

MAKO BAY

(SAMPLE)

STEPHANIE RUTH



Copyright © 2021 by Stephanie Ruth.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Not to be used in A.I. training without contract and remuneration.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, organisations or events, live or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-7386059-8-9 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-0-473-59007-9 (Paperback POD)

ISBN 978-0-473-59008-6 (Epub)

ISBN 978-0-473-59009-3 (Kindle)

ISBN 978-0-473-59010-9 (Digital Audiobook)

BE MINE TONIGHT: Words and music by Dave Dobbyn and Ian Morris. © Copyright Native Tongue Music Publishing Ltd and Ian Morris. Print rights administered in Australia and New Zealand by Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd ABN 13 085 333 713 www.halleonard.com.au Used By Permission. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorised Reproduction is Illegal.

RENEGADE FIGHTER: Words and music by Nathan King and Ben Campbell. © Copyright Zed Music Ltd. Print rights administered in New Zealand by Zed Music Ltd. Used By Permission. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorised Reproduction is Illegal.

BOHEMIAN, ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM, ROLL ON SUMMER, CRUSH: Words and music by Stevi Nixon. © Copyright Rosie Said Music. Print rights administered in New Zealand by Stevi Nixon, www.rosiesaid.nz Used by permission. All rights reserved. Unauthorised Reproduction is illegal.

Cover design by Tī Kōuka Publishing.

 Created with Vellum

*For Aaron,
to the dinosaurs and back again.*

*And in recognition of Kiwi musicians, both living and gone, who gifted us
the soundtrack of our lives.*

Ngā mihi nui, aroha nui.

MAKO BAY

Do friends really make the best lovers?

Shal Hoffner's back in Ōtepoti after eight years of self-imposed exile. Setting up a new fashion boutique and juggling bridesmaid duties for her best friend's upcoming wedding, she's determined to forget her ripped-up past, soulless love-life, and the guy who broke her heart.

She should've known it wouldn't be that simple.

Assuming the proximity of Cameron Dante—builder, guitarist, surf-buddy, and ex-flatmate—the least of her worries? Big mistake. Huge. Because there's more to the past than Shal knows, on a collision course with her immediate future, and if she can't stick to friends-with-benefits there's a chance she could snap. Just like before.

'No promises, no commitment, and no exclusive rights.' Shal's mantra is fast losing traction, and it's all Cam's fault. He's not the shy surfer-down-the-hall he once was and he's out to prove something, no matter the cost. He's been in love with Shal forever, so what's he got to lose? His newfound roots, his music career, his very heart and soul...

Pretty much everything, actually.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	24
<i>Want More?</i>	33
<i>About Stephanie Ruth</i>	34
<i>Also by Stephanie Ruth</i>	35

1

Listening to...

Welcome Home - Dave Dobbyn
From the album: Available Light

Two digits and six letters in all.

She'd memorised the simple address, but Shal Hoffner checked her phone to make doubly sure before leaning across the dashboard to peer up at the brickwork.

Definitely the one.

Fumbling with her keys and handbag in her haste to get out of the car, she had to push herself back against the door when a bus rumbled past.

Shitsticks.

Her hatchback was in dire need of a wash after the long drive, and now her jeans were too. Shal brushed at the dark denim with agitated fingers, wanting to be here, yet not.

She'd studied briefly in this southern university town, and though it seemed like a lifetime ago, the lessons the place had taught were deeply scored. Etched indelible.

Knowing the campus had to be somewhere nearby, Shal scanned her surroundings to stabilise her bearings. Cam's directions had engulfed her in downtown Ōtepōti suburbia, Victorian villas and

Edwardian townhouses crowding around like disapproving great-aunts.

Her ex-flatmate's latest doer-upper stood proud amongst them, firewalls separating it from the single-storey neighbours. The window frames had been repainted, white sills fresh against the terracotta, and it wasn't the only tarted-up house on the street.

The overall atmosphere of the area was moving towards city chic, which was a bit of a surprise. When Shal had flatted nearby eight years ago it'd been strictly student grunge. Slack bellied sofas on front porches with peeling paint, hiked up rents with cold rooms and noisy neighbours.

Perhaps parts of the city were moving on? Moving up?

Shal took the short path and rapped on the front door, trying to convince herself it was excitement, not dread, fisting in her stomach.

She *was* excited about returning—about being Katie's bridesmaid and pushing forward with the southern boutique. But darker emotions weren't so easily shoved aside now she'd actually arrived.

Cupping her hands up to her eyes like blinkers, she tried to peep through the stained-glass panel.

Still no answer.

Shal rummaged through her handbag for her cell phone, but a shadow appeared behind the glass before she'd had time to place a call, evaporating her tension like a curl of steam off a welcome cup of tea.

Cam.

God, she was a sight for sore eyes.

Shal stole Cam's breath away. Always had, and probably always would. She stood on the front path exuding an easy elegance—even in worn blue jeans.

Though his old flatmate's coat was looped over her arm, she still wore calf-hugging boots and an oversized scarf. Obviously more prepared for the southern weather this time, she was layered up to stay warm.

Eight years ago it had been a different story.

Glossy dark hair was twisted into some sort of tie at the back,

but a few wayward tendrils had escaped to frame Shal's oval face, softening the strictness. Ocean eyes startled against her olive complexion and right now those beauties were crinkled up at the corners in delight.

Her smile was infectious.

"Cam!" Shal held both arms wide, inviting a hug.

What was a man to do? He swung her into a quick embrace.

Shal laughed, so maybe she didn't mind a week's worth of whiskers as he smacked a kiss on her cheek and placed her carefully away from himself.

"Nau mai, haere mai. Welcome, e hoa."

"Thank you. It's been too long! You smell like wood... Pine?"

"Ah, sawdust." He brushed at his T-shirt. "Sorry," he added with a grimace, eyeing the soft and probably expensive weave of Shal's scarf. "Forgot I was covered in it."

And he'd planned to have a shave, too.

"Don't be an idiot." Shal reached one hand up, stopping just before touching his hair, which was getting too long. "Dreads are gone," she said with a wry little twist to her mouth.

"Long gone." He ran a hand through his rough mop with a faint sense of disquiet, feeling Shal's non-touch more acutely than if she'd yanked on it.

"You look different."

"Yeah? Well you look just the same. A little warmer maybe. Your lips aren't blue," he teased, tugging on the corner of her scarf. "But otherwise just the same."

Gorgeous.

"You know it's still summer, right?" he continued to hassle, gesturing towards her winter get-up.

"*Almost* autumn. But you can't ever be sure of the season in Arctic Otago."

"Hm." Cam didn't bite at the old taunt. He'd been thinking about her all day, inching ever closer on the southern highway. "Good drive?"

"Beautiful. I finally got to see the boulders."

"Moeraki? Worth the wait?"

"Amazing. Monumental, in fact," Shal enthused. "I was half expecting one to hatch."

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Forged out of concreted marine mud, the orbs emerged like giant eggs from the soft cliffs to the north.

The legend of Āraiteuru had been one of his father’s favourite stories, and Cam had heard many renditions of how his ancestral waka had run to ground on the reef, spilling its cargo. The boulders were crosshatched with calcite-crystal fissures, and it wasn’t hard to imagine them as fishing nets, fossilised full of the day’s catch. Or enormous eel baskets, washed overboard in stormy seas.

They’d been planning to go to Moeraki as a group long ago, but the time had never come.

Cam studied Shal surreptitiously as they talked. She still exuded an exotic quality, though there had been a few subtle changes. Like all of them, she’d done some growing up. Confidence seemed to sit easier on her shoulders now, diminishing the underlying fragility of before.

“Get some shots?”

Shal had rarely been without her camera as a student.

“Plenty,” she returned with a soft smile, looking up through her lashes.

Like sunshine breaking through the clouds.

Cam swallowed. “Sound a bit husky too. I’d say you’ve been singing.”

“Yep. All the way. You know me too well!”

Laughter made Shal’s face light up, eyes sparkling like polished pāua.

Endearing in its pure lack of pretence, Cam was relieved Shal’s snort and chuckle remained every inch the same. For all her spit and polish, she’d always had an incredibly geeky laugh.

Not just gorgeous, not just sunshine, she completely undid him.

Cam cleared his throat and brought one hand up to rub the back of his neck.

“Bags? Board?” Realising he’d been staring, he shook off the old, all too familiar feeling. It was a bit of a shock to have it back in full force—undiluted by distance or time.

“I didn’t bring my board, but I’ve got plenty of other stuff. This one’s mine.” Shal gestured to the late model hatchback parked out front, and Cam ragged her about not bringing surfing gear to

arguably the best breaks in the world as he followed her towards her car in his work socks.

"Hells bells," Cam whistled. "How long did you say you were staying again?" He nodded towards Shal's luggage, and she reassessed the heap.

True, quite a lot.

She'd folded the seats down to double the boot space when she'd left Te Whanganui-a-Tara, then stuffed it full of suitcases and black zip-up hanger bags.

"It's mostly samples for Jac and Katie." She pointed towards the clothing bags, then pressed the same finger to her top lip, realising belatedly she hadn't labelled which was for whom.

Oops.

"Okay. Let's haul, then." Cam nodded, his jaw locked in a resigned line.

"The big suitcase is all yours." Shal was quick to delegate, having struggled with the damn thing at the other end. "It's bloody heavy."

Cam tested its weight and pulled a comical face.

She'd really missed his easy manner—missed having him around to laugh with. No matter how long they stretched time between seeing each other, with Cam there was always the comfortable hum of being with a friend who accepted her as she was.

His scruffy, handsome face was smiling right back at her.

Scrap that last bit. Best to remove it from the equation. Attraction wasn't a complication she needed.

Though Cam *was* good looking, and always had been in a boy-down-the-hall kind of way, he called her e hoa—friend, and that's what they'd been to each other since the beginning.

Unshaven, with his caramel hair somewhat shaggy and without the signature dreadlocks, she mightn't have recognised her old flatmate if she hadn't kept up with him online. Except for those cocoa-and-honey eyes, they were just as she remembered.

He'd filled out, too. His well-used T-shirt showed off the

muscular arms and solid chest of a man who obviously worked with his hands.

Cam took the two larger suitcases and returned for the smaller ones as Shal ferried piles of hanger bags into the hall, studying the place with great interest. The period features remained in the moulded ceiling medallions, while the paintwork was all soft-tone white, making it feel light and airy.

"Wow, this is really lovely. I wasn't expecting it to be so complete. I thought your place was still a work in progress?"

"No. This one's nearly done. Actually, it was supposed to be signed off last week." Cam ran a hand through his hair again, making him look boyish, younger—more like the guy she remembered. "Touch wood, the tradies should be out of your hair by Wednesday." Cam rapped his knuckles on the bannister then angled a look at her, returning back from wherever his thoughts had taken him.

His frown eased off.

It was kind of him, giving her a place to stay for a couple of weeks till Katie and Rue's wedding.

"So nice to see you," she murmured.

"Yeah, nice to see you too."

Shal noted the laughter lines at the corners of Cam's eyes, more than he'd ever had before, and the deep fissure dimples forming down his cheeks as his grin grew to match hers.

He smiled with his whole face, the one errant eye-tooth that refused to stand in line endearingly familiar.

She lifted a hand to wipe a smudge of finely powdered sawdust off Cam's forehead, not thinking about the intimacy of the gesture until she was half way through executing it.

They'd been so close once, living in each other's pockets, but that was a lifetime ago.

Shal dropped her hand self-consciously. "So, show me around?"

Cam cleared his throat. "Sure. Right."

Cam took Shal through the ground floor of the restored townhouse, satisfied it was almost complete.

Dundas Street was one in a chain of purchases he'd made since starting out five years ago with his business partner, Jonno. They were gradually pulling together a portfolio of properties—some for rental, some for clients, and the occasional one to on-sell.

A renovation with major concessions to the cold winters this far south, the team had been stripping and refitting the old brick two-storey since Jonno had bought it—just before Christmas. The timing had been perfect to outfit it with basic furniture for friends and family to use.

Well, almost perfect.

With his cousin's March wedding fast approaching, whānau needed multiple places to stay. Only two weeks left until the main event, and Dundas Street had presented itself as an indirect wedding present to Katie.

Free accomodation for her bridesmaids.

Thompson & Dante would lose money on the delay in property turnover, but it was a worthwhile cause.

"Downstairs bedroom is pegged for Aroha and Links." Cam hefted the largest of the suitcases and began to lead Shal up the wide staircase. "Otherwise, you're first in, so first served."

"Which one's your...?"

Turning back, he shook his head deliberately, noting the sudden stiffness in Shal's posture when she cottoned on.

"You don't *live* here?" she squeaked. "I thought..." Confusion made her eyes appear even bigger.

Cam sighed, re-bracing his stance against both the weight of the suitcase and his decision to move out.

"I did while we refitted it, but as soon as the next job's up and running I move in and live onsite." A half-truth... "Like a hobo, my mother kindly informs me." That bit was the whole truth. "I'm just a couple of blocks away up on Park Street."

Cam knew damn well he could've stayed on until the others needed the beds, or even camped in the lounge. It definitely would've been a more comfortable option. But he'd lived with Shal before, and knew from experience how hard it was have her on the home front, without ever actually *having* her. Two weeks within her general vicinity was going to be awkward enough.

Park Street wasn't exactly fit for habitation yet, but he'd make do.

Shal was still blinking at him. "Oh. I see." Her knuckles showed momentarily white against the bannister. "Well, it was really kind of you to invite me to stay here, either way. Thank you." She attempted to mask her bewilderment politely, but he could still read her, loud and clear.

"No worries. I hope you know you're welcome anytime." Cam could still feel Shal's eyes still on him as he turned and continued up the stairs, and for the first time that day, considered the clothes he'd thrown on for work. Paint-stained jeans and a holey Wild Foods T-shirt might come across as a tad on the shabby side to an award-winning clothing designer.

He reached the landing and took some pleasure in dumping Shal's case down for a breather.

"Disclaimer. Don't tell her I said so, but Mum's not entirely wrong. I tend to live like a tramp on whatever worksite I have on the go." Best to get that straight from the get-go. "Three bedrooms up here." He pointed to the corresponding doors. "One with an ensuite. This is the shared bathroom. Not quite finished yet, sorry about that. The tilers..." he trailed off, grimacing.

Shal didn't need to hear about the screwed up tile order and ensuing delays.

"So, you're alone here until my brother turns up sometime this week, then Aroha and Links arrive the following Thursday. Adele's somewhere in the middle, I think." Katie's sister lived in Oz, but would be flying over soon-ish. This week? Cam had a scratch at the back of his head, but it didn't jog the memory. "Katie's got it all written down."

"I've never met your brother. He's not staying with your mum?"

Cam laughed. "Māui couldn't drag him there. Not when all Mum's sisters are descending for the wedding."

"They don't get on?"

"Like a house on fire, with dynamite under the floorboards. Inflammatory comments get biffed his way until eventually he explodes. It's entertaining to watch. From a distance. Like an extreme sport."

"Dante D," Shal said a little too dreamily for Cam's liking. He turned to look at her sharply, hands riding low on his hips.

It was years ago now, but his older brother would probably never lose the nickname. Daniel had been dubbed 'Dante D' when he'd rocketed into the spotlight as first-five for the prestigious provincial rugby team. The name had stuck, and gained momentum when he'd made the national line-up two seasons running. He'd been young for the team, but ready. Even now, and even if you didn't follow rugby, everyone knew who Dante D was.

Cam was used to the hype. It was nothing like the fever-pitched intensity it'd reached when his brother was still playing, though.

Before his catastrophic knee injury.

Cam hefted up Shal's suitcase again, shaking off the faint unease at her reaction. "So, the house is yours for two weeks until the wedding, and however long you want to stay after, but the others aren't coming until closer to crunch-time."

"High-noon."

"What?"

"Call it high-noon, not *crunch*-time, it sounds less... I don't know... Ominous."

"Less ominous? Okay. High-noon," Cam conceded. "No, let me think. I'm sure I can come up with a better one. I know! Do or die time," he teased. "Sink or swim time?"

With her arms full, he knew Shal couldn't throw a punch his way. She tried to kick his butt instead, but he evaded easily, anticipating the move.

"The point of no *retuuuuurn!*" Cam hammed it up like a movie trailer, bugging his eyes out and using a deep, spooky tone. He was gifted a light snort and a goofy grin from Shal for his trouble.

"Idiot."

Their views on marriage and commitment were poles apart, but he'd rather make light of it than have a serious discussion on the subject. Over the past few years Shal had flitted in and out of so many relationships, Cam was hard pressed to keep track. The only thing he was sure about was none of them were particularly long-term. Six months seemed to be Shal's own version of crunch-time.

Carrying on down the hall to the room overlooking the back courtyard, Cam nudged the door open with his shoulder.

"If I were you, I'd definitely lay claim to the biggest, sunniest room with the ensuite—the *only* working bathroom at present. Besides..." He flicked a nod towards the large suitcase in his hand with a slow grin. "It's got the biggest wardrobe."

"Sold!" Shal walked in and her jaw dropped almost comically. "Oooh. I *love* this room." Dumping her clothing bags on the white linen duvet, she popped her head into the walk-in wardrobe. "God, Cam. It's beautiful."

"You mean the wardrobe?" he joked, vaguely uncomfortable with the level of admiration Shal was oozing.

"No. I mean all of it."

The master had come up really well. Two large sash windows, bordered in a heavily lined satin, overlooked the greenery beyond and threw a ton of light into the generous space. The plain carpet and walls were a blank canvas for the sparsely furnished deep blue and teal scheme.

Acting as both bedhead and feature wall, the wall-hung Turkish rug behind the bed was huge. An undeniable focal point, with the aquatic colours repeated in the throw cushions on the simple chaise between the windows.

Shal cocked her head to one side, walking over to touch the hand-woven wall rug. "These are my favourite colours," she said softly, almost under her breath.

"I'm glad you like it."

It was a marginally better line than 'I know,' which of course he did.

Shal looked like part of the overall design standing there in her blue jeans. In fact the room hadn't seemed quite complete until she'd walked into it.

Following Shal towards the white-tiled ensuite, Cam caught sight of the gift bag he'd left in the centre of the vanity bench.

"This bathroom's good to go." Thank the gods. "And there's a goodie bag from Katie." He reached in with one arm, not wanting to crowd Shal in the small space, and handed her the string-handled bag.

"Oh, she spoils me!" She was immediately rummaging within. "Smell this. So good." Removing a bar of fig and honey soap, Shal waved it under his nose before moving back to the main bedroom

and spinning with her arms outstretched to encompass the space. The gift bag circled her like a ring around Saturn. "Did you do all of this?"

"The interiors? Yeah. There's a team of us on building and reno, though. Jonno's registered, so the building-to-code stuff falls to him. We contract out for the tiling, some of the painting, plumbing, electrics..."

After bouncing on the bed, Shal went over to try out the chaise as well. Like a kid in a candy shop she seemed to need to touch everything, stroking the teal velvet before reaching up to rub curtain fabric between her fingers.

Cam had picked up the 1960's chaise at auction, then had it restored and reupholstered. The chair and the antique Turkish rug were worth more than the rest of the upstairs furnishings combined.

He'd had Shal in mind when he'd finished this room.

He'd had her in mind a lot recently.

Who the hell was he trying to kid? He never really managed to get her fully out of his head.

"Make yourself at home and I'll bring the rest of your stuff up." Cam removed himself from Shal's bedroom, asap.

He found her a while later, downstairs in the kitchen.

"I've boiled the kettle and I'm looking for...?" Shal started to query when Cam came in from packing away decking supplies in the courtyard. "Oh!" she exclaimed on spotting the arrangement of flowers in his hand. "Are those for me?"

"A welcome back gift." Cam shifted his weight uneasily, stopping himself a split second before welcoming Shal 'home'.

He'd grown up in Ōtepōti, but for Shal it'd been under a year, and with all that had gone on, it'd taken her the best part of a decade to venture back this far south.

He offered the flowers forward a little awkwardly. On getting them out of the ute, he'd begun to second-guess himself. Purposefully avoiding traditionally romantic flowers, he'd chosen a cluster of brightly coloured daisies with sunny faces instead.

"Thank you! They're gorgeous."

As Shal turned to put the flowers on the counter, adding more water to the oasis foam, Cam let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

Given as a friend, accepted as a friend—all smooth sailing.

“Joining me?” Shal brushed against him as she reached around to pick out two cups, and once again his ex-flatmate was much too close, and achingly familiar.

“No, thanks. I’d better get on with… Ah, work.” He took a step sideways, pulling open a drawer and handing Shal the unopened box of her go-to Dilmah, before edging towards the wooden bi-fold doors.

“Are you coming to Katie’s for dinner? Do you want to share a ride?”

“Tonight?” Of course, Katie would be eager to see Shal. The two women had remained close since university. Ever since Shal moved into Cam’s flat to live with her boyfriend. “No. I’ve got plans I can’t get out of.” Suddenly remembering Shal’s set of house keys, he dug in his pocket and laid them on the bench. “I might be able to drop by later, though.”

Katie hadn’t specifically invited him, but she usually had an open door policy when it came to cousins.

“Great. Organic oat milk? Yum.” Shal had her head in the fridge, and her jeans fitted every bloody curve of her legs and butt, leaving nothing to his imagination.

Yum. The word reverberated around in Cam’s head unhelpfully.

“Katie chose it.” He reached into his back pocket and double-checked the time on his phone, giving himself something else to gawk at. “I’d better fly.”

Stepping outside and easing into his waiting work-boots, Cam was edging the door closed before he remembered. “I’ve told the team to come in after nine a.m. tomorrow. I hope that’s not too early? I know you’re on holiday.” And not exactly a morning person.

“Working holiday,” Shal corrected him. “No, that’s fine. I’m meeting Jac at the boutique at nine, so I’ll be out of their way.”

Cam was familiar with Shal’s business partner, and knew if Jac had arranged a nine-a.m. meeting at the boutique, the builder onsite would potentially be in for an earful. He wondered briefly if he should warn Jonno, then smothered a grin as he decided against.

Let the big man put out that particular fire on his own.

Shal squeezed out her teabag with a spoon—as always, too

impatient to wait for it to steep. She added plenty of oat milk before taking a large swig, arching her neck first one way, then the other.

Driving tension in her shoulders, no doubt. He could offer to rub those knots out.

Cam dug his fists into his front pockets instead.

"Okay. I'll let them know to use the tradie keys."

"Maybe see you later tonight, then." Shal smiled. "And Cam?"

"Yep?"

"Thanks again for letting me stay here. It's beautiful, and I really appreciate it. No, *really*," she insisted, as he tried to shrug off her unwanted gratitude. "It's so much nicer than a hotel."

Placing her cup back on the bench, she slid over to give him a quick hug in the doorframe. The crest of her dark head rested just under his nose.

"Ah... Sure." Her hair smelled like vanilla and peaches, and a hunger that had nothing to do with food shafted through him. "Don't forget to lock the door after me," he cautioned gruffly, stepping back.

"Yes, *Granddad*." Shal nodded with mock earnestness.

"Will you be okay here by yourself?" The empty house suddenly seemed like an unfriendly place to leave her, and for the first time, Cam was conflicted about staying somewhere else.

He remembered how much trouble Shal used to have sleeping.

The nightmares.

"Don't be silly. I live on my own in Te Whanganui-a-Tara." Shal smiled, but the light didn't quite reach her eyes.

2

Listening to...

Love Your Ways - Salmonella Dub

From the album: Inside The Dub Plates

Like an emerald brooch on a muddy sweater, Roseneath was surprisingly pretty. Clasped to the silt bay by a saddle of lower-lying land, the peninsula was small and robust, and heavily bejewelled with both trees and houses. It would've been easy to miss the turnoff; the hidden pathway to Katie and Rue's secret hideaway, but Shal had been given detailed directions.

She arrived on time, no longer in the city but not yet in the port, and cried fat tears when Katie squeezed her extra tight on the front porch of the restored bungalow.

It'd been a full six months since Katie's last trip to Te Whanganui-a-Tara, where Shal was now based. Possibly their longest spell apart since they'd met. They'd had a fabulous girls' weekend to celebrate Katie's twenty-eighth birthday, and filled it with wine and food, talk and chatter, bridal boutiques and plans for the wedding.

Katie's fiancé, Rupert, stood a little back in the shadows of the panelled hall, eventually moving forward to give Shal a chaste kiss

on the cheek. It was a refined greeting, but the tall, softly spoken Englishman appeared sincere in his welcome.

"You have *such* a lovely home." Shal moved into the open-plan living area, where traditional gave way to a light-filled, modern interior. "And I can't fault your view, either."

Dove-grey water took on the muted purple of the evening sky, and the hills of Otago Peninsula folded into shadow on the other side of the harbour.

"Yeah. I feel a bit like the cat with the cream." Katie's grin was Cheshire-wide.

"You *look* a bit like the cat with the cream."

"What?" Katie's hand instantly moved to her belly.

"No, dingbat!" Shal laughed, hugging her friend again and fluffing up her short, auburn hair. "Not *that*. Happy. You look really happy."

Katie began to laugh too.

"Call me Bridezilla. I'm so stressed about fitting into my dress, the thought of cream makes me jumpy. Shoot me if I start talking weight loss."

"I *will* shoot you if you start talking weight loss. You look fantastic, as always." Katie had curves rather than height, and a prettily rounded face with wide-spaced eyes.

"Nobody's shooting anybody," Rue objected. "It would be a decidedly macabre affair if the bride was topped by a bridesmaid a few weeks before the wedding."

"Two weeks," corrected Katie and Shal, at exactly the same moment. They turned to grin at each other and link pinkie fingers.

"Jinx! *Duplo* jinx! *Triad* jinx! *Quad bike* jinx!" They chanted the childish litany in unison, then fell together, choking with laughter.

"Separated at birth, were you?" Rue looked a little bemused.

"Mmm. Something like that," Katie agreed, catching Shal's eye.

A fleeting sadness passed between them, and Shal knew they were thinking the same thing.

Not birth. Death.

Death had wedged eight years and eight hundred kilometres between them.

The two had first met as students, when Katie came around to

the flat to borrow a surfboard off her cousin. Shal had been unpacking her single meagre suitcase in the cold, cavernous room she was supposed to share with Mason—her boyfriend at the time—and Katie had sneaked her a few of Cam's coat hangers to cheer her up.

The straight-up, tell-it-like-it-is Ōtepotiite had earned Shal's loyalty from that moment forward.

Shal had relied on Katie, loving her almost immediately, never considering whether their friendship was mutually beneficial until much later.

Perhaps Katie had needed to nurture Shal as much as she'd needed to be mothered?

Highly doubtful.

It was just in the redhead's practical nature to pick up and dust off those who fell by the wayside, setting them back on their feet with a clear direction in sight.

Katie had energy in spades, an infectious laugh, and knew her way around a kitchen. She managed to conjure a simple lamb roast into a mouth-watering, restaurant-worthy dish with a handful of spices and fresh herbs.

Rue was mashing salt and butter into the steaming potatoes, and it smelt divine. "Is Shal a shortened version of Sheldon, or Michelle, or...?" He let the question hang for a moment in the warm kitchen. "Something else?"

An unwelcome burst of heat crept up Shal's cheeks.

"Something else, actually. People usually assume it's a hippy love-child thing. Seashell. But I was named Shalom as a nod to my Jewish heritage. I've always disliked it." Possibly the understatement of the decade. "My father's the only one who calls me that, now."

"I know shalom as a greeting. Hebrew, isn't it?"

"Yes. Meaning peace. I have a running joke with the Swedish side of my family. My parents should've called me 'G'day,' or 'Kia ora,' and been done with it. Much more Kiwi." Shal grimaced. "In Sweden *hej* means hello, so my cousins had a field day with that, too." She paused, remembering the warmth behind the teasing.

Rue had a red biro propped behind one of his ears, and Katie smiled as she gently removed it.

He blinked first at his fiancée, then at Shal before replying, “Whereas, I was named after a bear in a children’s story. I’m rather grateful it wasn’t Paddington.”

“Or Pooh,” Katie added, smirking.

Catch up—what a strange idiom. It felt more like filling up. The easy domesticity and laughter between Rue and Katie topped up Shal’s tank, and she began to relax.

The two women were opposites in many ways. Where Katie had creamy skin and pretty constellations of freckles passed down by her Scottish ancestors, Shal’s own complexion gave the illusion of someone addicted to spray tan. Katie was straight-up and open, family oriented and giving. Shal knew she came across as a lot more closed and insulating of herself—perhaps the upshot of being an only child.

It was tricky opening your inner self to expose less likeable traits, and hard to estimate how much to share, when other’s reactions were impossible to predict. But with Katie it had always been easy, because she accepted Shal totally unvarnished.

“Do you feel okay being here?” Katie’s question caught Shal off guard. They’d finished their meal and stacked the dishes off to the side but remained seated at the table, wine easing lower in their glasses.

They’d been discussing their mutual friends, Aroha and Links, and whether the couple would stay in Ōtutauhi or return to Otago. The earthquake that had rocked their adopted hometown a few years ago couldn’t exactly be called out of the blue, but no one had expected an aftershock with such disastrous results.

“Okay about being at your place?”

“No. Okay about being back in Ōtepōti.” Katie had a look that cut cleanly through bullshit and she was wearing that expression now, leaning forward and fixing Shal with a stare.

Glancing across at Rue, Shal searched mutely for a way out of this particular conversation. But the Englishman didn’t lift a finger to bail her out. Instead he took it as his cue to leave, winking at

Katie as he picked up the pile of dishes and blatantly left the women alone to talk.

"You had your own personal disaster down here, not an earthquake, but a really good shake." Katie's voice was laced with regret. "I know you didn't ever want to come back."

Feeling the pinch of her friend's admission, Shal reached both hands across the table, capturing one of Katie's. "You're wrong. I wanted to come back. *I needed to.*" She met Katie's gaze, trying to answer as honestly as possible. "I'm not saying I haven't been avoiding it, but I feel..."

What, exactly?

Removed? Disconnected?

"I'm separate from that now. It happened, but it's gone." Shal gave the hand in hers a quick squeeze. "I want to concentrate on *now*. I'm so excited about your wedding, and the new boutique ices the cake for me."

Turning purposefully, Shal looked over her shoulder at the serene view. The hills of the peninsula both welcomed and taunted her with memories. She'd been holding the sense of loss at bay, but the nostalgia brought on by being in Ōtepoti was forcing her to be a bit more honest with herself.

"When Links gets here... I feel a bit more conflicted about that. He lost so much."

"Not his life."

"No. Not his life." Shal swung back to blink across the table at her friend, who perhaps knew her just a little *too* well.

"Are you planning to go out to the memorial?" Never one to pussyfoot around, Katie laid the burning question on the table.

"I was thinking about it." Shal swallowed a faint bubble of panic.

"Promise me something? Don't go alone, okay? I'll come out with you. Or Cam would take you."

Katie was clearly nervous. The aftermath of the accident and how it had affected them all was still fresh enough, eight years on.

Shal took her own fear and mentally pushed it back down to stillness. "I promise." Giving Katie's hand a final pat, she picked up her water glass and deliberately changed the subject. "I drove to St. Clair today, straight off the motorway."

St. Clair had always been her favourite spot, and she'd found herself drawn inexorably to where the Pacific Ocean slammed into the coast.

"Figures. Goofy bird. Catch a few waves, then?"

"No, I didn't bring my board. It was stunning though. I've missed it."

"Did you head on up to Poppy's?" Mid-way up the hill, Cam's mother's house had magnificent views of the bay.

"No. I thought about it, but didn't have time." Shal would need to put a couple of hours aside to visit Poppy—to catch up and debrief.

And if she was honest with herself, she didn't have the emotional reserves to deal with that right now.

"I dropped her a text to let her know I'm around."

"Oh, don't you worry, she *knows* you're around. I swear my Aunt Poppy's third eye is permanently tooth-picked open."

Though she laughed along with Katie at the spot-on depiction, Shal was actually looking forward to seeing Cam's mum again. The woman had an expansive heart and loved conversation, though being one of five sisters she always seemed to be besieged by company.

Shal coped better with one-on-ones.

"I guess we should all do lunch," she murmured, wondering vaguely just how many people that would involve. "And speaking of food, I wanted to thank you for the groceries at Dundas Street. That was lovely of you."

There was a brief silence.

"Yeah, I could take the credit for that, but the food thing was Cam's idea," Katie admitted.

"But he said—"

"He asked me to write a list of what you liked. I guess he wanted you to feel at home," Katie interrupted gently. "So, you've caught up with him, then?"

"Oh! Yes. He was at the Dundas Street house to give me the keys and show me around. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Mm. You should've seen the state it was in when they bought it. That's their specialty though. Ruins to riches. I haven't seen the kitchen finished. How did it look?"

"Dreamy." Shal rested her chin in her hands, elbows on the table.

"Really? *Dreamy?*" Katie laughed. "I'll have to pass that on to Cam and Jonno."

"He gave me flowers."

"Who, Jonno?" Katie's tone went sharp.

"No, Cam." Surprised by the snappy reaction, Shal turned to stare. "I haven't met Jonno face-to-face yet. Is he nice?"

The tension in Katie eased a little.

"Urgh, he's alright. Bit of a lad, but he and Cam get on well. They make a good team."

Something in Katie's demeanour hinted she was hiding something.

"And?"

"And nothing. They like to give each other a hard time, that's all. I thought Jonno might've... Well, he's a bit of a ladies' man," Katie grumbled.

"You thought he might've put the moves on me already?" Shal deduced.

"Obviously missed the memo that the hottest chick this side of the Southern Alps was in town." Katie grinned, and Shal snorted. "So, flowers then?"

"A bouquet of gerberas. He's so sweet."

"Ha! Sweet..." Katie mumbled something else under her breath, her smile skidding off to be replaced by a twitchy frown.

"It really was in a mess," Shal decided aloud, studying the before-and-after photo album of the fire damage at Roseneath. Rue was leaning in, pointing out interesting details.

"After we bought the place, Cam invited one of his father's relatives. An uncle? I've forgotten the Māori word for his position. One of the elders. Held in high esteem." Rue looked at her expectantly.

"Kaumātua?"

"Yes! *Kau-mā-tua*," Rue rolled the unfamiliar word around his tongue and turned the pages until he came to the blessing. A solid man with a shock of white hair held an ornately carved walking

stick. Flanked by two middle-aged women, he wore regular clothes—suit pants and a blazer—but the elder's pounamu was a large and seemingly old piece, the jade so dark it appeared black against his light tie.

"Matua Teddie." Though he was older, Cam's great uncle was very distinctive.

"Oh, you've met him?"

"Just the once." At a funeral. Shal swallowed hard.

"He blessed the land. Spoke about his ancestors and the gods of the earth, sky, and sea. Cleansed it, I suppose. Removed the shadow of the fire. When the women sang, it was haunting." Rue rubbed his arms. "Gives me the chills just thinking about it. It's hard to explain, but that's when I knew for sure it was the right place for us. I felt welcome."

"Lucky, considering we'd already bought it." Katie had returned from answering the phone. "That was Cam, exhibiting the impeccable timing of a hungry kaihana." When Shal looked up in askance, Katie smiled. "I was just about to serve dessert, so he's invited himself over. More wine?"

"Not for me, thanks." Not when she was driving home. She was borderline obsessive about it. Better to be safe than immeasurably sorry.

"Okay, more for me." Katie eyed Shal shrewdly as she nodded, no doubt guessing exactly where Shal's mind had crept. "He's bringing some music printouts for the wedding."

While Rue went to find plates and forks, and Katie got dessert ready, Shal continued to pour over the photo book. The bungalow was a true transformation story, from fire-damaged auction to the pristine home she was sitting in right now. Every image attested to the mammoth task undertaken.

Shal was about to turn the page when one of the smaller snapshots caught her eye.

Holy hell.

She dragged the album closer.

Cam had obviously been working on the roof in the heat and the picture had been taken from ground level, looking up at his smiling face. He'd taken his T-shirt off and it was hanging out of his back pocket, revealing a slim trail of dark hair that disappeared into a

low-slung builder's belt and well-worn jeans. He looked sweaty, bronzed, and muscular, with his familiar pounamu settled close around his neck and a shabby Otago cap shading his eyes.

Shal stared, blinked, then flushed a little before turning the page. She hadn't finished with that particular picture, but neither was she willing to get caught perving.

"So much work." She swallowed, closing the book to tap the cover as Rue set a plate and fork to her right.

"I kept out of it for the most part. Tits on a bull, me."

Shal laughed at Rue's farming turn of phrase. It sounded so comical in his clipped English accent.

Reaching out, she played with the simple white daisies in the centre of the table and was reminded of her grandmother in New York, who always kept fresh cut flowers in the house. Snapping a single bloom off she stroked its soft golden heart, still a little off-kilter from the warmth Cam's picture had stirred up.

"You fronted up with some of the dosh though, which makes you pretty indispensable." Katie approached, sliding behind Shal's chair.

Shal could relate the money side of things to her Nana as well.

"And if he hadn't been so damn calm about it every time I changed my mind...?" Katie set down a serving bowl of fresh whipped cream. "Things could have gotten a *whole* lot more stressful."

Having stolen the flower from between Shal's slack fingers, Katie repositioned it behind her friend's ear.

Pointedly avoiding a certain page, Shal reopened the photo album and flicked back to some of the images she'd skimmed over earlier. There was a shot where Katie's clear happiness was caught mid-laugh, Rue's arm slung over her shoulder.

"This is one of my favourites. I was so bummed I couldn't make your housewarming party." Shal had been in the States, mixing business with a long overdue visit to her father's side of the family. She motioned to the next snapshot. "Dante D?"

"Yes. Daniel. Unmistakable, isn't he?" Katie's laugh had a brittle edge as she bent to study her cousin's not-exactly-smiling face. "I'd forgotten that picture was there."

"And his girlfriend?" Shal's finger hovered under the cool

blonde who stood next to the well-known rugby player, raising her champagne glass to his beer bottle in a coy 'cheers' for the camera.

"No." Katie looked at her strangely. "That's Cam's ex. I thought you'd met Jody before?"

"Oh, right. I thought she looked familiar. Yes. We met at Links and Aroha's once. She really is stunning, isn't she?"

"She's a piece of work alright," Katie muttered.

3

Listening to...
Fallen - Lauren Wood
From the album: Cat Trick

Homemade pumpkin pie was Shal's absolute favourite. By the time Cam arrived, bringing a rush of cool harbour air and the scent of the evening inside with him, Katie had dessert all laid out on the dining table.

"Not for me, thanks love." Rue bowed out, patting his stomach. "I'm done."

"You're turning down Katie's pumpkin pie?" Cam called through from the kitchen where he was washing his hands. "Nutter."

"Yeah, but *so* damn cute with it." Katie reached a hand out to pat Rue's butt as he passed, and he grinned, softening up all his serious features.

New York Nana made pumpkin pie whenever Shal was in the States, and though she was careful never to express disloyalty in so many words, Shal much preferred Katie's version. What was not to like about freshly roasted pumpkin? The crust was a beautiful honey-brown, and the filling a rich, dense orange. Her mouth was

watering in anticipation well before Katie plonked her share in front of her.

"How's the recording going?" Katie passed the second plate to Cam as he settled at the table, before serving herself a very small sliver.

Remembering her friend's earlier instructions regarding weight loss, Shal formed a gun out of two fingers, sighted Katie up, and mimed the shot.

The redhead grinned. "Calm down. I'm having some, aren't I?"

"It's coming along. I didn't stay to hear the final mix tonight, but they're sounding clean. Fresh." Cam dumped a generous spoonful of freshly whipped cream next to his slice of pie.

"What recording?" Shal laid down her imaginary gun and looked from one cousin to the other.

"Cam didn't tell you? He's doing some session work for Pieta."

Shal's jaw dropped. "What? Pieta as in... *Pieta*?" Her brain stalled, then raced on ahead. Pieta was a relatively new sound on the Kiwi music scene, but her first EP had been so well received the title song popped up practically every time you turned on the radio.

"Yep." Katie gave her cousin a slow-mo punch on the arm. "Best damn guitar player this side of the straight, isn't that right, Rue?" Rue grunted in the affirmative from the sofa, his face partially hidden behind a newspaper. "Not to mention best *looking*. Old Pieta knows what side her bread's buttered on."

Pieta wasn't old, she was young and pretty.

The singer was also a talented songwriter, with a voice that evoked angelic comparison. Already the sweetheart of the national media, Pieta was beginning to get recognition on the international stage, too.

The woman was seriously going places.

"Well, *shit*. That's amazing! She's recording down here? She's from Otago?" Shal swivelled to aim her questions at Cam, who was sitting diagonally across from her.

"Cromwell, originally." Cam shovelled another forkful of pie in. "Man, Katie." He rolled his eyes. "That's *so* good. You should go into the pie business."

Shal huffed at him impatiently as he leaned back in his chair.

"What? It's delicious. She studied at Otago, but years later than me," Cam explained. "I met her through Davis."

One of Cam's old music degree mates was a sound engineer, working out of what was little more than a soundproofed double garage. Locally known as The Den, the studio had become a hive of indie music.

"Pieta's original guitarist turned out to be a bit of an asshole." Cutting off a chunk of pie-crust with the side of his fork, Cam dragged it through whipped cream ever-so-slowly. "So, I agreed to step in."

"Super-Cam to the rescue." Shal's voice sounded a little sarcastic; snarky even to her own ears.

She busied herself with her water, embarrassed at herself. She was *jealous*, she realised, choking on the liquid instead of swallowing it.

Cam raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to one side, waiting till she'd finished her coughing fit before replying, "I'm not doing it for superhero status."

Shal felt the heat rise on her face, and wondered if she was as see-through as she felt.

"I'm getting paid," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Of course you're getting paid!" Katie interjected. "You're incredibly talented, and she's lucky to have your amazing-ness anywhere *near* her album."

"Thanks, Kit-Kat. Since I'm so *uhh*-mazing, can I take some of this pie home?"

"Sure." Katie looked from one to the other before getting up to join Rue on the sofa. "You can wrestle Shal for it. Best I don't have the leftovers taunting me from the fridge come breakfast time."

"Gonna fight me for it?" Cam challenged Shal across the table, those long dimples on show again.

"Goes without saying," she returned snootily.

"But I missed dinner," Cam lamented, all puppy-dog eyes.

"Not my problem." Shal attempted to keep a straight face, and failed.

"Go halves with you?"

"Honestly? I'd be happy with one slice." As Cam's grin widened, Shal quickly added stipulations. "A *big* slice. On the

proviso you scratch together a wetsuit and board for me this week and take me to St Clair, the rest is all yours."

"Done." Cam half stood, reaching a hand across the table to shake on it.

"I'm a little envious," Shal blurted, finding it strangely disconcerting to be holding Cam's hand, even under the guise of a handshake. Especially when he was looking at her so intently like that. His palm was work-rough and strong, enveloping hers in heat. "I want to be recording with Pieta."

But it wasn't the entire truth. Shal was feeling more jealous of Pieta now she was basking in the beam of those amused, honey-brown eyes.

A warm curl of awareness flickered alight near the base of her belly, and the image of Cam shirtless came back to her, clear as day.

Hell, no. Just friends, as they always had been.

Shal removed her hand hurriedly.

Cam brought out a sheaf of song printouts after dessert, resigned to the fact he'd have to spend some close-up time with Shal, and suffer for it.

"Katie and Rue chose the music. I just put them in the key I thought would be suited to your voice."

Shal, who had the lyrics splayed over the coffee table, looked up, her eyebrows drawn together.

"You used to sit comfortably as an alto," Cam reiterated, reaching over to pluck two song sheets from the group. "We can easily change the key if we need to." He handed the lyrics over. "Lauren Wood, *Fallen*. We did it once as a cover, remember?" He tapped the top of the second page. "And, *There's Something in the Water*, Brooke Fraser. I haven't heard you sing any of her stuff but it got a lot of airplay, so you'll know it."

"My favourite," Katie called from her snug spot on the sofa somewhat dopily. Rue had laid down the newsprint and was rubbing her socked feet.

Shal's vocals had always appealed because she was unstudied. Imperfect. But Cam wasn't about to tell her that. Raw emotion came

through in every lyric, every run. Sometimes that got studied out of a person.

Shal ignored the offered papers. Motionless beside the coffee table, she knelt with her hands pressed between her knees.

“You’re nervous.” Cam could see it—recognise the tightness.

Shal looked almost childlike with her hair out, glossy and dark, a white daisy tucked behind her ear.

Cam refocused on the lyric sheet. It was wordy, and that had sometimes been Shal’s downfall. Stage fright swallowed up the familiar lyrics and left her standing mute.

“Yes.”

“Shal was always sick with nerves before a performance,” Katie turned to Rue to confide. “And I mean *sick*. Then she’d get up on stage and knock it for six.” Her demeanour lost all hint of humour as she angled back towards Shal—concern obvious, and probably well warranted. “Look, I know you said yes to this, but I don’t want you to feel pressured into it, or feel bad about pulling out. Cam can fly solo. Right, cuz?”

“Absolutely.”

“No. I really want to. It’s just...” Shal looked across at Katie with a touch of desperation. “Cam’s been recording with *Pieta*, for God’s sake. I’m just an amateur. I could so easily screw this up—”

A cushion lobbed from the sofa flew across and walloped Shal on the side of the head, knocking her sideways into Cam and cutting off her self-doubt, mid-stream.

“Amateur, my ass,” Katie followed up sardonically. “That’s my *bridesmaid* you’re dissing. I didn’t ask frickin’ *Pieta*, because I didn’t want frickin’ *Pieta*.”

Grins built slowly, until the two women were laughing at each other across the room. Shal’s hair was all mussed up across flushed cheeks, and Katie gripped a second cushion, threatening to biff that too.

“Well. When you put it like *that*.” Shal blew hair out of her eye. “It’d be my honour to sing for you both.”

“And a hundred or so of their closest friends,” Cam muttered.

He picked up the bruised daisy, knocked to the floor by the cushion, and missed the fact Katie had re-aimed the second missile

at his own head. The closest cousin to him in age, she jumped at any excuse to knock him down a peg.

She was also a damn good shot.

Shal smiled hopefully at Cam as he righted himself, flicking his hair out of his eyes and shoving the offending cushion under his knees. In another time and space Katie would've received that cushion back with interest, prompting all-out war.

Shal was clutching the Brooke Fraser lyrics to her chest. "Maybe I just do backing vocals for you on this one?" she whispered.

She'd probably need to barf up her nerves before she performed, backing vocal or not. Katie wasn't the only one who'd held Shal's hair back on occasion... but they could stress about that later.

Shal's tension had been beginning to ease, but when Cam casually invited her to run through the new song with him, she suddenly felt all kinds of awkward again.

"No. Let me get familiar with it first." She hadn't forgotten who Cam had just been in a studio with.

In the process of getting his acoustic guitar out of its hard case, Cam stopped, narrowing his eyes at her across Katie's living room.

"Cold feet?"

"No!" she blustered, suspecting Katie was only *pretending* to read the article Rue had handed her, and was actually listening keenly. "Of course not."

Shal got up and strolled nonchalantly over to where Cam was kneeling on the far side of the room, instrument half in and half out of its case. Lowering her voice, she reached down to touch the hand holding the neck of the acoustic. "But I *do* want it to sound good when Katie first hears it, so I need to practice on my own first."

Cam's face was close now, and she could follow his expression as it changed from askance to humour—watch the smile spread. From the first eye twinkle, right down the long dimples tugging generous lips upward.

"Right. Belt it out in the shower a few rounds before airing it in public. I forgot about that."

"Exactly." She smiled, glad Cam understood.

He knew her so well, she rarely had to explain herself.

Cam had actually managed wipe those overheard moments from his memory. How was that possible?

Shal had always scuttled off to be alone when learning a new track—alone on the water, in the shower, or simply with her head thrust out the car window—she'd burst into song. Not always with the correct lyrics though. Cam would catch her out, then bait her by calling out corrections like, 'Elephant in the room, not elephant of *doom*.'

They'd argue about it, sometimes for days, until he'd finally rustle up a copy of the lyrics and plant them in front of her face.

She hadn't always been gracious about the heads-up, either.

Cam had a million more memories of his ex-flatmate crowding around, anxious to be aired after such long suppression. Shal's hand still covered his, and her cool fingers moved to stroke his forearm absently before dropping to her thigh, silver bracelets jangling.

It'd take a million years to wipe those goddamn million memories.

"If you play both songs solo tonight, I'll record you on my phone," she cajoled.

He was a sucker for her big ocean eyes. Always had been. Something shifted in him when she looked down at him like that.

"Sure." He got up to put some distance between them. The soft timbre of Shal's voice and the smell of her so close was intoxicating, and he found it hard to think straight. There was a tendril of hair brushing her cheek, begging him to tuck it back behind her ear.

It seemed like a mammoth task to keep his hands to himself.

Gripping his guitar, Cam collected the lyric sheets and moved towards the back deck, needing to be in the open air. "Out here?"

"Oh." Shal sounded dubious. "Won't you need a jacket?"

"No." He laughed. "But you'd better bring yours."

By the time Shal joined Cam on the harbour-facing deck, coat firmly buttoned and phone in hand, he had the outdoor gas heater going and was sitting off to the side, strumming. He'd left her the seat directly under the heat, and she was grateful. The evening was cool off the ocean, moonlight dipping the water in pewter.

The setting seemed both wildly open and strangely intimate.

"So stunning." Shal breathed in the briny tang of the bay. The view across to the shadowy peninsula was dreamlike in its calmness, with small lights twinkling from faraway windows.

"Sure is." But Cam wasn't looking at the view, he was looking at her, his face partly in darkness so she couldn't read his expression.

"I suppose you built this deck too?" Shal surveyed the wooden expanse—wide steps leading down to the garden. She knew without turning to look that this was the portion of roof Cam had been photographed standing on, directly above the French doors.

Cameron Dante had carved a solid niche for himself, constructing monuments to good living. All these beautiful, practical things he built and restored with his own hands.

"I had some help." Cam had his head to one side as he watched her pace around, and she tried to pinpoint why the familiar action made her feel so unsettled.

It was like he could see straight through her, while he himself hid in the shadows.

"How did you end up as a builder, when you have a music degree?" she wondered aloud.

Cam shrugged. "The two aren't mutually exclusive. I had some collateral from working the cruise ships, started as Jonno's lackey, and learnt fast on my feet. Dad was a carpenter, so it runs in the family. You can't expect to make ends meet as a full-time muso in Aotearoa."

No. Though it seemed like an almighty waste of talent.

When Shal had first heard Cam play guitar in their old shared flat, the hair on the back of her neck had risen with the pure, soulful beauty of it. And years later, on a deck in Roseneath, it was incredibly disconcerting to find her body reacting in exactly the same way.

But something was different this time. It wasn't the guy she'd known in the past whose fingers slid and flew over the strings.

There was a nuance of confidence—a practiced grace in how Cam paced out the underlying emotion of the piece.

Shal shivered, the familiar music yanking at her memories and turning her inside out, and upside down.

Fallen. She hadn't heard this song for years. Not since Mason.

The thought brought a sudden rawness to her throat.

Oh, God. Don't cry.

Mason was *long* gone, and Shal was well past holding onto his memory with any semblance of grief. It was ridiculous to miss him when he'd gambled with her emotions—the truth—his life.

He'd lost that final idiotic game of chance, and with it, his beautiful, glowing spark.

The sheer wastefulness of it clamped her windpipe shut.

She could almost see him, eyes closed as if in sleep. But for the stillness of his lungs, no longer breathing. But for the silence of his heart, no longer beating.

Mason had died instantly. That's what they said, though how could anyone know for sure? Shal had wondered vaguely at the time, and forever after, if those words were just a fallback they used to anaesthetise the ones left behind after a horrific accident.

If he'd died instantly, there wouldn't have been any pain. If he'd died instantly, he wouldn't have heard Links screaming as the bones in his lower legs were shattered and mangled by the impact.

If Mason had died instantly, he would never have had to face the enormity of what he'd done.

Shal could hear the vocal lead coming up.

"You sing it," she whispered. Cam looked up from the strings but didn't miss a beat. One side of his face was tawny in the intense light from the heater, the other in deep shadow as he sang the opening line.

Shal scrambled to record him, catching a glimpse of the innermost self he rarely allowed to show—the level of emotion he usually hid from view. Once again, it made her wonder how deep the iceberg went.

Just how much of Cameron Dante remained unseen?

WANT MORE?

Download Mako Bay to continue reading Shal and Cam's story, book 1 in the Otago Waters series.

To gain access to exclusive short stories from the same world, and free monthly book stashes, sign up for my newsletter at www.stephanie-ruth.com.

ABOUT STEPHANIE RUTH

A multi award-winning contemporary romance novelist and short story writer, Stephanie Ruth lives in the South Island of Aotearoa, Te Waipounamu, with her husband, three children, and an ever-expanding array of animals. If it doesn't have a happy ending in some form, Stephanie's not writing it.

Mako Bay, winner of the Daphne Clair de Jong First Kiss Award and finalist in the Koru First Book Award of Excellence, is her debut novel, and first in the Otago Waters Series.

You can find her on: TikTok@stephanie_ruth_writes_nz , Instagram@stephanie_ruth_writes_nz , and Facebook@stephanieruth.nz

Or peruse her available books via her universal link: www.bit.ly/m/AuthorStephanieRuth

Sign up to Stephanie's newsletter to receive exclusive access to short stories, ARC reads, and links to other Aotearoa writers on her website www.stephanie-ruth.com



ALSO BY STEPHANIE RUTH

Otago Waters Series

Mako Bay

Ruby Island

Lake Taimana

Otago Waters Novella

The Ocean Between

Taniwha Creek

Tinsel River

Short Stories

Add a Splash of Love

Gregory Anders Drives Me Nuts

Between Friends

Also-effing-lutely

Boutique Series

2 Peas

Anti-Freeze

