

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Breaking Point
By Chris Quinton

He was late.

Ben Tremayne looked at his watch. Again. David was now forty-seven minutes behind time, and Ben had a pretty damned good idea why.

Ben scowled into his empty coffee cup and signaled the waiter for a refill. This would be his fourth. It had been David who'd phoned his hotel room out of the blue and asked for the working

breakfast meeting in Café Nero on the Strand. David who'd wanted Ben to go along with him to the auction to check out the eighth-century missal, no matter that they hadn't seen each other in months. And David Bloody Granger was now -- Ben checked his watch -- fifty-one minutes late. The mystery of how the man had even known Ben was going to be in London for a few days would have to wait.

With an angry snort, Ben took out his cell phone and punched in numbers. He'd taken David off the speed dial when their affair had ended, but he couldn't erase it from his memory any more than he could throw away the key-card to the man's riverside apartment. It took a long time before the call was answered.

"H'llo," said the too-well remembered voice. It was husky with sleep and, Ben was certain, sex.

"This is your one and only wake-up call," Ben snapped. "If you don't get your arse over here in the next half hour, I will go to that auction, buy the fucking missal in your name and shove it up your fucking arse, page by fucking page!" He cut the call and stared at the small, silvery thing in his hand in shock. The ultimatum had gone from brain to mouth so fast he hadn't known what he was going to say until he heard the words. Then he shrugged impatiently. Who the hell cared? He didn't, that was for sure.

They had been partners for five years -- working partners, that is. Their brief love affair had been an incandescent mess, and even after a year apart, it could still raise a nasty burn. It had ended badly, breaking their business apart as well as their lives. Tremayne & Granger Antiques was now Granger & Curtis. Barbara had been hovering in the wings for years, and had slid in to take Ben's place in all departments. Well, David had never pretended to be anything other than bi.

But David had wanted commitment. Something that Ben had never given to any of his bed buddies, and that had included Tall-Dark-and-Impossibly-Handsome. It didn't matter that they'd clicked on all kinds of levels, that being together was the nearest thing to perfection Ben had ever known, that even the everyday living together stuff was right up there with the so-hot sex--

Ben swore, knocked back his coffee and signed for another. Only last week Bloody Barbie had flounced into Sotheby's New York auction room, and sat beside him in a swirl of magenta silk and expensive perfume.

"Ben!" she'd exclaimed, pressing a coral red kiss on his cheek. "It's so good to see you again. My, but you're looking fine. There's something about blond men and suntans." She'd giggled and patted the place she'd kissed. "Don't worry about the lipstick, darling. It's guaranteed not to come off." There had been a time when he'd considered her a good friend. Not any more.

"Here for the Lalique?" he'd asked, resisting the urge to scrub his face anyway.

"Of course. You know how much I love it. I've started my own collection, and Davie has given me carte blanche as a present. The piece of my choice, just for me..." She'd sighed, her blue eyes dreamy. "He is so good to me. So, Bennie, when are you coming to London next? It's been ages since we had any time together."

“I’m not,” he’d lied through gritted teeth. He hated ‘Bennie,’ always had, and she knew it. “Sorry, Babs. Paris, Berne, Tokyo, no plans for the U.K..”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I’ll just have to get you caught up while I’ve got you pinned down here.” And Barbara had spent the rest of the auction at his side, cooing a constant news-feed on the social and business whirl of Granger & Curtis. The last straw for Ben came when she happily burred that, any day now, David would be popping The Question, and should she change her name to Granger or keep the Curtis? Ben hadn’t answered. He’d just smiled sweetly and topped her bid for the set of perfume vials she’d had in her sights.

It hadn’t all been spite. He was a freelance these days, buying on commission, and that success had earned him a nice little bonus from a certain gallery in Berne.

Half an hour and one minute later, Ben stalked from the restaurant and took a taxi though the cold, fog-bound streets to Sotheby’s. He didn’t bother to look at the missal in question. He did not give a flying fuck if it was genuine, a medieval forgery or a modern one. Its fate, along with David’s, was sealed.

For once, the ranks of ancient books and manuscripts did not snare Ben. He had one goal in mind and he was relentless. He sat in the middle of the front row, semi-sprawled, arms folded across his chest and pinned the auctioneer with a narrow-eyed hunter’s gaze. And waited.

When the missal was carried to the lectern by the white-gloved assistant, Ben did not give the thing a glance. It was beautiful, but he already knew that. David had emailed him the pictures in the online catalogue -- tooled and gilded leather, colors not much faded, and the pages inside were still bright jewels of art. Then the bidding started.

When it ended, Ben, or rather, David Granger was the owner of a book that may or may not have been what it was purported to be. Fortunately, the auctioneer knew David, had sold to and for him many times over the last fifteen years or so. He also knew Ben, and had no problems with the letter of authorization that let Ben bid and buy in David’s name. He couldn’t know it was a letter Ben had carefully forged during his half-hour wait in the restaurant.

With the missal wrapped in layers of tissue and strong brown paper, Ben took another taxi to the Canary Wharf apartment block. The fog was thicker here, skeining from the leaden water to hang dense in the still air. It was approaching two-thirty in the afternoon, the streetlamps bled an eerie glow through the murk, and the temperature was dropping towards freezing.

Ben ignored the chill. His seething resentment was more than enough to provide internal central heating. No way of guessing, of course, if David was still there. But if he was, he probably wasn’t alone. Ben could remember very clearly how David’s deep voice had sounded when he

was well-fucked and sated. Given that Ben was the one who'd been lumbered with the book auction and not Bloody Barbie, it was odds on that she was with David now. Possibly still in his bed. Not that it mattered.

If she was around when Ben got there, she could have a couple of pages inserted where they'd do the most good, as well. Or maybe he'd just chuck her in the river. That would cool her hots a little. The Thames in winter was not a pleasant prospect. The anger that had simmered all through the wait and the auction hit rapid boil again and his smile was vicious.

But he was not an intemperate fool. He took the elevator to the top floor and let himself into the understated elegance and luxury of the living room. Once, the apartment had been a second home for him. For all of eleven months, two weeks and four days. Even now, it was as if he'd come home. Part of that, Ben realized with a jolt, was because the room hadn't changed. The antiques and artwork they'd bought for each other were still on the display shelves. The small bronzes from half a dozen ancient civilizations were also mementos of the far-flung places they'd visited. Together. There was no sign that Barbara had put her mark on the room. No doubt that would change.

Ben found his jaw was clenched hard enough to crack his teeth and made an effort to relax. "It's me," he yelled before he opened another door and walked into the dim cocoon of candle-lit warmth that was the bedroom.

Most of the candles had burned out, but a few still pooled golden light across the cream silk sheets. The scent of incense, not sex, infused the air -- amber and sandalwood -- with the faint echo of a heady musk.

"G'morning..." It was a sleepy murmur from the only occupant of the bed, and Ben swore.

"You lazy sod!"

Ben strode forward and kicked at the wet towel on the floor, glaring at the man spread belly-down on the sheets. At least David I-Think-With-My-Balls Granger had started to get himself dressed. As far as the boxers, at least. They were a dark blue, Ben noticed absently, and clung flatteringly around an arse he knew to be lean and powerful with muscle.

"Ughn," David said intelligently and sank back to sleep.

Ben stood there, clutching the missal to his chest. David's skin gleamed with the same richness as the sheets beneath him, his hair was tangled black satin in the dimness and the lashes of the only eye Ben could see were a sable fan. His athlete's body was limned with candlelight and he looked good enough to eat. A gourmet feast. Inside the constriction of his tailored slacks, Ben's flesh swelled, and hot tension throbbed through his blood, suggesting all kinds of possibilities.

His anger died to an unfamiliar hungry despair. For a long time before they'd become lovers, he'd watched David, had wanted him. It had taken a while before David had cottoned onto the attraction and began to flirt back. That had been all the encouragement Ben had needed and he

had closed in. Sex with David had been everything Ben had expected, and more. But then the stupid idiot had to go and spoil it.

“You and me,” David had said in a post-coital high. “I want us to be together. Just us.”

Ben had laughed, his own sex-fueled haze dissipating fast. “That sounds sickeningly like a proposal,” he’d drawled.

“That’s because it is.” David had been solemn, His voice and expression had shown Ben how much that moment meant to David. Every word had been spoken with absolute conviction and intent . “I love you. You love--”

“Shit, look at the time! I’m late! I should go -- we’ll talk about it later, okay?”

And that was the moment their relationship had crashed and burned.

They never did talk about it. Ben had found an urgent reason to be in New York, where David was not. The next time they’d met, David was off-hand with him, and all over Bloody Barbie.

Leaving had been the sensible thing to do, Ben had been certain. In fact, he should never have become involved with David in the first place. He’d known all along that the man committed on more than one level.

Ben wasn’t ready to commit to anyone, then or now. But something stirred in his heart, and it felt a hell of a lot like regret. And loneliness. David had been a good friend as well as a lover. Ben shouldn’t have come here. He sighed, placed the missal on the dresser and turned away, then froze where he stood.

David had sighed as well, and the slither of the sheets as he moved was a gentle susurration. Sighed and whispered a name. “Barb’ra...”

The rage surged back, and with a distant, self-mocking humor, he recognized its pedigree: Fury, out of Jealousy, sired by Lust. But now all that anger was directed at himself. He had been a blind, stubborn fool, and it had cost him more than he could afford to pay.

Ben wasn't good at apologies. He had always found it difficult to admit out loud that he'd been wrong about anything, let alone something -- someone -- so important. But that was a moot point. David was with Barbara now. Ben knew he should leave, but he couldn't force his feet to move.

A rare indecision tangled his thoughts. On the one hand, Ben knew he should walk away, lick his wounds and get on with his life. On the other was another impulse, one that was perhaps a little less civilized. He stroked his fingertips over the missal, and noticed that he'd nudged aside a framed photo when he'd put the book down. The photo was of David and him, arms around each other's shoulders, their heads pressed together, laughing in tropical sunlight. They looked more than just happy. They looked right together.

Ben glanced around the shadowed room and there was no sign of Barbara here, either. On the bedside table was another photo: just Ben himself, smiling into the camera. Would it still be there if David had moved on? A small spark of hope kindled in Ben's chest. He took a deep breath and made a decision. But the first thing he had to do was to make sure David would listen to him.

So Ben took David's out-flung arm and flipped David onto his back, dropping astride him to grip David's ribs with his knees and pin David's wrists on the pillows. "Just hear me out--" But his captive was too much to resist. Ben thrust his head down and took that startled mouth in a devouring kiss, using teeth as well as tongue, and tasted blood.

Ben pulled back enough to draw breath, then buried his face in the angle of David's neck and shoulder. "I was wrong," Ben choked out. "I love you. I need you back. We belong together and I was too damned scared to admit it. Why the hell did you let me walk away like that?"

"Ben--"

"Shut up!" Ben kissed him again, seeking the blood, hearing a grunt of pain and relishing it. Then he realized David wasn't fighting, and the mouth he was attacking possessed a tongue that was doing some dueling of its own.

Ben broke the kiss and sat back on David's belly. The man was smiling. His smile became a grin and the stomach Ben was sitting on heaved with silent laughter.

"Got you," David whispered in what sounded like a delirious triumph. He moved, but not to struggle. It was a slow sensuality that arched his back a little, and his dark eyes were half-lidded, a perilous sultry glow in their depths that might not have been a reflection of the candlelight.

"What?" Ben demanded. "You expected me to show up here? You were *waiting* for me?"

"I had to be sure," David said, and twisted his wrists against Ben's thumbs, breaking the hold. He reached up and trailed fingers through Ben's short hair, traced nose and cheekbone and lips. The other hand was working its way under Ben's coat and sweater, seeking the waistband and zipper of his slacks. "Sure that you want this as much as I do. I miss you, Ben."

"You could have said--" He broke off with a gasp as David's hand slipped inside his slacks and cupped his erection, thumb stroking lightly over the dampening fabric of his boxers.

"And what would you have done?" David murmured. "Run like a bloody greyhound in the opposite direction. For God's sake," he went on, desperation and desire roughening his voice to a velvet growl that burned along every nerve-ending in Ben's body, and fired its lightning in his groin. "If you want me so much, get rid of these bloody clothes!"

Ben dragged off his coat and threw it across the room. Sweater and shirt followed it, and he smacked David's fumbling hands away. Quickly, he rolled off the bed and shoved slacks and

boxers down and off, taking socks and shoes with them, not removing his eyes from David the whole time.

And David shed his own boxers with a languorous grace that would have put a high-class stripper to shame, and lay there, ostensibly relaxed. But Ben could see the fine tremor of tension in the long muscles, and the way the man's white teeth caught at his swollen lower lip. Uncertainty or anticipation? It didn't matter. There was no going back now. His eyes were drawn to the proud flesh that rested against David's belly, flushed and glistening against the darkness of body-hair and tanned skin. No uncertainty there. The scent of musk that threaded through the incense was David, Ben realized, and Ben's hunger was a low keening in his throat that deepened David's eyes to black.

They came together like iron to magnet, like flame to tinder, two strong men unwilling to give quarter. Later, there would be a time for tenderness, for exploration, for relearning each other's bodies and pleasures. This was about hunger and need, about claiming, marking: a mating of leopards.

Ben pushed his knee between David's thighs and dropped his full weight on the man. He got a double grip on David's hair, part of his mind registering the heavy silken warmth of it, and trapped the man's head. David's hands raked down his shoulders and back, clamped hard on his buttocks and welded their bodies closer still. Their erections were trapped between them, between hard-muscled bellies slick with sweat and pre-come, and Ben could feel the heat of David's cock pressed beside his own.

Desire was a rage in his blood, searing through him in a surge that threatened every one of his carefully constructed barriers. David was imprinted along the length of his body: the strength of corded muscles overlying the perfect framework of bone, the texture of sweat-embossed skin cross-grained with a fine pelt of dark hair on breast and belly and groin. And a mouth so shaped it could surely seduce the most stoic of celibates, which Ben was not and had never been.

He sought that mouth again, not for the blood this time, but the indefinable tang of David. It transmuted the kiss to a flare of sensation that struck through every erogenous zone he possessed. David cried out and Ben drank the word -- his name -- with the breath, and began to move in an escalating rhythm.

David's body shuddered under him, hips driving up to meet and match the grinding need, and still Ben did not break the kiss. All too soon, climax began as a tingling rush in his limbs, surging to his groin and drawing up his balls. It peaked with shattering convulsions that left him gasping for breath and boneless in David's arms, only peripherally aware that the same seismic shock had ripped through his lover.

His lover. Again.

"Mine," Ben whispered with intense satisfaction.

David's hands were still locked on his ass with a grip that would leave bruises. "No," he murmured. "You're mine, now."

Ben thought about that, and decided he didn't have the energy to argue it at the moment. "How about," he suggested, "we agree to agree we're both right?"

"Mmmm." It was a purr of appreciation that seemed to vibrate through David's body and into his own, and was assent enough for Ben.

"I mean it," he said quietly. "I'm not running this time. I love you. I was stupid enough to mess things up between us before, and I'm not doing it again. It's you and me, lover, all the way along the line. And as soon as we can get it all set up at the nearest registry office, we are committing. Bloody Barbie will--"

"Be over the moon." David's arms tightened, but there was a wary note in his voice. "She planned it all out, right down to the--"

"You are kidding me!" Ben reared back, unable to decide if he was angry, relieved, or just plain confused.

"No, she said she was fed up with me moping around like a lovesick fool."

"So it was all a setup? Her showing up in New York, the missal, this--" He waved his arms at the guttering candles and rumpled bed. "You sneaky bastards!" Then he remembered the missal, and somehow found enough coordination to free himself from David's embrace. He staggered as far as the dresser and returned with the wrapped book. He stretched out on the bed and molded his body along David's, and watched with breath-held anticipation as the man carefully removed the paper and tissue.

"Beautiful," David said, voice soft and reverent. "You bought this-- you shouldn't--"

"I didn't," Ben said demurely.

David's gaze changed from limpid delight to diamond-hard intensity. Then he snatched the envelope that had been on top of the missal and tore it open. He unfolded the bill of sale -- made out in his name -- and his jaw dropped. The next moment, he gave an outraged screech.

"*How much?*"

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