

ANYTA
SUNDAY

MAGIC
FOR
YOU

MAGIC FOR YOU

Love & Family #4

ANYTA SUNDAY

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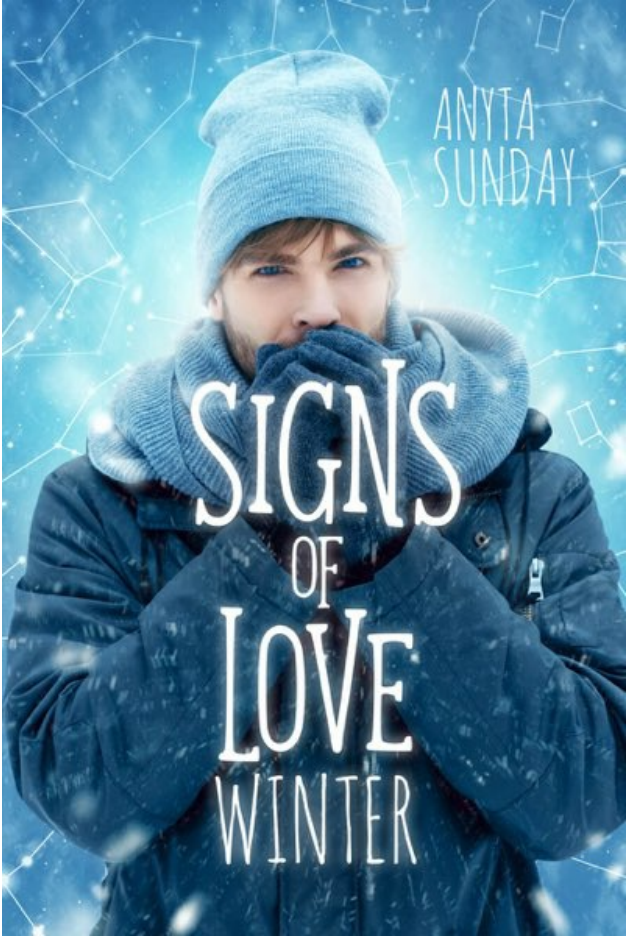
This book contains sexual content.

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Magic For You

Will this Christmas gift, with its hint of “magic”, win the love of his crush?

In the middle of the festive season, gardener Jase finds himself renting in a new neighbourhood, tending yet another garden that won't belong to him. But when a boisterous golden retriever brings Robin into the yard, something magical in Jase wakes up.

Jase wants to gift his new neighbour the Christmas tree of his dreams—a real live fir, grown in Robin's own back garden—and win his heart in the process.

From young sapling to fully-fledged Douglas fir in less than a year? That would be magic.

He has a plan to make it happen, and it all seems to be coming along well . . . until 'awesome, amazing' Lyle shows up. Lyle is also crushing on Robin, and he has the most annoying advantages: He's smart. He's witty. He's ridiculously good-looking.

And he got there first.

The race to Robin's heart is looking tough; Jase must outdo Lyle at every romantic opportunity. So that, this Christmas, he'll share the tree with the one he loves.

This novella grew from my short story *The Douglas Fir*. While re-reading the story, I kept itching to take the premise and explore it in a slightly different direction. That direction turned into this.

I hope you enjoy.

Chapter One

“**T**here’s no magic anymore.”

The bench I’m sitting on overlooks the garden I made—lovingly designed, built and tended—over the last half-year. My boyfriend—ex-boyfriend now, I suppose—paces the creaking veranda between me and the view.

“You must feel that too. Or rather, not feel,” he says.

The gift I prepared for him sits heavily in my lap, wrapped in colourful-Christmas-tree paper. Twenty minutes ago—hell, *ten* minutes ago, I thought I’d be watching him unwrap it right now.

“Say something.”

I smooth a crinkle in the gift wrapping and try to keep my tone even. “It’s Christmas Day.”

He hears the accusation in my voice, despite my efforts.

He crouches before me. “Shitty timing. I know.”

I look at him.

His eyes are teary, but I’m not sad. I’m tired. His voice shakes. “I was too nervous to tell you. I kept putting it off. I don’t know why it suddenly came out like that.” His voice drops to a whisper. “It doesn’t stop it being true.”

“No magic,” I repeat, and cast my gaze behind him to the garden. I guess it’s goodbye. Another garden full of baby trees I don’t get to see mature.



MY BOSS, MR COLE OF COLE'S GARDENING, KNOWS A WOMAN WHO KNOWS A woman who has a rental available. It's the shittiest house on the best block—a rundown square box from the sixties that looks like it hasn't seen a paint job—or a lawnmower—since it was built. For a drop in rent, I offer to fix up the garden.

I begin on the first day of the new year. Flex my neck side to side and pull on my gardening gloves. My fingertip catches on a little split in one seam; these are the last in a string of industrial pairs I wore through in my last garden and they'll fill up with dirt in no time, but they'll do for today. Clearing the noise—the weeds and the overgrowth. Seeing what's here.

He was right. We aren't right for one another. *We should feel a zing*, he'd said. *We should feel comfortable. We should want—no, need to go beyond to make each other smile. We should be perfect to each other, warts and all.*

The heavy work, the taste of sweat, the sun boring down on my exposed back . . . gradually, the bones of the garden begin to show. I snip the last of the roses into shape; there are seven, evenly spaced in a graceful curve. Beneath them I can see the clear form of a bed, and the fading blades of tulips and daffodils poking up through straggling chamomile plants. Someone loved this garden once.

The sun is high and hot now; I can feel the sweat soaking my t-shirt and running down my spine. I pull the shirt off with dirty glove-covered hands and move across the newly cut grass to my dirt-covered Cole's Gardening Services truck, parked temporarily across the footpath, to shift the compost on the back to a pile on the driveway.

Mid-shovel, something moves in my peripheral vision. A sandy-haired guy and a sullen teenager walking in my direction, deep in conversation. I hurriedly pull the last of the compost from the truck and jump down to clear the narrow strip left of the concrete for them, then plunge the shovel into the

pile and lean on the handle as they pass.

Sandy-haired guy's gaze slides over me and he says, exasperated, "*That's* why you stay in school."

I straighten a bit. "Are you for real, mate?"

The teenager snickers and keeps walking. The older guy, perhaps twice the teen's age, stalls and looks at me. I eye him up and down. He's the pretty type. His jeans are tight and his t-shirt is clean, locally designed. The shoes look like they've never seen mud or even a puddle. The way he holds himself as he comes forward, brow pinched, is distinctly . . . academic. A thinker. He clasps his hands behind his back.

"Did you call me?"

"I called you *out*." I lean more heavily onto the shovel. "I didn't like what you were implying."

He flushes and glances in the direction the youth hurried off in.

I laugh shortly. "Whatever. Off you go."

He faces me again and shakes his head. He even steps forward, virgin shoes pressing on crumbs of compost. "That was spectacularly rude of me."

I arch a brow.

He clears his throat. "My—he's only fourteen. I was trying to—"

"That's how you apologise?"

He meets my eye steadily. "Right. I'm sorry."

Movement near the hedge next door. I grimace. Looks like someone is enjoying his brother's embarrassment.

"I also have a much younger brother." I swipe the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. "I don't care what he ends up doing for a living as long as he's happy." I project my voice. "But I'd be upset if he didn't go to school. Not for learning facts, but for learning who you are. What you believe in. What you want." I glance back at Mr Academic. "Even if it's just to hang out with mates."

The guy looks from me to the hedge and back again. He mouths *thanks*.

“Sorry for my implication before.”

I pick up the shovel and he moves on.

I shake my head and lift a shovelful; the wheelbarrow fills steadily. Five minutes, ten minutes. I’m still frowning. What a way to meet the neighbours . . .

A gleeful bark and before I even have a chance to look up a big ball of yellow fur bounds into me and my precariously heaped shovel. I stumble, jerking the shovel skyward and cringe a moment before the inevitable. Damp, crumbly manure-rich compost slips and slides onto my head and shoulders, clinging to the sweat on my exposed chest. I look down at myself, brain struggling to catch up.

Well-worn hiking boots skid to a stop on the footpath in front of me and the owner of the dog gasps, hands frantically chasing a trailing leash. “Are you okay? Can I help?” I shake off the worst of the compost and blink.

When I look up, my stomach flips, stealing away a moment of irritation. Such concerned sea-green eyes, and teeth worriedly teasing pink lips. I laugh and pull myself up. “Shit happens.”

He sucks in a smile and glares at the golden retriever now lazily headbutting his side. “Tool, what is it with you?”

A bark is met with a fond rub behind floppy ears, and curious eyes look my way. “Are you new to the street?”

I hold out my gloved hand, and then draw back my filth-covered fingers. “Jase.”

“Robin. I live a few curves down, seventeen. Come over for a beer sometime.”

“Let me shower, and I’ll take you up on that right now.”

He grins, and bloody hell.

It feels like magic.

Chapter Two

Monk Estate. The gardens are huge, and ordinarily I'd be captivated by them—their layout, the planting choices for all the different soil types and conditions, the seasonal growth patterns—but I'm distracted. I drift around, half-heartedly installing irrigation sprinklers, for the next week and a half. It's so *easy* with Robin. He'd invited me over that first day and we'd hit it off, spent every other day together since. He'd even let my visiting brother tag along. And yesterday, the way his eyes lit up as he leaned over to me on the couch—

Water jets out of the sprinkler head, hitting me at the waist, and I lurch back.

“Get your head out your arse,” Boss Cole says, brushing a hand over his salt and pepper beard to hide his smirk. “What's got you grinning like a love-struck puppy, anyway?”

I peel off my gloves and toss them at him, grinning as I catch him smack in the chest. “Oh, look at that. Day's over. I gotta pick Scott up from my neighbour's.”

Cole's eyebrows waggle. “The one you're mooning over?”

I wish I had another glove to toss. “*Robin*. He wasn't working so he suggested the two of them hang out. That way I was free to slog it here on this hot Saturday with you. And quite the delight it was.”

He laughs, and it's followed up with a wheeze. "Smart arse. I'll pack up, you get out of here to your two boys."

I leave him with a grin and boot it to my truck. I slide in and hightail out of there, and twenty minutes later I ease into a parking spot outside Robin's house.

I wipe my face free of dirt and pluck my singlet from my chest to give it a sniff.

Could be worse.

I crack open the door and get out, flipping my keys over my finger after I lock up. As I move up the hydrangea-lined path, Tool the Golden Retriever looks up from his spot on the deck. My identity verified, he lowers his head and resumes his kip. This level of comfort is how far we've come in this short time.

I jump gleefully up the one-foot rise onto the wooden deck, and barely lift my hand to knock before the door swings in.

"The man himself. We were just talking about you."

"Good stuff, I hope?"

"Just that you're the best brother in the world."

Robin grins, leaning on the doorjamb, ankles crossed. His baggy teal shorts stop just above his knees, showing off smooth tanned legs. His t-shirt is covered with pet fur, cat and dog. The fur is a regular feature of his outfits.

He brushes ineffectually at it. "My critters shed like you wouldn't believe." He pushes off the jamb and beckons me in with a tilt of his head. "Scott's feeding Dusky."

Dusky, a blue-tongued skink, is the most recent addition to Robin's household—brought in to the SPCA with a broken leg. Robin was in charge of his care and I guess he just couldn't bear to leave him. As comfy as they make the enclosures and as caring and dedicated as they all are there, for most of the animals it's not a home. Quite a few end up here, when Robin has space. His heart's too big for him to turn them away.

“He’s doing fine. Scott loves him. Don’t be surprised if he starts begging you to buy him from me. He asked, but I said no.” Robin glances at me as we head to his living room. “I don’t like giving or selling animals to kids. Nothing against your kid brother or anything”—his eyes cloud—“but a lot of kids don’t live up to the responsibility of looking after a pet. I don’t do it on principle.”

“I get it,” I say, gaze narrowing across the room. Light filters through the windows and catches on tinsel, making it glitter. There’s a silver Christmas tree standing in the corner, one of those collapsible ones. “Isn’t it a bit late to have your tree still up?”

Robin dives onto his couch and hooks his arms behind his head. A black and white cat with a truncated tail jumps up to curl into his side.

Robin pats him absently. “I’ve been lazy. I dragged the box up to repack it, I just didn’t quite get that far.”

I see the white packaging and Styrofoam against the wall.

“I’ll do it later; I have to take another shot of it, the ones I took at Christmas had bad lighting.” He points to a photo album on the coffee table, next to an old camera, the kind that has real film in it.

I take the album to the other end of the couch, nudging his feet to move. When he shifts, I sit, and Robin stretches his legs out again, wiggling his toes into my side. “Better.”

I suck in a breath. Well, this is new.

I glance at him, trying to read his expression. Nothing. Like he slides his bare toes under the hem of my singlet every day.

Maybe it was an accident.

I open the album. On the first page is a photo of a cartoon-themed Christmas tree. It’s dated 1998. The next page, 1999, is a tree made of streamers.

“What is this?” I ask, leafing through the next variations of Christmas trees. The last one has a blurry guy that isn’t Robin in it, trying to balance a

golden star on a tree made of books. From what I can tell, he doesn't look like a relative, and the way his shirt hitches mid-way up his side suggests an ease Robin and I definitely don't have. The warmth of his feet against my thigh right now aside.

"Tradition," Robin says. "My older sister started it for me the year I was born. Ever since, every year, I have a different kind of tree." He glances at the page I'm on. "That's Lyle. He lives around the corner. I'll introduce you sometime."

I swallow in an effort not to shake my head. Rather not. He looks a little too comfortable there in that picture. The cheeky tongue-poke he's aiming over his shoulder suggests he's used to Robin capturing him on camera.

I squint. There's something familiar about this guy . . . "He looks like . . . a good friend."

"Oh yeah, the best."

Robin shifts, lifting himself onto his elbows, and the cat kneads his stomach. Gently, Robin pries its claws from his top.

"The Christmas tree thing, it's neat."

"Yeah, but it's getting harder and harder to come up with ideas. This Christmas it was just me, and I didn't put much effort in. It's more fun when you have someone to share it with, you know?" He shrugs, and I wish I'd met him before Christmas last year. And been single then.

"Maybe next Christmas you'll be around family."

"Yeah, probably not. They're staying in Europe with my sister. She just had a kid."

I point towards blurry Lyle in the picture. "Your friend wasn't around last year?"

"He was with his family."

I glance away, towards Robin's camera. I shut the photo album and tap his feet with the spine until he shifts them back. "Let's get a shot of last year's tree, shall we?"

Picking up the camera and uncapping the lens, I ask, “What was your favourite tree?”

Robin’s gaze on me makes my side tingle. “They’re all great. Don’t have a favourite.”

“How far in advance do you start planning the next one?”

He chuckles. I turn the camera on him; his eyes are closed, crinkling slightly at the corners as he smiles, hair mussed with one part pressed against his temple. I take the shot. “I’m already thinking of the next one,” he says. “What I really want is a traditional fir. I’d love it if I could grow one in my own yard.”

“So do it,” I say, unable to stop myself from taking a few more pictures.

“Too much work.” He gives his cat an extra rub around the ears. “I already have so much to take care of. Besides, a Douglas fir takes years to get to Christmas tree size.”

“Five to six, actually, in the right conditions,” I say, lowering the camera as the pounding of feet comes down the hall. “Not to be pedantic.” I give a meek grin. “Gardener.”

“Jase!” Scott bounds into the room with a flicker of excitement in his eyes. “Tell Robin I’m responsible. I’ll look after Dusky as well as I look after my LEGO sets.” He jumps onto the end of the couch where I’d been sitting, and Robin swings his legs off to give him room. The cat scrambles away.

“I’ll take good care of him, for real.”

My brother squirms, pleading with his big, mud-coloured eyes. His curly brown hair bounces with his movement.

“Sorry buddy,” I say, my senses prickling as Robin picks up the camera. “I’m sure Robin will let you help out with his pets when you come back to visit in a few months.”

Robin smiles and glances up at me for a second before focusing on Scott. “Sure you can. And bring your wetsuit when you come down next time, gremlin. We’ll get you more familiar with a surfboard, yeah?”

“How long before you stop calling me a gremlin?”

“When you stop eating the ankle busters, kid.” Robin winks at him. “You’re way ahead of your brother. I still haven’t managed to get him into the water.”

“That’s impossible,” my brother says, losing his laugh. And I know the next words out of his mouth before he says them. I lunge over to him, reaching out to slap a hand over his mouth and shut him up, but I’m too slow. “He won’t swim. *Can’t.*”

A panicked breath rolls up my chest.

That’s . . . I grab Scott by the shirt, haul him to his feet, and drag him towards the door. I can’t bring myself to look at Robin. Can’t bring myself to face the reasons I don’t go in the water.

“Don’t bring that up—”

“It’s not your fault—”

“*Ever again.*”

I let him go, feeling the heat of Robin coming close to my side, and then his firm hand on my arm, giving me a light squeeze. “Scott, do you think you could fill the cat bowl for me?”

Scott slinks off.

Immediately, I want to pull him back. Tell him I’m sorry. It just . . . hurts. Robin squeezes me again, and drops his hand.

I look up, focusing on the living room—the silver Christmas tree—over his shoulder.

“Did we get a good shot of the tree this time?”

Robin’s gentle smile comes into focus. “I can teach you to swim. Or I know a few people who are great at giving swimming lessons. Lyle—”

I shake my head, cutting him off. “Yeah, nah. I’m good.”

He frowns as I leave him and stride after my brother, into Robin’s small, bright yellow kitchen. “Come on, Scott.”

Robin follows, and hovers in the doorway. “You could stay for dinner?”

Any other day, I'd have leapt at the chance.

Scott looks at me, guilt stained onto his skin. Like he needs the breather as much as I do.

“Sorry, yeah. Let's call it quits for today.”

Chapter Three

I send Scott ahead with the keys and walk the block. The air is moist with the promise of rain. The clamminess against my face makes it harder to shake off the memories . . . the lake, my gurgling cry, the small body.

I blink back the heat in my eyes and focus on calming my sticky breaths.

Across the road, movement catches my eye and I jerk my head around to catch a crop of sandy hair and very clean shoes vanishing behind a car.

I raise a brow.

An adult man, ducking to avoid me? I cross quietly towards him, stop at the boot of the car and lean an elbow on the roof, looking down at his crouching figure while he peers around the front fender. He's trying to see if it's safe to come out yet.

Smirking, I drum my fingers on the car roof; the guy twists around in shock and topples onto his ass in the gutter. He blinks up at me and slams his eyes shut. "This is awkward."

I glance down the street to make sure he isn't being laughed at by a teen behind nearby bushes. "No company today?"

"Never hear the end of it if there was." He picks himself up and dusts grit from his jeans.

I gesture to him, me, the car, the whole scene. "I don't hold grudges, you know."

He laughs self-deprecatingly but holds his chin up, meeting my gaze. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “Have a good evening.”

He strides off with a confident set to his shoulders and I stare after him, shaking my head in bewilderment.



THE NEXT MORNING, CALM RESTORED, I REGRET REJECTING ROBIN’S OFFER OF dinner and promise to make it up to him. His birthday is getting close. I’ll find him something special. Something thoughtful, memorable.

“Maybe some wax stickers for his surfboard or something?” Scott suggests as I wait with him for the bus that will take him back to Mum’s.

“Nah, it has to be . . . unique.”

Scott unzips the top of his suitcase and pulls out a packet of chewing gum. He stuffs a piece in his mouth and offers me one too.

“No thanks.”

“It sounds like you . . .” My brother shrugs. “You’re into him, aren’t you?”

I stare down the road. “Your bus is late.”

“You are. You are!”

I clip him over the back of the head and then yank him into a one-armed hug. “Think you can keep quiet about it?”

He squirms out of my grasp, grinning. “Depends. What’s in it for me?”

“Rascal.”

“Gremlin, actually.”

“What do you want?”

He looks me square in the eye. “That lizard. Get me Dusky, or I’ll blab.”

“You little gremlin!”

He laughs as the bus turns the corner and draws up to the stop. Other passengers start to line up, but Scott isn’t in any rush. He gives me a quick

hug. “He’s got a photo album full of Christmas trees,” he says between loud chews. “He seemed into it. Why don’t you make him the best Christmas tree ever?”

“Because it’s his birthday.” I stand and take his suitcase to the driver, who is stacking luggage into the side compartments of the bus. “Christmas isn’t for another eleven months.”

Scott shrugs. “Well then, he’d be surprised.”

I shake my head and send my brother off with a light punch to his arm. “Stay out of trouble.”

He steps onto the bus and snaps his fingers at me. “Get me that lizard.”

It dawns on me as I drive back to Lyall Bay in my truck: Scott is right. Robin would be surprised.

I ease my foot off the gas and do a U-turn, a plan formulating in my mind.



I COO TO TOOL AS I MOVE THROUGH THE OPENING DOOR WITH ROBIN’S GIFT. I haven’t wrapped it, save for a plastic stick-on bow that isn’t very sticky and is probably only a minute or two from dropping off.

“You’re the first to arrive, which is uncharacteristic. Lyle is usually early,” he says, glancing to the gift in my hand and raising an excited brow. “That for me?”

“Nope, I just like carrying plants around.”

He steps back and lets me pass. “The barbecue’s out back,” he says. I nod, leading the way.

We step outside, and I turn to face him, my fingers clutching the ceramic pot a little too tightly.

“For you,” I say, jerking the pot towards him. It doesn’t have to travel far; he’s standing close. So close that as the afternoon sun hits his back, I’m in his

shadow. “Happy birthday.”

He takes the pot carefully and lifts it, inspecting the Douglas fir I’ve brought him, and then he looks at me through the bristly little branches. “Did you buy me my very own Christmas tree, Jason Kress?” His lips twitch; there’s that mesmerising glint in his eyes again, the one that seems to draw me closer. I lean towards him until green fir needles tickle my nose.

“It’s not just any Christmas tree,” I say, glancing between Robin and the fir. “It’s magic.”

“A magic Christmas tree?” he repeats, as if he isn’t quite sure what to make of that. He moves into his yard, past his surfboard shed and the rotary washing line that swings around in the breeze, all the way to the long grass far back, where there’s space for a tree to grow.

He crouches and sets the plant down. “It’s magical, you say?”

I chuckle and crouch next to him, staring at the little tree. “It won’t grow full-size overnight,” I say, feeling the ground. Nice and warm, and the soil looks rich enough. I glance behind us; I can’t see the back of the house from here. Perfect.

“This is your Christmas tree for this year,” I say. “By the time Santa starts making his rounds, it’ll be as big as your surfboard.”

He looks at me curiously. “I thought they took years to grow? This looks barely thirty centimetres.”

“Twenty-five. And it *would* usually take years to get to surfboard height,” I say. “That’s why it’s magical.”

Robin glances at me and raises a brow.

“Tell the tree something true, and it will grow. Like reverse Pinocchio.”

“*Anything* that’s true?”

I shake my head. “The more personal the better. Like, I could tell the tree that I’m really sorry for getting upset at Scott for telling you I can’t swim.” I keep my gaze on the tree, even as I feel him studying me. “And then, while you’re sleeping, the fir will grow.”

Robin's voice drops to something just more than a whisper. "If I tell it that I really want you to learn how to swim, will it grow?"

I swallow and meet his gaze, just briefly, before wiping my soiled hands on my cargo shorts. "It'll grow."

"Does it grant wishes too?"

I swallow. "I don't know."

We stare at the little tree as a warm breeze ruffles our hair and worms under our shirts. We only stir at the sound of Robin's doorbell ringing.

"That'll be Lyle," he says, smiling.

"Great." I wonder if it sounds as reluctant as I feel. "I'll just plant this here for you. Then I'll be right in."

Chapter Four

I hear the laughter first.

It's wholesome and lively, and already I'm not a fan of Lyle.

I fling a glance at myself in the hallway mirror, run a hand through my hair, and round into the living room with my thumbs tucked into my pockets. Nonchalant, totally at ease—

“You!” It comes out in a burst, along with the lining of my pockets.

Lyle and Robin whirl around. Robin has a quizzical smile on his face, and Lyle . . . Lyle drops the beer he's holding.

He catches it against his belly while staring at me with wide hazel eyes through his sandy hair. His fingers whiten on the bottle neck, and his cheeks flush.

“Do you two know each other?” Robin asks, and we both turn to him with a quickly uttered “No.”

“We've . . . run into one another. A few times,” Lyle says. “All I know is . . . he doesn't hold grudges.”

He attempts a smile and I laugh dryly.

He frowns, and I fold my arms. *This* is the friend Robin always talks about, the one he's most comfortable with. The one who's totally glancing at him with *softening* eyes . . . “Beer would be great.”

“In the fridge, help yourself.”

From the kitchen, I hear them resume their conversation. Lyle is a series of quick-witted retorts and delightful laughs, and everything about it seems like a pose. Like a “pick me, I’m perfect.”

I scowl into my bottle and return to Lyle grinning, an arm thrown over Robin’s shoulders. He spots me and his smile wanes. Something at least.

The arm lingers though.

“Lyle was telling me about a crazy server upgrade at work and how he busted ass to be here.” Robin leans into Lyle with a touched smile tipping his lips, and Lyle drops his head to rest against Robin’s. It’s way too sweet and charming, and the look Lyle flashes me speaks volumes.

He got there first. They have a connection.

I take a long pull of my beer, eyes narrowed on Lyle. Turns out I hold grudges after all.

“Let’s sit out on the deck,” I suggest and finally Robin breaks away to lead us all outside.

I drop myself near him, but make the mistake of leaving a space between us—a space just big enough that Lyle manages to squeeze himself into it. The pleasant tingle of proximity to Robin turns into a hot, annoying itch at my side.

“Do you do small gardening jobs as well as the large estates?” Lyle asks me, with a polite smile that actually seems genuine. Damn him.

I stare out into the darkened yard, thinking of the Douglas fir and wishing Lyle would back off. Because if it comes down to it, what chance do I stand against computer-whiz Lyle?

“We do all kinds of gardens.”

“In that case, maybe I can hire you?”

I choke on my beer and have to dab my sleeve over my mouth. Where is the guy who’d rather duck behind a car than face me?

Is this some posturing right now? Is he going to be the nice guy that Robin can totally fall in love with?

Lyle slaps my back—with a touch too much enthusiasm. I side-eye him. “I’m good.”

He drops his hand. “Mine’s a shambles at the moment. It needs a total makeover.”

Lyle glances at Robin and then at Tool, who’s sitting in front of me, panting. “I’d like to have space for pets to run around in, and somewhere for a really big dog kennel.”

Of course you would.

Robin tips back the rest of his beer. “You don’t have a dog.”

This is . . . painful. I’m sort of enjoying witnessing Lyle’s transparent and embarrassing performance, but at the same time . . . I get it.

“I might get one someday.” Lyle claps his hand on Robin’s shoulder and turns to me. He has a sharp nose and a smile that’s just a bit too big for his face, but it suits him. Dammit. “What do you think? Can you fit me into your schedule?”

“I don’t know,” I hedge, thumb picking at the label on the beer bottle. “We’re pretty busy at the moment.”

Lyle shrugs and quirks his lips. It deepens the grooves etched at the sides of his mouth. Grooves that speak of daily charming, general schmoozing, and lots of academic talk. How many of those smiles have been for Robin? “I can wait a few months.”

Well, what can I say to that? I can hardly say no. What type of bastard would I be if I did?

Robin leans forward around Lyle, half his face glowing with the orange of the back door light. “I’m sure you’d do a great job. Can I get you another beer?”

“I’m good,” Lyle says, grinding the bottom of his bottle on his knee, staining his light corduroys with condensation.

I drain the last mouthful of mine and hand Robin the empty. “Yeah, thanks.” When he disappears inside, I rub Tool’s ears so I have something to

do and don't have to look at my competition. "So. Which is the real you? The flustered one from the street, or . . . this."

"Right back at you. Are you the straightforward guy from outside, or this jealous one?"

"You—" I purse my lips.

"We all have shades. We're just starting to see some of the variations."

"Did you mean it? About your yard?"

"Not exactly." He thinks for a moment. "At first it was . . ."

"To look good in front of Robin?"

A small laugh. He lifts his eyes to mine. "But thinking about it . . . I would like your help."

"Why?"

He sighs and stares out into Robin's garden. "I was really shitty that day."

"It's out of guilt?"

Again his eyes hit mine and stay there. "Yes."

"Forget about it."

"I don't want to. I want to atone."

"Your atonement makes me uncomfortable."

"Why?"

"It feels like I'd be using you. Robbing you."

"Rob me. I'm letting you."

"You're a strange guy."

He chuckles softly and winks.

"Least you're upfront about it." I eye him, and grimace. "I'll rob you then."

"You're talking about the yard, I hope?"

I flash him a toothy smile.

He pulls out his phone and light hits the grin on his face. "What's your full name?"

"Jason Kress." *Friends call me Jase.* Yeah, I'm leaving that bit out.

“Number?”

I give it to him and glance towards the back door. How long does it take to grab a beer? “How long have you known Robin?”

“I hooked him up with some intermediate-school swimmers who wanted to learn to ride the waves a few years back, and we sort of hit it off. He helped me improve my surf skills.”

I snort, and say teasingly, “You do more than read books and play computer games?”

He shoves my arm with a scowl and lips that twitch. “I don’t like what you’re implying.”

I don’t even hear the back door close. Suddenly Robin’s warmth is beside me as he sits and passes me a fresh beer. “Did I hear surfing? Lyle’s like a pro now.”

He’s looking at me as he says it, and I hear the plea behind it. If I’d just open myself up to be taught . . .

His thigh touches mine, ever-so-slightly, as he leans forward to rub Tool’s head. He gets a wet dog-kiss for his trouble, and I chuckle before taking a good pull of beer. I murmur, more to the bottle than to Robin, “I’m sure Lyle had the best instructor.”

“I did,” Lyle says, waggling his brows over at Robin and receiving a grin in return.

I hold back a scowl and excuse myself to stretch my legs. I drift over to the Douglas fir and crouch to whisper a truth that should definitely make it grow. “This is going to be more complicated than I thought.”



THE FIR GROWS.

I go home to bed after the beer runs out and Robin starts yawning. Technically, I go home once I see Lyle walk down the street and around the

corner.

Thank bloody God for that! I refrain from pulling Robin closer as he hugs me goodbye and give him a tight smile and nod when he asks what I think of Lyle. *Then* I leave, stumbling down from his porch still high from his touch.

I don't return until the dead of night.

I sneak down the side of his house, hefting a bucket and a duffel bag, slipping Tool treats from my pocket to keep him quiet all the way to the fir in the backyard. I lay down the bucket and bag and give Tool's ears a quick touse. I crouch and we both stare at the fir. Well, I stare. Tool dribbles as he munches on another dog biscuit.

There's little light back here; I rummage in the bag for a torch and set it to lantern form so it can rest on the ground. I whisper, "I do feel like a criminal," as I take out a trowel, glad the tree's spot is far back in the yard. Tool cocks his head and then lies down, panting as he watches me. It's like he's giving me the okay, like he knows the plan and he's all for it.

"Right, let's make magic."

I remove the tiny first fir and replace it with another, exactly one centimetre taller and a touch bushier, still in its plastic pot for easy removal.

I press the soil in place over the pot and fill the hole, then give the new tree some water from the large bottle I've brought. Then I spread fresh bark around the base. The bark had been Mr Cole's wise suggestion when I'd told him my plan. This way, the freshly-turned soil that would otherwise give me away will be disguised, and added bonus, it'll help the soil stay rich and acidic.

Tool shuffles closer as I work; in the frosty small hours of morning, his warmth is welcome.

"Looking good?"

He rests his head on my lap.

I take it for a yes.

Chapter Five

Robin not noticing the ‘growing’ fir is what I want. The transformation has to be so gradual that he doesn’t notice until, come Christmas, he’s staring at an eight-foot fir and marvelling how it could possibly have happened.

He tugs my sleeve as he sits on the grass in front of the bark and the fir. “Sit, I haven’t seen you all week. Tell me what you’ve been up to.”

I look down at him, to the space he’s patting, and drop to his side, loosely hugging my legs. “What have I been up to?” I repeat, staring at the fir. “Just busy. Getting myself all grubby, as you can see.”

Robin takes in my soil-stained T-shirt and work pants. “You know,” he says, and then, as if he thinks better of it, zips up.

“What?”

He looks away from me, to the fir. “The tree looks healthy.” He peers at it some more as he plucks at the grass between us. The side of his hand accidentally brushes mine; I jerk, breaking the contact—and immediately wish I hadn’t. Robin doesn’t seem to care, or even notice.

I force myself to look away from his hand as he rubs his jeans at the knee. I try to think of something to say. Actually, if the shivers would stop running rampant around my gut—and lower—I might actually be smiling right now.

“Just keep telling it truths,” I say, “and come Christmas, it’ll be ready.”

He smirks and leans forward towards the tree. “My neighbour’s a pain in the arse.”

“Is that what I am? Only a neighbour?” I feign being kicked in the stomach and laugh.

“When you annoy me, yes.” He picks himself up off the ground and extends an arm to me. I stare at it blankly, and just as Robin looks ready to drop the offer, I snap to my wits and clap his hand to pull myself up. “Lucky for you, you rarely annoy me.”

“And when I don’t annoy you, what am I?”

His turquoise gaze sparks as he shrugs. “My friend.”

“Well, better than ‘neighbour’. What did I do to annoy you?”

He turns back to me and then to the fir, and the fun leaves his voice. “You don’t listen. Swimming is a great skill. If only a great way to wash off after a hard day’s work.”

I rub at the dirt on my arms. “It’s not about not hearing you.”

“Then what is it?”

I shift uncomfortably on my feet. Panic rises up my throat and my heart hammers. I slam my eyes shut. Learning to swim would make the water safer. If I’d known how back then, maybe . . . The logical side of me gets it, but the illogical side . . .

I swallow, look away. “I’ll . . . think about it.”

“You will?” His voice is bright, eager. I like it and hate it.

“I can’t take lessons from you. Or your friends.” I can’t have him knowing how much the water frightens me. How much I panic.

I only just keep myself together seeing Scott in the water.

Robin frowns. “I’d do a decent job. Or Lyle, if—”

I let out a breath. “I can’t take lessons from either of you, okay?”

Robin frowns. He doesn’t look too happy, but he nods. “If you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”



IT'S NINE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING AND ROBIN IS AT WORK. IN THE TWO weeks since his birthday, I've become very familiar with his timetable; I know when I can make these swaps safely. Sometimes the dead of night works best, but I'm no machine, and I need to sleep as well.

I pour bark around the base of the tree as Mr Cole shakes his head and rubs Tool's ears. He's driven over with the next Douglas in his trailer.

"Aren't you lucky you can use trees from the garden centre?"

I smirk at him as I pack up my duffel bag and place the old fir in the bucket. "Promise they won't get damaged. I'll pay for any that do."

He shakes his head. "You do know the best time to transplant firs is in winter, right?"

I nod. I know the basics about transplanting. "Most of them will stay in their pots. Until the very end. It shouldn't hurt them."

"Youth," Mr Cole laughs. "The crazy things you do for love."

He follows me back to my truck, bucket at his hip. "Look," he says, resting against the side of the deck as I drop in my duffel bag, "about that job that kid offered you—"

I twist sharply. "Lyle?" I suddenly know what Mr Cole is going to say, and I wish I'd never told him—ranted, perhaps?—about my 'competition'.

"Yeah, look, I have a couple of smaller stints I'll be working on over the next couple of months but not much." He shrugs. "Tough economy. It could tide you over until I have something bigger for the both of us."

I rest my back against the truck and fold my arms. "I said we were busy for the next few months."

Mr Cole shrugs. "Tell him you managed to squeeze some time in to help him out."

"God, I hate you right now."

He laughs and squeezes my shoulder. "I'm not thrilled to be suggesting

this either. Look, I could swap you one of my smaller jobs, but it involves sorting out the yard after a sewerage leak.”

I make a face. Lyle, or sewerage? Tough choice.

“Look at it another way,” he says. “You’d be earning yourself a few points helping out your true love’s friend, wouldn’t you?”

I stalk to the driver’s side and open the door. Fan-bloody-tastic.



THE BASTARD.

All those nicely fitting designer t-shirts and spotless slinky jeans, the kind smiles, the twinkle in his eyes. All the complicated tech talk he does over the phone. Even the scents wafting from his kitchen have me scowling. Does this guy have to be amazing at *everything*?

And there’s another two full days of him ahead of me.

Keep your head down and focus on the yard. Keep him out of your mind. And Christ, stop imagining the two of them together.

I hack with vengeance at the overgrowth and toss straggly branches into a heap at the side of the house. Lyle’s amazing villa overlooks the bays and has bedrooms to spare. It’s like he bought the house expecting he’d soon have a whole family to fill it. Or Robin and all his pets.

Amazing house, amazing job, amazing cook, amazing friend—

I breathe in through my nose and exhale slowly—

“Found a pair!”

I turn and he waves a pair of gloves at me with a crooked smile.

I lay the loppers down on the patchy grass and wipe the sweat off my brow with my arm. “Thought you hired me to do the grunt work?”

He shrugs. “I hired you for other reasons, remember?”

Right. “You’ll get all sweaty.”

So how about you just go back inside?

He slips on the gloves. Two of his fingers catch in one space, and he flicks the glove off as he tries to right it. It hits me smack on the nose before dropping to my boot.

I crouch to pick up the offending glove. Fluffy, soft wool. Cosy, I'm sure. Amazing on frosty mornings. *Not* gardening gloves. These won't last five minutes—they'll be full of dirt and torn to shreds in no time.

I look up. He's flushing as he tries—more carefully—to put on the other one. "This one fits better."

I take a breath but I've got nothing. I shake my head with a short laugh and move to my duffel bag, rummage around until I find a thick pair of leather gardening gloves. A faded yellow and slightly stiff, they aren't pretty, but they'll protect his smooth, gardening-virgin skin.

"Try these."

They're a bit big on him, and they definitely don't suit the rest of his look, but that works for me. "Ready?"

He straightens and his hazel eyes scan the mess in front of us. He curls his fingers towards him. "Bring it on."

By the time I'm gathering up the piles of weeds and prunings and carting them to my truck for disposal, Lyle looks about half an hour past eating his offer to help. His t-shirt is soaked with sweat, and he walks like his jeans are giving him some serious chafing.

I smirk behind a mouthful of water, and offer him the bottle when he passes.

He takes it and guzzles the lot. "How the hell do you do this all day?"

"There's just something about it. It feels good to work hard and make space for something beautiful, out in the sun with the breeze and everything. I couldn't sit in front of a computer the whole day."

Lyle glances longingly back at the house, as if getting back to his desk is exactly what he wants.

I shift a few branches onto the bigger pile at the fence. "I can take over

from here. Go on in.”

The look of relief that creeps over his face is almost comical—he takes a breath to speak but the doorbell cuts him off and I know exactly who it’ll be because his eyes light right up. He steps back towards the house and jiggles my empty drink bottle. “I’ll fill this up for you. Back in a tick.”

Ah, shite.

I kick at some loose scrub. I’m an arse. How long has that light been coming into his eyes while Robin just ploughs on oblivious? What I really should be feeling is sympathetic. I stand staring at the yard, sinking into the miserable realisation that Lyle is a genuinely good—amazing—guy.

“How’s it going?” An arm lands across my shoulders, the crook of the elbow against the sweaty skin at my nape. Under the pretence of picking up larger shears, I free Robin from my sweat.

“It’s going.” I glance at him; he’s frowning now. “How was your day?”

Robin stuffs his hands into his pockets and sighs. “A few cats were brought in. One Jack Russell picked up.”

Lyle returns, holding out my drink bottle. “Here you go.” I choke back a laugh at the fresh T-shirt he’s changed into; his hair once more perfectly frames his face. “Cold from the fridge. I squeezed in some fresh lemon.”

I squirt some water in my mouth. Of course, it’s delicious and I feel instantly refreshed. Damn him.

“What’s next?” Lyle asks, picking up his borrowed gloves.

Robin laughs. “You? Gardening? I’ve got to see this.”

Lyle looks at me, waiting for instructions, and I murmur, for his ears only. “Aren’t you clever.”

He slips me a smile. “Thank you.”

I swat him with my gardening glove, and he laughs, breezy and carefree like he wasn’t huffing and puffing and swearing under his breath just a few minutes ago.

“All right. Trim these shrubs back.” I show him how to use the shears and

where to cut, then hand them over. “Have some fun with that while I show off my muscles clearing some of the big stuff.”

Lyle’s eyes flash.

I lean in. “Yeah, I’m clever too.”

“Robin,” Lyle calls. “Come here, let me tell you a funny story from work.”

Dammit, Lyle.

I load up the wheelbarrow and disappear around the front, their shared laughter following me around the side of the house. Somewhat more aggressively than I might usually unload a wheelbarrow, I hurl dead wood and green waste into the bed of my truck, then decide on a five-minute break. Scott answers on the second ring. “Hey bro,” I say.

To which his first words are: “You got me that lizard yet?”

“You’re out of luck.”

“Remember I’ll blab, Jase.”

“Not if you ever want to stay with me again.”

Scott swears under his breath.

“Besides,” I say, staring towards Lyle’s wisteria-draped villa. “I don’t want to be that guy.”

“What guy?”

“The guy that lets fear push him around.”

“Ha! A zebra can’t change its stripes, you know.”

“Tiger.”

“Dude, you’re definitely the zebra.”

“You’re such a tender, loving brother.”

“Just doing my duty.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’ll tell him and let the cards fall how they may.”

“Ah-ha. When?”

“Before you get here.” Better yet, tonight. Yeah. I’ll take him to the fir

and say my truth.

“Doubt it. I still want Dusky.”

“Tough luck, Scotty.”

“I’m coming down next holidays still, right?”

“Not sure. Mum said she wants you to stay up there. But you can come over the winter holidays.”

“That’s so long away! It sucks here. Wellington’s way cooler.”

“It’ll be winter before you know it. Then it’ll be me and you again.”

“And Robin, right?”

“Yeah, and him.” I hope.

“You think if I got Robin a really sweet wax comb that he’ll let me have ___”

“Later, bro.” I hang up, shaking my head. He’s persistent, I have to give it to him.

A rapping comes at my window, and I look up to Robin with his hands shielding his eyes as he peers inside. He leans in when I wind down the window, folding his arms on the sill. “I was just about to head off for fish and chips. What do you want?”

I shake my head. “Thanks, but I think I’m winding up for the day, and”—I gesture towards the truck bed—“I gotta get rid of all that.”

“Oh.”

Does he look . . . disappointed?

My hands grip the steering wheel tightly. “Can I pop round to yours later?”

“Hey, Robin,” Lyle yells as he emerges from the house, making Robin jerk out from my window. “Get me a spring roll as well!” I glare at Lyle through the passenger window. I could’ve sworn he can’t see me, but suddenly his gaze meets mine. His lips curve into a smile.

“Spring roll. Sure thing!” Robin says to him, and then to me, “Chat later?”

I nod, wiping my clammy hands over my shorts. I really hope so.
The last thing I want to be is the zebra.

Chapter Six

I'm so the zebra.

To be fair, though, I only show my stripes at the last moment.

Robin looks at his watch and jumps up from our cosy spot in front of the fir. "Crap. I promised Lyle we'd go for a midnight surf." He glances up. "Full moon tonight."

Moon? Who cares about the moon? I'm still stuck on "midnight surf". That sounds . . . well, romantic. Doesn't it? "Do you often go, er, surfing together in the middle of the night?" Jesus, the way I say it sounds positively dirty. *Please say no!*

"Yeah, whenever we can." I stare at the cat in my lap and try not to imagine the two of them tangled up together, naked.

I lift the cat and put him down next to me as Robin says, "It's a rush. Like flying."

I know he's talking about surfing, but now everything he says turns erotic.

"You all right?"

I look up to find his gaze soft on mine. He reaches out an arm, and this time I take it, no hesitation. When I'm standing, he doesn't let go right away.

"There's something honest and raw about the dark, don't you think? Everything feels . . . more intense, somehow." He lets my hand go and twists

towards the fir. It's forty-eight centimetres now. "Maybe one day you'll know how it feels." I watch his profile as he smiles and slips his hands into his pockets. "It's like this fir. Magic."

"Teach me to swim!" The words tumble out of me. I blame the night. And the fantasies that have come crashing to mind. They're enough to, at least right now, dull the panic.

He turns to me, barely containing his grin. "We'll make a plan. Lyle's a patient teacher."

Lyle?

"Ah . . . I'd rather"—not have him there, eyeing you up like candy he wants to lick all over—"he didn't see me struggle."

Robin nods. "Sure. I'll get some tips on how to go about it and then it'll just be us. Tomorrow?"

Tomorrow? So soon? I shiver. "How about next weekend?" I need time to mentally prepare.

"It's a date."

Those words. All the terror to come will be worth it.



I HOPE ALL THE TERROR WILL BE WORTH IT. I SEEM TO BE HYPERVENTILATING a lot, and there are still five days to go . . .

I drag a hoe through the soil, loosening the earth in a new bed in Lyle's backyard. Why is anticipation the worst?

I pause, tip my head towards the dark-clouded sky and breathe in the moist air. Two frustrated voices rise from the house. Lyle and his brother.

I'd turned up in time to see the show. The arrival of a scruffy teenager with a backpack of clothes and an announcement he'd be staying a while. Lyle had definitely been taken unawares, but he'd urged his brother inside anyway. Then he'd caught sight of me and flushed.

Naturally, I ducked my head and busied myself with the yard, but now I need to visit the wharepaku . . .

I clomp over the deck, making my steps heavy enough to warn Lyle of my impending arrival. I toe out of my boots and rap against the glass door.

The argument stops. Lyle lets me in, a frown cutting his brow, his lips pursed. His eyes don't meet mine.

In the living room behind him, the brother is sprawled out on the couch, his dirty shoes on the nice upholstery and the remote in his hand.

He's scrolling through Netflix with a stubborn, stroppy pout on his face. I'm familiar with that pout—I've seen it on Scott. Fifteen-odd years ago, I wore it myself.

I gesture to Lyle that I need the bathroom and pass through the tension to the hallway. When I'm done and washing my hands, their voices rise again.

“ . . . your fault,” the teen whines.

“I did the best I could for both of us.”

“Well, they suck. I'm staying here.”

“They care about your future. So do I. If you quit school, how will you afford to live?”

“I'll crash here. Gardening looks easy enough. I'll do that.”

I laugh under my breath. Shaking my head, I make a timely appearance and clap my hands. “Right. You.” The teen resembles his brother in the mouth and cheekbones. The eyes, not so much. But that could be because of the malevolent glare. “I'll give you a taste of how easy it is. Paid, of course. Take yourself out back.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“A gardener. I'm offering you your first job.”

Lyle opens his mouth to interrupt and I cast him a ‘give me a shot?’ glance. After a moment's hesitation, he steps back and folds his arms. “Off you go, Jordy. Follow Jase's instructions.”

Jordy casts the remote to the floor, near-missing Lyle's feet. Lyle hauls in

a breath and I touch his elbow. *Ignore it.*

I put as much breeze in my tone as I can manage. “Head to the lemon tree.”

Jordy scoffs and drags himself out back.

Lyle pivots. “Sorry you had to see all that.”

“Equally sorry if I’m interfering too much. But . . . sometimes being set straight by an outsider helps.”

“Had experience with that?”

“Our neighbour. It was only when they had a good go berating me that it sunk in how shitty I was being.”

He raises a brow.

“It’s easy to be shitty to the people that love you most. You trust they’ll stay.”

“You reckon all that”—he gestures to the couch where Jordy had been—“was a show of trust?”

“A show of it, and a test of it.”

Lyle absorbs this, tipping his head back. “I’m not good at this stuff.”

“Mate, your patience is impressive. You’re doing all right.”

He huffs a laugh.

I say, “I also get how it’s harder, with a much younger brother. The dynamics are different. We don’t see them all the time; we want to give them everything they want, out of guilt for not being there.”

Lyle shuts his eyes.

I blabber on, hands slipping into my back pockets. “But discipline is sometimes the best gift you can give a kid. Even if it comes from a nosy gardener.”

He chuckles, opens his eyes, and scrutinises me with a cocked head. “I suppose you turned out . . .” He doesn’t finish, just gestures me towards the doors and Jordy swatting a lemon off the tree. “Have at it.”

I have at it.

I put Jordy to work clearing a section along the back fence. He complains a lot. The gloves are too itchy, there are too many spiders, that sort of thing. I ask him to help me cart mulch from my truck into the yard instead. He struggles lifting a bale of pea straw out of the truck bed and drops it. The twine breaks open and straw spills into the gutter.

He sulks instead of apologising. I tell him to find a solution.

Lyle brings chilled water to the deck, and I take a pit stop at his side while Jordy balances bales in the barrow and wheels them down the side of the house to the back fence.

“How haven’t you flipped yet?” Lyle asks.

I laugh and take a few gulps of my water. “A few selfish thoughts keep my spirits up.”

“Selfish thoughts?”

“Finally, I have proof.”

“Of what?”

I lean in and whisper close to his ear. “You’re not entirely perfect.”

He elbows my side. I side-eye him, and he side-eyes me, and we hold it for three long beats before breaking apart on a smirk.

Five minutes later, Lyle disappears inside and Jordy gives the wheelbarrow a boot as yet another bale of straw topples off his haphazard stack. He’s done.

I dig in my pockets and pull out a folded twenty.

“What? Just this? I worked for hours.”

“You didn’t even hold out the hour. That’s over minimum wage.”

His mouth drops open and he snaps it shut again, stiffening his shoulders. “Whatever.”

He stomps over the deck to the back door but before he can step inside, I clamp a hand on his shoulder and steer him back. “Shoes off. Respect his space.” I lower my voice. “Him, too.”

“Why do you care?”

I laugh. “Simple human decency, mate.”

“Fuck this.” He rips himself away from me and treads through the house in his shoes. I toe off my boots and head in to hear him yelling at Lyle, “Your place is worse than Nan’s.” He grabs his bag, and the front door slams.

I wince.

Lyle is standing in the middle of the living room, palming his head.

I stop beside him. “Did I make it worse?”

He jerks his head up. Shakes it. “Believe it or not, this probably means he’s taking it all in.”

“Do you need to follow?”

He rushes into the hall, grabs his keys, and hops into his clean sneakers. “Would you mind locking up when you leave?”

I wave him off; he mouths his thanks and races after Jordy, and I head back to the garden and tackle the lavender beds. Turned out to be quite the eventful morning, with one shiny silver lining: I temporarily forgot about the swimming thing.



THAT ANXIETY RETURNS, OF COURSE. RETURNS, AND PEAKS, FIVE DAYS LATER.

“How are you feeling?”

Nervous, clammy, excited, sick.

“All right,” I say as I pull up my new navy swim shorts. The smell of chlorine hits the back of my nose with every breath; there’s no zoning out what’s waiting for me out there.

Robin’s toes curl and tense, and I think he might be about to say something, but then he walks away.

Grabbing my gear and towel, I slip out of the changing room and stride after Robin to the pool.

Just look at the man. He’s all smooth, tan skin, save for the green and

blue shorts that—unfortunately—leave room for the imagination.

Water splashes over my feet as some guy doing butterfly stroke finishes a lap. He pops up out of the water with his goggles on and smiles a self-satisfied smile as he looks at the clock.

It isn't just him out there either. Almost all the lanes are in use by at least one person. All swimming. Swimming well.

Butterfly guy starts a new lap. He looks so much younger than me.

I don't realise I've stopped until Robin backtracks and stands beside me. "That could be you one day."

I want to shake my head. That will never be me. "One step at a time, right?" I say, because that sounds rational and clear-headed and far more attractive than hyperventilating.

All you have to do is get in the water and finish this lesson. Then you can say, well look, we tried.

Robin bumps shoulders with me, his skin cool against mine. "Come on, we can start in the kiddie pool."

The kiddie pool.

Heat rushes to my face as I force myself to nod and follow him. The shallow pool is almost empty; through the still water, the bottom is clear to see. On it are colourful murals of kids splashing and laughing. There's even a picture of a tween coaching his baby brother to swim.

"The very first step is to hop into the water," Robin says, chuckling. I flush even more.

"Yeah, right. That . . . that probably makes sense."

There are four shallow steps, and Robin is already on the last one, his back to me. I take a moment to swallow back my nerves before stepping in after him.

The water bites coolly for the first step, and the second, and the third, until I'm covered up to my hips. Robin turns, and the smile he gives me looks relieved, as if he had expected it might be harder to get me this far. He

touches the surface of the water, making it ripple around him. “First, let’s get comfortable in the water. Walk around.”

I wade over to him, and we push our way to the far side of the pool as he outlines all the steps he and Lyle have planned for me. His voice is animated, but as his excitement grows, so does the queasy feeling in my gut.

I look away, towards the large windows overlooking a grassy yard.

This is never going to work.

“One-two-three, breathe,” I say. “Yeah. Got it.” I turn away from the windows and focus on the far end of the pool. He wants me to walk there, bent towards the water, arcing my arms in strokes and angling my head to take a breath on the third one. I feel large and clumsy in the small pool, and it’s awkward wading through the water, imitating freestyle.

Just get to the other side. I stop a quarter of the way to roll my shoulders and rid myself of the tension coiled at the base of my neck. Who cares what you look like? Just think, once you can swim, maybe you’ll be able to surf . . . surfing at midnight . . .

One-two-three, breathe.

One-two-three, breathe.

One-two—

A sharp wolf-whistle slices over the water, followed by a chorus of laughter.

Robin swears behind me, and I snap my head up to a group of schoolboys passing through to the lane pool.

“What a loser.”

“Shut up, dickweed, maybe he’s slow.”

“Then he’s your type of loser.”

I flip them all the bird just as Robin says, “Ignore them.”

“Ignore it?” I spit out. “Easy for you to say.” I’m already moving towards the side of the pool. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Jase, wait—”

I pull myself out of the water. *Wait? When every time I'm waist deep I see images of my drowned friend, face down, floating on the lake right next to me?*

I choke on things I can't voice. I point to the toddler pool to our left, the mural at the bottom of the shallow pool, and the tail end of the crowd of schoolboys. I shake my head. "It's not going to happen, okay?" I rub my brow. "No hard feelings."



LATER, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY, I SNEAK INTO ROBIN'S BACKYARD AND place the next Douglas fir. Sixty-two centimetres. It will stand two days before I replace it with the next one, eight centimetres taller. Tool butts his head against my leg after I hoist my bag over my shoulder and pick up fir number seventeen.

"I shouldn't have got so upset this morning," I say to him—and to the tree because boy was that the truth.

Tool opens his mouth and pants. It looks like he's smiling. He doesn't care if I look like an idiot.

I rub his soft ears and swallow hard.

My pocket vibrates; I set the fir back on the ground and fumble for the phone.

"Jase?" Robin's voice is hesitant, nervous, and . . . is that the sound of a car engine?

I straighten, immediately feeling like I've been caught red-handed. I pray Tool won't give me away with a delighted doggy yelp.

"Hi." I grab the fir and make my way down the side of the house, Tool trailing behind me. "Look, about earlier—"

"Yeah, that's why I called." His breath crackles down the line. "I've swapped my afternoon shift. I'm coming to yours to chat."

I still. “You are?” How far off is he? I jog towards the truck.

“Yeah, I’m just around the corner. Shit, it’s just . . . I’ve felt awful all morning. I should’ve been more sensitive.”

I dump my gear into the truck bed and—

Where are my fucking keys? They were in my pocket!

“Robin, I’m not home right now.” I look back towards the house. Shite. They must’ve fallen out. “You really don’t need to do this, there’s nothing to talk about.”

“Sorry, what?”

“We can chat another time.”

“I can’t hear you at all, I’ll be there in a few.” He hangs up. I get the feeling he wasn’t driving through a dead spot.

I race back into the yard. “Keys, keys. Where are you, dammit?” The watch strapped to my wrist seems to tick more and more loudly as I search through the grass and bark.

Tool sniffs the ground next to me as if he wants to help as well.

“*Of course* they have a green tag on them,” I tell him as I press the soft grass, trying to feel for them.

Tool noses something and gives a small bark. I scramble over to him and he nudges at metal glinting in the sun. Keys! I snag them, thanking Tool over my shoulder as I sprint back to my truck.

I jump in and screech into a U-turn. As I turn the curve in the street, though, I catch a glimpse of Robin’s blue Camry. Fuck! I check over my shoulder, shift into reverse, and park in a spot he won’t be able to see from my place. He’s bound to pass it when he leaves, though . . .

I jump out, grab the fir from the truck bed, and stash it under the dashboard on the passenger side. Lying lengthways, it fits, just—though soil spills out of the pot. But that’s a price I’m willing to pay. I chuck my jacket over it to be on the safe side.

I lock the truck and jog down the footpath and through the open gate—

And stop at the sight of Robin sitting with his back against my door, hugging his knees loosely and staring out into space. He runs his fingers absently over the edge of his grey cargo shorts, and then, seeing me, clambers to his feet. “Jase. I thought you didn’t want to let me in.”

I shake my head. That would never be the case. “I was just”—I jerk a thumb over my shoulder—“walking. To, ah, you know. Think.”

“Because of this morning?”

I shrug. “More to peer into people’s gardens and get ideas for Lyle’s yard.”

Of all things, of all possible things, I had to bring *Lyle* into this conversation.

“You’re working there again tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” I step up to the door and open it for us. “Come in.”

“Do you mind if I hang out with Lyle while you’re working?”

Yes, a little. A lot. “Sure thing. No problem.”

He smiles and moves to my kitchen, where he immediately opens my fridge and pulls out a couple of cans of Coke. He cracks one open and hands it to me, and then slumps into a seat at the dining table.

He stares at his can as he speaks, and I slowly move to a chair opposite him. “It was stupid to do lessons in a public pool. I’m sorry. Next time we’ll go someplace private.”

Next time? “Uh, look—” I twist the Coke in my hand and lift it to my lips. “I don’t think we should do it again.”

A pause, and the sound of my hard gulp of Coke.

“At all?” He glances up.

“At all.”

“It was a shit morning. Don’t let it put you off learning altogether. You can do this. Look,” his eyes spark with excitement, “if you practice an hour every day, you could be swimming before your brother comes back. Hell, you could be surfing before he is. When’s he coming back?”

“Next month, maybe. And also, just so you know, he hasn’t forgotten about Dusky.”

“He doesn’t give up, does he?”

“Nope.”

Robin grins. “I hope it runs in the family.”

I blink down towards the table. “I don’t want to be eating ankle busters in front of you,” I say as an excuse.

“It’s a rite of passage. If you didn’t eat any, I’d be pissed off.” He smiles behind his can. “And, you know, you’re in safe hands. I know mouth-to-mouth.”

I jerk my chair back. He looks at me, startled, and I hurry to finish my Coke. “Another?” I ask as I charge towards the fridge.

Robin frowns, looking . . . confused. He drains his Coke. “Please don’t give up. Maybe I wasn’t the best teacher in the world, but don’t let that stop you learning.” He crushes his can and trashes it in the recycling bin. “Do me a favour, ask Lyle. He’ll teach you right.”

Just what I want to hear.

“I should—”

He stops me with a hand on my forearm. “Wait. There’s something else I wanted to ask. Completely unrelated.”

I raise both brows.

Robin smiles. “Do you have plans next weekend?”

Chapter Seven

Originally, he'd planned to take along a workmate, but they bailed last minute, so Robin wants me go with him to a beachside wedding, black tie. His plus one. I'm not thrilled to learn Lyle is also friends with the happy couple and will therefore be there too, but the opportunity is too good to miss.

After work the next day, I head to the nearest menswear store with suits to hire. The place is small and quiet—one shop assistant, and one other customer shuffling about behind a fitting room curtain.

“How can I help?” the assistant asks.

I'm not sure, exactly, but he seems prepared for that and instantly springs into action, taking my measure and providing a rack of options that he wheels to the second fitting room. I take the first option and duck behind the curtain; I'm fiddling with the bowtie when I hear a familiar voice.

I whip my curtain open to find Lyle standing before the mirror, trying to gauge his appearance from the back. His head swings my way and he snaps out of his pose. “What are you doing here?”

“Robin invited me to your friend's wedding.” I cock my head at his sleek black tuxedo and crisp white bowtie. “Shouldn't you have organised this earlier?”

“I thought I had. Turns out I don't fit my suit anymore.”

I scroll my eyes down his elegant frame.

He scowls. “My shoulders are wider. Must be the swimming.”

The assistant trots over and coos at me. I glance at the mirror and spy Lyle eyeing the dark navy suit with a grimace. He moves to his pre-selected rack, pulls off another suit and disappears into the cubicle.

I do the same, and this time we re-emerge simultaneously. Lyle is in bold red, accented with a paisley pocket square. He looks incredible.

I slide on a black dinner jacket and smooth the lapels. His nostrils flare and he grabs another suit.

The racks are our battlefield as we fight to outdo one another. Lyle is all classic sophistication, while I try for charisma.

Finally, Lyle rubs his face and peeks over the tops of his fingers. “This is childish.”

True. However . . .

I dangle a suit jacket over my shoulder and smirk. “Who says grown-ups can’t give in to their feelings from time to time?”

Lyle gives this earnest consideration. He eyes me slowly up and down and his sparkling gaze pierces mine.

I choke back a laugh, and scowl. “Bring it.”

He eyes my curling finger; his expression contorts, but he schools it and dashes back behind his curtain.

We leave no suit untried.



LATE THAT FRIDAY—THE FRIDAY OF THE NINETEENTH FIR, 138CM—LYLE wriggles cheeky fingers from the front passenger seat of Robin’s car and I submit to taking a backseat for the three-hour drive north.

We’re all staying together, in a bach belonging to someone vaguely related to someone, right on the beach. In fact, there’s so much sand on the

patio out front you could almost say *under* the beach. Luggage hanging from our shoulders and suits on hangers hooked around our fingers, we squeeze into the living room and drop and drape our things, flicking switches as we pass. The place is packed with relics left behind after summers past, every surface covered in treasures and books and puzzles; the lightshades cast soft glows through old glass, each a different colour.

It's been a long day; Robin has been a series of yawns for the last hour. "Let's get some shut-eye and start early tomorrow."

We peek into the two bedrooms. One is box-room size with a child-size bed and a little dresser squeezed in beside. The other is bigger but only holds a double, flanked by old wooden chairs. Robin grimaces. "I did say three adults. Guess they assumed there was a pair between us."

Lyle just smiles. "Don't worry about it. This place is great."

"It's no problem," I agree, stretching. "I reckon Lyle fits the small bed best."

A scowl is fired my way.

I look back innocently. "Robin's taller, he needs the extra length."

"You're right. Someone smaller sharing with him will give him more space." Lyle comes up to me and squeezes my biceps. "A hardened man like you won't mind roughing it in a single bed for a night."

I raise a challenging eyebrow. "And a generous man like you won't mind giving up the bigger bed to a guy who strained his back in your garden yesterday."

Lyle chuckles, unfazed. "I'll pay for you to get a massage."

"What about tonight?"

"Guys?" Robin interrupts, gaze shooting between us in confusion. "I'll take the single."

We spin to face him; he's already picking up his bag and closing the door behind himself.

Lyle swats my arm.

We share defeated glances as we slip into the crisp sheets of the double bed. Double, but still a tight fit. Lyle stuffs a pillow between us, and I shove another next to it. Simultaneously, we turn off the little bedside lights and flop onto our spots.

“Did you really hurt your back?” Lyle says in the dark.

“It’s nothing.”

“I meant it about the massage. As many as you need.”

I pull the pillow from under my head and crush it against my face with a groan.

He laughs.



I WAKE UP IN A TANGLE OF WARM LIMBS, SOFT HAIR TICKLING MY NOSE. LYLE squirms in my arms and shifts the thigh he has over my hip down my leg. Cold toes bite at my calves and I jolt.

Lyle stiffens, and then we’re yanking ourselves to the far edges of the bed, staring at one another in horror.

“What happened to the pillow barricade?”

I glance down at the floor on my side, where I spy the two offending pillows.

I leap out of the sheets and slyly kick the pillows under, hopefully all the way to Lyle’s side. “Maybe you should ask yourself.”

Lyle twists and looks at his side of the mattress. His face flushes. He fluffs the sheets, and I feel something soft hit my ankles as he says, “I didn’t . . .”

He shuffles around, spies the pillows, and sighs. “I won’t blame you. I’m too tempting.”

Cheeky.

I suppose that makes us both cheeky.

“If it was me,” I murmur, “I assure you I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Lyle’s mouth quirks. “Don’t make it too easy for me.”

I steer him snickering out of the room.

There’s only one—very small—bathroom. It takes us over an hour to get everyone showered and suited-up for the wedding. Robin is gorgeous in his timeless black tux with satin lapels and white shirt. His waistcoat is tailored perfectly, but his trousers . . . they have both Lyle and me staring.

We drag our eyes off him and look at one another, and the suits that won our hormone-fuelled suit-off. I chose a rustic beige with the fresh touch of white linen, and Lyle ended up with charcoal grey—slim-fit with a patterned shirt and a pocket square. I like to think we’re both mesmerising, but Lyle carries his suit with enviable grace and the sunnies are a tie-breaker.

The invite said barefoot ceremony, so we leave our dress shoes behind and sink our way through fresh morning sand to the stretch of beach where the wedding will take place. White chairs adorned with fresh lengths of climbing rose are arranged in rows and there’s a carved arch in front, at the edge of the water. Pockets of guests hover around in their finest, their conversations hushed by the waves sweeping up the shore.

Robin breathes in deeply, eyes sparkling like the surface of the sea.

He bends over to scoop up some sand, and Lyle and I are suddenly left staring at one another, his gooey-eyed face likely a mirror of my own. We snap our attention towards the happy shrieks of children splashing in ankle-deep water.

A scream pierces the air, and in a single breath my stomach drops, my feet sink deeper and deeper into the sand, the world spins; water and waves. Another cry.

Little arms break the surface of the water, too far out.

Guests are running. Panicking.

Robin is dashing to the water, stripping off his jacket—

I’m not in my body anymore. I’m above it, looking down, watching

detached as I step back, turn away, run.

My breathing is shallow and scratchy. I can't stop shaking. I lean against the brick wall of the shower block, sea out of view, and sink to the sandy footpath. I cover my ears.

My mind fills with flashes of that summer at the lake. I'm playing, cupping and showering water over my head. The kids farther down, near the teachers, are screeching and splashing around.

Something bumps my back and I jump away from it. Are there sharks in lakes?

I try to run out, and fall. Water closes over my face. I open my eyes to sunlight through the water. It's pretty. And then a shadow drifts over me.

It has a face. A young face.

He's limp, not moving. His fingertips touch my shoulder.

I scream bubbles of water.

Adult hands. The scent of sun-warm stones getting wet. The boy.

The body.

Wind blows sand up my ankles and I try to focus on the feel of it—

Shudders roll through me. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes?

The cries have stopped.

The sound of footsteps through damp sand, coming closer.

Lyle's voice. "There you are—" His casual tone sharpens into a hiss and he crouches, palming my forehead.

I shake more violently and press my face against bent knees.

He starts to move and I grab his arm. "Please." I shake my head. "Don't want him to see me like this."

"What . . . is this?"

It's kindly asked, curious. Worried.

I don't answer, and he sits close next to me.

I turn my head away, heat stinging my eyes.

His hand meets my back and rubs warm, calming circles that make my

throat thicken more.

“What kinds of trees are those?”

I lift my head and gaze at the distant greenery. “Macrocarpa,” I say croakily, and cough. “Nikau and manuka.”

He keeps rubbing circles. “That’s where the honey comes from, right?”

Heat flushes my cheeks. “Sure. If my brother were here, he’d talk you blue about honey.”

“Ah, the much younger Kress. What’s he like?”

“Lizard crazy. Ask Robin how he’s eyeing up Dusky.”

“Does he like mobile games?” Lyle’s circles turn to tapping fingers over my shoulder blades. “I’ve been developing one where lizards catch varying speeds of flies. Dusky gave me the idea.”

I keep my eyes on the hills. “I’m sure he’d love to try it next time.”

“Does he live far away?”

“Taupo. He comes down a few times a year.”

“Is it hard, having him so far off?”

“I left home when he was three. I still haven’t got over the feeling I abandoned him. Dad’s gone, so I left him and Mum. It was . . . hard.”

Lyle’s hand drops to his side and screws up a ball of sand. “The hardest,” he murmurs.

I glance at him, shifting closer, sudden quiet in his expression—

A bell sounds, someone shaking it excitedly, calling for guests to find their seats.

Lyle says, “If you need more time . . .”

I swat my face and run a hand through my hair. “I’m fine. I’ll be fine. Do I look okay?”

He reaches out and fingers stray hair, then pushes it to one side. He considers my face, takes his sunnies and slips them over my puffy eyes. “You look good.” He rises sharply to his feet and hurries towards the wedding ceremony, tossing cheekily over his shoulder, “But not as good as me.”

It's just what I need. I chase after him towards the lines of white chairs quickly filling up. One seat is left free next to a freshly-changed Robin, now in a dress shirt and jeans and looking around wildly trying to spot us. When he finally does, he waves and his eyes brighten as we near. Lyle moves faster. I attempt to give him a run for his money, but I'm touched he endured my panic attack. It's only fair to let him have this shot. I play fair, after all.

"How is . . . everyone?" I murmur between them.

Robin nods sombrely. "Kid's fine. Much relief all around."

"Good," I murmur, my own wave of relief washing through me.

It's only once the beach ceremony is over that I can redirect my thoughts enough to enjoy the wedding.

Lunch is held in a beautifully decorated old hall with twelve round tables and edible fruit centrepieces. Robin and Lyle know heaps of the guests; they spend a lot of time chatting to others or being chatted to.

A particularly chatty grandpa is standing at Robin's seat telling his stories, gesturing wildly; Robin listens and nods, but he's side-eyeing the fruit—

Lyle plucks a few grapes and casually starts feeding him, grape after grape. Robin raises his brow quizzically but he's too invested in being polite to Gramps to reach for the fruit himself.

I watch Lyle's smooth fingers alternate between his own mouth and Robin's. Hazel eyes graze over mine with a glint that is absolutely outrageous.

"Lyle?"

His gaze returns to mine. "Hm?"

I gesture with a finger to my mouth in the universal sign for *you have something between your teeth*.

He stops smiling as his tongue works hard to fix the issue. He mutters to himself and I shake my head, gesturing a few teeth over.

He grabs a napkin and tries that.

Again, I shake my head.

His chair rumbles out from the table and he stands, napkin pressed to his mouth. “Excuse me.”

He bolts off to the bathrooms, weaving around tables and couples moving to the cleared space in the middle of the hall for a dance, and Robin finally turns to me. “Sorry, this must be boring.”

I pluck the single strawberry from the centrepiece and denude it of greenery. Robin watches longingly—I’ve long learned strawberries are his favourite—as the strawberry heads towards my mouth. I stop an inch short, smile, and offer it to him as the music picks up, lively notes of jazz that have more than one guest tapping their feet.

“It’s yours, you have—”

I push it gently into his mouth, and he smiles around it, laughing.

Lyle, who is making his way back to us with a sharp shake of his head my way, is not laughing. “Liar,” he mouths.

I return him my own outrageous smirk.

His eyes narrow on me before he diverts to the table next to us and asks if any of the ladies can swing dance. Hands shoot up, and Lyle spares us a smug look. He takes a hand and glides out onto the floor.

Robin hollers, cheering Lyle on as he pays homage to a dance of a bygone era in his dapper suit.

Exactly the attention Lyle has been angling after.

I slouch further and further into my seat with each seemingly effortless dance. Bloody hell, his moves look choreographed.

After a half dozen songs, Lyle bounds over to us, breathless, and downs Robin’s full glass of water.

He’s not looking my way, but the cheeky curve at the edge of his lips is all for me. *What do you have to top that?* I fold my arms, and his smile grows.

He takes Robin’s arm and pulls him out of his seat, glancing at me. “One

dance. It'll be fun.”

Robin half-heartedly protests, but lets Lyle drag him onto the dance floor and show him some moves.

Amid the joyful dancers, Lyle curves his arm around Robin's waist and guides him into a slow waltz. Robin treads on his shoe, and Lyle laughs, undisturbed.

All I can do is watch Robin's growing enjoyment as he finds the groove. I top up my champagne again and again, and later enjoy a splitting headache as we drive back to Wellington.

Chapter Eight

The next weekend, I drag myself up Lyle's front path, duffel bag of gear slung over my shoulder. Being here is one of the last things I want to be doing. Robin said he'll be coming round, and quite frankly, I'm not up for seeing Lyle's flirtatious show. The wedding weekend showed he's good at it.

And the way he helped me . . . he's deserving too.

I ring the bell, and after a long pause, Lyle yanks open the front door.

"Oh. Jase. I thought Robin would be here first."

I blink. Is that the reason he's in nothing but a towel? Trying to lure Robin in with his finely chiselled swimmer's body?

I shake my head and readjust the bag strap sitting heavily on my shoulder. "He'll be twenty minutes." My lips twitch. "Plenty of time for you to get dressed."

Lyle grins and finishes tucking in the end of the towel around his waist. Rivulets of water dribble lazily down his chest towards his navel. "Right. Come in."

I look down at my mud-caked workboots and back up at Lyle, whose skin is pebbling with goosebumps. His towel slips a notch at one hip, revealing more of the V leading to his crotch. I lose my train of thought. Something. Muddy shoes. Yeah. Let Lyle get dressed before Robin arrives. "I'll just . . . get going on the garden." I turn abruptly and stride back to my truck, shaking

my head. Focus.

I haul a shovel and a bag of sheep pellets I hadn't planned on bringing out until later off the bed of the truck. Then I beeline down the side of the house, right to the back of the yard, where I'm planning a row of fruit trees against the back fence.

Not much later, Robin and a (thankfully) dressed Lyle find me in the farthest corner of the garden.

There's a twinkle in Lyle's eye. Maybe it's the way the sun is shining.

"Look who finally decided to show up," Lyle says.

Robin nudges him. "I swung by the bakery first." He smiles widely at me. "You want to join us for a bit?"

If it was just Robin and me, I'd jump at the chance. As it is, I don't particularly want to be reminded of how charming Lyle is, especially since I'm already dusty and sweaty after barely twenty minutes out here.

"Nah. I've got a fair bit to get done."

"Fine," Lyle says quickly. Too quickly. He reluctantly adds, "If you need a hand later . . ."

His eyes glimmer with the hope I'll decline.

My smirk disappears the moment Lyle slings his arm around Robin and leads him to the picnic table.

I work on, but soon I need to head back for the bag of manure I'd rested against the side of the house. As I come closer, Robin's voice slows me down.

"I'm torn between trying to work out how he does it, and marvelling at the result."

Lyle hums. "Sounds like magic."

"The best kind."

Lyle glances at the yard and misses me standing behind the old lemon tree. "What do you think of him?"

I almost snap the branch I'm holding back to peer at them, and hold my

breath as Robin turns away from me.

“How do you mean? He’s a solid guy. He cares about animals. He’s a great brother. He’s been a good friend.”

Lyle visibly relaxes at “friend.” He reaches out a hand and settles it over Robin’s. Robin starts, sweeping his gaze to their hands, but he doesn’t move his. Just looks up at Lyle, whose hair glistens with strands of red in the sunlight. He swallows hard and flushes a bit.

“Lyle?” Robin asks carefully.

“I . . . I—”

I can’t watch anymore.

I drift back to the yard, but instead of digging in the pellets I carted down here, I toss the spade on the grass.

Shite.

With a sting in my eyes, I collect my gardening tools into the duffel that has journeyed the length of the garden with me, and brace myself as I walk towards the deck. I’ll tell Lyle I’m not feeling well and come back during the week.

Their hands are no longer joined. I have no idea what that means, and I’m not hanging around to find out.

“Lyle,” I say, glancing briefly at Robin, whose eyes are on me. I run a soil-covered hand through my hair. “I ate something dodgy this morning. You mind if I head off?”

Robin straightens. “Are you all right?” he asks, while Lyle runs an analytical eye from the top of my head to my feet. He raises a gentle, disbelieving brow.

I give Robin a quick nod. “I’ll be fine.”

Lyle looks between the two of us. “Take whatever time you need to get over it.”

Nice subtext, Lyle. I attempt a smile that feels more like a grimace. “I’ll call.”

Robin grabs his jacket. “I’ll drive you home in your truck.”

“That’s not necessary—”

Robin isn’t paying attention. “Lyle, can I leave my car here and pick it up tonight?”

“Of course.”

Of course, because when he comes to pick it up later, they can continue whatever it is they’ve started. There’ll be more midnight surfing, and this time there’ll be no ocean involved.

I’m left with no other choice. I drop the keys onto Robin’s outstretched hand, and we move to my truck. I jump into the passenger seat while Robin takes his time slipping behind the wheel and belting up. He inserts the key, and the truck rumbles to life around us. More carefully than I’ve ever done, Robin eases out of the park and onto the street. He changes gears, and it grates a bit. “Sorry,” he says as he tries again with more success.

“No worries. She’s sensitive.”

“How’s the stomach? If you need me to pull over . . .”

“Just a weird moment back there. I’m okay.”

He glances over at me, and I nod my head in assurance.

Robin drives right past my place and parks outside his. “Since you’re feeling better, come in for a bit.”

Something’s up. He’s tense, and he’s brought me here for a reason.

He doesn’t wait for my answer but climbs out of the truck and heads for his front door.

Inside, he puts on the kettle while I slide onto a chair at the dining table and watch. He keeps letting out long, deep breaths, as if he wants to say something but can’t get it out. He moves to the windowsill where he’s put Dusky’s enclosure and crouches down to stare at the skink. The bubbling of the kettle fills the silence between us.

On the one hand, I want it to keep boiling and boiling. I have no idea what to say to him. I might not really be sick, but there’s a greasy, heavy

feeling inside when I replay the day.

On the other hand, I want the kettle to finish boiling because maybe it'll make him speak. Say whatever it is he's preparing himself to say.

The bubbling wanes, and the only sounds left are our breathing and the shift of Robin's feet over the floor as he moves to make us some peppermint tea.

"Honey?"

I startle at the endearment, then register the jar of honey he's lifting down from the cupboard. Of course. He and Lyle are a thing now. "That'd be great."

The cat patters into the room and smooches around my ankles, and I use the distraction, petting and lifting him to my lap. I ruffle his fur, waiting for Robin to tell me.

My stomach rolls.

Robin grips both cups of tea. "It's too warm in here. Let's take these outside." He turns to the back door and laughs as he realises he can't carry both teas and unlock the door at the same time. "Would you?"

I swallow back my excuse to leave and open the door.

Robin sets my tea on the table on the deck outside. With a small sip of his drink, he wanders into the backyard. I pick up my tea and follow him to the fir.

"What do you want to say?" I croak out when we're both sitting, staring at it.

"How'd you know I wanted to say something?"

"Why else would you bring me here?"

He laughs, but it's the nervous kind. "I want it to be a magical Christmas this year," he says, picking up a piece of stray bark and thumbing the rough edges.

I sip my tea, waiting. I can sense the truth hovering on his lips.

"Lyle wants to be with me," he says softly. "Romantically, I mean."

That queasy feeling slithers around in my stomach some more. “Is that right?”

He looks at me out the corner of his eye. “Do I come across as gay?”

What?

It shouldn’t be, but it’s the last question I’m expecting. Somehow, in all my imaginings over the past months, I never questioned his orientation.

I’m an idiot for making assumptions.

Robin continues, “Maybe I gave him some unintended signals?”

My gut churns, heavy, syrupy. Now I really do feel sick. I stare at the fir. “What’d you tell him?”

“That I want us to stay friends.”

I close my eyes at the pang Lyle must also have felt. Is everything he dreamed of now slowly choking him to tears?

My throat squeezes. I pick myself up off the ground and drain my tea. “My stomach’s playing up again. Wouldn’t want you to catch it.”

Robin knocks over his cup as he hurries to stand, and tea chugs out onto the grass. He eyes me and then glances at the now-empty cup in my hand. He nods kindly. “Feel better soon.”

Somehow, I don’t think that will be the case.

Chapter Nine

Early Sunday morning, I'm about to sneak off to transplant the next fir when the persistent buzzing of my ancient doorbell provokes my volatile calm. "All right, all right. Hold your horses, would you?"

Cold, tired, with one boot on and my jacket slung over my shoulder, I clomp every second step to the front door. I'd been planning to leave via the back, where I stash all my tools.

That damned bell.

I yank open the door, fully prepared to unleash my wrath on whatever power company representative or person wanting to tell me about Jesus is on the other side of it—

It's Lyle.

On my porch, in a beam of morning light, cradling a box of lemons. His hazel gaze rakes over me. Whatever he sees, his conclusion is to shake his head. "Where are you off to so early on a Sunday?"

"If it's so early, what are you doing here?" I plunk my duffel bag onto the floor and lean against the doorjamb.

"You said you were sick. I brought some lemons and mint from the garden."

I glimpse the mint squished in beside the lemons. "I haven't planted any mint."

He shrugs, toeing off his shoes and peering at me from the corner of his eye.

I step back from the door and take the box out of his arms. He gives me a look as I back down the hall towards the kitchen, but he chases after me and drags out a chair at the table. It's the same chair Robin usually sits in when he comes over. Lyle fills it differently; he's an inch shorter, and his sandy hair, swept over his forehead, frames a pretty face rather than Robin's strong-jawed handsomeness. He smells different too, subtle hints of soap instead of ocean salt.

I fill the jug and plant my still-booted foot on the chair across from Lyle as I undo the laces. I just have to convince Lyle I'm sick, get him out of my house, and race over to sort out the fir while Robin is still out.

I recall Lyle's younger brother clomping dirty shoes through his nice house. Maybe I should take a page from that playbook.

I slip my boot off and set it on the table, close enough that if he leans over his nose will touch it.

His brow shoots up. He picks up the boot and inspects it. "I'm thinking of getting some like this too."

"For all the gardening you love to do?"

His lips twitch.

I make lemon and mint teas. He stares into his cup for a long time. The smile he brought with him fades, and suddenly there are dark shadows over his face. The happy crinkles at the edges of his eyes don't deepen like they usually do. Pretty though the man is, right now he looks like one who hasn't slept. Who might have recently had a good, hard sob.

Strange what difference a smile can make.

We sip our tea. My watch ticks loudly, but I don't care quite as much about hurrying him out of here as I did a moment ago.

Lyle looks at me over his cup. "I came because I understand. This bug. It's not nice. I hope we get over it quickly."

“Should I have made lemonade?”

A small laugh, then Lyle takes a larger gulp of tea and grimaces. “Actually, yeah.” He lowers my boot to the floor. “I won’t stay long. I just wanted to say . . .” He looks at me. “I hope you’ll finish my yard. But I understand if you don’t want to. You’re still allowed to rob me for it.”

He rises and heads to the front door, where he sinks his feet into his shoes, paying attention to everything else but me.



THE FIR’S GETTING BIG NOW. SOON I’LL HAVE TO START THINKING ABOUT how I’ll manage the bigger trees. Maybe Mr Cole will help.

I spread the bark around the base and then hook an arm around Tool. We stare at the moonlit fir bristles. *Why am I still doing this?*

I glance over my shoulder, as if I could see all the way to the house and through it. Robin and Lyle are in there having a movie night. At least I don’t torture myself as badly as Lyle does. He seems to be here more than ever.

I look at myself—covered in soil and bark, smelling of fir—and wince, rolling my face into Tool’s fur.

Ah, shite. “This is the definition of delusional.”

Tool pants in agreement.

I sling my duffel over my shoulder and carefully haul up the old fir. Holding the pot firmly, I tiptoe down the side of the house.

Tool bounds past me and I lose my footing. My shoulder bangs against the side of the house with a resounding thump and I freeze, ears straining.

Dammit. I should never have risked this while they were home.

I just . . .

Muted voices, the sliding door, footsteps.

I dash down the never-ending length of the house—

Feet on the deck.

I won't make it unseen.

I press my back hard against the weatherboards and hope, if I remain still, the downpipe and the darkness will disguise me.

I gulp as the grass muffles the footsteps—

This is it. The magic will disappear.

Lyle's shadowy figure stops a few steps from me. His gaze meets mine and drops to the fir I'm carrying. For a few moments, neither of us reacts.

Silently, I plead with him to stay quiet, not to give me away.

Finally, he shifts a step closer, letting out a soft sigh. No cheeky or charming smile tonight. He glances down the house as he rubs the back of his neck. "What are we doing?"

He steps closer, body a wall of warmth blocking the slight breeze, the scent of his recently shampooed hair catching in my nose. His sympathetic stare squeezes my chest, makes it hard to breathe. I lose my grip on the fir and it drops to my side.

I want to chase after it, but a second set of footsteps creaks over the deck, and I freeze. Robin's voice trails around the house. "What is it?"

Looking at me, Lyle calls, "Nothing. Just Tool running about."

I sag.

He catches my arm, squeezes. I look at him, then away as that chest-squeezing sympathy hits me again. I push off the house—

He shifts at the same time and we instinctively grab one another to catch our balance. A hand clutches my arm, the other grasps my shirt at my waist. My arms come around his shoulders like a hug, and my lips smack against his forehead.

We freeze.

I peel my lips from him. "Sorry."

My shirt tightens. Lyle's words funnel around my collar. "It's fine."

I release a relieved breath as we untangle ourselves.

Lyle averts his gaze. "I'd better get back."

“Thank you,” I murmur.

He hums and moves swiftly around the house while I grab the fir and slink back to my truck, still tasting Lyle’s shock against my lips.



I FLUFF OUT THE LAST BIT OF PEA STRAW AND NESTLE IT AROUND A LAVENDER plant, then take a critical look. The perfect square of ready-lawn gleams in perfect bright green stripes, framed by a perfect path of white quartz pebbles. Against the boundary fences to each side, standard roses alternate with the lavender, and across the back the pear trees stretch out their young branches across wires. In a few years, those branches will meet at the tips and offer up three perfect rows of fruit. The big lawn would be perfect for a dog, even if it’s not the dog Lyle was hoping for; the planting is resilient enough to withstand running, jumping paws, but will still be beautiful. It’s simple, but I like that—the nod to formality suits the gingerbread feel of the house, and it should be easy enough for a novice gardener to keep it looking good.

Lyle’s garden is done.

Instead of coming to meet me when I knock on the back door, he calls me in, and I pull off my shoes and enter the villa.

Lyle is in his room, bent over his computer, typing madly. He bites his bottom lip as he concentrates on the screen. He stops jabbing the keyboard for a brief second to laugh, and then madly goes at it again.

I clear my throat. Even though he called me in, he jumps as if I’ve snuck up on him.

“Is that the lizard game you’re working on?”

Lyle catches his breath and gestures to the seat next to him. I lean forward to take a better look. “You’re not wrong. Scott will love it.”

He shuts his laptop and sits back in his chair, twiddling his thumbs. “You’re done, I guess?”

“The only thing I left out was the dog kennel.”

His nostrils flare as he breathes in, and his cheeks pinken.

“Yes, well.” He lifts his gaze to mine with a lifeless smile. “Weren’t we both hopelessly in love with him?”

I stand up and push the chair in.

“Maybe you should stop,” he murmurs. “With the fir.”

“It’s a gift.”

“He might not thank you the way you want.”

“A friend deserves magic too.” I walk away, stomach lurching.

Lyle’s chair scrapes over the hardwood floor. He pads after me and catches my arm in a warm, solid grip. “Jase—” I glance at his hand on me and he looks too. He lets go. “Why are you running away?”

“I’m not. I’ve finished the job.”

“We can be friendly, right? You can stay to chat.”

I eye him suspiciously. “Are you . . . testing my emotional maturity?”

He looks up with an arch of his brow. “What if I am?”

“Honestly, I might fail.”

Lyle smiles gently. “Drink?”

We move to the kitchen and I stand on the opposite side of the counter as he pulls a beer from the fridge.

I snatch it before he can open it, and set it aside. “Just tea.”

Two teas later, we’re still sitting at a small table in the corner of the living room, under the soft light of a lamp. We’ve covered a bunch of superficial topics, and Lyle doesn’t shy away from the deeper ones. His eyes glitter, stuck on the middle distance between us. His finger draws through the condensation his mug has left on the table.

I twist my mug. Sip, and stare at him over the rim.

He chuckles. I do too.

“When my last boyfriend left, he said there was no magic left. I guess I thought . . . if I could make some . . .”

He raises an eyebrow.

“The magic always seems to run out before the trees have grown up.”

He ponders this for a while, and when he speaks his voice is contemplative. “It’s easy to think magic is the surprise, the wonder, the breathlessness of all the firsts. But isn’t there something more remarkable about knowing the hard work that goes into the seconds, thirds, ten-thousandths? Breathlessness turning into sighs of contentment. That’s true magic.”

“I like this about you.”

Lyle snaps his gaze to mine, sharp, focused.

“You’re candid. Whether it’s an apology or admonishment or contemplation of the world.” I grin. “I . . . I trust what you say.”

He flushes, tries to take a sip and spills tea down his front. “Of course,” he murmurs, laughing at himself. He sets the mug down. “Can I compliment you?”

I lean in and pluck at his wet shirt, laughing. “As revenge?”

“It’s only fair,” he growls.

I rise from my seat and hurriedly slip into my jacket. “Another time. It’s late, I have work at five tomorrow.”

“You’re running away again.”

“The faster, the better.”

Chapter Ten

I know the guys have wetsuits on out there, but they have to be icicles by now. I zip my coat right up to my chin and rub my hands together. Maybe if I weren't sitting here—if I were in the water—I'd be warmer too.

I shiver again, dig a smooth stone out of the sand, and throw it at the tideline.

I try to stay objective. Scott's surfing is getting better. He isn't falling off the board as often. He's a strong swimmer. He's careful. He's safe.

I throw another stone.

"Your brother is amped out there," Robin says as he and Scott drip their way out of the sea and to the towels I'm sitting on. Scott sets down his surfboard and dives onto his outstretched towel.

"I'm done. Those waves are cranking."

Robin laughs, carefully rests his board next to me, and sits himself on the other side. "They aren't bad. For a gremlin." He looks at me, eyes lit and smiling. "Nice that you came along."

He blinks away and focuses on Scott, but I have that prickly feeling he's very aware of me. But is he aware how taxing it is, watching every wave roll over them? Holding my breath, heart hammering, until I see them emerge?

"How about tomorrow we do some Dawn Patrol?" he says.

Scott beams as he nods and jumps to his feet. "Come on, Jase, I'm

freezing.”

We carry our things back to the truck, me trailing behind, watching Robin rib my brother. We pile into the front, Scott squeezed between Robin and me, the salty smell of the sea coming off them and their slick hair.

I glance over Scott at Robin. He faces me, one eyebrow rising. *Swim with us, swim with us*, his eyes are pleading.

I grip the wheel.

“I’ll see if Lyle wants to teach me,” I say, and Robin immediately straightens.

“He’ll be back in a couple of days—”

“It’s been three weeks, give him time to settle back in,” I hedge. “Paid trips to Europe. I’m so envious.”

Envious. *Relieved*. Since I finished his garden, I haven’t known if or how I should be around him. Even to the point, the day before he left, he caught me ducking out of his sight behind a tree.

He rounded the trunk behind me and tapped my shoulder. I almost jumped out of my boots.

He laughed and gestured to my hiding spot. “This is familiar.”

I groaned. “Busted.”

“Busted doing what, exactly?”

“Being flustered.”

“My doing?”

I lowered my voice, “I’m just . . . The magic thing. I’m still . . . you know. And you’re . . . candid.”

“Well . . .”

I pressed a palm to his mouth, glowering, and he chuckled warmly against my skin.

Scott’s laugh jerks me back to the present. I park outside Robin’s and he leads us inside. “Clean up, then it’s on to dinner.”

Half an hour later, Robin and I are peeling and chopping in the kitchen

while Scott hovers around Dusky's cage. "Feeding him is easy," he says as he rations out flies for Dusky. "It's not like I'd forget or anything."

Robin stops slicing potatoes to shake his head. "Not happening. You know my rule."

I grin over at Scott and dump the celery into the pan. It sizzles, and curls of buttery garlic steam rise to my nose. Robin whistles as he finishes with the potatoes and starts on the pumpkin. It feels comfortable. Like we're a family.

I stir the pan and peek at Robin. "What are your plans for the weekend?"

"Dunno. But Lyle will be back."

He drops a handful of potato into the pot. The butter spits and he jerks his arm back, brushing against mine. He watches me stir and says low, "I like that you're giving lessons another try."

Scott calls cheekily, "Don't get your hopes up."

I toss a bit of pumpkin at the back of my brother's head.

"Hey!" He picks up the offending vegetable and glances from the lizard to Robin. "Can I feed this to him?"

Robin nods as Scott continues to yap, "Swimming will never be his thing. He'd be better spending his time impressing a nice guy who actually digs him."

Robin blinks a few times.

I glare at Scott, who snaps his mouth shut and bows his head, blushing furiously.

I skirt around the table to get to him, narrowly managing not to slap the back of his head. He chokes up an apology as I steer him out to the hall.

"I don't get it," he says. "You said he's not gay. Who cares if he knows you are?"

What if he figures out I like him? What if things get weird? What if we don't stay friends?

It worked with him and Lyle, but . . . "I'll tell him when I'm ready."

Scott's gaze flickers over my shoulder. "Um . . ."

I whisk around.

Robin stands behind us, hands in his pockets, listening. His expression is unreadable, but when I step towards him, he steps back, twists, and walks away.



I FOLLOW HIM ALL THE WAY OUT TO THE FIR.

He swings around. His hands meet my chest but stop short of shoving me. He drops them.

I brace myself. He's confused. Hurt.

Tool bounds between us with a bark, like he feels the tension.

Robin strokes him absently. His fingers dig into the soft fur and tease all the way up to the tip of Tool's ear. He repeats the caress on the other ear and then scratches under his collar.

His shoulders droop until he's almost eye level with the tip of the fir.

Tool nudges my leg and I work my fingers through his coat as well. I want to stretch mine down the back of his head until I brush Robin's. I want to slide my fingers through his and squeeze.

And I want him to squeeze back.

I slam my eyes shut. "I'm sorry I never said anything earlier. I didn't want things to get awkward between us."

"Or for me to freak out and act differently around you, right?"

How did this evening end up like this? It was supposed to be fun and relaxed. We should've had a lovely soup together with freshly baked bread while I slyly fished for when would be best to sneak over for the next fir transplant. We should've all ended the evening content and ready for a good night's sleep, where I would've dreamed of . . .

I sigh. "I'm sorry."

He stares at the fir and the edges of his eyes are wet.

My chest squeezes tight. “It has nothing to do with not trusting you, not thinking we were friends.” I haul in an uneven breath, and step closer.

He lifts sad eyes.

I swallow. “I . . . I like you.”

He blinks, surprised, and glances away. “Oh.”

I pick up a stray piece of bark and toss it to the base of the fir, chest twisting painfully.

He clears his throat and rocks back on his heels. “I mean, it’s cool. I’m flattered.”

My stomach plummets to my feet, making each step away from him heavy.

“Jase.”

I keep walking.

“You’re a great guy.”

Just not that way.

I stumble back towards the house. “Sure. I’m a great guy. I know.”

“Can we forget about all this and get back to dinner?”

Scott’s inside, I can’t grab him and leave. “Sure. Don’t worry, I’ll get over it.”

“This doesn’t have to change anything,” he says at the door.

But it will. It already has.



SCOTT STILL GETS UP AT THE CRACK OF DAWN THE NEXT MORNING FOR DAWN Patrol. I climb into the truck and drive wearily to Mr Cole’s, then return to Robin’s.

I plant the next fir with stinging eyes.



SCOTT LEAVES THE NEXT WEEK, AND I BARELY SEE ROBIN DURING IT. I WANT to go over there and fix the weirdness between us, but excuses on both sides get in the way. And after three weeks, then four, then five, it feels too late to pick up what we once had. The daffodils come and go in the little garden of my run-down rental just a few curves down from Robin's house. The tulips push their wide blades and long stems up through the chamomile out the front, a riot of colours under the curved row of roses all budding up white. I keep the weeds under control and cut the grass and think sometimes about how I'm tending a garden someone else planted, and tended, and ultimately had to leave behind.

I stare at a picture of a guy surfing on the front of a cereal box. The surfer has his back turned, and for a moment I imagine it's Robin. A shopping cart bumps into my backside, bringing me sharply back to reality. Fluorescent lights, shiny floors with rubber scuffmarks, squealing shopping carts, shelves and shelves of food—and none of it entices me.

I have to fill my near-empty fridge though; a few heavy yard jobs are coming up, and Mr Cole has told me to stock up on my strength.

I push my trolley to the frozen section and stack two dozen meals into it.

It's too easy eating crap, living alone. Cooking for one. I veer back through throngs of shoppers to the fresh produce.

Apples. Kiwifruit. Melon—

Across from the melons, picking up a container of pre-cut fruit, is Robin. The light shines on his hair, illuminating the strawberry in his strawberry blond. He wears a long-sleeved maroon T-shirt that has stray bits of cat fur on the arms.

A guy calls out to him, and the voice is familiar. I cringe and follow it to Lyle trying to open a plastic bag for his green apples. "Robin, can you bloody well open these things?" He studies his fingertips, and lets loose one of those classic Lyle smirks. "I've worn out my fingerprint typing." He jiggles the bag once more and then chucks it and the apples in the crate. "Too healthy for a

movie night anyway.”

Someone nearly rams into me again. I move out of the way, and the movement catches Robin’s eye. He looks up. His turquoise gaze is warm for a moment, and I think . . . maybe—

He glances away, biting his lip as he places fruit into his basket.

I push my shopping cart a step forward, but Robin keeps his back to me.

Lyle casts me a smaller smile as my gaze washes over him on the way back to focusing really, ridiculously hard on some bananas.

With a tight throat, I drop a bunch into my shopping cart. After one last look in Robin’s direction—getting a visible wince from Lyle—I turn away, merging with the flow of people towards the checkouts.

It’s one of those sad life facts: things change, and people who might have once been close, now are no more than neighbours.

Chapter Eleven

“Lyle,” I say as he swings open the door I’ve been pounding on insistently for the last minute. With sleep-tousled hair and a scrunched-sheet pattern indenting his cheek, Lyle’s glare is a major fail. “Teach me to swim.”

He rubs the sleep out of his eyes. “You couldn’t have called? At a more humane time? Jeez, it’s still dark.”

I lift my prepared bag.

“Are you high? What brings this on so suddenly?”

“Not high.” But I haven’t slept—thinking about things—and as I was switching the fir again I realised: I want something to change. I want a reason to speak to Robin again. I want us to get back to talking. Get back that friendship we used to have.

This is my brilliant opening. If I can overcome my fear, if I can swim, it might touch him. He could give me surfing lessons and laugh as I eat the ankle busters. “I need to learn. Will you help?”

Lyle packs his gear and jangles his keys on his way out the door, but he’s frowning. I follow him to his car, and he drives us across the quiet hills, away from the pools, to the ocean.

“Where are we going?”

Lyle glances at me, continues to drive on the empty coastal road, and

parks in a quiet spot before a rocky shore. The world is shades of grey outside, waves gently washing with white tips against craggy rocks. The ebb and flow of the ocean is rhythmic and lulling.

I open my seatbelt and swivel in his direction. He stares out at the soft silvery glow kissing the surface of the water.

“What?”

He looks at me. “You avoided me for weeks. Your brother stayed with you for the holidays. I thought he’d come around. Test out my game.”

“I was planning on introducing you, but . . .” I let out a weary breath. “I indulged in self-pity instead.”

He glances at me, eyes softening, a small frown cutting his brow. He rips his gaze back to the vast whitening canvas of the sky.

“I couldn’t bring myself to hear your I told you so’s.”

He laughs hollowly and looks at me. “You’re willing to hear them now?”

“I just have.”

Lyle’s lips quirk, but the smile quickly fades. “You want to learn to swim for him.”

“I want to salvage our friendship.”

“Swimming is the way to do that?”

“It’d give us a point of connection. Will you teach me?”

“Yes. No.”

“Which is it?”

“Yes, if you want to learn for yourself. No, if it’s for him.”

“You really are straightforward.”

“Let me be more straightforward.” He stares solemnly into my eyes. “You don’t *ever* have to learn to swim.”

Usually, when it comes to this topic, everyone is encouraging, coaxing, wishing, pushing me to learn.

Lyle is shrugging his shoulders like it doesn’t matter.

“You don’t think this is a basic skill I should have?”

“Only if you *want* to.”

A breath that had been weighing heavily on my chest whooshes out of me. But I’m left off-balance, dizzy. “Shouldn’t I push myself to overcome my fear?”

He settles a hand on my shoulder, speaks quietly, “It’s not a fear.”

I stare out at a bigger wave crashing against the rocks, spraying high into the air. *I’m afraid of the water. If it’s not fear, what is it?*

“It’s trauma.”

The sob comes from nowhere. A sudden and vicious wave rises up stomach, throat, pounding into my head, uncontrollable.

Lyle’s fingers tighten around my shoulder, and the warmth triggers another wave. This one I choke back, but my torso buckles with the effort.

“Hey. Hey, Jase.” He’s half climbing over the console to reach my back and rub circles, and I’m turning away from him, swiping at my face. “Oh God,” I try to laugh. “Sorry. No idea where that came from.”

“I spoke too bluntly,” Lyle says.

I shake my head. “‘s fine.”

He rubs my back like he did on the beach the day of the wedding.

My body shudders. My laughter is thinly disguised sobs. “He was just a young boy. He went in to *play*.”

I’m shaking. Lyle squeezes in behind me and wraps his arms around my waist as the thin disguise dissolves. The silver sea and white skies blur. Lyle holds me closer. It’s awkward; the space is small, his leg is half over mine, his sympathetic sighs are funnelling down my neck. But it’s tight, and warm, and safe.

I’m telling him over and over again what happened, like it’s still a puzzle I haven’t solved yet, but the end picture is always the same. The small body on the sand staring vacantly at a blue sky.

We sit there a long time, Lyle listening, tightening his hold, murmuring into my hair. The sea outside is no longer silver but a deep turquoise and the

sky has hints of blue between thinning clouds.

We shift apart when I flex my leg and rub out a cramp. Lyle returns to the driver's seat, starts the engine, and cranks up the heating.

I palm my eyes, tired. I let out a small laugh. "You see all my ugly sides."

"This is true."

"That was your cue to say something comforting."

Lyle smiles and exaggeratedly pats my hand. "I prefer the tears and snot to your mooning over Robin."

"Too uncomfortable to see a reflection of yourself?"

"Ha! Something like that."

I shift in my seat and eye him as he backs the car out and sets off around the coastal road. "How did you manage to get over it? It seemed so effortless."

Lyle concentrates on driving. "I let myself look around and realised . . ."

"What?"

"There are more fish in the sea."

I scoff. "It's not about finding any fish. It's about finding the *right* fish. About there being a connection, and—"

"Magic?"

I sigh. "I think I'll take a break from men altogether."

Lyle casts me a quick look.

"Work on myself for a while," I clarify.

"Mmm."

I look at him. "I think we should hang out more. You'll keep me level-headed."

"What are you asking, exactly?"

"It's not like we're rivals anymore. We can be friends."

He considers this. *Hesitates.*

My stomach drops to my knees and I flush as I stare out over the ocean. "Have I misinterpreted this?"

He's quiet for a few bends in the road, and then, "Let's trial it."

I laugh in disbelief. "Will I get performance reviewed?"

I expect a laugh as he hears himself, but instead he nods. "We both will. If it's unhealthy, I'll have to let you go."

Chapter Twelve

“**W**hat do you keep shaking your head about?” Mr Cole hefts the fir out of the ground. The pot is brown and sticky with dirt, and a crack runs down one side. Really, a tree this size wants to be in the ground for real. “Someone on your mind?”

“Not the way you’re thinking.” I shake my head again. “Do you ever performance-review potential friendships?”

My boss carefully sets the tree down next to a lazing Tool and gives the dog a quick pat. “Fir guy?”

“No. Lyle.”

“Ah, the love-rival you can’t stop complimenting.”

I laugh in outrage.

“Slip of the tongue. The love-rival you can’t stop complaining about.”

I pick up a shovel and widen the hole where the new fir will go.

Mr Cole looks over at me and the third-to-last Douglas fir, this one in a big woven-plastic planter bag. “You’re still planting firs for a guy who rejected you in hopes you can be friends again. I’d say you’re pretty dedicated friend material.”

With a hum, I heft the fir and move it to the hole. Mr Cole grabs the handle on the other side of the bag, and we gently lower it into the ground. I thank him for his help, wiping the dirt off my hands onto my pants.

Mr Cole gets to work pressing soil around the base of the tree. “If I didn’t know better . . .”

“What?”

He takes in the thick tree with its bushy needle-branches. “I’d think this fir was magic.”

I smile. “That’s what I’m after.”

Mr Cole lands a firm hand on my back. “Go hang out with your friend.”



I GRAB SOME BEERS FROM THE STORE AND ROCK UP TO LYLE’S FOR AN impromptu visit. Down-to-earth and friendly. At my knock, Lyle opens the door, eyes widening at my presence on his front porch. I hold up the beverages but instead of inviting me in, he steps out. “This is unexpected.”

He looks furtively over his shoulder, as if he heard someone move about in the hallway.

Realisation hits me and a flush creeps over my cheeks. I grip the cardboard handle of the beers. “That’s why people call first.” I laugh awkwardly and step backwards off the porch. “Another time. Have fun.”

Lyle chases me up the path in his socks. “Wait.” He rounds me until he’s caught my gaze. “It’s not a good time right now.”

“I gathered.”

Something glitters in his eyes, like he finds amusement in this. “Jordy is here,” he says.

His brother. I let out a light chuckle. “Is he giving you a hard time?”

Lyle steps forward, lifts on his toes, and cups a hand to my ear. “He came to apologise.”

He rocks back from me with a delighted smile, and I grin too. “Definitely don’t want to disturb that.”

“Yeah. It’s hard enough for him to admit he’s wrong already.”

“Get back in there, then.”

Lyle starts to walk back, but pauses as his shoulder brushes past my arm. “He told me you helped him when I was in Europe.”

“I promised him I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Well . . . I mean, he’s told me himself now. Some of it anyway. I’d like to hear your side.”

“I was finishing a job near the park and I recognised him on my way to the truck. His friends had gone on without him and he wasn’t in a good state so I brought him to your place. I used the key in the lockbox, hope that’s okay.”

Lyle nods. “He said you made him text Mum that he was okay, and helped with his hangover the next day.”

“Pickles for breakfast.”

“He hates pickles.”

“He won’t be rushing to get smashed again then.”

“Did he really throw up on you?”

“That jacket needed a wash anyway.”

Hazel eyes glance sideways to meet mine. “Thank you.”

I wave it off and he walks away, calling over his shoulder. “Bring those beers back tomorrow.”



SO I DO. THEN AGAIN THE WEEK AFTER. THEN WE SHAKE THINGS UP AND GO out—an epic food crawl in preparation for which we starve ourselves for the whole day. Spicy tacos and sizzling kebabs and the best Korean fried chicken in the city. A flute of bubbly over a shared bowl of decadent chocolate mousse. By that time I’m feeling a little woozy so I push the bowl towards him. “All yours.”

“Here I thought we were embarking on bromance. Turns out you want to

torture me.” Lyle sips his bubbly and leans forward. “Better idea. We’ll ask one another questions, and the first who doesn’t answer has to finish the mousse.”

I raise a brow.

He grins. “Prepare to explode.”

“I’ll ask first, then.” I hum. “Your biggest pet peeve about me?”

“Why? Will you try and change it?”

“Would that help me pass the performance review?”

Lyle folds his arms, leaning back comfortably in his seat. He scrolls his eyes up and down me. “Not sure I know you well enough to tell you your worst traits.”

I shake my head at him. “That’s . . . frank.”

“You like that.”

I narrow my eyes.

He laughs and leans in. “Jealousy. Gosh you got riled up, competing with me.”

I lean in too, eye to eye, a standoff. “You like that too.”

He sucks in a breath and sinks further into his chair, breaking eye contact. “What was it about Robin, for you?”

“Too soon.”

He pushes the bowl towards me.

I stop it. “His warmth, the gentle way he is around animals, how easy it is to be around him. He felt like a home.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I’m approaching thirty and move to a new rental nearly every year. I’m constantly designing and tending gardens I never see mature. Settling down with a good guy, having a family, feeling like we’re a home. That’s what I want.”

Lyle takes the bowl and sets it in the middle of the table. He stares at the glass. “I asked two questions. You can too.”

I rub my hands together. “How long do I have before the performance review?”

A snickery laugh. Lyle twists the base of the bowl. “I’ll let you know before Christmas. I won’t start the new year with you if . . .”

I fail, got it. I laugh light-heartedly. “You’ll regret it if you abandon me.”

He shakes his head adamantly.

I clutch my chest. It seems exaggerated, and it is. Yet, my stomach twists. “Is there anything you regret?”

“Eating this much?”

“Real things, I mean. Important things.”

Lyle’s small smirk fades. He laughs hollowly, picks up his spoon and eats the last of the mousse.



SOMETIMES IT’S MUNDANE STUFF LIKE THE GROCERIES, SOMETIMES I DRAG Lyle to the gardens and give him lessons on plants, sometimes he trounces me playing video games, sometimes we head to a movie after work, but it’s every week. We just do stuff together.

I’m fairly sure he’ll keep me, even if we have had a few disagreements. Mostly around tardiness. Lyle is scrupulous with his time-management; he’s rarely late anywhere. I, on the other hand, have a more relaxed relationship with time. I’m a good friend of the fashionable fifteen-minute rule. Sometimes it’s more like twenty, though. Thirty, a couple of times.

“Sorry,” I say, careening into the café and plonking myself on the chair across from him. “I was transplanting.”

“At Robin’s?”

“He goes surfing this time on Saturdays.”

Lyle frowns into his half-finished cup of coffee. “I should head home. Cleaning.”

“What? I thought we’d have the day together.” I glance out the windows. Scott’s on his phone, taking his sweet time to get inside. “I have someone I want you to meet.”

He snaps his gaze to mine.

I grin, leap up to the door, and call for Scott to hurry up. I hook an arm around his neck and haul him to Lyle. “Lyle, this is my bother.”

“Brother!” Scott says.

“*Bother.*”

Scott attacks my side with tickles and I break apart from him in quick surrender. We fall into our seats and turn to Lyle. He’s smiling, his lips gently, comfortably curved. “So you’re the gremlin.”

“Not for much longer.” Scott glances at me. “I’ll be something else once I stop eating sand. Which might be this weekend. When are you seeing him?”

My stomach sinks and I shuffle uncomfortably in my seat.

Scott grabs my upper arm and tugs. “Don’t tell me it’s still weird from last time.”

“It’s still weird from last time.”

“What? *Why?*”

I rise. “What do you want to drink? I’ll order.”

I head to the counter and leave Lyle to pick up the mess I’ve left. I hear him calming my frustrated brother, telling him friendships sometimes need pauses, time to settle. That he could still visit Robin with him to see Dusky or go surfing.

I buy another coffee for Lyle, too.

I pay and wait near the counter, cringing when I overhear Scott ask Lyle if *he* thinks about Robin that way.

Lyle chokes on a gulp of coffee. “I met someone more suited to me.”

I swing around. He has? The last few Fridays he’s cancelled on me in favour of after-work drinks with his colleagues. Could one of them have caught his interest?

The barista holds out two cups. “Decaf vanilla mocha and a latte.”

I return to Scott and cut his prying questions short. “How about Scott tries your video game after this?”

“How long are you here?” Lyle asks Scott.

“The weekend.”

Lyle looks at me. “Jordy’s coming this afternoon, for the night.”

“Right, we shouldn’t disturb—”

“If that doesn’t bother you, I’d love it if you both came over.”

I grin. “How about I run to the supermarket for some steaks and sausages and we crank out that barbecue from your garage?”

Scott slaps the table in excitement. He’s crazy for barbecue. Always has been. “Christmas has come early.”

Lyle looks startled, and laughs.

Chapter Thirteen

On one of the many Fridays Lyle is busy with his ‘afterwork drinks’, I take Mr Cole out for a fish and chip dinner. We bundle the hot parcels into our jackets, poke a hole in the paper at our throats, and eat at the beach. It’s already quite late after a long day working on an estate garden. The sun is sinking, and so are we into soft sand.

Mr Cole is off to Australia tomorrow to meet up with a woman he chatted to for a few hours on a long-haul flight.

“You really jump into new relationships,” I say, reaching down my jacket for a hot chip.

“At my age there’s no time to waste. Are you still pining after the fir guy?”

“I just want to patch things up with him.”

“Why not jump back into the dating game?”

I shrug. “I’m good right now.”

My phone rings in my pocket and I fish it out with greasy fingers. I prod the screen and hold it to my ear. “Lyle?”

His voice is barely audible over the rowdy voices and music in his background. “Can you pick me up?” He sounds off. Worry spikes through my stomach. “King’s, down on the wharf—”

The line dies.

“Lyle?” I stuff my phone in my pocket and pick myself up off the sand. Mr Cole lifts a questioning brow. “Gotta go.”

“Ditching me for a man.”

“I’ll make it up to you another time.”

He laughs, shooing me away.

I toss the paper remnants of my fish and chips into the nearest bin, jog to my truck, and head around the bays to the harbour. I park with a screech of brakes and hoof along the pedestrian waterfront towards the restaurant.

The sun has set, and thousands of lights set the surrounding city aglow. The seawater is dark, lapping rhythmically against pylons. My footsteps slap urgently.

Why would he—

I careen around a corner and halt abruptly. Lyle is a couple of hundred metres before the restaurant. He’s leaning against a bollard, palm pressed to the top, head bent. It looks like he’s struggling to stay on two feet. I call his name, racing towards him, and he lifts his head.

His eyes are shiny and so is his smile. “You came,” he cheers.

“You asked.” I lift his chin and inspect his smiling face. “How much did you drink?”

“Christmas drinks. Got carried away. Wallet at office. Phone died.”

“So I’m your Uber tonight?”

He nods.

“Your colleagues left you like this?”

“I left. Didn’t want them to see . . .”

I smirk. “Only I get that pleasure?”

He attempts to smack me, but he can’t get any strength into it; his fingers land softly against my chest. He sways and I catch him around the waist.

“Bit dizzy,” he murmurs.

“What’s the likelihood you’ll chuck?”

He shakes his head vehemently.

“Won’t be the end of the world if you do.” I let him go and crouch before him, offering my back. “Hop on.”

Fingers graze over my nape, and I feel his hesitation.

“Easier to carry you like this,” I say.

Slowly, arms slip around my neck, and Lyle’s warm body nestles against my back. I push up, using the bollard to help, and curl my arms around Lyle’s knees.

He rests his head against my shoulder and his words tickle my neck. “Put me down any time.”

I keep moving.

The waterfront is quiet around us; a few pockets of people are scattered here and there, but mostly we have the broad path and light-speckled harbour to ourselves. I’m glad he didn’t try to make his own way home. There are no fences here; one wrong step could’ve had him in deep water.

I tighten my grip on his legs.

“Did you have a good evening?” I ask.

He hums.

“Was . . . the guy you’re interested in there?”

A long pause, and another hum. “He came.”

Something churns low in my stomach. “Is he the reason you keep bailing on me on Fridays?”

Another hum.

I grumble, “Did you drink so much because of him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Not sure he’s into me the way I want.”

“How do you know?”

“Observant.”

“What’s so good about this guy?”

Lyle sighs and the warm breath funnels under my jacket. “He’s caring,

good natured, solid,”—he whispers the last part in my ear, like it’s a secret —“hot.”

I laugh. “Remember he’ll have shades. He’s probably a right mess under all that.”

“Hmm. A little bit.”

“You still like him?”

His chin hits my shoulder as he nods.

I chuckle. My curiosity is sated, but my stomach continues to churn. “I hope—” I turn my head and our noses bump. After a hitched breath, Lyle pulls his face back an inch and casts his gaze towards the approaching carpark. I look away too, clearing my throat. “I hope he’s not another Robin.”

Arms stiffen around my neck.

“What I mean is, you’re not allowed to get hurt again.”

“Do you have this kind of say over me?”

“Yep.”

He nips my ear, growling.

At the truck, he slides off my back and I help him in. He sinks into the front seat, eyes watering as he stares out the front window. I pull the seatbelt and carefully draw it around him, clicking it into place.

He tugs my sleeve as I retreat, and looks at me. “I’ll just observe him a little longer.”



IT RAINS HEAVILY THE NEXT WEEK—SO HEAVILY, LEAKS SPRING IN MY ROOF, dripping onto my bed and in the lounge. I call the landlord, who promises to have someone come round tomorrow to fix it, but until then . . .

Until then, I have to make do.

It’s past ten on a Saturday night, but Lyle answers my call on the second ring. “Jase?”

He sounds groggy, like he'd been asleep.

"My place is damp, wet, and cold. I'm coming around to crash."

The sound of shuffling comes down the line. "Shouldn't you be asking if that's okay?"

"You're not an acquaintance anymore."

"So no need to ask?"

"Such are the privileges of being close."

He huffs down the line.

I grin. "I'll make it up to you."

A sigh. "No need. I'll set up the couch."

"The spare room isn't free?"

"Jordy's here."

"I'll be quiet. I'll text you at the door."

Fifteen minutes later, Lyle creaks the front door open and quietly ushers me inside.

"I'm having trouble with the pull-out couch."

We shuffle through dim light to the living room and try transforming the couch to a bed, but our insistent tugs meet resistance, and in the end, the stubborn frame creaks and cracks and collapses.

My last over-enthusiastic tug has sent me sprawling to the floor, and Lyle is torn between silent bouts of laughter and groaning at his poor couch. "Let's try fixing it in the light of day."

He sighs.

"Guess we'll have to bunk together," I say, and pause at his hesitation. "You don't want to?"

"It's not that . . ."

"Then?"

"It might be misinterpreted."

"Ah. Jordy?"

Lyle rubs his nape.

“I’ll get up early. He won’t see.”

He twists away from me sharply, then croaks, “Come on, then.”

His room is bathed in soft moonlight coming in through mesh curtains. One side of the bed is rumpled from where he’d been sleeping earlier, and after stripping to my t-shirt, I slide into the other side. The sheets are cool; instinctively, I curl towards him, foot sneaking over to his side for warmth.

He uses his toes against my shin to shove me back into my place, and I smirk.

“No barrier this time,” I murmur. “Look how far we’ve come.”

Lyle takes his pillow and whacks me over the face with it, muffling my laughter. He steals it back and fluffs it under him. “Let’s keep it down.”

Jordy.

I suck in another chuckle. “You have him over a lot. What a good brother.”

Lyle sobers, the lines of his face sharpened in the moonlight. “Not really.”

I bop his nose. “Yes, really. The morning of his hangover, you came up every other sentence. He looks up to you.”

His eyes shut, and his lips press tight.

What’s this about? “Lyle?”

“You asked me once if there’s anything I regret,” he murmurs. “I have something I sometimes regret.”

“Sometimes?”

“More like moments of profound regret.”

“But the rest of the time you don’t?”

“The rest of the time I’m happy with the choice I made.”

My limbs tense at the edge in his voice, at his uneven breathing. I push up onto one elbow and look down at him. In the silvery darkness, his face is pale and his eyes are big, dark and shimmery.

It calls for whispering. “Are you okay?”

He shakes his head. “Jordy comes every other weekend. It’s the least I can do.” He shifts his eyes to look directly at me. “He’s not my brother. He’s my son.”

I swallow. “Your . . . son.”

He turns on his side, away from me, and a tear slips down his nose. I recall all the conversations we’ve had about family. How hard it is to be far away, how we want to give them everything when they’re with us. Because we feel guilty.

Even our first meeting—Lyle’s careless words thrown out in frustration with Jordy—takes a different weight. How torn he must have felt, how powerless. How much he must struggle with feelings of responsibility, and possibly, how he doesn’t want to see his son make mistakes so early in life.

Lyle shudders, and his words are full of cracks. “I regret not being more careful. Not considering consequences. Or maybe, not taking them seriously or thinking they’d ever apply to me. And sometimes I regret accepting my parents’ offer to raise him.” He swipes his cheek, and it breaks my heart. I slide an arm around his waist and tug him until his wet face presses into the thin material at my chest.

I stroke large circles on his back; whisper sorries into his hair.

His hot breath seeps into my skin. “I was too young. Mum and Dad gave me the chance to finish school, go to university, *live* my life. But when Jordy’s with me, when I hear how much he looks up to me . . . I regret how much I love my freedom. Regret not being there for him.”

“You’re doing the best you can. If you’d tried to raise him on your own, you might not be the person you are today.”

“What person is that?”

“One who he looks up to. You had the time to discover yourself, get educated, find a great job, buy a house. You can offer him security now, because you have it yourself. Maybe he’s not with you every day, but you make the days you are with him count.”

“Some days it’s so hard. I feel I’m failing him. Some days I just completely mess up.”

I stroke his hair. “It’s okay if you mess up. Reflect, apologise, try again.”

“You think? It won’t do permanent damage?”

I hum into his hair. “We’re not damaged permanently, and we’ve messed up with one another before.”

Lyle shifts, raises his chin and looks at me.

I lift a gentle brow.

He tucks his head against my chest again and sighs.

We’re quiet after that; his shallow breaths and my long ones. I don’t stop rubbing his back until he drifts off in my arms.

Chapter Fourteen

I stir at the first brush of morning light over my face, and slowly blink my eyes open.

What a solid sleep.

I stretch and shift onto my side, coming face-to-face with a slumbering Lyle. His hair is a tousled mess on the pillow, and his mouth is slightly ajar. He looks far more at peace than he had been last night.

Sunlight touches his forehead, minutes from hitting his eyes. I gently push back my side of the blankets, pad to the curtains, and try to readjust them so the sun doesn't disturb his sleep. There's a stubborn crack that refuses to close; I return to the bedside and stack pillows to shade his face.

Let him sleep in. He needs it.

I touch my t-shirt where he'd sobbed against me and my stomach twists. He's doing his best. He'll get through this. He's not alone.

Quietly, so as not to let Jordy find me here, I sneak out of the house. The morning air is sharp and fragrant, and I find myself pacing the street as I recall the emotions of the night.

I'd meant it when I said the mess-ups between us in the past have done no permanent damage. It's a calming thought. I hope it helps him.

I look up, taking in the houses around me, and glimpse Robin's at the bend. I sigh, rub my nape, and move towards his gate.

“Robin,” I say, the moment he opens the door.

Like so many times before, his eyes are warm. They light up, as if he has a hundred things he wants to share with me and doesn’t know where to begin.

He blinks them all back, as if he just remembered we haven’t shared anything for months. A sad look crosses his face, the same look I’ve been wearing for months whenever our paths cross.

I want the light in his eyes to shine again.

“Can I . . . come in?” I ask.

He blinks a moment, and steps back with a welcoming gesture. I follow him to the lounge.

He looks uncertain as he sits on one end of the couch. He’s bronzed, his hair glittering even inside, and he smells faintly of ocean and aftershave.

“I’m going to be frank.”

His head snaps up.

“I want us to be friends again.”

He sinks into the couch and lets out a long breath. “I thought I’d fucked it up forever.”

“You? *I* fucked up.”

He shakes his head. “I was wrong to say you should’ve told me. Wrong to make you feel guilty about that. I’m embarrassed. Sorry.”

I flop onto the couch next to him and lean my head back to stare at the ceiling, like he’s doing. “I’m sorry too.”

“What for?”

I turn my head and look at him. “I should’ve been clear. I’m not interested in surfing. I’m *definitely* not interested in swimming.”

“My reaction is to say ‘but’ right now,” Robin admits.

“There are lots of great reasons to learn to swim. If you want to. I don’t. I’m not ready, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready.”

Robin looks like he wants to interject again, but he swallows it down. “I won’t push you again.”

A smile tips my lips along with a relieved sigh. “Thanks.”

Robin’s gaze skims to my face. “I miss you.”

A lump punches into my throat at hearing those words.

He continues, his hands rubbing up and down his shorts. “I miss hanging out, making dinners together, watching movies, shooting the shit . . . being your mate.” Tool jumps onto the couch between us and we each pet an ear. “Will you . . . will you come for Christmas lunch? I invited Lyle, but I want you both there.”

My voice comes out raspy, and I clear my throat. “Scott and I would love to come.”

“Scotty’s down?”

“Mum won a cruise. I’m picking him up from the station in an hour,” I say. “We’d love to come for Christmas lunch.”

“It’s a date.”

And though it pleases me to hear it, the words don’t hit home in quite the same way they would have earlier in the year.



I COLLECT SCOTT AND HEAD TO COLE’S NURSERY. I’M SELECTING THE FINAL fir for Robin’s gift when my phone, left on a fence post, rings. I call out to Scott to answer, but he’s run off, deep into the rows of baby trees.

I dust my hands of dirt and race over. “Lyle?”

“You really snuck off this morning.”

“As promised.”

“Not sure how I feel about it.”

A breeze carries the scent of pine needles and the rush of rustling leaves hopefully masks my baffled “Huh?”

I try again. “I was trying to avoid misinterpretation.”

“I feel . . . like that failed.”

“I’m confused.”

“You didn’t have to go without saying goodbye to me.”

“You were sleeping. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He’s quiet a moment, then he lets out a tired chuckle. “I thought, maybe, after getting all snotty on your t-shirt last night . . .”

“No, no. Do that to your heart’s content. Besides, turnabout is only fair.”

“Jase?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I talk to you?”

“We aren’t already?”

“Face to face. In person.”

“Sure, when do—”

“Now.”

“I’m at the nursery, what if I—”

“Wait for me.”

I hang up and jolt as I find Scott standing right behind me. He flashes his pearly teeth at me. “Was that Lyle? Are we hanging out with him and Jordy again?”

I wag a finger at him playfully. “Don’t hog all the gaming equipment next time.”

“Jordy didn’t mind.”

“I did. You acted like you’ve been starved of any fun your entire life. Makes me look bad.”

“Your friends are so much fun. I dunno what they see in you.”

“Gremlin!”

He ducks away from my chastising swipe at the back of his head, and I chase him around the dense rows of conifers. I shake my head at his distant joking laughter and let him hide while I return to the firs, and to—

“Lyle.” I wave, catching his attention.

He spots me and his eyes light up. He’s dressed nicely, as always.

Spotless jeans, sleek t-shirt, bright blue shoes. His gaze shifts to his feet and up again. The slight smile on his face fades as he takes in the field of Douglas firs around us. He soaks it all in as he approaches, and frowns at his shoes again. He'd said he wanted boots better suited for gardening, and I had fun last week secretly sleuthing his shoe size to buy him a pair for Christmas.

I grin at him and pat the bark of the fir tree I've chosen. "It's been a good day."

He glances at the fir and me.

I lean in, unable to stop a ridiculously large smile. "I made up with Robin. Day after tomorrow, we'll all be celebrating Christmas together."

For a moment, a split-second, something in Lyle's expression seems to shatter. Did . . . something happen between him and Jordy again? Has my enthusiasm for a happy Christmas rubbed things in?

I step forward, reaching for his arm to check he's okay, but he steps away, forcing a stiff smile. "I'm glad things are better between you."

"Has something happened?"

Lyle glances at the firs, and shuts his eyes.

"Is it Jordy?"

He reopens his eyes and looks at me. "It's you."

A spike of adrenalin shoots through my middle and I step hastily forward.

Again, Lyle steps back.

That single step feels like a kick to my stomach. My throat gets tight. "Because I left you this morning?"

He shakes his head, and says six words that tear through me, make my heart pound, *hurt*.

Those six words go over and over in my head while he continues talking. Explaining. He's being clear, he's drawing his lines, and I can't respond. I can barely process what he's telling me.

I stagger as he ends with another punch. "I don't want to do this again. I can't be friends."

Chapter Fifteen

Almost this time last year, I broke up with my ex. I'd been disappointed, but I numbly moved on. This cuts worse. The worst I've ever felt. My chest hurts every breath. I'm stuck on his words all night, all Christmas Eve day. Time passes in a blur; teeth gnawing on lips, long shivers, a pounding heart.

Scott measures himself against the eight-foot tree we've heaved out of its hole. His hair has grown since he was last here; it catches in the fir's bristles.

"Where's Robin?" he asks as he tugs his curls free.

"Last-minute shopping," I murmur on another shiver. I widen the hole with a shovel and rough up the sides so the roots will take. "We need to get on with it."

Scott shrugs. Not for the first time, I wish Mr Cole were here instead, especially since I'm planting for real—no planter bag today. But Mr Cole has headed to Australia again for some Christmas romance, which leaves me with this eight-and-a-half-foot Douglas fir, a five-foot pain-in-the-arse, and the endless loop of Lyle's six words.

"Bring me those two sacks," I say, pointing. One is full, the other empty.

With lethargic steps, Scott moves the ten paces to where I've stacked all the gear. With an exaggerated grunt, he drags the sacks over. Tool stirs out of his slumber as one of the sacks brushes over his paws. He stretches and

scoots alongside Scott.

“Hold open the empty one.” He holds the burlap sack open and I shovel some of the soil from the hole into it. “Now the compost.”

Scott lets out a horribly-bored yawn.

“Sometimes magic is just plain old hard work.” I say, and rest my shovel in the hole. Reaching over, I yank open the compost sack and pour some into the hole.

Tool comes around to my side, and his wagging tail thumps against the back of my knee. “*You’re* a good boy.”

Scott pokes his tongue out and rolls his eyes. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“There’s here and there’s here.”

“I could say the same. You’ve been off someplace else since yesterday.”

I swallow. “Gently unwrap the tarp around the new fir.”

After I set the root mass carefully into the hole, he helps me get it straight. “Bit to the left. Right. No, that was too much. Left . . . left . . . ah, there. Just right. No, not move it right, it *is* right. Go left. Stop! There, perfect.”

After that, he packs the compost and soil mixture around the root mass as per my instructions. “Nice and firm. That’s great. And can you go a little faster?” My arms shake holding up the heavy tree and keeping it exactly straight—

“Ah, mother of shite!” Scott yells.

What the heck? Peering through the branches, I catch sight of a big wolf spider crawling out from the dirt. By the time I yell back that it’s harmless, Scott’s halfway across the yard, pressed against the wooden fence like he’s trying to be sucked into it. Beside him, fir leaves from the old Douglas snatch at his hair.

“I did not sign up for th-th-that,” he whimpers.

This is the last transplant. I’ve made it through almost a year of sneaking into Robin’s garden to make this happen; I can’t mess it up now. Certainly

not for a harmless spider the size of a golf ball. “You and Jordy have a fair bit in common.”

“What?”

“Come back and put the rest of that soil in. Once that’s done, I can take over.”

My brother shakes his head sharply.

Trying to reason with him obviously isn’t going to work, and time is ticking. It must have been over an hour since Robin left for his shopping trip. What if he found everything he needed in one store and was done?

“I’ll give you twenty bucks.”

Scott stirs, but doesn’t leave the relative safety of the fence. Tool bounds over to him and sniffs him. He bites his lip, looking from me to where the spider had been.

My arms are killing me. Not so much from the weight, but the awkward position I’m in to hold the tree in place. “Thirty,” I grunt.

My brother is nothing if not an opportunist. He sidles closer, still cautious, but tempted. “Fifty,” he says. “So I can get a new cage for Dusky when you finally get him for me.”

“Money doesn’t grow on trees, you know. Forty.”

“Fifty. Or magic won’t grow on this tree, either.”

He drives a hard bargain, but he holds all the cards. “All right, gremlin —”

“Not a gremlin anymore.”

I growl.

He inches closer. Using the shovel, he tosses compost soil in, and then uses his foot to compress it.

“Am I still straight?” I ask as he steps back to take a look.

He laughs. “Were you ever?”

“I meant the tree.”

“Sure is erect.”

If I could've tossed something at him, I would have.

I slowly release my hold on the tree. It looks pretty good. Great, actually.

We fill the remaining space with more soil, saturate the area with water, and add still more soil. "Now bark."

Tool barks.

"Not that type of bark."

Scott gathers the bark we removed from around the old fir earlier and scatters it around the base of the last tree.

I'm adding a few spades of fresh bark when Tool bumps against my leg as he races towards the house.

In the distance, a car door slams shut. Robin calls for Tool.

A second voice chimes in. Lyle.

Scott and I look at each other. For a boy who'd claimed transplanting trees was boring, he sure looks alert and interested now.

"Shite," I mutter, grabbing my tools and stuffing the smaller ones in the duffel. I need a plan to get us, the old fir, and the tools the heck out of here.

Tool's bark grows more distant, as if he's leading Robin away. Stalling for time? If we manage to somehow disappear from the scene without getting caught, I'll buy him a juicy bone.

How to get out without getting caught—

The fence.

It's high, and it backs onto the neighbour's yard. This could go all kinds of wrong, but it's the only option other than burrowing our way out.

In true brother fashion, Scott takes one look at me and reads my mind. He grabs my shovel, sneaks up to the fence, and drops it over. It makes a soft thudding sound as it lands. I hoist up the duffel bag and swing that over too, wincing as I drop it. The tools clang as they hit the spade.

Tool's barks sound louder.

As quickly and carefully as possible, I lay the old fir tree down and mime for Scott to grab the top end. On a silent "three," we lift it up. Soil spills out

and over my face as we lift it higher. Pressing the bag against the fence, I roll it over the top.

It hurts to let go, but it has to be done. It thuds to the ground; the bag sounds like it's split, and there's a distinct snap.

Please only be a minor branch.

I lock my fingers together for a step, and Scott gracefully flings himself over the fence. He chuckles like he's having the time of his bloody life.

"Move the fir out of the way," I hiss. "I'm coming over."

Scott whispers, "Quick. One of the neighbours opened their back door."

Tool barks again; he's even closer now. Perhaps around the side of the house. With a quick glance back, I make sure we've left no evidence—

Shite. The sacks.

I dash over to where they're hidden behind the fir and yank them up. With no time left, I swing the sacks around twice and fling them high into an arc over the fence.

"What's all this ruckus?" Robin asks, rounding the house.

Lyle doggy-talks, "What're you on about, eh?"

I eye the massive fence, glance towards their voices, take a running start and vault over.

Air whooshes out of my lungs as I hit the other side, half of me landing on the tip of the fir and half sprawled over a muddy patch of grass. The mud slurps as I unstick myself.

Scott is laughing silently, body shaking with the effort not to let it all out. "Wait until you grow up," I murmur as I sling the strap of the duffel bag over my shoulders. "See what crazy shite you get up to." I grab the heavy end of the fir.

Over the fence, Robin lets out a sigh.

Lyle speaks, and I give myself over to the longest shiver yet. "Is that right? Is that right? Well, I see nothing here but magic, boy."

Every drop of sweat and rain and adrenaline surges.

This is what it's for.

I'd once imagined Robin would be the one to say it, but . . . Robin sees the fir for the magic it seems, but Lyle . . . he's seen how it's done. He's known I come here every week and toil away swapping firs in the earth. He's seen through the trick.

He still calls it magic.

Heat builds up behind my eyes. My throat is so raw not even swallowing helps. I'm exhausted and tired, and I want to shuffle back against the fence and sleep, comforted by those words.

By *all* the words Lyle has exchanged with me.

Scott takes the light end of the fir and, ducking my face towards my chest, I steer us and the fir through the neighbour's yard and back home.

Chapter Sixteen

It starts as a walk, as self-contemplation, but suddenly I'm back in Lyle's garden, gazing at all the shades of night-time blue. I turn towards the house. The living room is lit candle-yellow, and Lyle is there, on the phone, pacing.

He says something, and after a moment, the curves of his cheeks lift.

I jog up to the back door and knock. I want to be closer. See that smile better.

Lyle's steps creak. He barely has the door open when I squeeze in. He takes me in with a blinking gaze, and I feel our moment from yesterday punching into me all over again:

"Has something happened? Is it Jordy?"

"It's you."

"Because I left you this morning?"

He meets my eye. "I have to let you go."

We both suffered one-sided attraction with Robin. It's painful and self-pitying, and Lyle doesn't want to go through it again.

He broke up our friendship because he was starting to.

The one he'd been observing for clues they felt the same way was me. He began avoiding our Friday nights because they felt too much like dates. That's why he drowned his feelings in alcohol.

I was making him hopeful. And miserable.

I have to let you go.

His voice had cracked.

My heart had too.

He swallows, and lowers the phone from his ear.

I press him against the wall and kiss him, and it feels nothing like I thought it would. But at the same time, I think I knew it would be like this. That I would feel it everywhere, and it would loosen all my muscles and make my heart thump and my blood fizz; that I'd feel desperate, and hungry, and peaceful and safe. That it would feel like . . . relief.

He stares at me. "Jordy," he says into the phone, "something's come up." When I make to give him his space, his free hand clutches the back of my head and keeps me there. "See you for Christmas lunch. We'll go to Robin's together."

He drops the phone. It clatters against the floor, possibly broken, but Lyle doesn't even notice.

He draws me close. His hair is damp from a recent shower, and it tickles where it touches my forehead. His lips brush mine, tentative, exploring. Giving me time to change my mind.

I press my mouth more firmly against his. A summer breeze blows the night scents of the garden through the open door. His breath hitches, and his heart bangs hard under my splayed fingers. It's like the moment the morning sun first touches a tulip flower and it relaxes. There's a nurturing rhythm between us, something so profoundly comfortable, that makes us want to open up.

All our conversations, our ups and downs.

All setting roots down for . . . *this*.

Lyle breaks the kiss a half inch. Our foreheads press together, our noses tap; he murmurs, "Explain."

I sneak another kiss. "Scott's with Robin. He's convincing him of my

plan to adopt Dusky on his behalf.”

“And?”

“When I left, he was coming around.”

He rolls his eyes and motions between us. “Explain *this*.”

I take his smooth hand and link it with mine.

I squeeze tightly. “I don’t know if I can.” His hazel eyes flash. I try again. “I mean I don’t know how it happened. I guess it’s been . . . growing? Since I met you, really. So gradually I didn’t realise, and then suddenly it’s right in front of me, eight feet tall.”

A whisper, “What is?”

“Magic. Our magic.”

He looks like he’s struggling not to yank me into another kiss, but when I dip my head he laughs and holds me at arm’s length. “Keep talking.”

“The magic of seeing all sides of someone, the contentment in that. It hit, it *hurt*, when you . . . The thought of not seeing you again . . .”

It twists my stomach. Makes me ill.

“I want to see you, talk to you. I want to kiss you—”

He kisses me.

My gasp is soft, and he whispers, “I kept telling myself I was into Robin, but . . . butterflies.”

I laugh. “You were so good at it all, so damn perfect. And those suits . . .”

He sighs. “You looked glorious. I wanted to help you out of them.”

“I should’ve reflected more. My sub-conscious even discarded the pillow barricade.”

“I thought I’d done that! I was mortified.”

“Not you. I saw them on my side first and kicked them over to yours.”

Lyle laughs. “I really wanted to dance with you at the wedding.”

“That is something I’d like you to teach me. Hey!” I try to hook his gaze but he keeps skipping his away. “You weren’t worried about Jordy when I slept here the other night.”

He stops that train of thought with a quick nip and a nuzzle down my throat. He sighs into the crook and I hug him tighter.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone that morning.” I exaggerate a long sigh. “I’ll have to prove I’ll never do that again.”

He pulls his ticklish lips off my throat and meets my eye. “When can you start?”

I laugh. He smiles.

And it’s magic.

A year later

Lyle's hands come around my waist, pushing at the edge of my T-shirt. He drags his fingers over my skin to my chest.

My gasp is soft, and he whispers against my nape, "Happy moving-in day."

We're on his back deck, taking a breather from emptying boxes. The sun is out and a warm breeze pushes at the garden-sea of lavender heads. His body is warm and familiar at my back and I hold his hands in place against my chest, my steadily beating heart. "You know that space," I say cheekily, "where you once wanted a dog kennel?"

He pinches my nipples and I laugh, threading my fingers between his and squeezing. "I think our tree should go right there."

"Our tree?"

"Mm, let's go to Cole's this afternoon and choose one together. We'll plant it right in that spot."

"Will it be magical?"

"Yes."

"Will it grow very fast?"

"No."

"What'll be magic then?"

"Getting to see it grow."

Lyle holds me tighter and nibbles kisses at my neck. “Jase?”

God, hearing him say my name so softly, wantonly. It never gets old—

I spin around and capture his mouth in a kiss. “Yeah?”

“Jordy and Robin are gone . . .” He smirks. “I mean, there’s not much left to unpack.”

He pulls off my shirt and his fingers dance over the fine chest hairs to my nipples. Blood rushes south, and Lyle kisses me again. I bring him flush against me and nip his lip.

He hums. “You touch me like you do plants in the garden: firmly, with a confident hand. I like it.”

I laugh and, drawing on any willpower I have left, pull myself away from him, backing towards the house. “There are things left to unpack. In the bedroom.”

Our bedroom.

Lyle pounces from behind, toppling us both into the empty boxes on the floor. He’s heavy and warm against my back, vibrating with laughter; his lips brush lightly over the skin on my neck, and I turn my head and snatch his lips to mine.

We extricate ourselves from the crushed boxes and stand, the tips of our big toes touching. Sunlight pushes through the mesh curtains, kissing Lyle’s hair and one side of his face, and a light breeze washes over my skin. I tangle our fingers together. This gorgeous man before me—

Lyle kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue with passion as he works my buttons and yanks down my shorts. “Jase. I want you.”

Our naked bodies come together in a cool clash that quickly warms. Hands roam over my back, digging into my skin, calling me closer.

I nudge him towards the large bed. He doesn’t want to let me go, even for a moment, and we tumble down beside three unopened boxes. Lyle gasps at the cool blankets under his back, but stills me with firm hands when I try to roll us over. “I like your weight on me.”

The breeze caresses my back, hips and thighs. I pin his hands down, stapling his fingers to the bed with mine.

It feels good to be with him like this. From the first time we touched, intimacy with Lyle has been easy. We connect—a spark on the surface, and something like a sigh under it. Maybe it’s knowing all his shades, and him knowing mine. Maybe it’s feeling like we can make mistakes; knowing we’ll find ways to fix them.

Maybe it’s his goddamn gorgeous grin and the sexy way he *moans*.

Our skin becomes hot and damp.

He bites my ear, my neck.

The boxes beside us jump and lurch.

Nails dig into my back, drag down . . .

The boxes fall off the bed. Something breaks.

I don’t care. I collapse onto Lyle’s panting, sticky body and steal his curled lips into a soft kiss.

He tastes it with a satisfied, sleepy hum, and his eyes crinkle. “Let’s go buy our tree.”

~ The End ~



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Emerett Has Never Been In Love - Chapter

1

Emerett “Lake” Lakewood loved love, and *loathed* weddings.

He snatched the spare key from underneath a pot of petunias and broke into his best friend’s childhood home. Floorboards creaked as he stole into the urban-farmhouse-style living room.

Taylor’s Xbox shimmered in a shaft of moonlight; the distressed-wood coffee table he and Taylor had studied at for exams gleamed; the forest-green vase they’d taken turns throwing up in the night they’d graduated college taunted. A silly ache washed over him like a late October breeze.

He’d been one of the last to leave the local hall, though he’d wanted to bail the minute Taylor and Amy—his now wife—had driven off with a clatter of tin cans.

His sigh echoed in the room. From his tuxedo lapel, he removed a cream lily. The flower his best friend had chosen for the centerpieces and bouquet.

Lake set it atop the rustic mantelpiece, under an old clock that ticked ten past three, and slung himself lengthwise over the couch. He sank into its familiar hold, but it lacked comfort without Taylor trying to knock his legs away.

Lake buried a sad groan in a linen throw pillow.

He should be happy.

Taylor loved Amy, they were devoted to each other. Lake and Taylor had

just turned twenty-six, for crying out loud. Dynamics changed with time. Best friends became friends, and then later, acquaintances. This was the natural course of life.

But, God. This sucked.

No best friend to listen to his crazy schemes and political tirades.

No best friend to give him advice on his boring commercial-editing job and his nonexistent love life.

No best friend to be blatantly open with.

He'd become a loner, suffering in bromantic solitude.

He punched the pillow over another self-pitying groan.

A darkened figure appeared in the doorway, brandishing Taylor's baseball bat. Lights flashed on, and Lake shielded his eyes. "Just add to the torture, why don't you."

"Lake?" Taylor's dad said, a surprised hitch in his low-timbred voice.

Lake lowered the pillow.

Taylor's dad—Knightly Dixon, or Knight, as Lake had been calling him daily for the last seven years—lowered the bat and threw his neatly tuxedoed ass into the adjacent armchair, gripping Taylor's bat like a king holding his staff. With his free hand, he loosened his bowtie and popped a button.

He looked nothing like Taylor. Taller, darker brown hair, squarer jaw, and deeper laughter creases. He'd shaved for the wedding, but he already sported light, silver-speckled stubble. A badge of raising a child alone in his twenties and thirties.

Okay sure, he had a good relationship—friendship?—with Taylor's dad. But Knight had a way of making Lake see his own faults. And Lake did not enjoy seeing his own faults . . .

Knight settled tired, soulful brown eyes on him. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Lake rolled onto his side, propped himself on his elbow, and stared at Knight's muddied dress shoes. "Did you walk back?"

“I’d hardly drive after drinking.” He toed off his shoes and tossed them onto the tiled hearth.

“Guess I made you traipse in here with them on?”

“I saw a flicker in the window and grabbed this from the shed.” Knight lifted the bat an inch off the ground and dropped it again. “I have a great deal of patience when it comes to you, Lake. But please, never scare me like that again.”

“Mental note: Don’t give Taylor’s old man a heart-attack. Got it.”

A pillow hit Lake smack-bang on his grin.

“Forty-four is not old.”

“Says the forty-four year old.”

Knight laughed. “You held yourself together today. Only spotted you bawling once.”

“Behind the crostini station?”

“The men’s room.”

“Of course. The men’s room. That was absolutely the only time.” Lake sagged until his head hit the couch. “He’s married. My Taylor. *Our* Taylor.”

“You act like you’ll never see him again. He’s married and traveling Europe for a month, not transferring there for good. He lives three blocks from here.”

“He’ll miss us too, Knight. He might be shedding a few tears of his own right now.”

“I certainly hope not.”

“How are you okay with all this? He lived here until he was twenty-five.”

“I’m okay with it because he lived here until he was twenty-five.” Knight’s blue gaze danced. “And he’s okay with it because now he only has Amy’s day to ask about, not both of ours.”

“Especially since one response was always delightfully dramatic?” Lake teased. “Come on, I know that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. And what I would have followed with.”

Lake laughed and tucked the pillow Knight had thrown at him under his head. “You love telling me how it is, don’t you?”

“It’s kept me entertained for years.”

Honesty triumphed because Knight knew flattery would inflate Lake’s already robust ego.

Irritatingly wise man.

They stared vacantly into space. The air thickened, morosely, weighted with honeysuckle and a thousand memories they’d all shared in this room. It had so often been the three of them; everything felt off-balance now Lake and Knight were on their own. Like the Knight that Lake knew as Taylor’s dad had to be relearned. Even though, factually, Lake knew everything about him already.

Confusing.

Knight rubbed the arm of his chair, staring toward him thoughtfully.

“Do you think he’ll miss us?” Lake asked quietly.

“It’d be impossible not to miss one of us.” Knight cleared his throat. “He’ll also send more pictures than we’ll know how to respond to. He and Amy will be smiling in all of them, and that will make me the happiest dad in the world.”

Lake rolled toward Knight, absorbing his warm, solid smile. “Freeze. That beauty right there on your mug. Acknowledge I played a significant role in that. I hooked them up, after all.”

Knight rolled his eyes, snorting. “Something you did with far too much glee, Lake. It’s a surprise you bawled today at all.”

“Matching them up, giving them advice, watching them fall in love . . . that was the fun part.” He sighed. “I’ll never forget the day they met. Pouring rain, Amy trudging her cat in a carrier and Taylor lugging your Garfield to the same vet. Me, the only one with an umbrella. Taylor admired pretty Amy and her plaited hair, and when it came time to leave, I took an extra-long time until Amy was done with the vet. Then I swapped Taylor my umbrella for the

cat carrier and the rest, as they said today, is till death do us part.” Lake grinned. “Maybe I need more of that.”

“Garfield is due for her annual shots. Be my guest.”

“It won’t happen the same way twice. But bring on the falling in love.”

Knight eyed him inquisitively. “For yourself this time?”

Lake barked out a laugh. “I’m never interested in the guys who are into me. Most are only into my looks.” He waved a hand from his dark hair and model-like face to his perfectly proportioned body, blowing out a frustrated breath. “Love is supposed to be this amazingly powerful thing—and it happens all the time—but *I’ve* never felt it. Not with any of my exes. It’s not for me.”

Lake shoved a nervous hand through his hair, avoiding Knight’s expression. No doubt he’d give logical advice on the situation, but Lake didn’t want to hear it.

“So no,” he continued, “not for me. But I did notice Philip watching Amy and Taylor like he wished it was his big day.”

“Philip? The big-eared guy you and Taylor volunteer with at the food bank?”

“He also DJed, and his ears aren’t that big. You know, you shouldn’t identify people by their negative traits.”

“What if I happen to like big ears on a man?”

“Do you?” Lake had hardly seen him date at all. But now that it was brought up . . .

Lake cocked his head. Objectively speaking, his best friend’s dad was ridiculously handsome. Always had been. Why didn’t he date more?

Knight rubbed his jaw, fingers sliding over ever-smiling lips. Lake snapped his gaze to the beadboard skirting the walls.

“Philip, the guy with the alligator shoes,” Knight corrected.

“And the penchant for clapping when he’s excited,” Lake added, flustered. He cleared his throat. “We’re in Port Rātapu, arguably the most

liberal town around. Hooking him up should be easy.”

“Careful, Lake,” Knight said. “Messing with other people’s love lives might backfire.”

“They might not have love lives, otherwise.”

“Fine,” Knight said, laughing. “I was thinking of having a barbecue next weekend. Invite Philip and whoever you’d like. Have a little fun for one afternoon. But don’t be surprised if it doesn’t work—there might be a reason Philip-with-the-alligator-shoes doesn’t have a boyfriend.”



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About the author

A bit about me: I'm a big, BIG fan of slow-burn romances. I love to read and write stories with characters who slowly fall in love.

Some of my favorite tropes to read and write are: Enemies to Lovers, Friends to Lovers, Clueless Guys, Bisexual, Pansexual, Demisexual, Oblivious MCs, Everyone (Else) Can See It, Slow Burn, Love Has No Boundaries.

I write a variety of stories, Contemporary MM Romances with a good dollop of angst, Contemporary lighthearted MM Romances, and even a splash of fantasy.

My books have been translated into German, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Thai.

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