

A close-up, slightly out-of-focus photograph of a woman's face, showing her eyes and nose, serving as a background for the title text.

Loving RUSH

a Love is an Open Road story

A photograph of two men standing on a wooden dock, looking out over a calm lake towards a mountain range under a clear sky. The scene is peaceful and scenic.

sofa grey

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LOVING RUSH

By Sofia Grey

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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LOVING RUSH

By Sofia Grey

Photo Description

Two handsome young men, both naked from the waist up, are kissing passionately against a wooden fence. They both wear jeans and are visibly aroused. The man on the right is driving the kiss, and he holds the other man's neck with a tender hand. They are lost in their own world.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We have always been close, never quite what you see here. He is my best friend and I love him desperately. I find myself watching him work and I can never decide which I want more... Him to throw me down and ravish me or to do the same to him. I have been with my fair share of men and so has he, but we've never crossed that line. The problem may be that both of us are too hard headed to realize what has always been right in front of us. A passing touch or a lingering glance leaves me breathless. He makes me want forever, not just one night, I know he is meant to be mine for I have always been his.

Always,

Wendy ~M/M Junkie~

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, movie star, friends to lovers, IT, frottage, men with pets, sexual tension, reunited, in the closet, hurt/comfort

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LOVING RUSH

By Sofia Grey

Chapter One

“Rush is coming back to Wellington.”

I rolled over in bed and gazed bleary-eyed at my bedmate. I hadn’t heard him right. “Rush?”

Jono’s gaze met my own, and then he turned his attention back to his smartphone. “Come on, Ed. *Rush*. The actor, Rush. Hollywood legend, Rush.” He clicked his tongue in the way that was really starting to irritate me. “He’s Local-Boy-Made-Good. Even *you* must have heard of him.”

You could say that. He’d been my best friend at one time. I was still half in love with him.

I grunted and tugged up the duvet to cover my face. Asking Jono to stay had been a mistake. How quickly could I persuade him to leave? Ironically, I’d first hooked up with him because he reminded me of Rush, in a superficial way. His eyes were a similar blue, but not as bright. That and a shared love of sci-fi movies had been enough.

There was a rustling noise, and the bed dipped beside me. Jono peeled back the duvet and stole a brief kiss. “Got to go, sweetie. You up for another round tonight?”

“Not sure,” I mumbled. “I’ll call you.”

He didn’t bother showering—just dressed, gathered his stuff, and left. Ten minutes later, I heard the front door slam shut. Beth, my housemate, was away this weekend, so that just left me and James here.

Rush would tell me if he was coming home. Wouldn’t he? I hadn’t seen him since the wedding—and what a carnival that had been. Hollywood superstar marrying the current Princess of Pop. I’d gone to L.A. for the ceremony—hard to say no, when he paid for first-class tickets and five-star accommodation—but I’d barely spoken to him.

That was a year ago. Since then, there’d been a handful of emails and a couple of drunken texts from one award ceremony or another. It looked as though our easy, laid-back friendship was gone.

I reached for my phone. Had he texted? No. I flicked through my emails. Nothing there, either. Jono must have seen something in the news. I called up the premier New Zealand online-news service, and there it was.

He'd made the headline today, but that wasn't surprising.

Rush-ing Home

Hollywood star Rush is set to star in Brady Banner's new film. With the action set entirely in New Zealand, Rush is making a welcome return to his roots. "I'm keen to support Kiwi filmmakers. Brady gave me my first role, without which, I wouldn't be where I am now." Look out for Rush gracing our streets early next year, when filming starts in Wellington.

Okay, so it wasn't as though he'd be arriving in the next few days. More like three to six months. Maybe he'd be in touch before then. It was difficult to avoid mention of him in the news, and I normally devoured everything I found. Somehow, I'd missed this.

There was a bumping noise at the bedroom door. Jono hadn't closed it properly, and I looked up to see a black nose jammed in the gap.

"Come on, then," I said.

James used his shoulder to barge the door open and launched at the bed with a rattle of claws on the wooden floor. He'd never gotten out of the habit of jumping on me, and while I didn't mind when he was a tiny pup, he was too big and heavy to do it now.

He dropped his C-3PO chew toy on my leg and then sprawled beside me in the space recently vacated by Jono. That was another mark against my maybe boyfriend. He didn't like dogs.

I dug my fingers into the soft fur on James's neck and contemplated going back to sleep. My hangover urged otherwise. It demanded water, painkillers, and a large coffee. In that order. A bacon sandwich would help, too.

My phone beeped, and I grabbed it with a speed that woke the dozing James. It was a text from Mum.

What time are you coming over? Your dad needs some help with his laptop and is too stubborn to ask.

That took care of this afternoon. I was helping my dad expand his furniture-making business with some online marketing, and building a website for him. While he was fantastic with a buzz saw, he'd yet to master the intricacies of wireless technology.

The monthly Sunday lunch at home was a thinly veiled excuse for my parents to pull their chicks back to the nest. I didn't mind, though. On top of a huge lunch and a bag full of leftovers for my freezer, I got to hang out with my two sisters. I always took James with me. Everyone spoiled him rotten, which usually diverted attention away from me and my messy love life. My sisters were both married, with matched sets of children, while I lurched from fling to fling. I was the youngest and played on that for all I was worth, but some days I didn't feel up to the debate.

My hangover was muted, but I could have done with a nice, quiet lunch. Maybe one of my sisters would dominate the conversation this time?

"So, Ed. Rush is coming back." Vicky looked as though she'd burst with excitement. "You *have* to invite him here for lunch."

I didn't have to do anything. I bit down my reply and shrugged. "I don't know what his plans are. He might not have time."

"Jimmy practically grew up here," added Mum, her smile that of a proud mother.

"Mum"—Lisa's tone was scathing—"nobody calls him Jimmy any longer. It's *Rush*."

"He'll always be Jimmy Rushmore to me."

I'd nicknamed him Rush the day we met at school, and it stuck. Now the world used it. I glanced up, realising belatedly that Vicky had asked me a question. "Uh, what?"

"Will he have Sonara with him? I'd love to meet his wife."

I shrugged again. "You know as much as me." I'd met Sonara briefly at the wedding, but aside from an impression of huge eyes and clouds of dark hair, I couldn't remember anything about her. Rush, though... I could describe him in enough detail for a police ID image to be drawn up—the shaggy, dirty-blond hair with sun-kissed gold highlights; the brilliant eyes, the colour of the Pacific Ocean on a sunny day; the beaming smile and the tiny dimple high in his right cheek. The way he looked at me, as though I was important to him. As though I mattered.

He probably looked at everyone like that.

"Have you heard what the film is?" Lisa waved her fork at me.

The interrogation wasn't over. This time I just shrugged and continued helping myself to Mum's roast potatoes. I needed a little sign to hold up, one that read, *I DON'T KNOW*.

"Ed, why didn't you tell us? It's Rush's first gay film. They're saying it's the Kiwi equivalent of Brokeback Mountain."

I nearly choked. Why did I not know this? Rush was so fiercely het, such a pussy magnet, I'd never have expected this. "That's brave," I managed to say. Lisa opened her mouth to speak, but I talked over her. "Before you ask, he's straight. Always has been."

It meant my fantasies of him would be ramped up a bazillion times when I saw him making out with another guy. Watching him snogging women was bad enough.

Dad rescued me after lunch by having me help on his website. My sisters took James for a long walk up the hills, and I finally relaxed. Safe in my dad's converted garage, I could avoid the questions that still kept falling from everyone's lips. I worked through the list of computer issues and was concentrating on configuring the spam filters when Dad spoke. "Your mum would love to see him again. She always thought of him as a second son."

I gritted my teeth. "Like I said, I don't know what his plans are. I didn't even know he was coming here at all until I read it in the news."

"That's sad. You used to be so close."

"Our lives changed, Dad." I went to Uni; he went to Hollywood.

"You still keep in touch, though. The wedding."

Watching him pledge undying love to a glossy chick. I was unlikely to forget that in a hurry. I'd stood at the back of a sweeping lawn, the ocean in the distance, and entertained a fantasy of him calling off the nuptials. He would dump Sonara onto his best man and come striding through the crowd to find me. Yeah, right. My part-time hobby developing video games meant I conjured fantasy scenarios everywhere.

I dragged my focus back to the screen in front of me. "These are the spam-filter settings. You need to know how to find them."

Shame I couldn't set up a filter in my brain. I'd set it to sweep everything Rush-related into the bin.

Hours later, on my way home, my phone beeped. And again. And then a third time. I needed fuel anyway, so I pulled into the nearest gas station and checked my phone there.

The text messages were all from Rush.

Dude. I need a favour. Flying into Welly 2nite n want 2 avoid the press. Will you gimme a ride from the airport?

Forgot to say. 11:30pm arrival.

Missed ya.

Chapter Two

I tried to dial down my anticipation during the short drive to the airport. What were the chances of him being mobbed by the press at Wellington Airport? This wasn't Heathrow with paparazzi always on standby in the Arrivals lounge. This was sleepy Wellington with its single terminal.

He'd been away too long.

Why couldn't he just get a cab like anyone else?

Because he wanted to see me?

Ever since the rainy day he'd flown out of New Zealand, I'd been waiting for this moment. Now it was here, I didn't know how to react. Would he tease me about my Aloha shirt? I used to wear them to wind him up, and now they were my favourite clothes.

Excitement battled with anxiety inside me. If nothing else, he was a mate—one I hadn't seen for a year. I looked forward to chilling with him, having a beer, talking shit, and catching up. He might have his wife with him, but we could still hang out. Maybe.

Traffic was light. I arrived in plenty of time and snagged a parking space near the entrance. He hadn't said *where* he was flying in from, but there was only one arrival scheduled at 11:30 from Auckland. It had landed early, so I hastened to the Arrivals hall.

There, among the small group of tired passengers and bored-looking café staff, was a cluster of people. Cameras flashed, and my heart lurched into my throat. So much for keeping a low profile. Rush stood at the centre, laughing and shaking hands with people, a bag slung over his shoulder. I watched as he signed autographs and then posed for one photo after another. His smiles looked genuine, as though there was nothing he'd rather be doing.

He was really here.

His last text was burned on my retinas. *Missed ya*. I missed you too, Rush. More than you'd ever know.

My tongue felt like a slab of wood in my mouth. I couldn't pull a coherent thought together. With my pulse booming in my ears and my stomach tying itself in knots, I tried to think through the fog of emotions.

Should I just walk up to him? I doubted he'd need rescuing. As though he read my thoughts, he looked up, gaze scanning the hall until it found me. His smile widened to light up his face, and I felt the blast down to my toes. Without missing a beat, he made his apologies to the fans and then strode towards me. A couple of teenage girls hurried with him, and he paused for more pictures, but they finally drifted away.

I stood by the Mojo coffee stall and watched him move. He'd always had a feline-like grace, but now it seemed enhanced. A little more swagger in his stride. His face was leaner with uncharacteristic shadows beneath the eyes, but apart from that, he glowed with health. He was fucking gorgeous.

"Bro. You're still wearing flowery shirts." He slung one arm around me in a loose man hug, and then we knocked our fists together. Just like old times. "Man, that was a bumpy flight. I'd forgotten how windy it gets here."

I clung to my composure, but it was touch and go. "This is nothing, dude. Barely a breeze. You've been away too long."

"Yeah." His tone was serious, his gaze locked on the night outside the glass doors. "I have."

I couldn't speak. Having him so close, his woody scent filling my nostrils, made me tingle in places I didn't want to think about. My cock, half-hard at the first sight of him, was already nudging at my zipper. Thank fuck I was wearing a long and baggy shirt.

I should say something. I gestured at his single bag. "Any more luggage?"

He turned to me, his gaze snapping back to focus on my face. "Nope. Travelling light."

"And—uh—Sonara? Is she with you?"

His jaw tightened a fraction. "Like I said. Travelling light."

Behave normally and don't swoon like a little girl. "It's good to see you again, man. I missed your ugly mug." I mock punched his arm, and like the sun coming from behind a cloud, his beaming grin was back.

"You too. I can't wait to hear all the news. Are we getting out of here?"

We turned together and headed for the car park. I had to shove both hands into my pockets to stop them from reaching out and touching him to prove to myself this wasn't a dream. "This is Welly, mate." My voice came out gruff. "If anyone's got news, it's you."

He frowned at me. “What have you heard?”

“Apart from the new movie, nothing. But you’re here, in the dead of night, when nobody expected it.”

“Change of plans.” He shrugged and hitched the bag higher on his shoulder. “What car do you drive these days?”

“A piece of crap compared to your collection.” I saw them when I flew across last year. Jesus. A different car for every day of the week.

“Eh, they’re just toys,” he said.

I stopped at the side of my aging Mitsubishi station wagon and unlocked the doors. “I bought it cheap from a friend. I only use it at the weekends, so there’s no sense in having anything expensive.” Why was I defending my car? Maybe because I was seeing it through Rush’s eyes—the faded paintwork, the dent in the wing that I’d never smoothed out, and the fact that it was fifteen years old.

“Ed, it’s a set of wheels. I’m grateful you showed up.”

“Yeah, well... Couldn’t leave you stranded.”

We exited the car park and headed for the main road, and I glanced across at Rush. He tapped his fingers on his knee as though listening to a song in his head.

“I never asked. Where to? Where are you staying?” I automatically headed towards the city. He’d be booked into one of the upmarket hotels.

“Hang on.” He placed his hand on my arm, and a shiver ran up my spine. I tightened my grip on the wheel. “Let’s go up Mount Vic first. I wanna see the city,” he said.

It was already a late night for me, but what the hell. When would I get the chance to do this again? “Sure.” I diverted to a side road, and minutes later, we wound our way up to the top of the hill. Mount Victoria was the highest point around, as evidenced by the radio mast at the very top. The tiny car park was deserted. Without speaking, we climbed out of the car and walked to the lookout point.

We’d sat here the night before he left for L.A. I’d come many times since, just sat and gazed at the city spread at my feet and wondered if he ever thought of that night? If he ever thought of me?

It was the perfect time to look down at Wellington and the city lights strung around the harbour. The early autumn weather had been gentle so far, and it

wasn't cold yet. We settled side by side on the giant slab of stone we'd always favoured. Longing coursed through me, hot and desperate. I'd never had the courage to say anything to him then. Would I now, and risk him turning away completely?

Rush broke the silence. "Do you remember the last time we came here?"

"I remember being wasted."

He huffed a soft laugh in the darkness. "*You* were, aye. More than me. I remember..."

"What?"

"Eh. Just that it was the wrong way round. I was celebrating my escape and thought *you'd* have to carry *me* home."

How could I have celebrated my best friend leaving? I was terrified I'd never see him again. Furious at myself for not being brave enough to take that leap into the unknown. And sad, with the aching awareness of youth, at the changes about to happen in our lives. Nothing would ever be simple again.

"I've missed all this." His voice was so soft, I only just heard it over the night insects chirping in the bush. "It's beautiful. And it looks just the same. Some nights, Ed, I think about this view and try to recreate it in my head. There's nowhere on earth like it."

The conversation threatened to stray into areas I wanted to keep away from. "What about the view of Beverly Hills? How does that compare?" I asked.

"Not a patch, bro. And not just the city." He lay back on the stone. "The stars feel close enough here to fuckin' touch. You don't get stars in L.A.; there's too much pollution. Too many people."

"Do you remember what you said? That sitting here, you looked down over Wellington, but it wasn't enough. You wanted the world at your feet." He'd wanted to leave me behind too.

"I was an arrogant bastard."

"You did it, though." I stared up at the night sky. A smattering of clouds misted some of the stars, but the Milky Way sprawled across the inky darkness in a dazzling blanket of lights.

"What's that poem?" he murmured. "The one about the sky being an embroidered cloth?"

“Why ask me? I’m gay, so I can recite poetry?”

“Smart-ass. You’re the academic.”

“I studied I.T.”

“You did?”

I heard the teasing note in his voice and smiled to myself in the darkness. It’d been a long time coming, but we’d fallen back into our old easy banter. Something tight inside me eased a fraction. Maybe I could get through this visit without wrecking everything permanently. If I limited the amount of time I saw him and kept it strictly hands off. Just mates.

I steadied my voice. “Some of us need to work in the morning. I’d better take you to your hotel.” I pushed up to a sitting position and sneaked a look at him. I ached for him, and he never knew. “Which hotel did you book?”

“I—uh—didn’t. Can I come stay with you?”

Chapter Three

He wanted to stay at my place?

Dirty images swarmed my tired brain. Rush sharing my bed. Every deliciously filthy thing I'd ever wanted to do to him. I gulped. If I weren't sitting, my knees would have given way.

My place.

Not my bed.

I sent frantic stay-down signals to my poor, deluded cock, but it hadn't gotten the message. It throbbed, hard to the point of it being painful.

My mouth as dry as the Sahara, I tried to form some words. It was entirely possible I was drooling. "I... There isn't a spare room."

His eyes glittered in the weak light. "Your boyfriend. Will he mind?"

I'd been seeing Jono on and off for a couple of weeks, but he wasn't my boyfriend. And he would push me aside to get to Rush. I hesitated. "I—No."

"The sofa, then? I really don't want to sleep in a hotel." His voice sounded hollow.

He'd rather use my sofa than a king-size in a plush suite? Odd, but he was waiting for an answer. "Of course. No worries."

We hardly spoke on the way back down the hill and through the deserted streets to the quiet suburb I lived in.

"This yours?" He looked with interest at my house, a graceful terrace on a private road. It made a nice contrast to my scruffy car. "I always liked this end of town."

I shrugged and stepped ahead to unlock the door. "I like it. I can walk to work." As soon as the door opened, James charged down the hallway to me, tail thrashing wildly as usual. "*Hey.*" I grabbed his collar before he could jump at Rush. "Stay down." He whined but obeyed, although he strained to get closer to him.

"Cool hound. Is it yours?"

"Yeah." I let James go when it didn't look as though he'd knock Rush over, and he immediately sniffed Rush's hands before licking them.

“I wondered where you were.”

I jumped at Beth’s voice. I’d completely forgotten she’d be home.

She stood in the doorway to the kitchen, pink pyjamas showing beneath a loose white dressing gown. “I gave James a walk.”

“Dude, you named your dog after me.” Rush sounded delighted.

“You’re both needy bastards.” I grinned to take the sting out of my words, and he laughed.

“True that.” His gaze swung to Beth and then back to me, a contemplative frown on his face. “Gonna introduce me?”

“You’re Rush.” Beth clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh, my God. You really are.” Stepping forwards, she stuck out her hand. “I’m Beth Williams. Oh, God. You’re even taller than I imagined. What are you doing here? Let me get you a drink. A beer? Or coffee. No, it’s too late for that. How about a nightcap? Ed has some vodka, and I’m sure there’s tequila in the fridge.”

“Hi, Beth.” He squeezed her hand briefly. “I’m an old friend of Ed’s, but he never mentioned you.” He raised his eyebrows, and she leapt to answer.

“We’re housemates, and he never mentioned *you*.” She touched my arm, her attention flicking back to me for a microsecond. “Jono called round. I said you’d phone him.”

It was beginning to feel like a bad sitcom.

“So what about that drink, Rush? May I call you that?” Beth asked.

I’d never seen her so excited. She was quite funny, but I wondered if everyone reacted like this to meeting him.

“I’ll pass on the drinks, thanks, but you know a cup of tea would be awesome.”

“One tea coming right up!” I was thankful when she vanished into the kitchen, James following.

“Come on through,” I said to Rush. “Do you want a tour?”

“Maybe tomorrow.” He paused as though he was going to say more, but Beth clattered something in the kitchen, and the moment was gone.

Chapter Four

I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. Knowing Rush slept just feet away was doing bad things to my libido. I'd already jerked out a quick one in the bathroom, but it wasn't nearly enough to sate me.

I ran our conversation in my head. We'd both sipped tea, and he'd been unfailingly polite to Beth, answering a colourful array of questions. He mentioned meetings with a bunch of people I'd never heard of, but nothing about how long he was staying or what his plans were. He also said nothing about his wife. Then he started yawning, and Beth and I retreated to our rooms.

What was he doing here? Running away from something—or someone? If I Googled his name, what would I see this time? Something was wrong, but I'd wait for him to tell me. It didn't seem right to pry into his personal life.

It was nearly two in the morning, and I was still wide awake, my brain running in circles. James snuffled on the floor beside the bed, and somewhere in the house, a floorboard creaked.

My mind leapt straight back to Rush. He was my friend. My oldest mate. If I chose to lust over him, that was my problem. I didn't intend to wreck our friendship.

I thought I'd dream about him, but no. When my alarm trilled, I lifted scratchy eyelids and thought about going back to sleep, but knew I couldn't. Mondays were busy at work with a string of meetings to attend, and I couldn't really bail out.

I let James into the minuscule garden while I brewed coffee, made toast, and then raced through a shower. I took care to tiptoe through the lounge, but Rush didn't stir. The sofa was plenty big enough for him, and the only part visible was the top of his head. I lurked for a few minutes in case he woke, but he didn't stir.

When I left for work, I left him a handwritten note and my car keys.

Help yourself if you need to go out. I'll be back 6-ish. Text me if you need anything.

I had no idea what Beth's plans were for the day. She was a nurse at the hospital, and irregular hours were normal for her. I preferred the steady nine-to-five of my office job.

Rush didn't contact me all morning, so I flicked him a text at lunchtime.

Hey, bro. How you doing 2day?

No reply. He was most likely jet-lagged and adjusting back to local time. I texted Beth as well, but she didn't reply either. She might be at work. I stared out of the office window, but for once I didn't see the curve of Wellington Harbour. Instead, I saw golden skin, taut muscles, and brilliant blue eyes.

After yawning all afternoon, I decided to leave early. I was just packing up when my phone beeped. *Finally.*

It was from Dan, a friend, reminding me I was meeting him this evening. Hell, I'd completely forgotten. Like me, Dan wrote indie computer games in his spare time, and I'd promised to test one of his creations. Was there any chance I could reschedule? Unlikely, since I knew he was working to a tight deadline and this particular game was part of his University course.

I called him. "Hey. I can't stay long tonight. I've got a friend visiting from out of town."

"Oh. Okay." I heard the disappointment in his voice. "That's a shame. You won't get to see all the levels." He huffed out a soft breath. "Or you could bring your mate with you? There's loads of room, and more people would give it an even better test. What do you think?"

Take Rush with me? "I dunno. I'll ask him and let you know." I had to track him down first.

When I arrived home, my car was parked on the street, but haphazardly and not how I'd left it. My heart lifted, and I strode up the steps and through the door where I almost got knocked over by James. Laughter rang from the kitchen, and I followed the sound to Rush and Beth at the table poring over a magazine.

I paused in the doorway and watched them a moment. His fair head and her dark mop of hair contrasted each other, but they looked comfortable together. Like a couple.

"Hey." I tapped on the open door, and two pairs of eyes jumped to meet mine. Two pairs of startled eyes. Huh?

Beth recovered first. "God. Is it that time already? I'm on shift tonight; I'd better shower." She hurried out of the kitchen, her feet clattering up the stairs.

The corners of Rush's lips tilted upward. "Aren't you supposed to say 'Honey, I'm home' when you come in?"

"Asshole," I tossed back, unable to wipe the answering smile from my face.

"Takes one to know one." He closed the magazine, propped his elbows on it, and dropped his chin into his hands. "Good day at the office, darling?"

"Ha ha." His teasing cut a little too close for comfort. What I'd give to have him here every day when I came in from work. To spend my evenings and weekends with him. To share my bed. With some effort, I walked to the sink and ran the tap for cold water before filling a mug and taking a few sips. It bought me some self-composure, and I turned back to face him. "I'm seeing some friends tonight. Giving one of them feedback on a game he's developing. You could come along too, if you want?"

He didn't say anything, and I leapt to fill the silence. "Dan's a mate. He won't go psycho fan on you. He can be discreet."

Rush's stare was mesmerising. I could drown in those blue pools and die happy.

"Yeah. Why not?" He gave a sharp, decisive nod.

I felt absurdly pleased. "Cool. I'll walk James then sort out some food. Okay if we leave around seven?"

After half an hour of throwing sticks for James in a nearby park, I was ready to face Rush again. I spoke sternly to myself as James and I walked home. It'd taken me the best part of ten years and one wedding to wean myself off the man. Now, just because he was back in town—and in my house—didn't mean I was going to be a fuckwit and fall in love with him all over again.

Correction. I'd never been *out* of love with him. The difference was, I knew how to deal with it now.

Chapter Five

I rang the doorbell and waited for Dan to answer while Rush fidgeted behind me on the step. Would they recognise him? They couldn't fail to. The surprised look on Dan's face when he opened the door and saw who was with me was comical. "Fuck me. You look just like Rush."

Rush had to have heard that line a million times before. Unruffled, he stuck out his hand. "You got me."

Dan's gaze met mine. "Jamie is going to spazz when he gets here. He's a huge fan." He turned back to Rush. "My—uh—boyfriend."

I'd known Dan a few years and had never pegged him as gay until he hooked up with Jamie a few months back. They were cute together, but Dan was clearly still getting used to the relationship.

We settled in his living room, and I ran through the same explanation I had with Beth. Old friend, visiting on the quiet. Rush continued to be vague about his plans, and I didn't push him. Every day he spent with me was a bonus. We had to repeat the introductions for Jamie a little later, but by this time, Dan had stopped grinning like a simpleton.

Rush took it all in his stride, sharing snippets of Hollywood gossip and steering well away from anything personal. It turned out he and Jamie knew some of the same people in the Wellington film industry, and they swapped contact names and chatted like old friends.

How did he *do* that? He'd always been able to charm the birds from the trees, as my mum said, and years in the media spotlight had honed that skill even further. Meanwhile, Dan fired up his Xbox, walked me through the story outline, and loaded up the characters. He was developing a post-apocalyptic role-playing game, complete with plenty of enemies to be disposed of, but with a series of story arcs for each of the characters. It looked like great fun.

"Aren't we taking part?" Rush leaned forwards. "It looks good. I'd like to play." He glanced across at Jamie. "How about you?"

"I've played it already. It's awesome." Jamie's smile was affectionate. "But then, I'm biased."

"Can we join in?" Rush asked.

“That’d totally work.” Dan’s face lit up. “I haven’t tested four people in combat mode. Let’s do it.”

A couple of hours later, I got up to use the bathroom. On my way back, I paused in the doorway. Jamie sat on the couch, Dan on the floor next to him, while Rush was sprawled in an armchair. His celebrity status forgotten, they joked and riffed back and forth. Rush had been accepted as one of my friends.

With Jamie’s easy air of sophistication and Dan’s scruffy version of handsome, they looked good as a couple, and happy together. I felt a pang of envy. I’d never achieved that comfortable stage in a relationship. All my flings fizzled out when the initial lust burned through. Maybe I was incapable of a solid relationship? Or maybe I was hung up on the one guy I could never have.

“You giving up already?” Rush’s strangely appropriate question jarred my thoughts, and I dragged my concentration back.

“As if. I need a chance to whup your ass first.”

“That’s big talk for a guy who doesn’t have a controller in his hands right now.”

I reclaimed my seat, and tried to focus on the play.

Walking the short distance home in the dark, Rush by my side, I felt buzzed from a couple of beers and a fun night. We hadn’t gone far when Rush paused. “We’re near the cemetery, aren’t we?”

“Yep.” I pointed to a side path. “Up there. Wanna go?” It was another mild night with patchy cloud cover. Perfect for a walk.

As we made our way up the hill, Rush chuckled. “Last time I came here was to snog Stacey Milburn. We were on the school trip to the Botanical Gardens. Remember?”

“Dude. I was the one covering for you when Mrs. Abrams took roll call.” We’d been fourteen and invincible at the time. I was still trying to pretend I liked girls, and failing, while Rush gobbled up every piece of skirt he could. Even then, his appetite had been insatiable.

“What happened to Stacey?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Dunno. Probably has a tribe of kids by now.”

We reached the cemetery, spooky in the moonlight, and apart from us, deserted. Rush spread out onto a wooden bench, his arms trailing over the back of the seat. “Did you know then that you were gay?”

The beer had made me mellow. I leaned against a nearby tree, shoved my hands in my pockets, and strived for nonchalance. “Yeah, but I tried to fight it.”

“I kept pushing girls at you.”

I shrugged. “Hey. We were fourteen. We both had a lot of growing up to do.”

“S’pose.” There was just enough light to see his expression when he turned his face to the sky. He looked lost. Not the returning Hollywood superstar. Rush looked as though he was hurting inside.

My heart lurched. I could be patient no longer. “What’s wrong? I know something is.”

He kept his face turned away from me. “I envy you, Ed.”

“What?” I couldn’t stop my amused snort. “Yeah, right.”

“I do.” He glanced at me, and then his gaze skittered away again. “You’re real. You’ve got friends. Family. A steady job.” He swallowed. “A boyfriend. Beth told me about Jono.”

“Whoa. He’s not my boyfriend. He’s just—” I struggled for the right words. “It’s casual. And besides, you’re married, bro. You have Sonara.”

“Not any longer.”

“Eh?” I didn’t hear right. I pushed away from the tree and came to stand next to the bench. Rush raised his gaze to meet mine. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s over. She wanted kids. My kids. And I said no.”

I didn’t know what to think. Prickles ran down my spine at the idea of him being single again, but I quashed them. Unmarried Rush meant he reverted back to the revolving door on his life spinning a fresh girl every day. I’d been right about him hurting.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but you’ve still had too much beer if you think you envy my life over yours.”

“No beer at all.” He smiled, but it looked forced. “Dan pressed a bottle into my hand, but I didn’t touch it all night. I don’t drink now.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know, Ed.” Leaning back, he let his head hang over the edge of the bench seat. “I don’t envy your car though. It’s a piece of shit, mate. I took Beth up to Masterton this afternoon, and I didn’t think it’d get over the fucking hill.”

“My car’s all right.” I didn’t point out his changing the subject. “Why were you in Masterton?”

“You know I’m back for a movie, right? I wanted to get a handle on the location. And... yeah. There’s something I want to ask you.”

Chapter Six

Rush was already borrowing my car, sleeping on my sofa, and hanging with my friends. What could he possibly want from me now? I knew whatever it was, I'd almost certainly agree to it, just to get the carefree, relaxed Rush back.

"Sure." I rocked on my heels and watched as he straightened his back and stared at me, his gaze intent.

"It's a big ask." He hesitated and then scrubbed a hand over his face. "I. Umm... I want to see your mum and dad."

"Okay." I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't that. "They'd love to see you. My sisters too. Maybe next weekend? Will you still be here?"

"Probably. I'm going nowhere."

"Could have fooled me. Oscars one week, MTV awards another. You're in the freaking stratosphere while I'm still here. Still in Wellington."

"You don't get it." His voice was muffled, both hands covering his face. "You were always the smart one, Ed. Excellent grades in every subject. University. All I could do was prance around on a stage. The only thing I could ever keep in my head was my lines. I could remember scripts word-perfect, but if I had to write anything down, I was fucked. The only chance I ever had to make something of my life was to get away, and I've been running ever since."

He made zero sense, and I wrinkled my forehead as I tried to follow his convoluted thinking. "You're a star, Rush. A frigging honest-to-God movie star. I'd say you made something of your life."

"I'm paid to look pretty. To take off my shirt and flex my muscles. To kiss the leading lady and then fuck her a couple times to make the gossip column. I thought it'd be different if I married, but she's just as fucked up as me. Her agent told her to get pregnant, and that's why she wants to start a family. Her image needs softening. And there's no way in hell I'm bringing a kid into this world who doesn't have two parents to love it. Really love it." He kicked out at a stone on the path. It rattled off his boot and flew past me. "Sorry."

Rush had never known his father. His mum had been more interested in booze than bringing him up, which was why he'd spent so much time at my house when we were young.

I could see where he was coming from. “I’m sorry to hear that.” I put the pieces together in my head. “Is this why you wanted to come and stay with me instead of going to the Intercontinental? You can’t be comfortable on my sagging couch.”

“I don’t trust myself to stay out of the minibar.”

His words sank in, and my gut cramped. “Stay with me as long as you need. Seriously.”

“Actually, I need to head out tomorrow. People to see, you know.” He wouldn’t look at me. A few minutes ago, he said he was going nowhere.

“Next weekend,” I said. “We’ll head up to Levin. See my folks. Okay?”

“Sweet.” He still kept his gaze averted to the ground near my feet. The stone he’d kicked past me.

This morose, unsettled Rush worried me. He was always the fun-filled, energetic half of our double act—or at least, he always had been. Unless that was just an act. Which was the real Rush? Our light-hearted evening with Dan and Jamie seemed like weeks ago. I stood there, uncertain what to say but knowing I had to say *something* and hating myself for being so useless.

Rush broke the silence. He stretched and then stood and moved to my side. “There was something else. Something I need your help with.”

“It’s yours.”

“You might not think so when I tell you.” His lips curved in a hint of a smile.

Real or fake, I couldn’t tell, but I wanted to keep it going. “You want to borrow my piece-of-shit car again?”

“Hell, no.”

“You want to sit up all night watching a Die Hard marathon?”

“Nope.” He took a step closer, and a pleasant shiver ran down my spine.

“An all-weekend gaming session? You want to pretend we’re fifteen again.”

“No.” He stood so close now, I could smell his shower gel or his deodorant or whatever it was that made him smell so fucking delicious.

I balled my hands into fists inside my pockets and willed my dick to behave. “What, then?”

“This film I’m here for.” He ran both hands through his hair. I watched, fascinated, when it fell rumbled onto his forehead. “It’s my first gay role.”

Fuck. One mention of *gay* and my cock was not only fully awake, but wanting to come out and play. I shifted my feet and tried to ease the pressure, but my hard-on was lodged firmly against my zipper. Thank God it was dark out here.

Was he waiting for me to speak? “Yes,” I squeaked. “I mean, I know.”

“Thing is”—he dropped his voice into the husky, fuck-me tone I could listen to all day—“I’ve only ever kissed chicks. I want to practise.”

Oh no. Please, no. Not that. My chest tightened to the point I wasn’t sure if I could breathe.

He cleared his throat and tugged some more at his hair. The little voice of sanity inside me was shrieking no, but I ignored it. “Practise?” It came out as a whisper. I had no voice left.

“Yeah. On you.”

Chapter Seven

Every mental image I'd ever had of myself kissing Rush flooded my brain, bombarding me with a 3D-technicolour dazzling array of possibilities.

He wanted to practise kissing a dude. On me.

Not kissing for real.

Acting.

I knew without conscious thought that the instant his lips touched mine, I'd not want to stop. My knees shook, and for a moment I felt dizzy. Breathe. I had to breathe.

"I can't."

Had I spoken aloud? Rush didn't show any sign of hearing me. "Just one kiss," he murmured, the words intoxicating. He was temptation in human form. Heat poured from his body, and I wanted to bask in it. I'd burn to a crisp, and it'd be worth every second of agony.

"Why?" I hauled in a painful breath through lungs that had forgotten how to work. "You've kissed lots of chicks."

"Hundreds," he said. His mouth was dangerously close to mine. I wanted to shove him away and pretend this had never happened.

I wanted to grab his shirt and never let go.

I didn't dare take my hands from my pockets. I couldn't trust them. Little fuckers would be all over Rush. I'd frame his cheeks first. Brush my fingertips across his temples.

"Why?" I repeated.

"I want to see if it's different."

His breath feathered across my chin. If I leaned forwards the tiniest distance, our lips would meet. Rush opened his mouth, flicking his tongue across his teeth.

I couldn't drag my gaze away.

I couldn't move.

Rush was going to kiss me.

Dear God. I'd dreamed of this forever. I prayed I didn't fuck this up.

I felt weightless and heavy as lead at the same time. Butterflies danced in my stomach, and I'd swear I had palpitations. A Rush-induced heart attack? I'd die with a smile on my face.

"Yes?" he whispered.

"Yes," I replied.

Time slowed down. Every second expanded and bloomed, and I catalogued the myriad of intricate details. The way he slanted his mouth as he approached. The hand that tunnelled into my hair and held me at the perfect angle. The first brush of lip on lip.

If I believed in God, this would be a religious experience. Trumpets would sound. Lightning would crash. Rainbows would dance and shimmer in the air.

The second sweep of his lips was playful. A teasing kiss that caught the outer corner of my mouth and managed to nip at the same time.

My heart rattled so hard against my ribs they'd be bruised on the inside. My cock begged for release, and my balls ached to the point of numbness. And still the kiss continued. Without even thinking about it, I grabbed his T-shirt in both fists and clung on for dear life.

A third pass, and suddenly, the world made sense. It was me and Rush. Nothing else mattered. Pressure on my lips encouraged me to open my mouth, and I whimpered. I was drowning in pleasure.

A dog barked.

Voices drifted on the night air.

Rush jerked back.

There was enough light to see the expression in his eyes. Confusion. They probably mirrored my own. I lifted trembling fingers to my mouth. *He's just acting. This doesn't mean anything to him.*

"Fuck," he whispered. "That was close."

His breathing as uneven as mine, he stepped back, creating a cold space between us. "Too close. I'm sorry, Ed. I shouldn't have done that."

Chapter Eight

I'd never been awkward with Rush before this. Never been in a situation where I was utterly swamped with emotion, to the point where I couldn't look at him. I was afraid to—and scared of what he'd see on my face. In my wildest dreams, kissing him had only ever led to a triple-X-rated fantasy. The reality was better than I could imagine.

I stood there, shivering as though freezing, my brain playing *The Kiss* on a continuous loop. This was the single moment that defined my adult life, and yet Rush didn't seem to care. He strolled a few steps up the path and then glanced over his shoulder at me. "I think it's time to get back."

Was I so stupidly in love with Rush that I'd take anything as a sign that he felt something back? He was acting. Just practising his fucking part.

Nausea cramped in my guts. I couldn't let him see what he'd done to me. How would he expect me to react? Laugh it off? Tease him about a new way of life he could embrace?

No.

The Kiss was everything to me.

I pulled in a ragged breath and dug deep. I couldn't ever let him know how I felt. It would wreck everything between us. I shoved my hands in my pockets and made my feet move. I'd pretend to be normal, even if it killed me. From the way my heart was hammering, it probably would.

We didn't speak on the walk back to my place. Rush sauntered along, head down as though deep in thought, while I argued and rationalised with myself. It was just a kiss. One freaking perfect, never-to-be-forgotten kiss, but still just a kiss. I wasn't a starry-eyed teenager with his first crush. I was a grown man, and it was about time I acted like one.

I kept up the pretence back at home, but when Rush wanted to stay up and watch TV, I escaped to the sanctuary of my room and pretended to sleep.

I stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen the next morning, not expecting to see him already up. He sat hunched at the table and nursed a mug of coffee while a bright-eyed Beth made toast. Still fresh from her night shift, she chattered about the weather, but I tuned her out. Every atom in my body pulled me towards Rush.

Without even thinking about it, I found myself by his side. “Morning,” I mumbled.

“Hey.” He glanced up at me and then stared back at his drink.

“You two look like a pair of week-old dishrags. What the hell did you get up to last night?” Beth poured me a coffee and then topped up Rush’s mug, drawing a smile from him.

“Went to Dan’s,” I replied. “Guess we were out later than I thought.”

“You mentioned going to your parents for the weekend.” Rush still wouldn’t look at me. “Is that still on?”

I tried to think clearly instead of staring at his mouth. He’d not shaved, and light scruff covered his face. It turned him from hot to blistering. “What?”

“Next weekend.”

I gulped at the hot drink and nearly scalded my tongue. The jolt of pain cut through the lust fog, and I thought clearly for a second. “It’s the Levin car show, and yeah, we’ll all be there. Vick’s and Lisa’s husbands are into muscle cars too.” I took a more cautious sip and tried to sound casual. “You should come. Just like old times.”

Another blue-eyed glance in my direction. “I’ll be out today. Meetings and shit.” He traced the rim of the mug with his thumb, round and round. I longed to grab his hand and press a searing kiss onto his palm. Or just push his chair back and tackle him to the wall. Fuck. I had to stop thinking like this.

“Ed?”

I hadn’t been paying attention again. With an effort, I looked up and met his eyes. “Yeah?”

“I’ll try and get back by the weekend.”

Tuesday dragged at work. Part of me expected Rush to be there when I got home. To see his backpack in the corner of the lounge, his boots abandoned by the front door. He’d only been here for two nights, yet he left a hole the size of Alaska.

Beth confirmed he’d gone soon after me, disappearing in a cab. There wasn’t a trace of him left.

Heading out, he'd said. But where? Not back to L.A. already? I scrutinised the gossip columns and the celebrity-news pages. I Google-stalked him as fiercely as the most rabid fan but found nothing.

Much as I wanted to reach out to him, something held me back. He knew where to find me. It might be the most difficult thing I'd done, but I'd wait for him to come to me.

Wednesday and Thursday crawled by. Each time my phone chirruped, I had a millisecond of eager anticipation that it was Rush, and every time I was disappointed. I attended planning meetings, updated my team on implementation schedules, and managed to look as though I paid attention to my job.

I also caught up with Jono. We met for coffee one lunchtime, and I told him it was over.

He gazed at me, hurt welling in his eyes. "Why? I thought we were good together."

How should I reply? Because I'm in love with another man? Even if he never returns it?

"Is there someone else?"

Heat filled my cheeks. "Not exactly." *But every time I look in your eyes, I think of Rush.*

"I thought we had something special, Ed. When you invited me to your place, I thought..."

"I'm sorry."

"I really liked you."

Jesus. It felt like kicking a puppy to the curb. I almost gave in but stuck to my guns. "I'm hung up on someone else. And until I get over him, it's not fair to string you along."

Jono bit his lower lip in a move so reminiscent of Rush that I nearly groaned. "If I said I didn't mind that? That I'd stay with you anyway?"

"I'd say you needed to put yourself first and stop pining for what might be." Maybe it was time to start taking my own advice.

After Jono left, I ordered another coffee to take back to my office. It'd been four nights since Rush swept back into my life, disrupting it as severely as a

hurricane tearing down power lines. Four nights of tossing and turning. I needed caffeine at two-hour intervals just to get through the day.

“Ed.” A familiar voice spoke at my side, and I turned to see Dan.

“Hey.” I looked more closely. “You look like shit, dude. What’s up?”

He shrugged and clutched his takeout cup to his chest. “I shouldn’t say anything.”

“Fuck that.” I had a couple of minutes before my drink would be ready. I steered him to a quiet table and pushed him onto a seat before claiming the chair opposite. “Spill.”

His hair hung lank around his face, and for the first time ever, he had shadows under his eyes. Dan was normally the poster boy for good health—he was a freaking personal trainer in his spare time—and I’d never seen him under the weather. He reached across the table for the sugar packets and began to play with one, sliding it back and forth between his fingers.

“It’s Jamie.” He fiddled with the sugar some more and then dropped it onto the table. “He wants me to go to a family wedding. One of his cousins.”

“And?”

“Christ, Ed. As his date. As his *boyfriend*.”

“And you’re not sure, because...?”

He glanced left and right and then leaned over the table. “I haven’t even told my parents yet. I’m not out. And I don’t know if I can handle this.”

“What does Jamie think?”

“Fuck. I’ve hurt his feelings, that’s for sure. We’re kinda not speaking.”

“So tell him you want to go as a friend and not a date.”

Dan lifted troubled eyes to mine. “That’s what he said.”

“So?”

“It just feels... I dunno. Dishonest.”

“Dude, you’re good together. Don’t fuck it up.”

A smile curled his lips. “Yeah, that’s what Jamie said too. You been comparing notes?”

“Nah. But seriously, Dan. Is it really freaking you so much?”

“I don’t wanna lose him.” The words tumbled out as one.

“Huh?”

“You heard me.” His lips tilted some more. “I need to call him. Apologize for being a fuckwit and tell him we’ll fix this.” He shoved his chair back, worries forgotten. “Thanks, Ed.”

If only my own love life could be so easily fixed.

Chapter Nine

The Levin annual car show had been a family event since we were all kids. Dad owned an ancient Cadillac, and he displayed it every year. For as long as I could remember, the week leading up to the show was filled with buckets of soapy water and polishing cloths. We all got involved in the clean-up and then rode to the showground together to eat cotton candy and hot dogs and squabble about who got the window seats on the way back. As the youngest, I always ended up sitting in the middle, but hey, I tried.

The times Rush came with us were the best. I didn't mind conceding a window seat if he was in the middle with me, all four of us squashed in together.

In recent years, I made my own way and met the others there. I was late arriving this time, mainly due to traffic, but also because I'd spent an unhealthy amount of time searching for any mention of Rush in the news and hanging on until the last minute in case he turned up. Wherever he was, he finally kept a low profile. He'd not emailed or texted since I last saw him. Would he remember the show today? Compared to what he was now used to, it was small-town-ville to the extreme.

The sun beat down from a cloudless sky as I walked up to the showground. It was a packed event this year, and I'd had to find street parking. From yards away, I could hear the horns and engines, a PA speaker blaring, and strains of live folk music. I couldn't help smiling. It was like my childhood recreated every year. I'd enjoy the day whether Rush turned up or not.

I walked past the familiar stalls—the leather-belt guy, the precious-stone girl, the woman who bottled her own salad dressings. The guy selling the best hot dogs north of Wellington. There were new people as well, but the others were like old friends. My senses were assaulted from all sides. Noise. Food smells mixed with engine oil. The sun's warmth on my bare arms.

"Ed. Ed. Come and see our new puppy." Cora, one of my nieces, darted up and tugged on my hand, dragging me along behind her. Eight years old and going on eighteen, she was a force to be reckoned with, and a miniature version of Vicky.

"I didn't know you had a puppy. When did you get that?"

“We haven’t yet.” She led me to the animal-charity caravan, grabbed a leaflet, and lifted it for me to see. “He’s three months old and needs a new home. Will you help me persuade Mum? She’ll listen to you. Isn’t he *gorgeous*?”

“Yes, Ed. Isn’t he?”

I spun on my toes, Cora forgotten. Rush winked at me and then crouched at eye level to my niece. “Let me see. We haven’t met, but you look just like Vicky. You must be...” He tapped his stubbled chin with one finger and flicked a mischievous smile at me. “You’re Louisa.”

“No.” She sounded entranced rather than annoyed. “Guess again.”

I was glad I didn’t have to make conversation. My mouth could have been filled with sand. Relief swept through me, the force of it making me dizzy. He was here.

“Penelope,” guessed Rush.

“No.”

They completely ignored me. I leaned back against the caravan and waited for my racing pulse to subside. Damn. I probably had an idiotic grin on my face, but I couldn’t help it.

“Guinevere. Isabella. Juliet. Kylie.” Just as Cora opened her mouth, Rush snapped his fingers. “*Cora*.” He shook her hand. “I’m Jimmy.”

She gave me a questioning look, and I nodded. “It’s okay. He’s an old friend of mine. Where is everyone?”

“I’ll take you.” She slipped her hand into mine and darted through the crowd, Rush following us. I was glad of the distraction. Never mind the puppy looking gorgeous. Rush looked beyond hot. His golden skin glowed, the black T-shirt fitting like it was made for him. Faded jeans, battered Converse, and a scruffy baseball cap, and he blended seamlessly into the throng. His hair looked shorter. No tousled blond strands escaped the hat. His eyes sparkled with good humour today, and that grin was pure sin. I stood no chance.

I hung back and watched the rapturous welcome from my family. He was like a second son to my mum, who hugged him hard before scolding him about not coming home more often.

My brothers-in-law were thrilled to meet him, and he quickly charmed my baby nephews and other young niece.

“Bessie’s looking good, Mr. T.” Rush stroked the Caddy’s shining roof. “How long have you been bringing her?”

“Nearly thirty years. She doesn’t win so many prizes now, but it’s not for lack of care. I help out with the girls’ cars now. Have you seen those?”

“Not yet.” Rush allowed himself to be hauled away by Cora, this time with me following. She showed him Vicky’s Camaro and Lisa’s Firebird while my brothers-in-law eagerly told him about their cars. I lurked and tried not to gaze at Rush’s perfect ass. Those jeans should be illegal, the way they outlined his butt.

It seemed like forever before he escaped and came to find me. “Wanna go check out the show? Man. In some ways it doesn’t look any different from when we were their age.” He nodded towards Cora. “Does anything ever change in Levin?”

“I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

He laughed. “I’ve missed this.”

“Really?”

“I ran thousands of miles to get away, but I’m right back here. What does that tell you?”

I stared, confused. What did he mean? Was he thinking of staying here? My heart fluttered.

He grinned, his face lighting up. “Do they still have that hot dog stand here? The one with the mad chilli sauce?”

“Yeah.”

“Hotdogs, Ed. What are you thinking about?”

I swallowed hard, my cheeks burning. “Chilli sauce. Yeah.” And seeing him. And kissing him again. Maybe.

Chapter Ten

“I can’t believe you came today. My mum’s really pleased to see you,” I said as Rush and I strolled across the packed showground.

He shrugged. “Yeah, no. I couldn’t stay away.”

“Where’ve you been this week?” I wanted to ask where he was planning to stay tonight, but one step at a time.

“Auckland, mainly.” He huffed a soft laugh. “I keep forgetting it’s only an hour’s flight there. Remember that road trip we took when we were seventeen?”

“Kinda hard to forget. That shitty car I borrowed from my cousin—how many times did it overheat?”

“Six. Seven, maybe.”

“We had to keep waiting for it to cool down before we set off again.”

We dodged around a cluster of people and paused to admire a gleaming cherry-red Mustang. “Pretty,” I murmured.

“Not as pretty as that sunrise we saw over the Desert Road. If the car hadn’t conked out, we’d have missed it.”

That morning had felt as though our world was filled with endless possibilities. His mum was still alive, and our future plans were fluid. University for me, but Rush was vague about what he’d do. Back then, I couldn’t envisage a time when he wouldn’t be in my life.

“Why don’t you ever have a decent motor?”

Rush’s question startled me. “What?”

He shrugged. “That thing you’re driving now. It’s two steps away from the scrap yard. It can’t be safe.”

“It’s fine.” I wasn’t going to admit he was right.

“Let me buy you one.”

“A hot dog?”

“A car, assmunch.”

I stared at the lazy grin that made my stomach go into free fall. “Buy me a car?” I hadn’t heard him right.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

I scrubbed my hands through my hair. “Don’t be stupid. Let’s get the hot dogs.”

His eyebrows tugged together. “Don’t call me stupid.” He stood his ground, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

“I don’t mean it, you fucker. Now let’s go. You were dying for a hot dog a minute ago.”

“I want to buy you a car.”

Where the hell had this come from? “I don’t want you to.”

“Well, what *do* you want? Everybody wants something from me.”

What I wanted he wouldn’t ever give. “Mate”—I spoke firmly—“I’ve no idea what stick you’ve got up your ass, but leave it. Okay? I don’t want a car. I don’t want your freaking money.”

“This one.” He gestured towards the Mustang. “You like this one.”

The owner, a balding middle-aged guy, sat on a folding chair a few feet away. He watched us with some curiosity.

“Of course I like this one. It’s a classic,” I said.

“Perfectly restored.” Rush pointed at the information board. “Mint interior. Rebuilt V8 engine. C’mon, Ed. It’s a sixty-five Fastback. Can’t you see yourself driving this baby?” He hunkered down by the doors. “Look at that paint job. You could use this as a shaving mirror.”

He was crazy. Before I could say anything, he strode across to the owner and stuck out his hand. “Fantastic car. How much do you want for it?”

The owner laughed. “She’s not for sale. Sorry. I spent five years working on her; it’d be like selling family.”

Rush laughed, but it sounded weird. Fake. “Trust me, everything has a price. How much?”

The owner flicked me a what-the-fuck glance. “Not for sale.”

“Okay.” Rush whipped off his ball cap and dragged his fingers through his hair. What was left of it. Fuck, he’d had a savage haircut in the last few days. The shaggy locks were gone, and the hair cropped tight at the back. It made his chiselled cheeks even more prominent. “Not sure if you recognise me. I’m Jimmy Rushmore, and I’d really like to buy your car.”

The owner’s mouth dropped open. A cluster of people moved closer, presumably to see what was going on. One woman squealed, and then another.

Rush stood there, arms open, expansive grin firmly in place. “How much? Forty? Fifty? Sixty-five, if I get to drive her home tonight.”

More show goers rocked up. Cameras clicked, cell phones pointed at him, and Rush spun to face me. His smile looked manic. Was he high? That would account for the mood swings. There’d be a fucking mob here in a minute.

I steadied my breathing and stepped forwards. “Come on, Rush. You’ve had your fun. Let’s go.”

“Not without the car.” He looked back at the owner. “Sixty-five?”

The guy rubbed his chin and surveyed the crowd, which grew by the second. “A hundred, but forty of that goes to the veterans’ charity.”

“Deal.” Rush shook hands with the guy and then held up their clasped fists to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you.”

Was this an exercise in how different our lives were? Or was it payoff for The Kiss? I felt sick. This wasn’t the Rush I knew. Not the man I loved.

I turned and walked away from the crowd forming around him.

Chapter Eleven

I had no idea where I was heading; I just had to get away. The air was tight in my lungs as I pushed my way past the people surging forwards and barging into me in their hurry to see the Hollywood star.

He was stressed. He was struggling with his marriage. He was fighting an alcohol problem. He wasn't the same guy that left here ten years ago, but neither was I. How many excuses could I come up with? I didn't recognise him like this.

I ran out of steam somewhere near the hot dog stand and gazed unseeing at the menu board. What did I do now? Just like at the airport, Rush didn't need to be rescued. If he wanted to play the superstar to his adoring fans, it was his choice. Not all of us wanted that.

I wanted *my* Rush back.

I was half expecting him to come and find me, but he didn't. It was only when I went back to my family that I saw him. He stood on the main stage, presenting spot prizes. At least he did something useful with his status, I snipped to myself. What the hell was wrong with me? I worried that Rush behaved erratically, and then I threw a teenage strop. I settled into a folding chair and pretended to listen to the buzz of chatter around me, my focus on the stage and the man haunting my dreams.

I couldn't accept the Mustang. He was crazy if he thought that.

By the time Rush dispensed with the show organisers and strolled across, I'd got my head back in gear.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry about that. I kinda got carried away."

I blew out a relieved breath. "You had me worried, bro. I'm not used to seeing you in Diva mode."

He shrugged one shoulder in an elegant movement that made his abs tighten under the clinging T-shirt. "They asked if I'd give some prizes, and I couldn't really refuse. Was the hot dog good?"

"I didn't get one."

"No? I thought that's where you went. Do you still want one? I'm ravenous."

I narrowed my eyes, a nasty feeling worming its way through my gut. “What exactly were you apologizing for, Rush?”

He looked at me as though I’d sprouted a second head. “For leaving you to go to the hot dog stand without me. What did you think?”

I balled my fists in my lap. “The car,” I snapped. “You were being a complete dick with that car.”

“Wait a minute. I’ve just donated forty-fucking-thousand dollars to charity, and that makes me a dick? Thanks, Ed.”

“Insisting on buying it when it wasn’t even for sale. Throwing your weight and your considerable wallet around and showing off. That was the dick move, bro.”

Anger flashed in his eyes, and he covered the distance to my chair at the same time I rose to my feet. “Your churlishness when I try to give you a present—I’d say *that’s* the dick move here, *bro*.”

“You weren’t trying to give me a present.”

“Yeah? What the fuck do you think was happening?”

“You’ve changed, Rush. And not for the better.”

He flared his nostrils and twisted his mouth. From his flinty stare, I could tell my arrow had hit the mark. “I could say the same about you.” His voice was low and held a current of danger. It sent a delicious shiver up my spine, and I tried very hard not to look at his mouth. At the sensuous lips just begging for me.

He was furious with me. And turned on. His hard-on bulged against the faded denim, much as mine did. I had to look up. Stop staring at his crotch.

If I uncurled my fists, I could grab his T-shirt, pull him into my body, and kiss the ever-loving fuck out of him.

Not here.

Not where a hundred people would see us.

But, God help me, I wanted to.

Chapter Twelve

I no longer cared that we were fighting. I needed him, and I knew what I had to do. “You wanted to practise,” I said to Rush. “On me.” To my credit, I managed to speak the words clearly.

His eyes darkened. He took a step closer, crowding me and making me dizzy with lust. My sensible half shrieked a warning into my brain. This would change everything.

It was time for a change. Rush was hard. For me, I hoped. As risks went this was enormous, and the potential for a catastrophic clusterfuck was high. I’d still take that chance.

“Practise. Yes.” His husky whisper made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Somewhere private.” I ached to touch him. I had to dig my fingernails into my palms to stop myself from reaching out. “Right now.”

His eyes darkened, their blue turning into molten sapphires. “Where?”

I hesitated. Hadn’t thought that far ahead. In truth, I hadn’t fucking thought at all; I was going off pure instinct. I’d teased Rush about being a needy bastard, but I needed him now more than I did my next breath. “Dad’s lock-up.” A short walk from here, just off the main highway. We’d be undisturbed while the family stayed at the show.

He loped beside me, keeping a respectable distance. Neither of us spoke. Fear and excitement battled inside me with a sense of fatalism. If this fucked everything, I’d regret it later.

But I’d still do it.

I dug into my pocket for my keys, selected the one for Dad’s yard, and fitted it into the lock with trembling fingers. Rush crowded me again, his breath hot on the back of my neck.

Common sense tried to woo me one last time. Dad might come here. Unlikely. All the same, I re-locked the gate behind us. If anyone came in, we’d have a few seconds notice.

I turned and looked fully at Rush. Saw the heat in his eyes, the flicking muscle in his cheek, and the way his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. He

might pretend to be calm and unaffected by me, but I'd bet every cent I had *that* was the act.

"Shirt," I whispered, my voice deserting me. "Take it off." The yard had a high fence all around it. It was as private as we could get.

He held my gaze, and then he reached behind him and tugged his T-shirt over his head. Uncaring, he dropped it to the floor, a smirk on his lips. "You too."

Holy fuck. I'd seen him without his shirt before, but not this close. Not since we were kids, swimming together at the river. He didn't have a six-pack then or such broad shoulders. Now he looked good enough to eat, and he knew it.

"Your turn," he reminded me.

I nodded and copied his move to stand shirtless before him. I might not be an action-movie hero, but I was no slouch in the fitness department. I ran every few days and kayaked too. I loved the way his eyes darkened and ate me up as though greedy for what he saw.

"Christ, Ed. You're fucking hot." My heart stuttered at his words.

His hair drew me. I had to touch it, see if it was soft or if the cut had made it harsh. I lifted my hand, cupped the back of his neck, and found it shorn and bristled. His skin burned beneath my palm, and his breath hitched at my touch.

"Why cut your hair?" I asked.

"The film. Some pre-publicity coming up."

I dug my fingers into his neck, and he eased closer. We were a similar height, but his confidence and swagger always made him seem taller. Larger than life. I placed my other hand flat on his muscled chest and felt his heart thump.

This had gone beyond him practising for a role. This was real.

I did what I'd wanted to for so long. What I'd fantasised and dreamed about. Cupping both hands around his cheeks, I caressed the stubble—now *that* was fucking hot—and slowly leaned into the kiss. This time, I claimed him.

I felt everything. The sun, warm on my bare back. The rasp of his firm nipples. The soft fuzz of chest hair against my skin. The firmness of his jaw beneath my fingers. The heat that poured from his body, and the enormous hard-on pushing behind his zipper. I couldn't mistake his desire.

He whimpered at the first brush of my lips on his and then sighed when I returned a moment later. This was no tentative, innocent kiss. I hungered for him too much. It was starving and every kind of needy, the force of it making me weak at the knees.

All too soon, he pulled back. Dazed, I stared at him.

“My turn,” he growled. He grabbed me by the shoulders and spun us with ease, so my back was against the wooden gate and he was in charge. “Fuck, Ed. I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Was he going to stop? Had I pushed him too far?

He dropped his head, flicked his tongue over my upper lip, and then fucking devoured me. Tunnelling one hand into my hair, he held me in place and kissed me with a desperate need. It wasn’t pretty. Teeth, lips, the hard press of our mouths together, and his other hand digging into my shoulders. It was perfection in a kiss.

I don’t know how long we stood there, his mouth locked with mine, and our confined cocks pressing together. I was dying and in heaven at the same time. Nothing would ever surpass this moment.

Rush rested his forehead against mine and stroked my cheek. “I wanted to know if it was different—kissing a guy.” His voice was husky.

I sucked in a breath. “Well?”

He continued to trace a pattern over my cheek with his fingers. “Trust me. It’s different.”

“Different good or bad?”

He chuckled. It sounded rusty. “Do you even need to ask?”

There was something else I had to ask. Where did we go from here? I knew what I wanted. It involved my bed and getting naked, but would that be too much? I slid my hands down his sides, enjoying the way he trembled under my touch, and hooked my thumbs in his belt loops. Held him close.

“Stay with me tonight,” I said.

There should have been an immediate response. *Fuck, yes*, would be good. Any kind of yes would. The silence was unsettling.

Even worse, he pulled back. Took a step away and watched as I dropped my hands from his jeans. He sank his perfect white teeth into his lip in a way that made my cock ache all over again, and then shook his head.

The breath jammed in my lungs. I hadn't been wrong. He was totally into me, so why was he backing off now?

“I... Fuck, I can't. I'm sorry, Ed.”

Chapter Thirteen

Rush stared at me, but I couldn't read his expression. An array of emotions flickered in his eyes. He bent down and retrieved his T-shirt. "I can't," he repeated.

"Can't or won't?" I moderated my heated tone. "If it's too much too soon, we'll go slow. You don't have to do anything you're not sure of."

"I'm not going to do anything." He spoke as though choosing his words with care. "*We're* not."

I'd come this far with him; I couldn't back down now. "I know you want me." I glanced at his erection, still clearly outlined in his jeans. "That's kinda hard to fake."

He looked away, up to the sky, and then back at me. "I'm an actor, Ed. That's what I do. I pretend."

If he'd kicked me in the gut, it couldn't have hurt more. There was a bitter taste in my mouth, and I had to force myself to speak. "I thought this was more than acting. I thought you were into me." The conversation with Jono ran through my brain. *I thought you liked me.* Was this how he felt? It sucked.

Rush was already tugging the T-shirt back over his head, but I was frozen. I could only stand there, half-naked, the pieces of my heart shattered on the ground.

"So what now? We pretend this never happened? Go back to being friends? I'm not sure I can do that." My dignity had taken the first bus out of town. I was behaving like a petulant child. Would I lie on the floor and throw a tantrum next?

"*Fuck.*" Rush raised his arm and let fly, driving a punch into the gate, inches from me. The wood rocked under the impact. "Fuck it all."

I gaped, my mouth dropping open. Blood spilt across his knuckles and smeared over the painted wood. As I scrambled to say something, he turned, sagged at the knees, and slumped down to land on the ground with a thump.

"I'm fucked, Ed. I can't do this anymore." He sank his face into his hands, the bright red of the blood startling on his golden skin. Christ, that had to hurt.

My pride ignored and my broken heart put to one side, I crouched beside him. "It's okay. We'll be okay." Should I touch him? Would that make things

worse? I hesitated but let instinct take over. Slowly, afraid he'd push me away, I wrapped my arms around him and hugged. Shivers racked his body, but I held on. I squeezed tight, and after an eternity, he relaxed and leaned against me, his head resting on my bare chest.

"It's okay," I repeated. "Whatever it is, we can fix it."

"This was the only honest thing in my life, and now it's broken too." Rush's voice shook. "I'm sorry, Ed. So sorry."

Sorry he didn't want me? Sorry for leading me on? I knew with a heart-stopping certainty that our friendship was over. Some issues you could recover from, but not ones of this magnitude.

Much as I wanted to walk away, pulling the shards of my remaining composure around me, I couldn't leave him on the ground. Rush said our friendship was broken, but so was he.

I'd been pathetic in the drama class at school. I couldn't tell lies to save my life, but right now, I'd pretend with every atom in my body. I relaxed my bear hug and rubbed my knuckles across the top of his cropped hair. It was softer than I thought, and for a second, I couldn't function. God. This was tough.

"Dude." I made my voice light, jokey, as though I was messing around. "Nobody died. I got to snog a movie star, and you got to"—break my heart—"take a walk on the dark side. What's the big deal? It was a kiss, okay?" It was the best thing to ever happen to me. "On your feet, you big wuss."

He stiffened, but I pressed on. "Harden up, Rush. Do I need to get my mum to put a Band Aid on your boo-boo? You've been in Hollywood too long, mate."

"Do you hate me?" he whispered and broke my heart afresh. "I hate me."

"I think you're a giant pain in the ass." I wanted to stay wrapped around him, protecting him from the world, but it was impossible. "Come on, dude. We need to get back to the show."

He finally gazed up at me, his eyes filled with pain. "I need to talk to you."

No. The time for talking and emotional outpouring was over. As of now, I looked after myself. I rolled my eyes. "Really? Later, eh?" I couldn't look at him. I'd weaken. He'd tell me everything he worried about and leave me in a bloody mess while he felt better. *Nu huh.* I let go of him and pushed to my feet to examine the gate. Drying blood streaked across it. I'd need to wipe that

clean. I felt absently in my pocket for a tissue, but it was a faint hope. I'd come back and fix it later.

Rush scrambled to his feet and stood there, nursing his injured hand, shoulders hunched and head down. "Ed, let me explain."

"Nah." This nonchalance was killing me, one word at a time. I imagined every syllable as a needle, digging into my flesh. "Nothing to explain, bro. We're all good."

"Are we? Really?" The hope in his voice made my chest hurt. "Can I come stay at your place tonight? On the sofa?"

I blinked away the sudden moisture in my eyes. "Sure. I'm... uh... seeing Jono tonight, but you're cool with that. Aye?" I could be in training for an Olympic medal in lying. Did he believe me? I stared at the gate and rubbed at the dried blood with my fingertip. I couldn't look at him.

He huffed out a soft breath. "Yeah, that's cool. And you know what? I've got something to do tonight after all. I'll find a hotel."

To give him credit, by the time we walked into the showground, Rush had his game face back on. The cocky superstar had returned with all his confidence and showmanship. I watched from a distance as my mum—predictably—made a fuss of his injured hand and insisted on tending the wound. I made some lame apologies about needing to be elsewhere and escaped the madness.

Somehow, I made the hour-long drive back to Wellington without wrecking my car. I couldn't decide if I was angry at Rush or just disappointed. Either way, I ached for him and for what we no longer had.

I told Beth I had a migraine and lay on my bed with a bottle of vodka for company while she walked and fed James. Too much had happened for me to process. I needed space and time to figure it out. One thing kept gnawing at me. Rush had been worried about staying in a hotel, in case he hit the booze. Was he doing that now?

I wasn't his keeper. I couldn't take responsibility.

My phone kept chirping with one message after another. My mum. Dad. Vick. Lisa. Half a dozen people who'd seen Rush at the show. I churned out more excuses to my family and ignored the rest.

Sunday morning was too damned bright for my liking. And noisy. Somebody rang the doorbell before nine, but to my eternal gratitude, Beth was up and took care of it. She knocked on my bedroom door a few minutes later.

“Ed? You awake?”

“I am now.” I sat up gingerly and rubbed my face. Fuck. That was too much vodka. “Come in.”

She burst into the room, James on her heels, and stood at the end of my bed, a set of keys dangling from her fingers. “You’ll never believe what just arrived.”

Surely not...

“A guy just dropped it off with all the papers. This has to be something to do with Rush.” She laughed, delighted. “Oh my God, Ed. It’s a car. Did you know about it?”

It had to be the Mustang. “A red Muzzy?”

She nodded, her eyes wide. “It looks crazy expensive.”

“Yeah.” My jaw hurt with the effort of smiling and trying to be polite. “It’s from Rush, but I’ve no idea what the fuck to do with it. We don’t even have a garage here, and I can’t leave it on the street.”

Beth stared at me, a worried frown emerging. “Are we going to see Rush again?”

I shrugged and then regretted it when my head pounded from the movement. “Probably not.”

Her face fell. “That’s a shame.”

“He’s married, Beth. You didn’t think...” Even though it was okay for me to proposition him. Double standards all the way.

“No. Duh. But he’s your friend. And you don’t look happy about it, either.”

Maybe by the time another ten years had elapsed, we could hang out together again. Right now, anything else looked impossible.

Chapter Fourteen

By the time Sunday lunchtime rolled around, I had two pressing problems. I had to find somewhere to garage the Mustang, and I had to swallow my pride and say thank you to Rush for it. Beth pointed out the obvious solution to the first issue—take it up to my folks' place. They had plenty of room and a half-empty barn that would be perfect.

Thanking Rush would be more difficult. I had no idea where he was. I spent ages composing a text message, trying to hit the right note of polite and friendly. What started as a rambling you-shouldn't-have message was eventually pared down.

Hey. Thank you for the Muzzy. It's beautiful.

I hit 'Send' and waited. The message just hovered in cyberspace, undelivered. I opened my email, retyped, and sent it. Phoning was a step too far. I'd wait and check again later.

After several coffees and a large bacon sandwich, my hangover was under control, or at least, bearable. I wished I could get my head straight as easily. It wasn't like me to wallow. I'd fucked up, and I'd get over it. I knew before I kissed Rush that I risked everything, and I'd still gone ahead. What did that say about me?

Hard fact number one—I loved him. Correction, I was in love with him.

It had crept up on me. There'd been no single point in time when I looked at him differently and thought, "This is the man I love." For most of the past ten years, I'd compared all guys to him. Every partner was lacking.

Hard fact number two—I couldn't leave it like this.

Not having Rush in my life was unthinkable. Even if we only shared occasional emails and texts and made vague promises to meet up, it was better than the non-Rush alternative. I had to swallow my pride and apologize for acting like a giant ass. First though, I had to find him. For all I knew, he'd cut short his visit and fucked off back to Los Angeles.

My email was unanswered and my text message still undelivered. That suggested his phone was switched off. In flight perhaps?

I hit up social media. His Twitter account, normally filled with shit and one-liners, had been quiet all week since he came to New Zealand. His Facebook

account too. The various celebrity-stalk pages had no mention of him in weeks, and there were no stories about him in the local or global news.

Where else did he hang out online? Tumblr? Not to my knowledge—and let's face it, I was a walking encyclopaedia of everything Rush. Instagram, perhaps? Weeks ago, he'd posted me a link to an image he'd shared. I searched through my email for the link and then stared at it, perplexed.

Nearly all his online activity was conducted as Rush, but this Instagram account used an alias—E.Tyler101. My name. The photo he'd sent me was an ocean scene with the caption "Not a patch on NZ."

What else had he posted under this account? I looked. And stared some more.

Pictures of New Zealand. Wellington. James. A fuzzy screenshot of Dan's game. The car show. The Mustang. And then, a pretty looking hotel, Virginia creeper sprawling across the front of it. He'd posted that yesterday evening with the sun setting behind it. He might still be in New Zealand.

I maximised the image, but the name was blurred out by the poor light. It could be anywhere. Frustrated, I sat back and glared at the picture. Maybe Beth would recognise it.

She did. "Rush took me out the other day when we headed up to Masterton looking at film locations. Remember?"

I nodded.

"This was just after the junction for Martinborough. We drove down the wrong road and found this place. He said it was perfect. I thought he meant for the movie."

He might have only just gotten around to posting the image online, or he might be there now. Thanks to the wonder of Google Maps, we found it quickly. Colliers Hotel. Within seconds, I had their phone number.

I took a deep breath, braced myself, and phoned. They had nobody called Rushmore staying there. I glanced back at the Instagram account. Surely not. "Do you have a Mr. Tyler there? Ed Tyler?"

"Yes, we do. Would you like me to connect you to the room?"

I nodded to Beth, and she clapped her hands with delight. "Yes, please," I replied to the guy on the phone, my heart lodged firmly in my mouth. Seconds passed. The phone rang. Just when I'd given up, someone answered with a grunt.

“Rush? Is that you?”

There was a long pause. “Ed.” His tone was flat. Resigned.

Now that I had him on the line, I didn’t know what the fuck to say. “How long are you staying?” I blurted. “I need to see you.”

“Dunno.”

I frowned. His voice didn’t sound right. “Bro, are you okay?”

A short laugh drifted down the line. “Fucked if I know.” His words slurred together, and I realised what was wrong. He was drunk. Or worse.

“I’m coming to see you. Stay there. Okay?”

Chapter Fifteen

I drove the Mustang. Man, she was a sweet ride. The miles flew by, and within the hour, I pulled up outside Colliers Hotel. The silence was startling when I turned off the engine. I took a moment to appreciate the car. She was quite simply the most beautiful thing I'd ever driven. It was possible I was also delaying the moment I had to get out.

Still unsure of what to say, I walked to the reception desk and caught the attention of a middle-aged woman behind the counter.

“Hi. I'm here to see Ed Tyler. Can you give me his room number, please?” In other parts of the world, she'd quote privacy rules and turn me away, but here, in the rural heartland, she smiled and told me where to find him.

I stood outside his door, ready to knock, and sent a little prayer to any deity that might be listening. *Please let me fix this.* I rapped sharply on the wood. There was a shuffling noise from the room, and then the door cracked open.

“Yeah?”

It was Rush. The smack of pure relief was a physical pain in my chest. I stood there, grinning like an idiot. “Hey. It's me.”

“Ed?” He sounded perplexed. He opened the door and leaned against the frame with his arm. “What're you doing?”

The careful phrasing, the unfocused gaze, and the sweet whiff of tequila told me everything I needed to know. He was hammered.

I let out a breath I didn't realise I was holding. “I'm here to see you. Can I come in?”

“Sure.” His head low, he pushed off from the door and staggered across the room to sink onto the bed.

I closed the door behind me, followed him, and claimed the armchair. I cast around for somewhere to start. “Thanks for the Mustang. It's incredible.”

He just grunted.

“And I need to apologize for giving you shit. You're right; I was the dick.” Rush stayed silent this time, and I faltered. This was beyond awkward. I was tempted to take the half-empty bottle of tequila on his bedside table and swig

some myself. I'd been in such a desperate hurry to get here, but now I didn't have a fucking clue.

I cast around for something else. "I want to stay friends." I perched on the edge of the seat, ready for flight.

Rush sighed and then lifted his head and looked at me. Shadows lurked beneath his eyes, and he'd not shaved. Jesus. Even messed up as he was, I wanted him. A fantasy of scratching my nails through his stubble played inside my brain.

"I don't." Rush's quiet words stopped my imagination in its tracks.

I replayed the conversation in my head. "You don't want to be friends?" I had to have heard him wrong.

"No."

I couldn't breathe. The pain in my chest made me wonder if I was having a heart attack. I stared at my hands. Flexed my fingers. Blood still circulated around my body. My heart was broken but still functioned. How could that be?

This was all a hideous mistake. Maybe it was a nightmare? I might wake in a minute and find this never happened.

While I sat there, my world falling apart, Rush had climbed off the bed and taken an unsteady step towards me. Was he going to throw me out? Would this be the last time I'd ever see him? I had no words.

He stood in front of me, swaying gently. "Not just friends, Ed." What? I lifted my gaze to meet his eyes and saw the pain in them. "I want more," he said.

"What?"

He gave that sexy, feline shrug again. "If I wasn't drunk, I wouldn't dare tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Fuck." He raked a hand through his hair. "I want you. If you'll have me."

For the second time in as many minutes, my heart stopped. "*If I'll have you?*" I asked. "I don't know what to say."

"Yes?" Another little shrug accompanied his anxious frown. I wanted to wipe it from his face.

The nightmare had morphed into a dream, and I intended to hang on to it as long as I could. My legs felt shaky, but I stood and covered the distance between us. This couldn't be happening.

I placed both hands on his chest, and his breath hitched. "Yes," I whispered. More confident, I curled my fingers into the soft fabric of his T-shirt. "Hell, yes."

His face was so expressive. I saw hope blooming, then confidence and a sweet, butterfly-inducing smile. "S'good." He lifted his arms and draped them over my shoulders, hands linking at the back of my neck.

Desire rippled down my spine at his touch. I knew what I had to say. "I need to kiss you."

We moved together and met in the middle, desperate and hungry. He tasted of tequila and something quintessentially Rush. The sweetest thing ever. We were pressed together from the chest down. His hard-on bumped against mine, and desire snaked through me like liquid electricity. Fuck. How I wanted him.

His lips were soft, and his stubble was scratchy. Such a hot combination. I didn't know what I wanted more—to fall to my knees and suck him into heaven, or to feel his mouth on my skin. Rush dug his fingers into my hair and angled my head, driving the kiss deeper. Our tongues lashed against each other, and he moaned.

This was even better than I'd dreamed. My conscience nagged at me, though. Rush was spectacularly drunk and quite possibly not thinking straight. From the uninhibited way he was kissing me, pouring his very soul into me, he was perfectly happy. But would he feel the same in the morning?

It was one thing to use alcohol for Dutch courage, to say something you might not dare when sober, but another entirely to be wasted. I wanted our first time together to be memorable. I wanted him sober. Even at the risk of nothing happening, I had to wait.

Chapter Sixteen

“What do you mean, *no*?” Rush squinted at me. “Don’t you wanna fuck?”

I framed his beautiful face with my hands and rubbed my thumbs over his bristled cheekbones. Damn. If he kept looking at me like that, I’d melt faster than a chocolate fireguard. “Yes. I want you.” I nudged him with my erection. “But not like this, half-cut.” I took a steadying breath. “I’m not going to take advantage of you.”

“Fuck, Ed. Why do ya have to be a gentleman?”

“Because I love you.” The words slipped out unfiltered, and I groaned inside. *Way to go, Ed. Is there any better way to scare him off completely?*

Rush froze, his eyes wide. “You mean that?”

I’d already said it. No sense in pretending otherwise. My heart hammered so hard I didn’t think I could speak. Still, I managed to say, “Yes.”

There was a tiny pause, and then a beaming smile lit up his face. “Thank fuck for that.” He leaned forwards to rest his forehead on mine. “I fucking love you, Ed Tyler. Always have.” He tightened his arms around me. “Always will.”

Holy. Fuck. My legs wouldn’t hold me up any more. Before I collapsed to the floor, I guided Rush the two steps to the bed, and we dropped together to lie tangled on the covers. We kissed so hard I’d be surprised if my lips survived. He loved me. He was pissed as a newt and might not even remember this conversation tomorrow, but he still loved me. That wouldn’t change.

I wasn’t changing my mind about tonight, though. When he started playing with the edge of my shirt, I stilled his hand. “Not now, lover. I want you to sleep this off first.”

He pouted, and I tried not to smile. Failed.

“Changed your mind?” he asked.

“Nope. Trust me, you’ll have to beat me off with a big stick tomorrow. I won’t be able to take my hands off you.”

“Promises, promises.” He yawned, and his eyelids drooped, and I knew this was the right decision. My dick was so hard I could probably play cricket with it, but I’d survive.

It was still early evening, and I was way too hyped up to even think about sleeping, but the chance to lie in bed and snuggle up to Rush was irresistible. I stripped him down to his boxers, settled him under the covers, and then snuck in next to him. He immediately curled up by my side and laid his head on my chest.

“Meant it,” he mumbled, half asleep. “Love you.”

I trailed my fingers across his cheek and tried to ignore my raging hard-on, just a short distance from his mouth. “Love you, too.”

I awoke with a start and stared at the dimly lit, unfamiliar room. Where the fuck... Oh, yeah. Memories of the evening flooded in, and I realised I was alone in bed.

Moments later, Rush padded across the floor, lifted the covers, and slid in beside me. “Sorry. Needed the bathroom.” His voice, husky with sleep, was the sexiest thing I ever heard.

He sighed, warm minty-fresh breath drifting across my bare chest. My nipples tingled with awareness. “Am I dreaming?” he asked. His eyes were closed, and he didn’t look far from sleep.

“Good dream or bad?” I curled one arm around his shoulder, and he nestled closer.

“Pretty good.” He opened his eyes and locked his gaze onto mine. “But it could be better.”

Every drop of moisture vanished from my mouth. “How?”

The corner of his lips tugged upward, and he slowly walked his fingers down my chest and past my navel. He paused at the top of my boxers. “Take these off, and I’ll show you.”

I swallowed, all rational thought dissolving. My cock strained against the fabric and ached for his touch. Why had I wanted to wait?

“Ed,” he rumbled against my skin, “I’ve waited for-fucking-ever for this.” He slipped his hand beneath the elastic and brushed the sensitive head. My hips bucked with a mind of their own, and I was lost.

With shaking hands, I dragged down my boxers and kicked them free, pushing back the covers at the same time. My chest heaved, and my heart raced

as though I'd just run a marathon. I wanted him so much. I was still half-scared he'd change his mind. Breathe. I had to remember to breathe, but it was difficult with Rush eyeing up my cock as if it was the tastiest thing he ever saw. He licked his lips, and perspiration broke out on my forehead. Was it me, or was it insanely hot in here?

“You too,” I rasped.

He didn't hesitate. Hooking his thumbs in the waistband, he shucked out of his boxers and dropped them on the floor. He was perfect. Long and thick, his rock-hard cock sprang from a nest of fair curls. His pubes were neatly trimmed. He reclined on the pillows and lay there like a Greek god brought to life.

As I stared, he wrapped one hand around his dick. “You're my first, Ed. There's only been chicks before.” His eyebrows dipped together in the start of a frown. “Take it slow?”

I nodded. “As slow as you want.” I reached out and cupped his cheek. He rubbed against my palm, and any remaining resistance on my part melted. “Touch me,” I whispered. “I've waited forever for this too.”

Chapter Seventeen

Rush turned onto his side facing me. He blew out a soft breath and placed his palm on my chest. “I can feel your heart.” The knuckles had scabbed over from yesterday, and the back of his hand was stained with a bruise.

I traced my fingertips around the discoloured skin. “What happened yesterday? Why did we fight?” I needed to understand what was going on inside his head. Would he trust me enough?

“I was scared.” Honesty shone in his eyes. “I’ve got so much shit going on in my life, and I panicked. What if...” He swallowed. “What if this doesn’t work out? I’ll have fucked up the best thing in my life.”

There was a lump in my throat the size of a boulder. “Is that why you never said anything? Why you never even hinted you saw me that way?”

“I guess. The crazy thing about living in the spotlight is that everyone thinks they know you. What they expect of you. I can’t tell you how good it feels to do something real.”

“Are you prepared to come out?”

His smile was shaky. “Every chick I’ve been with, I’ve wondered if it would be better with you. So yeah, I can be out and proud, if you’re with me.”

“Wow. No pressure, aye.” I tried to make a joke, but he furrowed his brow again. “Hey.” I touched the creases and stroked them smooth again. “Just talk to me.” I caressed the side of his jaw, drawn to his scruff. “Ask me anything.”

Rush paused as though thinking. “Do you top or bottom?”

“I’m a switch. I like both.” I carried on with my gentle touching. “I’d like to do both with you.” I held my breath for a moment. Too much too soon?

“Yeah. I want that.” He flexed his hand on my chest and slowly, hesitantly, moved further south. My stomach muscles clenched at his touch, and he smiled. “Like that?”

“I like anything with you.”

“Uh huh.” His smile grew. “How about this?” He leaned over me and closed his mouth around my dick. I nearly flew off the bed. Hot and wet, his tongue flicked my cockhead in a way that would soon have me begging.

“Where did you learn that?” It was a struggle to speak.

One gentle lick, and he released me. “I know what I like. Figured you might like the same.”

“God, yes.” I was painfully hard and aching for release. At this rate, I’d totally embarrass myself in a very short time.

“I’ve wanted to do this for a fucking long time.” He gripped the base of my cock and ran his tongue down the length. My heart felt as though it would explode out of my chest. I balled my hands into fists and tried to lie still—tried to stop myself from coming. Another lick that threatened my sanity. “I don’t think I can deep throat without some practise.” He closed his mouth around me again, and I whimpered.

“Oh fuck. You can practise on me whenever you like.” I was dangerously close to the edge. “Rush, I need to touch you.” He lifted his head, and I pressed my fingers over his mouth. “I’m about three seconds from coming, if you carry on.”

“What happened to practising whenever I liked?”

“Smartass.” I flipped him onto his back and straddled him, our cocks brushing against each other. His eyes opened wide. “I’m not going to fuck you tonight. I can’t promise to be gentle, I’ve wanted you too long,” I said. “But I’ll show you something else that’s almost as good.”

He held my gaze, undaunted. I knelt over him and rested my forearms on both sides of his head, caging him in. I’d never forget this moment as long as I lived. The trust on his face made my heart swell. Every part of me felt electrified, every inch of my skin wired for his touch. When he wrapped his arms around me, it felt as though I’d come home. Every encounter we’d ever shared had been foreplay for this moment. Rush and me, naked and together.

I dropped my head and claimed his lips, and at the same time, flexed my hips. He gasped at the contact. At our cocks rubbing together. I did it again and again, and he picked up the rhythm. Jesus, that felt good. I’d pulled back a vestige of control, but it was thin at best. My balls were hard and tight, and from the way Rush moaned into my mouth, he wasn’t far off, either. He gripped me, curling his hands around my shoulders as we stroked ourselves into oblivion.

I’m not sure who came first. I exploded in a white-hot stream of cum at the same time that Rush cried out. In-fucking-credible.

Dawn's early light crept through a crack in the curtains when I woke next. Rush snored softly beside me, his arm thrown across my stomach. I gazed down at him and stroked his hair. I wasn't used to it cropped like this. He grunted and nestled closer.

It was Monday morning, and I needed to go to work in a few hours. I didn't want to call in sick, but I also didn't want to leave Rush. Would he have regrets this morning, now that the tequila buzz had worn off?

"Hey." I dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Wake up."

He made an inarticulate sound that might have been "Fuck off. I'm sleeping," or it might have been "Good morning."

I tried again. "Rush. I have to get to work soon. Are you staying here, or are you coming back to my place?"

He cracked his eyelids half open, and he groaned. "It's the middle of the fucking night."

"You always were a grouch first thing."

"Fucking Jose."

"Huh?"

"Jose Cuervo. I'll never touch tequila again."

I fetched him water, found some Nurofen in the minibar supplies, and went for a shower while he surfaced. I'd find out soon enough if he regretted last night. He was sitting up when I emerged, and I took this as a good sign.

With just a towel wrapped around my waist, I perched on the edge of the bed. "Shall we try the whole *good morning* thing again?"

"Smartass." He tackled me down onto the bed with him and kissed me. I could get used to that every morning. "Did you say something about work?" he asked.

"Yeah. Some of us still have to do the nine-to-five routine." I claimed another kiss. "What are your plans today?" It wasn't the question I wanted to ask, but I'd work up to that.

"Dunno." He rubbed both hands across his face. "Last night. You and me. Us. It doesn't seem real."

I pushed back on the anxiety that bubbled at his words. "You? Me? Us? Which bit?"

“The whole thing.” He took a ragged breath. “Did you say you loved me?”

Dear God, please don't tell me this was all a mistake. I nodded. “Yep.”

Relief swept across his face. “Thank fuck. I thought I dreamed it.”

I grabbed him and rubbed my knuckles over the top of his head. “Don't do that again. You freaked me out.”

He wriggled free and leaned back against the pillow. “There's something I need to know, Ed. Is this just a one-time thing? For you?” The same question I'd wanted to ask.

I was quick to reassure him. “I'm not going anywhere. I'm yours, as long as you want me.” I glanced at the brightening sky outside. “But I still need to leave in the next half hour, so if you want a ride back into Wellington...”

“Don't tell me you drove here in that piece of shit?”

I shrugged. “Some guy bought me a flashy car the other day. I came in that.”

He pressed me to the bed again and proceeded to kiss the fuck out of me. We still had much to resolve and dozens of things to discuss—from his impending divorce to him resettling in New Zealand—but for now, I couldn't be happier.

Rush was back. And this time, he was mine.

The End

Author Bio

Romance author Sofia Grey spends her days managing projects in the corporate world and her nights hanging out with wolf shifters and alpha males. She devours pretty much anything in the fiction line, but she prefers her romances to be hot, and her heroes to have hidden depths. When writing, she enjoys peeling back the layers to expose her characters' flaws and always makes them work hard for their happy endings.

Music is interwoven so tightly into my writing that I can't untangle the two. Either I'm listening to a playlist on my iPod, have music seeping from my laptop speakers, or there's a song playing in my head—sometimes on auto-repeat.

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