

SOFIA GREY

*Displaced*  
A LOVE'S LANDSCAPES STORY

## **DISPLACED**

Cast out by his race for taking a male lover, Henare lives as a man during daylight hours. At sunset he returns to the sea, to take his place as an immortal guardian of the water, the feared *Taniwha*. He's never allowed anyone to get close, until TJ comes along.

Can this young man tame the mighty sea monster?

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## DISPLACED

**By Sofia Grey**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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## Photo Description

A young man, naked from the waist up, lies on his side in water, face half-hidden. The colour of his eyes is mirrored in the indigo blue of the water and the sky. He has a watchful expression, as though he waits for something... or someone.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*This is my life... by day I walk on land and I am as human as the man standing next to me... but by night... the water calls to me and I must return to it... all I have ever wanted is a man who would love me for who I am... both day and night...*

*I would only ask for a story... as beautiful as this photo*

*Sincerely,*

*Donna*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** exile, family issues, guardian, homophobia, immortal, loneliness, tattoos, tour guide

**Word Count:** 15,065

# **DISPLACED**

**By Sofia Grey**

**dis·placed** *adjective*

1. lacking a home, country, etc.
2. moved or put out of the usual or proper place.

## Prologue

I ran my fingers across the plaque and traced the letters etched into the wood.

The Taniwha (*pron. Tanifa*) was believed to be a fearsome sea monster that acted as a guardian for the New Zealand coastline.

They got the monster part right, and the guardian. They didn't say anything about the loneliness though.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 1

I hated the summer. Long days meant more time on land, pretending to be a man. I lived for the hours of darkness, when I would return to the sea and take my native form, only to return again at sunrise. I'd wait impatiently for the winter months, but in truth, I didn't like those much either. I fooled myself that I was happier in the water, but I'd just become a master at lying to myself.

Sitting on my usual piece of driftwood, I surveyed the quiet stretch of coastline. A pair of joggers way in the distance. A lone dog walker in the opposite direction. And me. Even the seagulls gave me a wide berth. Even though I looked like a normal human, they could sense that I was different, and whether they stayed away out of fear or respect didn't matter.

I closed my eyes against the bright sunlight, but the rays continued to kiss my pale skin. I wouldn't burn, or tan, or freckle. I'd never wrinkle or age, and I could never die. My life would continue, alone, for eternity.

*Immortality sucks.*

A muffled *woof* and a splash dragged me from my pity party and I opened my eyes to glare at the dog walker. He'd obviously not picked up on the keep-the-fuck-away-from-me vibe. The dog, a shaggy mongrel, felt it. He skittered behind his master's legs and as far from me as the leash would allow. At least he had some sense.

The guy nodded to me as he drew near. "Afternoon." He paused as though he expected me to answer. That was a novelty. I stared at him, expecting him to walk away again, but he stayed. He was young, mid-twenties at most, and still had that innocent naivety of someone who's enjoyed their life. Thick dark hair, almost as black as mine, flopped onto a lightly tanned face, stubble raking his cheeks.

The way he cocked his head to one side reminded me fleetingly of Matiu. He shifted and the resemblance was gone.

"Great weather." White teeth flashed in a friendly smile. With the afternoon sun behind him, I couldn't tell what colour his eyes were, but they were light.

Conversation? Why the hell not. It might distract me for a few minutes. "Afternoon," I muttered, expecting him to walk away, but he didn't. He

extended the dog leash to let the beast move further away, and it ran into the shallows. As far from me as it could go. Sensible.

“I saw you here yesterday.” His smile was undimmed by my sullen attitude. “You’ve a great spot to watch the sea from.”

I knew every inch of this coastline. I could walk it blindfolded and still tell exactly where I was at any given moment, but I hadn’t noticed him before. Was I so wrapped up in my misery that I’d stopped paying attention?

I looked at the stranger properly. Took in the bare feet, faded denims and sun-bleached once-black T-shirt. He held the dog leash firmly in one hand, but the other held a small green twig, fresh leaves along its length.

He waited, presumably for me to reply, and for no reason other than I was bored, I spoke to him. “That stick looks a bit small for your dog.”

The smile burst into a grin that lit up his face. “This?” He lifted the twig. “This isn’t for Butch, it’s for the *Taniwha*.”

For a ridiculously long moment, I thought he was going to offer it to me. *Don’t be so stupid, Henare.* “*Taniwha*?” I queried, liking the fact that he pronounced it correctly.

His eyebrows disappeared into the floppy hair. “You know, the sea dragon. There’s a monument at the other end of the beach.” He must have taken my intentionally blank face for misunderstanding. “Wow. I thought it was something we all learned at school. The legend of the *Taniwha*. My sister was terrified of it and my grandma used it as an excuse for everything.” He chuckled. “If you don’t do your homework, the *Taniwha* will catch you. That sort of thing.”

Despite myself, I was amused. Interested. “And did she? Do her homework?”

“Christ, yes. Highest achiever in the school. She’s studying hard numbers at Cambridge now.”

The dog yanked at the leash, and the man tightened his grip. He had long fingers with clean, tidy nails, and that was another painful reminder of Matiu. Or maybe I was just seeing him everywhere right now. Another midsummer had come and gone, with no sign of him.

“*Wait for me,*” he’d said. “*I’ll come and find you.*”

Three hundred years had passed. How much longer did I have to wait?

The guy watched me, a cute smile on his face, and I tried to recall what he'd been saying. The twig drew my attention, and I gestured to it with my hand. "So what are you doing with that?"

He tapped it gently against his thigh, his gaze scanning the incoming tide. "It's an offering. Like I said, I grew up with the legend, and my grandma taught us that it's polite to leave gifts for the monster if we want to venture into his territory. First crop or new growth." He shrugged broad shoulders. "Whenever I go out on the boat, I always do this first."

My heart warmed for the first time in forever, and it wasn't just because he was attractive. It was good to see the old practices observed. "You, uh, going fishing?"

"Nah, I'm going across to Kapiti Island. I'm leading a tour group there."

I followed his gaze to the hulking great island in the distance. "Nice and calm. You should have a good trip."

"Thanks." He frowned at the dog, currently tugging on the lead. "Stupid hound. I daren't let him loose, I'd never catch him." He flashed another smile at me, and I felt my lips tilting in reply.

How long was it since I'd been attracted to anyone? Sex was an itch I scratched occasionally, more out of defiance than anything. I sought out guys to fuck, because I wanted—for the briefest moment—to feel needed. They were never more than a tight ass, or a wet mouth, the faces forgotten within minutes, the names never known. Since Matiu, I'd never let *anyone* get close.

"Nice talking to you." The guy scratched at his chin with the back of his hand, but didn't move.

"Yeah," I mumbled. This was enough, it seemed. He turned and walked to the water's edge, where he shortened the dog leash to bring the hound to his ankles, and then crouched on the damp sand. Entranced, I watched as he held the twig to the sea rushing in, and laid it gently in the water, to wash back out again.

Good manners. I approved. And he had a nice, firm ass.

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## Chapter 2

As the first rays of the sun broke the sky, I took human form again. Lifting my head from the waves, I took a gulping first breath and waited for my lungs to reinflate. The water was warm and soothing, and I floated face up, trying to subdue the voices in my head while I drifted into the shallows.

I could still hear my family, the echoes of them rippling on the currents. They laughed and talked, the young ones playing noisy games while I listened from a distance. At night I lurked on the outer fringes of their realm, hoping for someone to notice me, but wasn't that the whole point of exile? I could never return.

I rolled over in the water and closed my eyes, feeling the sun's warmth stroke my back. I'd need to get out soon, and retrieve some clothes. Humans took a dim view of nudity these days, and there were more of them around in the summer.

Matiu had loved this stretch of coastline. If he ever came to look for me, he'd come here. This was where we'd kissed for the first time. After that, we'd fucked here more times than I could count, well away from spying eyes.

Thundering, splashing footsteps broke into my memories. Before I could react, hands grabbed me, tugging on my hair and dragging my face out of the water. What the fuck?

*"Jesus. Are you okay? Please don't be dead."* Panic threaded his voice, and I recognised him immediately. The dog walker with the nice smile. My brain finally woke up, and I felt like smacking myself on the forehead. He'd thought I was drowning, an impossibility. How fucking funny was that?

There was a bizarre moment where he tried to haul me out of the water and I resisted, before he saw that I was actually conscious. "I'm fine, you can let go."

"You were face down. I thought..." He swallowed, and stared at me, his eyes wide and scared. "Christ on a bike, I was freaking out." He swayed, as though his knees were shaking, the water continuing to swirl around his thighs. "I came early to walk Butch, and then I saw you."

His eyes widened further when I stood up. "You're, um." His gaze darted to my crotch and then up again, to fix on my face. "You've lost your shorts." Colour splashed his cheeks, and I felt sorry for his embarrassment.

"I swim naked. I prefer it."

He nodded, water droplets sliding down his face, over the now coarse stubble. His T-shirt stuck to his chest, highlighting perfectly sculptured muscles, and for a heartbeat, I was tempted to touch him.

Shaking the thought away, I folded my arms before I had any more random ideas. "Thanks, though. Even though I was in no difficulty, I appreciate it."

This drew a smile. "Yeah, no, it's all good."

The familiar Kiwi phrase struck me as funny, or maybe it was just the situation. It felt like the start of a bad joke: a sea monster and a tour guide were standing in the ocean... And the tour guide was shivering. His jeans looked black, they were so full of water. I knew I'd regret it, but I couldn't walk away and leave him. "You're soaked. I live close by if you want a towel and to borrow a change of clothes." I jerked my chin toward the simple wooden beach house that nestled against the dunes.

A smile lit up his face again. "Thanks." He turned and splashed through the last few yards by my side. "I'm TJ, by the way."

"Henare," I replied, before I thought about it. *Whoa*. We didn't need conversation; I didn't want to know his name. I was going to lend him a change of clothes, that was all.

The mutt was obviously torn between hiding from me, and rushing toward its master. It growled as we approached, and bared its teeth. The fangs were tiny compared to mine in my native form, but his bravery amused me.

"I don't know what's up with him." TJ sounded puzzled.

"Dogs don't like me." Nor did anyone else, and that was the way I wanted it. I'd no intention of making friends with TJ, so it didn't matter if I ignored his dog. All the same, with a little sigh, I bent down and showed it my bare hands. This drew a sniff, and a tentative lick across my palm, and then he rolled onto his back and assumed the belly-up-you've-beaten-me position. I had to smile.

TJ's teeth were chattering by now, and I hastened to lead the way across the sand to my cottage, Butch following closely at my heels.

I'd learned early on that to fit into society, I had to follow certain norms. A home. An income, from intricately carved pieces of driftwood. I had no need for food or drink, and I didn't need to sleep, but the little cottage I rented had come fully furnished. This was the first time I'd invited anyone back. What if

he got the wrong idea? He might want to become friends, or come back uninvited.

“Wait here.” I left him dripping in the doorway, while I went to fetch him a towel. He’d need some clothes too, and so I dug out a T-shirt and a pair of board shorts—another concession I made to “fit in”. If they were too big, that was too bad. I was done helping. I dragged a pair of denims over my already dry legs and hurried back to find him.

TJ hadn’t moved. Another tick in his favour. Butch sat by his feet, tongue lolling and perfectly relaxed, and his thick tail thumped when I approached.

“Here.” I handed him the bundle and then realised he needed some privacy. “You can get changed in there.” I gestured toward the bathroom with my fingers and tried not to watch as he padded across the wooden floor, the jeans hugging his perfect ass. I turned my focus to the dog instead. Butch gazed up at me, the fear gone. “What are you staring at, hound?”

He made a whining noise and flopped to the floor, the huge brown eyes tracking my every movement. Maybe he was thirsty? Against my better judgement, I went to fetch a bowl of water, and as I placed it on the floor, TJ emerged from the bathroom.

My clothes were loose on him, but not by much. In the bright light of morning, I could finally see his eyes properly and they took my breath away. Green with gold flecks, they reminded me of the inside of a mussel shell, and they danced with amusement.

“I thought you said dogs didn’t like you?”

I had no smart answer for that, so I said nothing and tried to scowl at him. He was invading my space. Wearing my clothes. Smiling at me as though he liked what he saw.

Falling back on rudeness seemed the only safe option. “You need to leave.”

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

The sun began its slow glide down the sky and the afternoon drifted into early evening. I watched the families packing up for the day, the fishermen clustering together, and the joggers materialising now the temperature had dropped. The sea had been as placid as an inland lake, and I wondered how TJ's tour had gone, and then wondered why the hell I cared.

As though he heard me thinking about him, he appeared in the distance, Butch trotting on the end of a long leash. I didn't move from my driftwood seat. *He might not see me.*

I was wrong. He lifted his hand in a cheery wave, and I had to acknowledge him. I'd have looked stupid otherwise. His stride lengthened, and before I knew it, TJ stood in front of me, a now familiar grin dancing on his face. "Henare. I'm glad I caught you." He tugged on the dog lead and then, with a graceful twisting move, released a small backpack from his shoulder.

"I've brought your gear back. Thanks." He dug into the pack and produced my clothes, neatly folded.

"Umm, thanks." I set them on the bleached log next to me and stared at the sea while I waited for him to leave.

He didn't take the hint. Instead, he rummaged in the bag again and produced something with a flourish. I gazed at the four bottles of beer in his hand.

"I brought you a proper thank you." His smile was too enticing. Jesus, what had I started? Instinct told me to refuse the gift, but curiosity made me hesitate. I couldn't get drunk, and I'd never tasted beer. Today was a day of firsts. Maybe it would also be the day I put Matiu behind me? The idea made my chest ache, and I tried to push past it.

"Beer. Thanks. Do you want to, uh, join me?"

"Love to." TJ sank onto the golden sand, and Butch settled down between us. "I just grabbed the first I came to, do you like this one?" He snapped off the metal cap and handed me the cold bottle, moisture clinging to the glass.

I took it cautiously, and pretended to examine the label. "Not tried it." *Not tried any.* "I'm sure it'll be good."

“Cool.” He opened his own drink, and lifted the bottle to tap gently against mine. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I muttered. The scent reminded me of fresh green hedgerows, almost floral. Unusual. I copied TJ when he took a drink, tipping the bottle to my mouth and gulping the liquid. Cold, sharp and yet sweet, a fizz of bubbles filled my mouth and came down my nose, making me cough. What the hell?

TJ raised his eyebrows, but I recovered and took a smaller sip, holding the beer in my mouth for a second before swallowing. Flavours cascaded onto my tongue and exploded on the roof of my mouth. This was good. I drank some more. Really good. Why had I never tried beer before?

The bottle was already half-empty and I stared at it, feeling TJ watching me. “I like it.” What could I give him in return for this experience? I could talk to him. “How was the tour?”

He leaned back against the driftwood and wriggled his shoulders, as though getting comfortable. His dark, silky hair lay just inches away. “It was good. Mostly rich Americans, but they were all fit enough for the climb.” He tilted his head to look up at me, in the way Matiu used to. “You’ve been to Kapiti Island, yeah?” A flood of memories hit me and I was unable to speak, so I nodded. “We took the shortest route to the summit and it only took a couple of hours. The views were awesome today. As clear as I’d seen it.”

The island was designated a nature reserve, and there were only limited numbers of people allowed to visit. Matiu and I had spent time there hundreds of years ago, before the native Maori settlers had even set foot there. *Stop thinking about him, Henare.* With an effort, I listened to TJ’s chatter, and the ache eased a little. I could do this again. Spend an undemanding hour with a handsome guy, even if he did seem determined to become a friend.

TJ opened and held out another bottle, swapping it for my empty one. “Yeah, it was a good day,” he concluded, and closed his eyes against the low sun. “I won’t come running into the sea tomorrow morning, now I know you don’t need rescuing.” His chuckle loosened something tight inside me.

“No, you really don’t need to.”

“You know what?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here now. It’s all good.”

He reached down and fondled Butch’s ear, and the dog grunted. I watched his fingers slide back and forward in the thick fur, gentle and graceful. There

wasn't anything ugly about this man. I took the opportunity to examine his face, noting the long, thick eyelashes and the bruise blooming on his cheek.

“What happened? To your face? The bruise.”

“Some jerk decked me this afternoon. Thought I was ogling his chick.” He didn't sound upset.

“Were you?”

“Nah.” He opened his eyes and pinned me with the blast from his stare. “I'm not into chicks.”

My mouth instantly dried, and I took another gulp of beer. He was perfect for me. Young, hot and interested. Lust pooled in my gut, and all the blood in my body shot to my dick.

Even as my brain processed his words and my body reacted, I felt another pull, one that could not be ignored. The tattoo on my arm heated, a warning of my imminent change, and I dragged my gaze up to see the sun minutes from setting.

Fuck. How long had we sat here? I needed to go.

TJ closed his eyes again, his shoulders sagging. “Don't be offended, Henare. If you want to punch out my lights as well, feel free. Every other fucker does.”

The tattoo started to burn. I had two minutes at most.

“I have to go,” I blurted. Before I could change my mind—or consider the implications—I leaned down and cupped TJ's cheek. His skin was smooth, he must have shaved before coming to see me.

It was the swiftest of kisses. No more than a featherlight touch, my lips brushing over his. “I'm not offended,” I whispered. “But I still have to go.”

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## Chapter 4

For the first time since I'd been cast out of my realm, I looked forward to the sun rising. When I drew breath, I swam through the waves to the shore and splashed through the shallows, anticipation bubbling through my veins. Would TJ be there?

Memories of the kiss-that-wasn't-a-kiss surged. In truth, they'd not been far from my thoughts all night. The way his eyes had snapped open. The desire that had flashed between us. The disappointment on his face when I hurried away, darting behind him into the cover of the dune, just a couple of strides away.

There hadn't even been time to strip before my human form dissolved into a cloud of moisture particles and arrowed back to the sea, to merge with the ocean. I'd heard TJ call my name, and then I'd submerged beneath the waves. What must he have thought?

I saw Butch first, trotting along the shoreline, a stick in his mouth. *Not* on his leash. As soon as he saw me, he bounded across and tossed the stick at my feet with a playful *woof*. If the dog was here, TJ would not be far away.

Throwing the stick seemed to be what the hound wanted, and he raced after it while I padded across the sand. Where was TJ? Apart from Butch and myself, there was nobody... and then I saw him. He sat on the dry sand close to my cottage. Watching me.

I blew out a breath, tension leaking from my shoulders, and I fought to hide my smile. He was here. An unusual emotion settled in my chest, one I'd never imagined feeling again. *Pleasure*. His wide smile suggested he felt the same.

I paused, a few steps from him and reined in my first thoughts before they became words. I sought something neutral. "You've let Butch run free?"

"There's nobody about for him to run after." His gaze darted down my nakedness to my half-hard cock, before rising slowly to my face. "You must have gone out early." His cheeks coloured, and he shrugged. "I mean, I've been here a while and didn't see you go out. Do you swim far?"

*Hundreds of miles*. "Yes, I like to swim." I tried to contain my delight, wanting to hold onto the emotion. He'd been waiting for me. *Unlike Matiu*. I clenched my fists at the memory of my lover, and TJ noticed.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to stalk you or anything.” He tensed, and I could sense his uncertainty.

“I’m glad you came back,” I replied.

He scrambled to his feet, a hopeful look in his eyes. “The way you disappeared last night. I thought, well, yeah. I couldn’t be sure.” He gave an awkward one-shouldered shrug.

He’d come back, that was what mattered, and I didn’t want him to doubt that. “Be sure of this.” I curled one hand gently in his T-shirt—so soft—and tugged him toward me. He moved fluidly to stand close, our mouths just inches apart. I could smell something sweet on his breath. “I don’t like girls either.”

His answering smile was a thing of beauty.

It felt like the most natural thing to lean into TJ, and claim his lips, even while alarm bells shrieked inside my head. I never kissed. That implied more than physical lust, more of a connection, just *more*. I wanted to fuck him, that was all. I was about to pull back and say something, when he made a broken sound in his throat and opened up to me. His tongue flicked over mine, and I was scorched in a blast of heat.

Sweet, hot and enticing, I wanted more. My cock pulsed with need, and I flexed my hips to brush against his denims. A shockwave of sensation flooded me and I knew in that moment, I had to have him.

TJ lifted his head. “We should move,” he whispered, his eyes bright and pupils dilated. *Move?*

My brain caught up with his words, and I sucked in a harsh breath. “Come.” I stepped behind him and pushed open the door. Another first. I’d never fucked here before. He followed, the dog bounding alongside, and then he leaned against the door to close it. The cottage was dim inside. The morning sun wouldn’t reach the windows for some time, but I didn’t need light for this.

“I want you.” I planted my palms on the door, either side of TJ’s head. “Now.”

His response was to slide one hand onto my neck and tug down my head. “Fuck, yeah.” The kiss this time was harder, almost rough. I nipped at the full lips, my teeth grazing at his skin, and my tongue soothing the sting away. Heat flashed between us, and when I dropped one hand to cup him, he moaned at my touch, his hard-on jerking beneath my fingers.

“Take me, *please*.” TJ’s voice was strained, as though he surfed the edge of control too. It would take very little for me to turn him, drag down his jeans and take him right here, against the door. He moved, fumbled with his jeans, and then with a clink of a belt buckle, and a rustle of heavy fabric, they were gone, pooling around our feet.

He wore no underwear. His cock bumped up against mine and I heard his breath hitch. Gods, that felt good. I sent a mental thank you to mighty Tangaroa, God of the Sea, for sending TJ to me. I hadn’t fucked in an age.

“Here.” He shoved a foil packet in my hand. “I can’t wait.” Humans insisted on condoms, and usually lube. I only carried them when I went looking for sex, and I wondered if TJ was the same, or if he was always prepared. It didn’t matter. Within moments my dick was covered, and straining inside the thin latex.

I couldn’t see his eyes clearly in the near darkness, but I found his mouth easily for another kiss. He was addictive.

As if he’d read my thoughts, TJ turned to face the door and bent slightly. “Now. *Please*, Henare.”

By Tangaroa, his ass was as perfect as I’d guessed, the skin smooth and unblemished to my touch. His whimper made me smile, and I took my time, teasing with one finger between his clenched cheeks. “Lube?”

“Just do it.”

I didn’t want to hurt him, and the thought made me pause. Why was I bothered? I sucked on my fingers anyway, and teased some more, before sliding one wet digit inside his ass. His groan of pleasure reverberated through my aching cock. I could wait no longer.

The first push into his tight hole made my head spin. Heat enveloped me and I plunged deeper, filling him, taking everything.

The world around me ceased to exist. I pumped steadily in and out, each thrust dragging a moan from the man I pinned to the door, every movement hauling me closer to a dizzying climax, held at bay by sheer force of will. His T-shirt was soft under my hand, and I pressed my fingers into his shoulder. Such contrast. Firm, strong muscles and bones, all hidden from view. I’d admire them later.

Reaching around his front, I took his cock in my fist and squeezed.

“*Henare.*” He cried my name and I lost it. I dug my teeth into the soft flesh at the base of his neck and let the orgasm roll over me, coming in waves until I was spent. I sagged over him, my knees strangely weak, and the breath tight in my lungs. What the fuck just happened? *He called out my name.* Another reminder of Matiu.

My worlds collided for the briefest moment. The man I yearned for, and the man panting beside me. I could pretend they were one and the same. His cock like granite in my hand, I wanted to pleasure him. With care, I eased out of his ass, earning another whimper. His turn now. Pre-cum was sticky on his cockhead, and I used it to slick my fingers, before gliding along his length.

“Jesus, that’s good.” No, he mustn’t speak. I couldn’t pretend otherwise. I released his shoulder and stuffed two fingers into his mouth, to keep him quiet. He sucked them, eager and intent, and I continued to jack him off, fast and hard, until he came over my hand.

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## Chapter 5

We'd fucked. It was time for TJ to leave, only... I didn't want him to go just yet. He wriggled within the confines of my arms, and turned to face me. "I don't... it's never..." He swallowed, as though the words had stuck in his throat.

Had I misread him? Anxiety speared my temples, and I stroked an unsteady finger down his stubbled cheek. "Did I hurt you?"

His soft huff of laughter warmed my chest. "Fuck, no." He gazed back at me, holding the connection. "It was amazing."

Leaning into him, claiming those full, soft lips again, felt right. Instinctive. As did tossing aside the condom, taking TJ's hand and leading him into the previously unused bedroom. I was acting so far outside my normal behaviour that I didn't recognise myself.

Knowing that still wasn't enough to stop me.

I wanted to go slow this time, to savour the experience. TJ stripped the T-shirt over his head leaving him as blissfully naked as me. The only thing he wore was a chunky watch, and a smile.

"Let me taste you." He sank gracefully to his knees and gazed up at me, an impish grin on his face. I nodded, unable to speak, and helpless with longing. My dick was hard and ready to go again, and it thickened even further when TJ closed his sweet lips around it.

*Holy Tangaroa.* This was more than I expected. Moist heat enveloped my cockhead, sparking so many sensations that my knees were buckling under the onslaught. I had to grab the decorative chest of drawers for balance. Bit by bit, TJ took my cock. It must have been uncomfortable, but he swallowed, glanced up at me, and then took the last inch, leaving his nose pressing into my groin.

How could he breathe? The myriad of anonymous fucks had never matched this, or even come close. Millions of nerve endings sang in pleasure, and that was before he started to move. Long slow glides to almost leave his mouth, before he sucked again, back and forth, in and out. My chest tightened, the air constricting in my lungs.

I, the dreaded *Taniwha*, was reduced to helplessness by this man on his knees. He'd almost made me human.

His tongue laved the underside, swirled over the head, and caused stars to flash before my eyes. “*TJ.*” I dug for control, to wrestle back some power, but he ignored me. My balls ached with the need to come, but I feared he’d choke. “*Stop,*” I managed to gasp, before coherent thought disappeared altogether.

Worry flitted across his beautiful eyes, but he let my cock slide from his mouth. His lips were dark and swollen. Edible. “Did I do something you don’t like?”

“No.” I sucked in a ragged breath, my heart pounding. “It was too good.”

TJ’s smile was sweet. “There’s no such thing. Will you come in my mouth? Please?”

He offered freely what I’d only ever taken before. As easily as he took my cock into his mouth, he slipped under my defences, and chipped away at another piece of my armour. I wanted him too much. I couldn’t refuse.

This time, he stroked my super-sensitive balls while he sucked, and I couldn’t stop. I erupted into his throat, fierce spasms that seemed to last forever, each spurt robbing me of my sanity.

I stared, open-mouthed, when TJ licked me clean. His dick jutted forward, hard and flushed, and it cried for my attention.

*I don’t do this.*

I only touched him earlier because I pretended he was Matiu.

I don’t give.

Sinking onto the bed, I held out my hand to him. “Come here.” My voice was little more than a rasp. TJ scrambled to his feet, and then perched on the edge of the bed. “I want to touch you.” The words were unfamiliar when I spoke. I’m not sure I’d ever used them.

A smile to rival the sun lit his face, and he wriggled back, to sprawl against the pillows. “I want that too, Henare.”

Not sure where to start, I lay on my side next to him, and slowly stroked his dick with my fingertips. Root to tip, I mapped the veins and listened to the sounds he made, learning what he liked. Over the head, I slicked through the gleaming pearl of pre-cum, and then used that to lubricate my fist. Watching him, seeing the signs of his arousal, and feeling him, satisfied me in a way I’d never known possible. How could it be that I was getting turned on, by pleasuring him?

It made no sense, but judging by the pink flush on his cheeks, and the way his eyes glazed, he was enjoying it. I pumped his shaft, the way I like to touch myself, and his whimpers turned to groans. Desire unfurled again in my belly, and my cock stirred. I could do this all day. Touch him, and then fuck him. I squeezed harder and found a faster rhythm, his erection hot and sticky within my hand.

“Henare,” he whispered, and tugged at my head. Our lips met a second before he came, the hot streams splashing over his stomach. Beautiful.

“Christ,” he muttered, his head dropping back onto the pillow. “I don’t think I can move. Do you have any tissues?”

No. I dug into one of the nearby drawers and produced a T-shirt. “Use this.”

TJ’s eyes flicked open, his surprise tangible. “I can’t use your shirt. I’ll get some toilet paper.” He wouldn’t find any, but he didn’t know that. I forestalled his argument by wiping him clean, and then dropping the shirt onto the floor.

The first fingers of daylight peeped through the window, and strayed across the bed. I wanted to look at TJ some more, see his face illuminated by the sun, and wonder at what he was doing to me.

I slid my finger over the purple stain on TJ’s cheek. “Who else has hurt you? The ‘other fuckers’?”

He gave that awkward one-shouldered shrug that I already associated with him. “Does it matter?”

Something heated inside my chest. “Yes. It does.”

“Fuck.” TJ dragged a hand through his hair, before meeting my eyes. “My dad. My stepfather. My brother.”

“Your *family*?” Why would they do this?

“Because I’m gay, that’s why. Families suck. Mostly. My Gran was lovely, and my sister is awesome, but the rest of them can go to hell.”

Yes, we had something in common there. “I don’t see my family anymore.” *They disowned me.* “They caught me with my lover and...” *Exiled me.* “Couldn’t accept it.” My heart banged painfully against my ribs, and the words dried in my mouth. I’d never spoken of this before.

“*Henare.*” TJ stroked my neck, his fingers caressing the fine hairs, soothing me. “That’s awful. What happened to him? Your lover?”

*He abandoned me. Walked away as though I meant nothing.* My skin prickled and felt too hot. I couldn't talk about this. TJ's fingers continued to whisper over my neck, his gaze holding mine. *He didn't judge me.* "Matiu was my oldest friend and he told me he'd come back one day. I'm still waiting." I shook my head.

I'd said too much.

The beautiful young man by my side said nothing, but his eyes spoke volumes. When he kissed me, his lips were gentle.

I could have stayed there all day, lying next to TJ, skin to skin, feeling his heart beating beneath my palm, his soft breath as he slept. I would watch over him. My family wanted to pretend I'd never existed, but they'd never physically hurt me. Which was the easier to bear?

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## Chapter 6

The sun was fully through the windows when TJ stirred. Stretching, he yawned and scratched at his chin, then opened his eyes and saw me. Surprise flickered across his face, and then desire and he reached up to claim a kiss. “Shit,” he mumbled, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“I didn’t mind.” I meant it. I didn’t want him to leave, but wasn’t sure how to say it. As I sought the words, he glanced at his watch and groaned.

“Hell. I need to get moving, I don’t want to be late.”

Disappointment surged, but I swallowed it down. I was being foolish if I thought he wanted to spend more time with me.

“Hey, are you free today? Maybe you could come? If you wanted to.” TJ messed with his hair some more and met my gaze. “I just thought, you know.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t contain my smile. “I would like to come with you.”

“That’s great.” He climbed out of bed and picked up his T-shirt. “You might not be so keen when I tell you what I’m doing.”

His body was so perfect, it was a shame to cover it with clothing. I stared at his ass when he walked into the bathroom. He would be mine again soon.

TJ paused on the way out, and gestured to my carvings, the works in progress that covered the table. “You make these?” I nodded, and his eyes opened wide. “Wow. They’re amazing. I’ve seen them for sale but didn’t know they were yours.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. “Should we go?”

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TJ gestured toward the sprawling house at the end of the track. “This used to be my gran’s place. She’s been gone a few years now, but her friend lives here still.” TJ flashed me a smile. “I do odd jobs for her, and today I’m bringing in her firewood.”

It was the middle of summer, and had been hot for weeks. “Odd time of year to need firewood?”

“Yeah, about that.” TJ stopped walking, shoved his hands in his pockets and stared into the distance. “I’m not going to be here this winter.”

I paused beside him. "Oh?"

"I'm going overseas. You know how us Kiwis always want to fly the nest." The shimmering sea in the distance held his attention.

I processed his words. "You're going far?"

"Uh huh. England. About as far as you can get."

"Your sister," I murmured.

"Yeah." He gave me a hint of a smile. "She's got a year left at Cambridge, and has a room free in her house. I miss her, you know." *I knew*. I understood that only too well. TJ rubbed the back of his neck. "It's been my goal for years, and I've saved every cent I can lay my hands on. And yeah. My flight's already booked."

"How soon?"

"Next week."

My turn to stare at the sea, the sensation of loss painfully familiar. Why did I care? As Butch darted up to me and licked my hand, I clung to the truth. TJ was just another anonymous fuck. I'd have forgotten him by tomorrow.

TJ's friend was a bright-eyed, plump lady with weather-beaten skin and a mop of tangled grey curls. She could have been anywhere between fifty and eighty, and moved slowly to greet us, leaning heavily on a wooden stick. Butch was visibly delighted to see her and bounded up, his tail wagging fit to burst. She hugged TJ hard and then turned to me. "I'm Elizabeth. And who might you be?"

TJ wriggled from her embrace. "This is Henare," he announced, a curious note of pride in his voice.

I shook her hand, surprised by the firm grip. "I'm honoured to meet you." My manners were rusty, but she smiled and tilted her head to one side, as though looking for something.

"You too," she murmured. "Now are you both ready to work? I have a mountain of logs just waiting for your attention."

There was something solid and mindless about heavy labour, and I lost myself in an afternoon of chopping, hauling, and stacking. TJ threw himself into the task and there was no need for conversation, but he bantered with me, teasing and playful. He treated me like a friend. *A lover*.

As for laughing, my sides ached and my stomach hurt more and more as the day passed. I had never been so amused by anything, as by the sight of Butch galloping after a stray seagull, with no hope of catching it. The gull squawked rudely and then returned to taunt the hound some more.

Elizabeth brought us drinks and snacks, and after refusing the first time, I acquiesced and sampled her food. Little sticky pastries, fragrant with spice and drenched in sugar, they melted on my tongue. It would almost be worth being human if I could eat these every day. For once, I didn't gaze blindly to the ocean and brood over what I had lost; instead I sat with TJ in the late afternoon sunshine, and just enjoyed the moment.

Did he have any idea of how delectable he looked? He sat in the doorway to Elizabeth's woodshed, dust and woodchips clinging to his clothes, and a twig tangled in his hair. Dirt smudged both cheeks, but his smile was bright and happy.

"Thanks, Henare." He squinted at me in the sunshine. "I've got it done in half the time with your help."

I inclined my head, unsure how to answer. I enjoyed it too? You made me forget for a few hours? The realisation that he too would be leaving soon, left a bitter taste in my mouth, one that not even Elizabeth's baking could shift.

Walking back, I contemplated how to ask TJ to return to my cottage with me, when he nudged my arm with his elbow. "Hey, my housemate is away for a couple of days. We could go to my place if you like."

His place, a tidy clapboard house, was a short walk from the beach and by my reckoning, we had four hours before the sun set. We could do a lot in that time. We'd barely made it through the door before he was in my arms, and we were kissing the fuck out of each other. Desire, on a slow simmer all day, ratcheted up to fever pitch in the blink of an eye.

TJ smelled of wood and green leaves, and his lips tasted of sugary spice. The combination would always remind me of this man, and take me back to this moment in time. I hungered for him with an urgency I'd long forgotten.

With our clothes making a trail across the floor, we fell onto his bed in a tangle of limbs. TJ lay beneath me, his cock grasped in one firm fist, while he ground onto my belly. Every movement made me harder, and he paused his teasing to kiss me, sucking on my bottom lip for a second.

"I've got lube and condoms in the drawer." He didn't take his eyes off me, the shimmering green lighting up his face. Moments later, he dropped a foil

packet and a small bottle onto the bed, and I hastened to fit the rubber. I was close already. It wouldn't take long before I came, and this thought made me pause. It was no longer just about me. TJ had gifted me a perfect day, and I wanted to give him something back.

Instead of flipping him onto his front, I nudged at his legs, encouraging him to let me reach his asshole. Excitement flickered in his eyes, and he tucked up his knees, watching eagerly as I poured lube into my palm and slicked my fingers.

Slowly, with the utmost care, I stroked his tight pucker, making him moan before I slipped a finger inside. A second followed, and then a third, to pump in and out. Watching his obvious pleasure, and listening to the little sounds he made, somehow heightened everything for me. I'd never forget him. He was already way more than a casual fuck, and now, my chest ached at the thought of losing this intimacy.

"Now, Henare." He sounded breathless. I knew how he felt.

Removing my fingers, I guided my cock inside him slowly, prolonging the sensation, feeling every inch of my erection being squeezed. So tight, so intense. From this position I could kiss him, stroke his own hardness, and then gaze into his eyes as I fucked him. Every slap of flesh, every moan, made me harder, but this time I didn't rush. I was already saying good-bye to him.

His hair fell limp onto his perspiration-slicked forehead and framed his beautiful eyes. I wanted to remember every moment of this. Every thrust. Every heartbeat.

"Oh, *God*. Henare, I'm going to come." I fisted his cock and watched it erupt, and felt my own orgasm draw closer. It would be unstoppable. A tsunami that threatened to destroy me with its intensity. I hovered on a knife-edge, unable to hold back, and gave in to a climax unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

This had been perfection. Nothing could come close.

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TJ lay with his head on my shoulder, his fingers drawing loose circles on my chest. "I'm going to a party tonight, do you want to come with me?" I tensed immediately, and he sighed, warm breath drifting over my skin. "It doesn't have to be as my partner, just a friend. It's at the boating club, the guy who runs the Kapiti Island tours." He peeped up at me, his eyes hopeful.

“D’you think you might? And then maybe,” he smiled but it looked nervous. “Maybe, you could stay the night. If you want to.”

The stark difference between us was highlighted yet again. My night, as every night, would be spent in the ocean, guarding this stretch of coastline. There would be no parties, no easy gatherings with his friends. No long nights curled up together, warm and sheltered from the elements.

“No. I can’t.” My voice was gruff, and his gaze fell.

“Yeah, okay.” His finger continued its soothing motion. “Was that no to the party or spending the night? Or both?”

“Both.” His hand stilled. I needed to tell him something, but what? “I have to be somewhere else.” It wasn’t a lie, but it was the closest I would ever come to the truth. He waited, as though expecting me to say more. The silence stretched between us, growing cooler and more uncomfortable by the second.

He spoke first. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. It’s short notice, I get that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. That wasn’t a lie either.

I held him close, spooned around him. From here I could kiss his neck and pretend I didn’t have to leave, that he wouldn’t be leaving either. I couldn’t do this again. He’d made me feel, made me *want*. Dangerous emotions. Ones I could not afford.

When I left here tonight, it would be good-bye forever.

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## Chapter 7

When the sun rose, I stayed in the water for longer, watching from a safe distance to see if TJ came to my cottage. He did, and waited for an age, just sitting there on the sand, looking out to the ocean.

Emotions churned and dragged at my stomach, reminding me how I felt when Matiu walked away from me. This was completely different, I scoffed to myself. Matiu and I had been together for hundreds of years. I'd spent one day with TJ. *One perfect day.* And he was leaving soon. Better that he thought I didn't care, than to wait for me, hoping I'd come back.

Was that what Matiu had thought too? Had he wanted to stop me from pining for him? I couldn't decide how I felt about this.

I feasted my eyes on TJ, from my obscured position in the waves. He would get over me. With those sparkling eyes and bright smile, he'd make new friends and lovers easily. My chest heated at the thought of another man touching him, and I pushed the emotion away.

He was not mine. He never could be.

Eventually, TJ walked to the water's edge and dropped to a crouch. He was making another offering. He must be going to Kapiti Island again today. The sea was calm as a millpond, and it would be a beautiful day for his trip. I'd collect some clothes when he left, and go sit on another beach today, just in case he came back. In fact, I'd stay away until I was sure he'd left the country next week.

I couldn't risk seeing him.

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I watched the little boat speeding away toward Kapiti Island and wondered if TJ was aboard. Wondered if he was thinking about me. Did I need to maintain this separation? Surely I could just enjoy what he offered while he was here?

I'd never been a coward before, but I'd never felt such an intense connection before. Not even with Matiu. I had to stick with my decision.

I spent the day staring out to sea as usual, but further up the coastline, in a position where I'd see TJ's boat when it returned. He wouldn't see me, but I'd know he was safely back.

The afternoon crawled. Sitting on a rock, waiting for the time to pass, I noticed a disturbance in the water near the island. I squinted to see more clearly. In the space of a few minutes, clouds thickened and a strong wind whipped up from nowhere, creating white foam horses on the waves. Heavy rain lashed the island and moved toward the shore, sending holidaymakers scattering for cover.

This was not normal. This had the mark of the Sea Gods.

Logic battled with fear. TJ was out there on a tiny boat, at the mercy of the elements.

Maybe he wasn't on the boat after all, hadn't made the trip today? I ran to the boathouse, heedless of the other people darting for cover from the rain, and I barged through the doors. Skidding to a stop on the tiled floor, I spun around. There must be somebody here that would know.

A young woman stood behind a counter, her eyes wide as she stared at me. I sucked in a quick breath and strode toward her. "TJ. Was he on the Kapiti Island trip today?"

"TJ Morgan? Yes, he's the guide." She hugged a clipboard to her chest, as though it was a shield. "And you are...?"

"A friend. Are they in difficulties?"

She frowned, and pushed her blonde hair back from her face. "Not as such. They've just had to delay their return trip with the weather."

Relief flooded my chest, and I acknowledged how fiercely my heart was pounding. "They're not on the water at the moment?"

"No. They'll wait until it clears. What did you say your name was?"

I just nodded to her, turned around and left. TJ was safe on the island. My knees sagged, and I dropped onto a nearby bench, unable to walk any further. *Think, Henare.* Why would the Sea Gods be angry? All had been quiet in the ocean the night before. And more to the point, why were they targeting Kapiti Island, at exactly the time that my lover was there?

Mighty Tangaroa, had I put TJ at risk? I couldn't breathe past the ice that filled my lungs. Was this down to Matiu? Was he jealous?

Ignoring the wind and the stinging shards of hail, I sat on the beach and watched the island, and waited for the storm to pass. The rain made visibility

difficult, and cut down on available light, but shortly before sundown the storm broke.

Whatever had been happening, it must be over now. The skies cleared, evening stars slid from behind the dense cloud, and the sea calmed back to its earlier gentle undulation. The only thing remaining was an eerie purple cast to the sunset. I leaned forward, searching for the dancing lights that would signal TJ's boat setting off.

The tattoo heated on my arm, and I huffed a sigh of relief. Ducking under the nearby trees, I shed my clothes and dissolved into a cloud of water droplets, before heading straight for the ocean.

I felt the chaos immediately. All the creatures that lived in this stretch of water had taken cover, hiding from the unnatural storm that had raged above. *Taniwha* essence was everywhere, the sparkling residue we left behind. There had been a battle beneath the waves, but I couldn't sense if it had been a fight between a *Taniwha* and another monster, or two of my kind. There was no external threat now, of that I was confident. After guarding this place for all my adult life, I would know if an enemy was here. So was the battle nothing to do with me after all? My spirits lifted.

I surfaced, still in elemental form, close to the island. A small boat rocked gently next to the loading platform, and as I watched, a stream of passengers climbed aboard. Eight bright yellow lifejackets settled into the craft, but TJ was not among them. A flash of yellow on the pebbled beach caught my attention and I waited, just a swirling cloud of water vapour hugging the waves.

Yes. It was TJ. He scrambled in at the back and checked on all the passengers. "My cell phone is still dead, and so's the radio."

The captain of the vessel was busy with his engine. "Keep the flares handy. Just in case. It's only a short hop back, but you never know with these storms."

I would go with them. Make sure they returned safely.

The engine roared and then dropped to a steady, throbbing purr, and the craft eased away from the dock. TJ held the rail with one hand, his attention fixed on Kapiti Island in the growing darkness.

I was so focused on watching my lover, I failed to see the other *Taniwha* until it rose from the water. Right in front of the boat.

## Chapter 8

Matiu emerged from the ocean with a low growl, water cascading from his scales, all teeth and flashing claws. For a second, I was frozen. In his native form he was lethal, the most deadly of monsters, and the most feared creature of the deep. He was also magnificent.

I'd dreamed of meeting him again, longed to see him with every fibre of my being, but not like this.

His powerful tail crashed down, close to TJ's boat, sending a massive wave that rocked the small craft. Water poured over the edges and soaked the people huddled inside. The weather changed. A jagged bolt of lightning ripped the sky apart and hail clattered down, as though poured from a giant bucket.

Not like this.

Screams rang out as the boat tossed, helpless, the yellow jackets tangling together and separating again. The backwash from Matiu's tail threw the boat on its side and several yellow jackets dropped into the churning ocean.

Never like this.

It had happened faster than I could react. A heartbeat later, I assumed my native form and rose up, the waves parting in my wake. I stood between Matiu and the sinking boat. I would *not* let him harm them.

"We are guardians, not aggressors. Why are you doing this, Matiu?"

"Stand aside, Henare."

My old lover before me, my new lover behind. Could I be more torn? "You should not be doing this. They are innocent."

I heard screams. Sobbing. Pitiful cries for help that rang out over the noise of the storm. I couldn't hear TJ's voice, and fear gripped my heart like an icy fist.

Matiu snarled and flicked his spiny tail again. It snapped around like a whip, and caused another wild surge of water to smash into the helpless passengers. Into TJ. "He knows about the *Taniwha*. You told him. I am here to deliver judgement."

"Don't do this, Matiu. There is no need for judgement."

"I spoke to him." Matiu spat the words out. "Your *boyfriend*. He told me he has rituals for the *Taniwha*."

The cries were subsiding, but I daren't look, couldn't risk taking my eyes off Matiu. "He leaves offerings. You are casting judgement on someone for observing the ancient ways?" I advanced. Fury filled me, and I spoke through gritted teeth. "You are mistaken."

"I told you, Henare. Stand aside."

The wind intensified and the waves flew higher, whipped by the gale. More deadly by the second. I stood my ground and gazed into Matiu's coal black eyes. "I will not." The longer I could hold him back, the more chance TJ—and his passengers—had to escape.

"It's too late." There was a note of triumph in his growl. "They will have seen us now. They cannot be allowed to speak of this."

"It's dark. They will be confused by the water." I tightened my muscles and flexed my claws. "I will *not* allow you to do this." I hurled myself at Matiu, and lashed out with razor-sharp talons, swiping a hairsbreadth from his chest. *Taniwha* were created for fighting, but I didn't want to damage Matiu, just to drive him back.

He roared his anger, and the sea trembled. He didn't scare me, but I was afraid for TJ. I charged into Matiu's body again. Over and over, we crashed and hammered into each other, dodging the flailing claws and vicious teeth, both of us trying to achieve dominance. There was nothing I could do for TJ. I had to concentrate my entire focus on Matiu, and wait for the moment I could take him down.

I pushed him back, a step at a time, until his tail could do no further damage. His fury grew, and I knew he would make a mistake. I just had to be patient. With every second counting, putting the innocent people in more danger, patience was far from my mind. I had never been so angry. I had to hone that anger, focus it precisely and use it as a weapon.

There were just faint cries behind me now, and I had to act quickly. I hesitated, took my eyes off Matiu for the briefest moment, and half-turned to look over my shoulder.

He shrieked, and ploughed into me, in a move that would have knocked me over had I not been waiting for it. Twisting out of his reach, I used the momentum to wrap my tail around his legs and pull him to his knees.

His shock was visible, especially when I pinned him down, with my claws to the vulnerable skin on his throat. "Yield, Matiu. Let them go." He resisted. As I'd expected. I squeezed tighter with my tail, immobilising him while I dug my claws in deeper.

"You would choose that weak human over me?" His choked words cut me to my core.

"This is wrong, Matiu. Don't make it even worse."

He struggled, and I dug deeper with my tail, the barbs scraping under his scales. He'd been my lover, my closest friend. The last creature I would ever hurt. "Yield," I hissed to him.

His defiance was absolute. With a strength that surprised me, he twisted and almost pulled free, but I clung on, my talons shifting into a death grip under his chin. Our one vulnerability. "You are mistaken, Matiu." There was only silence now from the stricken boat. I swallowed down my fear for TJ, the despair flooding my veins. This had to be finished.

I squeezed hard. Cut off his breath.

I couldn't do it. Not even for TJ. I would never be able to live with myself.

Kicking Matiu hard, I pushed him under the waves. He'd be conscious within seconds, but that was all the time I needed. I turned back to the yellow jackets bobbing in the churning water and counted only two. Holy Tangaroa, where were the rest? Not TJ. *Please*.

As gently as I could, I used my tail to sweep the terrified passengers toward the shore and into calmer water. Toward the others that had already made it to the shingle beach. And there, was TJ.

My knees shook, but it was relief making me dizzy. He carried a woman out of the water, placed her on the ground near the others, and then turned and ran back to the waves, heedless of his own safety. I did a rapid count of yellow jackets. All there. The last two swept into the shallows and splashed with weak movements, to stand upright with TJ's help.

I stepped back, hiding behind the storm, and went to face Matiu.

He surfaced, water pouring from his scales, his teeth bared and deadly. If I'd thought him furious before, that was nothing compared to the rage flashing in his eyes.

"I spared you." My voice was frigid. "You will spare TJ in return."

The fury left him, replaced by uncertainty. "They may have seen us."

"Then punish me. Let me pay."

"You've been paying already. For my mistake." He sounded broken. "We can't talk here, Henare, and I need to speak with you. I've found a way for you to return. To be reinstated."

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## Chapter 9

Could it be possible? Could I return to my realm, my family, and my life? My lover? Thoughts tossed and danced in my brain, sparking like fireflies on a warm evening. What of TJ? And why was I even thinking about him? He was leaving in a matter of days anyway.

I shoved aside the strangely empty feeling in my chest, and sought my voice. "I would like to see you in your human form again. I'll wait on the other side of the island for you." The part where no humans ever set foot. The enormity of this threatened to overwhelm me, and I struggled to retain control. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he echoed. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then he slid beneath the waves and was gone. As though he'd flicked a switch, the sea calmed, the rain stopped and the wind eased. The passengers would put it down to a freak storm. After all, as far as they were concerned, the *Taniwha* were the stuff of legends.

Behind me, a whooshing noise heralded a brilliant crimson flare being fired into the sky. Now the sea was quiet, a rescue party would be here soon enough and TJ would be able to leave.

I might never see him again.

Fear cramped in my guts. I relived the never-ending moment when I thought he'd drowned, before I'd seen him on the land. What was it about TJ Morgan that had me tied up in knots? I was just lonely, but that would soon end. Until then, I would continue to watch over him, to make sure he returned safely to the mainland.

Blowing out a calming breath, I shifted to my elemental form and hovered, as a spray of water droplets, close to the shingle. I watched as TJ applied first aid skills, and I wondered where he left Butch when he came to the island. Dogs would not be allowed here. Perhaps he stayed with Elizabeth.

TJ limped away from the others, visibly in pain. He'd saved those people, while injured himself, and my heart swelled with pride. He sank onto the sun-bleached remains of a tree trunk, and gazed into the darkness, before sinking his head into his hands. Unable to keep my distance, I drifted closer. He'd never see me in the dark, never wonder why a cloud of water vapour hung in the air. The darkness was no barrier to my vision, and I feasted on his beauty.

The soft, silky hair. The sharp, determined chin. Those sultry lips. My lover had been perfect.

I longed to comfort him, to hold his hand, and take his mouth in a punishing kiss. I would miss him. He'd brought a light into the darkness of my cursed life, and he would always hold a piece of my heart. As though he knew I was there, he lifted his head and gazed in my direction. Exhaustion drew lines on his face that I ached to smooth away, but it was the despair in his eyes that tore at me.

The rescue vessel was swift to arrive, and efficient at loading all the passengers. TJ was the last to climb aboard, after one last look behind him. Maybe he was saying good-bye to the island?

I knew the crossing would be quick and safe, but I accompanied them to make sure. My last sight of TJ was as he hobbled into the boathouse.

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The tiny beach was inaccessible either on foot, or by boat, and made a perfect place to meet Matiu, well away from any spying eyes. I waited on the ribbon of sand, impatient and anxious at the same time. His words rang in my head on a constant loop: *I've found a way for you to return*. What had happened to change things? Were the old rules relaxing? Or had he found a loophole?

It didn't explain why he'd been trying to kill TJ.

No matter how much I burned for this chance to return, I needed to understand what Matiu had been thinking when he attacked my lover. I stared at my feet. *Not* my lover any more.

I felt his presence before I saw him. Turning slowly, I gazed on Matiu's human form for the first time in three hundred long, pain-filled years. Shaggy blond hair, so bright it was the colour of sunlight, eyes of the deepest green, and a smile that lit up the world. How had I survived so long without seeing him? Like me, he was beautifully, hungrily naked, his muscles toned and skin a pale gold. Soft hair adorned his chest, and I stared, greedy at the sight before me.

Matiu strode across the sand and clasped my arms in his warm hands. I blinked, as his scent filled my nose, wet sand and sea spray mingling in an irresistible combination. Slowly, with all the time in the world, our lips met and then slid apart again. A nervous kiss, both of us unsure about its reception. He tasted the same as I remembered. I knew he would feel the same too, if we came together. *If?* Surely I meant *when?*

Standing there, our hands on each other's shoulders, the years rolled away. There was nothing to say. I just wanted to enjoy this moment.

Matiu broke the silence. "I cannot stay long. I have petitioned mighty Tangaroa on your behalf and he is willing to grant clemency, if you plead your case. Things are different now."

Clemency? My heart swelled to bursting. Matiu must have worked hard for this opportunity, probably waited for many years. Excitement bubbled in my veins and I almost forgot how to breathe.

"When?" It came out as a whisper.

"Full moon." Matiu's smile was sweet. "Two weeks. You must stay here and in isolation until I come to fetch you." His fingers dug into my bare skin, reminding me of the thousands of times we'd touched each other. "You will be with us again soon, Henare."

Another thought of TJ broke through. There would be no chance to bid him good-bye. Isolation and reflection were essential parts of the ritual before seeing Tangaroa, a way of cleansing the spirit, and if I didn't take this opportunity it may never come again.

"Two weeks." I nodded. "I will wait here for you." After three hundred years, a couple of weeks would be nothing.

I'd imagined that if Matiu and I ever reconciled, we'd be starving for each other, unable to restrain ourselves. It was only after he left—a quick press of the lips later—that I realised I'd not been hard for him. He'd been soft too.

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My nights were spent circling Kapiti Island, and the days faded into a blur of sunshine, as I waited for the two weeks to pass. I couldn't keep TJ from my thoughts. Every time I thought I'd achieved a state of calm meditation, I'd remember his smile, and the raw hunger in his eyes. Even when I was restored to my full status, I'd not know what happened to him. *Taniwha* were not supposed to interact with mortals, and I guessed that's why Matiu had been so concerned.

My last—and only—meeting with Tangaroa had been when he declared my exile. When Matiu turned his back on me and refused to stand by my side. I wondered how long it had taken him to engineer this meeting, what price he'd had to pay? And if we could ever truly go back to those days of innocence?

It was the night of the full moon, and I was ready. In the final seconds before the sun disappeared, Matiu appeared on the sand. *At last*. I couldn't hold back my anticipation and I clasped his arms, eager and focused. "What happens now?"

His smile warmed me inside. "I will escort you. The court is in session and you will get your chance to petition for reinstatement." I thought he would kiss me, but no. He probably didn't want to disturb my already shaky composure. I followed his lead and took elemental form, arrowing into the sea and heading for the depths, for my realm. My home.

I was permitted to take robed human form in the Sea God's lair, and I gazed at the myriad of similarly attired *Taniwha* that bustled around the courtrooms. Tears pressed at the back of my eyes. Soon, I would see my family again. This would be my life once more.

Standing to one side, Matiu and I waited for my name to be called. I had so many things to ask him, I didn't know where to start. One question pulled at me, and could wait no longer. "Matiu, why did you think I'd revealed our secrets to TJ? You said you'd spoken to him?"

My lover flicked me a curious glance. "Yes. I met him at a gathering, and he commented on my tattoo." Like all of us, Matiu wore a *Taniwha* design inked into his skin. "He talked openly about you, Henare. It worried me that he knew too much."

"He didn't deserve to die. You should have spoken to me first."

He huffed in annoyance, a gesture once familiar to me. "There was no time. He told me he'd be leaving soon."

The reminder dug into me like a sharp knife. "What were you doing there anyway? Have the rules relaxed to allow *Taniwha* to mix with mortals?"

"By the Gods, no." His voice was shocked. "Nothing's changed like that."

"So what *has* changed? You said things are different now."

"My status." He sounded surprised at the question. "I occupy one of the senior positions in the circle now." He paused. "That's how I was able to petition for you. It took a long time, Henare. I worked hard for this." It was a subtle rebuke, and I hastened to reassure him.

"I cannot express my gratitude. The years have been long without you. To know that I can return is an honour, but to be able to be with you again is a gift beyond measure."

“Ah, about that.” Matiu’s attention was fixed upon the wall opposite. “I have a mate now. And young of my own.” He glanced at me, and then his gaze skittered away again. “There are some beautiful females here, and all eager to meet you.”

I had the strange sensation that I was holding one conversation while Matiu was engaged in a completely different one. Holding up my hand, I stalled his words while I sought my tongue. “I thought we would be together? You said things had changed.”

“Not like that.”

A chill descended upon me. “Explain.” I had to force the word out.

“We’ll have to be discreet this time.” Matiu kept his voice low. “Not get caught.”

Bitterness filled my throat, choking me. “So when I plead for clemency, I have to take a female mate?”

“You don’t *have* to. But it would make things easier. Smooth it over.”

It felt like a slap in the face. I stared at Matiu and put the jigsaw pieces together again, but making a different picture this time. “You brought me back, but I have to pretend. Live a lie.”

“You would still be here. We could see each other. By the Gods, Henare, haven’t you missed me?”

I had. Yes. But not anymore.

“Tell me again about TJ. You just *happened* to meet him? What are the odds of that?”

“*Shhh.*” He flashed me a warning glare.

I had no intention of staying quiet. “And if *Taniwha* are not supposed to mix with humans, how many rules did you break to talk with him?”

A new story was building up in my head. One I didn’t like at all. “You saw TJ with me and sought him out. Am I right?” The dark flush on Matiu’s cheeks made my stomach clench. “How long had you been watching me?” His lips pursed, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You were jealous? That’s the only reason you wanted me back?”

“If I can’t have you, I don’t want...” His hot retort foundered.

I had to get out of there. I couldn't go through with this. "I *loved* you, Matiu."

A soft bell sounded, and then a voice boomed my name.

"Stay, Henare." Matiu grabbed my arm, and then released it equally quickly. "I'll make time for you."

"Not like this."

"If you don't plead to mighty Tangaroa now, you won't ever have the chance. You will be exiled forever."

"I thought I already was."

My name rang out again, and I knew what I had to do. This was my one opportunity to change my life. I'd be a fool to waste it.

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## Chapter 10

I floated face down in warm water, the sun burning the skin on my back. My mouth and nose were clogged, and my lungs had difficulty pulling in air. With an effort, I lifted my head and gazed at the shore. Not far now. My limbs felt like dead weights, but I swam a few more strokes and then floated again.

Letting my legs drop, I finally touched sand with the tips of my toes. Thank the Gods. I splashed on a little further, stretched beneath me once more, and this time could stand upright with my chin above the gentle waves. I was exhausted. Could I even make it to the beach?

Only just. My knees gave way, and I collapsed onto warm, damp sand. I had no idea where I was, and when I forced my tired brain to think, I realised I'd no idea *who* I was either. These things had to be connected.

Bright lights flashed in my eyes, and voices boomed above me, asking questions I couldn't answer. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I was aware of being lifted and carried, of people in white coats examining me, and then a soft, cool bed.

Time passed. People came and went. I lay silent in the bed, and stared at a small window and a tiny patch of blue sky beyond. Food arrived on trays and I picked at it, but even that felt unfamiliar. Who was I? And how had I ended up here? It felt as though I had a giant door inside my head, and no matter what I did, it refused to open.

I knew I waited for something. Or someone.

The door clicked, and an old woman entered the room. Like everyone else, she was a stranger, but she seemed to know me. "*Henare.*" Her voice was shocked. Standing in the open doorway, she leaned heavily on a wooden stick, but she moved to my side and reached out to touch my hand.

Something jangled in my brain, but nothing emerged. *Henare.* Finally, someone who might have some answers. "You know me?"

"Yes." A smile lit up her tanned face. "I'm Elizabeth. What happened to you?"

"I don't know." I pushed at the door in my head, but it wouldn't budge. "I woke up on the beach and they brought me here."

“The doctor says you’re suffering from amnesia, possibly brought on by head trauma.” I touched my head. Nothing hurt. “You’ve been here nearly two weeks and not reacted to anything yet. He said you might respond to familiar places and things.” She dug into a shoulder bag and produced a white plastic box. I watched, curious.

Prying the lid free, she passed the container to me and I peered inside. The scent hit me first. Spice. Sugar. A crisp, still warm pastry nestled on a bed of crumpled paper. I knew this tasted good, I could remember the flavour, a thousand tastebuds dancing in glee. I inhaled deeply and held the delicious fragrance in my lungs. “For me?”

“Of course.” She laughed, her eyes crinkling in the corners. “You loved my baking that day you came with TJ.”

*TJ.* A tide of emotion flooded my brain, short circuiting my thinking processes. Why did that name sound so familiar?

The pastry melted on my tongue, and I closed my eyes in bliss. “Thank you. *Thank you.* What else can you tell me?”

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Elizabeth’s home was somewhere I recognised. The huge, shaggy dog that leapt up, also knew me, and I fussed his ears, and felt an echo of a memory. Elizabeth chattered. She told me about the sharp-suited lawyer that had arrived and told her where to find me. How he’d left valuable papers including the ownership deeds to a cottage on the beach that I’d inherited. His name had been Matiu Kaipara, but it meant nothing.

The only name that sang out was TJ. He was important, I felt it in my bones. Elizabeth showed me a picture of him, but as with everyone, I couldn’t recall seeing him before. She looked disappointed, but shrugged it away, and prepared to drive me to the beach.

I knew the cottage instantly. Recognised the wooden carvings inside and out. I picked up a half-finished piece of bleached driftwood and ran my fingers over the smooth surface. I’d worked on this. I could see myself sitting outside, a small knife in my hand, as I carved intricate patterns into the wood. Little pieces of my life crept back in.

Something was still missing though. *Someone.* I knew I waited for him to appear, and it felt as though I’d been doing that for a long time. Forever.

I might never get my memories back, according to the people in white coats, but I was healthy and strong, and grateful to be alive. Everything else would fall into place eventually.

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A week later I sat in the sunshine, breathing in the sea air, and scraping at a piece of driftwood with a sharp knife. Elizabeth would be calling round later, but for the moment I was alone, and that felt normal. I pushed continuously at the door in my head, but it was as though my memories had been wiped clean.

The sound of frenzied barking heralded her arrival, and I sat up, stretching my back and rolling my shoulders. Sure enough, Butch bounded up to me, to nudge at my hands and slobber on my feet. This time though, she wasn't alone. This must be TJ.

I recognised him from his picture. Dark, silky hair tumbled over sparkling eyes, above a smile that hit me in my gut. The knife fell from my hand, and I surged to my feet, a swarm of memories punching through the locked door in my head.

His lips. The sound of his laughter. Touching a bruise on his face. Staring into his eyes while we made love. Oh Gods. He was my lover.

“TJ?”

I reached out with shaking hands and he caught them. The flood of memories intensified, a myriad of images. Handing him a towel. Watching him tug on Butch's lead. Losing myself in his kiss.

“Do you know me, Henare?”

I saw concern in his beautiful eyes, but I could reassure him. At last, I knew something.

“Yes,” I said, unable to hold back my answering smile. “I've been waiting for you.”

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## Epilogue

It was a typical winter day when I lit the fire for the first time in Henare's cottage. An icy southerly wind swept up the beach and whipped the waves into a frenzy, making me glad I sat in the warmth. Henare was still out there, collecting driftwood, and probably throwing sticks for Butch to chase. He'd be frozen when they came back.

Sure enough, when they clattered through the door a few minutes later, they were both soaked from the sea spray, and Henare was shivering. I tossed a hand towel to him. "For your hair, and you can give Butch a rub down too." He nodded, and after depositing some new pieces of wood on the floor, he turned his attention to my dog, while I returned to the kitchen.

I'd made a rich chicken curry for dinner tonight, something else to tempt my lover's appetite with. In the six months we'd been together, he ate everything I put in front of him, and claimed to have never tried it before. Whatever had happened to him, it had messed up his memories. Even basic things, like shaving, seemed alien to him. I'd had to teach him, as though he'd never done it before.

His memory dated back precisely to the day we met on the beach. He must have had a life before then, before *me*, but it had been swept away as completely as the *Taniwha* offerings that drifted into the sea. He'd asked me eagerly what he'd been like before, but I didn't know. All I could say was that his rough edges had softened, and that he smiled more now. He was more relaxed, and I liked to think I might be responsible.

Henare snuck up behind me as I stirred the curry, and rubbed his knuckles down my cheek. "How was work?" he asked, and I shrugged.

"Chilly." I worked in a local nature reserve, and had spent much of the day repairing fences that had blown down in a spate of bad weather.

"I can warm you." He wrapped himself around me, and burrowed his hands into my pockets. "Thank you for lighting the fire. Butch has claimed the hearthrug."

"Are you surprised?" I leaned back against him and smiled when he pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss on my neck. "Don't let me forget, we've got a Skype session with Jools later." I chatted weekly with my sister, and I'd persuaded Henare to join the last few.

“Do you think she’ll come back to New Zealand? When she’s finished at university?”

“I hope so. I hated it there.” Too many people, houses and cars, and I’d been too far from the sea. I’d also been thousands of miles from Henare. The memory of Elizabeth’s desperate phone call was still raw, as was my urgent change of plans and my panicked flight back home. I closed my hands over his arms and breathed deeply, his familiar scent chasing away the remembered fear.

“How long until we eat?”

I gazed at the pan on the stove. “Half an hour. Why?”

“There’s something new I want to do.” His deft fingers unfastened the button on my jeans. “You and me, on a rug in front of the fire.” He nibbled my earlobe and a shiver ran down my spine. Everything felt new to Henare, and I loved the delighted smile on his face when he found he liked something. Ice cream. Bacon sandwiches. Long showers together.

One day he might recover his memories, but in the meantime, we were busy making new ones, and I’d never been happier. Judging by the heat in his eyes, and the love in his smile, he felt the same.

**The End**

## Author Bio

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

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

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