

A Joy Good Idea

By Syd McGinley

A Jolly Good Idea is a sequel to “Not Sir”

It's been a year since Hugh's dad died. Hugh was horribly stoic about it, but I was on eggshells for months. He never mentioned his dad except in business related matters, but Hugh had a hair trigger about other things. I've never once dared tease him by addressing him as Sir Hugh now that he's inherited the title. I think the last year has been worse for me than him, but that can't be so. I know he's grieving. I've been doing my best to serve him and pamper him without letting him think I pity him.

He went home at the time and got a lot sorted. I missed him like crazy, and wanted to be there to support him -- what else is a boy for? -- but I took his point that a funeral wasn't the best time to introduce a new partner. Even if his family accepted him being gay in principle, an actual boyfriend was a different kettle of fish.

And showing up just when successions and inheritances were being discussed would be pretty tacky. Not that I want any part of it. I'm enough of a leftist still to think titles -- unearned ones -- are a crock. He's my sir, but I think his baronetcy is a burden, and I wish he

could renounce it. Even if it is the lowest hereditary title you can have. It's one of the things Hugh likes about me -- he's sick of monarchy-struck Americans swooning over his title and not seeing him. I see him all too clearly and still stick around.

Now that we're together, he's decided against having a child with a surrogate to make his mum happy. I couldn't handle any of it for a start: bringing up a son, Hugh being a father, and the kid being more his family's than mine. He needed little persuading. He's not much for the rugrats and was mostly considering it as a sop to his parents. So it wasn't as if he was making a huge concession to me.

Nonetheless, I'm kind of hurt about the heir thing as I've been his boy for three years now. We have joint accounts and joint property, and suddenly his nephew is his heir. Hugh tells me not to fuss. He says he has a watertight estate plan and I'll be fine. I'm stressed as hell over not knowing about the contents, and, frankly, I think he's being a prick, not a master.

We're traveling to England next week to see his mum and family for a whole bloody month and I'm ready to puke with nerves. Hugh arranged it all before telling me about it, and he was just lucky I could get that much time off work. He just growled and said: "Boy, you haven't used your full vacation since I've known you. Of course you have the days." I'd tried to say that wasn't my point, but of course, I did have the days, he knew it, and it wasn't my decision to make. I know he's my master, but he's so high handed about my external responsibilities sometimes.

I'm doing my best to be excited about going to England. I've agree to not say anything about being anti-monarchy, and Hugh has promised we'll get some time to ourselves to tour around. I'm utterly overwhelmed by imagining a whole family of Hughs. And I've never left America before. I hope and hope that my passport will be delayed, but it arrives in time. Hugh tells me to stop worrying, that I have perfectly acceptable table manners, and after three years of serving him, I'm in decent shape for company. I swat him grumpily at that, and get one hell of a spanking for "dumb insolence."

I'm still sprawled over his thighs sniffing when I feel a familiar pressure against my belly. Hugh has never much bothered about distinguishing sex from punishment -- it's all service as far as he's concerned. But today I still feel sulky enough to want to ignore his hard cock. As if it were my choice. He pulls me off his steely thighs -- he may not play rugby any more but he's still in great shape -- and positions me between his knees. I sigh. He's still gorgeous even if he is pissing me off. I kiss the scars on his knee to help me get into a kinder mood, and then run my tongue up his thigh. I snuffle my nose around his hairy balls enjoying his musk and lack of manscaping, and then settle into a diligent blow job. Even after three years, I love to play with his foreskin -- sticking my tongue under it and swirling and then rolling it back with my lips as I start to suck on him. Hugh lets go of my hair and lies back on the sofa once he sees I'm cooperating. Even though he's not holding my head, I don't back off when he starts his hip thrusts. He's been training me to tolerate some minor breath control this way and although it freaks me still, I know it'll please him a lot if I let him stop my airway for a little. Besides, I dare not piss him off twice in one day. Recently, his riding crop use has become harsher.

He backs off again and I gulp some air. His eyes are closed as he approaches orgasm so he misses my brief panicked expression as he lunges in again. I clutch his hips as he shudders out deep into my throat. Breath control is one thing, but drowning is another. He's in a good mood now though and I remember why I love him -- we have a good evening together. There's some rugby on the satellite, I've bought his favorite Newcastle Brown ale, and Hugh let me order pizza in for a change.

Hard as I try, time doesn't stop, and soon we're suffering through the flight to London. Even first class -- his treat, although a lot of the upgrade was from my frequent flyer miles but I didn't complain about privilege for a change -- it was an exhausting trip. Puddle jumper to D.C. and then the transatlantic jet, and then a line an hour long through immigration. Hugh had already breezed through, got the luggage through customs -- one minor advantage of not being his partner was that we had separate arrival forms and at least I could schlep through customs with just my carry-on -- and had settled in with a drink by the time I caught up with him. He just humphs when I bitch and says, "What do you expect me to do about it, Ryan? Stop fussing. It's the same for every one. Thought you hated special classes and exceptions? And I did get all the luggage." I don't point out that when he travels he doesn't suffer as much with U.S. immigration since green cards get to go through with citizens.

We still have the drive across country to deal with, but at least I can nap as Hugh drives the rental. I have to shut my eyes -- being in what I think of the passenger seat and seeing cars come at me is terrifying. I keep trying to stomp a brake pedal and Hugh gets pissed with me. "Don't you trust my driving?"

I scowl. He knows I do. He's always the fucking driver when we're out together. I'm just freaked by being on the wrong side of the road. I do doze after awhile and Hugh's temper has eased by the time I wake up. I still love my man, but the last year has been hard, and I've been re-thinking how much he gets away with under his master mantle.

I gawk at his home as the rental crunches up the private gravel driveway. It is an old house in the Palladian style with stables, orchards, and paddocks. There's even a kitchen garden and huge greenhouse with vines and oranges. A rose garden and a croquet lawn. A trout stream and woods beyond. Hugh laughs at my dropped jaw.

“What, my little American federalist -- got a Tory bug? It's not old family land. It was grandpa's wedding present to mum so long as she signed away in return any claim on his estate so it would go to her brother.” Hugh winks and whispers, “Nouveau riche, you know! And it was never Father's. Grandpa endowed a trust fund to care for it and to make sure it stayed Mummy's. So it's not mine, and may never be if Sis's son breeds before mum dies.”

I am absolutely fucking terrified. Hugh has insisted that his family is not wealthy, just comfortable. I guess they are land rich, not cash flow rich, but still. Hugh's house in America is nice, but nothing out of line with his professional income, and we live well with our two salaries. This is way out of my league.

His sister Kate and her children are waiting to meet us along with his mum, and they surround us, babbling in the hallway, kids tugging at Hugh's sleeves for attention while he hugs his sister and then politely pecks his mum on the cheek. I feel lost. Hugh suddenly seems bigger and more foreign and, despite his jokes about his sibs bullying him, he's quite clearly the head of the family.

Hugh's mum breaks up the friendly greetings by offering me her hand and giving a chilly handshake. She says we should all go through to the sitting room, and not stand around in the hall like a herd. The kids giggle and storm away bellowing "moo -- herd -- moo" and Hugh's mother gives Kate a look that should have any daughter quailing. Kate cheerfully says, "Just good spirits mum, they're just happy their uncle is here." She pauses. "And his friend."

"Partner," I mumble when Hugh says nothing, and I want to hit him when he just follows his mother out of the hall. Kate gives me a measured look and ushers me into the sitting room.

Thank God, it's more of a family den, not a formal lounge. The kids are sprawled on a rug with a game, and they beg Hugh to join in. To my dismay, he does lower himself down, only wincing a little as his unrepaired knee bends. (God, getting his one knee fixed was a trial, and I dread his second knee surgery.) Although I've never seen him like kids at home, he dotes on his niece and nephew. I sit, miserable, on the edge of a sofa and watch Hugh play some pirate board game. Kate passes me a cup of tea.

"You wouldn't get how to play any way," she says.

I wonder if that's a slam disguised as comfort.

"We have special family rules for it," she adds just to rub the salt in.

Hugh's mother is polite – I may be American and gay and despoiling her one and only son, but I am a guest. She makes conversation about the flight, the drive, what I think of the scenery, have I ever been to England before, what state am I from -- it's excruciating.

Kate joins in and makes some lighter remarks about how horrid air travel is these days and how much she liked New York when she was there last, and we stumble through a reasonable facsimile of a conversation.

Nigel is shouting in triumph and doing an "in your face, loser" dance to his little sister, Polly. Polly is sniffing. Hugh raps him sharply on the skull with his knuckles.

"Disgraceful, young man! We don't mock the defeated. Where's your sportsmanship? I hope your brother Henry is picking up better manners at school. Polly -- don't cry when you lose, miss. Congratulate the winner."

I expect Nigel to fly into a rage at being rebuked or even at being measured against his big brother, but instead he stops dancing.

Polly has controlled her incipient tantrum, and says, “Well done, Nigel.”

Nigel apologizes to his sister. “Sorry, Polly. I forgot you’re a girl and shouldn’t be teased.”

“That’s not quite what your uncle said,” says Kate. “And besides, you beat Sir Hugh as well – are you calling him a girl?” And I give her a look. Maybe she’s not so bad. Hugh and Nigel are both glaring, and Polly is giggling and repeating the story all over to her grandmother.

“I was right here, darling,” says Hugh’s mother, but she lets Polly carry on with her “and then Uncle Hugh said!” Kate and Lady Barstow seem more human now, but I’m shaken by hearing Kate call her brother Sir Hugh. I’ve still not dared, but it is who he is.

I continue to feel left out, but I work hard at being the nice American uncle. It seems to be working on the kids – Polly will chatter to me and Nigel has showed me his “war room” -- he has a huge table covered with military models but frowns at me when I ask if it’s Warhammer -- but I’m trying too hard with the adults. We’ve been there a few days and Kate, Hugh, and his mum have relaxed into joshing each other and family banter. I try to be jolly in

the way I think they're being -- and perkily say to his sister Kate in the pub as I try to squeeze on the bench next to her, "Shift your fanny."

Kate slaps me hard in the face.

I don't know what I did, so I gasp "sorry" -- since I obviously did something -- and make as dignified an exit to the john as I can. Hugh is still coming back from the bar carrying drinks and I just hurry past him. I don't even pretend to piss, but sit in a stall and brood. At least I don't cry, but I'm so fucking homesick, and so out of place with these guys. And Hugh's distant. And his mom, oh face it Ryan, she hates you, and is a patrician bitch.

I was just trying to be pally and maybe I was over familiar, but I still don't think a slap in the face was called for. I try not to get all dizzy about it -- Hugh hates my minor drama queen tendencies -- which were never strong to be fair -- and I've trained myself out of them.

But Hugh knows I'm sulking. He taps the door, and when I don't open it right away, he rumbles, "Boy, open it."

I reach forward and unlatch the door, but I stay seated. Hugh swings the door open and stands in the entry. He fills the whole fucking space.

“Come out, boy. This is my family’s local. I want no rumors about us in the bathrooms.”

I shuffle out and wash my hands to at least pretend I was using the john. Hugh has his “I’m waiting” expression on. I know better than to make him ask.

“I said something wrong to Kate. She slapped me. I’m really sorry, Hugh. I didn’t mean to offend her. I was just trying to fit in with the teasing. Oh please, Hugh, let’s go home. Please. I’ve tried. I just don’t get England and your family.”

“What did you say?”

Hugh is standing a safe distance away from me. I wish he’d give me one of his rib creaking hugs and say, “All right boy, we’ll go home,” but I already know that won’t happen. We’re here for the whole damn arranged time.

I repeat what I asked Kate to do, and Hugh looks amused for a fleeting second, and then his grim face and tone take over.

“Ryan, fanny doesn’t mean ass in England.” He pauses. For a rugby player Hugh is remarkably clean-mouthed. I mean he swears and all, but he can’t quite do the translation aloud. “Begins with c, ends in t. Four letters.”

“Oh fuck! I said that to your sister? Oh, God. Hugh, I’m so sorry.”

He sighs. “Okay, boy, come on out and face the music. I’ll buy a you strong drink and you can apologize to sis. I’ll back you up that fanny is American for bum.”

“Well, it is,” I mutter. I’m still hurt that Kate thought I’d say that to her unprovoked. And damn, she slapped hard. Harder than Hugh has ever hit me. No wonder he says his sibs made rugby seem gentle.

Hugh buys me a brandy and has me drink it before we go back to the family table. I man up, look Kate in the eye and apologize. Hugh adds his coda about UK/US vocabulary. Kate accepts my apology, but makes no reciprocal move about slapping me. She’s her brother’s sister all right. His mum just gives me a frigid look. I can almost hear “damn colonial” running through her brain.

When we get home from the pub, I go right to bed, and no one tries to stop me. At least Hugh has insisted we share a room. His mum is surface-polite, but chilly about it, but I don’t think I could bear this trip without being able to curl up against Hugh’s chest at night. He’s a bit Brit repressed about sex when his mum is on the same floor, but I’ve snuck in a few bjs. I’m getting kinda horny though – I need to get laid. I meant to stay awake and get Hugh to fuck me, but I must have fallen asleep before he came up because here it is morning – I’m bone hard and Hugh’s already in the shower. Damn. I know I’m out of luck. He never fucks after he’s just got clean for the

day and I'm not in the mood to just blow him. I'm fighting a mixture of lust and grumpiness as I go down to family breakfast.

That must be why I nearly pass out when Hugh strides into the kitchen tapping a riding crop against his thigh. I nearly go to my knees and ask, "What did I do?" but it's counteracted by my other attempt at speech. "For God's sake -- your nephew and sister are right here!" And as a result, I just gasp like the landed trout I got all city soft over yesterday.

"I'm not faggy," I'd said crossly to Hugh who bellowed at me for dropping his fish back in the water. "I'm a city boy editor. I've never seen a hooked fish suffocating before." It'd been the first hour we'd spent together alone out of the house and I didn't want to spoil it. Hugh'd been so busy with estate matters, and I'd been left to my own devices a lot. And I liked fishing right up until Hugh caught something. I'd only been watching as fly fishing is tricky and I've never even pole fished.

Hugh sits down to join us for coffee, and says, sotto voce, "Ryan. Look at what I'm wearing, you ninny."

I gulp and get a grip. Just for a moment though because his riding breeches and boots have got me just as flustered as his crop. Oh god... thigh hugging buff pants, and polished tight boots...

Hugh pinches my thigh under the table. I know he means me to shape up, but it makes it worse.

I shake my head feebly when he asks if I want to come to the stables.

“Are you scared of horses, Uncle Ryan?”

“Um, no, Nigel. Or at least I don’t think so -- I’ve never met one.”

“Polly is,” says Nigel smugly.

“Polly is seven,” says Hugh sternly. “And we don’t tease girls for being nervous, young man.”

“Or Ryan,” says Kate, rather unkindly I thought. Hugh gives her a look as well, but she just sips her coffee.

I rather like Kate despite the slap and her snipes... she’s funny and takes no shit from anyone. I wish she liked me, though.

And I wish Hugh would defend me more. He gives looks, but that’s it. Although, apart from Kate’s slap, no one has openly insulted me. Just silent disapproval and constant patronizing from his mum, and

amused tolerance from his sister. Nigel seems to like me though, or at least he calls me Uncle Ryan and shows me his soldiers, and I think Polly has a crush on me. She's a sweet kid. In her own little world and full of jokes only she finds hilarious and made up nonsense songs. Henry, Kate's eldest, is a weekly boarder at the local prep school and I've only seen him on the weekend. He's supercilious, but he's that way to his brother and sister too. He's twelve and spends as much time as he can in the tree house, reading.

I spend the morning reading and no one bothers me. I stroll around the perimeter of the house to loosen up before lunch so I see Hugh come riding back into the stable yard. Oh dear God! He's a vision of manhood on that horse. He's riding so naturally even though I know it's been years since he's ridden a horse. His legs in those britches are enough to make me hard, but the boots! Oh fuck...the shiny leather wedged into the stirrups...I hold my book in front of me like I'm back in fucking eighth grade.

Hugh dismounts and disappears into the stables. I follow him in and watch jealously as he unsaddles and grooms his mount.

"No need to drool, boy," he says. "You can come upstairs and help me off with these boots."

I all but scamper to our room and kneel down to help my beloved ease his boots off. I rub my face against his leather calf as I cradle his heel and start easing it free. I breathe deeply to catch the delicious Hugh aroma and he laughs. When both boots are off he undoes his britches and his cock leaps out so eagerly it hits me in the

face. I catch his head in my mouth and gobble. Hugh pushes me away and I fall back on my heels and whimper. What can I have done wrong?

“Start a shower, boy. I’ve a mind for you, some soap, and some steam.”

I’m more than eager. My ass needs his cock so damn much. He joins me in a few moments, his cock so hard and drooling that I know he’s fluffed himself. My prick bumps the shower wall as he gets in behind me and moves under the water.

“Sir Hugh,” I whisper daringly as I kneel and let the hot water stream over my face and his cock. He doesn’t rebuke me, but fills my mouth, then throat for a torturous moment.

“Stand, boy,” he orders, his voice thick with desire, and with no more foreplay he jams his cock into my ass. I spread eagle myself against the shower wall and let him ram away. I have longed for him to be in me. Hard and deep. He’s snarling now with passion, and I yield more and more under him. He’s too tall and too rough for this position -- my ass may tear from the rough sex and lack of lube, but I bite my fist and think: Sir. Sir Hugh. My sir. Surely he’ll let me call him sir now he’s inherited his title? I must have earned the right by now. And then he growls, and I feel wet heat in me easing the burn and he’s pulsing and roaring, and I see my own come hit the shower wall as I buck under him.

We stay in the shower until we are clean again and go down to lunch. As the afternoon progresses, Hugh moves more and more painfully and Kate teases him mercilessly. At last he yells at her, “Okay Kate, I’ve not ridden in America – happy? I’m as stiff and knotted as mother’s morals, okay?” Kate and I both snort, and then check to see if Lady Barstow is around.

“A soak in a tub, baby brother – and then perhaps Ryan will be kind enough to massage you.” Hugh and I don’t dare look at each other, but I hear Hugh grunt at his sister.

But the next day, I’m back to lonely and bored. Everyone is so busy as well. They’re at home, and have their routines and occupations, and Hugh’s dealing with all kinds of business. As usual, he doesn’t see fit to include me in what he does and decides. I feel left out. Sometimes Hugh takes me to a pub lunch or we get to ramble around the grounds, but mostly I’m stranded and lonely. Their house is in the middle of freaking nowhere and then down a long gravel drive. Some days Hugh asks me to sign some papers and after the first time of trying to understand British legal writing, I just sign whatever it is. I trust Hugh after all. I am curious, and ask once and he just says, “It’s estate stuff, Ryan. I’m looking after you as I said I would and making sure my U.S. property and U.K. property are separate. My family can’t claim my U.S. stuff -- that goes to you, and it acknowledges our joint ownership of the U.S. stuff -- and you are signing away any claim on the U.K. stuff.” It seems fair enough to me, and I’m not that interested in the details. Besides I don’t want to think about Hugh dying, and I also don’t want to know what I signed away. I’m only human and seeing how much it is might make me bitter.

Nigel and Polly have been deputized to take me on a walk around the grounds. Lady Barstow has finally realized how neglected I am while Hugh is doing business, but she can't quite manage to spend time alone with me. "I have my own business to attend to!" she says and I believe her. She is always on the phone talking to some poor tradesman in her managerial tones, and Kate is always disappearing into town on mysterious errands.

Polly grabs my wrist and says, "Come on Uncle Ryan, I want to show you my favorite place at granny's house."

"I thought you lived here?"

"No, we live about ten miles away," says Nigel, "But we stay a lot since daddy travels. We have our own rooms here, and mummy has her old room still."

"We're here right now 'to help granny through a trying time,'" says Polly innocently.

"To see Uncle Hugh," corrects Nigel, "and meet Uncle Ryan." Hugh would have been proud of his manners at that moment, but he's not here, so I just smile at the kids and say I'm glad they are here. I wonder whether Polly was quoting her mother or grandmother,

Nigel is most interested in showing me the stables and paddock -- he has his own pony here -- and Polly wants to show me her fairy garden -- a funny little gazebo covered in wisteria and half falling down behind the orangery. It looks like a good private spot and I remember it for later.

We pass by Hugh's mum in the rose garden -- she has on a huge straw hat, gardening gloves and is pruning rather efficiently. She says good morning back to me, but then the kids are right there.

Nigel is showing me the garage when I have a revelation: everything is rather shabby even if it is well maintained. And Hugh's mum isn't just puttering in the roses. She is the gardener! It's taken me a week to realize that Hugh wasn't lying at all when he said his family is not rich. They have a huge, old house and some lifestyle privileges, but everything is old. Not like antique old, I mean out of date and still being used. Sending your children to boarding school, keeping horses, and maintaining a two-hundred-year-old house means having old cars, faded upholstery, "classic" clothes and doing your own weeding, I suppose.

"This was grandpa's car," says Nigel proudly, and gives the leaping cat hood ornament a polish with his sleeve. I see he is doing a stiff upper lip thing and obviously still misses his grandfather. Polly is too young to truly remember more than a year ago.

"Hello, Uncle Hugh," pipes Polly's little voice and Nigel and I both jump.

Hugh strolls in and I shiver. This may not be his estate, but he's sure got a proprietary air about something.

He looks at the Jag too, and says, "I can remember mum and dad arguing about this car just before I left for America. Dad wanted something fun now the last sprog -- me -- had finished college and left home. Mum wanted a new Volvo."

"I see your father won."

Hugh laughs. "Sort of. Mum got a Volvo too -- it's the estate car she still drives." He pauses. Nigel and Polly are dashing across the stable yard to the house. They know Hugh being back means it's nearly teatime. "We get the best and keep it," says Hugh, patting the Jag and then me. That passes for romantic and mushy in his world.

I see an opening and slide my hand onto his ass and smile.

"Hugh -- we're alone."

Hugh frowns. "It's teatime, boy. You do not want to try being late for my mother."

"Christ! Your priorities!"

“Boy! Watch yourself.”

“No! Hugh, I’m getting so fed up with not ranking in your life. I’m just ‘boy’ and I don’t get to call you sir, even though you are Sir Hugh. And your mother...”

I break off. Even upset, I know the line.

“My mother?” says Hugh far too calmly.

“Is charming,” I snap. “I see where you got all your lovable qualities from...”

Hugh grabs me, bends me over the hood of the jag, and lands two mighty wallops on my ass.

Damn, they feel good, and snap me right out of my pissy mood, and back into wanting Hugh. I squirm round, slide to my knees, and undo Hugh before he can complain. Although the garage door is open, the car is hiding me from the house. I know that once Hugh’s cock is in my mouth he won’t argue.

“Christ,” he says and leans his hands on the hood and thrusts in. It’s like he’s doing push ups into my eager mouth.

Even though we spend each night together, I’m missing my man so much. I suck and nuzzle, tongue and lick frantically. Because I want him to come and because, actually I don’t want to see his mother’s reaction if we’re late to tea.

“You can’t go in sporting wood. Do yourself, boy.”

I don’t need telling twice. My cock is in my hands in a second, and I thrash away at it.

There’s an intense few minutes of silent motion and then I hear Kate calling. “Hugh -- mummy’s on her way down stairs! Quickly!”

Hugh muffles a groan and shoots. I don’t know what to know if Kate’s call triggered him, but I work on my own load and come neatly into my cupped hands. Hugh hands me a clean handkerchief.

“One for blow, one for show,” he says and laughs. “Come on, boy -- hurry. We’ll talk about Sir later on -- at the weekend.”

I'm wondering why it has to wait until the weekend, but I'm mollified when I overhear Hugh one day defending me to his mum. I'm hiding in Polly's fairy garden pretending to read, but really I'm sulking and feeling homesick. It's a Saturday and Henry is home. He's an okay kid, but his hauteur is too much for me today. He says I'm loyal and kind, and she has to get used to me because we're going to be together. It's not the most undying declaration I've ever heard but from gruff Hugh to his ice queen mum, it's quite something. I just wish he'd stick up for me publicly.

Hugh finds me there half an hour later. He gives no sign of wondering how long I've been there, but says he was looking for me: he wants me to play some rugby with Henry and Nigel.

I smile gamely, but my heart plummets. This just seems like more disaster. Hugh sees my anxious face and gives me quick squeeze.

"Show them what you can do, hey, boy?"

Henry and Nigel are already passing the rugby ball back and forth.

"Pick Nigel," whispers Hugh to me. "He could use the boost."

I doubt being teamed with me is a compliment in either of their eyes, but Hugh meant it kindly. I also doubt that Nigel and I will hold our own against Hugh and Henry.

“Come on, Nigel,” I call cheerfully. “Let’s show the big ones what fast wings and backs can do.”

Henry sneers something about American football and throws the ball hard and fast at me. I catch it easily and sprint off calling to Nigel. I pass just in time -- Hugh has taken me down in a tackle, but I hear Nigel yell in triumph as he catches my pass.

“Hugh,” I gasp. “Get off -- we look indecent.” He’s lying half on top of me with his arms still around my thighs.

“We look like rugby players,” snorts Hugh, but he gets off me and lumbers away to direct a disconsolate Henry in a new play.

We pass and tackle, and Henry gets off his high horse when he sees I can play proper rugby. Hugh actually says, “Ryan’s a decent back when he concentrates. He doesn’t play American football, chaps. He’s a real rugby player.”

I’m still glowing from that when Lady Barstow storms around the side of the house.

“For heaven’s sakes boys -- not on the lawn! Can’t you thunder around in the paddock?”

We get scolded for a good five minutes standing a row in front of her, all of us shuffling our feet. We are filthy with mud, and we have taken chunks out of the grass. I get the same earful from Lady Barstow as her son and nephews, and we are all sent for baths. At least she doesn't send us to bed with no supper. If anything Hugh is in the most disgrace as the boys are children and I'm a guest.

I feel happy for the first time in days. I was equal in her eyes for one wonderful moment. Hugh glares at me. He's genuinely chagrined at the muddy gashes in the lawn. He rejects my attempt to wash him in the shower, and mutters, "Mum pampers that lawn. She even pays for a mowing service and sprinkler system. How could I have been so thoughtless?"

I expect it to be unmentioned as are most awkward things here, but when we go downstairs Kate is fussing about whether the torn up spots can be patched before... she breaks off when I come in. It's not as if I'd question their household affairs, but I am getting puzzled at the number of private errands, phone calls, and calendars being consulted recently. And the silences when I enter a room.

Henry and Nigel slink in and apologize to their grandmother. Henry offers his quarterly allowance for repair fees and Nigel gamely offers to be her garden assistant all summer. To my mild surprise, she accepts. I see Henry and Nigel gulp. I'm not the only surprised one. I give Hugh an imploring look. I've got no idea what to offer, or whether a guest offering would annoy her even more.

“Nonsense, mother,” says Hugh brusquely. “I’m proud the boys offered, but there were two adults there, and it was my idea. We’ll pay for the turf company to visit and the mower fees for the summer. The boys have apologized, that’s enough.”

Lady Barstow glares at all four of us again, and then shrugs. “Boys will be boys, I suppose.” Her glance lingers on me as if surprised I am in that category. I’m just tickled that Hugh said “we” and she accepted.

“Pirates,” cries Polly, dragging out the game.

“There’s time for a quick game before dinner,” concedes Kate. “Come on, Ryan -- we can play with Polly against the boys.”

Despite knowing Hugh will tease me later about girls against boys, I join in wholeheartedly and listen attentively when Polly explains the special family exceptions and add-ons to the official rules. Hugh has to take his own advice about being a good loser when we resoundingly defeat him, Henry, and Nigel.

It’s a pleasant evening, but the next week is exhausting. Hugh is hardly ever around; Kate, despite signs of beginning to like me, is very busy with something; and Lady Barstow is in the study on the phone all the time or else gardening in such a determined manner that no one, much less I, would dream of interrupting. Polly and Nigel are at school in the day, and Henry is back at his boarding

school. I am worn out with morosely pottering around their estate. I had no idea being lonely and bored could be such hard work. But then I am bitten in the ass by a huge influx of visitors. Shit. On Wednesday evening, all Hugh's sisters arrive. If I thought Kate, the baby of the sisters, was Amazon tough, then Amanda, Veronica, and Eleanor are the Valkyries.

"Why are they here?" I ask Hugh, almost panicking.

"To meet you, nitwit," says Hugh.

I am nearly hyperventilating when yet another car pulls up. I really start to freak when Hugh's Canadian second cousin, Roger, gets out. Is this some huge family reunion I'm caught in the middle of? I don't think I can bear it. Hugh alone is plenty overwhelming, but all these different versions of him are going to make me flip. I gulp: Pete, my rugby coach and Rog's husband has just got out too. I feel ridiculously delighted to see another American, and another non-Hugh relative. I give Pete a hug, but Rog is oddly wary of me. Does he not want to be seen with me in front of family? Pete sits next to me at dinner and that helps. It's the first formal meal here, and I'm in agony.

Lady Barstow has already thrown up her hands saying, "None of you girls brought your husbands, and none of you men are...." She trails off. "And an odd number! How am I meant to do a proper table seating?"

Hugh calms her, “Mother, I’ll take the head and you, the hostess position. Ryan on my right and Amanda as my oldest sis on my left. As usual, split up the only married couple and put them opposite each other -- so Pete next to Ryan and Rog next to Amanda. Ronnie on the left, Ellie on the right -- same level away from the head so no squabbling about precedence you two, and then baby Kate on your left hand.”

“It’s still odd,” snaps Lady Barstow just as Ellie says, “but there’s no one beneath me. That’s just as if Ronnie is over me!”

“I’m not done,” booms Hugh. “Since Henry is away, I think Nigel is quite old enough to be at Mother’s right hand to make up numbers and as Kate’s son quite appropriate to be under his Aunt Ellie.”

No one says anything. I am dizzy -- they are bickering about a damn table seating and places of honor and no one -- no one! -- has argued about me being Hugh’s right hand. Only Nigel could be more thrilled to be at the big table than I as we settle down to our positions. Not only am I recognized, but I have Pete next to me even if the terrifying Amanda -- the eldest of the siblings -- is opposite. I briefly hanker for the significance of sitting opposite Hugh, but then realize it wouldn’t work anyway -- he’s the head of his family, and his mother is still alive. Right hand is my best shot.

Pete is not much of a talker off the rugby field at the best of times and is even quieter than usual, and Hugh is engaged in monitoring the whole table. Rog is diligently chatting to Ellie and Ronnie -- almost ignoring me and poor Pete. I am left to the tender mercies of

Amanda. Boy, does she grill me. Pete gives me a pale, overwhelmed smile every so often and I take what comfort I can from knowing even my coach finds this bunch too much. I take some small pride in having survived this long when I see him quail under a barrage of queries from Amanda. My heart sinks again though when I hear the husbands are expected on Friday night for the weekend. I take the chance to down my burgundy while she's not probing me. Hugh atypically takes my hand under the table and squeezes.

I review what he's told me about her: she's his oldest sister, pushing fifty, the one who skipped college for Swiss finishing school so she could catch an ambassador. She did marry a minor diplomat and he's attached to a consulate in Europe. He can't leave his duties, but she's flown home to meet me. Her son is Hugh's heir. She's turned her attention back on me. We've exhausted my family, education, and career to date and now she's ready for the meat of her questions.

"So, Ryan," she trumpets, "How did you get to be Hugh's fiancé?"

There's a long silence.

"Good God, sis," says Hugh at last. "How on earth are you an asset to Piers at the consulate dinners?"

To my surprise, Amanda bops Hugh on the head with her soup spoon.

“Children!” roars Lady Barstow.

“The British gentry,” mutters Pete just to me. “Overgrown children running the Empire...”

I snigger. Pete doesn't share my left-wing politics, but he is steadfastly republican -- with a small r -- about aristocracies. And his husband is Canadian and has been known to mutter disparaging remarks about the Commonwealth.

In all the fuss, I write off Amanda's word choice as just another faux pas among many as this family try to cope with their Sir Hugh bringing home a “damn colonial.”

The next day I try to find Rog and Pete to spend some downtime with fellow gay, non-Brits. I'd like their company, even if Pete did ruffle my composure last night by saying I sounded Brit -- I've just picked up some swear words from Hugh is all -- and I guess they seem more obvious to Pete now he's also a “foreigner.” Rog hedges and then disappears. I feel hurt out of all proportion. Pete gives an apologetic shrug, and dashes off after him.

I wander around the garden and peer morosely at the scars in the lawn. I look in through the French windows to the sitting room and see all four of Hugh's sisters in full feather as Hugh would say -- all

talking at once, all waving their hands – and I feel a massive wave of homesickness and loneliness wash over me. I don't want to be on my damn best behavior another minute. Hugh's family will tolerate me at best, and I've had enough of knuckling under. I don't even have the compensations of serving Hugh on this bloody trip. A few quick fucks after dark and stolen blow jobs is not the damn deal. Clandestine only stays fun for so long and then it becomes repression.

I start walking -- just to shake my mood -- but I'm headed down the driveway. Once I realize, I keep going away from the house.

“Just a beer at The Queen's Arms,” I mutter. “Alone!” I check my pockets -- Hugh, bless him, has made a point of giving me British money on a daily basis. No matter that I never get to go anywhere or do anything. What he imagines I need it for is beyond me. Still, I have plenty of cash for drinks, a pub lunch, and, if I want or need it, a taxi back from the pub. I leave their driveway and stamp along feeling more secure about the project but just as irritated with the whole bloody set up. If I'd been pissed about Hugh's autocratic ways before, then this trip has just magnified the whole damn issue. Without the compensations of serving him I really have to question - - oh fuck! -- what the -- I'm flying through the air -- higher than any rugby tackle and I land in a hedge. Jesus Christ, that hurt! The branches are still vibrating above me when I hear a car door slam and cut-glass tones calling my name. Oh no. Oh no no no. Lady Barstow has hit me with her Volvo!

I must have fainted when she moved me. There's no other way to explain why I am on the back seat of the car being driven pell-mell through cobbled streets.

"Hold on, young man," she yells over her shoulder. "We'll be at the County Casualty in no time!"

"But..." I manage feebly. "I'm all right..."

"Nonsense! Of course, you're not all right. I hit you full tilt as you wandered into the road."

I ignore her implication that I caused the accident and continue. "And I can't afford medical bills -- I didn't get travel insurance."

She snaps at me. "We don't leave injured people in the road, young man. This is England. Even foreigners get medical care."

I shut up, recognizing from long battles with Hugh just where the fruitless quixotic point is. I even stay quiet when she tells the ER staff, "This young American crossed the road as if he were at home..."

It's just not true, and Hugh has told me how his mother is a holy terror in the country lanes and has had several speeding tickets, but I can't argue anymore.

The hospital staff are cosseting her and saying "poor Lady Barstow, what a terrible shock for you" and "how brave you were" and "who can we call?" and "do you want a nice cup of tea?" I am suddenly past my shock and realize that I hurt like all fucking hell.

"Excuse me," I say politely. "I think --"

"Wait your turn, please," snaps a nurse and I blanch. I give Lady Barstow an evil look, but I suddenly see her through the hospital's eyes. She's seventy and bird-thin and just hauled a healthy young man into her car and dealt with an emergency that would have had many in a dither.

"I have her son's phone number," I say assertively. That gets me some attention, and Hugh is called. I sigh in relief. I know he's going to yell at me, but he'll look after me, too.

I don't have to wait that long -- Lady Barstow demands loudly to know how her son's guest is and suddenly I get attention.

I'm taken down to radiology in a wheelchair, and Lady Barstow insists on coming with me. They pop her in another chair and we are parked side by side while I wait my turn.

I wonder whether she's expecting me to apologize for getting in her car's way, when she comes right out and says, "Of course, I'd rather Hugh were straight. After all my work to have a son the estate is going to a nephew." She sighs and I feel bad for everyone -- me, Hugh, his discounted sisters, and even his mum. "But I know it won't change and you do seem to make Hugh happy. Just please stop being so bubbly and cheerful and friendly and..." She trails off and looks frail.

"American?" I ask weakly.

"Yes, thank you," she says briskly. "Hugh has read me the riot act about calling you a Yank."

I realize she means Yank as an insult, and that Hugh knows exactly how she means it so, even though it hadn't occurred to me to be offended before, I start to bristle. Her next words take the winds out of my sails.

"My son spends quite a lot of his time defending you, you know. Tone it down please so he can focus on arranging his affairs."

I gulp and ignore that once again it's my fault. "That sounds like Hugh is writing his will."

"He is. He's the head of this family. He can't just have things willy nilly, you know. Especially if the title is going to have to descend collaterally." She sighs. "I suppose you'll stick out no matter what."

I remember what Hugh has said about my looks. I see basic, corn-fed, Midwestern, blue-eyed blond, and Hugh says: twit, you're exotic in a Brit village. You stand out as American before you even speak -- your tan and perfect teeth scream USA at us.

I mumble something about trying harder to Lady Barstow and then berate myself for being a wimp. But you know what? She's too hard to take at the best of times, and I'm pretty sure she's broken my arm and some ribs with her crazy driving. I drift a bit, and I'm sure I hear Amanda and Hugh bickering as I'm wheeled away at last.

The radiologist is nice. He moves me around gently and apologizes when I yelp at the position he places my arm in. When he's done he says he needs me to wait outside the lab while he makes sure the exposures are okay. He asks if there's any one I want to wait with me.

"Hugh," I mumble before I think about it. I don't really, but perhaps he'll get his irritation vented with me while I'm still here and then the trip home won't be so bad. My eyes well up. Have I really been

reduced to thinking about my beloved Hugh in those terms? Some one not to please, but someone whose temper I tiptoe around and manage? Oh crap, here he is and I'm sniveling.

He offers me his handkerchief and sits next to me.

"Boy," he begins.

"I'm sorry!" I blurt. "I'm sorry I traumatized your mother!"

Hugh looks disconcerted. "That's not... damn Ryan, stop crying, please. How much are you hurt?"

I wave my good arm at the radiology door. "Waiting to know."

Hugh nods and takes my hand. "Ryan -- I know the last weeks have been hard for you. You've been very good. My family do approve of you, you know. And the reason Kate and mum have been so busy -- well, it's my fault. I asked them to plan a reception at the house for us. For after our civil union in town. It's this Saturday. It's all set."

All I want is to be married to Hugh. I've been hinting about going to Canada for the last year, but suddenly I'm really, really pissed off.

“I think you forgot something, Hugh.” I snatch my hand away. He looks genuinely perplexed so I help him out and hiss: “Asking me!”

“Christ, Hugh! I told you to propose to him, not tell him he’s getting married.” Amanda pops out from around the corner.

“Bloody hell, Amanda! I told you to drive mother home! Where is she?”

“Right here,” snaps Lady Barstow and wheels herself around the corner.

I carefully reverse my wheelchair back into radiology and listen through the door as they argue. They don’t notice me leave. The radiologist comes up behind me with my charts and I put my fingers to my lips and we both listen to Hugh rant at his family. I learn a lot: He’s been arguing with his mom about the wedding. The sibs are on his side. Hugh wants to marry me and can’t imagine me refusing after all my hints about going to Canada. He really thinks this is a wonderful gift to me. He also doesn’t want a fancy wedding, but agreed to a party afterwards.

Apparently, Hugh wanted the whole wedding to be a surprise to cheer me up because I’ve been moping around like a week of wet Wednesdays. He and Amanda rehash their whole argument about a surprise wedding being romantic.

“It’s a jolly good idea,” insists Hugh. “Ryan wants me to be romantic and prove my love. And this will make Ryan an honest man.”

“Yes, but Hugh, I told you he’d like a proposal more! Honestly! Men!”

“I did propose,” yells Hugh.

“You did NOT,” hollers Amanda.

The radiologist behind me stifles a giggle.

“Ryan,” he whispers. “I’m sorry, but I have to get them to quiet down, and get you back to a doctor. You’ve got a broken arm and a cracked rib. Want to get a pathetic face on?”

I put on my best orphan in a rainstorm face and get wheeled back out. Hugh’s expression softens, and Amanda shuts up. Lady Barstow pokes Amanda.

“Take me home, girl. Hugh can look after Ryan. They don’t need us here.”

I blink. I’m pretty sure it’s the first time she’s used my name. The radiologist gives Hugh directions and lets him wheel me off in another direction than Amanda and their mother.

I think I hear: “Sorry, boy” but I’m not going to push it by checking.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” says Hugh as we get closer to the waiting room. “I thought your not having to worry about the planning would be a nice present. I know you hate that sort of thing.”

“Hugh,” I say quietly. “You’re right, I don’t like fussing over social events, but my own wedding would be different. And I heard you say to Amanda that you thought I’d get over-excited and annoy your family. And I heard you say you slipped the application and consent forms into the stacks of estate papers for me to sign.” I take a deep breath and hide a whimper as my rib complains. “A surprise might be sweet and romantic, but this was disrespectful and dishonest.”

Hugh gives my chair a final push into the waiting room and then walks on out through the exit. To my shame, I burst into tears. I’ve never sassed my Sir like that before. And worse, I meant it. A different nurse is on duty now -- not the one who rebuked me in front of Lady Barstow -- and she takes a peek at my chart and clucks

over me. "Poor lamb. That's a nasty break. Don't you worry -- we'll be ready in a jiffy to set it and give you nice shot. Cheer up now, lamb."

I give a brave smile, but I want to wail. I adore Hugh. I want to marry him. His family is showing up for it. His mother has been part of the surprise reception -- all those phone calls fall into place now - - so do Kate's myriad errands. And even poor Rog avoiding me. He's notorious for blabbing secrets.

And now I've screwed up and told Hugh -- Hugh of all people -- that he's dishonest and disrespectful.

I try to be stoic through having my arm set, my rib taped, and my injections, but I'm filled with anxiety that Hugh has truly left. I confide in the nurse, and she steps out and spots him pacing under the entrance canopy.

"He's still there, sweetheart," she says, "And he looks that worried!"

I puzzle over how worried she means until I recall that can be used to intensify in Brit, and I smile at her.

Hugh comes back in silently when she summons him, and goes to get the car. He's driving his dad's Jag, not the rental, and I reluctantly enjoy the ride back. He still hasn't spoken when we get

back to his mother's house. I'm worried the silence will persist and that either his family will provoke us more or we'll go to bed in deadly silence.

"I know you meant well," I mutter as we sit in the parked Jag.

"I did," he replies.

We exchange cautious looks, then Hugh leans over and kisses my mouth. We neck for a little, like teenagers, in the car until my arm and rib complain through the pain meds.

"Will you marry me?" asks Hugh.

An old Jag in a converted stable garage with me full of pain pills is not really more romantic than a radiology lab, but he's asking this time.

"Yes, please," I say enthusiastically.

"Oh thank God," he says, which isn't really very romantic either, but we've cleared the air and we sneak into the house as if we've missed a curfew and make it up the stairs before Hugh yells, "We're home. Safe. Wedding is on. Good night!"

He knows none of them will dare open our bedroom door so we are safe from interrogation until the morning.

We fall asleep cautiously entwined and in the morning, we make careful love. It's not fucking or blowing him or giving him a hand job. It really is smushy old love making. Hugh is tender with my battered body -- I have one hell of a set of bruises as well -- and won't let me exert myself.

He massages me, kisses me, and jerks off as he strokes my cock. I can hardly believe it -- he rarely does me -- but I'm sure not complaining. I lie back and think of my Englishman. Hugh comes first and I worry that he'll stop, but he uses his come to lube my cock further and by the time I come, I'm worried my poor rib will pop from its taping. The pain is lost in my ecstasy as I shoot -- I yell Hugh's name -- and lie shuddering in his arms afterwards.

Hugh kisses my forehead and ruefully says, "Now my sibs will think I abused you this morning too. They're quite protective of you, you know."

"They just met me."

Hugh snorts. "I assure you, Ryan, Kate has been on the phone to them daily since you got here. So has mother. They can read

between the lines. They know what mum is like. Any one she bitches about as much as you must have some good qualities. All the sons-in-law went though this.”

“Oh,” I say quietly and squirm: son-in-law. I never thought those words would apply to me.

Hugh is looking at my arm cast. “Well, there’s enough of your hand sticking out to get the ring on.”

I try not to squeak or get all over-excited, but I’m getting a ring!

“Up, boy. We have a house of pre-wedding women to face, so courage mon brave!”

I get up and wash as fully as I can at the wash basin musing all the while: this Saturday! The day after tomorrow! I’ll be married to Hugh. I’ll have a wedding ring! I’ll be Ryan Green-Barstow. I feel a flutter in my diaphragm, and I realize I need food and a pain pill.

At breakfast, I see Ellie and Ronnie whispering together, and after breakfast, I see Ellie peel off and pursue Hugh. He walks faster and faster but won’t run from his sister, and I suspect she catches him before he reaches the stables.

Kate has cut Ronnie off at the pass -- she was headed for me. “Ronnie -- I need you to go into town and see the marquee people for me. They’re giving me some nonsense about not being here until noon on Saturday and that’s just not acceptable. The wedding party will be back by then! Please, Rons, you’re so good with tradespeople...”

She ushers Ronnie off and winks at me. Amanda gets up from her final cup of coffee and beckons me. “Come along, Ryan. I know just the spot for you to take a book and lounge in the sun. We want you to do nothing except relax until Hugh gets a ring on your finger. After that, you’re on your own!”

Clearly Amanda and Kate have one agenda and Ronnie and Ellie another -- and since Kate and Amanda seem to want me to be left alone, I’ll follow their lead. I spend a happy morning snoozing in a deck chair in front of the greenhouses. I think I read a whole page. The pain pills from the hospital are fantastic. I don’t hurt at all and I can drift off as soon as I shut my eyes.

Hugh comes stamping around the corner later. I’m half asleep and confused as he rants at me. I can’t follow what he’s saying, but he’s pretty clearly backing out of his proposal.

“It’s the decent thing, Ryan,” he says. “You only said yes because you had to. So -- ”

What the fuck?

My arm is throbbing and my rib feels like it's trying to pierce my lung. And now Hugh is reneging on me. I'm fed up with him and his family. Every time I think I'm going to be happy, something snatches it away. It's like Eduardo and his family all over again. I thought the last few years with Hugh had exorcised that fear, but his family has brought it all rushing back. These macho traditional guys will always do what their mothers want in the end. Too bad I have a broken arm or I'd steal their precious Jag, head for the airport, and trade in my first class return ticket for the first flight out.

I brush past Hugh knowing he won't grab an injured boy no matter how mad he is. I blurt something about "if that's how you want it to end," and I head upstairs and slam the door to our room. Pointless, I know. There's no lock and Hugh can come right in -- it's his home and his room.

I do start packing though and plan to call a taxi. Or ask Lady Barstow to drive me to the train station. I bet she'd help me leave her precious son.

There's a tap at the door, and I ungraciously yell, "I can't stop you." But it's Ronnie, not Hugh.

"Don't go," she says.

“Why not? Hugh changed his mind. If I leave now I can have my friends move me out of his house before he gets back, and I won’t bother him any bloody more.”

Ronnie wrings her hands. “Ryan, Ellie and I screwed up. We thought he’d fucked up the proposal and we wanted him to try again. Ellie was mad that he asked you when you were injured and alone overseas in hospital. With mummy right there! We thought he’d bullied you into saying yes, because lord knows we wouldn’t marry him! So Ellie told him this morning that he had to offer you the chance to say no. And to ask you again properly.”

I have no idea where to begin. First, I’m boggled that Hugh was bullied by Ellie so effectively -- I’d never quite believed him when he said they ruled him -- and that his sisters are such total meddlers, and -- well, fuck.

“But he did ask again,” is all I manage.

“That’s what Ellie said Hugh said too.”

“Because he did,” I scream. “And now he un-asked and I said okay again because I thought he was backing out and I always try to do what he wants!”

I must be crazy looking because poor Ronnie steps back, but she's a good sister because she perseveres and says, "We want Hugh to be happy, Ryan. He's our baby brother even if he is head of the family. Mum and dad were still hoping, but sisters know. And now we've met you, we can see he loves you."

"You can? How? Sometimes I'm not sure."

She giggles. "Honey, he lets you get away with loving him. That's how we know. He's so awful to try and pamper and you do it without being eaten alive."

I give her the stink eye, but I stop trying to one-handedly throw things into my suitcase and sit down on the edge of the bed.

She sits down at the other end of the bed. "We were talking and decided it's a good thing our brother isn't straight. He'd be an awful prick, and I can't see him with a wife -- but it seems to work for you."

She looks at me hard for a long moment, and I crumble.

"Yes," I whisper. "He wouldn't let me call him sir, but..." I look at Ronnie to see if she gets that I don't mean her brother's title, but something else. She has a wicked grin on her face, and I remember all Hugh's jokes about the British upper classes and BDSM.

She grins. “I knew it! Don’t worry, baby boy, we sibs are far happier knowing Hugh’s found a niche than being bothered by that.”

As usual, I’m an afterthought, but at least she adds, “Oh, and if you are happy too.”

I nod. I’ve fallen into a stupid habit of placing my self second to Hugh so why should his sibs be different? We’ve really screwed up this Sir thing all on our own without help from anyone, I realize. I wonder what he was going to say about Sir this weekend? Or if I’ll ever learn now?

“Mum’ll settle to it once Rupert gets married next year. He’s got a fiancée with good hips so mum’s already excited about being a great-grandma. As soon as Hugh’s heir breeds, the ice will thaw. Mum adores his fiancée.”

“She does? How can you tell?”

Ronnie laughs. “She hasn’t eaten her!”

I groan. His mum is devouring me. Politely with sterling silver cutlery. But still. And she was a little nicer today after having knocked me over with her Volvo yesterday.

“Ryan -- she’ll get used to you. Really. Even though she and dad approved Ellie’s wedding they didn’t warm up to her husband for a while. Something about his father being too high church -- he was a vicar -- lace in the services or something.”

I knuckle my eyes and moan. I’m a total heathen. I’ve skipped every Sunday service since we’ve been here no matter how much Hugh or his mother glared. A damn lefty. A big old fag. And, most damning of all apparently, American. I’m not sure I want his mum to get used to me.

Ronnie sighs and gets up to go.

“Ronnie -- I told Hugh it was off. What do I do? I can’t ask him to marry me. That’s not how we work.”

“I don’t know, Ryan. Ellie and I have fucked up enough. Now I’ve told you our part in it, we want to step back.”

I see her point. Hugh and I wouldn’t be unengaged if they’d stayed out. But oh God, what a mess! Hugh backed off because Ellie convinced him he’d bullied me -- and to be fair, Hugh is a bit of a bully to me and he knows it so it wasn’t an unreasonable doubt for him to have harbored except usually I like being bullied by him -- and I thought it was what he wanted and I try to please him even

when it's not what I want. Oh, fuck. We are like those idiots in sitcoms who won't say what they want or try to hide secrets and get into crazy muddles.

I flop on the bed and wonder what on earth to do. I want Hugh with my whole mind and body. Can I go home and resume my Canada hints after this? Can we pick up and carry on without a wedding this weekend? I wonder if Rog and Pete will help me get home. I can't even imagine traveling next to Hugh if we can't figure this out. But Rog is his cousin even if Pete is my coach. They'll take his part even if we are not actively fighting.

After a bit I stick my head under the cold tap to try and stop my brain racing, towel my hair, comb it and mutter, "Big girl panties, Ryan," and go downstairs.

Every one is having tea in the kitchen. I get the feeling they are huddled round the big table having a family war meeting, and I nearly back out, but Rog and Pete stand and motion me to the table, and have me sit next to Hugh. They stand behind us.

There's a long silence and then Ronnie, despite her stay out of it announcement not half an hour ago, blurts out, "Will you both just cut the crap?"

I see Lady Barstow's eyebrows disappear, but Ronnie is carrying on. "Ryan, for God's sake stop thinking about what Hugh wants and just

say what you want for a change. Do you want Hugh to be your husband?

“Yes,” I mumble.

“Hugh, you rotten excuse for a brother, will you make this sweet little American boy an honest man?”

“Yes,” bellows Hugh. “I’ve been trying to all month!”

Polly giggles and yells, “I now pronounce you!”

“Sorry,” says Kate. “She was a bridesmaid just after Christmas and that’s stuck.”

“And a bridesmaid on Saturday too,” I say and grin at our niece, who is skipping around the kitchen yelling, “Hugh and Ryan! Kiss the bride!”

Hugh has my good hand under the table and says quietly, “I told you it was a jolly good idea.”

“Kiss!” demands Polly.

Hugh looks straight on at his mother, turns to me, and crushes my mouth against his.

Polly is whooping, and her delight covers Hugh saying, “You call me Sir from now on, boy.”

I look straight at Hugh, then his mum, and say clearly, “I will, Sir --” I pause long enough to tease him, and add, “-- Hugh.”