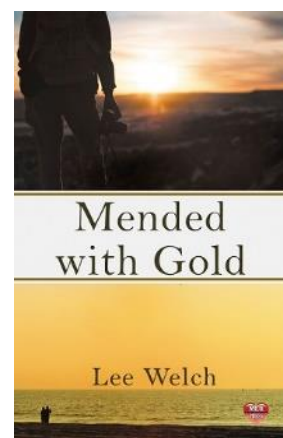


Out Loud is a free epilogue to my novella Mended with Gold (published by MLR Press and available from [Amazon](#), [Kobo](#) and other places where ebooks are sold).

Out Loud is set two months after Mended with Gold and contains spoilers, so if you plan on reading Mended with Gold, please read that first. Thanks! – Lee



Out Loud

Joe woke to a kiss on the back of his neck and the sound of surf. He was at Alex's place in Kahawai Bay, in Alex's warm wide bed. Joe rolled onto his back. Alex was leaning over him, a dark outline against grey dawn light.

Happiness swelled in Joe's chest. *Now. Tell him now. Just say it. Whisper in his ear.*

Joe reached up to pull him closer and got a handful of woollen coat. Of course, Alex was working. Early start. He'd mentioned it last night.

Alex sat on the edge of the bed and kissed him, soft, close-mouthed. "Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

"Alex—" *I love you.*

"Hey! No. Don't start with that tone of voice. I know where that leads and I have to go."

"Okay." Joe grinned, in spite of himself. Now wasn't the time for declarations. He switched to a formal, stilted voice, "Goodbye, Alex. I hope you have a good day."

"Mm, slightly robotic. Much better. See you later? Back here?"

"Yeah, five o'clock. I've got work today."

Joe stretched, cautiously, not letting go of Alex's coat. Nothing hurt much, not even his shoulder. There was only that stiffness he was starting to trust in and to think of as normal. The warmer spring weather—and being at Alex's well-heated house so often—was making a bigger difference than he'd expected. *I'll say it the moment I get back. I'll walk through the door and tell him: I love you.*

"Aren't you meeting someone after work? To talk comics?" Alex asked.

"Oh. Oliver. I forgot."

"Okay." Alex took Joe's chin, turned his head and kissed the side of his neck, teeth nipping the skin. The sensation shot all the way down to Joe's cock. His breath caught.

"Don't forget I'll be waiting for you," Alex said.

Joe could hear the smile in his voice. And the promise.

"I won't," Joe said. *Because I'll be thinking about you all day.* "I'll be back around six thirty, okay?"

"Great. Bye, sweetheart."

Alex's fingertips lingered in the newly trimmed hair behind Joe's ear, eliciting another pleasurable shiver. Then Alex stood up.

Joe listened to the creaks as he crossed the living room floor, the quiet sounds as he gathered together about a hundred pieces of camera equipment, the front door opening to let in the roar of the sea, and closing. Alex's car engine starting, and receding along the gravel road.

Sweetheart.

Joe's toes curled with delight. It was two months since Alex had first called him that. Two months since Joe had told Alex his secret. Joe had expected everything to be over, but instead, the opposite had happened. Alex had led him into this room, already naked, clothes in a pile on the living room floor. Two months since they'd become lovers.

Joe still couldn't quite believe it was true.

The first time he'd seen Alex at art group had felt a bit like the car crash. Without the nightmare element, but with the same sense of unreality, the same 'oh, God, is this happening?' Because men as gorgeous as Alex didn't usually turn up in Edith's living room, smouldering at Joe while he tried not to die of blushing.

And now, Joe was waking up in Alex's bed.

Alex called him 'sweetheart'.

Alex read his comics and laughed in all the right places.

Alex didn't seem to care that Joe was like a cobbled together Frankenstein's monster from the neck down. Alex didn't seem to notice the scars, except to be careful of them. He said things like 'you're gorgeous' and apparently meant it. And the sex was fantastic. Joe had *known* Alex would be dynamite in bed, and he was.

With Blessing, sex had been good, but not very exciting because at first Joe had been too young to know what he wanted and then, once he'd worked it out, too shy to tell her. Sex with Sean had felt like a public affair because Sean told his friends everything. Joe knew some people would have laughed along, but he never could. And when he blushed and protested, Sean teased him about that too, and the constant minor embarrassments began to feel like a series of slaps to the face. Joe could never relax because whatever he did might become a snide joke the following evening.

Alex understood that some things were for him and him alone. He never made fun of Joe afterwards. He let private things *be* private. By now, Alex had only to *look* at Joe in a certain way and Joe's inner critic was silenced by lust in a way that was almost alarming. Of course, it wasn't just sex. Alex was everything Joe had dreamed he'd be: clever, kind,

cultured, funny. He was also everything Joe wasn't: well-travelled, self-confident, sexually experienced, good at public speaking. Hell, Alex could even *talk to strangers*.

Yes, Joe was in love all right. But what about Alex? Was the relationship as good for him? He seemed happy. Mostly. He didn't act like Joe was just one more guy. Alex hadn't said 'I love you', but then neither had Joe. Although, Joe had *almost* said it.

A couple of weeks ago, Joe had arrived at Alex's place one evening to find him sitting on the old sofa in the sun room, hands over his face.

"Hey," Joe had said softly, pausing in the open doorway. Seagulls were calling, high and harsh. The setting sun was streaming in, making everything glow.

"Hey," Alex said. It came out part sigh. Fed up. Not inviting.

It was on the tip of Joe's tongue to ask, "Are you okay?" but it was clear Alex wasn't. Either Joe had done something heinous without realising or something had triggered Alex's post-traumatic stress disorder. Probably the latter. Joe settled for, "Did something happen?"

Alex took his hands away from his face, but didn't look up. "No. Just more boring shit."

"Oh. Okay."

Joe could guess what that meant. Alex had had therapy, but from time to time he still had flashbacks. Or bad days. Joe sat next to him on the sofa and sifted through a number of things he could say, but they all felt wrong. The sea wind buffeted the old house. Outside, the long grasses hissed and the surf was a muted thunder.

Alex said, "I had that job today—photos for the theatre company." His tone was reluctant, as though he might stop telling the story at any moment. "At the last minute they wanted to go to the Botanic Garden. They're doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* so they wanted some woodland shots. Fine, right? But when we got there..." Alex dragged his hand down his face. "It's November, so the spring flowers are over and there were these empty, dug-over garden beds everywhere. Just like the ploughed field we were on when it happened. It's not like I had to walk on them, but they were all around and it...it just fucking blind-sided me. I was sweating and shaking...and...and everything's so great and then that happens. I had to delay everyone while I got my head together and then I did a bad job. I can't bring myself to look at the shots. And just...fuck...this will *never* be over. You know? And I am so fucking tired of it."

"I know. It sucks. I'm sorry." Joe put an arm around his shoulders.

Alex let out a deep breath. Then another one. But the tension in his shoulders didn't lessen. "Enough from me. How was your day?"

"It was okay," Joe said slowly.

There was something Alex wasn't saying, but he was trying to change the subject. Perhaps he wanted to be distracted.

Joe said, "I drew beetles for those conservation pamphlets. I did a nice *huhu* bug. And a tiger beetle."

"Uh huh." Alex was sitting hunched forward, forearms resting on his knees. He glanced at Joe, expression unreadable. "Look, I'm not going to be any kind of company this evening."

"That doesn't matter."

"Why don't you head home?" Alex stood up, leaving Joe alone on the sofa.

"Do you want me to?" Joe asked.

Alex sighed, a sound without hope. "I don't know, Joe. Do what you like."

Alex didn't look around. He walked away, through the living room. Joe heard the bedroom door open and close, and then silence.

Joe sat in the red-gold light, perched on the edge of the sofa. The sun room was usually one of those magical places where it was impossible to imagine anything bad happening. And now this. He'd been dying to see Alex all day. He'd been hoping Alex might be dying to see him.

Did Alex want him to go? But Alex had said 'do what you like'. Joe wanted to stay—in case Alex changed his mind and wanted him.

Joe took out his sketch book and tried to draw the view through the sun room windows: the wind-tossed flax, the sea, and the jumbled rocks of the northern headland.

But the sketches were lifeless and Joe wasted page after page. Alex would be lying on the bed feeling awful. Or maybe sitting on the floor, forehead on his knees. Joe had seen him sitting like that once before. But that time Alex had stood up when Joe arrived and offered him tea and seemed happy to see him.

Joe turned to a fresh page and began to draw a comic. He drew a picture of himself—all skinny wrists and bony knees—sitting on the old sofa, brows furrowed, eyes anxious. In the next panel he drew himself again, same expression, same position—only now a Joe-shaped outline was leaving his body like a ghost. The outline was transparent, but it had a heart inside it from which lines radiated bright and bold. The outline drifted past the kitchen and through the living room. It slid under Alex's bedroom door.

In the final panel, it curled its empty arms around Alex where he sat slumped against the wall in his bedroom.

You can't feel them. Maybe you don't want them. But they're there.

Joe studied the comic, strengthened a few lines, added shading. Was it lame? Sometimes simple ideas were strong, sometimes they were cheesy, but Joe meant every line of this one. He'd left a comic for Alex once before and that had worked out okay. Alex had liked it. It had cheered him up.

Joe tore the comic out of the sketchbook, crossed the creaky boards of the living room, knelt, and slipped the paper under the bedroom door. Then he stayed where he was, kneeling on the floor, unsure what to do next. Maybe *now* he should go home. The comic said what he wanted to say. Alex could have some space and come and find him whenever he was ready.

But the bedroom door opened. Alex stood looking down at him, the comic in one hand. He looked tired, and not happy, but he didn't look angry. Hope flared in Joe's chest.

"Joe." Alex ran his free hand through his hair, as if he didn't quite know what to do. Then Alex was sitting down next to him, holding him close. It was like in the final panel of Joe's comic, except their positions were reversed, as if Alex were comforting him.

"Oh, Joe," Alex said, into Joe's hair.

"I'll go if you want some space. I won't be offended."

"I don't want you to go. I *never* want you to go. I feel guilty for laying my shit on you and bringing you down."

"You don't bring me down," Joe said.

"No, I'm a laugh riot. Your day got way better when you came over here."

Joe lent into him, resting his head on Alex's shoulder. "It's better *now*."

Alex half-laughed, a rueful huff of breath in Joe's ear. "What did I do to deserve you?"

"You laugh at my jokes? You like comics?"

"I like *your* comics." Alex pulled him a little closer. "Joe, you could probably have anyone you like. You'll realise that soon, I think. I'll understand, you know, if one day you decide you've had enough of me. I don't want to hold you back. You get that, right? Christ, you're twenty-six! You might want to travel. You might want a family—children, all that. I want you to be happy, not worrying about me and having to deal with my bullshit."

"I don't want children. Blessing and I used to argue about that all the time."

“Well, you might want something else. I want you to know I’ll understand if you decide to move on.”

“When I was with Blessing I felt guilty—at the end anyway—because we wanted such different things. And when I was with Sean I felt like everything about me was wrong or not good enough. But when I’m with you, I just feel happy. You never bring me down. I know you’re having a bad day. I’m not happy about *that*, but it’s just a bad day, isn’t it? It’s not who you are. I want to be with *you*.”

Alex shifted his left arm, giving Joe a more comfortable angle to lean at. How did Alex do that? How did he know how to make their bodies fit together in a way that always felt so right?

Alex said, “I used to think I was the luckiest man alive, and then I doubted that for a long time. But now I know it’s true. You’re the sweetest boy in the world and somehow you’ve ended up with me. How did I get so lucky?”

“It’s not luck. It’s because you manage to overlook all the terrible things about me. I don’t know how you do it, but I’m not complaining.”

“What terrible things?” Alex pulled back so they could see each other’s faces.

Joe relaxed a little more. Alex was looking him in the eye.

“I’m not listing them,” Joe said. “There might be some you haven’t noticed.”

“I guess there is your tendency to bring me flowers—which is *very* gay and absolutely repulsive.”

“You see, I knew you hated that.”

“And your other idea of a romantic gift is a dead fish.”

“At least I make sure they’re dead before I give them to you,” Joe said, with exaggerated dignity.

Alex actually smiled. “I used to think the fish was less sweet than the flowers, until I realised you always fillet the fish for me. You don’t gut fish for anyone else. Other people get given them whole and have to do their own dirty work.”

“That’s because you don’t know how, you city slicker. Everyone else around here could gut a fish with their eyes closed, but you have no idea. And Mrs. Rakete gives me the flowers from her garden because I mow her lawn. I told her I like to draw flowers, which I do sometimes. And then I bring them to you. They look nice on your kitchen table.”

“If you can’t see how that story makes you even more adorable there’s no hope for you,” Alex said.

Joe grinned. Alex was smiling at him. It wasn't a big smile, but it was there in his eyes. He looked exhausted, but they were together. Alex wanted him; the day was golden again.

Comics were *always* a good idea.

Joe stretched again and sat up in bed. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the comic he'd drawn that day. Alex had tacked it to the wall above his bedside table.

I should have told him that day. I've been thinking it for weeks. Why can't I be the kind of person who just says things?

It's just...

What if he doesn't say it back?

Joe had a shower, using Alex's expensive shower gel. It had a fresh, citrusy scent that would make Joe smell a little like Alex all day. He shaved, towel-dried his hair and combed it with his fingers. It felt strange to not have hair falling in his eyes all the time. The way the air touched the back of his neck was still a surprise.

Bella's girlfriend, Emmi, had cut it last weekend, after lunch at Alex's place. Joe usually hated having his hair cut because the person doing it so often wanted to talk. Small-talk too, which Joe was terrible at: things like the weather and rugby and politics and celebrities he'd never heard of. It was different with Emmi. She took him outside onto the concrete step at the front of Alex's house and began to cut his hair in the spring sunshine. The dark feathery clippings drifted off to catch in the flax bushes. She didn't talk. She hummed a little under her breath. It was clear Joe wasn't expected to say anything. Alex and Bella followed them outside to watch, Bella carrying the mirror from the bathroom.

When Emmi stepped away, Joe hardly recognised himself. He glanced at Alex, who had stopped smiling and was staring at him.

"Is it okay?" Joe asked.

"Gorgeous."

"You should keep it like this," Emmi said to Joe. "I'll do you a deal, okay? You draw Bella for me, but as a cat. Got it? Then I cut your hair forever."

Bella spluttered something and went scarlet.

"Okay." Joe grinned. Alex liked it, so that was fine. He liked it himself. He felt lighter, as if Emmi had cut away more than just hair.

Joe finished combing his damp hair with his fingers. He was getting dressed in Alex's bedroom when he noticed a streak of something white down the front of his old blue shirt. It was probably pasta sauce, but it looked like dried come. He scraped it with a fingernail and made it worse. He could get a clean shirt at home, but Alex often lent him clothes and Joe loved borrowing them. Wearing a shirt of Alex's was proof, a tangible reminder that Alex was real. Also, Alex's clothes were *nice*. Everything was high quality, natural fibres: cotton, linen, cashmere, silk. Things that felt good against Joe's skin.

Joe chose a long-sleeved shirt in a creamy unbleached cotton/silk blend. It was so soft, and he remembered Alex wearing it around the house. The shirt settled around Joe like a caress. It was a bit loose, but all Alex's clothes were big on Joe. Nothing chafed.

He drove the short distance home through the bright morning to check on Blue. The old white horse was growing fat on spring grass and had bidibids all through his mane. Joe picked the seeds out, pushing Blue's nose away from time-to-time so Blue wouldn't slobber all over Alex's nice shirt.

Joe had an idea for a comic coming. He tossed bidibids into the hedge and thought about panels and lines. The black lines between panels were spaces in time. They were bits cut out of the action, but sometimes what happened there was as important as the main story. Because those moments counted too. Those were the times when someone sat with you in silence or said something mundane about dirty dishes. They were moments when nothing happened, but somehow, when examined all together, they made a pattern that was revelatory. Why did the way Alex parked his car or buttoned his shirt make Joe love him more? Joe wasn't sure, but he could imagine the comic – the panels getting smaller and smaller, the bigger picture that lay underneath becoming clear.

Joe drove to work and spent the day selling canvas and graphite blocks, pastels and drafting paper. It was a good day. Not too busy. Being on his feet all day made his shoulder ache, but today he got to sit down between customers.

At four o'clock, he closed the shop and walked to the café where he was meeting Oliver. It was a new place: polished wooden floors, comfortable-looking booths, the walls decorated with old-fashioned pictures of duchesses waving fans—only someone had given the duchesses tattoos and nose-rings. Joe got a flat white and sat down. At the same time, someone sat opposite. Joe looked up, expecting Oliver, and found Sean lounging there, all blue eyes and smiles. Joe froze.

"Hi," Sean said. "Cute haircut."

"Thanks," Joe said automatically. "Uh...Sean, I'm meeting someone, so..."

“Who? Not that old guy? Bryan Adams?”

“He’s not...it’s none of your business,” Joe said, trying to sound off-hand. His shoulder twinged. He took a deep breath, tried to relax.

“Jesus, settle down. I’m only being friendly.”

“Great. You’ve been friendly. Can you go now?”

“No, I can’t.” Sean smiled. “I work here. I get off soon. Got your car? You could give me a ride home if you were feeling nice.”

“Why would I do that? I’m meeting Oliver.”

“Oh, God, the comics nerd? Although, that doesn’t narrow it down much, does it? Wait a minute—he’s the ‘mum caught me wanking’ one, isn’t he? Jesus, Joe. Come home with me instead.”

“Sean!” A woman called from behind the counter.

“You have to go,” Joe said.

“Yeah.” Sean looked over his shoulder, yelled, “Just a sec!” then added, to Joe, “Text him and cancel. You know you want to.”

“No way.”

Sean leant across the table. “You pissed me off last time, but I forgive you because that haircut makes you look like you stepped out of *Brideshead Revisited*. You look different all round actually.”

“Do I?” Joe asked, in spite of himself.

“Yeah. You look hot. What are you doing? Yoga, or Prozac, or something?”

“No.”

It’s Alex, of course. It’s because I’m happy. But he wasn’t going to talk to Sean about Alex.

“I was always hassling you to get a haircut and wear decent clothes. You never listened to me, did you?” Sean said.

There was genuine hurt in Sean’s blue eyes. Joe shrugged, not knowing what to say. It was true that Sean had always been on at him to smarten himself up, to take some pride in himself. It was also true that Joe had clung to his crappy old snowflake jumper partly to annoy Sean.

It hadn’t started out that way. Joe had worn the jumper because it was the warmest thing he owned and it helped against the aches that plagued him in cold weather. But Sean had made such a fuss about it that Joe had begun to wear it more out of contrariness. Perhaps it had been petty, but that was Sean; he brought out the worst in Joe.

Sean said, “I don’t see how it was so hard to buy clothes that aren’t *hideous*, and get a haircut from time to time. You seem to have managed it now.”

“A friend cut it.” Joe ran his fingers through his hair.

Once Emmi had finished cutting it, and she and Bella had gone, Alex had grabbed Joe’s hand and led him straight to the bedroom. Alex had kissed Joe’s exposed neck and ears, and stroked the short hair on the back of his head. Then Alex had stripped him naked, and kissed him some more. Finally, when Joe was whimpering with need, Alex had fucked him, from behind, teeth on the bare nape of Joe’s neck.

It had been so good they’d done it twice. The second time had been slower, more languorous, and just before he came, Alex had whispered Joe’s name.

I should have told him then. I love you. It would have been so easy to say.

“Joe! Jophiel! Wake up!” Sean waved a hand in his face. “Come on, Joe, come home with me. I’m feeling *very* bossy. You’ll love it.”

“I don’t want to. I wouldn’t come with you anyway, because I’m meeting a friend, but if that’s not enough for you: I’m seeing someone. I’m in a relationship.”

“I knew it! It’s that old guy, isn’t it? It’s the daddy thing.” Sean sat back. “Oh well, I’ll call you in a month, eh? Those things never last. He’ll get bored, Jophiel. I bet you don’t know anything about his old-person crap. I bet he likes jazz. Oh, God, how fucking tragic.”

“*Sean!*” The woman behind the counter called again.”

“Bye, Sean. Don’t call me. I’ll be blocking you anyway.”

“Well, fine. Last time I try to be nice to you. I hope you like geriatrics wards. Hope you like incontinence pads, and zimmer frames, and...fucking *prunes*.”

And with that, Sean was gone to get a hissed bollocking from the woman at the counter. Joe left his coffee untouched and went outside to wait for Oliver. They’d go somewhere else instead.

Joe drove out of town, shoulders tense, a headache coming on. Oliver had been in a bad mood—worried about his job, having trouble with his girlfriend, down on his comics. Not that Joe minded talking about stuff like that—that was what friends were for. No, Oliver wasn’t the problem.

Alex wouldn’t get bored of him, would he? They always seemed to find plenty to talk about. But it was true that Joe didn’t know much about photography—although he was learning—and he’d never heard of most of the music Alex played. Nor visited any of the countries Alex had been to. And when Alex went running, he always had to go alone,

because Joe couldn't run. Not anymore. Would Alex have preferred someone he could go running with? Someone lithe and fit and laughing? Someone who never worried about anything?

Joe pulled over and turned the ignition off with a shaking hand. This was bullshit. And he *wasn't* going to take it home to Alex. He was only worrying about it because Sean had put the idea in his head. If he let it, it would circle around until it paralyzed him and he'd be silent and awkward and never be able to tell Alex: 'I love you'.

In case Alex didn't say it back.

But he would. Joe knew it.

Probably.

Joe took slow, deep breaths, hands on the wheel, forehead resting on his knuckles.

What did Sean know? He knew nothing. He knew *nothing* about Alex and how he and Joe were together.

In Kahawai Bay, Alex would be waiting. Not in a finger-drumming 'you're late' kind of way, but in a pleasant 'I'm expecting you' way. Alex was easy-going about time. He never fussed if people were a bit late. He'd be working through the photographs he'd taken that day, weeding out any unsuccessful shots, editing the rest, and putting them in order if the client had requested it.

But the moment Joe came through the door, Alex would get up, smiling. He would hold Joe close—as if to have Joe in his arms was the most important thing in the world. And they would kiss, and the kiss might deepen and they might go to the bedroom. Or the kiss might turn affectionate and one of them would discover he had something to say. They might talk, or cook, or walk down to the beach. And whatever they did would feel right and natural and easy, and Joe wouldn't feel like a freak who never knew what to say and who liked the wrong things. He would feel like himself, only better.

Joe started the car, checked his mirrors and blind spot twice. To be alone with Alex. That was all he wanted. He pulled out into a gap in the traffic and was soon turning onto the Makara Road. He negotiated the sharp, familiar turns, past steep fields of gorse and sheep. He passed his own place with Blue grazing out the front, and turned left, heading south along the gravel road that led to Kahawai Bay. The hills rose high, blotting out the sun and cell-phone coverage. And then there was the turquoise chaos of the sea, with white surf and menacing dark patches. And there was Alex's place, perched on the far hillside, nestled amongst the flax and the remains of Mrs Addison's salt-bitten roses.

There was an old red Toyota Corolla parked next to Alex's shiny new model Mini Cooper. Joe pulled up next to it and got out of his car. The air was hot. The sea wind had dropped and a chorus of cicadas came from the stand of manuka trees up the valley. He glared at the Toyota. He didn't recognise it, but it was parked too close to Alex's house to look as if it belonged to beach visitors. Alex appeared, waiting for him on the concrete step at the front of the house. At least he seemed to be alone.

"Hi," Joe said, walking up the garden path. "Whose car is that?"

"Hey."

Alex gave him a quick kiss. He wore jeans and a pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his biceps. He looked so *good*, so handsome, arms tanned and strong-looking. Joe's brain momentarily shut down. Later, those arms would be wrapped around him, or braced above him.

"Nice shirt," Alex added, touching Joe's shoulder.

"Thanks. The car?"

"We've got visitors. They're for you, really. They wanted to surprise you, but they've gone down to the beach because the kids have been cooped up in the car all day and couldn't wait any longer. I said I'd wait for you."

Joe frowned. A surprise visit, with kids, in an old car. He glanced down at it. A car with a crystal hanging from the rearview mirror. A car with wooden beads on the dashboard and a pale orange muslin scarf that was just the kind of thing—

"Oh, shit, my mum's here, isn't she?" Joe said, breaking out in a cold sweat.

Joe loved his mother, but she was an acquired taste. Sean had met her once by mistake and treated her with a condescending scorn that had made Joe cringe inside. Mum had responded by getting extra cosmic and telling Sean that he had a spirit watching over him whether he knew it or not. Alex was polite to everyone, but he did prefer rational thinking and had no time for crystals and ley lines. Joe's incipient headache, which had almost gone away, pulsed through his left temple.

"Uh huh," Alex said. "And Blessing. Very pretty, isn't she, your ex? And—" Alex ticked off his fingers, "—Summer, Thor and Kahurangi, who are kids. And Sarah and Jake, who are dogs."

"Why are they at your place?" Joe asked.

"Okay, so I guess you haven't mentioned me to them?"

"No, I...no."

Was Alex hurt? Should Joe have told Mum about him by now? The thing was that being with Alex was so big, so important, so all-encompassing, that telling other people hadn't seemed right yet. Joe had wanted to be sure it was real before he started doing that.

Alex said, "Okay. So, they went to your place first, but you weren't there, so they drove to Makara Beach to buy ice-cream, and someone in the café told them if you weren't home you might be here, so here they are."

Joe could almost see them; a car-load of kids and dogs emptying out, Mum laughing too loud and hugging people she didn't know, Blessing doing cartwheels and handsprings, all intruding on Alex's privacy and quiet.

"Oh, God, Alex, I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Alex was looking at him closely. "Well, I didn't tell them anything. As far as they know, we're just friends."

"I don't mean that! I haven't *not* told Mum about you. I just haven't told her. You could have said anything."

"Could I?"

"Of course. Mum's fine about whatever I do. Girlfriends. Boyfriends. Whatever."

"Whatever? Is that what I am?"

"No! You're..."

All the words Joe knew were inadequate. What *should* he call Alex? Boyfriend? Lover? The Most Amazing Thing to Ever Happen to Me? What did Alex want to be?

"Your boyfriend?" Alex asked. He was smiling, but his eyes were serious. "Although, I'm hardly a boy."

"I can't say 'man friend'. I'd have to die."

"Partner?" Alex said.

Joe blinked. He hadn't thought of it. Maybe because it was a word he wouldn't have dared to use, because it sounded so permanent, so committed. To him, at least. Maybe, to Alex, it meant something else. Joe hadn't thought about the future too much, in case he jinxed something, or tempted fate. But 'partner' wasn't a word people used for a fleeting thing, was it?

"Partner," he repeated.

"Okay. Sounds good. Hey, are you all right? This is a nice thing, eh? You get to see your mum. You get on with her, don't you? And Blessing, who seems lovely. You two are friends now, right?"

"Yes, but don't you mind a pack of strangers turning up at your door?"

“They’re hardly strangers.” Alex grinned. “I’ve met your mum before.”

“*What?* Where?”

“Well, our spirits have met before. On another plane. She recognised me straight away.”

“Oh, God.”

“Joe, I like her. She gave me a big hug, and told me she could tell I’d suffered, but that my future was clear. She can tell from my aura.”

“Alex, look—”

“I told her she was quite right and that I have post-traumatic stress disorder. They’d been here for about two minutes when I told them that.”

“Oh, God. Alex, look, Mum asks people all kinds of things. Just tell her it’s private.”

“Joe, listen. Do you know one of the worst things about having PTSD? It’s that it’s invisible. And yet it’s hard to tell people because it’s not the sort of thing that comes up in casual conversation. It’s not the sort of thing you can say to most people after two minutes acquaintance. But I could tell your mother and Blessing, couldn’t I? Because they work on a different level to most people. And they’re not scared, or embarrassed. They don’t think it’s weird or intense. They think it’s normal that I would tell them that. Do you know how amazing that is? So, stop worrying. I *like* them – even if your mother is younger than me, which I have to admit is slightly freaking me out. Anyway, I’ve invited them to stay the night.”

“No, she’s not younger than you. She’s—” Joe did the maths and said reluctantly, “Er...forty-five.”

“Uh huh? Same as me, eh? Well, that’s all right then. I can stop worrying about that, can’t I?”

Joe found himself smiling. But it was funny, because it was so unimportant. Alex’s eyes had sparks dancing in them. He didn’t care either. Not really.

Alex said, “I’ve also found out they’re not vegetarian, but they won’t eat anything battery-farmed and they don’t believe in processed foods, although when it comes to ice-cream for children they make an exception. Also, they’d like to get up early tomorrow because they have a wedding to go to over in the Wairarapa. It’s at midday and we’re invited to the party afterwards. There’s no dress code, except everyone should wear flowers, and Blessing is a dab hand at garlands. Want to go?”

“Do you?”

“I want to see you in a garland, that’s for sure. Maybe we could get flowers from Mrs. Rakete?”

“Maybe. Who are the kids? Summer is Blessing’s, but the others? Will *more* people be coming? Will anyone’s parents be arriving?”

“Not that they mentioned. Thor and Kahurangi are just friends, I guess, who came along for the trip. Kahurangi told me in confidence that if we come to the wedding she can show me her party trick. But she won’t say what it is.”

“It might be fire-poi” Joe said, absently.

He was still wondering what the word ‘partner’ meant to Alex. Maybe he should just ask. His stomach lurched and his heart started pounding. Was now the time to say it?

“Fire-poi? I doubt it. She’s only about seven,” Alex said.

“Alex, if I tell them you’re my partner—that’s important. It means something, doesn’t it? It does to me because I...” Joe’s breath had all run out. He reached for Alex’s hand and stood looking at it for a moment. Alex was holding onto him, a strong, gentle grasp. Joe managed to look up, into Alex’s eyes. “I...love you. So much.”

“Come in here a moment?” Alex pulled him inside and kissed him, slow and thorough. He took Joe’s face in his hands. “Joe, I’ve been wanting to tell you for weeks that I love you. I didn’t want to come on too strong when we’ve just got together. But it’s true. I’ve loved you since the day you sat on that concrete step out there and told me about Fox’s glacier mint wrappers, and put that comic under my front door.”

Fireworks were bursting in Joe’s belly. He was burning with joy. He stood there, alight, Alex’s hands on either side of his face.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for weeks as well,” Joe said.

Alex smiled and brought their foreheads together. “You know, I am delighted to meet your family, but I wish they weren’t here so I could take you to bed right now.”

Joe squirmed, involuntarily. “Me too.”

Alex let him go. “Well, I will get my hands on you later. I promise.”

“But we can’t...you know...do it, if my mother is in the next room. It’s not like when Chris and Miguel were staying. And even that was a bit weird.”

“Ha, listening to you trying to be quiet was *almost* more of a turn-on than listening to you normally. But, anyway, I have a plan. So, come on, let’s go down to the beach and find everyone, but I want you to know we’re not missing out on *anything* tonight.”

They went down to the beach. Alex might have walked, but Joe floated there on a golden cloud. Joe introduced Alex properly. Mum hugged them both, and said, to Alex, “I knew there was something special about you.” Blessing hugged them both too.

Alex made dinner. Alex and Mum turned out to have been to some of the same places in Morocco and India and Thailand. They talked about cities Joe had never heard of and looked at some of Alex’s photos from those places. They discussed the benefits of ecstasy as a treatment for PTSD and dance parties as a form of transcendental meditation. The kids invented a game dodging around all the flax bushes in the garden and Joe sat with Blessing on the concrete step, half watching the kids, half listening to Alex and Mum talk.

Joe couldn’t help remembering the first time he’d seen Alex at Edith’s place—how unobtainable he’d seemed, the hot-shot photographer from London. How talented and stylish and sophisticated. How absolutely out of Joe’s league. And now—Joe glanced over his shoulder.

Alex was standing by the kitchen bench, a knife in his hand, cut lemons in front of him. He was listening to something Mum was saying, smiling. He noticed Joe looking at him and his expression changed for a moment into something far more intimate.

I love you.

I love you, too.

Joe looked away, cheeks growing hot.

“Joe?” Blessing said. The sea breeze had sprung up again and her long blonde hair blew towards him. It was so fine that a few strands kept floating straight up, as if she was about to start ascending. Her eyes were pale, pale blue, clear as the evening sky.

“You’re really in love, aren’t you?” she said, quietly.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah, it’s glowing out of you. I’m not big into auras like your Mum, but you’ve got one at the moment.”

“Well, okay.”

“Don’t worry, it’s just as obvious with him. When we got here, I asked about that picture of the seagulls on the wall because I could tell you’d done it. I thought you two had something going on because he lights up when he talks about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he thinks you’re wonderful. Which you are. You won’t have to pretend, with him.”

“Pretend what?” Joe said, feeling exposed. He hoped she wasn’t talking about sex, although it was true he didn’t have to pretend in bed with Alex.

“Anything. You could tell him anything. You could trust him with your life.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

Later, when Mum was talking about going to Joe’s house to sleep, leaving Blessing and the kids at Alex’s, Alex said he wouldn’t hear of it. He said it was an old Canadian custom to give up one’s own bed to one’s guests. He added that he’d already changed the sheets, and would be devastated if Joe’s Mum didn’t take him up on his offer.

“Joe and I will go to his place. He should check on Blue, anyway,” Alex said.

“Can I come?” Summer asked. “I can help. I know lots about horses. I could sleep on Joe’s sofa. I’ve done it before.”

“You’re staying here,” Blessing said.

“But I want to see Blue!”

“In the morning, eh Joe?” Blessing said.

“In the morning, Joe and I will come back and make breakfast,” Alex said. “Maybe Joe could bring Blue along with us?”

Alex and Joe said good-night and began walking to Joe’s place using the back way, past the manuka, through farmland. The night was scented with dried grasses and crickets sang at their feet. It was about nine-thirty. There was still an amber streak of light to the west, and, in the east, a half-moon bright as a *pipi* shell. It was too dark to see much, but Joe knew the way.

“This is your cunning plan?” Joe said. “That we go to my place? Blessing guessed why we were leaving. Mum, too.”

“I never said it’d be cunning. Anyway, so what? I hope you realise your mother’s slept with more guys than I have.”

“Alex, don’t.”

“Ha. She’s one of the least embarrassed people I’ve ever met, and you’re so sweet you blush if I mention sex when we’re alone. Are you sure you’re related?”

“Families have embarrassment quotas. I do hers for her.”

“Young people today,” Alex said loftily. “So prudish.”

Joe snorted. Alex might as well have said ‘okay, bye, we’re off to have sex now’. But then, Alex didn’t care who knew. Mum and Blessing didn’t care. Sex was just something people did. Why did it still make him blush?

“I saw Sean today,” Joe said, surprising himself. When he was with Alex, remarks just popped out. Sometimes even things Joe had decided not to talk about. Like this.

“Oh? Bad luck. And how is the Prince Frog? Is he taking up painting?”

“No.” Joe had to smile, the idea was so ridiculous. “He didn’t come to the shop. Turns out he works in the café where I went to meet Oliver.”

“That *is* bad luck.”

“He wanted me to go home with him. Can you believe it? He was such a *jerk* to me, and then he thought I would go with him like nothing happened.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Yeah. He liked your shirt, though. My green snowflake jumper used to drive him crazy.”

“Ha! I bet it did! That’s its benevolent side. It drives away unsuitable lovers. Maybe I owe it something. What do you think? Would it like a bottle of fabric softener?”

“I think that would offend it.”

“You’re right. I expect it drinks rum. Or maybe blood. There is something a bit terrifying about it.”

“Do you want me to get rid of it?”

“No way! If I said yes, it’d *know*. It’d come back to haunt me. In any case, I want you to keep it so you can write more comics about it.”

“I think it likes you. Have you noticed the strange tracks around your house when I’m not there at night? It pines for you.”

“Okay, now you’re scaring me.” Alex took his hand. “Come on, I’ve got plans for you tonight. And they don’t involve your sweater.”

They came out onto the Makara Road, crossed it, and walked the few hundred metres up the road to Joe’s house. Joe opened the door, went into the bedroom and turned the bedside light on. The house had been shut up all day and was stuffy. Joe’s grandma had been dead for three years, but at times like this he could still smell her lily of the valley talcum powder. He opened the window.

Alex had closed the front door behind him, but stopped in the bedroom doorway.

“Actually, this is your place, isn’t it?”

Joe frowned. “What?”

“I’m just thinking: Your house, your rules.”

Joe frowned a bit harder. They both knew how sex usually went. Joe liked Alex to be in charge. It meant Joe could stop thinking. He could relax, because Alex called the shots and Alex would look after him. Alex always made it great.

Alex leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. “Yeah, I think you should be in charge tonight.”

There was a gleam in Alex’s eyes that made Joe tremble with anticipation. Alex had done this a couple of times before, confusing him, so he couldn’t guess what was coming next. With anyone else it would have been awful. Because it was Alex, the uncertainty morphed into arousal.

“So, you’d better tell me what to do,” Alex said.

Joe opened his mouth and closed it again. Alex had a half-smile lurking in his eyes. Joe glanced away, trying to collect himself. If he was going to have to tell Alex what to do, he was going to have to say things like—*oh*.

He looked back at Alex, eyes widening.

Alex smiled. “Yeah, you want it, you’re going to have to ask for it. Out loud.”

Joe blushed. He couldn’t. He’d forgotten how to speak anyway.

“Want me to start you off?” Alex said. “I think you want to take out that lovely dick, and show me how hard it’s getting at the thought of all the dirty things you’re going to have to say to me.”

Joe swallowed. Why was it easier to suck Alex’s cock than to say he wanted to suck it? It would sound so *rude*. But he *was* getting hard. And of course, Alex knew that.

“Come on, sweetheart. Do you know how much it’ll turn me on to hear you say it? And then you’ll come for me. But only if you tell me what you want. So, dick out, and the rest is up to you.”

Joe put his trembling hands to his fly. His breath was speeding up. He was already aching with the need that had been building since Alex had woken him that morning. He wanted Alex to fuck him, but quite how he was going to get them to that point was a hot blur of taboos. His face was already burning, and he hadn’t even opened his mouth.

Of course, he could tell Alex he didn’t want to do this. Alex wouldn’t mind. He’d say something like ‘okay, dumb idea. Now get over here’.

But maybe it would be exciting. Joe could start with some easy stuff. If he didn’t like it, he could always change his mind. He undid his fly, pushed his underwear down enough to free his cock.

Alex exhaled, shakily.

Joe said, to the carpet, “I...I want you to come closer.”

Alex obeyed, stopping about an arm’s length away. Joe could only see his feet. Joe glanced up. Alex had the intent expression that meant he was turned on.

“Um...I want you to take your clothes off,” Joe said.

Alex did it slowly, fingers lingering on buttons. Joe managed another glance at him.

“Faster,” Joe said.

Alex smiled, and pulled the rest of his clothes off. He was trim from all the running he did, but not as skinny as Joe. There was nothing boyish about Alex. He had a man’s set strength, a man’s broad shoulders, hairy chest and strong thighs. And, of course, a fine, jutting erection, slightly fleshy, foreskin starting to pull back. Joe was used to the size of it by now. He couldn’t wait to get his mouth around it.

Joe sank to his knees, and Alex stepped back, out of reach. Joe looked up. Not fair. Alex raised one eyebrow.

“Come closer,” Joe said.

Alex didn’t move. “Why? What do you want to do?” He put his hand on his cock and jacked himself a few times, lazily.

Fine. Two could play at that game.

“I want you to undress me,” Joe said. His left knee was hurting from kneeling on the hard floor. “On the bed.” He got up and knelt on the bed instead. Much better.

Alex knelt in front of him, smiling. “You little tease. This is *not* what you want, and you know it.”

Joe couldn’t help smiling back, shame-facedly. Alex took the hem of Joe’s shirt, and took it off, careful not to force his left arm too high. Alex pulled Joe’s trousers and underwear down around his knees. Joe kicked them off. He couldn’t help noticing that Alex took care to only touch the clothes, not him. Alex was going to make him ask for that.

When Alex was done with the clothes, he knelt there, almost touching Joe, but not quite. Joe twisted his head with frustration. He could smell Alex, could feel the warmth coming from him, their cocks were nearly touching. But not quite.

“What next?” Alex said.

“I want you closer. I want you to kiss me.”

“Uh huh. Where?”

“My...neck, and mouth. Just kiss me, Alex.” The second sentence came out a bit impatient-sounding.

Alex put one kiss on Joe's neck, making him moan. A lingering kiss on his mouth, quite hard, tongue swirling over Joe's. Then it was over.

"Don't stop," Joe gasped. "Kiss me again. Put your hands on my arse."

Joe writhed against him, grinding their cocks together, letting his head fall back so Alex could have full access to his mouth.

"Alex, get the lube. I...I want..."

"Mm? What do you want?"

"You to get it."

Alex grinned, but reached for the bedside drawer and got out the tube.

"Put some on your fingers," Joe said.

Alex did as he'd said, then held his fingers up. "Well? What could you possibly want with these very slippery fingers?"

"Um..." *I want them stroking my hole. I want them stretching me and teasing me. I want them inside me.* "Uh...Alex, can we just do it now?"

"Do what?"

Joe groaned in frustration and let his head fall forwards onto Alex's shoulder.

"Do what, sweetheart? Where do you want my fingers? Huh? Do you know how much I want to hear you say it?"

"I want them...up my arse." Joe's face was burning again.

"Mm," Alex said, and slipped his fingers under Joe's balls, first to stroke his hole, and then to push two fingers inside, quite fast. Joe gasped, grabbing at Alex's shoulders, cock twitching. Alex slipped his fingers out, circling the rim, and then pushed them in again. Then he stopped.

Joe kissed him. Alex didn't move.

Joe groaned, half in frustration, half in pleasure. His thighs were trembling. It was as if Alex controlled Joe's entire being with those two fingers.

They knelt there, chest to chest, Joe with his knees apart to give Alex access. Joe could feel the sweat beading on his skin in the close air of the bedroom. Being made to say what he wanted was excruciating, but it was also making him as hard as he'd ever been. Because Alex was in charge, really. If Joe wanted more, he *had* to say it. And he *had* to have more. It didn't feel like a choice. It was a necessity.

"Move your fingers. Do what you did before. Push them in. Oh, God, yes. There...harder." A moment later, Joe gasped, "Fuck me."

"With my fingers?"

“Alex, just fuck me.” It was a demand, not a request.

“Be more specific.” Alex’s breathing was hitching.

Joe pulled away, glared at him. “Fine. Stay still. You touch me and it’s all over.”

He went down onto his hands and knees and took Alex’s cock into his mouth, one long, smooth movement, making Alex say “Oh, Christ!”. Joe sucked him until Alex pushed at his shoulders to fend him off.

“Joe, stop. Seriously.”

Joe looked up. “Why?”

“Why? What’ll happen if you don’t?”

“So?”

“You don’t want that,” Alex said.

“Don’t I? What do I want?”

“You tell me.”

“You’re *infuriating*,” Joe said.

“Say what you want then.”

“All right. *Fine*. I want you to...to...” Joe blushed, but he was too turned on by now to care. “...rim me. And then fuck me. Hard. And no stopping. Fuck me until I come. Happy now?”

Alex grinned. Wolfish, not like his usual smile. “Oh, I’m happy. This evening is going *great*.”

He pushed Joe down onto his back and flipped him over. “God, you have no idea,” he said, into Joe’s ear. “You have no *idea* how much I want you right now.”

Joe was shaking with anticipation. It would feel *so* good. If he had to wait a moment longer, he would scream. Alex was kissing his way down Joe’s back, hands moving lower, stroking his arse. Joe could feel Alex’s breath, hot against his skin.

Then Alex’s tongue was on him, soft and wet. Joe’s eyes fluttered and closed. He could hear himself making breathy moans. He grit his teeth, but his breath kept catching. He wriggled, lifting his hips to let Alex get at him better. He clutched the bedclothes in his fists, cock aching. It was a torment of pleasure, because while it felt as if the whole world had melted away, it wouldn’t be quite enough to get him off. Although, tonight, it nearly was.

“Alex,” he gasped. “Let’s fuck. Quick. Because—”

Alex didn’t let him finish. He grabbed Joe’s hip and pulled. It meant ‘turn over’. Joe obeyed. Alex liked this position best. He liked to watch Joe falling apart, liked to see him come. Alex kissed him, mouth greedy, fingers probing and stretching again, but this time he

didn't stop. This time, his fingers were moving faster, almost jerkily, and Joe realised, with a pulse of pure lust, that Alex was coming apart too, that usually he was more in control, but this time, Alex was getting swept away along with him.

Joe turned his head away from Alex's kiss.

"Fuck me," he demanded. "Quick."

Alex took Joe by the hips and pulled him onto his lap. Joe wrapped his thighs around Alex's waist, crying out when he felt the tip of Alex's cock easing into him. He would come any moment. He needed it *now*.

"Quick," Joe sobbed.

Alex pushed in. "Oh, Joe," he groaned. "Oh, Christ!"

Alex rocked his hips, settling himself, sending shivers of ecstatic tension throughout Joe's body. He writhed, helping Alex find a rhythm that got swiftly faster and harder. Joe's hips were jerking, breath gasping. He grabbed his cock with a sweaty hand and convulsed, painting his scarred chest with ropes of come. Alex bent over him with a wordless shout, eyes closed tight, jolting into him. Joe was spiralling around in that place where there was nothing but sensation. It was a black-red place, like the colour you see behind closed eyes. It was the void before life, the place you go when you die. It was the space in between panels, where nothing happens and everything does. It was pure, and he was there with Alex.

They stilled, both gasping for breath. Alex opened his eyes and shook his head like a dog to get the sweat and hair out of them. Joe gazed up at him. In these moments, Alex was truly his. The sophisticated, award-winning photographer was gone; Alex was a man and nothing more, and yet at the same time, he was more himself than ever. Joe was looking into Alex's soul and Alex was looking into his. The taboos that made Joe blush were nothing. The memories that haunted Alex were forgotten. They were naked before each other. Two people in love. That was all that mattered. It was all that would ever matter.

Alex lowered himself to kiss Joe's mouth, making a little surprised sound that Joe had never heard from him before.

"What?" Joe said.

"What do you mean 'what'? *That*. It was mind-blowing."

Alex withdrew, and groped on the floor for something to mop up with, coming up with the cream shirt Joe had worn that day. Joe made a noise of protest.

"What? It'll wash. Here." Alex finished with it and tossed it to Joe, then flopped down next to him on the bed. Joe wiped the come off his chest, and from between his legs. He was dripping with sweat. Alex was shining with it.

“Want a shower?” Joe said.

“No. Can’t stand up.”

Joe looked at him.

“You’ve fucked my brains out,” Alex explained. “I’m putting you in charge more often.”

Joe smiled, an unfamiliar feeling of victory coursing through him. He lay back too, closing his eyes. If Alex couldn’t be bothered to have a shower, neither could he.

A breeze was coming in through the open window, carrying with it the scent of grass and pine and a base note of cooling tar from the road. Joe lay, limp and naked, letting the breeze play over him, over the scars and the raw-looking, shiny red areas where he’d lost too much skin for it to ever look normal again, and over the numb patch on his hip that was the graft. He’d learned not to hide from Alex, because Alex didn’t want him to, but usually Joe covered up after sex – with a t-shirt or the covers – as soon as he could without it being too obvious.

Tonight, it didn’t seem important. His bones were molten honey. The breeze washed over him, warm and gentle, intimate and gloriously impartial. Alex touched him like that. Alex had hands like a summer breeze. He had hands like a summer night. Joe’s thoughts were scattering into sleep.

Fingertips touched his cheek, bringing him back from the brink.

Alex said, “Joe?”

Joe opened his eyes. Alex was leaning over him. There was a strange look in his eyes, so tender he might almost be going to cry.

“What is it?” Joe mumbled, dragging himself back into wakefulness. “You okay?”

“You’re falling asleep on top of the covers,” Alex said. “Get under. You’ll get cold in the night.”

Joe groaned, but Alex was right. Joe did as he was told. Alex brought the covers up over them, smiling down at him.

“You love me,” Alex said, gentle triumph in his voice.

“You love *me*,” Joe said. He didn’t blush. He was too sleepy, too relaxed. He could say anything to Alex and it would be all right.

“Yes, I do. Good night, sweetheart.”

Joe wanted to gaze at him forever, but his eyes were closing again. Sometimes it was like this after sex—all the tensions of life had been exorcised by Alex’s touch. Alex switched off the bedside light. Joe turned over, getting comfortable. Alex was behind him, solid and

safe, breath even, one hand on Joe's hip. Joe couldn't feel Alex's fingers, because they were on the grafted skin, which was numb to the touch. But he could feel the weight of Alex's hand. He could feel it deep down, inside, where it really mattered.

Joe fell asleep to a kiss on the back of his neck.

The End

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