. One large box was filled to the brim with cushions.

"That's a whole lot of cushions," Jacob commented.

"Gran went through a period of embroidering quotes onto cushions. I think it was her way of trying to pass on some important life lessons in my teenage years without actually lecturing me."

Jacob smiled at that, but his smile faded as he watched me. "You okay?"

I blew out a breath. "Yeah, I'm fine. I mean, it's just a house, right?"

Jacob continued to study me with a soft expression. "It's the house you grew up in. It's home."

"Yeah." I ran my hand along the faint pencil lines that lined the kitchen door frame. They showed my growth from a three-year-old right up to my height now.

I could see hesitation in every line of Jacob's body. He wanted to hug me, I could tell. And I wanted to be hugged.

But the memory of what had happened during our last hug sat between us.

He reached out instead, clapping a hand on my shoulder. The solid weight of it settled something inside me.

"Righto, let's get you home."

I picked up the box of cushions. The top cushion offered its advice in faded embroidery thread.

Home is where the heart is.



When I arrived home, the girls were already in bed, and Matilda was talking on her phone in the lounge.

She muffled it against her shoulder. “How did it go?”

“Good. She’s all settled at her new place.”

“That’s great. The team turn up to help?”

“Yeah, they were great.”

Matilda had found it amusing when she discovered that Jacob and the team were helping Gran move. She’d rolled her eyes at the time. “That’s so Jacob. He’s such a do-gooder.”

Now she gave me a caring smile. “I’m glad it went well.”

She turned her attention back to her phone, and I retreated to my room. I needed a shower after a day moving.

I already had a list of things I didn’t let myself think about in the shower. And I quickly included visions of how Jacob’s muscles had strained under his T-shirt today, how good his ass had looked in his jeans every time he bent down to pick up something.

My phone chimed as I came back to my bedroom, and my heart swelled. I was pretty sure it was Jacob checking I was okay. Maybe it was just part of his do-gooder routine, but I’d take it.

A smile was already spreading on my face as I grabbed my phone. It was a smile that abruptly vanished when I saw the name on my screen.

Brett.

I dropped the phone as if I’d been stung.

Brett. My former boss. Brett, who’s voice still echoed in my head with surprising viciousness. *You knew this was only a casual thing, right?*

Why the hell was Brett contacting me now? What did he have to say for himself?

I picked up my phone gingerly and read his message.

Hey.

That was it? The guy hadn't talked to me for eight months, and he led with that. Shit, he was a tool. And not a cool tool, like a Swiss Army knife that could do anything.

Brett was the human equivalent of an overpriced tool that you bought because it looked shiny and useful, only to discover you didn't need it after all.

My heart thudded, and I threw my phone down on my bed. It bounced over to the base of my pillow where it sat in disgrace.

It chimed again.

Hell. Curiosity killed the cat, and if I was a feline, I was definitely having my grave dug right now. Because I couldn't help retrieving my phone to see what Brett had written now.

I've been thinking about you.

Oh, well, that's nice, Brett. Eight months too late, but still nice to know I had finally crossed his mind.

Can I FaceTime you?"

Shit. No.

I didn't know if I had enough self-restraint not to accept an incoming call from Brett.

I almost sprained a finger replying to him. *I don't think that's a good idea.*

Come on, baby. Just because you left doesn't mean we can't stay in contact.

Baby. He knew how much I used to melt when he called me that. Stupid Previous Austin thought it meant that I mattered to him in some way.

Now I knew it was probably just his catchall for everyone he hooked up with, so he didn't have to remember names.

Another message arrived from him.

We could still have some fun over the phone.

I looked at the time. It was early morning in the UK. He'd probably woken up alone for once. And knowing the guy like I did, he'd woken up horny and I had crossed his mind for the first time in months.

Brett was a risk-taker, one of those guys who drove fast cars and did crazy daredevil things like skydive even when his contract with his club said he wasn't supposed to.

I'd wondered how much of hooking up with me had been part of that risk-taking, try anything once mentality.

But I couldn't deny that it had been intoxicating, having a guy like that want me.

I wasn't sure what Brett's deal was, whether he was fundamentally straight and just experimenting or truly bisexual or pan. It actually wasn't any of my business. What had happened with us was between two consenting adults, so did it need a label?

But despite that, I knew I had to shut down any hope on Brett's part of a long-distance virtual repeat.

Sorry, not interested.

Could I put it any clearer?

Another message came through.

You wouldn't believe the shit that Katie's pulled now.

I groaned. So it wasn't just about him getting his rocks off. He also wanted someone to complain about his ex-wife to.

Nothing between Brett and me had started until after the tabloids had exposed the affair Katie had been having with her gym instructor.

Brett had been devastated, and that had endeared him to me. Up until then I'd thought he was attractive and charming but a bit too cocky for my tastes. Seeing a more vulnerable, sensitive side of him during the breakup had made me like him a lot more.

Which was one of the reasons I'd shown incredibly bad judgment and fallen into bed with him when he'd propositioned me a month after he and Katie split up.

I tapped out a reply.

I'm sad for Felix and Ruby that things aren't good between you, but it's not my business anymore.

I remembered the exact moment when Brett's chaotic divorce had stopped being my business. The moment when I'd gone down to breakfast after a hot and heavy session with him to discover pictures of him on the front page of the tabloids locked in an embrace with a wannabe supermodel.

The git had had the audacity to be surprised when I stormed back up to his room to confront him.

"I didn't think you'd care. You knew this was only a casual thing, right?"

Hurt had stabbed in my chest, and I'd struggled to control my breathing. "Did this morning feel particularly casual to you?"

"Look, we've had a whole lot of fun together. It's been a blast. But I can't be with a guy long-term, you know that. The papers will eat me alive."

The knowledge that Brett had never seen me as anything other than a convenient fuckboy had been gutting at the time. And I knew I couldn't continue working for him, which meant I was out of a job.

And when, in a conversation with Gran, she told me the story about her friend Nancy's hip operation twice, suddenly going home to New Zealand had seemed like the best idea ever.

My phone beeped again.

What the hell? So typical of Brett not to accept that no meant no.

But this time it wasn't Brett. It was Jacob.

Hey, you doing okay? Thought this might make you smile.

It was a cartoon of two snowmen standing together in a field. One was saying to the other, *It all smells like carrots to me.*

I stared at the picture of the snowmen for a long time. And I thought of the honest answer I could've given Brett.

No Brett. I don't want to play with you over FaceTime, because I've moved on to crushing on my next boss.

Oh God.

That was what I was doing, right?

Crushing hard on Jacob, every interaction cementing my crush to the point where it was stronger than a nuclear bunker.

And Jacob was an infinitely nicer guy than Brett had ever been.

Which only meant he had the power to hurt me more.

Jacob

Our first test match of the season was in Auckland.

I knew I'd made the cut for the team by the skin of my teeth. Luckily the storm in the media about my place in the team had died down, mainly because it had been eclipsed by a bigger story—the selectors' decision to start Tyler Bannings ahead of Aiden Jones. Aiden had been the starter for New Zealand for the past four seasons, so his demotion was big news.

And I was probably one of the few people aware there was even more to the story than the media knew.

I had no idea whether what I'd walked in on at training camp was just a casual hookup or something more. But regardless, I knew that Tyler Bannings and Aiden Jones' relationship extended beyond that of competitors and teammates.

Which must make the fact Bannings was now starting ahead of him difficult for Jones.

I glanced at him as we headed to the bench after the national anthems and haka, but Aiden's expression remained impassive as Tyler kicked the ball to start the game.

It was a solid start, our backs doing their usual flashy thing and Bannings doing some awesome work that led to him breaking through the Australian defense and handing the ball off to Tuala who scored by the corner post.

Macca gave me a slap around the shoulders, and I reciprocated with a shoulder nudge. The other guys on the bench celebrated as if they'd been the ones out on the paddock.

This was the thing about New Zealand rugby. We might all be individuals who played for different teams for most of the year, but the team-first mentality was at the core of the culture. Which was a big reason why the New Zealand rugby team had the most successful record of all the sports teams in the world.

And we were looking likely to add to that record tonight if the play so far was anything to go by.

That was until Australia's number eight decided to do a highly illegal tackle, grabbing Bannings while he was going for a high ball, sending him spiraling headfirst into the ground.

All of us on the bench instantly rose to our feet, yelling at the ref. I craned my head, trying to get a glimpse past the circle of people who immediately surrounded Bannings. It looked like he wasn't moving.

The medical team ran a stretcher onto the field.

Fuck. That wasn't good.

I glanced over at Aiden, and his expression took my breath away. He looked as if he was ready to fight through every player on the field to reach Tyler. Zach was next to him, holding him back.

I guess that answered my question about whether what I'd stumbled across was just a hookup.

For the next few minutes, a hush enveloped the stadium as the medics loaded Tyler onto a stretcher and bundled him off the field.

Bloody hell. Losing our starting first-five wasn't great this early in the game. But it wasn't like we had a poor backup option. Aiden Jones was still one of the best players in the world.

The only problem was it looked like he was refusing to go on the field.

Murray, the assistant coach, was having a tense standoff with Aiden, who was yelling at him.

Shit. I felt for the guy. I really did. I was worried about Bannings, so I couldn't imagine how he felt. And now he was expected to go play a game of rugby like everything was normal.

"Uh, I think he needs to follow the ambulance to hospital," Zach said to Murray.

"You're telling me...him and Bannings..." Murray said.

"Yeah, it's like that," Zach confirmed.

I shot a look at the other guys on the bench, who were watching what was going on. The guys who'd figured it out had jaws dropped open, eyes wide, while there was only confusion stamped on the faces of those who hadn't pieced everything together yet.

Jo, the head physio, offered to drive Aiden, and suddenly Aiden was gone.

"What the fuck was that about?" Macca asked. "Where the hell is Jones going?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm guessing he's going to the hospital to be with Tyler."

Macca's eyes widened as he joined the crew of understanding. "Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Bannings and Jones?" Luca Grey said.

"Looks like it."

Expletives seemed to be the order of the day.

"Christ."

"Hope Bannings is okay."

"Think we should be praying for the whole team," Macca muttered as Connor jogged onto the field looking as if he could lose his lunch at any point.

It was understandable. He was our third-string player. The probability of him making the field would usually be low, unless Coach decided to give him the chance to stretch his legs in the dying minutes when our win was guaranteed. Now he had to play most of the game without any backup.

This was going to cost us.

And cost us it did.

I was subbed on at thirty minutes, way earlier than expected. But by that point I guess Coach felt he had to do anything he could to mix it up. We were getting slaughtered by the Australians. Our entire game plan had gone to shit, given we were missing such vital pieces in the middle.

The whistle for halftime felt like a reprieve. But it was only going to be a temporary one. We still had another forty minutes of game time to go.

We headed into the tunnel toward the changing rooms. Jansen spat out his mouthguard and said, “Where the hell is Jones?”

The guys who’d been on the field when Tyler was injured hadn’t witnessed Aiden’s conversation with Murray, so they were confused.

“He left,” I said.

“What the fuck? Why?”

I couldn’t see any point in lying. “He’s gone to hospital to be with Bannings.”

Jansen’s face scrunched up in confusion and then morphed into the now common expression of surprise. “Crap. You’re telling me him and Bannings are a thing?”

“Guess that would explain why he chose to leave,” I said.

It was a conversation that was playing out all over the dressing room. I could see the ripple of disbelief in the form of mouths dropping open and eyebrows shooting up.

But the reactions didn’t seem to be ones of disgust. Just surprise. Except for Graham McLeod, who was muttering to

Levi Reid and had a face that looked as if he'd eaten something sour.

Coach Wilson strode into the changing room, and we all fell silent. Coach was notorious for chewing us out when things weren't going well, and to say things weren't going great right now was like saying the Titanic sprang a small leak.

He eyeballed all of us.

“You boys need to get your heads out of your asses. I get that things haven't gone down the way we expected. But you're professional athletes, you're New Zealand rugby players, for God's sake. You can handle a little change to the game plan.”

“Any news on Bannings?” Tuala asked.

“He's in hospital being evaluated. From what I heard, he's regained consciousness.”

“Any news on Jones?” Graham called out.

Coach squinted at him. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

Graham had a smirk on his face. “Well, he's not here, is he? So I figured he must be injured too.”

“Jones is not playing tonight for personal reasons, which is fully within his rights. Besides, you're not thinking about who we're missing right now. This is the team we've got on the field tonight, and it's our job to make it work and represent our country to the best of our ability.”

Coach's words had some rallying effect, but not enough to stave off the inevitable.

It was an ugly loss, made worse because it was to Australia. Australia was New Zealand's big brother, twenty-five million people to New Zealand's five million, the country we constantly tried to keep up with.

Our overall record against them in sport wasn't great, but rugby was usually the one sport where we clawed back some dignity.

Not tonight though.

But there were bigger issues right now than just losing to Australia.

After the game, most of the team headed to the hospital. Tyler had been given the all clear but wasn't up to visitors. Aiden came out to talk to everyone, and Coach gave us a lecture about keeping the news in the team, which was undone approximately five minutes later when it became apparent that a video of Aiden yelling at Murray had found its way into the treasure trove of social media.

Shit. I really felt for Aiden and Tyler. The media hype surrounding this was going to dwarf anything they'd ever experienced.

There was nothing more to do then but catch the team bus back to the hotel.

Once I got there and climbed into bed, my roommate Luca Grey wanted to chat.

"Shit, big night," he said. "Jonesy and Bannings together, who'd have thought?"

"Yeah."

"It was going to happen sometime, right?"

"What was going to happen?"

"The first openly gay New Zealand rugby player."

"I guess."

"But who'd have thought it would be two of them at the same time. Especially those two. I always thought they couldn't stand each other."

"It looks like they can tolerate each other."

Luca snorted. Then his voice turned serious. "What do you reckon your dad would make of it all? I'm guessing those old-school players will find it difficult to get their heads around."

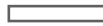
"Yeah, probably."

I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling as Luca's breathing evened out.

Six months ago, I would have followed the whole thing with interest, concerned about the fallout for Tyler and Aiden, but it wouldn't have felt quite so...personal.

Because I couldn't help the question circulating in my head.

What did this mean for me?



Arriving home the next morning and having my heart leap when I saw Austin wasn't what my confused brain needed right now.

He was outside in the backyard drawing with chalk on the concrete with the girls. He smiled through the window when he saw me, and my heart beat double time.

"Daddy!" The girls ran inside to greet me. Lily tackled me around the legs with more force than some of the Australian players last night. Austin followed them inside with a bright smile.

I concentrated on greeting the girls, but when they ran outside to continue their drawing, I turned to Austin.

He hesitated, his expression turning cautious. "So, it must have been an interesting last twenty-four hours for New Zealand rugby."

"Yeah, definitely." I ran my hand through my hair.

"How's the team handling it?"

"Okay, I guess. I just feel so bad for Tyler and Aiden. That it's come out in this way."

"It sucks when anyone is outed against their will." Austin shrugged. "But maybe in the long run they'll realize this is a good thing, that it's out in the open, rather than spending their lives hiding."

Anger rose inside me like lava in a volcano. “You have no idea what it’s like playing professional sport!” I said the words with far more venom than I’d intended.

Austin raised his palms, an image of contrition. “You’re right, Jacob. I’m sorry. I’ve got no idea what the two of them will have to face. I shouldn’t make assumptions or project my own opinions and experiences onto others.”

I was shaking now, a shiver that seemed to have overtaken my body. “You act like it’s so easy, being out. You’re telling me you’ve never run across homophobic jerks?”

“Of course I have. But the alternative, not being true to myself and who I am, would suck a whole lot more.”

I swallowed. Was that comment aimed at me? Was he still thinking about how I’d kissed him? Did he know how much I was running from myself?

But there was nothing in Austin’s face to make me suspect he had any type of agenda.

I blew out a breath. “How have the girls been?”

Austin accepted my blatant change of subject without even a blink. “Great. They’ve been having so much fun drawing with the chalk. If Michelangelo was alive, I think he’d be quaking in his boots.”

I chuckled. “I better go and admire their artwork then.”

“Good idea.”

As Austin and I walked outside, I flicked a glance at him.

Did he know? Did he have any comprehension of the swirling confusion inside me that grew every time I spent time with him?

Did he realize that every time he smiled at me, every time he laughed, a spark was lit inside me? And it had now reached the point where it was a burning inferno.

It was also reaching the point where denial no longer seemed a viable option.

I found my manny attractive. I had feelings for him.

What the hell did I do with this knowledge?



Aiden and Tyler held a press conference the next day confirming their relationship.

I'd watched the whole thing on the edge of my seat. When I checked out the press and social media coverage afterwards, ninety percent of it was positive. Attitudes had come a long way in this country, even in just the last few years.

But I didn't have too much time to dwell on it because I had a family dinner to attend.

My sister Grace and her husband, Darren, were there, along with Jen and Sam and their kids, so it was even more of a crazy house than usual with eight kids charging around.

Lily loved the chance to spend time with her cousins, but Eloise held back and required some urging from me to join in. But then Grace's daughter Stella took Eloise by the hand and led her off to show her my mother's strawberry patch, giving me a break from my shadow.

Unfortunately the kids scampering off saw the conversation in the living room turn to adult topics.

My mother had just carried in a platter of pre-dinner snacks when Darren turned to me with a snarky grin. "So, what's new in New Zealand rugby, Jacob?"

I gave him a hard look. "Nothing much."

He quirked an eyebrow, still smirking. "Oh really? Not much been happening?"

"It's a hard thing to get your head around, isn't it?" Mum piped up. "Two New Zealand rugby players in a... relationship."

"I just can't believe Aiden Jones is a, you know..." Darren finished the sentence with a limp-wristed hand gesture.

Fury surged in me. “Aiden Jones is the furthest guy in the country from having limp wrists. Pretty sure he could take you any day in an arm wrestle even with one hand behind his back.”

Darren continued to grin idiotically. “Better watch out, Jake. You’re a good-looking guy. He might line you up next.”

“Did you not listen to the press conference? He and Tyler are in a committed relationship!” I was aware I was breathing like a raging rhinoceros.

“Relax, I’m just kidding around.”

“Yeah, well, this kind of crap is the reason they had to hide their relationship in the first place.”

Darren’s eyebrows threatened to fly off his head. “Did you know about them?”

I swallowed. Hard. As the silence stretched where my denial should have been, my whole family turned and stared at me.

“I roomed with Tyler at training camp,” I muttered.

“Oh my God, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it wasn’t my information to share. Besides, does it really matter?” I asked. “What happens in their private lives should stay in their private lives.”

“Says the guy who sold his wedding photos to the highest bidder for the whole of New Zealand to see,” Darren said.

I wasn’t normally an advocate for violence, but I really wanted to clock the guy right now. I slid a glance at Grace, wondering how attached she was to Darren’s nose in that exact position.

As if she’d recognized my look of impending violence from our childhood, she put a hand on Darren’s arm and gave a reproofing squeeze.

“What do you think, Dad?” she asked.

My breath caught in my throat.

My father scratched the back of his neck. “Not really my business. Nothing like that happened when I was playing, but then that type of thing is more common now, isn’t it?”

“There are over a thousand men who’ve played rugby for New Zealand. There would have been other gay New Zealand rugby players before, it would have just been swept under the carpet,” Jen said.

“Might cause a problem in the team when you’re on tour, having two players involved like that.” Dad shrugged. “Wilson will handle it.”

My father’s words played through my head. Coach would handle the *problem* of two of his players being gay, being in love.

Nausea swamped my stomach.

“You want something to eat, Jacob?” Mum nudged the platter toward me.

“Nah, I’m not hungry right now,” I said.

Austin

Two weeks after Aiden Jones and Tyler Bannings' press conference, Jacob left to travel to the UK for a rugby tour.

I was almost relieved when he left.

Because there had been something in the way he'd looked at me sometimes, a mixture of tenderness and what seemed almost like heat, that had caused a seed of hope to sprout inside me.

Was I imagining it? Letting my imagination run wild, seeing what I wanted to see?

I'd thought it might be good to have some distance between us, to clear my head.

Instead, I just missed him.

Messaging him and FaceTiming him with the girls went some way toward filling the hole, but it never left me fully satisfied. Like when you'd had a snack, but what you really craved was a three-course meal.

Jacob FaceTimed the girls every night, and together we continued to tell the stories of Kea and Kaka.

By the time New Zealand was due to play Wales in Cardiff, it had reached the point where I decided to suffer through a whole rugby game just for a glimpse of him.

Because the UK was on the other side of the planet, the game started at 5.30am. Which was well before the time I was usually ready to face the world.

But I dragged myself out of bed, the sky still dark. I kept the lights off, so the TV was the only point of brightness in the house.

I was just being supportive of my boss, right? After all, I was spending lots of time reading lines with Matilda for her new role. Watching Jacob was the same kind of thing.

Although reading lines with Matilda definitely didn't give me the intense thrill I felt when the camera panned over the New Zealand rugby team as they did the haka and I saw Jacob in the second row, his face so fierce and focused. I found myself leaning forward, my breath catching every time the footage showed him.

My great-grandfather had been Maori, so it must have just been my Maori blood stirring at an emotional haka, the Maori war dance that the New Zealand rugby team did before every game.

I got even more choked up halfway through the second half when a huge roar rose from the crowd as Aiden Jones ran on to replace Tyler Bannings. The TV cameras panned around the ground and showed hundreds of rainbow flags waving proudly from all corners of the stadium.

Openly gay men playing rugby for New Zealand and being celebrated for it. It was beautiful to watch.

Jacob didn't come on until five minutes later. The commentators' voices rose with excitement as he ran on.

“And here comes Jacob Browne, son of the legendary Roger Browne, who captained New Zealand from 1994 until 2001. And wasn't that a golden era of New Zealand rugby, Anto?”

The other commentor piped up. “It sure was. Roger's biography is due to be released soon, and I know I'm going to be first in the queue to buy it.”

Unfortunately, Jacob didn't feature much once he was on the field. I was sure he was doing important stuff to help the team, but he didn't seem to be where the action was.

In the end, it was an easy win to New Zealand. I watched all the post-match coverage, hoping for another glimpse of Jacob, but they didn't talk to him.

I turned off the TV, feeling strangely unsatisfied, just as Matilda stumbled into the lounge, yawning.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked.

"I was just watching the rugby."

Matilda studied me with a curious expression. "I didn't realize you were such a rugby fan."

I shrugged, trying not to flush. "Sometimes I am. I was in the mood to watch some this morning."

I'd just dropped the girls off at kindergarten when my phone vibrated with an incoming call.

Jacob.

I pulled my car over by the beach, feeling like my insides were vibrating even more than my phone, and answered the call.

"Hey, are you out celebrating?"

"Nah, I'm back at the hotel now. Going for an early night. But I wanted to talk to you."

My heart swelled at his words, but I tried to keep my voice light and casual. "You needed my voice to put you to sleep, right?"

Jacob laughed a low chuckle. "Well, it does have that monotone drone quality."

"You've clearly never heard me sing. Because that is far more into screech territory."

"Don't tell me your singing is worse than your dancing?"

"It's a close call."

"Someday I look forward to you doing a song and dance routine."

“I’d recommend earplugs for that. And maybe a blindfold.”

Jacob laughed again, and I closed my eyes, enjoying that sound.

“You played well tonight,” I said when his laughter had subsided.

“You watched?” His words were cloaked in surprise.

“Yeah, I watched it. Got up early, deprived myself of some beauty sleep. I hope you appreciate it.”

“I appreciate it.” Jacob cleared his throat. “Did you see the reaction Aiden and Tyler got?”

“Yeah, it was amazing. There were so many rainbow flags in the crowd, it’s great to see.”

“Yeah.” There was so much loaded into that one word

Was that why Jacob had called? He wanted to discuss what he’d seen tonight?

“Has the team been handling it alright?” I asked.

“Yeah. I mean, Aiden and Tyler aren’t doing PDA or anything. There’s been a few jokes cracked, but all in good nature.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

I could hear Jacob’s breathing on the other end of the phone.

“You okay?” I asked gently.

“No, not really.” I heard him take a shaky breath. “The thing is...I’m fairly sure one of those colors in the rainbow flag applies to me.”

My breath left me.

The colors of the rainbow flag actually stood for sex, life, healing, sunlight, nature, magic/art, serenity, and spirit, but I didn’t correct Jacob now. Not when I could tell how much those words had cost him.

“Oh...okay,” I said.

“I think I’m bisexual.”

“Right.” I tried to keep my voice casual, not betray how my heart was racing at his admission. Oh holy God of all things rainbow. This was big. A whole blue whale bigger than big.

“You’re the first person I’ve ever said that to.” His voice sounded choked, panicky. “I thought it was something I could keep hidden forever. But watching Tyler and Aiden together...”

“Jacob, it’s fine. You don’t have to figure it out all at once. And it’s no one’s business but yours.”

“Did you always know you were gay?” he asked softly.

“Yeah. I mean, I told Gran when I was five that I was going to marry Prince Harry when I grew up, so obviously I had an inkling even back then.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad you managed to resist Prince Harry’s charm.”

“Yeah, it was difficult, all those times he tried to seduce me.”

Jacob laughed softly again. And I had a physical craving to touch him in that moment. I imagined him lying in bed in some nondescript hotel room, and I wished with all my heart I was there with him.

“You ever need to talk about it, you know I’m here, right?” I said.

“Yeah, I know. And that means a lot.”

I didn’t want to ask about what his admission meant for his and my...friendship. Whether he thought about me in that light. Whether, even if he did, anything could actually happen between us.

He was my boss, after all. This was a big stumbling block. Not insurmountable, as I’d discovered in the past, but I had a feeling Jacob wouldn’t be quite as dismissive of the ethical

issues around it as Brett had been. The silence stretched, and I felt the need to fill it.

“You’d never guess where I am right now,” I said.

“At dancing lessons?”

I laughed. “No. I just dropped the girls off at kindy, and now I’m parked by the beach just down from Cave Rock. It’s such a beautiful day. I might take the girls paddling later.”

“They’d love that.”

We chatted about the girls and what they’d been doing and then more about rugby and what had been happening on tour, but we didn’t talk any more about his revelation. I leaned my head against the car window and watched the beach start to fill up with dog walkers and joggers as I continued to talk to Jacob on the other side of the world. It wasn’t until I glanced at my watch that I realized how long we’d been talking.

“Oh shit. I’ve got to pick up the girls. And God, it must be so late for you now.”

“Yeah, I should probably get some sleep.”

“Well, good night,” I half-whispered.

“Thanks, Austin. For everything.”

“Anytime.”

I finished the call and stared out at the ocean.

Jacob was bisexual. He was interested in men romantically. Sexually.

The hope that had been simmering inside me flared up so intensely it was surprising I didn’t spontaneously combust and leave an Austin-sized scorch mark on the front seat of the car.

I really, really wanted my boss.

I groaned, slumping my head into my hands.

How the hell had I gotten myself in this position again?

But Jacob was nothing like Brett. Brett was a cocky asshole who charmed his way through life with a snake-oil-salesperson smile.

Jacob was a gentle giant. A guy who was strong and dependable but sometimes too stoic. A guy who adored his kids, who tried so, so hard at everything. A guy who went out of his way to help others and didn't expect anything in return.

Oh God. Anyone listening to my inner thoughts would tell me that what I felt for Jacob was way, way beyond the point of turning back.

But how could I do this to myself again?

Best case scenario, even if Jacob did turn out to be attracted to me and could get past the me working for him thing, where could it lead?

Jacob might have admitted to himself that he was bisexual, but there was still a whole lot of distance between that and admitting it to the rest of the world.

I'd been on this journey before. I knew all the route markers. Secret Street. Denial Drive. Heartbreak Highway.

But the problem was, if Jacob did want me like that, could I resist him?

Jacob

How was it possible that being on the other side of the planet from Austin made me want him more?

I would have thought that being away from his physical presence would dim my attraction to him. Instead, the distance only amplified it.

Maybe it was because we talked every day now, completely separate conversations to me FaceTiming the girls. And because we talked rather than FaceTimed, his voice was right in my ear. We weren't having normal manny/boss conversations, either. Hell, we weren't even having normal friend-level conversations.

We were talking at a level I'd never, ever talked to anyone before, about all kinds of random stuff. Having deep discussions about our childhood but then in the next breath making each other laugh.

I'd never been a big one for talking, but somehow Austin changed that. Maybe it was because I could talk to him about anything. I'd told him I was bisexual, which I could still hardly believe. But after the Cardiff game I'd had a desperate need to talk to someone, and Austin was the first person I'd thought of.

I'd been so sanctimonious when I'd thought of Matilda and Austin together, worried that Matilda's lack of common sense would mean she would fall for the manny without thinking through the consequences.

Well, the joke was well and truly on me now, wasn't it? I was the one who'd kissed him. I'd jerked off to thoughts about him. My heart pounded like a lovestruck fool every time my phone showed an incoming message or call from him.

It was the day before we were due to go home, and I was sitting in a hotel room with my half-packed bag. My roommate, Carlos, had gone to do some last-minute souvenir shopping, and I decided to use the opportunity to call Austin, even though I'd already FaceTimed the girls and it was now way past their bedtime.

"Hey, Jacob." Austin's greeting was bright and happy, and I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

"Hey." I cleared my throat. "Girls get off to sleep okay?" I don't know who I was fooling, pretending that was my reason for calling. The truth was I wanted to hear Austin's voice.

"Yeah, no issues. I had to explain to Lily how even though you're leaving the UK tomorrow, you won't be here for two days."

"It's quite a difficult concept to grasp."

"Yeah, she seemed to get it."

"She's a smart kid. It's in the genes," I joked.

"Must come from Matilda," he shot straight back.

"Oh, burn." I laughed, and he laughed too. I honestly could listen all day to the sound of Austin laughing.

"Oh hey, I meant to say earlier, I walked past the bookshop today and saw a big poster promoting your dad's biography. Have you read it?"

"Yeah, he gave me an advanced copy."

"Does it mention you at all?"

"Not really. There's one bit that talks about me and my sisters, but only briefly. It's mainly about his rugby career."

"I won't bother reading it then. I was only going to read it to find out things I could hassle you about."

I huffed out a laugh.

“Do you think your dad deliberately didn’t mention your family so he could keep that private?” Austin asked.

“I think it’s more that it’s about his playing career, and us kids weren’t a big part of his life when he was playing.”

“What do you mean, you weren’t a big part of his life?”

I ran my hands through my hair. “I mean, he was there, but he was always busy, you know. And he was never really involved in the day-to-day parenting.”

“He missed out then.”

“Yeah, he did. It’s probably a good thing. Whenever I did interact with him, I always got the feeling that I never quite measured up to what he expected from his son.”

Austin drew in a sharp breath. “Did he say that to you?”

“Nah, it was just the impression I got. I mean, I was good at rugby, but I was never the standout that he was. And although he never said anything, I know he hated how when I was a kid I used to cry when my sisters teased me.”

Fuck, saying those words was hard.

I both loved and hated my father, I realized now. I admired the crap out of him; he was the role model I’d always looked up to. But I felt trapped by his version of the world, the rules he lived by, the rules I had absorbed growing up as his son. Be a hard man. Show no pain.

Other former New Zealand rugby players had started to have conversations about mental health and being vulnerable. But that older generation of players had been forged in a different era.

“Oh God, Jacob,” Austin said, and I knew he’d heard the pain in my voice. There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. “I guess I never thought there was a positive side to not growing up with a dad, but I didn’t have any expectations, you know? Gran worried about me not having good male role models, but in some ways I think it was easier not feeling like I was letting anyone down.”

“Not all fathers are like mine though. I want to be a different type of father,” I said softly.

“You already are, Jacob.” Austin’s voice was equally soft. “Trust me, you already are.”

There was so much affection in his voice that I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to control my emotions.

Did Austin want me the same way I wanted him? Or was he simply being a nice guy? And if he did feel something toward me, what was I going to do about it? He worked for me.

And how could I possibly be in a relationship with a guy? It would require me coming out to the whole of New Zealand. Even worse, it would require coming out to my family. My chest constricted at the thought.

But nothing could change the fact that Austin was the person I thought about the most right now.

“I can’t wait to see you all,” I said.

“The girls are so excited. I’ve been trying to calm them down all day. God knows how I’m getting them to sleep tomorrow night.”

“And what about you?” I couldn’t believe I’d asked the question. Or that I was holding my breath for the answer. “Are you looking forward to seeing me?”

I heard a hitch in his breath. And he took a while to answer. When he did, his voice was husky. “Yeah, I can’t wait to see you too.”

Austin

I don't think I'd ever anticipated anything as much as I was looking forward to seeing Jacob again.

When I was a kid, the most exciting events on the calendar were my birthday and Christmas. I'd wake up on those mornings feeling as if I'd sucked on a million sherbets, my insides frothing and buzzing.

But even if I'd combined the excitement from every Christmas and birthday I'd ever had, it still wouldn't have come close to what was fizzing inside me right now.

Jacob was coming home today.

My boss who had realized he was bisexual. Whom I had an amazing connection with. But I wasn't letting my mind go to the place where possibilities swirled, endless and inviting.

I just really, really wanted to see him again.

Jacob was flying home midafternoon, and Lily and Eloise spent the day bouncing around too. When it was finally time to head to the airport, it was extra difficult to get them focused on the essentials like brushing their hair and putting on shoes.

I'd dressed in my best jeans and a blue button-down shirt, as if I was going out to a nice dinner rather than just the airport. But by the time I'd realized what I'd done, it was too late to muck around changing. I had a plane to meet.

For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me that there'd be other people meeting the same flight. All of the Marauders

players who were in the New Zealand team were also returning to Christchurch. When we arrived, there was a throng of people waiting at the arrivals gate, and the crowd was swelling by the second. TV camera crews were waiting there too. Damn. This was way more of a circus than I'd anticipated.

"Hold my hand," I instructed Lily and Eloise. But I'd only just clutched Lily's hand securely when suddenly she wrenched it from mine and darted away.

"Nan, Pop!" She collided with an older couple standing at the back of the waiting crowd. Fortunately they didn't seem to mind being accosted by an almost four-year-old.

My intellect was on point, so I connected the dots. A woman with the same eyes as Jacob, standing next to Roger Browne, the legendary New Zealand rugby player who even I knew on sight.

Jacob's parents.

My mouth went dry. I hadn't expected Jacob's family to be here. I ran a quick hand through my hair as I led Eloise forward so we could reclaim Lily.

When we reached them, I gave a hesitant smile. "Hi, how's it going?"

"You must be the manny," Jacob's mum said.

I stuck out my hand. "Austin."

"Hi, I'm Deb." Jacob's mum had a quick trigger smile. The opposite of his father, whose expression was cautious as he shook my hand with a grip so strong I was surprised he hadn't been employed as a rock crusher in a quarry.

"Nice to meet you," he said. His large eyebrows didn't unfold as he squinted at me like I was some curiosity he couldn't figure out.

Deb fussed over Eloise before straightening up and addressing me. "Are the girls excited to see Jacob?"

"Oh, I think what we've got here is beyond excitement." I conveniently didn't mention that I was struggling with similar

feelings.

Luckily, there wasn't too much time for small talk as players started emerging out of the gate, each pushing a trolley of luggage.

Heart thudding, I spotted Jacob among the other hulking players dressed smartly in their traveling suits. The girls appeared to be equally gifted at spotting Jacob, because suddenly they dashed toward him.

“Daddy!”

Jacob crouched down the moment he saw the girls, and they ran into his outstretched arms in what could have been a Hallmark movie moment or maybe part of the starting montage of *Love Actually*. The smile on his face as he hugged his girls was one for the record books.

I laughed, because seeing Jacob again, seeing him so happy and the girls so happy, I couldn't contain the happiness inside me, and so it bubbled out in laughter.

Jacob looked up at the sound, and his eyes met mine.

The smile lines around his eyes deepened even more.

And I found myself propelled forward by some force I couldn't control, a desperate need to be closer to him.

“Welcome home.” Had words ever felt so inadequate for everything I wanted to say?

“I missed you guys all so much.” Jacob's gaze stayed snared with mine for a few heartbeats until Lily said something and he glanced back down at her.

My heartbeat continued to thump in my ears.

Deb approached him, and he straightened up so he could give her a hug. Then he gave his dad a hearty handshake.

There was suddenly an outburst of excitement in the crowd, and the TV crews were moving rapidly. I turned to see what had caused the commotion.

Aiden Jones and Tyler Bannings had emerged from the gate.

They'd barely made it a few steps into the arrivals area when the cameras were shoved into their faces.

Jacob's dad watched, his forehead creasing.

"That happen a lot on tour?" he asked Jacob.

"Pretty much. They got lots of attention everywhere."

Roger's frown didn't waver.

Speaking of attention, fans who'd been respectful of keeping a distance while families greeted returning players now pressed in, wanting autographs and selfies.

I stood back with the girls and watched Jacob interact with fans, happily drinking in the sight of him again. Jacob, with his broad shoulders and his slow-burn smile that was still set at full wattage, even as he talked to strangers.

Roger also attracted lots of attention, the crowd around him five deep as people queued up to meet a rugby legend. Even a handful of the other New Zealand rugby players came over to shake his hand.

Gradually the crowd started to thin, and Jacob looked at me. "We better get home."

With a few last backslaps from his teammates and good-byes to his parents, Jacob followed me out to the parking lot.

I'd come to the airport in his truck, but I suddenly realized that after a thirty-two-hour journey, he might not feel like driving.

"Do you want me to drive?" I offered.

"Sure." Jacob gave me another easy smile.

I felt strangely tongue-tied as we loaded his luggage into the back and I climbed into the driver's seat. Luckily Lily started a monologue about everything she'd been doing since Jacob left, despite the fact that she'd told him all of this over FaceTime.

Jacob, being Jacob, listened attentively. It was a forty-minute drive from Christchurch International Airport to home, and Lily managed to fill most of it with her chatter.

She paused for breath just as we exited the motorway, and Jacob looked at me. “You’re very quiet.”

I threw him a grin. “Not sure if I can get a word in edgeways.”

He smiled back, and it took all my willpower to wrench my gaze from him and pay attention to the road.

I wound up the hill to the house, and we pulled up in the garage.

Jacob got out, stretching his back as he looked through the garage window to the ocean. The girls raced inside, no doubt to grab stuff to show him.

“Good to be home?” I asked.

He turned from the view, his gaze finding mine. “It’s great to be home.”

My mouth went instantly dry from being the focus of Jacob’s attention.

I swallowed hard. God, I needed to get myself under control.

We headed inside, and Lily and Eloise appeared with armfuls of stuff. Jacob gushed over everything. Just when I’d thought it wasn’t possible to like him more, I had to listen to him admiring Eloise’s new yellow stripy headband with such enthusiasm you’d have thought he was examining the Sistine Chapel.

When he finally ran out of things to admire, he flicked me a glance. “I think I might have a shower.”

Yeah, that’s what my imagination needed, the idea of Jacob naked and soapy in a shower.

“Personal hygiene is always a good concept,” I said.

At least Jacob having a shower gave me some breathing room from him, a chance to wrestle my heart rate back under control.

It was a beautiful afternoon, so I took the girls outside and set up the sprinkler underneath the trampoline, which the girls

thought was the best invention since scented gel pens.

Jacob found us out there after his shower. I caught a waft of soap and his woody aftershave, and I had to resist a crazy urge to put my nose into that crook between his shoulder and neck and just breathe him in.

“You’re not too tired?” I asked instead.

“Nah, I slept pretty well on the flight from London to Dubai. I can sleep just about anywhere.”

“Daddy, Daddy, watch this!” Lily said, doing a handstand on the trampoline.

Jacob stood next to me, and we clapped as Lily and Eloise showed us all of their tricks.

Was it my imagination, or was Jacob standing closer to me than normal? He was in a T-shirt that hugged his upper arms. He shifted his weight, and suddenly one of those drool-worthy biceps lightly pressed against my skin.

Maybe the polite thing would have been to move away and open a slight gap between us.

But I didn’t. I remained standing there, our arms lightly touching. It was completely chaste yet sent tingling up my arms.

I swallowed.

Was Jacob pressing in slightly to prolong the contact? I wasn’t going to question it. Instead, I did the same. We stayed in that position, arms brushing against each other, until Lily and Eloise emerged shivering from the trampoline and Jacob and I hustled them into towels to get dry.

The theme continued as Jacob helped me cook dinner. We seemed to find ways to touch each other as we maneuvered around the kitchen.

As he came past me to grab the chicken out of the oven, his hand rested against my waist for a moment, creating goose bumps on my skin.

I struggled to keep my breathing even. It felt as if my whole body had fully embraced my immense crush on Jacob and was taking every opportunity to remind me of it.

“Daddy,” Lily began as I finished dishing up the food onto everyone’s plates.

“Yes, Lily?”

“What’s orange and sounds like a parrot?”

Jacob frowned. “What?”

“A carrot!”

Jacob laughed loudly.

“I think I know where that joke came from,” he said, looking at me with such...affection that for a few seconds I forgot about the essential life requirement of breathing.

My hand shook slightly as I brought a forkful of mashed potatoes to my mouth. God, I needed to get myself under control.

When we’d finished dinner, I stood quickly and started clearing away the plates.

“Daddy can put you to bed tonight while I do the dishes,” I said to the girls in a voice that brooked no argument.

Lily stuck out her lower lip. “What about a story?”

“We’ll start the adventures of Kea and Kaka again tomorrow night. But I bet Dad’s missed putting you to bed.”

Actually, I didn’t think I could handle being in a small bedroom with Jacob right now, with this tension that was building and building between us.

The kitchen seemed a much safer zone.

As I loaded the dishwasher, I took deep breaths to calm myself down. But the hope pounding inside me was almost unbearable.

Ten minutes ticked into twenty, and Jacob still hadn’t come back.

I tried to concentrate on the dishes, running soapy, foaming water to wash the last of the pots that couldn't fit in the dishwasher.

Were the girls hard to settle, or was he watching them fall asleep? I'd done that a few times. There was something peaceful about watching a young child drift off to sleep, their eyelids starting to blink rapidly as dreams claimed them.

Suddenly I heard a noise. I looked up to see Jacob carefully shutting the door to the hallway behind him.

"The girls get to sleep okay?" I asked. God, my voice sounded strung out. The tension that had been building inside me all day was playing havoc with my vocal cords.

I continued scrubbing at the pot so I could avoid looking at him.

"Austin." Just hearing my name in his deep, soft voice, caused a shiver to go down my spine.

I slowly put down the cloth and dried my hands before turning to face him, leaning my back up against the counter for support.

"Austin..." he said again.

"Yeah?" The word came out as a breathy whisper. Because my heart couldn't handle the way Jacob was looking at me right now. With a kind of intensity that couldn't be faked.

"I'm not imagining this, am I?" There was a vulnerability on his face that caused my breath to leave me. And I couldn't lie to him.

"No." My voice was hoarse. "No, you're not imagining it."

He crossed the distance between us, each step deliberate, his gaze not leaving mine.

My heart thudded in my ears, an incessant pounding.

Then he was right in front of me, reaching for me with those solid arms, and it was the most natural thing in the world to lean into his embrace, to tilt my head toward him, for his mouth to find mine.

Oh my God, this kiss.

In this kiss was all the times we'd laughed together, confided secrets over the phone, LEGO wars and vegetable puns and making up stories, his support for me with Gran, my support to him in return.

It started out sweet and gentle, one of his hands coming up to cup the side of my face. It almost made my knees dissolve; Jacob Browne, the big hulking rugby player, kissing me like I was something precious.

My hand came up to his side at the point where it narrowed down to his waist. I slipped my other hand under his T-shirt, stroking the muscles in his broad back.

Our noses brushed up against each other, and I opened my mouth under his because finding out what Jacob tasted like suddenly seemed like the most important thing in the world.

But when our tongues touched, the gentleness of the kiss dissolved in an instant, and it turned hot and full of intent. I moaned, and Jacob seemed to chase the sound, his kiss becoming more forceful. I clung to him, swept away by the sensation of his warm lips, the taste of him, the feel of his strong arms around me.

He finally wrenched his lips away, panting.

"Are you okay?" I asked. Because nothing was more important than making sure Jacob didn't regret this kiss. I didn't think my heart could handle it if he regretted it.

"I'm more than okay." His voice was gravelly.

I tugged him to me again, but he hesitated before our lips met.

"If I kiss you again, I don't think I'm going to be able to stop at just kissing." His words were gentle puffs against my skin.

My breath whooshed out of me. "Oh, I'm totally on board with that idea."

"Are you sure?"

All the reasons why this was a bad idea briefly paraded through my mind. But they were pushed out by the one core truth.

I had never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Jacob.

“I’m sure.” I grabbed him and pulled him into another kiss. It was blistering from the start this time, our need coming out in the desperate way our tongues slid together. Jacob kissed me like he wanted to consume me, and I was pretty sure I was kissing him with the same intensity. I rocked up against him so he could be in no doubt how into this I was. And feeling him hard against me almost blew my mind. Holy hell.

He pulled back, huffing, his lips red and wet.

“Bed?” he suggested.

“My place or yours?” I asked.

Jacob laughed, and the sound was like an aphrodisiac, filling me with such need and want that I thought I’d explode.

“Yours,” he said, and tugged me toward the stairs.

I dashed away from him. “Race you to my room.”

Jacob caught up to me at the top of the stairs.

“Fuck, I’ve never tried to run with a hard-on before. It’s surprisingly painful.”

“Important life lesson learned.”

His laughter faded as we stepped into my room.

His fingers fumbled frantically with the buttons on my shirt, and I was just as frantic, yanking at his T-shirt, lifting the hem up to speed up the process.

He shucked off his T-shirt, and oh God, Jacob’s chest. It was as mouth-watering as I’d imagined, with a scattering of dark hair across his sculptured pecs leading down to his defined abs.

I traced the curve of his shoulders and arms that had tortured me so much, finally getting my fill of running my hands over his warm skin.

I couldn't believe I was here, doing this with Jacob. That Jacob was looking at me with such hungry eyes as he undid the last of my buttons and tugged my shirt off.

I reached for the buckle of his jeans, and his hand slid over mine to help me undo it. Then he pulled them down, giving me an eyeful of the large bulge tenting his boxers.

I drew in a shaky breath.

Holy hell.

This was really happening.

Jacob

This was the thing about having sex with someone you knew so well.

The gender might be different to what I was used to, but I knew Austin. I knew all his facial expressions. I knew what happiness and pleasure looked like on him.

I'd never had sex for the first time with someone I knew like Austin. And this felt like just an extension of knowing him, discovering how his breath hitched when I ran my fingers across his chest and down his stomach to the button of his pants.

I was about to have sex with a guy. I should have been freaking out.

But I wasn't.

My mind had been a swirling mess of confusion the whole way home, but the moment I'd heard Austin's laugh at the airport, I was struck with complete certainty.

I wanted him.

I wasn't certain about much in this life, but about that I was absolute.

The rest of the day had been an exercise in frustration. Being so close to him but not getting to touch him properly.

Now, as I tugged down his pants and he watched me, eyes glazed with lust yet so...trusting, it struck me what a privilege

this was. That Austin was letting me be with him like this, share this with him.

He stepped out of his pants and boxers and gave me a shy smile, and I couldn't help swooping in to kiss him. He groaned and tugged me toward the bed, and I went oh so willingly. We kissed heatedly, our naked bodies pressed against each other. His lean body with its hard planes and edges was so different to my previous bed partners. But I was crazily turned on as my hand stroked down his chest and across his stomach. I only hesitated when my hand bumped up against his cock.

I'd never touched another guy's cock before. But it was so easy to wrap my hand around his, to stroke that steel stiffness overlaid with velvet up and down.

Because this was Austin. And all I wanted to do was make Austin feel good.

I'd known the thought of him turned me on, but now my need ratcheted up to another level. How could stroking him, seeing his eyes going heavy-lidded with pleasure, cause my own cock to throb as if it was me being touched?

"God, Jacob," Austin whispered.

I leaned forward to claim his lips again. Kissing Austin felt as natural as breathing, the slide of our tongues together just serving to heighten my arousal.

Austin kissed me back just as desperately as his hand found my cock. I stroked him, sensing his need rising, and I was struck with an overwhelming urge to kiss down his neck and chest.

But I didn't stop there. I ventured lower, kissing down his stomach.

I felt his muscles tense under my lips.

"You don't have to..." Austin said.

I looked up at him. "I know. But I want to taste you. I want to know it's you I'm with."

Austin's eyes turned to molten liquid. "Shit, Jacob, you can't say stuff like that to me."

I didn't answer, just continued to kiss my way down his lean stomach to where his cock was straining up at full attention.

Okay, now I was here the idea was more intimidating. But hell, I'd been on the receiving end of enough blow jobs. Surely I could summon some level of competency. It wasn't like it was rocket science. Cock. Mouth. Suction and friction. It was an equation that even I couldn't completely screw up.

I delivered a light kiss to the head of his cock, and Austin hissed.

It spurred me on, and I took the top of his cock in my mouth, sliding my lips down.

Oh fuck. I'd been concentrating so hard on making Austin feel good, I hadn't thought about what this would do to me. But having a hard cock in my mouth triggered something inside me that I hadn't expected. It was so hot. My cock throbbed even harder as I ran my tongue over the head, a moan escaping my mouth as I felt him swell even more. I moved my mouth down the shaft a few times and was rewarded by Austin's hands going to my hair.

I picked up the pace, adding my hand to the mix so I could concentrate on giving lots of attention to the head.

Suddenly Austin's hands in my hair tightened.

"I'm going to..."

I pulled off. Yeah, I wasn't sure I was ready for that reality of having sex with a guy.

But it didn't matter, because Austin had tugged me up so he could kiss me. His kisses were hot and needy, and he had his hand wrapped around my cock, and mine was back on his, and suddenly he was stiffening and crying out as he came.

Shit. The lava pool of heat inside me, which I thought I had control of, suddenly surged at the sight of Austin coming, and I joined him in an incredibly intense orgasm.

Oh fuck. Wow.

As I came down from my orgasm high, I realized Austin had buried his head into my shoulder.

“Well, I don’t think we set any records for duration,” I said, stroking his arm. “But we can work on that.”

He laughed a shaky laugh, his head still nestled against my shoulder.

“Hey.” I stroked under his jaw then gently tilted his chin up. His blue eyes were so guileless, pupils blown out. “Aren’t I supposed to be the one freaking out?”

“Yeah, you are. And I can’t stand waiting for it. Because it’s going to tear me apart.”

I flinched at his honesty.

“I’m not scared of this, Austin.”

“You’re not?”

I tried to put it into words. “No. I mean, I guess I’m... scared of the wider implications of what this means, but being with you like this feels natural...right.”

He stretched up then, claiming my lips in a gentle kiss. Which led to us making out, long lingering kisses, exploring each other’s mouths. Eventually I wrenched mine away from his to kiss along his jawline, the feel of stubble unfamiliar under my lips. It led me to kissing down his neck. I sucked gently on the point above his collarbone, and he gave a deep moan, which caused my spent cock to give a hopeful twitch.

Then I worked my way back up the other side of his neck, trapping his thighs under mine, my cock hardening.

When I finally put my mouth back on his, my arousal was impossible to ignore. I felt Austin’s lips quirk into a smile under my lips.

He pulled away and met my gaze, the smirk still on his face. “Shit, really?”

“I am a professional athlete,” I said. “Recovery time is kind of my thing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of a chance to show off your recovery time.” He reached down and started to stroke my hardening cock with his hand, then ran a finger behind my balls to touch the sensitive skin there.

My breath hitched.

His eyes were hesitant. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. You don’t need to check in with me. I’ll let you know if I’m not into something.”

But Austin pulled his hands away.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m worried about freaking you out,” he whispered.

The serious look on his face had me pulling him to me, depositing a light kiss on his forehead. “Is gay sex that scary?” I asked. “I didn’t realize it was more frightening than heterosexual sex.”

“Well, I’ve never had heterosexual sex, so I can’t really judge. But the thought of that freaks me out, so I’m assuming the reverse could be true.”

My forehead creased. “The thought of sex with a woman freaks you out?”

He gave a bashful grin. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have the first idea of what to do with girl bits. At least with guys I know how all the machinery operates.”

I couldn’t help my snort of laughter. “I’d like to offer my feedback that you are definitely a master-level machine operator.”

His eyes sparkled. “Are we doing machinery puns now? This should be fun.”

“Shit, what have I started?”

He fell back on the pillow, laughing.

I used that opportunity to pounce on him, pinning his wrists under mine. His eyes went molten as I leaned down to claim his mouth.

He kissed me back with equal ferocity, a deep possessive kiss.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me if I want to reach your skill level.” I said the words against his skin, kissing my way down his neck.

I could feel his whole body shiver against mine. Fuck, I loved how responsive he was to my touch, my words.

I loved even more how, in bed, we were still us. Everything that had characterized our friendship up to this point was still here. There was now just...more.

“I think it’s my turn to deliver a productive output,” he said, and pushed me so I was lying on my back.

Oh fuck, yes.

Yes to Austin kissing down my body, pausing to suck lightly on my nipple, which seemed to have a direct line to my cock.

Yes to Austin taking me into his mouth, that wet heat immediately ratcheting my need up to higher levels than I thought possible.

But I’d never had a blow job like this before.

It wasn’t because Austin seemed determined to prove he deserved master-level status, taking me deep in his throat then working me over with his tongue.

It was seeing Austin’s blue eyes gazing up at me, half-hooded with lust. It was the fact that it was *Austin’s* lips wrapped around me, *Austin’s* tongue working me over.

That knowledge was enough to send me over the edge into another mind-blowing orgasm.

I lay on my back, panting.

“You really do have a comprehensive knowledge of the machinery,” I said when I’d finally recovered my breath.

He laughed as he came to settle on the pillow next to mine. I pulled him to me, and he settled his head on my chest with a contented sigh.

I held him close, drawing light swirling patterns on his skin with my fingers.

My mind swirled as well.

What happened now?

Austin

I woke up the next morning alone.

What time had Jacob left my bed? I remembered having his strong arms around me when I'd stirred earlier, which was the only thing that convinced me yesterday's events hadn't been a dream.

My steps were tentative as I walked down the stairs.

How awkward was this going to be? Was this when the dream turned into a nightmare?

Jacob had his back to me, an open box of Eloise's favorite cereal on the counter beside him.

"Good morning." God, it sounded like I had a wasp nest buried in my throat.

"Morning." Jacob didn't turn around.

Right. So that was how it was going to be. My stomach dived, and I concentrated on putting a slice of bread in the toaster.

Suddenly, I was aware that Jacob was next to me.

As I turned the toaster dial, he caught my hand, trailing his index finger gently along my wrist.

Who knew my wrist was an erotic zone? Apparently it was when Jacob touched it because there seemed to be a direct nerve pathway to my cock, causing it to give a happy twitch.

My breath hitched, and I met his gaze.

He gave me one of his unguarded smiles that caused deep wrinkles around his eyes. I couldn't help smiling back, and his smile grew even broader.

This wasn't awkward at all.

Hot, sexy, frustrating-as-hell-that-we-couldn't-touch-each-other-properly, but not awkward.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Never better." I was pretty sure my breathy whisper belonged on one of those daytime soap operas rather than in a kitchen at seven thirty in the morning.

"I don't want to go to kindy today," Lily announced as she walked in the room.

Jacob withdrew his hand from mine and turned to face her, folding his arms across his chest like a man braced for battle.

"Why not?"

"Because I have more important things to do."

I could see Jacob trying to hide his smile.

"Lily, you have to go to kindy. Your teachers are expecting you."

"How about after we pick you up from kindergarten we go to the playground," I suggested.

Lily's eyes narrowed. "The playground with the tunnel?"

I looked at Jacob.

"Okay," he said.

"Deal," Lily said triumphantly.

Jacob slid me a smile. "Did we just get played?" he asked in a low voice.

"Completely," I whispered back.

Unfortunately, Lily's commitment to her deal waned after breakfast when it was time to get dressed and brush her teeth.

Jacob got growly while I remained upbeat, reminding her of the promise of the playground and all the toys at kindy she

loved playing with.

Eventually we got her and Eloise bundled in the car. Jacob wanted to drive them, so I stayed at home cleaning up the remains of breakfast.

As I tidied, I couldn't stop my thoughts from churning. I knew when Jacob got back we'd have to have a conversation about what happened last night. But I didn't know what I should say.

Hooking up with your boss wasn't exactly ideal workplace convention.

Jacob wasn't exploiting me, I knew that. But if things between us ended, it would make it hard to work for him. Which meant in all likelihood I'd be out of a job.

I knew all too well how badly this could end.

My stomach joined my mind in churning.

I'd just finished up the dishes when I heard the noise of Jacob's car in the garage.

He came in whistling, and all of my reservations disappeared in an instant. Because this was Jacob. And I'd gotten to touch him last night. How awesome was that?

"Hey," he said.

"Drop-off go okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Lily headed straight to the playdough table. She hardly noticed when I left."

"You handled her so well this morning," I said.

"You did too. We'll have the good cop, bad cop routine down pat by the time they're teenagers."

I sucked in a breath. Because I wouldn't be here when Lily and Eloise were teenagers. They wouldn't need a manny then.

Unless...

But I wasn't even going to let my thoughts go down that line.

Jacob seemed to have realized what he'd said. He stopped abruptly by the end of the island counter, watching me with wary eyes.

"I can't wait to see the mohawk Lily comes home with," I said quickly to cover up the awkwardness. "Although I wouldn't be surprised if Eloise shaves off her hair as a protest for some animal cause."

"Thank you for that optimistic view of my daughters' future haircut choices," he said as he moved closer.

"You know I always aim to please."

Jacob had obviously decided the best way to stop me talking nonsense was to kiss me. I wasn't about to protest his methodology.

How could a kiss be so hot yet so sweet at the same time? Jacob's mouth on mine, firm yet gentle. I sank into the kiss and just floated on the sensations: the rasp of his stubble, the feel of his warm lips, the taste of his minty toothpaste and something deeper, something uniquely Jacob.

The kiss teetered on the point of escalating, and I felt him firming up against me. Reluctantly, I wrenched my mouth away.

"So..." I said. Because I knew we needed to talk, and as Jacob stepped back, I could see from his expression he knew that too.

Jacob bit his lip. "I'm not that great at talking about stuff," he began. "Words aren't really my thing."

"You underrate yourself," I said. "You are so much better than you give yourself credit for."

"I don't know if you're right about that." He huffed out a breath. "But we really should discuss this."

"I guess I do kind of need to know the parameters of this," I said reluctantly.

Jacob took another deep breath. "I know I'm your boss..."

"You're also my best friend," I interjected.

He gave a brief smile but then met my gaze directly. “Last night was incredible.”

“It really, really was,” I said softly.

“I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t really like you.” He swallowed. “And I really want this to continue. But I can’t make any promises because I’ve got a whole lot of stuff to figure out.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“And there’s the whole Matilda thing,” Jacob continued. “I really don’t want the girls to suffer if Matilda finds out about this and goes on the rampage.”

I scrunched my eyes closed, trying to prevent that thought from entering my head. Matilda on a rampage wouldn’t be pretty. “Yeah, I know.”

“And I know that’s not fair on you, and it’s not what you deserve, but I want to be honest about what I can actually offer you right now.”

I opened my eyes, staring down at the counter. There was a spot I’d missed when wiping it down.

What had I expected? I knew Jacob was just coming to terms with being bisexual. I knew the idea of a relationship with a guy was a hard one for him to grasp. It’s not like I expected him to leap out of the closet dressed in a rainbow tutu saying, “Surprise! I like men too! Oh, and by the way, me and the manny are a thing!”

And Matilda was a big factor, because her enthusiasm to find me a guy likely didn’t extend to me hooking up with her ex. His family was another consideration; I didn’t expect they’d go out of their way to throw us a party with champagne and caviar.

There was a minefield to navigate. But when it came to me and asking myself what I wanted, the answer was simple.

I wanted Jacob.

“I’d really like us to keep doing this,” I said. “I know it has to be on the down-low, and I’m okay with that.”

Jacob studied me, his eyes dark. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

I didn’t think it was possible to go back to just being Jacob’s employee right now. Which meant we either continued this in secret, or I had to quit. And that would mean leaving a job I loved and having to scramble to find another one so I could still pay for Gran’s care.

I think Jacob, too, grasped that reality, the fact that this was now irreversible, because a frown had overtaken his face.

The mood between us was somber. This conversation was a reminder that life was not all fun and games in the bedroom, that actions had consequences.

I hated seeing those creases on Jacob’s forehead. He took things too seriously at the best of times. I wanted nothing more than to smooth away those lines.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“I think you should dance with me.”

Jacob’s lips quirked up. “I think I’ve made my stance on dancing quite clear.”

“Come on, it’s just me and you. If you’re lucky, I’ll show you my sexy dance moves.”

“You have sexy dance moves?”

“Yup.”

He had a skeptical look on his face. “Are your sexy dance moves more adventurous than your normal dance moves? Because in that case, I might have to take out life insurance before we start.”

“Hey.” I mock pouted. But it had the desired effect. Jacob’s mood had definitely lightened.

“Come on.” I grabbed his hand and pulled him into the living room, getting out my phone to cue up a playlist.

Jacob watched me with an amused expression as Justin Timberlake started telling us about the feeling he had in his bones. “You always told me you’d get me to dance. It’s interesting to see how far you’d go to win.”

I pressed my body up against his. “You’re right, this whole thing has just been about me trying to prove you wrong. It’s been my master plan all along.”

He laughed down at me, and I stood on my tiptoes to steal a kiss. Then I stepped back and started to really move to the music. And to my surprise, after observing me for a few seconds laughing, Jacob started to dance too.

He wasn’t a bad dancer. He actually had some rhythm, which made one of us.

After dancing together for a few minutes, Jacob tugged me to him, wrapping his arms around me as if he was trying to get as close as possible. Although it was quite likely that he was trying to immobilize my arms so I couldn’t inflict any damage on him. I didn’t care. I was in Jacob’s arms.

His mouth found mine. Our kiss started out lazy but quickly became hot and steamy.

He withdrew, looking down with heated eyes. “That mouth of yours should come with a warning label.”

“That’s been said before, although I don’t think they meant it in this context.”

He laughed and pulled me to him, to that spot between his neck and shoulder that seemed perfectly designed for me, like it had been measured for my exact dimensions. We close danced together, his arms keeping me snug against him. I closed my eyes, resting my forehead on his shoulder, enjoying the feeling of being this close to him, trying not to think too hard about the future.

Did I deserve better than being Jacob’s dirty little secret?

Of course I did.

But this was all Jacob could offer at the moment, and I had to accept that.

And the reality was, I'd take Jacob in whatever way I could get him.

I was just going to have to work extra hard to protect my heart.

Jacob

It was two weeks since I'd arrived home from the UK. Because Matilda was filming her new show in Auckland, I was with the girls full-time at the moment.

Which meant Austin and I got to explore each other every night. And most mornings, too, because the girls were at kindergarten four mornings a week. Austin was supposed to have the time off to do whatever he wanted, but currently he wasn't spending much of that time outside his bedroom. Although I guess you could say that he was doing what he wanted. What we both wanted.

Sex with Austin continued to blow my mind. It was so much fun and insanely hot.

I'd never wanted someone so desperately before.

It was an exercise in self-control not to touch him when the girls were around. Not to plant a kiss on his forehead whenever he made one of his bad puns. Not to brush up against him or pull him into a hug.

So I had to get my fill of touching him when I had the chance.

He was nestled into me now as I trailed a finger lightly down his side, over his rib cage to where his chest began to narrow to his waist. Just a light skimming touch, more about connection than anything else.

“So, what's on your agenda today?” I asked.

“You mean, besides more of this?” Austin was drawing lazy circles on my chest with his hand. He appeared to have the same addiction to touching me as I had to him.

“Yeah, besides that.”

He shifted his head. “More birthday party preparations. Matilda’s given me a list of things she wants in the party bags, so I have to buy all that stuff. And I need to visit Gran and talk to the manager at Bluehaven.”

There was a worried look on his face that made me frown.

“Why do you have to talk to the manager?”

“When she called last night, she said she’s got some concerns she wants to talk about face-to-face.”

My frown deepened.

Austin had seemed a bit subdued when he’d come back into the living room after the phone call, but he hadn’t mentioned anything about his gran and soon had become engrossed in watching *LEGO Masters* with me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I figured it was my problem, not yours.”

It was something I’d noticed about Austin previously. He wasn’t big on talking things through or asking for help. But then, what right did I have to insist he share everything in his life with me?

This thing between us wasn’t clearly defined. Technically we were employer/employee, friends with benefits. But neither of those terms was right for what Austin was to me. I felt closer to him than I did to any other person. It felt like I shared everything in my head with him, which was big for me.

But until our relationship was openly acknowledged, until I could claim him loudly and proudly, did I have a right to be upset when he didn’t do the same in return?

“I’ll come with you if you want,” I said.

Austin’s breath hitched. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. I can just hang out with Gwen while you talk to the manager.”

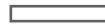
“I’m sure you’ve got better things to do with your time.”

“Austin.” I put my hand under his chin, tilting it up so I could look into his eyes. “Let me come, please.”

I didn’t know why it was so important to me. Maybe because it was one small way I could support Austin.

“Yeah, okay. I mean, if you want to.”

I deposited a soft kiss on his head. “I really want to.”



Bluehaven rest home was on the banks of a stream. I took in the beautifully landscaped lawns and elegant buildings with a frown. Shit. I hadn’t thought about it when we’d moved Gwen in, but how much of Austin’s salary was paying for this?

Yeah. I didn’t want to think about Austin’s salary and how I was paying the guy I was sleeping with.

Gwen bustled around making me a cup of tea, chatting about the weather. She seemed pretty normal until she tilted her head at me, squinting. “Do you know if Eve is coming?”

Eve?

“I’m not sure about Eve, but Austin will be here soon.”

Gwen’s face brightened. “Oh, we should go feed the ducks when he comes. Austin loves feeding the ducks.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

Austin returned a few minutes later. While Gwen was in the kitchen making him a cup of tea, I stepped closer to him. “Everything go okay with the manager?”

He rubbed his face. “Yeah, she’s just a bit concerned that Gran is going downhill faster than expected. She wanted to discuss the timing to move to the next level of care.”

“What’s the next level of care?”

“A smaller unit where they can monitor her comings and goings closely. They’ve found her walking around the grounds disorientated a few times, and they think she might be a wanderer as her disease progresses.”

“A wanderer?”

“You know, someone who wanders off. It sounds like some kind of superhero name, doesn’t it? Forget about the Avengers. Here come the Wanderers.” He snorted then stopped abruptly. “I can’t believe I’m laughing about this.”

“I think you have to laugh when you can. It’s the only way to stay sane.”

His shoulders slumped, and fuck, restraining myself from putting my arms around him was the hardest thing to do.

“Your gran wants to go feed the ducks,” I said instead. “She thought it was something you liked to do.”

Austin rummaged up a smile. “I would pretend that I’ve grown out of my duck feeding obsession, but I’d be lying.”

“There’s nothing wrong with simple pleasures.” I layered my voice with innuendo, trying to extend his smile.

Luckily it worked, and he threw me a wink. “As you know, I’m all about the simple pleasures.”

We were smiling at each other as Gwen bumbled in with Austin’s cup of tea.

Austin took one sip and wrinkled his nose. “Ah, Gran. I think you’ve mixed up the salt and sugar. I’ll just go fix it.”

After Austin had made himself another cup of tea and we’d salvaged some old bread, we headed out with Gwen to track down some ducks.

Halfway along the path to the stream, she stopped suddenly and stared at Austin. “Where’s Eve?” she asked. “I haven’t seen Eve for a while.”

Austin sucked in a sharp breath. He ducked his head, and I could see him struggling to compose himself.

“Eve’s not here at the moment, Gran,” he said finally.

“Who’s Eve?” I whispered to Austin.

“My mum.”

I’d suspected as much. Austin hardly ever talked about his mother, and I guessed he had complicated feelings toward her. Which was understandable.

He had a haunted look on his face now as we continued to walk.

Fuck it.

I looked around, but there was no one in the vicinity besides Gwen, so I reached out and grabbed Austin’s hand. He clutched mine as if it were a lifeline. I stroked my thumb over his, offering silent comfort.

“We should take the girls to feed the ducks sometime,” I said. “I think they’d really like that.”

“Lily will probably get angry when the ducks don’t follow her instructions, and Eloise will try to catch one as a pet,” Austin said.

I laughed, and some of the tension in Austin’s face lifted.

We reached the stream’s bank. A few ducks were paddling around, and they swarmed toward us, quacking enthusiastically.

Gwen stared at where our hands were joined and raised an eyebrow.

“I’d ask you what your intentions are with my grandson, but I’m pretty sure I don’t want to hear the answer.” She chuckled at her own words.

“Gran!” Austin admonished. He sent me a freaked-out look.

“My intentions are to give him the happiness he deserves,” I said quietly.

Austin looked even more freaked out at that.

But my words had been automatic, instinctive. Because isn’t that what I wanted deep down for Austin? Austin, who

was such a bright presence in my life.

He deserved all the happiness in the world.

But could I be the one to give it to him?



I was still mulling over that question two days later at the twins' fourth birthday party.

Matilda had jetted into town the day before and proceeded to change her mind about a lot of the stuff she and Austin had already planned for the party.

Austin handled the whole thing with his characteristic tactfulness, so he now stood at a folding table on the lawn, supervising all the kids making their own unicorn horn party hats. Glitter and glue were flying around, turning the grass into a sparkling version of itself.

Matilda looked stunning in a bare-backed sundress as she walked around serving drinks to the guests.

But I had eyes only for Austin. He was wearing a light blue Hawaiian shirt with red parrots on it, a glittery unicorn horn already secured in his curls.

I found myself drawn to him by a force stronger than gravity.

“Everything in control over here?” I asked.

A grin lit up Austin's face. “Everything's going great.” He nodded at the group of kids concentrating on making their unicorn horns. “We did have a dispute over the resource distribution of the rhinestones, but I think that's settled now.”

“I'm glad we're not about to witness any rhinestone-related violence.”

“So, are you going to make your hat?” he asked.

I looked at the table skeptically. “I'm not sure if a unicorn horn will enhance the look I'm going for.”

“Oh, come on. Father of the birthday girls gets a special hat. I’m thinking...sequins!” He thrust a bowl full of sequins at me.

Hiding a smile, I grabbed one of the plain party hats and started decorating it. As the father of two girls, I was well acquainted with glitter glue.

As I worked, I couldn’t help sneaking looks at Austin, who had moved down the table to where Theo, Ethan Lewis’s son, was sticking Superman stickers onto his unicorn horn. He patiently helped Theo plaster the entire horn with stickers.

“Do you know the difference between Superman and a fly?” Austin asked Theo conversationally.

Theo regarded him with a suspicious look. Which showed the kid had some brains. All of Austin’s jokes deserved that same level of suspicion.

“No,” Theo said.

“Superman can fly but a fly can’t superman.”

Theo’s deadpan expression didn’t flicker, while I almost buckled over laughing. The kid wandered off, clutching his Superman horn, and Austin flashed me a grin.

“Tough audience,” he said.

“Maybe you’re just used to your regular audience being easy.”

He bit his lip but couldn’t stop the smirk spreading across his face. “Maybe I am. I quite like easy.”

Warmth flooded through me. I picked up my hat and put it on my head, securing the elastic under my chin. “Do I make a good unicorn?”

He lowered his voice. “Definitely. You’re my special unicorn.” He scrunched his nose at me in a cute smile. I found myself taking an automatic step toward him, wanting to claim his mouth, to feel his smile under my lips.

But then my common sense and self-preservation kicked in, and my body juddered to a stop.

What the hell was I doing? I shouldn't be flirting with Austin like this. All my family was here. Plus Matilda. Granted, no one could overhear our conversation right now, but it was dangerous even having Austin in close vicinity because I ached to touch him.

I took a few steps back, wrenching my gaze away from him. I spotted Ethan, who was fastening the unicorn horn onto Theo's head.

"I'm going to talk to Ethan."

Austin's smile wilted around the edges. "Sure thing."

He turned his attention to two of my nieces who'd just arrived at the table, while I walked away trying not to look as though I was fleeing.

Shit. Had I hurt Austin with my abrupt departure? But he understood, right?

"Hey," I said as I reached Ethan. Theo had run off to join the kids on the bouncy castle.

"Great party." Ethan greeted me with a smile.

"Thanks."

He took a swig of his beer before he spoke again. "I'm trying to work up the nerve to talk to your dad. The other day I was watching some footage of that match against the Lions back in the 90s when they won the series, and fuck, that last ten minutes of the game was so hard-core."

"Yeah, it was an epic match."

"Does your dad get sick of people approaching him to talk about rugby though? Would he prefer to be left alone?"

I actually had no idea how my father felt about the constant barrage of people wanting to reflect on his glory days.

"I think he's okay with it. I'll introduce you if you like."

"That would be great."

My dad was standing in a group that included my Uncle Alfie, who used to coach New Zealand and was now one of

the New Zealand selectors.

Ethan squared his shoulders as we approached them.

“Hey, dad, Uncle Alfie, this is Ethan Lewis, our backup halfback for the Marauders.”

My father offered him his hand. “Nice to meet you. Your bullet pass should be in a textbook.”

Ethan’s smile was so wide I thought it might split his face. He shook Dad’s hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Roger.”

It was funny, because Ethan was the guy on the team always kidding around with a mischievous smile on his face, but even he wasn’t immune to my father’s presence. He did what I’d seen so many other guys do—try to mimic the hyper-masculine, staunch-guy persona that seemed to ooze naturally from my father’s pores.

Dad’s gaze drifted up to my head, his bushy brows tugging down.

Oh yeah, the hat. I suddenly felt ridiculous standing in this group of men wearing a glittering unicorn horn.

I yanked it off, some of the sequins flaking off in my hand. I stashed it in the back pocket of my jeans.

Matilda approached us then. Her unicorn horn was slightly lopsided.

“Does anyone want a cupcake?” she asked, offering out the plate.

I reached for one. It was the start of the off-season, so I didn’t have to watch my diet strictly at the moment. And if a guy couldn’t have a cupcake at his daughters’ birthday party, when could he?

“Great cupcakes,” Ethan said through a mouthful. He obviously enjoyed the off-season exemption too.

“Jacob and Austin made them,” Matilda said.

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you’re a cupcake maker, Jacob.”

“I only iced them.”

“I tell you, Roger, it’s a different world. Guys nowadays do stuff we wouldn’t have dreamed of doing,” Uncle Alfie said.

My father didn’t say anything. He just stared at the plate of cupcakes. I noticed he didn’t take one.

Suddenly, I had a vision of myself sharing with him exactly what had happened last night.

Yep, I iced the cupcakes with pink frosting. Then I went upstairs and had lots of gay sex with my kids’ manny. Isn’t that the kind of man you always wanted me to be, Dad? The son you expected?

I took a bite of my cupcake. The sugary sweetness was cloying on my tongue.

I couldn’t be the man Austin deserved me to be. I couldn’t be the man my father expected me to be.

So where did that leave me?



I kept my distance from Austin for the rest of the party because I didn’t trust myself to be around him and not arouse suspicion.

The girls had a cake each, a dragon for Eloise and a *Frozen* cake for Lily. Matilda and I carried them out, putting them on our low patio table.

Everyone sung happy birthday, and then Matilda and I both crouched down to help them blow the candles out.

“Daddy, where’s your horn?” Lily demanded to know. “You’ve got to have a unicorn horn.”

My horn was still smushed in my back pocket. I pulled it out, turning it over in my hand, more of the sequins flaking off.

Fuck it. What was the worst that could happen? I'd look stupid in a few photos. What did it matter if it made my girls happy?

I pulled the horn back on my head and then squeezed in closer beside Eloise and Lily.

"Smile," my mother said as she brandished her camera. I plastered a smile on my face, my eyes seeking out Austin, who stood at the back of the crowd with his phone out, recording it all.

After the cake cutting and present opening, our guests started to leave.

I went into the kitchen and found Matilda, along with Jen and Grace, putting cling film on the uneaten food.

Matilda gave me a tentative smile. "I can't believe it's been four years."

"What time were the girls born?" Jen asked.

"Just after four o'clock," Matilda said. "Eloise was born at two minutes past, and Lily five minutes after that."

Her smile had a sad tinge. I knew how she felt. This time four years ago we'd been holding our daughters for the first time.

I remembered looking down at Eloise in my arms, and something inside me had changed forever. The idea that my life wasn't just about me anymore, that I had another purpose other than looking after myself, had struck me hard. Perhaps, looking back on it, I should have felt that on my wedding day too.

"Do you want the girls to come to my place for a sleepover tonight?" Grace asked, looking between Matilda and me. "I'm coming into town tomorrow for the kids' swimming competition, so I could drop them back then."

Grace lived on a lifestyle block just outside Rangiora, half an hour north of the city.

Matilda's lips thinned into a straight line. "I'm flying back to Auckland tonight, so it's up to Jacob."

“You’re actually offering to deal with my daughters when they come off the party and sugar high?” I said skeptically.

“Sure. My kids will keep them occupied.”

“Uh...that would be great, thanks. The girls will love that.”

Lily and Eloise loved any chance to hang out with their older cousins, and they especially loved visiting all the animals at the lifestyle block.

“I didn’t realize you’re going straight back to Auckland,” Jen said to Matilda. “Are you filming tomorrow?”

“Yeah, it’s only two days, and then I’ll be back here for a week with the girls.” There was a defensive note in Matilda’s voice.

Jen continued to ask questions about Matilda’s new show. Matilda’s voice was bright as she responded, but she seemed a little fragile. Was it because she’d spent the whole day dealing with my family? My sisters and parents had treated her fine since we’d split, but there were always going to be awkward moments.

Or maybe she was upset that she had to fly back out straight away.

When it came time for her to say good-bye to the girls, her tears overflowed.

The girls were excited about spending the night at their cousins’, so they both impatiently wriggled out of Matilda’s arms and ran back to play, not looking at all concerned about the fact their mother was leaving.

Matilda straightened up, wiping her eyes and smudging her mascara. She looked lost.

Shit. I felt for her.

Before I could work out what to say, Austin approached her and gave her a hug. He whispered something, and she looked up at him, smiling through her tears.

Yep, I was watching my secret lover comfort my ex.

The fucked-up rating of this situation was extraordinarily high.



After Grace had bundled two excited four-year-olds into her people mover, Austin and I started the mammoth task of cleaning up.

Jen stayed to help, and I felt myself start to unwind as she, Austin, and I worked together. I hadn't realized until now how tense I'd been during the party. Austin did his usual thing, challenging me over who could fill our rubbish bags the fastest, and I found myself drawn into our usual banter.

He went inside to tidy up while I finished sorting the backyard. The day started to slide into night, and I was stacking the last of the chairs by the deck when the back door opened and Jen stepped out.

"I think that's about it," she said. "We've got your kitchen back to a state where you're not going to cry when you see it."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't often cry over the state of my kitchen. But I appreciate all your help."

"Not a problem."

I continued to stack the chairs. Jen just stood there, watching me.

I glanced up at her. "Don't you have your own home to go to?"

"They'll survive a few more minutes without me." She sat down at the edge of the deck as I folded up the last of the chairs.

"I really like Austin," Jen said.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, he's a good guy."

She gave me a piercing look. I remembered it from the time as a kid I'd been kicking a ball around inside and broken

her ballerina moneybox. I'd stashed the pieces at the bottom of the rubbish bin, but Jen had given me that same look, as if she had X-ray vision into my brain and could see all the secrets I was hiding.

"You know the stuff Darren said when Jones and Banning came out? You know he was just joking, right?"

My shoulders tensed. Why was she bringing this up?

"I know."

"Austin and Matilda seem to get on well."

"Yeah, they do."

"From the way Matilda was talking about him in the kitchen earlier, I think she's half in love with him."

"He's gay." The words came out more harshly than I'd intended.

"Yeah, I got that feeling," Jen said.

"What gave you that feeling?" I was almost scared to ask the question.

Jen was silent for a moment.

"The way he looks at you," she said finally.

Oh, holy hell.

"The thing is..." she continued, running her hand along the edge of the deck. "I've never seen you like this with anyone."

I looked at her sharply. "Like what?"

"Like you're the whole Jacob with him. You show him every side of yourself." She lowered her voice. "And I'm pretty sure he really likes every part of you. The same way you seem to like him."

I tipped my head back, looking at the sky. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"You worried about Matilda's reaction?"

“Yeah. And other stuff.”

Jen was silent for a minute before replying. “I get it, Jacob. I get that it’s hard as a rugby player, and it’s made even more difficult being Dad’s son. Hell, it was hard enough for us girls sometimes growing up as his child, but you’ve had all the extra expectation that comes from being his son, trying to follow in his footsteps.” She blew out a breath. “I sometimes get the feeling Dad’s just as trapped as you.”

“What do you mean, trapped?”

“Well, he’s supposed to be this hard man, right? Stoic, show no emotion. Which is completely screwed up, because who the hell wants to go through life showing no emotion? I’ll never forget when he was preparing to walk me down the aisle and I could see he was getting choked up. I pretended I didn’t notice, and he suppressed it because that’s what he’s supposed to do, right? He couldn’t show emotion even with me, his own daughter, on my wedding day.”

I’d never thought about it from my father’s perspective before. About whether he ever felt bound by the hard-man persona he’d created for himself.

Jen fixed her gaze on me. “If what I’m seeing is real, then you can’t let your concern about Dad’s or anyone else’s reaction stop you. You’ve got to be your own man.”

“I’m trying,” I said.

Austin

Okay, so I had to admit the kids had loved Matilda's last-minute idea to create unicorn horns/hats.

But getting the dried glue and glitter off my hands was a mission up there with sending people to Mars.

I was standing at the sink, trying to get the specks of glitter out from under my fingernails, when I felt a set of strong arms wrap around me and soft lips kiss the back of my neck, causing goose bumps to instantly rise.

"I wanted to touch you all day," Jacob said in a husky voice.

I managed to keep my voice even. "Well, I wouldn't want to deprive you of that experience."

He chuckled into my ear before kissing further down my neck. I moaned and suddenly Jacob swung me around and claimed my mouth in a hot possessive kiss that had me hardening instantly. My hands found their way into his hair, tugging him closer as our tongues slid up against each other deliciously.

I finally pulled back from the kiss, panting with want.

"Oh God, I got soap suds in your hair." I swiped at them but only succeeded in spreading them further.

"Totally worth it." He grinned at me.

"I'm just trying to get rid of all the glitter. It goes everywhere."

He gave me another soft kiss before drawing back. “Maybe we could turn it into a fun game where I have to hunt down all the glitter on your body.”

I batted my eyes at him. “You’re going to be my brave glitter hunter?”

Jacob laughed again. “If it means I get to be naked with you, then I’m happy to play whatever role you want me to.”

“Right now, the only role I want for you is naked and in my bed.”

“I can definitely do that.”

I don’t think anyone in history had run up stairs and removed clothes more enthusiastically than Jacob and I did just then.

We sank down onto the mattress, kissing and kissing. But when Jacob started kissing down my neck and onto my chest, I pulled back.

“Do you want to...I mean, I know we haven’t really talked about what you’re up for, and I know some guys don’t want... and it’s not like I’m not happy with what we’ve been doing...”

Jacob’s eyes heated. “Austin, are you asking me if I want to fuck?”

Just hearing him say the word sent a shiver of desire through me.

“Um...yeah. That’s what I’m asking.”

Jacob’s eyes didn’t leave mine. “If that’s what you want. Do you...uh...have a preference for which way round?”

Ah, this conversation was usually better had when you weren’t naked and horny, because logistics weren’t exactly a sexy mood enhancer.

But I loved the fact that Jacob didn’t automatically assume he’d be the one fucking me, despite my whole body currently fizzing with anticipation about that very concept.

“I can switch it up, but I prefer to bottom if I’m completely honest.”

“So, you want me to...ah...top?”

“Yep, definitely.”

My stomach fluttered at the fact this was Jacob’s first time doing this with a guy. But I didn’t know whether or not that meant it was his first time ever .

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

“Um...not this particular...target.”

I couldn’t help myself. I started to laugh.

After a moment, Jacob joined in. “I can’t believe I’m laughing about this,” he said ruefully.

“Sex is kind of funny when you think about it,” I said.

“Funny isn’t the mood I was aiming for.”

“Sometimes sex can be funny and hot at the same time,” I said.

“Well, I’ll just aim for the hot part.” He kissed me again, sweeping his tongue into my mouth like he was chasing the last of my laughter.

“You’ve definitely got the hot part mastered,” I panted when he pulled away.

Jacob’s neck was flushed. “Okay, so what do we need to do?”

I reached beside my bed to get the bottle of lube, drizzling it over my fingers. “If there is one motto you should live by when it comes to this, it’s that you can never have too much lube.”

His eyes heated as he watched me start to prep myself. “Can I do that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Jacob’s fingers were tentative as he stretched me, his forehead creased as if he were studying for a future exam. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah, it’s good. It just might take some time. It’s been a while.”

It was intoxicating, having Jacob so focused on me, our gazes locked together, his fingers pushing further and further inside me, still regarding me with that same intense look of concentration.

Eventually, I decided I'd had enough prep and reached for a condom to roll onto Jacob.

"How do you want to do this?" he asked.

"You just lie back like the master that you are," I said. "I'll do all the work."

"That sounds about right."

I was laughing as I straddled him. Then, ever so slowly, I lowered myself onto him.

His eyes didn't leave mine, his gaze dark with lust. "Oh fuck, that feels incredible."

I couldn't have agreed more.

His hand came up to grip my waist, and I experimented with moving up and down, and Jacob moaned. "Shit, you're going to kill me."

"That most definitely wasn't my aim." I leaned forward to claim his mouth, and we kissed, hot and messy. Then I straightened up and started to move again. It felt incredible, but even more incredible was looking down to see Jacob watching me so intently, like nothing mattered more than being in this moment with me.

He reached up to touch my cock, and I gave a groan as he stroked me.

"I'm not going to last long," he warned.

"Me neither if you keep that up."

I leaned backward slightly to adjust the angle, and suddenly I was a blathering idiot.

"Oh God, yes, right there, keep going, right there."

Jacob had one hand on my hip, continuing to make my whole body light up from the inside. I threw back my head and

groaned.

“Austin,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

I could feel him pulse inside me, and that was enough to send me flying over the edge of my own orgasm, waves of pleasure engulfing me.

I slumped forward, trying to catch my breath. Jacob’s hand was in my hair, smoothing my curls, before I gently pulled myself off, trying not to wince at the sudden feeling of emptiness. I lay down next to him, breathing heavily.

“That was amazing.” There was something approaching awe in his voice.

“Totally amazing.” I managed to find the energy to turn on my side so I could cuddle into him.

“It’s a bit messy though,” he said, looking down at his chest.

“Welcome to the world of gay penetrative sex.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Do I get a stamp on my passport or something?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. And there’s a welcome pack. It includes lots of wet wipes.”

He laughed again. And I reached for the tissues in my bedside cabinet and together Jacob and I cleaned up the mess between us.

When we’d finished, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. He ran a hand down my back, his fingers tracing a shivery path on my skin.

“We’re definitely going to be doing some more of that,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be able to twist my rubber arm.”

I yawned, closed my eyes, my head resting on Jacob’s chest. God, had I ever felt more secure than I did when I was pressed up against him like this? His naked body against mine, his warmth enveloping me.

I happily dozed off.

When I opened my eyes again, Jacob was still holding me, absentmindedly stroking my arm.

“Sorry.” I stretched. “I fell asleep on you.”

“I like watching you sleep,” he said.

The words were lovely, but when I glanced at his face, I felt a pulse of alarm.

Where before he’d been completely in the moment with me, now he seemed a million miles away.

I sat up slightly. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just thinking over everything that happened today.”

My stomach tightened at his furrowed brow. “I thought it was a great party. The girls definitely enjoyed themselves.”

“Yeah, it was good.” But Jacob’s frown didn’t fade.

“You seem...sad.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face. “Nah, not sad exactly. I just can’t help thinking back to when the girls were born. I made a mental promise that I would do everything I could to give them a good life.”

“Jacob, you’re an amazing dad. Seriously, I’ve never seen another guy who is as good with their kids as you are. And I’ve seen a lot of dads.”

His lips quirked. “There’s a chance you are slightly biased.”

I rubbed along his forearms. “I’m definitely biased about some things when it comes to you, but not about this.”

“I can’t help feeling like I failed them by not keeping my marriage together.” His voice was full of pain.

My breath hitched.

Shit. What could I say to that?

I’d already heard Matilda’s version of why they’d separated, but it wasn’t something Jacob and I had ever

discussed.

“It takes two people to work on a relationship, Jacob. It wasn’t only your job to keep it together.”

“No, but I could have tried harder. Only now...”

I held my breath.

“Only now...being with you...makes me realize that something was always missing...because it wasn’t like this.” He trailed his hands down my body. “It was never like this.”

Oh God.

Was my heart going to stay inside my chest?

Jacob tugged me closer and kissed my forehead, oblivious to the potential medical event going on inside me. I almost melted under his touch. Because touching me now wasn’t about either of us chasing an orgasm, it was pure affection.

“What about you?” he asked.

“What do you mean, what about me?”

Jacob’s gaze was steady on mine. “You know my relationship history. Hell, you live with my relationship history half of the time. But you’ve never talked about your previous relationships. Did you have a boyfriend while you were in London?”

My heart started to thud.

Was now the time to tell Jacob about Brett? He was being honest with me, and it felt awful not being completely honest back.

But how would he react knowing that I’d hooked up with my previous boss? Would it make him question what we had together? I couldn’t handle that.

Besides, I didn’t want to talk about Brett. I didn’t want to talk about what an idiot I’d been.

“I didn’t have a boyfriend. I had a casual hookup thing going for a while, but it ended before I came home.” My shoulders stiffened as I waited for him to ask more, but instead

he just shifted so my head could rest on his chest. I lay there listening to the steady sound of his heartbeat as my mind churned. Normally being in Jacob's arms gave me a feeling of complete peace, but not right now.

Thinking about Brett had left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Because it reminded me I'd been here before. That was the stupidest thing. Once again I'd fallen for my boss, a guy not prepared to be in an open relationship with me. Talk about repeating the same patterns of behavior!

But this time it was worse. Compared to what I felt for Jacob, what I'd felt for Brett was tiny. Microscopic. Minuscule.

I'd fallen for Brett's quick smile and charm and good looks, and had been lured into bed with him for a good time.

Jacob was my best friend and the best person I knew. He was someone I had fun with but could also rely on for serious stuff if necessary.

The worst thing was, I had the feeling there was only one word that could truly describe my feelings for Jacob right now. I pushed it away, refusing to allow it entrance into my brain.

But even having that idea hovering on the edge of my consciousness caused a pit in my stomach to grow as I realized how invested I was in this. How much I was already relying on Jacob to support me, to make me happy. I didn't want to rely on Jacob, because what happened when things ended between us?

After all, the definition of insanity was to do the same thing and expect a different result.

Jacob

Wednesday night, and I was in the apartment Matilda and I had bought after we separated, the place where we spent our weeks when we weren't at the house.

It was modern and soulless, but usually I didn't mind spending time here.

Tonight it felt claustrophobic as hell. Like the walls were closing in on me.

It just felt so wrong being away from Austin and the girls.

But Matilda was home for a week, and given she'd been away so much, I couldn't exactly begrudge her the time with her daughters.

I mucked around the apartment, trying to find something to distract me. But cooking dinner without Austin beside me making terrible puns felt wrong. Watching *LEGO Masters* without Austin seemed wrong too. Watching *any* TV shows without him on the couch next to me wasn't quite right.

The other night when we'd watched TV together, we'd been mindful of not getting too close in case one of the girls stumbled out, so we'd limited our contact to holding hands. But somehow, having Austin's hand in mine, his thumb stroking gently over my palm, turned me on more than some of the intense foreplay I'd had with previous partners.

What was it about Austin that made my heart soar and sore at the same time? Soar because being with him was so much fun and made me happier than anything else. Sore because I

couldn't easily see a way forward for us, a future that didn't involve conflict and upheaval.

I didn't want to bombard him with messages or call him now because I knew he would probably be with Matilda, and I didn't want to make her suspicious about who was messaging him.

How was I going to make it through the week?

I could drop by and visit, sure. But even if we waited until Matilda was out, it was still too risky to do anything.

Maybe Austin could get away for an evening and come here? But he'd have to lie to Matilda, and I didn't want to put him in that position.

Fuck. I'd heard people talk about how affairs were sexy because of all the excitement of sneaking around and the danger of being caught, but there was nothing remotely fun or sexy about this right now.

It just sucked.

My phone beeped, and hope surged through me. Maybe Matilda had gone out or gone to bed early?

But the message wasn't from Austin. Instead, it was Aiden Jones.

My eyebrows shot up. I'd talked briefly to Jones last week at the end-of-season barbecue Coach Wilson had hosted, but besides invites he'd put on the Marauders WhatsApp group to watch NBA games, I'd never received a message from the guy.

I clicked into it.

A few of us are going deep sea fishing on Wednesday. You keen?

Fishing. I could do some fishing.

I messaged back. *Sounds great. I'm keen.*

At least it would be a distraction, something to do besides my off-season gym sessions to fill the time until I got to see

Austin again. And a day out on the ocean would be good for me. Hopefully all of that sea air would clear my head.



The boat that Aiden had hired was a large aluminum one, big enough to fit Zach, Ethan, Reuban, Tyler, and me. There was a roomy cabin, plus space to fish off the front and back.

We launched from Akaroa on Banks Peninsula, heading out toward the harbor mouth, the rolling green hills providing the backdrop with alternating sandy bays and sheer cliffs studding the coastline. As we skimmed across the water, the breeze slammed into my face, the salty tang invading my nostrils. Zach did the steering while Aiden watched the GPS. Eventually, on Aiden's signal, Zach cut the engine.

"This is supposed to be a good spot," Aiden said.

Like most New Zealand kids, I'd done a bit of fishing growing up, mainly off wharfs, although I'd been sea fishing a few times in the Marlborough Sounds.

Aiden seemed to know what he was doing, cutting up bait for everyone, the pungent smell of squid spreading around the boat as we baited our hooks and then cast our lines overboard. I let my line spool out until I felt the drag of the sinker hitting the bottom.

After a few minutes, Aiden asked, "Anything biting?"

"Nope."

"Maybe we need some berley to encourage them," he mused.

"We could always throw Ethan overboard and see what he attracts," Tyler suggested with a grin.

"Hey, if anyone's going to be shark bait, it should be the Greens player," Ethan countered.

"Nah, I quite like having him around," Aiden said.

Tyler flashed Aiden a quick grin, and Ethan rolled his eyes. He tilted his head back to the sun, sliding his sunglasses on. “There’s only one thing that would make this better, and that’s some beer.”

Aiden set his rod into the rod holder and disappeared into the cabin.

He came back carrying a cooler, which he opened to reveal a stash of Heinekens. “One step ahead of you, Lewis,” he said.

“I can see why you put up with him now,” Ethan said to Tyler as Aiden passed around bottles of beer.

“Yeah, he’s good at keeping me hydrated.”

“Dude! Too much information.”

Tyler just laughed.

Aiden glanced at me. “I’m going to move to the front, see if the fish are biting there. You want to come?”

“Sure.”

My forehead wrinkled in confusion as I wound in my line. Why had Aiden singled me out? I stood up, and carrying my rod in one hand, beer in the other, I carefully edged around the cabin to the smaller deck at the front.

Aiden and I were both quiet as we cast our rods out over the side.

“Everything all good with you?” Aiden asked after a few minutes. Somehow, the way he said it was loaded with extra meaning. My heart beat a bit faster.

“Yup. All good.” I focused on reeling my line in a bit, fiddling with the reel.

Aiden hesitated, then spoke again. “It was good to meet your manny at Wilson’s barbecue. Seems like a good guy.”

Oh holy hell, he did know. How the fuck had he worked it out? Did I have a beacon over my head that gay guys could detect, announcing that I’d been having gay sex? Because fuck, I didn’t think I’d done anything at the barbecue that would make anyone suspect.

“Yeah, he’s a good guy.” My voice sounded choked. Then I decided to grow a pair. “He’s the best guy I know actually.”

Aiden nodded but didn’t say anything more.

The silence extended as I stared out at the sea. There was a slight swell that jostled us gently from side to side.

When I got the courage to look over at him, Aiden was gazing out toward the cliffs. “It’s peaceful out here,” he said. “I haven’t done much fishing since I was a kid. It was something I did with my old man.”

Shit. I remembered having heard about Aiden’s dad. How he’d died in a fishing accident. Yet, here was Aiden, on a boat.

“Tyler’s the one who pushed me to go fishing again,” he said, as though he’d sensed my line of thought. “But it’s good to be back out here. Reminds me of the good times we had together. Makes me feel closer to him, if that makes sense.”

“Yeah, that makes total sense.”

This was a longer conversation than I could remember ever having with Aiden. Definitely a deeper conversation than we’d had before.

A question burned in my mind, and I hesitated, but finally I couldn’t bear not asking him.

“Do you think your dad would’ve been okay with...you know?” I gestured toward the back of the boat, where Tyler was laughing with Ethan over something.

Aiden frowned, squinting into the sun. “I can’t know for sure. My mum is fine with it, and my dad was fairly laidback, so I like to think he’d have been okay.”

“When did you tell her? I mean, like, when did you know for sure?”

“I knew I was gay when I was around thirteen,” he said. “And I told my mum when I was sixteen.”

Right. I stared down at the beer bottle in my hand.

“But it’s not like that for everyone,” he added.

I snapped my head up.

“Lots of guys don’t realize until later in life. There’s no one way it has to happen,” he said.

My chest felt tight, but Aiden’s gaze was completely non-judgmental.

“And my experience with my mum isn’t necessarily the norm. Tyler...well that’s his story to tell, but his dad was a prick about it.”

“Yeah, I can imagine some fathers would struggle with the concept.”

I was keeping this conversation generic, but the expression on Aiden’s face indicated I wasn’t fooling him.

Because he knew my father. Hell, the whole country knew my father.

I didn’t think my father was innately homophobic. But he’d grown up in another era. An era where men were men, and women were women. And while back then some men had loved other men, it had been on the down-low, not in your face.

I didn’t think my father would disown me if I revealed I was bisexual. But his opinion of me would undoubtedly change. And seeing his confusion and disappointment would be hard to cope with, especially after I’d spent my life trying to live up to being the man my father was. Could I handle disappointing him permanently?

Aiden may have sensed my tension, because he started talking about some of his fishing trips with his dad, including a funny story about when they’d attempted to land a large mako shark when they’d only been in a small boat.

“Thank fuck the line snapped,” Aiden finished up. “Or I think it might have ended with the shark in the boat and me in the water.”

I laughed.

But as I drained the last of my beer bottle, his story made me think about my dad. What memories from my childhood

did I have of him?

Rugby. It had always been about rugby. Him coaching my team on winter mornings so freezing that steam came off the players. We had an advantage with him as the coach—when it was his turn to referee, there was none of the sledging from the opposition’s parents that refs usually got. Instead, at the end of every game, Dad would have all the opposition players and their parents swarming him for autographs and selfies.

“Fish don’t seem to be biting any more here, and it looks like you need another beer. You want to head back to the guys?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, if you ever need to talk through anything...” Aiden said as we edged around the side.

I attempted a smile. “Yeah, thanks, mate.”

Once we got back to the other deck the guys made an executive decision to try our luck at another fishing spot. Zach powered up the motor and we pattered toward the harbor entrance, and ended up dropping anchor not far from the edge of the marine reserve. As soon as we cast our rods, it became apparent we’d found the fish hangout spot, because suddenly our lines were pinging and we started winding in fish after fish, including good eating fish like cod, gurnard, and groper.

I hadn’t realized how restrained Aiden and Tyler had been on tour. But now, as the sun beat down, the music cranked up, and the beers flowed, you could see the affection between them, shimmering like its own heat wave.

When Tyler pulled in an enormous kawhai, he looked over at Aiden, who came to help him get it off the line and into the ice chest, and afterwards stood with his hand resting on Tyler’s back.

Watching their casual warmth with each other, a lump grew in my throat.

I wanted this with Austin. I wanted the kind of coupledness I’d taken for granted with Matilda, that the world accepted without question.

“This is the life,” Ethan said as he leaned against the side, opening another beer. “Think of all those poor suckers who are at work right now.”

“I’m pretty sure those poor suckers feel sorry for us when we’re getting tackled by Macca Mackenzie,” Zach said.

“Or getting torn apart by all the armchair critics on talkback radio,” Reuban added.

“I don’t know what you guys are complaining about,” Tyler said, a cheeky grin on his face. “You guys got to work three fewer weeks this season than I had to.”

Ethan straightened up and threw a glare at Aiden. “Did he seriously just bring up the fact that the Greens made the final and we didn’t?”

Aiden had a smirk on his face. “I’m not responsible for what he says.”

Reuban shook his head. “Seriously, Bannings, you got a death wish? You’re on a boat surrounded by Marauders players.”

“I still think he’d make great shark bait,” Ethan said. “That product in his hair will attract them from miles around.”

“Next season we will own you,” Reuban said.

Tyler just laughed. “We’ll see about that.”

“Actually, I think next year could be the Marauders’ year,” Zach said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“I heard a rumor management are chasing Luke Hunter,” Zach said. “He’s off contract in Japan, and they’re trying to entice him home with the big bucks.”

Luke Hunter was a few years younger than me, but he’d been one of those guys you always noticed in age-group stuff. Mainly because you got used to seeing him cutting through the defense and dotting down a try.

It had caused a stink when he’d chosen to go to Japan after high school rather than sign with a New Zealand franchise. I’d

often seen him used as Exhibit A in the argument that New Zealand rugby was letting some of their top young talent escape by not matching the lucrative deals offered by overseas teams.

Great for us if we managed to nab the guy now.

But I glanced over at Ethan's face, and it was obvious he didn't think the idea was so great. Instead, he looked as if he had developed an extreme case of seasickness.

"They're looking to sign Luke Hunter?" he clarified, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah. That's what I heard," Zach said.

"You know him?" I asked.

Ethan cleared his throat. "Yeah, he's from Ashburton too."

"I always forget that you're from Ashvegas!" Reuban crowed.

But I could see from Ethan's face that his mind wasn't on defending his hometown. He stared out to sea.

"Did you know him well?" I asked.

"He used to be a good friend of mine. My best friend growing up." He said the last sentence quietly.

"You guys not friends anymore?"

"Nah, not anymore." He scratched at his hand.

Everyone's attention was focused on Ethan now.

"What did you do?" Reuban asked.

Ethan chuckled, but it sounded strained. "Why do you automatically assume it was my fault?"

Reuban snorted. "Because I know you."

"I resent that assumption." If he was trying for a jokey tone, he didn't quite achieve it. He scuffed his shoe on the bristly mat at the bottom of the boat. "Although in this case, it kinda was my fault. I broke the bro code."

Reuban's eyebrows flew up. "How did you break the bro code?"

"I...ah...knocked up his sister."

"Hang on a sec. Luke's sister is Theo's mum?" I said.

"Yup. It got...messy."

"Shit," Reuban said.

"You going to be okay if he joins us?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't have a problem with the guy. He's the one who has a problem with me. And he knows I play here. If he signs with us, then hopefully it means he's over everything that happened."

"Guess it's his last chance to try to make the NZ team," Reuban said. "He's what, twenty-four now?"

"Twenty-five," Ethan said. "His birthday is on the sixteenth of September."

"From what I've heard, they reckon he's the biggest talent ever to escape New Zealand rugby," Zach said.

"I'm looking forward to playing the guy already," Tyler said.

Reuban snorted. "You wait, Bannings. This time next year, you'll be eating humble pie."

"Never tasted it before," Tyler said. "You guys will be able to describe the flavor though."

And so the conversation moved away from Luke and on to us Marauders spluttering at Tyler's sledging.

We headed back to shore late in the afternoon, making quick work of unloading the boat.

"This was fun. Thanks for the invite," I said to Aiden.

"Glad you could make it." Aiden cuffed my shoulder. "Catch up again soon, okay?"

"Yeah, sounds good," I replied.

When I reached my pickup truck, I realized Tyler had followed me. I put the cool bag containing my catch in the back, and turned to face him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Hey, I realized I never actually said thanks...you know, what happened at training camp, for keeping it to yourself.”

“Hate to be the one to break it to you, but I think the news is out now,” I said.

Tyler grinned. “Yeah. Although there’s a chance a hermit living on Stewart Island might not have heard.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.”

Tyler flashed me a grin as I climbed in my truck.

With a last wave at Aiden and Tyler, I gunned the engine and headed back to my empty apartment.

Back to another night of missing Austin.

And the growing knowledge that I couldn’t do this indefinitely.

Something was going to have to give.

Austin

“And then the princess and the goblin lived happily ever after,” Matilda said, finishing up her narration.

I managed to smile and clap enthusiastically as Matilda and the girls took a bow. They’d spent most of the afternoon rehearsing their play, and it was beyond cute the way Lily and Eloise had gotten so intensely involved in the whole thing.

I’d recorded their performance so I could show Jacob, because I knew he’d get a giant kick out of it, especially when he saw how Eloise had come out of her shell while she was on stage.

“I sense some Academy Awards in the future,” I said.

Matilda arched an eyebrow. “For me or the girls?”

“Well, your goblin king voice is outstanding, I have to admit. But I think Eloise’s tearful dragon and Lily’s bashful bear were the highlights of the show.”

Matilda giggled while the girls beamed. I smiled back, trying to swallow down my guilt.

I shouldn’t resent Matilda for spending time with her daughters. She’d been away so much filming her show, and it was great to see Lily and Eloise having fun with their mother.

But Matilda being here meant no Jacob. And I missed him. Even though we’d kept things completely PC during the day, I still missed all those moments when we had fun together with the girls and made each other laugh.

“Shall we call Daddy to say good night?” I suggested as I herded the girls toward bed.

“Yes!” Lily said.

Anticipation buzzed through me as I called him.

Jacob’s handsome face suddenly filled the screen.

“Hey.” My face didn’t feel big enough for my smile. “I’ve got two girls here who want to say something to you.”

“Good night, Daddy,” Lily said in a loud voice.

“Good night,” Eloise whispered.

I settled back on Lily’s bed, Lily tucked under one arm, Eloise under the other.

“So, what have you been doing today?” I asked him.

“I went out fishing.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you were a fisherman.”

“I’m not really. Some guys on the team were going out, and they invited me. Aiden Jones organized it.”

“Did you catch anything?”

“Yeah, we got a few gurnard and some groper.”

Lily squirmed next to me, and I suddenly remembered this conversation wasn’t just between Jacob and me.

“Did you hear that, girls? Daddy went fishing today.”

“We’ll have to take you two fishing off the wharf sometime,” Jacob said to them. “What mischief did my two munchkins get up to today?”

“We did a play,” Lily said.

“I recorded it,” I told him. “You’re going to love it.”

A movement caught my eye, and I tore my eyes away from Jacob’s face to see Matilda leaning against the door frame. She watched as Lily and Eloise talked over each other, telling Jacob about the play. Eloise was starting to talk more, which

was great for her but not so great for the sister dynamic, as Lily wasn't used to competing with her twin for airtime.

Jacob handled it perfectly, even over FaceTime, instituting a system where they took turns to talk, and coaxing Lily gently out of the bad mood she was teetering on the edge of.

Finally Matilda came into the room.

“Right, girls, say good night to Dad, and then you need to snuggle down into bed so Austin can tell you a story. Mummy just wants to talk to Daddy for a bit. I'll be back to give you a cuddle soon.”

Lily and Eloise said good night, and Matilda held out her hand for Lily to give her the phone.

She left the room, and I felt a lurch of unease. I'd buried all of Jacob's messages under a fake name in my phone, but would she finish the call and go snooping? If she stumbled across the message chain, it wouldn't take her long to realize it wasn't exactly a professional conversation between manny and boss. And what if Jacob messaged me after Matilda finished the call and she saw the message on screen? But he'd realize Matilda had possession of my phone, so he wouldn't do anything risky, right?

My mind churned over the possibilities as I told the girls a quick story. But making up Kea and Kaka stories without Jacob seemed wrong, and I stumbled through an incredibly boring story in which Kea and Kaka went to the playground and did pretty much nothing.

“That's not a fun story at all,” Lily said when I'd finished.

“Sorry Lily-bear, I'll try harder tomorrow night, okay? Or we'll get Daddy to help out when we FaceTime him and we can tell the story together.”

“It's a deal,” she said.

I gave both girls a quick hug then went down the hallway to the living space, slightly on edge.

Matilda stood by the counter in the kitchen, gazing off into the distance.

“Everything okay?” I asked tentatively.

She seemed to rouse herself. “Yeah, I’m fine. I better go give the girls a good-night hug.”

“Ah...do you have my phone?”

“Oh, sure.” She handed it over, giving me a strange look.

“Thanks.” I tried not to look guilty as I stashed the phone in my pocket.

But as Matilda disappeared down the hallway, I felt my phone vibrate.

It was a message from Jacob.

Call me when you can.

I finished the last of the dishes in a hurry. Luckily Matilda wasn’t back from saying good night to the girls, so I raced up to my room and called Jacob.

“Hey,” he answered.

“What did Matilda want to talk to you about?” Okay, maybe I should have led with something more neutral. Like “hi”. But Jacob didn’t seem to notice anything weird.

“She just wanted to discuss arrangements for next week. She has to fly back on Tuesday.”

“Oh, right.” I leaned back against the pillows on my bed, the knot of tension in my stomach dissolving. “So, fishing, eh? Is it strange that the idea of you as a hunter-gatherer trawling the sea to provide for your family turns me on slightly?”

“I’m fairly sure if you’d smelled me after a day’s fishing, you’d be the opposite of turned on.”

I laughed. “Did you have a good time though?”

“Yeah, it was fun. Good to have a chance to hang out with the boys. Ethan Lewis was there, and Zach, and Reuban, and of course Aiden and Tyler...”

As he talked, I let Jacob’s voice settle over me like a snug, warm blanket.

This was what I missed the most about Jacob being here. Not the sexy times, although those were awesome, but just talking to him about the day-to-day stuff, those little moments that meant so much more if you had someone to share them with.

“I miss you.” For some reason my mouth decided it was a good idea to spill out the contents of my brain halfway through Jacob’s sentence.

Jacob paused.

“I miss you too,” he said finally. “Why don’t you come over here tonight?”

“To your apartment?”

“Yeah.”

My heart leaped at the idea, before I spotted the potential fishhook. “What do I say to Matilda? It’s not like I can pretend there’s a raging party at Gran’s rest home to attend at this time of night.”

“I don’t know. Do you need to make up an excuse to leave the house?”

“She’ll ask me where I’m going, and I’m really shit at lying.”

Jacob hesitated for a second. “I’m sorry,” he said finally.

“What for?”

“For making you lie.”

“It is what it is.” I tried to keep my voice upbeat, but didn’t quite pull it off. “I’m sure I’ll think of something. I’ll be over as soon as I can, okay?”

“Okay.”

Damn. I could tell by Jacob’s voice that me freaking out about lying to Matilda had reminded him of the realities of our situation. And I really didn’t want Jacob to spend too much time thinking about how complicated everything was. I didn’t want him to decide what we had together wasn’t worth the effort.

“See you soon.” I ended the call. I had to get to Jacob’s apartment quickly so I could kiss him and remind him of all the reasons why this was worth it.

I tried to tamp down my nerves as I headed downstairs to the lounge, where I could hear the TV going.

But my pulse started to thud, and my palms decided that now was a good time to try an alternative career in sweat production.

For God’s sake, I needed to keep it together. Matilda didn’t have any superpowers which meant she could peer inside my brain and discover I was planning to head over to her ex’s apartment and have hot, steamy sex with him.

Best thing was to just keep it vague. I was going for a drive to get some air.

I took a deep breath and poked my head around the doorway.

But the breezy words in my throat died a brutal death when Matilda looked up from the couch. Her eyes shone with tears.

Oh shit.

I stepped into the room. “Are you okay?”

She drew a hand across her face, smearing her tears. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just being silly.”

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that Matilda definitely wasn’t fine.

I made my voice gentle. “What’s up?”

Matilda blew out a breath, disrupting her perfect fringe. “I met a guy,” she said.

Hope swelled in my chest. Would Matilda being in a relationship mean she’d be more accepting of Jacob and I together if it ever came out?

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” I said encouragingly.

“Yeah, it’s good, and it’s bad. He’s another actor on the show. Harry Enslaw.” She fumbled with her phone and flashed

up a photo of a guy with blond hair and dark brown eyes.

“He’s cute,” I said.

“Yeah, he is. He’s also really funny, and we get along so well.”

“I’m not really seeing the problem,” I said.

Matilda reached for a box of tissues on the coffee table and noisily blew her nose before answering. “The problem is me. I thought I was ready to move on to a new relationship. I thought I was over Jacob. But the other day at the birthday party, I couldn’t help wondering for the first time if I’d make a mistake breaking up with him.”

My stomach hollowed as my hope died an agonizing death.

In its place came terror.

Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Jacob’s a great guy and such an amazing dad,” Matilda continued, oblivious to the fact I was on the verge of having a massive meltdown. “And just the idea of starting from scratch with Harry, with him in Auckland and me down here, made me realize it’s going to be so complicated.

“And I can’t help remembering the good times I had with Jacob. Like at the start, we had so much fun, you know. He was so sweet and kind. Deep down, he’s just a really nice guy.”

Shit. Now my terror had a new friend. Jealousy.

“And things were really good between Jacob and me at the beginning, like we had this amazing physical connection, and I can’t help wondering whether we could get back to that.”

Here was a potential moment to bond with my employer—*yeah, Jacob’s an amazing lover, isn’t he? Did you like it too when he did that thing where he kisses down your neck?*

She let out a shaky breath. “My mother warned me about this when I split from Jacob. She said I was just chasing shiny

new things and I'd quickly realize the shiny new thing wasn't as good as the toy I'd just discarded."

What could I say? The first thing that ticked through my mind was completely self-serving.

You can't have Jacob back because he's mine.

The strength of my reaction shocked me. Because that's what I felt on the deepest level. Jacob was mine. I was his.

But the problem was that I was only one factor in this equation.

Would Jacob consider going back to Matilda?

He'd do almost anything for his girls. There had been such pain in his voice the other day when he'd talked about their separation.

The thought made my stomach churn like I could seriously throw up.

Sorry, Matilda, for vomiting all over you. It's because the idea of Jacob going back to you is like plunging my soul into hell.

I forced myself to take deep breaths as I considered the situation.

Eloise and Lily. I loved those girls fiercely. Didn't they deserve two parents together, a happy, stable family?

Could I bring myself to stand in the way of that?

"What do you think I should do?" Matilda's gaze was so trusting. I was her manny, the guy she trusted with her kids' lives, and I was also her friend. Of course she assumed I would have her best interests at heart. She had no idea that my own interests conflicted so violently with hers.

"What do you think..." I stumbled. "What do you think Jacob would say if you asked him to get back together?"

"I don't know. I mean, he hasn't dated since we split up, right? And when I first talked to him about separating, he told me he'd do anything to keep our relationship together for the

sake of the girls. He wanted to try counseling, but at the time I didn't think it would change anything."

Oh, Jacob. My heart cleaved in two, imagining him blindsided by Matilda's suggestion, desperately wanting to keep his family together.

"But now...I don't know. Maybe if I suggested going to counseling, seeing if we could reach a point where we could consider a reconciliation. But I don't want to be unfair to Harry, and string him along when I'm thinking about getting back with Jacob. What do you think I should do?"

The trust in Matilda's eyes was unbearable. I looked away, staring down at the coffee table.

"I don't know what to say," I said honestly. "It's something you're going to have to work through yourself. No one else can tell you the right answer."

She huffed out a deep sigh. "I think I'm going to pour myself a glass of wine and take a nice bubble bath and try to stop thinking about men for a while."

I forced myself to smile. "That sounds like a fabulous plan."

Matilda stood up and gave me a hug. "Thanks, Austin. I don't tell you this enough, but I really appreciate everything you do around here. The girls are so happy. Jacob was resistant to getting a man as a nanny, but you seem to have won him over too. And I'm really glad to have your friendship."

She pulled away and gave me a warm smile, and I attempted a smile back, but I'm pretty sure the smile police would have pointed out that it was the worst fake they'd ever seen.

Matilda left the room, and I stood there for a minute, feeling like the shittiest person in the history of the planet.



On the drive over to Jacob's apartment, I continued to replay everything Matilda had said, my mind whirring.

Because now I had a dilemma. Should I tell Jacob about my conversation with Matilda?

It would be betraying Matilda's trust, and wasn't I already betraying Matilda enough at the moment?

But there was another, uglier reason why I didn't want to tell Jacob.

What if Jacob wanted to try again with Matilda? Would he potentially choose her over me? He'd told me that what we had was different than what he'd had with Matilda. But when you factored in the girls, would he completely dismiss getting back with her?

At the apartment, before I knocked, I double-checked the address that Jacob had messaged me.

The door opened, and there was Jacob, wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants.

Jacob, with his wide, happy smile at seeing me.

And my mind was wiped clean. All I wanted was to touch him.

Luckily, Jacob seemed to have the same idea. I was barely inside when he'd grabbed me, pressing me up against the wall and kissing me like our mouths were attempting some new level of nuclear fusion.

Oh God, yes.

This is what I'd been missing. Jacob's arms around me. Jacob's warmth enveloping me. Jacob. Just Jacob.

He pulled back to catch his breath, resting his forehead on mine. "Oh fuck, I missed you."

I was panting. "It's been two days."

"I know. I honestly don't know if I can handle a week without you." He trailed his hand down my cheek as he stared into my eyes.

Having him voice exactly what I'd been feeling helped to quiet some of the turmoil inside me after my conversation with Matilda.

I yanked him back to me, kissing him hard. Then I tugged at his shirt.

He got my meaning and shucked it off, and I almost groaned at the sight of his chest.

“Oh, I see. This is just a booty call to you, is it?” he joked.

I paused my hands where I'd already started tracing the muscles on his chest.

“No, it's not just a booty call,” I said. I couldn't help the serious note that had crept into my voice.

Jacob stared down at me, his grin fading.

“I know,” he said.

And we were kissing again, and he was pulling my shirt off over my head, moaning as our naked chests collided.

He ground his hips against mine, and I could feel his hard cock trapped in his pants. Mine was suffering the same problem.

“What do you want?” he asked as he pulled away, his lips already red from our kissing.

“You,” I gasped.

His gaze ignited, and he kissed me again as we stumbled back, trying to multitask as we kissed, shed clothes, and moved toward the bedroom.

I barely had time to register the bed and dresser before Jacob was pushing me down on the bed, crawling on top of me, and kissing and grinding against me until I was a squirming, panting mess.

He withdrew for a second and reached for the bedside table, producing a condom and lube.

“You want this?”

“Definitely.”

How could I not want this? Jacob kissing down my body, Jacob prepping me with such gentle, loving strokes of his fingers, Jacob pushing inside me and lighting me up from the inside, so much so that I saw sparks when I closed my eyes.

The issue wasn't whether I wanted this or not. There was no doubt about that.

The issue was I wanted this forever.



“Austin.” It was Jacob’s voice, stirring me out of the dream I’d been having. I opened my eyes and found him propped up on one elbow, staring down at me, his face tight. “It’s after eleven. You probably should go.”

I couldn’t school my face fast enough as the reality of his words hit me, and I could see Jacob’s regret as he clocked my reaction.

I had to go. I had to go and sneak back into my home before his ex-wife got suspicious about where I was.

He flopped back down on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. “Sneaking around sucks,” he said.

“Yeah, I hate it,” I said flatly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s just...” I let out a shuddering breath. “It was the one thing Gran couldn’t stand because she had to deal with it so much with my mother. All the lying and the sneaking. So that was the worst thing in our house. She always said no matter what naughty thing I’d done, lying about it was always going to be worse.”

Somehow it seemed even more important to cling to the values that Gran had instilled in me now I was slowly losing her.

“You don’t talk about your mum very much,” Jacob said quietly, rolling over to look at me. His hazel eyes regarded me seriously.

“I don’t like to think about her that much. I mean, I hardly remember her.”

“You don’t have any memories of her?”

I paused for a second as I raked through my brain.

“She used to like to dance with me. She’d twirl me around. I remember that.” My voice was soft. “But then she ruined it all by dying.”

“You sound like you’re angry with her.”

“Well, she had a choice, didn’t she? I mean, after I was born, every time she relapsed, she was choosing drugs over me. I wasn’t important enough for her to stop.” The words bubbled up from some place deep inside me, surprising me.

Shit. I hadn’t quite realized I’d felt that way.

“You deserved so much better than that,” Jacob said.

“Yeah, well, we don’t always get what we deserve, do we?” I tried for a smile, but I knew it had a bitter tinge.

Jacob scrubbed one hand over his face. “I’m not giving you everything you deserve, Austin, I know that. But what I don’t know is if I can handle hurting you.”

A flash of panic surged through me. I sucked in a deep breath. “Do you want this to end?”

“No. Of course I don’t. But I can’t promise you any more than this at the moment. I wish I could, but I’ve got to figure things out.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I couldn’t put pressure on Jacob. It wasn’t fair on him.

We were both silent for a moment.

“It just feels...so easy with you,” Jacob said.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

I thought I’d clicked with Matilda and the kids when I’d first met them, but with Jacob, it was more than just a puzzle piece clicking into the right place. It was more like one of

those 3-D puzzles where everything was confusing until the last piece slotted in, and suddenly the whole thing made sense.

I climbed out of bed and started to hunt down my clothes, which were strewn across the bedroom and living room, and dressed slowly.

It was kind of the reverse of the seduction process. And definitely not nearly as fun.

Jacob followed me, still sleepy-eyed, his hair tousled, and I wanted nothing more than to drag him back to bed and spend the night snuggling with him.

Yeah, this felt pretty shit. Having to leave like I was some kind of rent boy, a one-night stand.

Jacob must have seen how I was feeling because suddenly he was pulling me to him, wrapping me up in a hug.

We stood by the door for a few minutes, holding each other.

“Good-bye.”

Jacob’s mouth lingered on my lips, gentle but intense. As if he was trying to tell me something with his kiss.

I pulled away.

I had to get out of there before I started professing things I really, really didn’t want to say.

I knew Jacob cared for me. But I didn’t know if it was going to be enough moving forward.

My mother hadn’t chosen me over her addiction.

Brett hadn’t chosen me and what we had together over the potential issues that being in a relationship with a man would’ve caused him.

And it appeared Jacob was in the same predicament.

When was someone going to choose me?

Jacob

Yeah, it turned out my willpower sucked big time. I tried to make it through the rest of the week without seeing Austin, but by Saturday I was going insane.

Seeing him on Wednesday night had only made it worse. Enhanced my appetite instead of sating it.

On Saturday afternoon I tried to distract myself by going to see my parents.

But when I arrived at the house, I found my mother all stressed out about my dad's upcoming book launch, fretting about the numbers on the guest list.

"The venue has a cap at one hundred and fifty, and I was expecting a number of people wouldn't be able to come, but only a handful have declined. And I just realized I hadn't included all the people from the publishing house on the guest list."

"I'm sure there will be some last-minute cancellations," I said.

She frowned at the list through her reading glasses. "You're not going to bring a guest, are you?"

"No." The word came out more curtly than I'd intended, filled with my annoyance that I couldn't have Austin by my side. But hey, at least having a secret boyfriend meant I was doing my bit to keep the guest numbers down.

She peered at me over the top of her glasses. “That’s probably for the best.” The way she said it made me think her response was about more than just guest numbers.

“What do you mean by that?” For a horrible moment, I thought she somehow knew about Austin and me. Obviously my childhood belief in my mother’s psychic ability hadn’t disappeared altogether.

“I can imagine Matilda wouldn’t take too kindly to you dating again, and you should probably make sure you don’t do anything to upset her for the sake of the girls.”

“Matilda is dating,” I pointed out.

“Yes, well, I don’t think Matilda would quite grasp the double standard, would she? She’d react on an emotional level instead.”

For some reason, my mother’s words made me defensive, even though she was probably right on the money when it came to Matilda’s reaction.

“You don’t like Matilda, do you? You didn’t like her from the moment you met her.”

Mum put down her pen and met my gaze with a hard look. “You’re wrong, Jacob. I thought she was a lovely, charming person. I still do. I just didn’t know if she’d make a good wife. And I was right about that, wasn’t I?”

“And what do you think makes a good life partner?” I was testing the water, deliberately using the gender-neutral term, but I could see the implications went straight over my mother’s head.

Mum shrugged. “There’s a lot of things. Someone who puts your needs ahead of their own. Someone who has always got your back.”

There was a noise in the doorway, and I glanced up to see my father.

“Dad, I didn’t see you there.”

He walked into the room, heading for his favorite chair. “Doesn’t seem like this is a conversation I can participate in.”

“What, you don’t know anything about what it takes to make a relationship work?” The words spilled out before I had a chance to reign them in. “It’s just luck then, that your and Mum’s relationship has lasted for over thirty-five years?”

My father’s eyebrows shot up. I’d never spoken to him with this tone of voice before. At least not in my adult years.

He stared at me for a few heartbeats but didn’t reply.

“Of course it’s not luck,” my mother jumped in. “Your father and I work on our relationship like anyone else. Relationships are about compromises sometimes.”

It struck me that she was illustrating her earlier point. She had my father’s back, intercepting the question because she knew he was uncomfortable talking about anything personal, even to his own son.

What was I expecting? That my father would start an in-depth father-son chat about his own relationship experiences? Share personal stuff with me?

Suddenly, I was full of bitterness about what I’d missed out on as the son of the most stoic man in New Zealand.

“I’ve got to get going,” I muttered.

“Don’t forget, I need you on Saturday morning to pick up the chairs and glassware for the guests,” Mum said. “And there’ll be the rest of the venue to set up.”

“Of course. I’m happy to help,” I said.

As I drove through the streets of Christchurch, my mind churned. It sucked having a big family event like this and not getting to invite Austin.

What was actually stopping me going public with our relationship?

I mean, Tyler and Aiden had already done the hard yards for gay rugby players.

My being in a gay relationship would cause a ripple in the pond of New Zealand rugby, but it wouldn’t be the cannonball bomb their relationship had been.

My father. Yeah, that was a big factor.

But I was becoming more and more accustomed to the idea that I didn't want to be the type of man my father was.

If Lily and Eloise came to me for relationship advice in twenty years, what would I do? I'd tell them everything I knew about life and love in the hope that something I said would help them figure out a smoother path.

My father would never view me in the same light if I told him I was bisexual. I had to accept that. And it would be hard to cope with it from the man I'd always looked up to.

I thought about the look on Austin's face on Wednesday night when I'd had to wake him up and tell him to go. When it came down to it, I'd prefer to see disappointment on my father's face than ever see that look on Austin's face again.

I breathed out a deep breath.

But then my thoughts hit the next stumbling block. And the others had merely been warm-ups to the main barrier standing in the way of Austin's and my relationship.

Matilda.

I thought about the sense of betrayal I'd felt at the idea of Matilda and Austin getting together. And I knew Matilda. Mum was right. Matilda would struggle with me being in any new relationship, let alone a relationship with our manny, who she obviously regarded as a good friend.

And my stomach filled with dread thinking about how Matilda's and my relationship souring would impact the girls.

I loved my girls more than life itself. And our relationship deteriorating to the point where we couldn't co-parent successfully would definitely have a negative impact on them.

But I couldn't ask Austin to sneak around forever. And if I did end things with him, there was no way he could work for us. I'd lose Austin from my life. And the girls would lose him too.

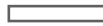
I didn't think I could cope with that.

It was an impossible predicament.

Fuck, I wanted to see him. I didn't care if I couldn't touch him because Matilda was there. I just wanted to be around him, have some Austin sparkle in my day. Remind me why all of this was worth the agony.

The bright orange signs of a DIY store caught my eye, and an idea crept into my mind.

I put my indicator on.



Half an hour later, I unlocked the front door.

“It's me,” I called out.

Matilda came into the front hallway. “What are you doing here?” Her tone wasn't unfriendly, just curious.

“I thought I'd fix that light in the pantry that blew the other day.”

“Oh...okay.”

“Where are the girls?” I asked.

“In the backyard with Austin.”

“Oh, right. I'll just go say hi, and then I'll make a start on the light.” I headed past her in the hallway, trying to keep my steps from being too eager.

“Hey, Jacob,” Matilda said.

I stopped and turned to where she was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for thinking about fixing the light. You're really good at stuff like that. I probably don't say that enough. I just take it for granted that you'll do all the practical stuff around the house.”

I blinked. “Ah...that's okay.”

She gave me a warm smile and went up the stairs.

Okay, that was a little strange. But nice.

I shook my head to reorientate myself then opened the door out onto the deck.

Austin was staggering around on the grass with his eyes closed, wrapped in a whole roll of toilet paper, a large flowery hat on his head, his arms held out in front of him as he tunelessly hummed “Baby Shark.”

The girls were giggling as they scattered away from him.

“Where have my baby trolls gone to?” he cackled.

Oh, holy fuck.

It was like I’d been tackled, leaving me winded.

Because in that moment I was struck with an absolute certainty, a soul-deep truth.

I was in love with him.

My love for Austin had been wrapped in the cloak of friendship, and I hadn’t recognized it for exactly what it was. But I sure as hell recognized it in this moment.

Shit, if I was being completely honest, I’d probably been in love with the guy before we’d even slept together.

I’d fallen in love with him sometime around the vegetable puns and making up bedtime stories with him.

With Matilda I’d fallen for her shiny, polished exterior. The beautiful woman, the talented actress and singer, the charming person the whole of New Zealand admired.

But with Austin, I’d fallen for the person beneath his good looks and quirky humor, the person he was deep down.

I didn’t get much of a chance to dwell on my realization as Eloise’s attention shifted from evading Austin to me.

“Daddy!”

Austin’s eyes snapped open, and there was pure happiness in his smile when he saw me.

Holy shit. When it boiled down to it, this was all I wanted. Getting to come home to see my girls and Austin's smile.

I swallowed the unexpected lump in my throat and walked down the deck steps onto the lawn.

Austin's smile wavered, and he tilted his head. "You okay?"

That was the thing about Austin. He knew me so well.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just thought I'd drop by and fix that light in the pantry."

His smile was back to full wattage. "Jacob the home handyman strikes again."

"Hey, I've got to be useful in some way."

"I find you have many useful traits." He gave me a flirty look, and fuck I wanted to kiss him.

"Oh yeah?" I asked. "What useful traits do I have?"

"You're very good with your hands."

I arched an eyebrow.

"Passing a rugby ball and all that," he continued.

A laugh huffed out of me. "Thanks for that compliment."

We grinned at each other until the door opened behind us. We both turned. Matilda came out onto the deck. She'd put on some lipstick and was clutching her car keys. "I'm just going to meet Annabel for a quick drink in the village."

"Okay," Austin agreed.

"I better get on to fixing the pantry light," I said.

Matilda hesitated, then looked at me. "My flight leaves tomorrow at four, so I'll have to leave here before three. I'll see you before I go, right?"

"Yeah, I'll make sure I'm here for the hand over," I said.

"Good."

I couldn't quite tell what was in Matilda's expression. I glanced at Austin. He had a frown line between his eyebrows

as his gaze ping-ponged between Matilda and me.

It was only after Matilda left that he relaxed.

“I’ll bring the girls in for a snack, and we can watch you change the light,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you going to be quality control, making sure I’m changing the light bulb correctly?”

“Well, I have seen some of your LEGO creations, Jacob. Sometimes quality control is needed.”

Once we got inside, I helped him make the girls crackers and cheese for afternoon tea.

“Can we watch *PJ Masks*?” Lily asked Austin as they finished their crackers.

Austin threw me a look. “What do you think, Daddy?”

“One episode won’t hurt them.”

Once Austin had set the girls up watching TV in the lounge, he pattered around in the kitchen while I worked on the pantry light. I also decided to replace one of the hinges, looking for any excuse to stay here and delay going home to the empty apartment.

Although being around Austin and not getting to touch him was its own special type of torture.

“This is horrible,” I said as I finished up.

“What’s horrible?”

“Not being able to touch you.”

Austin’s eyes heated. “Do you want me to come over tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll work out something to say to Matilda.”

As I finished up, Austin wandered over to admire my handiwork, opening the pantry door with gusto.

“And then there was light!” he exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such an idiot.”

“But I’m your idiot,” he countered.

In light of my earlier revelation, his words caused my heart to race. “Yes, you are.”

Fuck. There was no way Austin could have missed the affection in my voice. But he didn’t remark on it. Instead his expression softened, and he took a step toward me.

“Tonight?” he murmured.

“Definitely.”

I couldn’t help myself. I closed the distance between us and brushed my lips over his. Just a small kiss.

A kiss that promised so much more later.

Just as we drew back from each other, a noise came from the doorway between the lounge and the kitchen.

Lily stood there.

“Lily-bear!” Austin made his voice upbeat.

My heart pounded. How much had she seen? The pantry door would have obstructed some of her view, but she still could have seen us.

But Lily seemed unperturbed. She strolled into the room. “Can I have some milk?”

“Of course. One glass of cold white milk coming up.” Austin’s voice was still unnaturally high.

As Lily left the room carrying her glass, he shot me a panicked glance. “Do you think she saw anything?”

“I think we would have heard about it if she had,” I replied. That was the good thing about Lily— on this occasion at least. There was very little filter between her brain and her mouth.

He ran his hands through his hair, messing up his curls even more than normal. “God, that was dumb.”

“Yeah.” I stuck my hands in my pockets. “I better get going.”

“I guess you better.” The reluctance and disappointment on Austin’s face mirrored how I was feeling.

I said good-bye to the girls, and they barely bothered to look away from the TV. In some ways it was nice to not have the usual drama that often accompanied me leaving.

Although, maybe I should have been offended that they were more interested in an animated character dressed as a gecko than their own father.

Austin followed me to the door and gave my hand a chaste squeeze as I left.

“Tonight.” He said the word like it was something precious.

As I drove away, I churned through everything.

I was in love with Austin.

I couldn’t work out whether that made things better or worse.

Austin

The next day, Matilda's flight got canceled, and she had to be rescheduled on another flight later in the afternoon. But she didn't message Jacob, so he turned up at three o'clock as planned.

"My flight's not leaving for another two hours now," she said as he came into the kitchen.

"Oh, okay." Jacob rocked back on his heels.

"I'm just going to pack the last of my stuff, and then maybe we could play hide and seek with the girls or something?" She nodded out the window to where Lily and Eloise were happily bouncing on the trampoline.

Jacob's glance slid to me. "You keen for a game of hide and seek?"

"Austin's busy here," Matilda said. "I thought it could be just our family."

Well, this wasn't awkward at all.

"I've definitely got a mess to clean up," I said in a bright voice. The girls and I had been baking this morning, and it had turned into an epic, exploratory mess.

"Did a nuclear explosion go off in here?" he asked, watching me from the other side of the counter.

"I believe it's called your children's baking efforts," I replied, as I busied myself trying to get the caked mixture off the oven tray.

I didn't want to look too closely at Jacob because then I'd be overwhelmed with memories of the epic, unbelievable sex we'd had in his apartment last night. I had tried not to read too much into the way he'd touched me so reverently, kissing me like I was the most precious thing in the world.

I turned the tap to hot, nearly scalded myself, and scrambled around to find dishwashing gloves.

As I pulled them on, Jacob said, "Those pink gloves really do it for you."

I shot a look toward the stairs, but Matilda was nowhere to be seen.

I kept my voice low. "I'm glad you like them because I was thinking of wearing them for you sometime in bed."

He raised an eyebrow and shuffled closer. "You found my secret fantasy porn folder on my laptop, didn't you?"

And that set me off laughing; the kind of laughter that left me breathless and light-headed.

Although it appeared most things about Jacob left me breathless and light-headed.

An old comment of Gran's snuck into my mind, about how you had to accept that relationships weren't all glitz and glamour and sometimes life had its mundane moments too.

She'd been right, but somehow I'd found someone who made even the mundane moments enjoyable.

I just had to work out how to keep him.

Matilda wandered back into the room, looking amused.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

I tried to control the heat rising in my neck. "Just Jacob," I said.

Matilda raised an eyebrow at him. "I didn't realize you were such a comedian."

"I'm full of hidden surprises."

I sucked in a breath. Because his words definitely had a double meaning in the context of everything that was happening between us.

“Shall we go and play?” Matilda asked him.

Now it appeared she was the one making the double entendres.

“Sure,” Jacob said.

I continued to scrub at the wire rack, glancing out the window only occasionally to see Jacob and Matilda mobilizing the girls in a game of candlestick tag.

Matilda laughed as Jacob tried to crawl between her legs, and I felt a stab of jealousy so strong that I had to stop scrubbing and take a few deep breaths.

Was this Matilda trying to play happy families with Jacob? Reminding him of what they once had? Had she decided that she wanted to get back together with him?

I was only the manny. The person stuck inside cleaning up the mess while everyone else had fun playing.

Yeah, feeling a lot like Cinderella right now.

This feeling was familiar. Brett had used me for a good time but had ultimately never seen me as anything more than a servant.

But I knew there was a big difference between the situations. Brett had left me with scorch marks on the surface of my heart. Jacob had burrowed his way into my heart and had taken over the whole thing.

Could I continue to fall more and more in love with him without knowing if there was a future for us?

Misery welled up inside me. I did my best to choke it down as I dried the wire rack and put it away.

I'd just finished wiping down the bench when the door opened and Matilda came inside with Lily.

Both had flushed cheeks, and they were grinning.

Matilda picked up her phone off the bench and frowned at it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m supposed to be going on a date with Harry tonight, so I’m trying to let him know my flight was delayed, but he’s not answering my messages.”

Lily tilted her head as she looked up at her mother. “Is Harry your boyfriend?”

“Yes, Harry is Mummy’s boyfriend,” Matilda said distractedly as she tapped out a message.

“Do you kiss him?” Lily asked.

Matilda looked up from her phone and shot me an amused look before she answered. “Yes, darling, I kiss him.”

“Like Daddy and Austin?”

Matilda froze. “Like what?”

Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

If kids came with mute buttons, I’d have been frantically stabbing at Lily’s right now. But instead, Lily was in replay mode.

“Like Daddy and Austin,” she repeated.

Matilda’s eyes widened. “Are you saying that Daddy and Austin kiss?” She spoke slowly, articulating each word clearly.

Lily frowned as if she was concerned she was going to get the answer wrong. “Yes. On the mouth,” she said finally.

Matilda dropped her phone with a clatter and put her hands to her temples, clutching at her head. For a moment, I stupidly thought of those joke memes of people’s brain’s exploding. Because it looked as if Matilda was trying to stop her mind from detonating at the thought of Jacob and me together.

She turned to me, her eyes wild. “Is it true?” she whispered.

Oh God.

I couldn’t lie. Not to Matilda. Not about this.

But before I could answer, Jacob came in from the backyard.

He stopped short, looking between us, a line creasing his forehead. “What’s wrong?”

Matilda squared her shoulders. I could see her putting on her actress mask, tucking her hurt and vulnerability behind anger.

“Lily’s just telling me about how Daddy and Austin kiss. It’s a topic I’m interested in hearing more about.”

Jacob paled. “Lily, Munchkin, do you want to jump away for a second. Mummy, Daddy, and Austin need to have a grown-up talk.”

Lily took him literally, of course, jumping away like a frog.

It would have been funny if not for the insane level of tension in the room.

Lily’s croaking noises faded as she went down the hallway.

Matilda’s gaze ping-ponged between Jacob and me. “Please tell me this is some kind of sick joke.”

Neither Jacob nor I said anything. But we didn’t need to. Our silence said it all.

“Oh my God, you’re screwing the nanny.” She was half laughing, half crying. “You couldn’t avoid that cliché even when the nanny was a man!”

I drew in a quick breath, hurt by her casual dismissal of Jacob and me.

“And you...” She turned to stare at me. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends,” I said quietly.

“Some friend you turned out to be, screwing my ex behind my back!”

“It’s not screwing,” Jacob said sharply.

“What? So you’re kissing him but not screwing him? You expect me to believe that?”

“No, I’m saying it’s not just sex.” Jacob swallowed then looked at me. “It’s more than that.”

My heart relocated to my throat. I couldn’t break my gaze from Jacob’s.

“It’s more than that,” he repeated. “A lot more than that.”

I held his gaze. “Yeah, it is.”

Matilda made a noise like a choking goose. “Oh, this just gets better and better.”

I swung my gaze back to her, but she was staring at Jacob. “So, you’re gay now? Because you definitely didn’t act like you were gay when we were together. Or was our relationship just one big lie?”

“Of course it wasn’t a lie, Tilly,” Jacob said, his voice gentle.

Tears welled in Matilda’s eyes. “Don’t call me that. Don’t you dare call me that.”

“Matilda…” I started but then stopped. What could I say to comfort her?

She whirled to me, her face contorting in anger. “And you! I told you. I told you what I was thinking through, and you didn’t think to mention to me that you were screwing him? Fuck, you must have had a great laugh at my expense.”

“I wasn’t laughing, Matilda.”

Jacob’s forehead was furrowed. “What’s this?”

“Nothing,” Matilda snapped. “Anyway, I’ve got a flight to catch. And at some point we need to talk about Austin’s ongoing employment.”

My stomach dropped at her words.

“Don’t be stupid, Matilda,” Jacob said. “Think about the girls.”

“I am thinking about the girls! This will be confusing the hell out of them.”

“We’re not...” I swallowed. “We’re not doing anything in front of the girls.”

“Besides kissing, obviously.”

“That was one time, and it was—”

Matilda raised her hand. “I really, really don’t need to hear the details.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Matilda gave me a look of betrayal and hurt that I never, ever wanted to see on anyone’s face again.

“We’ll talk soon.” Her voice hitched. “I’m going to say good-bye to the girls.”

Jacob and I were both silent as she stalked away.

“That went well,” he said flatly.

I put down the dishcloth and walked into the living room. I sank onto the couch, my head in my hands.

I could hear Matilda’s footsteps pounding down the stairs, then her car starting and the garage door opening.

Shit. I wished I could blank out that last look on her face.

And how was Jacob going to react? It was exactly as he’d feared. Matilda really couldn’t handle the thought of us together.

I looked up to find him standing near the doorway, watching me. “What did Matilda mean when she said she’d told you what she was thinking through?” he asked.

Oh, holy hell. But I couldn’t not tell him now.

“The other day she was wondering whether she’d made a mistake breaking up with you and whether she should suggest going to counseling and trying again.” My mouth felt dry as I said the words.

Jacob’s chest heaved. “And what did you say?”

“I didn’t know what to say! I was in an impossible situation. I didn’t want to encourage it, obviously! But I couldn’t exactly tell her the truth, could I?”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to break Matilda’s confidence,” I mumbled.

The truth was, I’d hidden behind the not-breaking-Matilda’s-confidence excuse. Deep down, the reason I didn’t want to tell Jacob was my paralyzing fear that he might consider getting back with Matilda for the sake of Lily and Eloise. After all, reuniting with Matilda would be a whole lot easier than all the repercussions of being with me long term.

I could see Jacob had worked through some of that stuff himself because his gaze narrowed. “Do you honestly think I would have contemplated getting back with Matilda?”

“Well, it would be so much easier on you, wouldn’t it?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just stating the truth. You’re bisexual, and it would be easier for you to be in a relationship with a woman rather than a man.”

Jacob stiffened. “Is that what you think? That I’ll take the easy option?”

“I don’t know what to think,” I said miserably.

He blew out an irritated breath. “What the hell, Austin? I’ve trusted you with everything! Everything! I’ve told you things I’ve never told anyone else before. And you don’t even trust me not to go back to my ex.”

My lips felt numb. I’d never seen Jacob angry before.

There was a noise from the doorway; two sets of scared eyes were watching us.

“Why are you yelling?” Lily asked.

Jacob unclenched his fists, visibly trying to calm himself. “Sorry, Munchkins. Austin and I were just having an adult conversation. Anyway, it’s time to start thinking about dinner. What do you guys want to have?”

“Macaroni and cheese,” Lily said decisively.

“Sounds like a plan.” I pumped my voice full of enthusiasm as I stood up.

Jacob followed me into the kitchen. When he caught my eye, I tried hard to brew a smile. He reached out and put a hand on my waist, giving a gentle squeeze.

His touch settled some of the turmoil inside me.

The girls sat at the kitchen table coloring in while Jacob and I made the macaroni cheese and played happy families.

Because that’s what we’d been doing, right? All these weeks with Jacob and the girls, it had meant more to me than just a job.

This was my family.

It wasn’t until later, after we’d put the girls to bed and had sat down on the couch, that Jacob turned to me with serious eyes.

“I really need you to trust me,” he said.

“I do trust you,” I replied automatically.

Jacob ran his hands over the leather of the couch. “Because this is going to be hard. Matilda...” He drew a deep breath. “Matilda was the thing I was most worried about. And it sucks that she found out like that. But maybe it was for the best. We don’t have to hide it anymore from her. It will be easier from here on.”

My heart skipped a beat at the implications of what he was saying.

“You’re okay with coming out? To your family? To the whole country?” Disbelief ran rampant in my voice.

“Not yet. I mean, I think we need to give Matilda some time to digest it before we announce it to the world. But I don’t want to hide long term.”

The oxygen in my lungs chose that moment to flee, leaving me light-headed. Jacob was thinking about our relationship in the long term.

“But we’ve got to be in this together, okay?” His eyes didn’t leave mine.

The words to tell him what he meant to me, how much I loved him, hovered on my lips. But was now the right time, after what had happened with Matilda? After our first argument? And what if he didn’t say it back? My heart couldn’t handle that possibility.

I looked away, picking up the remote.

“We’re definitely in this together,” I said as I turned on the TV.

Jacob

I'd promised my mother I would help with setup for Dad's book launch, which for some reason involved picking up chairs from the hire place on the other side of Christchurch at the crack of dawn.

I tiptoed around Austin's bed, trying not to wake him. He looked so young and vulnerable when he was sleeping, his curls spread across the pillow, and protectiveness flared inside me.

I'd never felt this way about anyone before. I hadn't even realized I could feel this way.

Austin had been right last night. Being attracted to both men and women meant theoretically I had a choice. I could choose a woman better suited to me than Matilda and have a perfectly fine, functional heterosexual relationship, and I wouldn't be pretending.

There was only one problem. They wouldn't be Austin.

They wouldn't be someone who lit up my world. Who made me laugh so much. Who pushed me to try different flavors of ice cream and dance with them. Who made me want to get out of bed every morning, because every day was another day I got to spend with them.

They wouldn't be the person I was in love with.

Austin deserved to be claimed loud and proud. He deserved the person who was lucky enough to be with him to announce it to the world, to pull a Tom Cruise and bounce on

Oprah's couch and say how amazing it was to be in love with him.

I just needed to find the courage to be that person.

As I drove around Christchurch doing errands for the book launch, I scripted conversations in my head where I told my parents about Austin and me.

Maybe I should just bring him to the book launch as my date? Come out to my family and the who's who of Christchurch and New Zealand rugby at the same time.

Could I actually bring myself to do that?

For some reason known only to her, my mother had decided that instead of paying to hire drinking glasses, we'd supply our own. So after delivering the chairs, I was sent on a mission to Jen's house and my parents' house and even all the way to Rangiora to collect glasses from Grace.

When I dropped the glasses off at the venue, a grand old homestead that was now used for functions, my mother was busy fussing over an arrangement of flowers in the entranceway.

For a split second, I was plunged back to Matilda's and my wedding, when life had seemed to revolve around centerpiece arrangements.

"Looking good," I said.

"It's coming together." Mum stood back and surveyed the flowers with a critical eye.

I did a double take when I spotted a life-sized cardboard cutout of my father holding his book. The photographer had somehow managed to coax a reluctant smile onto my father's face.

"Nice photo of Dad." I nodded at the cutout.

"He hated the photo shoot for that," she said.

"I can imagine."

"Still, it's nice to have a celebration of his career."

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, it is.”

Would people gather like this if I had a book written about my rugby career? I snorted. Bench warmers who hovered on the fringe of the New Zealand team didn’t get books written about them.

I’d had years to come to terms with the fact I was never going to play at the same level my father had.

But tonight that fact would be rubbed in my face all over again.

So many former rugby players would be here tonight. And they’d talk to me about rugby because it was common ground. But underlying it would be the sense of how I’d never measured up to my father.

I was never going to be a man like him, admired by lots of people, a hero to the country. But maybe...maybe instead I should be aiming to be a hero to the people I loved.

I was mulling that concept over as I walked across the lawn back to my car.

My phone pinged.

I checked it immediately because eighty percent of my messages were from Austin. He’d promised to take the girls to the playground today, so I expected to see a picture of Lily or Eloise on the swings or slides.

Instead, it was a message from Matilda.

Shit.

I opened the message in trepidation.

But instead of the rant I’d expected, her message was one sentence.

Thought you might want to see this.

She’d included a link to a British tabloid. I clicked on it, and the headline reared up on my screen.

Gay Shocker! Brett’s Steamy Affair with the Manny Exposed.

My breath slammed out of me as if I'd been punched in the stomach. Part of me didn't want to read on, but I forced myself.

In a shocking turn of events, Katie Harris (26) claimed today that Brixton football star Brett (27) cheated on her for months with their nanny. According to Katie, it was his illicit gay affair that forced her into the extramarital affair with her personal trainer that ended their marriage.

Her claims are backed up by a series of steamy text messages between Brett and the nanny that were sent to the London Daily by an anonymous source.

The nanny, Austin Baker (25), moved back to his native New Zealand and is now working for another celebrity couple while Brett and Katie continue their bitter custody battle over the couples' two children, Felix (6) and Ruby (4), and their property estate worth £15 million.

Brett Harris has refused to comment on the allegations and has hunkered down in his Sussex mansion with his model girlfriend, Karina Webb (21).

Oh holy fuck.

Bile rose in my throat.

Austin had an affair with Brett Harris? His old boss?

The article had a long-distance picture of Austin with two kids and a woman in a playground.

There was also a photo of Brett Harris, a sexy, staged photo that had obviously been used in a charity calendar, and another emotion pierced my haze of disbelief.

Jealousy.

Pure, undiluted jealousy as I stared at Brett, who was a classic pretty-boy soccer star, with slick hair and a tanned, sculptured body.

I imagined him touching Austin. Imagined them fucking.

Oh, holy Christ, I was going to be sick.

I took deep breaths, trying to combat the nausea.

This couldn't be happening.

My phone buzzed with a call. For a moment, hope that it was going to be Austin, that he somehow had an explanation that would make this all okay, rose inside me.

But it was Matilda.

I pressed the answer button in a daze, but the knot in my throat prevented me from saying hello.

“Jacob, are you there?” Matilda asked.

“Yeah,” I managed to get out.

“Did you see the article?”

“I saw it.”

“I can't believe it. He had us all fooled. It looks like that's what he does, seduces his bosses.” Matilda's voice contained spite and glee.

And suddenly, my chest tightened. I couldn't do this. I couldn't discuss this with her. I couldn't dissect my relationship with Austin in light of this revelation.

I felt flushed and woozy, as if I'd been crushed under a scrum. “I've got to go.”

Matilda's voice changed to concern. “Are you okay?”

“I've got to go.”

Austin

“Austin, watch me!” Eloise called from the top of the slide.

“I’m watching.”

She sailed down, grinning broadly.

In my pocket, my phone started to chime. Glancing at Lily to check she was okay on the climbing frame, I took my phone out. It was an unknown UK number. Who in the UK wanted to talk to me?

“Hello?”

“Is that Austin Baker?”

I frowned. “Yes.”

“This is Leroy Mulder from the Metropolitan Mirror. I’m calling to ask if you want to make a statement about your relationship with Brett Harris.”

I felt as if my stomach had dropped down the slide with Eloise.

“Ah...what...?”

“Your relationship with Brett Harris. London Daily just broke a story that Brett had an affair with the manny. That was you, right?”

“No comment.” I cringed. It sounded like a line from a movie. And by saying no comment, had I just implicated myself? Should I have denied it outright? Claimed they’d got the wrong person?

“We’re willing to offer a very generous package to hear your side of the story.”

My heart pounded. I pulled the phone away from my ear and pressed the end call button.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

How had the papers found out about Brett and me? What evidence did they have?

With shaking fingers, I did a quick google and found the article.

Reading it, I felt as if I had a giant monster standing on my chest.

Text messages? Had Brett and I exchanged steamy text messages?

I checked my old messages, flicking through the chain between Brett and me. We’d never sexted but there had been some definite flirting in our messaging after we’d hooked up.

What time you back tonight?

8pm.

Good, I’ve got some fun plans for you.

It would be obvious to anyone who read the messages that our relationship was more than employee/employer.

I put a hand to my head.

What should I do? Call Brett? Was he going to deny it? Did he want me to deny it? If someone had hacked his phone, it would be stupid to lie about it, right?

My breath rushed out of me as my thoughts lurched in another direction.

Jacob.

Oh, holy shit. Holy, holy shit.

What was he going to say when he found out about this?

My whole body started to shake.

Jacob, who was so paranoid about people liking him for him, not his fame.

And now this had happened.

I looked like a celebrity chaser, someone who deliberately set out to seduce my famous bosses.

It would only be a matter of time before the story found its way to New Zealand. And the media would be all over this. They loved any local spin on international stories.

I should have told him. I should have sat him down and explained what had happened between Brett and me, and how different it was to what we had together.

And now it was too late.

Or was it?

I needed to talk to Jacob.

With my hands still not working properly, it took me two tries to call him.

He didn't answer. Usually Jacob's deep rumbling voicemail recording made me smile, but not today. Instead I waited impatiently for the beep.

"Hey, it's me. Can you call me when you get a chance? It's urgent. I mean, the girls are okay and everything, but it's still urgent. It's about...uh...well actually, I want to tell you myself rather than over a message, so um...just call me when you can."

Yeah, I'm pretty sure that voice message would feature on a how-not-to-leave-a-voicemail video compilation.

As soon as I hung up, I sent him a text as well.

Call me when you get a chance. Girls are okay, but it's urgent.

What else could I do? Email? Telegram? Send a message by pigeon? I needed to tell Jacob about this before he found out some other way.

On autopilot, I herded the girls toward the car. I made myself concentrate on the road as I drove them home, rather than letting my mind swirl off in other horrifying directions, like contemplating how Jacob would react when he found out.

As I made dinner for the girls, I checked my phone compulsively, but it remained silent.

My stomach hollowed as time ticked by. I tried calling Jacob again and again, but he didn't answer.

This wasn't good. Hopefully he'd just been tied up with some book launch-related emergency and hadn't checked his phone for the last few hours.

I'd just settled the girls to watch some TV after dinner when I heard the sound of the door opening.

I raced out into the entrance foyer, my mouth dry.

He knew.

I could tell from the look on his face.

It looked crumbled in, destroyed, like he'd just witnessed something terrible.

Jacob normally greeted me with a huge smile. Now his eyes flitted away as if it hurt to look at me.

"Hey," I said quietly.

"Hey." He ran his hand through his hair. "I'm running late. I need to get ready."

"Jacob." My voice was beseeching.

"I can't be late." His face was wooden as he pushed past me, heading for the stairs.

My heart in my throat, I followed him up to his room and stood in the doorway, watching him as he replaced his jeans with a tidy set of pants.

His movements were jerky as he got a shirt from his closet. He tugged off his T-shirt then started to button his dress shirt, still not looking at me.

Oh my God. I had to say something.

“I’m sorry, Jacob. I’m so sorry.”

His gaze finally met mine, and I almost took a step back at the depth of hurt in his eyes. “What are you sorry about?” His voice sounded splintery.

“That I didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me about your affair with Brett Harris?” He looked down at his shirt as he buttoned it.

“It wasn’t an affair. I wasn’t the reason Brett and Katie broke up. The tabloids are wrong about that.”

“But you did sleep with your boss?”

I looked him in the eye. “Yes.”

He flinched as if I’d hit him.

“It wasn’t like this. It wasn’t like us,” I said desperately, stepping forward, wanting nothing more than to touch him, to erase that horrible look from his face.

But Jacob stepped back, out of my arms’ reach. “What was it like then?”

I swallowed. “It was just a fling. It only started after they broke up.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t have feelings for him?”

I didn’t want to lie. “I had some feelings for him, but it wasn’t like this.”

God, I felt like a soundtrack stuck in a loop.

It wasn’t like this. It wasn’t like this. It wasn’t like this.

Nothing had ever been like this for me before. How could I make him understand that?

Jacob was silent as he tied his tie. “Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice was quiet.

“I didn’t want...I didn’t want you to think what we have was anything like that. Because it isn’t.”

He looked me square in the face. “You didn’t trust me.”

Shit. What could I say to that?

I hadn't thought of it in those terms, but he was right. I hadn't.

He grabbed a suit jacket from his closet and held it loosely in his hands. "I need to go. I've got to go to my dad's book launch."

"Jacob." I reached for him again as he came past me.

He ducked out of my grasp. "Please, Austin. I can't deal with this right now. I've got to go to the book launch."

The pain on his face cut at me, leaving slashes all over my soul.

Oh my God.

I had done this to him by not trusting him.

I followed him down the stairs, my footsteps heavy, my mind scrambling for ways to make this better. But I drew a blank.

He went into the living room to say good night to the girls, while I loitered in the kitchen, trying out various explanations and rejecting them all.

He came to grab his keys, his eyes skirting around me like I was a blank space. He looked so good in a suit and tie, and I couldn't believe I didn't get to touch him, hold him, comfort him.

"Jacob," I said softly.

He didn't look at me, just walked past me.

"Bye, Austin." His voice contained regret.

The door to the garage shut behind him with a quiet finality. The scrunching metal sound of the automatic garage door opening echoed through the wall along with the sound of his car gunning to life.

My knees gave out, and I buckled over, putting my head in my hands.

Oh God. No.

I crouched there, replaying everything, until suddenly Eloise was by my side.

I straightened up, trying to compose myself. Eloise gently leaned against me in her version of a hug.

That's when the full enormity struck me.

I had ruined it all.

I was going to lose him. I was going to lose Jacob, and the girls, and my job, and my home.

I was going to lose everything.

Jacob

I drove to the book launch still feeling as if my brain wasn't fully online.

Part of me had held out hope that Austin would deny it. Those tabloids made shit up all the time.

But no. Apparently Austin had slept with his previous boss.

Fuck. I was so stupid. I'd been so convinced that I'd found my once in a lifetime love.

I'd been in love before, but what I had with Austin had felt so much more powerful, so much more...right, than what I'd had with Matilda.

But it looked as if Austin just made a habit of sleeping with his bosses.

I'd never understood the word "gutted" before. People said it all the time. *I'm gutted the Marauders lost.*

Now I got it. I truly felt as if someone had gutted out my insides, leaving nothing behind.

I arrived at the book launch. There were already lots of cars there, so I had to park down the road. I sat in my car for a few minutes, trying to get myself together.

How was I going to handle tonight? Be around all those people without dwelling on what a complete fool I'd been. And would people know what was going on?

I got out my phone. Yep, sure enough, New Zealand's main news website, *Substance*, had already picked up the story, running the headline "Kiwi Manny Caught Up in UK Gay Affair Scandal." They'd found a picture of Austin and Matilda on her Instagram page, heads leaning in toward each other.

Looking at Austin's smile made me feel as if someone had scoured out my stomach with steel wool.

Right. I had to do this. I couldn't skip my father's book launch, despite the fact mingling with other people was up there with eating snails on the list of things I wanted to do right now.

I squared my shoulders and walked up to the entrance. My mum and dad were by the entrance greeting people as they came in, but I managed to skirt around them and headed straight to the bar. There were already over fifty people milling around in the main function room.

Getting a drink seemed like a great excuse not to talk to anyone, but unfortunately I hadn't recognized Darren in the queue right in front of me.

He turned with a beer in each hand, his eyes lighting up when he saw me. "Saw your manny made the headlines tonight. You don't lead a quiet life, do you?"

"Apparently not."

"You better watch yourself around him in case he tries to seduce you." He grinned, and I struggled to restrain myself from biting my brother-in-law's head off. It wasn't Darren's fault that his comment had cut too close.

Too late for the warning, Darren. I've already fallen in love with the guy. Stupid, eh?

"What do you want to drink?" the bartender asked me.

For a second I was tempted to go for something strong. But I was fairly sure that alcohol and I wouldn't be a good combination tonight.

"Just a Diet Coke, thanks."

I'd barely taken my first sip when suddenly Jen was there, one firm older-sister hand on my arm. From the grim set of her mouth, I knew what this conversation was going to be about. She pulled me into a corner lined with bookshelves, her expression morphing into one of sympathy. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"Have you talked to Austin?"

"Yes."

"And it's true?"

"Yep."

"What did he say?"

"That it wasn't the same as us." I tried to sound neutral, but the words clogged my throat.

Jen's gaze was steady. "Do you believe him?"

I took a deep breath. "I want to."

That was my honest answer. I wanted to believe Austin. I wanted so much to believe I hadn't been just another celebrity sportsman notch on his bedpost.

But even if I did believe that things between us weren't just a replay of what had happened with his last boss, the fact remained that he hadn't trusted me. He'd had so many chances to tell me, and he'd never shared the fact he'd had an affair with his previous boss.

And now that had been revealed, any future together would be so much harder. There would be all the sleazy innuendo and ridicule on social media that would turn our relationship into one giant joke for the whole country to laugh about.

Jen squeezed my arm. "I'm sorry," she said.

I swallowed hard. "Yeah, me too."

"Hey, Jacob, bro, how's it going?"

Fuck. I closed my eyes briefly, hoping to blot out the reality that Brandon Harris was bearing down on me. He was

one of my fake friend brigade from high school.

“Hey, Brandon, didn’t realize you were going to be here tonight,” I said.

It was a slightly more polite way of saying “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I work for the publishing company. Managed to score an invite.” He made a point of scanning the room. “Can’t believe how many rugby legends are in one place tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s a good turnout,” I said.

He slapped me on the arm. “Long time since high school, eh? Those were good times.”

Good times? For some of the guys, I supposed. For me, high school had been about trying to cope with my father’s legacy, trying to work out real friends from fake.

I squinted at Brandon. “What do you remember about me from high school?”

“You played rugby, dude!” He laughed. “First fifteen of course.”

My guts suddenly unclenched.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said in an easy-going voice. “I did play rugby.”

Jen sent me a puzzled look, but I felt lighter than I had all evening.

Because I knew if I were to ask Austin to list things about me, the fact I played rugby wouldn’t be in the top three. Maybe not even the top ten. Austin hadn’t been with me for the glory of being with a famous sportsperson. I knew that as surely as I knew my own name.

I’d criticized Austin for not trusting me, but didn’t I have to take my own leap of faith? Trust that what he said was true, that things were different between us. That his relationship with his ex-boss didn’t have any relevance to ours.

Any further conversation with Brandon was luckily cut off by the sound of someone tapping a microphone, drawing

everyone's attention to the makeshift podium at the front of the room. The official part of the book launch was about to begin.

First someone from the publishing company spoke. Then the ghost writer spoke about what an honor it was to tell the story of a New Zealand legend, and they also had Sean Harrison, a former New Zealand coach, say a few words about my father's career and the inspiration he'd been to the whole country.

"And now it's time to hear from the man himself. The hardest, toughest rugby player New Zealand has ever produced. They don't make them like this guy anymore."

They sure don't. My thoughts had a bitter tinge to them.

"Everyone, here's the one and only Roger Browne."

There was a tumultuous round of clapping and even a few cheers as my father made his way onto the stage. As always, he looked imposing and solid in his dark suit.

Once he got to the microphone, Dad pulled a pair of reading glasses out of his top pocket, and I felt a momentary pang. My father had been such a solid force in my life, as immovable as the earth and the sky, it seemed impossible that age was catching up with him.

Once he'd put his glasses on, he peered out at the crowd. "As you all know, I'm not a man who likes to talk a lot, which is why the publisher hired a ghost writer so someone else could tell my story."

There was a titter of laughter from the audience.

"But I want to say a big thanks to everyone for coming tonight." He paused, and for a second he looked as if he was going to add something, but then he dipped his head. "The publishers wanted me to read a bit out of the book. I think most of you will recognize this story."

With that, he opened the book and started to read the scene where he'd broken his collarbone and then continued to play. I listened with a mixture of pride and resentment. This was the

ultimate proof of what a hard man my father was, to keep playing through the pain of a broken bone.

It was such a folklore moment in New Zealand rugby history, and the audience all had smiles on their faces as he finished up and received another round of loud applause.

Jen turned to me. “He spoke well.”

“He always speaks well,” I replied. “For a guy who doesn’t like to talk much.”

The formalities ended, and the audience broke out into chatter. People surged forward to shake Dad’s hand, crowding around him. Brandon was one of them.

Grace came over, and I hovered with my sisters, managing to stay on the edge of their conversation as they talked about Grace’s kitchen renovations for another ten minutes. Then I saw Mum working her way through the crowd toward us. Had she seen the article about Austin? I didn’t know if I could stomach talking about it right now.

“I’m going to get some air,” I said.

It was unusually cold for a late October evening, and no one else was outside.

I stood at the railing of the wide porch and looked over the manicured grounds. What the hell was I going to do? I had to trust in Austin’s feelings for me and hope I could convince him to trust me.

Austin brought a lightness and sense of fun into my world. He made me live more boldly. I knew who Austin was deep down. Nothing that had happened in his past changed that.

But this shit coming out about Brett would make it so much harder to go public with our relationship. I could only too easily imagine what the trolls on social media would say once they got their teeth into this.

The noise of the door opening broke through my musings.

My father. Somehow, he’d escaped his legions of fans. He came and stood at the edge of the porch next to me.

“Good speech,” I said.

My father just grunted.

We stood there for a few moments, staring across the lawn. The chatter from inside was diluted out here, drowned out by the noise of the nearby water feature.

My father broke the quiet between us. “Never liked being the center of attention.”

I looked at him in surprise. “I don’t like it either.”

He took a deep breath. “The publicity people wanted me to read that section from the book. I tried to argue, but it wasn’t worth the hassle.”

“Why didn’t you want to read that bit?”

“Because I was an idiot,” Dad said simply.

I blinked. “What?”

“To keep playing when I had a broken collarbone.” My father still didn’t look at me, just kept staring across the lawn. “I was scared the selectors were thinking about starting Bruce Wairau ahead of me, and I didn’t want to come off early with an injury and let him have a chance to shine.”

He laughed a bitter, cynical laugh. “I’ve been hero-worshipped all these years for doing something completely fucking dumb. That’s my lasting legacy to the world, to tell people to ignore pain. But pain is what tells you something is wrong, and you need to try to fix it. I was lucky I didn’t do any permanent damage.”

Holy shit. I felt almost dizzy at his confession. Off-balance. Something I’d taken as the bedrock truth in my life had been suddenly upended.

“Yeah, you were lucky,” I said.

We stood there for another minute before I managed to rustle up my voice.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“For what?”

“For sharing that. I never knew.”

“Only ever told your mother that.” His smile was cynical. “It doesn’t really fit with the image the rest of New Zealand wants to see.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I better get back in there.”

“You are the man of the hour,” I said.

He clapped his hand on my shoulder. “You’re a good kid, Jacob.”

I stood outside by myself, my father’s words running through my head.

Pain is what tells you something is wrong, and you need to try to fix it.

I would be in pain without Austin in my life. Massive pain.

My hurt over the fact he hadn’t trusted me enough to tell me about Brett, and my jealousy at the idea of them together, were minor compared to the pain I’d feel if I didn’t have Austin in my life.

And okay, it definitely was going to be shit coming out to New Zealand, especially now when everyone would see Austin only as some man-grabbing, serial boss seducer.

But I didn’t want to be like my father and go along with a fucking lie just to keep to the narrative the public wanted.

I wanted to live my truth. And that included Austin.

I took a deep breath. It was like getting the ball at the twenty-two line when you had the whole South African pack standing between you and scoring.

Could I work out the best way to move forward?

Austin

How had everything turned to shit in such a monumental way?

In a performance worthy of an Oscar, I somehow managed to pull myself together and get through the bedtime routine with the girls.

But as soon as they were settled, I came back out to the lounge and curled up on the couch in a bundle of misery. What was I going to do? What could I say to Jacob to convince him that our relationship wasn't just a repeat of what had happened with Brett?

The noise of the front door opening had me instantly on my feet.

Jacob. Had Jacob come back from the book launch early? Were we going to talk about it? What should I say? Maybe I should start by saying exactly how I felt. I'd held off telling him that I loved him because I'd been too worried about whether he felt the same. But this wasn't a time to cling to my dignity. Now was the time to be completely honest, hope that I could convince him I was telling the truth.

I walked into the front hallway, and my shoulders clenched.

It wasn't Jacob standing there. It was Matilda.

I blinked a few times. "What are you doing here?"

She arched an eyebrow. "It's my house, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean it like that..."

But she was stalking past me. “In light of some revelations today, I thought that Jacob and I needed to have a face-to-face conversation.”

“He’s at his dad’s book launch,” I said numbly.

“Then I guess our conversation can wait until tomorrow. But spoiler alert, Austin. I don’t think that conversation is going to be promising for your future employment.”

“Matilda, please don’t do this...” My throat clogged, but somehow the truth still escaped past the huge lump. “I love him.”

She gave me a scathing look. “I bet you say that to all your bosses.”

I sucked in a deep breath, but my voice still came out raggedy. “I don’t actually.”

Matilda stared at me, and I held her gaze, trying to convince her I was telling the truth. But which way would the truth sway Matilda? Would my loving Jacob make her even more determined to get rid of me?

My phone chimed with an incoming call. Hope flared in my chest.

Was it Jacob?

But when I saw the caller ID, my stomach plummeted.

Bluehaven rest home.

“Hello?”

“Austin Baker? It’s Amanda Faraday, manager of the Bluehaven rest home. I’m calling about your grandmother, Gwen Baker.”

“Is she okay?”

The manager hesitated. “I’m sorry, but she’s gone missing.”

My chest felt as if someone had stomped on it. “What do you mean, missing?”

“She is not in her unit. Our CCTV footage shows her leaving the grounds around four o’clock, and she hasn’t returned. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for a few hours.”

God. I’d been ignoring my phone because of the calls from the British press.

“I don’t suppose you know anywhere she could be at this time?” she asked.

“No.”

“We’ve called the police, and they’re coming here. We’ll be assembling a search party.”

“I’m coming right now,” I said.

I ended the call, and the enormity of what was happening sunk in. I pressed my hands to my eye sockets.

Matilda was regarding me with a watchful gaze. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s my gran. She’s gone missing.”

I couldn’t believe it as I said the words. Could things get any worse? Why had the universe decided to unleash all its fury on me today?

I straightened up. “I’ve got to go.”

On wobbly legs, I went to the key rack and grabbed my car keys, but they were no sooner in my fingers than they slipped out, dropping to the floor with a clang.

I stared down at them for a second, uncomprehending.

Matilda swooped down and picked them up.

“Here.” She pressed them into my hand. “Are you safe to drive?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

Emotions warred on Matilda’s face. She was angry, but she also knew how much my grandmother meant to me.

“Good luck. I hope you find her quickly.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I tried to keep it together as I drove down the hill. The lights of Christchurch were spread out in front of me, but instead of admiring the view like I normally did, I clutched the steering wheel as panic rose inside me like damp rot.

Somewhere out there was Gran. By herself. In the dark.

Hysteria was creeping up to tap me on the back, and I gulped in air, trying to keep myself calm. In the turmoil of my mind, one thought pierced through, like a beacon of light in a storm.

Jacob.

I wanted Jacob.

But Jacob was at his father’s book launch. He was busy, and he was angry at me. I didn’t even know where things stood between us anymore. I couldn’t bother Jacob with this. I would have to handle it by myself, like I did everything.

But as I came to that conclusion, Jacob’s accusation flashed in my head.

You didn’t trust me.

He was right. I hadn’t trusted him to choose me over Matilda. I hadn’t trusted in his feelings for me.

But hadn’t Jacob proved, over and over, that he was trustworthy? Right from the start, he’d never promised more than he could deliver. I had told Jacob that things were different with us, different to what I’d had with Brett, but did I believe it deep down?

Jacob being here right now wouldn’t help at a practical level. And if I did call him, how would it feel if he didn’t answer? Or worse, if he answered but was too angry at me to come?

Could I handle that? Asking for help from Jacob and not getting it? Being rejected by him when I really needed him?

But I had to try.

Fingers shaking, I pulled over to the side of the road and called him.

“Hello?”

Jacob’s tone was clipped. Immediately the air whooshed out of my lungs. God, he sounded so angry. I wanted to hang up but forced myself to push on. “Gran’s missing.”

“What?”

“She’s gone missing from the rest home. I’m going there now because Matilda’s here to look after the girls. The rest home said they’ve called the police. But it’s a cold night...” My voice broke off.

“I’ll be right there,” Jacob said.

“But the book launch—”

Jacob’s tone offered no room for argument. “I’ll be right there.”

Jacob

Fear swamped my mind, pushing everything else out. Gwen was missing. And Austin sounded broken. I needed to get to him as fast as I could.

My mother approached me, her eyebrows knitted together. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to go.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Go? It’s your father’s book launch. You can’t just go.”

“Austin’s grandmother has gone missing.” My words had my other family members snapping to attention.

“Austin, your manny?” Mum asked.

“Yeah.”

I pushed past her, heading toward the front door. My only thought was how quickly I could get to Austin.

“Can we help?” Jen said. “We can come too.”

“I don’t know. I guess they’ll need people to help search for her.”

“I’ll round the family up. You go be with Austin,” she said urgently.

I nodded blindly, stumbling through the crowd and out the door. It was a hike to my car, but I jogged the distance quickly.

As I was driving down the driveway, a call came through my car speakers, the musical ringtone sounding so upbeat and

wrong compared to the thoughts lurking in my mind.

It was Jen. “I’ve got Sam and Mum and Dad and Grace. Darren’s driving in his car. Where are we going?”

“Bluehaven rest home.”

“Okay, I’ll google it. See you there soon, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

I pressed end, stunned. My father had left his own book launch to help my manny out? What had Jen said to them? I knew she could be persuasive when she wanted to be, and if it meant more people searching for Gwen, then I was all for it.

It wasn’t until I’d pulled up at Bluehaven and Jen’s car pulled in next to mine that I thought through the full implications of my family being there. Could I support Austin properly without my family realizing the true nature of our relationship? What would I do if faced with the choice?

I half-jogged across the parking lot, in the direction of the manager’s office, my family right behind me.

The foyer of the admin building was swarming with people, the blue uniforms of police officers scattered through the crowd.

And there was Austin, his curls wild around his face, his expression distraught.

In a few strides, I had him in my arms.

And I was answering my own question.

Because I knew this was not how you comforted someone who worked for you.

This was the hug you gave the person you loved when their world was falling apart. When you were going to do everything in your power to prop them up, to fill some of the void inside them.

That was the hug Austin deserved. So that was the hug I gave him.

I pulled back just enough to see his face. “What can I do to help?”

He huffed out a shaky breath and nodded toward the police. “They’re organizing a search party now.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

His blue eyes met mine. “Just be here with me. Please.”

“Always.” I brushed a kiss over his forehead and felt some of the tension drain out of him as he leaned into me. We stayed like that for a few moments, a pocket of stillness in the crowd of people bustling around us.

“Austin.” A policewoman approached. She was in her mid-fifties with a severe haircut and gentle eyes. “We need to talk to you about any other places you think your grandmother might have gone to that we should prioritize.”

We moved apart, but I made sure I kept one hand on his waist.

“Sure,” he said.

The police officer sent me a curious glance. “Hi, I’m Detective Sergeant Morris,” she said.

Austin hastened to introduce me. “This is Jacob. He’s my...uh...boss.”

“And his boyfriend,” I said firmly.

Austin’s eyes widened. But not as much as Detective Morris’s did when recognition clicked on her face. Obviously a rugby fan.

Her gaze slid behind me, and her eyes widened even more. Austin followed her gaze and blinked.

“You brought the cavalry,” he said.

I turned, still keeping my hand on his waist.

My family were standing a few feet away, all with expressions somewhere on the surprise-to-shock spectrum.

My gaze slid to my father. His bushy eyebrows had buried themselves in his hairline.

But I didn't care right now.

"You better go talk to them while I talk to the police," Austin said.

"I'll be right back," I promised.

My family were in a huddle, standing out from the rest of the crowd due to their fancy book launch clothes. My steps slowed as I approached them. This was it. The moment I'd dreaded. The moment when how my family regarded me changed forever.

But if that was the price I had to pay for being with Austin, then I'd take it.

I took a deep breath as I reached them. "Are you guys okay to help with the search? It looks like they need all the help they can get." I went for a preemptive strike, but nothing could distract my mother when she had that look on her face. That look I remembered from childhood when nothing was going to stop her working out who'd taken the last chocolate chip cookie from the packet.

"What's going on, Jacob?" she asked.

I played dumb. "What do you mean, what's going on?"

"It looked like...you and...the manny..." For the first time I could remember, my mother stammered.

I straightened my shoulders. "His name is Austin. And yeah, we're in a relationship, if that's what you're asking. At least I hope we still are. And I really, really don't need your judgment right now."

My mother put her hand up in a defensive gesture. "I'm not judging."

There was a moment of silence, then Grace snorted, and Jen joined in, and suddenly my sisters and I were having an unexpected moment of amusement at the idea of our mother not judging something in our lives. Even Darren and Sam laughed. My laughter had a tinge of hysteria. It faded when I realized my father wasn't even chuckling. His eyebrows were

still scrunched, as if that were his default expression now. Bewilderment.

“We’ll go register with the search team,” Jen said to me. “Don’t worry about us. Just worry about Austin.”

My father snapped his gaze to mine, and I braced for whatever he was about to say. But his eyebrows just unfolded slightly as he regarded me. “Call your teammates. They’ll want to help.”

“Okay.” I turned to see if Austin had finished with the police. He was still talking, his face intent as he pointed at something on the tablet Detective Morris was holding.

In a few strides, I was back by his side, my arm automatically sliding around his shoulders. Austin leaned into my touch as he continued to talk through the locations of significance. With my free hand I fumbled in my jacket pocket for my phone, pulled it out and opened the Marauders WhatsApp group.

Hey, guys, my manny’s grandmother has gone missing. Police are organizing a search, need all the help we can get.

Then I attached the map location of Bluehaven and pressed send.

It looked as if I was coming out to more than just my family tonight.

But it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except supporting Austin and finding Gwen.

Austin was poring over the search grid and I was standing next to him, one hand resting on his waist, when Ethan arrived. His eyebrows shot up when he clocked my hand on Austin’s waist, but his steps didn’t falter as he came over.

“How can I help?” he asked.

In the next half hour, other Marauders players trickled in—Zach, Ali, Reuban—and joined the search teams heading out into the darkness armed with flashlights.

The whole time I stayed by Austin’s side, making sure one part of me was always touching him.

Even though we weren't doing any actual searching because the police wanted Austin to stay at their impromptu search headquarters, I'd never felt more useful in my life.

My family trickled back in from the streets they had searched. I went over to check on Grace. She leaned down to massage her calf.

"I wouldn't recommend heels as good footwear to pound the streets," she said.

"I generally don't wear my heels outside the house," I joked.

Grace's eyebrows flew up.

I nudged her shoulder. "It's a joke, Gracie. Just because I'm in a relationship with a guy doesn't mean I'm dressing up as a woman. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I don't."

She nudged me back. "That's a good thing. You don't have the legs to pull off heels."

Austin drifted over to me, and I immediately put my arm around his waist.

"Grace was just insulting my legs," I said.

He rummaged up a smile. "Your legs are great."

"Ah, proof that love is blind," Grace said.

Before I had a chance to respond, there was a flurry of activity where one of the officers was manning the phones.

And Detective Morris was rushing toward us with a triumphant expression.

"We've found her," she said. "She's alive."

Austin's body folded into mine. He closed his eyes.

"It looks like she fell down a bank. An ambulance is taking her to hospital now. The report is that she's conscious but a bit confused."

Austin snapped his eyes open. "Can I go see her?"

"Of course."

He turned to me. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

I stayed in the same place I’d been throughout the night.
The place I belonged.

By Austin’s side.

Austin

Jacob drove us to the hospital, but he kept one hand on my knee, anchoring me.

I'd known I'd fallen for Jacob, that I was in love with him. But I hadn't quite appreciated until tonight how much he was my safe space. With Jacob, I could break down and know that he'd put me back together.

The fact he'd come, the fact he'd been so amazing, the fact he'd held me and comforted me unapologetically in front of his family and all the other searchers, had meant so much.

But I couldn't focus on that now. Now was about Gran.

By the time we arrived, by some miracle known only to the gods and the hospital administration staff, she'd already been transferred from A&E to the main ward. And in another small miracle, we were allowed in to see her despite it being past visiting hours.

I took a deep breath as I stood at the doorway of her room.

She looked so small lying on the bed, one leg swathed in bandages, blankets bunched up around her torso.

She was dozing, and I hesitated, not wanting to disturb her.

I took a small step into the room, and Gran's eyes cracked open.

"Austin." There was something desperate in the way she said my name. I went to her side, and her hand clutched at me,

and I gathered it in both of mine. Her papery skin felt fragile and cold.

“It’s me, Gran. I’m right here.” I brought her hand up to my cheek.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in hospital. You fell down a bank and hurt your ankle.”

“Is Eve here?”

I swallowed. “No, she’s not here right now.”

Her eyes flicked to Jacob. “Who’s he?”

My stomach plunged. How many times had she met Jacob in the last six months? The doctor had warned me that with Alzheimer’s the most recent memories were the first to go. But was this just confusion brought on by the bump to her head and her traumatic evening?

Jacob came forward. “I’m Jacob, Austin’s partner.”

My breath rushed out of me. Not only at his words but the way he delivered them. No hesitation. He’d called himself my boyfriend when talking to the detective, and that had blown me away. Now he was my partner? It seemed as if Jacob’s definition of our relationship was progressing at an incredible speed.

It’s funny how I’d always hated the word “partner.” It reminded me of cowboys strolling around the Wild West. But now, it seemed the most perfect word ever invented in the English language. Jacob was my partner in so many ways. The person I could trust to always be by my side. Hadn’t tonight proved that?

Gran’s eyes seemed heavy, and, as much as I wanted to stay by her side, I knew we should let her rest.

“You sleep, Gran. We’ll be back in the morning.”

I leaned forward and kissed her forehead, her skin dry and soft under my lips.



Jacob and I were silent on the car ride home.

There was so much to process, all the events of the evening, Gran going missing, Jacob being a constant presence by my side, his family and teammates right there helping out.

My shoulders slumped under the weight of it all.

I'd been ignoring my phone all evening, but as we arrived inside the house, I checked my record of missed calls.

“Shit.”

Jacob snapped his head up to me. “What’s wrong?”

“The UK papers are still calling me.” I rubbed at my face. “They’ll be wanting a comment on the Brett story.”

“Oh. Right.” Jacob’s face looked studiously neutral.

I bit my lip. “We need to talk about it,” I said reluctantly.

Jacob studied me. “We can talk about it in the morning. It’s been a long night. You’re shattered.”

But I tugged his hands, leading him to the couch. “No. I want to talk about it now. I don’t want you to ever think what happened with Brett is anything like what we have together.”

Jacob chewed the inside of his cheek. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he finally asked.

I took a deep breath. “You were right. I have a hard time trusting people. I grew up having to rely largely on myself, and it’s hard to change that. But I’m going to work on it, okay? And I’m so sorry. I should have trusted you enough to tell you.” I looked down at my hands. “I was also embarrassed. It’s hard admitting that I got sucked into believing someone cared about me when I was only a convenience to them.”

Jacob put a gentle hand under my chin, lifting my gaze to his.

“I can’t imagine someone getting to know you and not...”

“Not what?”

“Not falling in love with you.”

My breath left me. “I love you too,” I said softly.

He smiled then, one of those Jacob, deep wrinkle eye smiles. “I’m glad it’s a mutual thing,” he said, and a laugh escaped me.

Jacob chuckled too and I loved the way our laughter mingled, his low deep chuckle in perfect harmony with mine.

“Thank you for being with me tonight,” I said.

“Always.” The way he said the word gave it gravity; all the weight of the world was in that one word.

I leaned into him, letting out a deep sigh as my fears bubbled up inside me. “Gran’s Alzheimer’s, it’s only going to get worse. She’s going to slowly fade away, and there’s nothing I’ll be able to do.”

“You’ll be able to love her. And even if it gets to the point where she doesn’t recognize you, she’ll still know that she is loved.” Jacob’s voice was calm, steady.

I let out a shuddering breath. “It’s going to be so hard.”

“I know, Austin. There’s no magical cure. And there will be days that hurt.” He stroked my hair, his hand solid and reassuring. “But I will be with you every step of the way, okay? We’ll laugh together and cry together, and we’ll take the silver lining that it’s a reminder life is short and we have to squeeze every last drop of happiness out of it while we can.”

Oh my God. My heart pounded like crazy.

“And you say that you’re not great with words,” I managed to choke out.

He stared down at me, his eyes intent. “Is it a deal? That we’re together like that? Like a forever type of deal?”

I met his gaze steadily. “It’s most definitely a deal.”

It was a physical impossibility not to kiss him right now.

Our kiss was gentle and sweet and stayed that way, not ramping up to the scorching heat that usually ignited when Jacob's lips met mine.

Because this kiss wasn't about what went on inside the bedroom. This kiss was about the life we were going to build together.

Jacob pulled back. He gazed into my eyes then trailed a hand down my cheek to cup my face.

"I love you so much," he murmured.

How was this my life? That I had the most amazing man on the planet telling me he loved me?

I couldn't help leaning in to kiss him again, a press of lips that felt like a promise of forever.

A noise at the door burst the magical bubble between us.

Matilda stood in the doorway. She looked young and innocent in a pair of pink pajamas and with her hair loose, but her expression...her expression was how I imagined victims of war looked when they saw the worst horrors imaginable.

For a moment we all stared at each other. I was acutely aware of Jacob's hand still cupping my face. He dropped it down to his lap.

"I thought I heard voices. I just wanted to check..." She swallowed and took a deep breath. "How's your gran?"

"They found her. She's in hospital now. She hurt her ankle and bumped her head, but otherwise she's okay. The hospital let us see her. She was quite confused. I'm not sure how much of that was because of what happened tonight or just due to her Alzheimer's. But she's safe at least. They're keeping her overnight for observation, and they said they'd call if anything changes."

I knew I was talking too much, but what else could I do? I was fully aware Matilda had just walked in on an incredibly romantic moment between me and her ex.

"I'm glad your Gran is okay," she said.

“Thanks.”

Her gaze flicked to Jacob, but she didn't say another word, just turned and left.

I let out a breath.

Jacob's eyebrows drew together. “That timing wasn't ideal.”

“No. Definitely not ideal. It isn't really fair on Matilda to see this.”

Jacob grimaced. “We'll deal with it all tomorrow.”

Jacob

Waking up the next day, it was hard to believe the events of the previous twenty-four hours.

Everything was the same—I was waking up next to Austin—yet so much had changed.

With Matilda in the house, I'd thought about whether it was fair to her to spend the night in Austin's room. But after everything that had happened, I couldn't bear to leave him.

His eyes were still closed, his long lashes fanned out on his cheeks. I couldn't help kissing the top of his cheekbone.

And because a slow, sleepy smile spread across his face, I deposited a gentle kiss on his jaw, and then kissed down his neck to his collarbone.

"Mmm." Austin shuffled closer. "I like where this is going."

"And where exactly do you think this is going?" I asked, placing soft kisses on his chest.

"I think you're going to show me how much you love me..."

His blue eyes met mine, and I got a glimpse of all the warmth and affection—

"By sucking me off," he finished.

I chuckled. "Because nothing says love like a morning blow job."

“You better believe it.”

Right. With that gauntlet laid down, I was determined to bring my A game. Worship Austin’s cock to show him exactly how much he meant to me.

And judging from the way I turned him into a squirming, groaning mess, it worked. His chest rose and fell and he looked at me with eyes half-hooded with lust.

But just as I sensed he was getting close, I pulled off and moved up his body so I could claim his mouth. Fuck, kissing Austin was like accessing another plane of existence, one where everything boiled down to the heat generated as our lips and tongues slid together.

Our hard cocks rubbed against each other and nothing felt better than putting one hand around us both and jerking us off together.

“Oh shit...Jacob...” He arched his head back as he came hard. Fuck. Just watching Austin come was enough to trigger my own orgasm.

After we’d cleaned up, he lay with his head on my chest, our heartbeats in sync as they settled into a gentle pace.

“That’s definitely the best way to start the day,” he said.

“I can’t think of a better one,” I agreed.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t lie there together forever. Eventually, we had to face real life.

Austin called the hospital, who confirmed Gwen had had a stable night.

He let out a sigh as he put his phone back on the bedside table. “I’ll go see her as soon as it’s visiting hours. And I’ll need to talk to the rest home about moving her to a more secure unit.”

The frown lines etched in his face had me reaching to pull him close.

“I can come with you if you want,” I offered.

“Don’t you have stuff to do to help your family?”

“I just have to return the chairs and glasses. It should only take a couple of hours.”

“Are you going to see your parents?”

“Yeah. I’ll drop by their place.”

Austin seized up. “What do you think they’re going to say?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got no idea. Last night they seemed pretty shocked, but they handled it.”

He eyed me warily. “You seem remarkably calm about everything.”

I shrugged again. “Nothing they can say will change anything. And I was thinking I might put in a call to the New Zealand Rugby media team.”

“The media team?”

“Yeah, see if they can line us up an interview with one of those celebrity magazines so we can talk about our relationship. Matilda and I did a few articles, but we went through her agent. My agent deals with rugby contracts and sponsorship stuff, not really this kind of thing.”

Austin stared at me. “You want to come out to the whole country about our relationship? Now?”

“Yeah, if you’re okay with it. I don’t want it to be like Aiden and Tyler, where someone outs us. I didn’t see anyone taking videos of us last night, but it could have happened. And I don’t know how long Matilda will keep quiet on this. So I think we need to be proactive.”

He plucked at the top of the sheet, not meeting my eye. “You don’t want to wait until this Brett stuff dies down?”

“Nah,” I said. “I don’t think what happened with you and Brett should have an influence over anything with us. You don’t owe anyone an explanation for your past relationships.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

I wanted to claim Austin like he deserved to be claimed. So organizing an interview was my version of Tom Cruise jumping on a couch.

Austin was watching me with a warm expression. “If you hadn’t just gotten lucky, you’d be getting exceptionally lucky right now.”

“I’m exceptionally lucky regardless,” I said.

Austin moaned, grabbed a pillow, and hit me on the head with it.

I blinked at him. “What was that for?”

“You’re being too sweet. I can’t handle too much sweetness this early in the morning.”

“I never thought I’d be accused of being too sweet,” I said.

“I know. Look, I’ll do some dance moves. You won’t be able to stop yourself from insulting me.” He started to wiggle against the sheets. I grabbed his hands to stop him before he hurt himself.

“You think I need you your dance moves for an excuse to hassle you? Because you are really overrating your joke telling abilities.”

“Ah, there’s the Jacob I know and love.”

“And you think I’m too sweet.” I leaned down to kiss him.



Despite the calmness I had projected to Austin, my heart still pounded and my stomach clenched later that morning as I pulled up to my parents’ house.

I got the crate of glasses out of my truck and carried it to the front door, balancing it against the side of the house as I rang the doorbell.

My father answered, and I followed him into the kitchen.

“Where’s Mum?” I asked.

“She’s gone to return the vases she borrowed for the flowers.”

Damn. I put the crate down on the bench and ran a hand through my hair. I hadn’t anticipated having a conversation with my father without my mother here to run interference.

There was a moment of silence between us.

“How’s Austin’s grandmother?” Dad asked finally.

“She’s okay. She had a stable night. She’ll probably be discharged today back to the rest home.” I gazed around the bright kitchen. It was the same as it had been for years. The only thing that changed was the grandchildren’s artwork fastened to the fridge.

When my gaze drifted back to my father, I found him studying the countertop.

He cleared his throat. “So...your...relationship with Austin. Is it serious?”

“Yes. It’s serious.”

My father didn’t say anything more, and I found myself dredging up words from deep inside me. “I’m never going to be the same kind of man as you, Dad. And I’m okay with that.”

His gaze flew up to mine. “Jacob, no one ever said you had to be the same kind of man as me. You just need to be the best person you can be.”

“Austin makes me the best person I can be,” I said softly.

Dad nodded slowly. “Well, if that’s the case, I’m happy you’ve got him.”

I blinked, not even bothering to hide my surprise. “You’re telling me you don’t have a problem with me being in a relationship with a man?”

Dad rubbed the back of his neck, and I sensed he was choosing his words carefully. “I admit it’s not what I expected. And it might take me a bit to get used to the idea. But you’re my son.”

I waited for him to finish, but he simply opened the box and started to methodically return the glasses to the cupboard.

I was his son.

Maybe there was nothing more to say.



When I arrived home, Matilda's car was gone.

I found Austin in the girls' room, helping them into their swimsuits. "Where's Matilda?" I asked.

"She said she was going shopping," he said as he untwisted the strap of Eloise's suit.

"How was she?"

"Okay. A little subdued. I just kept talking at her until she eventually responded. It must be so hard for her." He rubbed sunscreen on Lily's face, his own holding nothing but sympathy.

"Are you coming outside?" he asked.

"Soon," I replied.

I blew out a breath as Austin and the girls went outside. What was Matilda going to do? Would she start to tell people about our relationship?

The thought had me getting out my phone and dialing New Zealand Rugby.

I asked to speak to Rachel, who was head of the PR team. She was a nice person, and I hoped I wasn't about to ruin her day.

"Hey, Jacob, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"I want to set up an interview about my new relationship. As soon as possible."

"Sure thing. I can give you a list of our approved magazines and approach them for deal offers, and you can decide which one to go with."

“I don’t care about the money. But I really want the article published as soon as possible.”

“No problem. I’ll put together a pitch sheet. What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

I cleared my throat. “Ah...it’s actually a boyfriend. And his name is Austin Baker.”

There was a pause on the other end, then muttering. “Damn. Damn. Damn.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

She gave a low chuckle. “We took bets around the office. I had it down for at least another two months, so you’ve just cost me money.”

“Bets about what?”

“About how long until the next rugby player came out. Now that Tyler and Aiden have paved the way for LGBTQ-plus players, we figured the odds were that more would emerge from the woodwork.”

“You’re telling me I’m just a trend follower?”

Rachel laughed. “We just figured it would be easier now for other players to be openly out.”

She was right. I wasn’t that worried about public reaction now that I knew I wouldn’t be the first gay New Zealand rugby player.

“There’s also a delicate situation that needs to be handled.” I quickly explained about the tabloid exposé of Austin and Brett’s affair.

“I think a celebrity magazine, something like *Famous Faces*, is definitely the right choice then. A fluff piece, and we can control the narrative about his ex.”

“Good.”

“How’s your family handling it? And Matilda?”

“My family’s okay. Matilda is a work in progress.”

“Have you told her you’re doing an article?”

“Uh... Not yet.”

“You need to give her the heads-up, Jacob. I’ll put in some calls to see if someone is willing to bump their cover story and get you in next week. The timing could be swift, so make sure you’ve talked to everyone you need to.”

“Okay.”

Shit. Talking to Matilda about this was one conversation I wasn’t looking forward to.

I thanked Rachel, who promised to email me some options soon. Then I headed out to the backyard, where the girls were squealing as Austin chased them with a water pistol.

I joined in, all four of us laughing and quickly getting soaked. Austin blasted water straight into my face, so I stalked him across the lawn, wrestling the gun out of his hands.

“Oh no, I’m being attacked by Brownes,” Austin cried out as he sunk to his knees, the girls and I piling on top of him. He laughed and squirmed, trying to get out from where I’d pinned him down.

“Get him Eloise,” I said, and she obligingly fired a jet of water into his face.

His spluttering and fake look of indignation made me laugh so much my stomach hurt.

A movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I looked up to discover Matilda standing on the deck, watching us all.

I released Austin from my grasp and stood up.

“Hey.” I ran my hand through my wet hair.

Matilda disappeared back into the house.

“I just need to...” I said to Austin.

The laughter had faded from his face, and he nodded. He turned to the girls. “Do you think we should get the sprinkler out?”

I walked into the house, dripping water onto the tiles.

Matilda was standing in the kitchen, staring blankly at the counter.

She jerked her head up, but didn't say anything.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey." Her voice was flat.

I stopped a few feet short of her, rocking back on my heels. "I...uh...just wanted to let you know that we're doing a magazine article."

She narrowed her eyes. "Who is doing a magazine article?"

"Me and Austin. About our relationship."

She folded her arms over her chest. "Whose idea was that?"

"Mine."

"But I had to drag you kicking and screaming to do the article about our wedding. You hate things like that!"

She was right. I'd despised doing magazine articles growing up and had resisted when Matilda had suggested the idea.

"I don't want to be outed by anyone else. I want to do it myself."

Her nostrils flared. "And have you thought about what's going to happen to me? The whole country will laugh at me!"

"No one will laugh at you, Matilda."

She jutted out her chin. "You love him more than you ever loved me."

What could I say to that? I didn't want to lie. And she was right. I did love Austin on a deeper level than I'd ever loved her.

Her shoulders drooped, and her eyes filled with tears. "I would have given anything for you to kiss me like you were kissing him last night. For you to look at me the way you look at him."

“I’m sorry.” The weight of the world was in those words. Because I was sorry. Sorry that I’d never loved Matilda like she deserved to be loved. Sorry that I’d fallen in love with our manny right under her nose and forced her to see exactly what our relationship had been lacking.

“We haven’t discussed his ongoing employment.” Her voice was brittle.

My back stiffened, and I stared her down. “If you insist on firing him, just remember he’ll still be here every second week as my partner. He’ll be part of our lives. Nothing you can do will change that.”

She turned away, but not before I saw the tears start to fall.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

At the bottom of the stairs, she turned back to me, wiping her eyes impatiently. Her expression was combative, but as she stared at me, it faded into something that was just sad.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“I know,” she said softly.

Austin

A week later, the whole of New Zealand knew.

Famous Faces, New Zealand's biggest celebrity magazine, had bumped their cover article to make room for the one Jacob and I did together, which was titled "How Jacob Browne Rediscovered Love."

And although I was making the news a little too frequently for my liking, I couldn't help smiling every time I saw the photo on the front cover.

Because Jacob had been awkward during the photo shoot and the photographer had tried everything to get him to relax but failed, until I'd come up with the great idea of whispering some of my best vegetable puns into his ear.

In the photo they ended up using, I had a satisfied smirk on my face and Jacob was laughing down at me, but the look on his face...so tender and full of love, it made my heart swell.

And okay, the rest of the article still made me cringe, especially the part where they'd tried to turn the recent UK media attention into a positive. *After his last relationship, the fallout from which made headlines in the United Kingdom, Austin knows that what he and Jacob has is special.*

The UK papers had connected the dots and run their own articles about Jacob's and my relationship with clickbait headlines:

"First a Football Player, Now a Rugby Player, Who's Next for Brett's Manny Lothario?"

“Manny Ditches Brett to Hook Up with a New Zealand Rugby Player, Son of New Zealand Great.”

Yeah, those headlines weren't so fabulous. But Jacob didn't seem bothered by them, so I was trying not to let them bother me either.

I'd taken a copy of the *Famous Faces* magazine to Gran's unit so she could have it as a memento, and hopefully it would help her recognize Jacob when he came with me to visit.

I didn't want to think too far into the future about her Alzheimer's and what was to come. Jacob was right, we'd take it one day at a time. And get through it together.

Today, the girls and I had spent the afternoon making papier-mâché heads. Lily was making a rhinoceros and Eloise a giant T-Rex that gave me chills every time I looked at it.

I was clearing up the last of the mess when Jacob came out and gave me a tight smile.

“The interview is on,” he said.

“Oh...right.”

I washed the glue off my hands, trying to quell my nerves.

It had been advertised all over television and social media for the past few days—an exclusive live interview with Matilda Nielson on the prime-time current affairs show.

Matilda had retreated back to Auckland for an undefined timeframe. Her excuse was that she needed to do publicity for her show, but I had the feeling she was trying to avoid Jacob and me as much as possible.

Her interview was supposed to be about her new show, but as social media was currently going insane over Jacob's and my relationship, we were pretty sure she would be asked about us.

I sat down next to Jacob, and he put his arm around me. I nestled into him.

“Whatever she says, I just want you to know I'll never regret this.” He placed a quick kiss on the top of my head.

Would I ever get used to the way Jacob treated me? The easy affection between us. These moments when he seemed to read my mind and know exactly what to say.

The interviewer had no sooner greeted Matilda when he asked his first question. “Now, Matilda, I know you’re here to talk about your new show, but given the headlines over the last week, it looks like there’s more drama going on in your own house than any screenwriter could come up with. How are you doing with all that?”

I drew in a breath.

Matilda tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Well, I don’t think anyone ever enjoys watching their ex moving on.” My guts tightened. Oh God, here it was. Matilda would cry, and we would become the most hated people in New Zealand.

“I’m sorry if this is difficult for you.” The reporter looked anything but sorry as he leaned forward, practically vibrating with anticipation.

Matilda straightened her shoulders. “No, it’s okay. I was just going to say that Austin is the best person I know, and he makes Jacob so happy, and Jacob makes him so happy. And of all the partners my ex-husband could have chosen, he’s picked someone my daughters absolutely adore, so that’s a big positive.”

The reporter blinked.

“Were you surprised at their relationship?”

“Yeah, initially it was a shock. But like...seeing them together, I’m surprised I didn’t notice it earlier. They just fit, you know?” She shrugged. “I know the country is hung up on the fact that Jacob’s with a guy now, but honestly, it shouldn’t matter. He’s found someone who completes him.”

“And you aren’t worried about the fact that your manny seems to make a habit of sleeping with his bosses?”

My breath left me in a rush. Jacob’s arm squeezed me reassuringly.

“No, I’m not worried about that at all. What happened in Austin’s past is his business, and no one else’s. I’ve seen Jacob and Austin together, and I know what they have is real and genuine.”

“Well, Matilda, that’s really nice to hear your perspective. And talking about unexpected drama, I know your character Felicity on *Mistaken Identity* has her own share of drama. What do you think is the hardest thing your character had to face?”

They started to chat about the show, and Jacob met my astonished gaze with one of his own.

“Did that actually just happen?” he said.

“I think we underestimated her.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

Jacob and I sat together and watched the rest of the interview.

Matilda was eloquent, charming, and beautiful as she talked about the show. Her place as New Zealand’s favorite daughter was secure.

After the interview, I picked up my phone and sent her a message.

Just saw your interview. Thanks.

A few minutes later my phone binged.

Did my hair look okay? The stylist did something really weird.

I grinned. Matilda was still Matilda. That would never change.

I tapped out my reply.

Looked great from where I was sitting.

Epilogue: Jacob

“And I now pronounce you husband and husband.”

I shot a look at Austin in the seat next to me, and he smiled. He grabbed my hand, lacing our fingers together.

It will be us up there one day.

Austin might not have been able to hear my thoughts, but he gave my hand a gentle squeeze as if in agreement.

At the front of the marquee, Tyler and Aiden were smiling at each other.

Yep, this was the wedding of the year. Two New Zealand rugby players getting hitched to each other. Arguably the two best players in their position in the world. The media had hyped this up as the gay equivalent of a royal wedding, but Aiden and Tyler had managed to keep it simple, with the wedding taking place in a marquee in the paddock of Aiden’s cottage out in the middle of nowhere. It wasn’t exactly the most glamorous setting.

They’d provided personalized gumboots for every guest as a way to cope with the extensive mud. Tyler had been going around saying he’d designed the gumboots and it was the first step in his gumboot design career.

“You may now kiss your husband,” the celebrant said.

Tyler’s smile was uncharacteristically shy, but Aiden showed no hesitation in moving forward to kiss him.

A loud cheer went up from the crowd when their lips met, along with quite a few wolf whistles and catcalls. There were a lot of rugby players among the guests, after all.

When they pulled apart, they were both smiling. I didn't think I'd ever seen Aiden Jones smile quite like that before.

As they walked down the aisle, holding hands, "Beautiful Day" by U2 cranked over the sound system.

"Nice wedding," Austin whispered to me.

"Yeah."

I could enjoy a wedding now that I could think of my marriage to Matilda without the bitter taste of failure invading my mouth. I'd done the best I could, but a big reason why it had failed was because I hadn't chosen the right person.

I slid a glance at Austin. I definitely wasn't on track to make the same mistake again.

Lily and Eloise had sat remarkably still during the ceremony but were now wriggling like eels. While Austin and I stood in the crowd of people waiting to congratulate Aiden and Tyler, the girls headed outside in their gumboots to join other kids splashing in the mud, getting dirt all over the nice dresses Austin and I had picked out for them this morning.

Oh well.

It was finally our turn to talk to Aiden and Tyler.

"Congrats, guys." I clapped Aiden then Tyler on the back.

"Thanks, Jacob." This was one day when Aiden retained no trace of his Ice King persona. He couldn't stop smiling.

"It'll be you guys soon," Tyler said, giving us a wink.

"Jacob might be lucky enough one day to marry me," Austin agreed.

I raised my eyebrows at him as we walked away, leaving the next people to congratulate Aiden and Tyler. "Lucky enough, eh?"

“It’s good to have aspirations in life, Jacob. Something to aim for.” He scrunched up his nose and gave me a cute smile, making me want to kiss him. And fuck it, if I couldn’t kiss him right now, when could I? So I swooped down to deliver a quick kiss to his lips. He broke out in a huge smile. I loved how simple acts of PDA could make him so happy. Hell, they made me happy too.

Austin and I joined a crowd of Marauders and Greens players and their partners. There was a large amount of good-natured heckling flying between the two camps, which was fair enough given our teams were currently embroiled in a close battle for top seed in the Supreme Rugby competition.

Macca Mackenzie was dressed in a kilt and appeared to be on a mission to shovel half the tray of fancy canapes into his mouth at one time.

“You Marauders are just lucky you’ve got Miracle Man,” he said through a mouthful of pastry, nodding toward the edge of the group where Luke Hunter was standing. “But he has to run out of new tricks sometime.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Zach said.

Luke’s play this season was a big reason why we were on track to be at the top of the table.

He was definitely a rising star in New Zealand rugby, and there was a chance he’d make the New Zealand squad this season despite the intense competition for the back three positions.

And the reason why he’d picked the Marauders to sign with had quickly become apparent when he’d arrived back from Japan with his long-term boyfriend in tow.

But his boyfriend was nowhere to be seen now. Instead, it was just Ethan and him, heads bowed toward each other. Which didn’t surprise me. While there had been tension between the two of them when Luke had first arrived in the team, they’d obviously managed to put it behind them, and for the last few months, they’d looked as if they were back to being the best buddies Ethan had said they were growing up.

Austin and I headed toward them.

Luke raised his dark eyes away from Ethan to greet me. “Hey, Jacob.”

“Hey, Luke, have you met my boyfriend, Austin?”

“No, we haven’t met. Nice to meet you.” The two shook hands.

I turned to introduce him to Ethan, but Ethan got in ahead of me.

“I’ve already met Austin. Remember, when you used us as a free moving service?” Ethan’s eyes twinkled.

“Oh, that’s right.”

Ethan’s face turned serious when he looked at Austin. “How’s your grandmother? Has she recovered from her ordeal?”

I’d forgotten that he’d been one of the players who’d helped search for Gwen the night she’d gone missing.

“Yeah, her ankle healed quickly,” Austin said. “Her memory’s not great, but we’re coping.”

Luckily, Gwen’s decline seemed to have plateaued. She had more good days than bad at the moment, and with a disease like Alzheimer’s, you were grateful for the small wins. And I’d been right in what I’d said to Austin after she went missing; spending time with Gwen provided us with a regular reminder to make the most of every day.

“I’m still trying to grasp the idea that you were brave enough to use Ethan as your moving crew,” Luke said. “Did he not tell you what happened when he was twelve and decided to rearrange his mother’s living room as a surprise and broke her favorite vase?”

“No, he left that one off his resume,” I said.

Ethan flicked a quick grin at Luke. “This is the problem hanging out with someone who’s known me since I was a kid. I don’t have any secrets.”

“Oh, I don’t know if anyone can pretend to know all of your secrets,” Luke said.

Ethan’s face paled and he swallowed, looking at the ground. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said after a few beats. “I’m a man of mystery.”

I clapped my hand on his shoulder. “You keep telling yourself that.”

The awkwardness in the air faded quickly, and we continued to shoot the shit with Luke and Ethan, until the tinkling sound of a fork on a glass caught our attention and the MC spoke through his microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you could please find your seats for dinner, we’ve got to welcome Mr. and Mr. Banning-Jones back to the celebrations.”

The roar that greeted Aiden and Tyler as they came back into the marquee put the crowd at Eden Park to shame.

And then it was time for the speeches.

Zach, as Aiden’s best man, stood up to speak first.

“Well, it’s probably fair to say that Aiden and Tyler don’t have the most typical boy meets boy love story,” he began. There was a titter of laughter around the marquee at that. “And I’m not sure if my reaction when I first learned about their relationship was my best supportive friend moment.”

Aiden snorted in what sounded like agreement.

“But to me Aiden and Tyler are the ultimate proof that love can conquer all,” Zach continued. “So I would like to propose a toast. To love.”

As we raised our glasses, Austin caught my gaze.

“To love.”

It was Aiden’s mother’s turn next, and she gave a lovely tribute to Aiden’s father and talked about how proud he’d be if he was here today.

Then Tyler’s dad stood up. From the look Aiden and Tyler shot each other, I don’t know that it was completely expected. He twisted a napkin in his hands as he began to speak. “Um...

Zach mentioned not having reacted perfectly to the situation, but I think I've got to claim that title overall." He swallowed hard then looked at Tyler. "But on behalf of your mum and me, I want to say how proud you make us, and now we're so excited to have a son-in-law to be proud of too. So welcome to the family, Aiden."

Aiden stood to shake Tyler's dad's hand, and then Tyler did the same.

When it was Tyler's turn to speak, he started out with a cocky smile. "I have a confession to make. I might have fantasized about marrying Aiden Jones once or twice when I was sixteen." Laughter broke out around the marquee. I glanced at Aiden, who was watching his husband with a fond smile on his face as Tyler continued. "But this is definitely one case where even my best fantasy never came close to the reality." He ducked his head, and a shy look came over his face as he met Aiden's gaze. "I could never have imagined that you would be you and we could have what we have together."

When Aiden rose to speak, his face was serious.

"I was only a teenager when the marriage equality bill was passed in New Zealand, and I had no idea that one day it would be so relevant to me, so I want to acknowledge everyone who came before us and made it possible for Tyler and me to get married today.

"I never realized until now how important it is to have the chance to do this, to stand up and publicly share our love with everyone.

"Of course, in our case, I've already publicly declared my love via YouTube and at a press conference," he added, and everyone chuckled.

He looked down at Tyler, swallowing hard. "And so I'm fairly sure most of New Zealand and the rugby world already knows this, but I thought it was worth repeating today. You're my life."

Tyler got to his feet and pulled Aiden into an embrace, pressing his lips gently to Aiden's.

“Wow,” Austin whispered to me.

The knot in my throat felt impossible to swallow down.

“Yeah, wow,” I agreed.

After dinner had been served, I went up to the bar. Tyler was there, grabbing a beer.

“Great speeches,” I said to him.

“Thanks. My dad surprised me. I thought he didn’t want to say anything.”

“It seemed heartfelt.”

“Yeah, I guess. He’s getting better, but we’ve had our issues to work out.” Tyler scuffed his foot on the ground. “I actually think you’ve helped.”

My eyebrows shot up. “I have?”

“I don’t know, I think deep down he maybe thought that having a gay son was a reflection of something he did as a father.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I know.” Tyler shrugged. “All I know is that it’s good for my dad to see Roger Browne’s son in a relationship with a guy.”

I slapped him on the back with a smirk. “Glad I could help.”

My dad had been his usual unemotional self around Austin and I, so it had been hard to read exactly how he felt. But when he’d been interviewed as part of the publicity for his book and the interviewer had asked about Austin and me, his reply had been simple. “I’ve always been proud of my son, and nothing will ever change that.”

I hadn’t thought about the perspective Tyler had just offered. Maybe it would help some other parents of LGBTQ+ people to see Roger Browne publicly accepting his son as bisexual.

Austin had been shy around my parents at first, but he'd gradually relaxed as they'd gotten to know him. For Christmas we'd had a big extended family lunch at their house, and they'd invited Gwen, which I knew Austin had appreciated. And at the last minute, Matilda had accepted her invitation and come along too. The moment Matilda, Austin, and the twins had ganged up on me in a water balloon war might not have seemed like a contender for Highlight of the Day, but it was. Matilda and Austin's friendship seemed back on track. Matilda had grudgingly accepted that during her weeks with the girls, Austin would be there during the day, but he'd spend the nights at the apartment with me. And Matilda and I were managing to keep everything civil for the sake of the girls.

Which was more than I could have asked for.

I ordered a whisky, and while I was waiting, I felt a body slip in next to me.

I looked over to see Ethan, his face a picture of confusion and misery.

My eyebrows shot up.

"You okay?" I asked.

He seemed to rouse himself and offered me a wan smile. "Free beer on tap, what's not to be okay about?"

"Right."

Hmmm. Ethan was usually the life and soul of the party. What had happened tonight to change that?

I didn't have much time to puzzle over it because next thing Austin was by my side, tugging on my arm.

"Come on, Jacob. It's dancing time."

"I just got a drink." I took a sip of my whisky.

"Your drink can wait. The dancing can't." He gestured to the edge of the dance floor, where Lily and Eloise were waiting in dresses streaked with dirt.

"Come on, Daddy," Lily called.

I took another swallow of my drink before putting it down on a nearby table.

“You wait, I’ve been practicing some special moves just for you,” Austin said as we made our way through the crowd.

My eyes narrowed. “What special moves?”

He gave me a sly smile. “Well, you know how we watched Footloose the other day?”

“Yeah,” I said suspiciously.

“Just think how great those moves would look when performed in gumboots.”

“Oh, shit no. No, no, please no.”

Despite my protests, I was laughing as he tugged me onto the dance floor.

And I danced with Austin and my daughters, grinning the whole time.



A note from Jax...

Thank you so much for reading! I really hope you enjoyed reading Jacob and Austin’s story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

It turns out I couldn’t leave Jacob and Austin alone, so I wrote a bonus extra epilogue covering the surprising way they managed to add to their family. It’s part of the exclusive content I offer to my newsletter subscribers - you can download it by subscribing via my website <https://jaxcalder.com/bonus-epilogue/> or on [BookFunnel](#).

If you’re one of the awesome people who already subscribe to my newsletter, you can download the bonus epilogue via [BookFunnel by clicking here](#).

If you have any problems subscribing or downloading the bonus epilogue, feel free to email me at jax@jaxcalder.com or contact me via [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

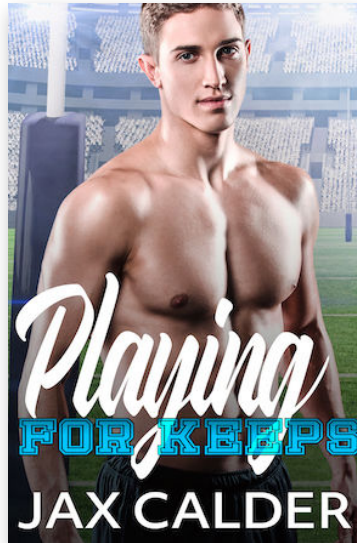
And don't forget that up next in the Sporting Secrets Series is Ethan and Luke's story *Playing for Keeps*, which you can [pre-order here](#).

One last thing...

As a new author, reviews are really important to help other readers discover my books. If you have time, I'd appreciate you leaving a review of this book on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#) or [BookBub](#).

Also by Jax Calder

[Playing for Keeps: A friends-to-lovers sports romance](#)



Falling for your former best friend? Never a good idea.

Luke Hunter has returned to New Zealand, determined to make the national team. So what if one of his new teammates is the person who shredded his heart? Luke's moved past that, and he's happy now. There is no way he's falling back under Ethan's spell.

But it turns out no matter how good you are at evading the opposition, there's one thing you can never escape—and that's the love of your life.

[Pre-order NOW](#)

[Playing Offside: A M/M enemies to lovers sports romance](#)



Falling for the guy after your starting spot? Never a good idea.

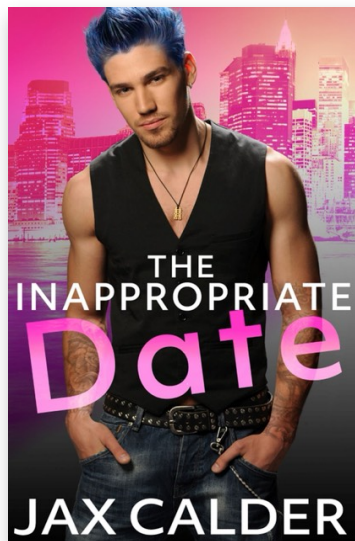
Aiden Jones, aka the Ice King, is one of the best rugby players in the world. And he's not about to surrender his starting spot in the New Zealand squad to Tyler Bannings, the cocky loudmouth who just joined the training squad. But when they end up rooming together at training camp, the heat between them threatens to melt

even the Ice King. Now Aiden's falling for the same guy who's plotting to take his spot.

But all's fair in love and sport, right?

[Read or Buy on Amazon NOW](#)

[The Inappropriate Date: a heart-warming short M/M novella](#)



Hunter has always been a good son. Unfortunately, his mother struggles to handle the fact he's bisexual. When she warns him not to bring someone inappropriate to his sister's wedding, Hunter decides to find the most inappropriate date possible.

Blue Hair. Tattoos. Most definitely male. There's more chance his mother will learn to moonwalk than approve of Adam as his date. But appearances can be deceiving.

And Hunter is about to learn this lesson along with the rest of his family...

[Read or Buy on Amazon](#)

Coming January 2022...

The Other Brother: a M/M New Adult romance



Ryan has had seventeen years of being compared to Cody, part of his toxic fractured family, so you'll forgive him for some epic eye-rolling when it comes to Mr Perfect. Although not related to him by blood, Cody has always been annoying background noise in Ryan's life.

One summer changes everything. It's the summer when circumstances collide, and they end up spending time together at Cody's family's beach house. It's the summer they become friends. And then more than friends.

But when summer ends, Cody and Ryan are forced back to reality. Can their relationship survive?

[Pre-order NOW](#)

About the Author

Jax's stories are all about light-hearted conversations and deeply-felt connections. She lives in New Zealand with her family and a wide assortment of animals. She's a rabid sports fan, a hiking enthusiast and has a slightly unhealthy addiction to nature documentaries. She is also a massive fan of M/M romance and enjoys both reading and writing it.

Jax is an extrovert living a writers' introverted life where she spends WAY too much time in her own head, so she'd love to hear from you in whatever way you want to connect with her:

You can hang out on Facebook in her authors group Jax's Crew...

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/jaxcaldercrew/>

Or follow her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [BookBub](#)

And don't forget to sign up to her newsletter via [BookFunnel](#) or her website www.jaxcalder.com/newsletter

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