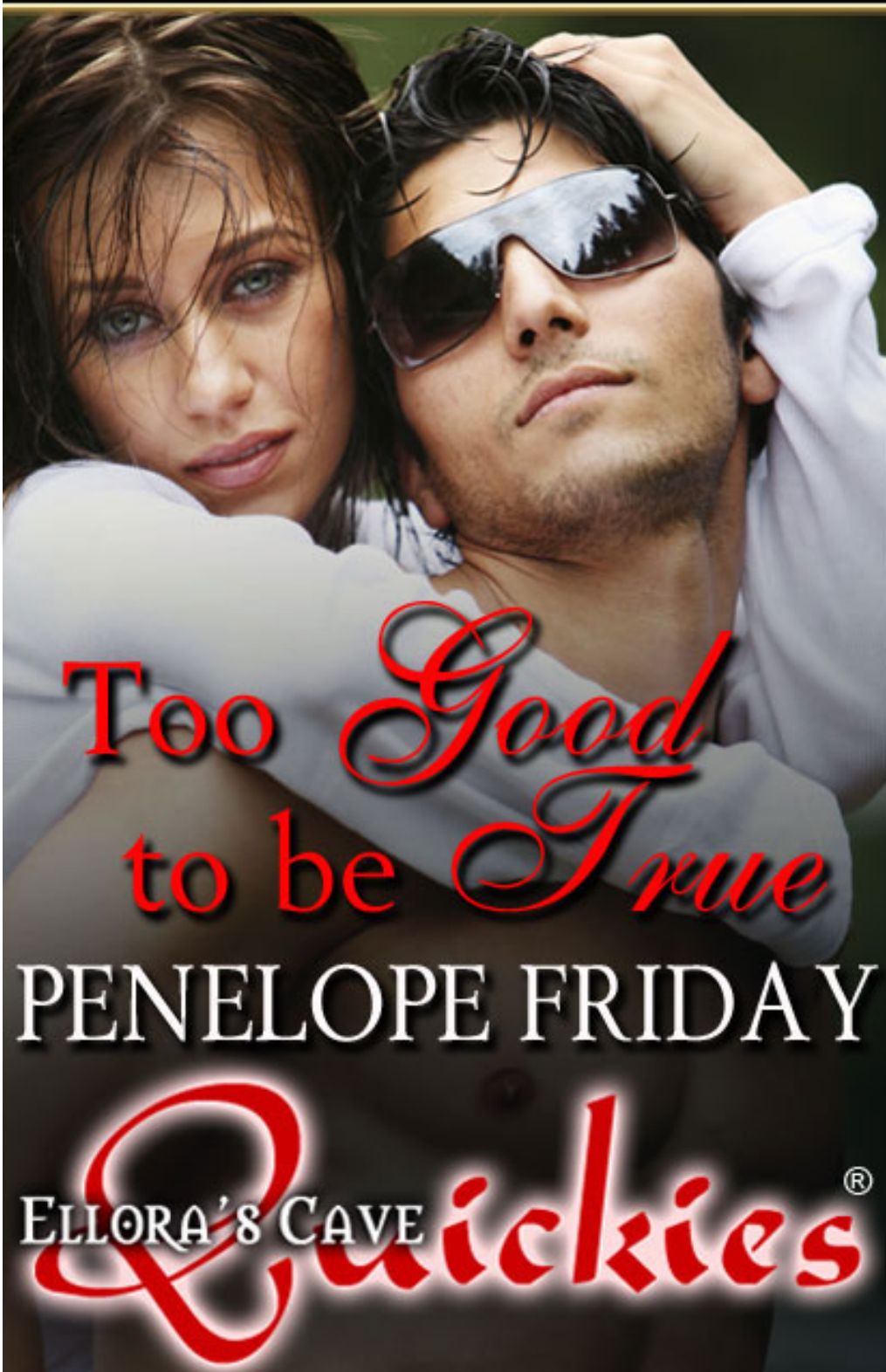


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Too Good
to be True*

PENELOPE FRIDAY

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

Too Good to Be True

Penelope Friday

Mandy thinks her love life, not to mention her sex life, is over for good when her husband leaves her—for an *older* woman. A chance encounter with a gorgeous man begins to change her mind. Scarcely daring to believe her luck when Jon asks her to meet him again, she agrees. One dizzyingly fantastic night of lust later, Mandy is in heaven.

But Jon has a secret. Has Mandy moved from a cheating husband to a man with an even more sinister past? Will she get the chance to explore the range of sexual possibilities Jon is introducing her to, or is her new life too good to be true?

Anglophiles ahoy! Too Good to Be True has enough British witticism to fill a Guinness factory. But this is no stiff-upper-lip affair!

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Too Good to Be True

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TO GOOD TO BE TRUE

Penelope Friday

Chapter One

I was fat, frumpy and forty and I was never going to have sex again. Kind and generous friends tried to reassure me that none of this was true, but quite apart from the date on my birth certificate proving them wrong, these same ill-advised friends had also told me that my (soon-to-be ex) husband would never cheat on me in a million years. “He loves you, Mandy,” they said, one after another. Given how accurate they were on that occasion, I didn’t find myself particularly disposed to believe them about anything in my personal life, present or future.

There is this entire “betrayed wife” stereotype, when the woman (crying daintily into a hankie, as opposed to my stertorous nose-blowing into a paper napkin) says tragically, “And he left me for a younger woman—a beautiful young woman. What chance did I have?” Well, let me tell you, Mrs. Tragedy Queen, it’s a damn sight worse when your husband leaves you for an *older* woman whose best friends don’t even attempt to deny her plainness. I mean, what did it say about me that Andrew (from now on known as Cheating Bastard) would rather be with her? Mind you, what did it say about her that she was quite happy to start an adulterous relationship with a married man? I sometimes tried to console myself by saying bitterly that they deserve each other, but frankly, when you’re lying on your own at 2 a.m., in a single bed (because Cheating Bastard has added insult to injury by moving out with the double), it really doesn’t cut the mustard.

So. There I was, suddenly single (which sounds like a reality television program waiting to happen—“You thought we were going out on a wedding anniversary celebration, but surprise, surprise. Welcome to *Suddenly Single*—I’m leaving you!”) and wondering how the hell I ended up here. I was living in Kent in a house I’d always hated, and working at a job I’d always hated, without the husband I’d foolishly always

loved, and with a cat who chose to show her disapproval of the upheaval by weeing all over the sitting room carpet. What a great way to start the fifth decade of my life. You'll have to excuse me for not being entirely over the moon.

"You just have to get on with life," said Julia briskly, after allowing me six months of wallowing in my misery. "It's like riding a horse—you need to get right back into dating before you forget how it's done."

Before I forgot? Julia, darling, I'd never known! Granted I'd ended up married, but look what a success that hadn't been. Speed dating? Well maybe, if you count watching any potential date run quickly in the opposite direction before I had a chance to say anything more than "hello". I tried to explain a little of this to Julia (still in her thirties, damn her; slender, beautiful and with men lining up in rows to take her out), but it clearly didn't register.

"And besides," I said, concluding the argument, "men don't want to go out with frumpy, mumsy-without-even-being-a-mum, forty-year-olds."

Julia shut up then, but I swear she was whistling the old music-hall song *Nobody Loves a Fairy When She's Forty* as she left. After, by the way, she'd eaten my last chocolate biscuit, the last comfort left to a dumped wife. Thank you so much. Friends like that, who needs enemies?

Nic took a different approach. "What you want is to treat yourself well," she said firmly. "Take yourself shopping, get one of those free makeovers done and buy some new clothes."

"So I can be a tarted-up fat and frumpy forty-something," I returned.

"Forty-nothing," Nic said, even more firmly. At two months older than me, correcting me about my age was clearly of greater importance than denying the other parts of my reply. When I refused to take the bait, she descended to threats. "Well, Mandy, if you don't do something about it soon, we will. Think on that."

And think on that I did. As well as Nic and Julia on my case, Belle—the third of the three witches, as I’d started to call them to their faces—would have something to say or do. And whatever it was, knowing Belle, it’d be decisive.

Next day in the pub, I thought I knew what she’d done. A gorgeous man strolled up to me as I was waiting for the witches to join me for our weekly alcohol and gossip fest.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked—and believe me, he had the sort of voice that would’ve made chocolate melt, let alone a sex-starved almost-divorcee.

I got halfway through “Be my guest,” when it clicked. *Oh God, I thought, they think I’m so desperate that they’ve ordered an escort for me.* The man, who’d slid into the seat opposite, looked at me as if he’d just asked to sit with a lunatic, and an awful thought crossed my mind. “Erm...” I caught his eye, somewhat nervously, “did I just say that aloud?”

He nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

That was when I decided that things had got so disastrous that they couldn’t possibly get worse. “No offense,” I said, “but are you?”

“An escort?” He was beginning to look amused—either that, or he was just trying to pacify the madwoman whose table he had foolishly approached. “No. I’m sorry if that’s a disappointment to you. My name’s Jon.”

“Mine’s Mandy. And,” I added ruefully, “I’m not usually as paranoid as this—nor as rude. It’s just that my husband left me a few months ago, and my friends have been...”

“Offering to pay for an escort?” Jon asked, his lips twitching.

“Not quite,” I admitted. “But they’ve all told me in turn that it’s about time I started dating again, and I wondered if they were trying to force my hand.”

I picked up my glass of wine and downed the contents, noticing for the first time that Jon didn’t have a drink. “Can I buy you a drink,” I offered, “to make up for

suggesting that you might be a sex worker? After all, it's partly your fault, you know, for being so good looking....oh God, I've just done it again. I'm so sorry." I suspected my face was as red as my wine had been, but fortunately Jon was laughing. "Go on, what's your poison?" I asked.

"A pint of Guinness," he surrendered, "and the next round will be mine."

"Oh well," I said uncertainly, "I'm kind of expecting..."

"A man?" he suggested, deadpan.

I snorted. "As if. The friends." My voice was dark.

I bought the drinks, and the witches still hadn't appeared by the time we'd finished drinking them so Jon, as he'd promised, got another round. I'd no idea what happened to them. It turned out later that Julia had come in, seen Jon and me getting on like a house on fire, and had stood outside the pub warning the other two not to disturb me before dragging them into a different bar to discuss this new development. Jon and I, therefore, were left alone all evening—by which time I was well on the way to tipsy, and more than a little in lust.

And then I went back to that single bed, and as I undressed before the mirror I was reminded of all the reasons that a tall, dark man with an extremely sexy voice would not be interested in me—from cellulite-puckered thighs to my double (verging on triple) chin and the lines which were closer to train tracks on my forehead. Oh, not to mention the absolute romance of taking my thyroid tablets before I got into bed. Welcome to middle age, people; shut the door behind you and don't look back.

* * * * *

Nevertheless, Jon had asked me to meet him again, and though I suspected that he'd change his mind as soon as he woke up in the morning (if not before), I trogged along to the Golden Compass three days later. I'd made a rudimentary attempt at putting on makeup—just in case, you understand—and tried on three sets of clothes. In the end, however, I'd decided that if Jon was going to stand me up, I'd prefer it to

happen when I looked like mutton-dressed-as-mutton (in this case, dressed in my standard jeans and a shirt) rather than demonstrating my hopes and humiliations in a mutton-dressed-as-lamb outfit. It had been bad enough that I'd made an idiot of myself with emotional scenes in the last weeks of living with Andrew, when I still hoped he'd realize that it was all a terrible mistake and he loved me and only me. It turned out, as I realized later when I overheard the conversation of some of the other regulars, that we'd been the Golden Compass's own private soap opera, and I was not, thank you very much, going to entertain them with a second act of *The Life and Lack of Loves of Mandy Hammond*.

Much to my surprise, however, Jon was there waiting for me—looking, if possible, even more sexy than he had on that first evening, and making me horribly aware of the comparison between a tall dark hunk in a smart suit and a small, dumpy, jeans-wearing, middle-aged woman. (To those who think that forty isn't middle aged—you try getting ditched, and see how young and sexy *you* feel.) Jon was either very tactful or blind, as the awkward disparity in our outfits did not appear to occur to him. Instead, he smiled at me, and said with every sign of meaning it,

"You look lovely, Mandy."

I gave him the Look that this patently untruthful statement deserved, but confined myself to a simple "Thanks."

He hooked his arm through mine and led me out of the pub. "Nothing against the place, but I prefer not to conduct my affairs in front of an audience."

His *affairs*. A good reminder that even if he had actually turned up, I was no doubt just one of a list of women he was seeing, and probably the oldest and frumpiest, at that. I forced a smile.

"I reckon I probably did enough of that myself with Cheating Bastard to keep them in gossip for the moment."

"With whom?" Jon boggled slightly.

I like a man who says *whom* correctly.

"Oh damn, did I really manage to call him Andrew last time?" He nodded. "The ex. Or, more accurately, the soon-to-be-ex, after he and I have finished our polite lawyerly discussion as to whether my having paid the entire deposit on our house means that it would only be fair for him to collect all the money. Ooh," I said, realizing what it sounded like, "do you reckon I'm bitter, at all?"

"Glass of red wine, aren't you?" he teased. "Do you drink bitter?"

I laughed. "Don't think I need to, given my last comment. So, where are we going?"

"A meal?"

I glanced down doubtfully at my jeans (albeit my *best* pair of jeans). "McDonald's?" I suggested.

He grinned. Did I mention before that Jon had the most sensual smile in the world? It flowed straight from his mouth through my body to set up a throbbing between my legs.

"I know it's a bit of a come-down if you've been expecting a high class fast food menu, but I was kind of thinking more along the lines of Beau's."

Beau's. Only one of the best eateries in town. Only the one which was mentioned in the "Twenty Restaurants You Must Visit" pull-out of the newspaper.

"Erm, what's the likelihood they'll turn me away at the door?"

Jon sighed and shook his head. "Sadly, very small. I'd like to think we could skip the meal and I could just take you home and ravish you, but I have an awful suspicion they'll let us in." I choked on an unexpected laugh as he led me up to the door. "Table for two—Jon," he said, smiling at the hostess.

She smiled back. I couldn't blame her. Jon's smile almost forced you to do the same in return. "Come through, sir, madam."

"First name terms?" I muttered to him.

"Easier than my surname. Trust me on this."

We obediently followed the waitress. I don't think I'd have dared do anything else. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been any place where someone called me madam. Certainly not when I was wearing jeans. To do her justice, she gave not even the smallest critical look at my clothing, instead leading us placidly down to a small table by the window.

"You were confident I'd come," I said to Jon when she'd left us to it.

"Not confident," he corrected, "optimistic. It is better to travel hopefully..."

"Than to arrive," I finished. "Would you rather I hadn't turned up?"

Jon put his head in his hands in mock despair. "Oh God." He lifted his face so that I could catch his eye above his fingers. "Did I just say that aloud?" he jested.

It was at that point that I realized I didn't care what the meal tasted like. For the first time in—well, a long, long, time (going back far before Cheating Bastard's cheating even began), I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

The meal, however, was delicious. The fact that I could notice what it tasted like says it all, given that I was faced with the distracting presence of an extremely handsome man who had not only a great sense of humor but also the sort of conversation that entertained without implying that the speaker was ten times more intelligent than oneself. And I have to say, when you're falling deeper and deeper in lust, usually you lose the ability to notice that the tomato and olive bruschetta starter melts in the mouth, or that the fish you have ordered as a main course might well have been cooked five minutes after it was extracted from the sea. But this meal was so fantastic that it transcended my usual sense of awareness. The tarte au chocolat was so smooth, so sensual, that I was almost orgasmic in its grip. Forget men, chocolate has a power almost as strong. (And no, I was not bothered by having ordered an Italian starter, an English main course and a French dessert. Sue me.)

As I took the final mouthful of the chocolate, I became aware of Jon's eyes on me. I opened eyes that had closed despite myself, and looked across the table at him.

"That," I said sincerely, "was the best meal I have had in my life."

"Same here," he said. "Though I think it's the company that made it for me. Would you like to come home with me for a coffee?"

Obviously, at this point one says no. You acknowledge that although you've spent two evenings with a man, in actual fact you know practically nothing about him. For all you know, he might be a serial killer who delights in feeding up the victim before slaughter, making you the human version of *foie gras*.

"Yes," I said, and my only difficulty was not sounding too eager.

* * * * *

Yes, we did end up in bed. *And* on the sofa, and on the stairs and in the kitchen. It had been years since Cheating Bastard went down on me (maybe I should've taken that as a hint... it's so easy to be wise after the event), and even when he had, believe me, it had felt nothing like this. I'd thought that "screaming multiple orgasm" was just the name of a cocktail at the Golden Compass. It turned out, to my shock (and later, when I remembered how uninhibited I'd been, embarrassment) that it could be an extremely real experience.

Jon spent the journey to his house telling me in a soft undertone all the things he'd like to do to me. Some blokes might just sound like a dirty old man doing that, but believe me, with Jon it was nothing of the kind. Listening to him describing all the parts of me he intended to kiss was outrageously sexy.

"Breasts are obvious, of course," he said musingly, "but I don't think I mind being obvious with you, Mandy. Then there's the vertebrae of your back—each one of those could have my tongue running all over it, with you lying naked on the bed. I could kiss your fingers in turn." He lifted my hand to his lips and suited the action to the words. "But when we're in bed, I could nuzzle your palm before working my way up your arm to your shoulder, and up further to your neck. Do you like having your neck kissed, Mandy?"

Did I? I didn't know, but I was very much prepared to find out. By the time we reached his house, I was practically out of my head with lust. I barely let him close the door behind us before I had my hands all over him, and my tongue trying to take up permanent residence in his mouth. Amazingly, he didn't seem to object to having a soon-to-be-divorcee flinging herself at him; in fact, I'd go so far as to suggest he was positively encouraging me. You get that impression, you understand, when a man is trying to undo your shirt, and in between snogs is muttering curses at buttons that refuse to come undone. Also, I spent as much time as I could pressed tight up close to his body and believe me, his cock was definitely standing to attention. By the time I'd managed to strip him of his clothes in turn, we'd got as far as the sitting room, and quite frankly neither of us felt the need to go any further at that point. Gorgeous big sofa, gorgeous man (big in all the right places) – who needed more?

My God, he was handsome. If I'd thought him good-looking when he was dressed, that was nothing to how he looked naked. Naked and oh-my-God absolutely aroused. By me! Undressing a man whose cock sticks firmly up at a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree angle, just because you're taking off his pants...it's a pretty good feeling. He began by kissing his way down my body, as he had promised, but the truth was that we were both too needy to be able to bother with all the preliminaries he'd been mentioning on the way home. As I told him, the words had been as good as the deeds. Instead, he knelt by the side of the sofa, my legs slung over his shoulders as he sucked so hard on my clit that I thought I might explode from the intensity of the feeling. And the weirdest thing was – with Jon's mouth between my legs, sucking my clit, diving his tongue inside me until I couldn't help thrusting my hips up toward him – I wasn't thinking about how he'd notice my fat, floppy thighs. I didn't worry about middle-age spread or whether I'd washed "down there" well enough. I just felt, and climaxed – and climaxed again and again and again.

Oh. My. God. There was a slight pause as he dragged himself up next to me and we both lay curled together on the sofa. Although I wanted to show him my appreciation, it was a couple of minutes before my head stopped spinning (and my vagina stopped

pulsing) and I could wriggle my way down his body to start placing a line of kisses down his beautiful cock, licking the tip teasingly before moving away again. When I actually did take his cock into my mouth, well...

Do I need to tell you how unbelievably fantastic it is, having a gorgeous bloke's gorgeous cock slip deep into your throat, and listening to him making deep noises of pleasure? The feeling of fullness, the taste of masculinity, the sound of a man begging for more. I don't think you can blame me if I slipped one of my hands between my own legs as I sucked him. In fact, listening to his rapidly more incoherent words of encouragement and praise, I nearly came once more just from having my mouth spread wide around his cock, my fingers cupping his balls and stroking his inner thighs.

We repaired to the kitchen at this point for what Jon claimed were "essential supplies" – a phrase that sent my brain into overdrive when I saw him pull out a carton of cream and a wooden spoon. I'll admit that I was at first taken aback by his switching on the washing machine. After all, was this *really* the moment to be thinking about having clean socks in the morning? But it turned out that he knew what he was doing. I'd never thought I'd have sex when spread across a turned-on washing machine, though I can tell you it was no way as turned on as I was. But with Jon pouring drips of cold cream over my breasts and then licking them off with a warm tongue; with his fingers demonstrating that there were some places they could reach that his tongue couldn't...it was a sensation I would never, ever, forget.

We made it to the bedroom shortly after that, but not for sleeping. Jon made me lie on my front, and as he kissed his way down my spine, he proceeded to prove that I had been completely wrong when I'd told him that words were as good as the real thing. He also stroked the wooden spoon over my buttocks with teasing gentleness, making me aware of every single nerve ending. I could hear a moaning sound and it took me a little while to realize that I was the one making it. The noise only served as most welcome encouragement to Jon. Later it was my turn with the cream, pouring it liberally onto my hands and then sliding creamy palms over Jon's cock until it was he who was on the

point of losing control, thrusting up into my hands and murmuring something that I didn't need to hear accurately to know was appreciation. I slid my hands faster and faster over his erection until the moment when I felt his cock twitch a little in my hand. I would have continued, brought him to completion, but he tugged my hands away before he came, kissing my mouth over and over before reaching into a drawer for the necessary protection. I took the packet from him, opening it and smoothing the rubber over his cock in a teasingly slow way. That was also something I hadn't done for a while, but it seemed that I hadn't lost the knack. I came again with him inside me, but the best feeling was directly afterwards—feeling him spasm inside me, brought by my orgasm to his own.

And that was just the beginning of a night of passion bettering any I'd previously experienced. Cheating Bastard's approach had always been that if he'd climaxed, that was the end of any lovemaking—the pinnacle had been reached (by him), and that was that. Jon, apparently, saw the first orgasm as a prompt for more, and believe me, I wasn't complaining. The next morning, I admit, I was realizing my age—staying up fucking all night was perhaps something best left to youth, at any rate when you were supposed to be making a sensible contribution at work the next day. But it was worth it for the self-esteem boost, worth it even more for the indignant expressions of the three witches when we met up a few days later.

* * * * *

"Go on," said Julia, "tell us the dirty gossip. Who is he?"

Actually, that was quite a good question. We'd talked about anything and everything that came to mind but general personal details had been left behind as we exchanged views on films, books and the disaster of TV's evening schedule on a Saturday night (to name but three subjects).

"Well," I said with slight embarrassment, "he's called Jon Quetescu, and he's a marmite lover, but not keen on the film remake of *The Time Traveller's Wife*—he says the book's brilliant and he'll lend it to me."

"He likes marmite?" demanded Nic in disgust.

"Ooh, we're on to the book swapping stage already, are we?" came from Belle.

Julia, however, had a slight frown on her face.

"What's up?" I asked. "I mean, come on, we've only been out twice."

"I just..." Julia stopped. "Nothing."

Now, there's nothing like someone saying "nothing" in that tone of voice to make you feel that not only is there something, but a very big something going on. I was pretty sure that Julia wasn't anti-marmite enough to see this as a serious problem, and we'd exchanged books enough times over the years that I didn't think she was bothered by this. What was more, she had agreed with me about the television scheduling, so it wasn't that either. Which left...

"Why, have you heard of him?"

"I might be thinking of the wrong person," said Julia, in the tone of voice of someone convinced that this is not the case.

"Ju, if Mandy doesn't kill you, I think we will," said Nic. "What are you keeping from us?"

"It's just... that surname, really."

"Weird, isn't it? He says it's Romanian originally, but he's not an illegal immigrant or anything." Surely Julia wasn't about to get all funny about foreigners? It didn't seem like her.

"Hang on," said Julia briefly, and was gone, leaving the other witches and myself staring at each other in bewilderment.

Twenty minutes later, and somewhat out of breath, she returned holding a copy of *The Evening Standard* newspaper. Flipping through it, she came to one page and looked up at me.

"Quetescu spelt Q-u-e-t-e-s-c-u?" she said.

"This is going to be something I don't want to know, isn't it?" I might be frumpy, but I'm not an idiot. If Julia had seen something in the paper about this bloke, it was clearly not going to be good news. "What's he done?"

"Well, nothing definite," she offered.

Belle snatched the paper from her at this point, and began to read aloud. Skipping through the main thrust of the article, she fixed on the important line—the one which had caught Julia's attention.

"Solicitor for Gaimens Investment Company, Jon Quetescu, was arrested on charges of serious fraud. He is bailed, and due to appear in court on 21st September."

There was a blank silence at our table. I finished my drink in a gulp, and Nic got up immediately to get a new round. It was only when she had sat down, and I had examined the article in full, that I spoke.

"Well, I suppose he's not a serial killer."

"Or hasn't been caught for that yet, anyway," Nic said, unhelpfully.

It looked as if'd been more accurate than I thought when I'd considered the dangers of going home with someone I knew only slightly. Even if he was fantastic in (and out of) bed. The only consolation was that given my parlous financial state at the present moment, I could be fairly confident Jon wasn't after my money. I couldn't help wondering, though, whose money he'd been using to pay for the meal at Beau's. His own, or Gaimens'?

"It's probably just a mix-up." Julia, having thrown the cat amongst the pigeons, was clearly regretting doing so and was chasing gamely, if not effectively, after the cat.

"Yeah," drawled Belle. "Or someone with the same name. I know a lot of Quetescus, don't you?"

"Belle!" Julia hissed.

I forced a smile. (I'd got good at that art during Andrew's and my break up.) "Oh well, better to know now than later. I thought I'd done my bit by being married to a

Cheating Bastard, without moving on to an actual criminal. I knew there had to be a catch somewhere—a gorgeous bloke like Jon’s not likely to hit on me unless there’s something seriously wrong.”

“Oh, give up with the self-esteem crisis,” Nic said bracingly. “Just because it looks like this bloke’s dodgy doesn’t say anything about you.”

Maybe it didn’t, but it sure as hell felt like it did.

Chapter Two

I had a dilemma. Meet Jon the following night, or not? I remembered scribbling down both my home phone and my mobile number when we'd been together. Awkward as it was going to be meeting him face to face and having a polite conversation about Things Men Ought To Tell The Women They're Sleeping With...it was better than trying to do it over the phone, making clearly phony excuses as to why I'd not kept our date. And there was one thing else I was certain of—this too was a conversation I was not going to share with the regulars at the Golden Compass.

I texted Jon with a brief message, saying, "Meet at Oak Tree instead?" It was quite a decent pub, but it was on the other side of town. Usually this was a reason to avoid it, but on this particular occasion it made the Oak look an extremely good meeting place—the odds on my bumping into someone I knew were quite long. His text in reply was briefer still: "OK". And so, two bus journeys and a lot of angsting later, I was sitting in the Oak waiting to talk to a bailed solicitor.

Jon was late. Not very, just ten minutes or so. I could see from the moment he arrived that he was harassed about something. I bit back the query "Have you just come from the police station?" but there must have been a look about me that showed what I was thinking. He collapsed into a chair by me.

"You know. Oh, thank God for that."

There would have been few better ways by which to put me on the back foot. The idea that Jon was grateful that I'd outed him as a crim was somewhat disconcerting. The fact he could tell from looking at me that I had did not help.

"Erm, hello," I said weakly.

"Sorry. Sorry. Can I get you a drink?" Jon was half out of his chair again, brushing the rain off his jacket.

"I've got one."

"Of course you have. Sorry. Do you mind if I just..."

"Go ahead."

By the time we were able to have a proper conversation, therefore, I was wondering whether it was he who was mad or whether it was me. He sat down with a pint of Guinness, and—typically, from what I knew about him from our past two experiences—got straight to the point.

"You're wondering why I didn't tell you about being on bail."

Actually, let me be honest here: he got a little *too* straight to the point for my taste. If it had been me, I'd've tried to work up to it gently. I mean, what can you say in response to that? Well, I'll tell you what you can say.

"Yes."

"Sorry," he said again.

The obvious question was "Did you do it?" but it struck me that there was precious little point in asking. I mean, even if he had, it's not as if he was about to come out with the truth when he was due in court in a few months' time. Unfortunately, with the question stuck in my head, I couldn't think of anything else to say. So for a couple of minutes we sat there drinking our drinks and looking supremely uncomfortable. It was funny really. When I'd got home after our last rendezvous, I'd thought I'd be embarrassed meeting him again because of the sex. I mean, because he'd seen me sprawled over his kitchen, to name but one place, in the nude; screaming his name out as he sucked on my clit; thrusting my hips toward his as I reveled in the feeling of his cock inside me. I'd feared it was going to be one of those things that seems all right—well, a great deal better than all right—at the time, but then afterward you wonder what the hell you've been doing and what he's going to think of you. As it was, I was more concerned with what I was supposed to think of *him*. At last, when neither of us could bear the silence any longer, he spoke.

"I...er...brought the book for you." He dug into the inside pocket of his jacket and brought out a book that looked as if it should have been far too large to fit. (And this was not the moment for cock-in-trousers comparisons, either, though I couldn't stop the thought from occurring.)

"Thanks." I picked up the book and looked at the back. I can't precisely say I was "reading" the blurb, because not a word of it stuck in my mind, but I certainly passed my eyes over it. And I still couldn't think of anything to say.

"Look," he said awkwardly, "I'm not a fraudster." He scratched his head. "Sometimes I think it would be better if I had done it. I'd still probably be saying I wasn't a criminal, but at least I wouldn't expect anyone to believe me."

"Um."

I was doing so well on the monosyllabic answers. I could see that Jon wanted something a bit more forthcoming, but really, what was I supposed to say? I couldn't fall into his arms and say, "Oh, darling, I never thought it of you," because—well, look, we'd met twice and although he was absolutely fantastic in bed (and out of it), sadly this didn't necessarily mean that he was as honest as the day was long. Damn, if it were that easy—good sex equals good man—I could've ditched Cheating Bastard way earlier than he'd ditched me. Though since I'd just thought that sex was Not Really My Thing, rather than that Andrew wasn't very good, I probably wouldn't have done.

"Is that a good 'um' or a bad 'um'?"

"It's an um-ish 'um'," I said with my usual clarity. "Look..." I stopped again. There really wasn't any way of phrasing this tactfully.

"That was definitely a bad 'look'," he said. "I suppose it's unreasonable of me to expect anything more. But it's bad enough being punished for something you've done—you've got no idea how bloody unfair it feels when you haven't. But anyway, that's my problem, not yours. You've just got over one awful bloke, it's not exactly likely that you want to jump into a relationship with someone who's even worse."

I took a breath. “I don’t *want* you to have done it,” I said. “And you seem like a great person—except I suppose fraudsters would need to be persuasive, in order to get away with it...” What was I saying about tact? Possibly there are some things less tactful than telling a man that he’s probably charming because he’s a crook, but I’m grateful to say I’ve not come across them. “Look,” I said at last, “maybe we can just slow things down a bit—stay friends, if you know what I mean.”

“To be honest, I don’t know what you mean,” he said ruefully. “I’m not sure whether this is the total rejection with the traditional tactful ending or whether you do want to see me again.”

“Oh God,” I said, embarrassed. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I? I actually did mean that I want to see you again, but I have to admit it sounded like the first excuse from a women’s magazine column on ‘How To Let Him Down Gently’.”

He grinned. “It comes just before ‘we’re not right for each other’.”

“And even beats ‘it’s not you, it’s me’,” I agreed.

Then we were both laughing, and for a meeting in which we had been discussing the possible criminality of one of us, I think that was pretty good going. Thankfully, it dispersed any tension there had been between us, to the point where we agreed to meet at the same time next week. “Except,” I added, “preferably somewhere over the other side of town, nearer home!”

“I know,” he said. “You didn’t want to be having the “criminal” conversation somewhere you might meet someone you knew, but with that behind us I might be allowed back into your area of town.” Since this was almost precisely what had happened, it was totally unanswerable—and Jon laughed again at the expression on my face. “You look just like a kid caught out doing something naughty.” As a response to which comment I intended—and, indeed, attempted—to make a cool and sophisticated exit, which was unfortunately prevented by my leaving my coat behind and having to come back for it.

“Until next time,” I said, glaring at his amusement.

"Until then," he agreed. "Golden Compass, seven o'clock?"

"Golden Compass, seven o'clock," I agreed.

* * * * *

The witches, unsurprisingly, were not wildly impressed that I'd agreed to meet Jon again.

"I'm sure he's a nice person," said Julia tactfully, "but..."

"Are you?" Belle cut across her. "I'm not."

Julia glared at her. "Well, I'm not, either, as it happens, but I was attempting to treat the subject lightly."

"Failing that," Nic suggested, "how about 'Mandy, are you completely mad, or just mostly?'"

Belle nodded. "That would sum it up pretty nicely," she agreed.

"Of all the men in the world," Julia added, "why you have to date one who's due to face criminal charges, I have no idea."

"And if I can get a word in edgeways," I said, indignantly, "I'd like to point out that I am *not* dating him, and I made it very clear that we wouldn't be—"

"Having any more of the best sex of your life," Nic inserted.

It was my turn to glare. "We are Just Friends, okay?"

"On your head be it," said Belle in the voice of doom, and the conversation ended.

The meetings with Jon, on the other hand, continued. I liked him more and more. He made me laugh more than any other person I'd met, and he was so clearly genuine that within a very short time I was absolutely certain that the charges against him were false. Of course, in a book this is a sure sign of the fact that the heroine is dating a villain—but then I never would have made a particularly good heroine and, as I kept pointing out to the witches, I was not dating Jon. Unfortunately.

Whilst Jon never made a move on me, however, he made sure that it was quite clear that he was holding back because of my worries, not because he wasn't interested. He was, indeed, so tempting a prospect that I had to take myself off to the bathroom on a regular basis and talk to myself sternly about how I was not going to fling myself at him. (Well yes, and, on occasion, masturbate. Purely in order to be able to get through further conversation without being overly distracted by sex, obviously.)

* * * * *

It was only after we had been meeting for several months and my self-control was on overdrive that Jon mentioned The Case again. We'd talked in vague terms about it, reckoning that not mentioning it would be rather too much like having an elephant in the room whilst we pointedly chatted about the weather. Tonight, however, he came out with something more specific.

"I'm due in court the week after next," he said bluntly.

"Oh."

He gave a half-hearted smile. "Yes, 'oh'. That's rather how I feel about it. Anyway, if you would rather not see me until it's over..."

"Don't be stupid!"

"Well, it may be a bit awkward," Jon said, in beautifully understated fashion.

"No, really?"

"Especially if I'm convicted," he went on, ignoring my ironic interjection.

I sniffed. "You are not going to be convicted because you haven't done anything wrong. And I am not about to leave you in the lurch now, thank you very much."

He frowned. "Yes, but... I'm not sure you realize how much publicity there's going to be. This is a massive case, and —"

"Oh, really?" My sarcasm was in full flow. "You'd never have guessed from the press coverage. I mean, they've barely mentioned it at all."

"Mandy!"

“Jon,” I responded. “Not only am I not going to desert you at this point, I am intending to come to the trial. Moral support and all that.”

“You mustn’t.” Jon looked concerned – more concerned, in fact, that he’d seemed about the fact that he was about to be on trial.

“That’s a pity,” I said briskly, “because I’m going to. Now, shut up and tell me more about what it was like meeting David Beckham.”

* * * * *

I felt honor bound to attend Jon’s trial, but I have to admit it wasn’t something I was precisely looking forward to. Jon had never gone into the specifics of the case and I hadn’t asked, feeling that he’d probably spent more than enough time answering questions on the subject without facing the third degree from me. I was just hoping that the gory details weren’t too awful. There had already been one photograph in the papers of Jon and me together. I was described, rather to my amusement, as the “allegedly crooked solicitor’s mystery woman”. Whilst I took exception to the “allegedly crooked” bit (I really hate the way you can get away with libel by adding the word “allegedly”), I was rather pleased to be a mystery woman. It certainly beat “Mandy Hammond, admin assistant at *Whole Encounters*”. But still, there was something uncomfortable about being officially labeled as a friend of the defendant. It meant that I was unlikely to be able to sneak into court unnoticed.

I was quite glad when the phone rang, distracting me from these thoughts. When I answered it, I was expecting it to be Nic, who had promised to drag me out to the hairdresser’s at some point during the week.

“Got to look your best for the court,” she had said, inexpertly trying to conceal her anxiety.

After their first objections, the witches had settled down and been very good about the fact that I was sticking with Jon despite everything. I knew that none of them really approved – they liked Jon, and hoped he was innocent, but it wasn’t precisely the sort

of relationship that anyone would wish on a friend, and particularly not on a friend who had only recently got over the break up of her marriage. But they said nothing and instead rallied round, and if there was a slight edge of “we need to be there to catch her when she falls”, they at least did not vocalize the thought. The person on the other end of the phone, however, had no such restraint.

“Hello?” I said in my usual telephone-enquiring voice.

“Mandy?”

“*Andrew?*” I had to be imagining things. Surely errant husbands didn’t suddenly phone you up out of the blue? Or was it in the Divorce 101 course—“Try to keep on terms with your soon-to-be-ex-wife. It makes you look like a nicer person, and will hopefully keep the settlement terms down.”

“Mandy, what’s this I hear about you and that lawyer bloke?” Cheating Bastard demanded, as if he had every right to know—as if he really was my husband still, in fact.

“It’s okay,” I said drily, “he’s not charging me consultant fees.”

“But—but—” Andrew was almost incoherent in his indignation. “But what about this court case?”

“What about,” I said, through gritted teeth, “you minding your own business?”

“This *is* my business, Mandy,” said Cheating Bastard, as if he could run off with another woman and still keep me on a little piece of string, dragging behind him. “You’re...”

“I’m what?” I asked. “Your wife? Don’t make me laugh, Andrew.”

“You surely can’t seriously be spending time with that criminal!”

“No,” I responded, “I’m frivolously spending time with someone who, incidentally, hasn’t been found guilty. How about presumption of innocence, Andrew—ever heard of that? I know I tried presuming it with you when you kept swearing you weren’t

having an affair and I was totally wrong, but that doesn't actually mean every man I ever meet is going to be lying to me."

"That was totally different!"

"Yes, it was," I agreed. "You *were* lying to me."

"He's a criminal, Mandy. He'll take you for all you've got," Andrew said.

"It's fortunate, then, that I don't have very much, isn't it? Because thanks to someone else ditching me and walking off with most of my stuff, I'm not really up there on the rich lists."

"Mandy..."

"Andrew, when I was living with you I was obliged to listen to all your pathetic little paranoias. Now I don't have to." I put the phone down, thinking that it was probably one of the most satisfying experiences I'd had of late. I still stuck to the theme that it was very sensible not to sleep with Jon whilst he was going through a court case, but it did lessen the number of ways of getting satisfaction at present. This, while not up to sex standard, obviously, at least gave me a moment's pleasure. "And fuck you," I added for good measure to the telephone handset. There's nothing like being truly comprehensive in your response, after all.

* * * * *

I'd booked a week off work, and hoped it would be enough. After all, it really wouldn't look good if Jon's "mystery woman" turned up for half of the case and then apparently gave up on him. Nic's hairdresser had done a fabulous job on my hair. It was unfortunate that he stopped short of being able to work the same magic with my face, but I suppose you can't have everything. Belle had called 'round the night beforehand and picked out with unerring judgment what she called "appropriate clothes" for a trial. I couldn't resist asking her how she knew about such things; however, Belle's quelling look could, when she chose, quell anybody, so I was obliged to do without an answer.

When I saw Jon outside the court, he was talking to an older woman, whom he introduced to me as “Mum”. I couldn’t help thinking that it was a slightly unusual way to be introduced to your new bloke’s mother – “Hello, I’m the not-girlfriend of your possibly criminal son” – but there was good reason to be grateful for it, not least that I had someone to sit with. I’m sure it’s not the sort of thing that ought to occur to you, but I have to admit I’d thought I’d look a bit weird, sitting on my own in the gallery. Jon’s mother (“call me Lyn”) saved me from that.

I will give Lyn the benefit of the doubt and suggest that it was the very strangeness of the situation that led her to make what might have been the most unfortunate possible comment. And, after all, it would be a bit rich of me to start criticizing anyone else for saying what should have been left unsaid. Still, on a list of things you don’t want to hear?

“I’m so glad he’s got over Ana so quickly,” Lyn said to me as we watched Jon move off for a discussion with his lawyer. “She was so beautiful, and he was desperately in love with her, you know. He was devastated when she threw him over because he wasn’t rich enough for her. Having all this,” and Lyn waved a hand at the courthouse, “happen straight afterwards... Well, I didn’t think he’d manage so well.”

Okay, Lyn, let’s take this bit by bit. The first thing you say to me is about Jon’s ex-girlfriend. And as if mentioning her wasn’t bad enough, you go on to tell me how beautiful she was – and yes, I can make the obvious leap as to where I stand in comparison, thanks. And that’s not even mentioning the “desperately in love” bit, nor that apparently losing her was more devastating than being accused of being a criminal.

I began to think that sitting on my own might have been preferable, though I did warm to Lyn later that day, when she murmured, apropos of nothing, “But you’re so very much nicer than Ana was.”

It was weird walking in, though, and seeing my Jon as “the defendant”. Somehow the very words “the defendant” imply guilt, and it was plain to see that most of the people there (predominantly journalists) believed that he would indeed be found guilty.

Jon had, after the accusation had gone to the Crown Prosecution Service, launched a counter claim against Gaimens, suing for damages for defamation of character—that case, however, was waiting until a verdict had been reached in this trial.

I have to admit that most of what was said went over my head. It belonged to the dull world of lawyers and financiers, and was crammed full of words that, at least as far as I was concerned, sounded like they'd been invented on the spot. As the first day wore on, however, I noticed that a number of the journalists (who presumably were trained to understand legal gobbledegook) were frowning a little, as if the case was not living up to their expectations. I could only think that this was a good sign for Jon, since I felt sure they'd been writing the "Quetescu Sent Down" headlines in advance of proceedings.

Lyn thought the same, and won me further back to her side by saying,

"Well, I don't understand a word of it, but I think it's going Jon's way."

By the third day, I was certain things were looking up. Jon's lawyer was looking decidedly perky, and the journalists were clearly moving onto Jon's side in great numbers. The Gaimens Investment Company representatives were attempting to look as if they still thought the case was going their way. However, there was something too obviously forced about their expressions of confidence.

Lyn was not been able to attend the fourth day of the trial. With the guilty tones most people save for confessions of great sins, she'd murmured,

"Chemotherapy, dear."

I stammered something sympathetic, and had an equally illogical feeling of guilt for not having instinctively known that Jon's mother had cancer. Lyn shook her head sadly.

"Yes, dear, terrible timing for Jon," she agreed.

"Not the best for you, either," I pointed out helpfully, and she smiled.

"Keep an eye on him for me tomorrow, Mandy."

"I will."

Of all the days for Lyn to miss, this was one I knew she'd have loved to be there for. It was halfway through the fourth day that the real shock of the proceedings happened. Out of nowhere, as far as I was concerned, the judge declared the case against Jon Quetescu dismissed; his comments on Gaimens Investment Company were something I would treasure forever:

"The untruths, evasions and downright lies told by many of the prosecution witnesses have little precedent in any trial I have previously attended. The determination of the company to throw blame for their own misdemeanors on an innocent man is despicable, and the corruption evident throughout the whole of Gaimens Investment Company something that requires the greatest and most stringent attention.

"I therefore find that Jon Quetescu has no case to answer. The case is dismissed."

Had I thought I knew Jon's smile? It was nothing to the expression on his face at that moment. His entire body noticeably untensed, and the joy and relief in his face as he looked over to me was beautiful. As soon as he was free of the journalists ("No comment. Obviously I'm glad to be found not guilty. No further comment.") I catapulted myself at him with so much force that we nearly collapsed in a heap.

"Fantastic. *Fantastic*." I kept saying the same word over and over again in incoherent delight.

Jon appeared to be beyond words; he just kissed every part of me that he could find—neck, ears, hand, nose, occasionally even my mouth if he could manage to sneak in a kiss before I said "fantastic" once more. The only feeling that I can even think gets close to the way we felt in that moment is the "child discovers Christmas" one—where Father Christmas is actually real, and magic happens, and the world is full of glorious potential. I have no idea what we did after that—the day seemed to vanish in a blur. I remember telling him to phone his Mum, and him laughing at me for the reminder. Everything was ten times funnier than usual; when the weather (unhelpfully refusing to cooperate) turned rainy, we danced through the puddles, grins still ear to ear on our

faces. I've never had a day like that before, and I probably will never have one again. Everything in the world was amazing.

Eventually, of course, we came somewhat down to earth again. The sky was black, and not just from rain clouds, and it was time that we wended our way homewards. This led to that notorious question well known to any couple, "my place or yours?" Although Jon had been to my house, he'd not been in my bedroom. I mean, it had, after all, been bad enough trying to keep my hands off him in the sitting room, without putting him in the same space as a bed. My mind might have been telling me that I shouldn't be having sex with someone who might possibly be in prison in a few weeks' time, but my body had been singing off an entirely different hymn sheet (and apologies for the inappropriateness of that metaphor!) and I hadn't trusted my primal urges not to take over. This meant, however, that I had rather sheepishly to explain that I only had a single bed, and therefore...

Jon interrupted me at that point, a gleam in his eye. "I don't seem to recall us using the bed last time, either—at any rate not most of the time." He looked with interest at my reddening face. "And they say modern women never blush. Am I scandalizing you, Mandy?"

"I'm thoroughly shocked," I retorted. "Also hoping that we might spend the night together, and while I'm certain you could give me a good time anywhere in the house, I'm far too old to be sharing a single bed!"

"Fair point," Jon admitted. And so, once again, it was his house in which he reminded me of his many and varied talents.

We began in the bedroom this time, giving me a chance to admire the room in more detail than I'd been able to last time. The window was a bay, with a large window seat underneath it. His house looked out over a small patch of woodland. The room was beautiful—masculine, of course, and none the worse for that. The bed had caught my eye the first time, and I had another good look at it before Jon distracted me. It had a wrought iron frame, with twisted metal bars at the head and foot. I remembered that

the metal had been cold against my skin when I'd brushed up against it, that afterwards Jon had warmed me thoroughly so that it was almost impossible even to remember the concept of 'cold'. It was king sized, and a bed positively made for sex—or possibly, made for positive sex! Whichever, we gave it what it asked for.

Jon started, as he had last time, with his head between my legs, using his tongue and lips to give me the most amazing sensations. The enormous time since we'd last (and indeed, first) had sex had made me wonder whether I'd just been seeing the encounter through the rose-tinted spectacles of "oh my god, I actually had sex." But before the first five minutes were over—let alone the first five hours—Jon had proved to my satisfaction that it had been no exaggerated memory. I found my fingers clenching the bars of the bed frame in order to keep myself from grabbing his head and forcing him to do more and more (which, to be fair, he did without any force needed).

If anything, it was better than I remembered. The first few orgasms came so close together that there was barely a moment to breathe between them; I eventually had to beg him to stop so that could get my breath back. Jon passed the time as tried to control my breathing by kissing parts of my body, quite at random. The backs of my knees, my ankle, halfway up my forearm. Places I'd never thought of as erogenous zones were made so by Jon's attentions. Then, after I had pulled him up to snog him, he whispered, "I wanted to hold off for later, Mandy, but I can't help myself. I want to be inside you so much."

"Then do it," I murmured back, proving that I remembered his bedroom far too well for someone who had only been in it once, by leaning over and finding the condoms in the same drawer as before. I rolled one over his stiff cock, and he thrust inside me, groaning as he did so.

"God, Mandy, I've dreamt about this," he said, buried up to the balls in my body. "Lying here on my own, thinking of you—remembering."

"Me too," I confessed. I'd spent a lot of close and personal time with my vibrator whilst Jon had the case hanging over him, but it just hadn't been the same as being thoroughly fucked by him.

He moved slowly inside me at first, almost frustratingly so. I arched my hips up against him in a mute plea for a bit more movement, and he laughed.

"Eager for more?"

"Yes." Oh yes. Was I ever eager for more!

"Your wish is my command," Jon said, and he ratcheted up the movement, little by little, until he was taking me hard and fast.

"Now, Mandy," he gasped several minutes later. "Turn over. I want to see your gorgeous arse as I fuck you."

It was not an order I was going to ignore. The bed frame came into its own once more as I clung to the top of it as he thrust in and out of me. I could hear myself gasping, begging him for more. He ran his fingers up and down my back as he took me, soft to begin with, then letting his nails scratch over my skin. Then he was humming out his release, and throbbing inside me, making me climax once more. Afterward we lay, temporarily sated, cuddled together.

"I'm so lucky," Jon said at one point, making me smile.

"Me too."

We lay in silence again for a while until Jon broke it once more.

"I need a shower." He grinned. "Fancy joining me?"

"Yes." Apparently he had reduced me to such a state that I could manage nothing more than monosyllables. He didn't seem to mind, though, taking my hand and pulling me up beside him.

"Come on then."

Jon's shower was large. It was also hot and steamy – though not as hot and steamy as Jon and me. Jon started by soaping me all over, turning me on as he lingered on my

breasts and ran soapy hands down my back to cup my arse and pull me in close to him. His cock seemed to have recovered from its previous endeavors and was pushing firmly against my tummy. I rubbed up against him, explaining innocently that I was, of course, merely trying to make him as soapy as I was myself. Jon, of course, knew precisely what I was up to, but he didn't complain. I would go so far as to say he positively encouraged me, in fact, and I discovered that I was rather addicted to Jon's encouragement. We ended up with my legs curled around his waist as he fucked me against the side of the shower. The noise of the falling water almost, but not quite, covered the little sounds Jon made as he moved in and out of me, and I could see a fuzzy reflection of Jon in the mirror, thrusting in and out of a wet and wanton woman who could not possibly be me. We both smelt of soap and sex, and the feel of the water on our skin just added another level of sensation to our loving.

When we finally dried ourselves off, we curled up together in his bed and went to sleep, at least for some of the night. Every so often one or the other of us would think of something else we fancied trying, and the other person was always happy to oblige. Best of all, we could make love in the knowledge that all the clouds over our relationship had gone—and, what's more, that we had absolutely no need to get up in the morning and could spend all of the following day in bed if we wished to. Which, as it turned out, we did.

Chapter Three

When the news of Jon's acquittal had done the rounds of all our friends and relations, Julia at once decided that there had to be a party as celebration.

"In the Golden Compass, of course," she said, adding with a grin, "It'll give us a chance to see him as he is, rather than 'the dodgy bloke Mandy's running around with' – and yes, my dear, we do intend to apologize for doubting him. All of us."

I was pretty sure Jon didn't mind being doubted. After all, the witches had barely known him. All they knew was what they'd read in the paper crossed with what I'd told them about him. It was scarcely surprising that they'd kept an open mind about his possible guilt or innocence. What he felt considerably more strongly about were the people who had been his friends for years, and yet suddenly had been "too busy" even to pass the time of day with him. But any excuse for a party, and so, only a week after the case had finished, there was a rabble of friends and well-wishers gathered together in Jon's honor. The same so-called friends of Jon's, of course, had come now he was cleared, and were now telling him they'd never doubted him. Jon was too happy to hold grudges, but I'll admit to giving them the evil eye from where I was.

The party went with a swing. Everyone was soon fairly drunk and extremely cheerful. Jon was giving me this look that said "hey, when can I take you home and ravish you?" which, considering the party was in his honor, was slightly ungrateful of him, but did wonders for my ego!

We'd been going for about an hour when an unexpected – and I have to say, hideously unwelcome – guest crashed the party. It was Julia who saw him first, sliding across to me to say, "Don't look now, but you really don't want to know who's just come in."

"Who?" I said, looking around instinctively. I found out the answer. Cheating Bastard himself, otherwise known as Andrew. "Shit."

"That sums him up nicely, Mandy. What do you want me to do? We witches could get him out of here if you want." She grinned. "Turn him into a toad if you want."

"He already is one. That's not the point," I responded automatically. "The point is, what's he *doing* here?"

My voice was rather louder than it should have been with this last comment. Andrew heard me and made straight for me.

"Hello," he said, smiling tentatively.

"So what *are* you doing here?" I asked. There are moments to skirt round subjects, and this wasn't one of them.

"I...er... Well..." He pulled his jacket more firmly over his shoulders. It was a weirdly familiar gesture, reminding me that I'd actually lived with this man for nearly twenty years. "I saw...on the telly..." His eyes moved in the direction of Jon.

"Yes. It turns out he wasn't a criminal after all," I said brightly. "Isn't that a disappointment to you—and, of course, especially to your girlfriend who I'm sure would have enjoyed following up 'sleeping with my husband' with 'watching me disintegrate in all sorts of other ways'."

"Mandy, I was acting in your best interests."

"No, you were just worried whether the people at your work would comment," I corrected him.

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

Ha. Of all the ironies. He left me in a particularly public and humiliating way—but he didn't want me to get 'hurt' by another man about whom he knew nothing. I rather suspect I made a snorting noise at this point of the conversation.

"So you've come here to apologize for the things you said about Jon, and you've done so. Now, Andrew, goodbye. This is a party, and you're not adding to the *joie de vivre*."

"No," he said, his voice sounding a little desperate. "I didn't come for that, precisely." (An apology—no, of course he hadn't come to apologize, how stupid of me. I ought to have known that.) "I... I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk away. Do. But get on with it, Andrew!" I didn't actually roll my eyes, which I think was extremely restrained of me in the circumstances.

"Can I come back to you?"

"Huh?" I know for a fact my jaw dropped, because it took a great effort to close my mouth again. "Erm, I know this is silly, but it just sounded like you asked to come back. As in, living with me, your ex-wife. Can you just tell me what you actually said?"

"That was it." Andrew shuffled on the spot—another familiar habit, but one which had definitely gone from "cute" (in the early days of my marriage) to "irritating" (now). "It's all over, with Helen and me, I mean. It was stupid, I was stupid. I..."

"And having given Helen a bit of a try, you've decided that the grass wasn't all that greener over the other side?"

"Something like that," he mumbled. "She's found a new... But anyway, I missed you, Mandy. I never stopped loving you."

Honestly, that has to be about the most sick-making comment in the world. Here was a man who'd had a damn good attempt at wrecking my self-esteem, and who had shown nothing in the way of interest or sympathy toward me in the months (that's MONTHS—and, what's more, bloody nearly a year) that he was living with another woman. But he'd "never stopped loving me". Yeah, sure. He'd lost Helen to her next conquest and reckoned all he needed to do was to come and see me and I'd fall at his feet. Been there, done that, had Andrew leave with the T-shirt. I wasn't intending to do so again.

"Well, I'm sorry about that, but frankly, I've moved on. You're going to have to find someone else to do your washing up for you." Probably I shouldn't have added that line, but it slipped out before I could help myself. "It's over, Andrew."

There was a sense of *déjà vu* in the conversation. It had been in the Golden Compass that Andrew had told me precisely the same thing—"It's over. I'm sorry, Mandy, but we're finished." Now, however, I was on the other side of the conversation, and it should have been a fine revenge, having Andrew crawling back to me. I ought to have been gloating aloud, but instead it was all rather embarrassing and sordid. I mean, there he was being all dramatic and "forgive me, I knew not what I did" The original break-up rows in the Golden Compass had been bad enough, but treating the place to a second round was a bit too much to handle.

"Please, Mandy. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"Well probably," I said cheerily, "but we're not going back to how we were, thanks very much."

"I knew you'd hate me for it," he said, all maudlin self-pity to the extent that I was embarrassed *for* him, not just by him.

"Look, it's fine. It's in the past. Finito. Gone. Okay?"

"But... I know I treated you badly, I know I did." (I had the urge to grab him by the shoulders and make him stand still—the foot shuffling was really beginning to grate. Only the fear of his mistaking my action prevented me.) "And I'm just so sorry, so very sorry."

"It's fine, Andrew—*fine*," I said for about the fifth time, looking desperately for the witches to come and extricate me. "Everything. It's okay. I got over it, moved on."

"And you'll take me back?" he asked again.

I shut my eyes and counted to ten. "No."

"Mandy..."

"Andrew, just go away," I said wearily. "Please?"

Helped by the witches, who had eventually noticed what was going on and caught on to the fact that I was requiring assistance, Andrew left. Jon, who had been keeping out of things, strolled over to me soon after.

“Problems?” he said, his tone casual.

I pulled him down to me and kissed him with unashamed thoroughness. “Absolutely not.” I grinned. “Fancy taking me home so I can prove it to you?”

It was his turn to smile. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said, and shamelessly we slipped out of our own party to go home and celebrate in our own way.

* * * * *

I don’t think the “damages” side of things occurred either to Jon or me. Well, I know quite well that I hadn’t thought about it, and Jon certainly wasn’t acting as if money was the chief topic in his mind. We were still rather distracted by exploring each other’s bodies in detail. Whilst I’d got a fair idea of the basics of his physique from our previous encounters, I appreciated the opportunity to discover him in more depth. There was time to trace the pattern of the moles on his back, to run my tongue down his spine as he had done that first time to me, and feel him shiver beneath me. I could spend ages stroking his buttocks, with no feeling that I was wasting time that should have been spent on the main event. Penetrative sex is not, as Cheating Bastard might be interested to know, the be-all and end-all of sexual experience. We had a chance to try so many other things and find out each other’s kinks and turn-ons. I could (and regularly did) get wet just listening to Jon describing all the things he wanted to do to me, transforming himself from the loving and gentle man I generally knew to someone different, someone who suggested sexual practices in words which might be vulgar but were nevertheless unbelievably damn hot.

“I want to tease you, Mandy,” he would whisper, his fingers brushing lightly against my skin. “I want to wait until you’re desperate for me, until you’re begging me

to slide my cock inside you. Until you're so needy that you don't care about anything except being fucked."

There was something so sensual about the way he spoke, the combination of the dark chocolate voice and the soft touch of his hands making me groan and grab him, pushing him underneath me and holding his hands down as I slid onto his cock. And still he'd talk, telling me how beautiful my breasts were, how he was dying for me to let go of his hands so that he could take each breast in one hand, scratching his nails gently down their sides and rubbing the pad of his thumbs over my nipples until they peaked with arousal. And of course I'd let go of his hands and he would do precisely as he had promised, and the act was even more incredible than the words.

But I could do things to him, too. I was exploring my sexuality in ways I'd never, ever, done with Andrew. I found that I could make him hard simply by sucking his finger in and out of my mouth in a way he evidently wanted me to repeat with his cock. I found uses other than gentle strokes for the wooden spoon we'd experimented with that first time, discovered that Jon had a vampiric love of biting and being bitten, and that blindfolds really did add an extra thrust to one's other senses. I'd got to forty before I'd discovered the incredible expanse of sexual possibilities laid open to me. I was not going to lose this opportunity to explore them all, especially not when I could explore them with Jon.

I knew he enjoyed it all. We took it in turns to bring "gifts" back to the house. I knew that I was a different Mandy Hammond the moment I walked into a sex shop and came out with handcuffs made of soft leather. The look on Jon's face when he saw them told me that he liked this new, sexually confident me.

"For you or me?" he asked. I could see the light of possibilities gleaming in his eyes.

"Both, I expect, at some time," I returned. "But I bought them; I get to use them on you."

"Should I be frightened?"

"Oh yes," I murmured, reaching up to kiss him, and rubbing the handcuffs gently against his cheek as I did so. "Very, very frightened." He pulled me in toward him, holding me close. "You know," I said, keeping my tone as conversational as I could when I was pressed up against a sexy man with a large erection, "I have always wondered why you had the bed you have." I took him by the hand then, regretfully untangling myself from him, and took him upstairs. "And now I think I know," I finished, as we both looked pensively at the frame.

"I don't know what you mean, Mandy," Jon said innocently.

I gave him a sideways glance. "Oh, I think you do," I said, unbuttoning his shirt with a determined ruthlessness, and pushing it off him before starting on his trousers.

"I hope I do," he whispered in my ear, running his hands through my hair.

"Now, lie on the bed," I instructed.

Jon was evidently perfectly willing to obey, and I slid the first handcuff over his left wrist, before threading the chain through the iron bars of the bed frame and fastening the second cuff to his right arm.

"I am at your mercy." Jon sounded hopeful rather than anxious.

"Mm-hmm." I smiled. "So you are."

Our joint food fetish had been one of the kinks we discovered earliest—in fact, Jon had showed me some new uses for cream on our very first sexual encounter—so the handcuffs hadn't been my only purchase. Wandering round the shop and getting all sorts of wonderful ideas for the future, I'd spotted some chocolate body paint and had picked it up almost instinctively. Now, with Jon laid out for my pleasure and handcuffed to the bed, it was time for the painting to start. Jon's eyes widened as I took the pot out of the bag I'd casually slung in the corner of the room. A faint smile appeared as I opened it and extracted a small brush.

"Mmmm," I said appreciatively, "now there's a smile to paint."

I went about the operation slowly, as if I were putting lipstick on myself. Jon's tongue protruded once or twice, and I touched it with my own before continuing to paint. When I'd finished, he was breathing slightly heavily.

"Can I lick now?" he begged.

"Oh no. That's my job." Teasingly, I ignored his mouth and continued my painting—the cleft in his collarbone, a line down his stomach, his nipples. Jon groaned at that point and I couldn't resist him any longer. I pressed my lips to his, sharing the chocolate between our mouths. Then I slid down and bit gently on his nipple as I sucked the chocolate off.

"You taste nice."

"Don't I always?"

I shrugged. He did, of course, but he didn't need to be told that. "Mandy," he said, a note of pleading in his voice.

"You want me to stop?" I asked.

"No...well, yes. Mandy," Jon's voice lowered a couple of tones. "Undress for me. Please?"

"I'll think about it," I said, enjoying his pleading. But Jon had more devious techniques.

"I'm tied up here, Mandy," he murmured. "If I wasn't, though, I wouldn't ask you to undress. Do you know why? Because I'd undress you myself. I'd undo your blouse, one button at a time, kissing each new part of you to become visible. I'd slide it off you, and then run my tongue across your breasts, over your bra, so that your nipples peaked out strong and firm." I was trying to continue making a meal of Jon, enjoying the chocolate and the sensation of firm masculine skin against my mouth. But he knew how to make it difficult to concentrate. Every word he said seemed to go straight through me, throbbing in my clit. And he wasn't finished yet. "And then, Mandy—then..." His body, despite himself, arched up toward my mouth; I wasn't the only one being distracted. "God," he said deeply. "I'd slip that skirt of yours down over your hips and

then I'd kneel between your legs and suck you through your knickers until you were begging for more." He stopped. "Undress for me, Mandy," he begged again.

I slid off the bed (and Jon) and started to undress, very slowly, in the manner he had been describing. When I was only in my underwear, I paused, and looked at him.

"That's all you're getting for now," I said firmly, and got onto the *real* business.

I'd always intended to paint his cock. Well, obviously. What's better than sucking the cock of a man you fancy like mad? Sucking a chocolate-coated cock, ditto. But before I could get 'round to the tasting, I needed to start preparations. With one hand underneath Jon's cock, holding it up (and forced by an irresistible desire to run my fingers along it), I held the paintbrush in the other. Starting at the base, with little light strokes of chocolate, I painted upward. By the time I reached the head of his cock, Jon was finding it difficult to lie still. If it hadn't been for the cuffs, I suspected he would have pushed my knickers off and slid himself into me, chocolate and all. I smiled at him.

"I'm in control. Any complaints?"

"None," he said huskily.

"Me neither."

I lowered my mouth to his cock and made a line of chocolate kisses down one side and then the other. I couldn't resist the temptation to lick the head as if I were sampling an ice cream, and the murmurs Jon was making suggested he didn't mind in the slightest. Then, suddenly, I found I wanted more. I took more and more of his cock into my mouth, feeling the chocolate explode on my taste buds alongside the incredible and familiar taste of Jon. Jon, unable to help himself, was bucking up against me so that more and more of his cock was pushed into my mouth and then out again. I stretched one hand down between my own legs, getting off on the feeling of Jon in my mouth, the unashamed lust in my mind. Then he came, filling my mouth with another taste; they mingled as I swallowed. I cuddled up to Jon, unfastening the handcuffs to allow him to cuddle me, and he pulled me on top of him.

“No complaints at all, Mandy. You are fabulous.”

And damn, did it feel good to hear him say that – and know that he meant it.

There were, of course, moments when our kinky exploration went by the wayside – when all we wanted was a quick, hot shag, and never mind the bells and whistles (not that we’d tried those, precisely, but I felt sure we would, given time!). But it was our choice. If we wanted to feed each other strawberries dipped in champagne, we could. If we wanted to fuck like a couple of teenagers trying to get it all in before their parents got home – we did that too.

So, as I say, money was not precisely top of our agenda. It was a shock, therefore, when I drove over (as had become customary) to his house after work and found myself faced with a pale and shocked Jon.

“What’s happened?” I demanded, wild thoughts flowing through my head about more court cases, more accusations, possibly some way in which they had decided that Jon was as Romanian as his surname and were going to deport him.

Jon said something in a voice so croaky as to make him incomprehensible.

“Come again?” I said, and he both laughed and coughed.

“I’d love to,” he grinned, his voice sounding more normal for a second.

“What’s happened?” I asked again. “Judging from your continued ability to turn any subject into sex, it’s not as disastrous as I thought when I saw you, but even I can see that something’s gone wrong.”

“Not wrong. Right.” His voice was beginning to croak again, as if he were some strange sort of frog. “You know I started a damages case against Gaimens? Well, they’ve got back to me and offered to settle out of court.”

“Yeah, I bet!” I said indignantly. “They don’t want it coming out in public that they set you up to cover their own arses, and...” I stuttered to a halt. “What?”

“Five,” he said quietly.

"Five grand? That's miserly, Jon. I hope you told them where to go." After all that the company had put him through, I was outraged that they'd be so ridiculously parsimonious. "No wonder you're looking pissed off. Just reject it. Fuck 'em, we'll see them in court. Again."

"Mandy, five *million*." The words were almost whispered, as if he feared that saying it aloud would prove it a lie. "They've offered me five million pounds in compensation."

"Oh," I said blankly. "Shit." Well, that was that, then. It'd been unlikely enough that a tall, dark, gorgeous bloke would spend any time with me at all. A tall, dark, gorgeous, *rich* bloke was completely out of my league. Jon looked as if I hadn't given an appropriate response; he looked hurt, so I tried again. "Congratulations. You deserve it."

"But...?" he prompted. "You know, I've heard people sound more enthusiastic when describing the death of their dog, or something. Mandy..."

I smiled faintly. "You always were out of my league. I'm delighted for you, but handsome, sexy millionaires just don't tally with fat, middle-aged admin assistants."

"Then," he said, pulling me into his arms, "it's a good job you're neither fat nor middle-aged, isn't it?" He kissed me, and for quite a long time both of us forgot the conversation. Jon's kisses had a tendency to do that to me, not that I was complaining. When, finally, we came up for air, he said, "So it's all right for you to date me when I'm a potential criminal, but not when I'm rich?"

He tugged me through into the sitting room and pushed me down onto the sofa, sitting beside me.

"Pretty much," I acknowledged. "Face it, Jon, you probably only stayed with me because I was willing to believe in you. Now everyone does. The world's your oyster—in fact, you can afford to have oysters every day if you want. You'll probably have Ana falling at your feet again now."

Jon was silent for a second. Then, very quietly, he said, "That might possibly rate as the most offensive thing anyone has said to me."

He stood up and walked away, and I had to force myself not to grab him. *This is the way the world ends – not with a bang but a whimper.* Eliot had been on to something when he wrote that, I thought. I felt weirdly shivery inside, finding myself staring at his back as he stood by the window, as if I might be able to force him to turn round. I'd been trying to do the right thing, make it easy for him. At least, that's what I'd thought as I said it. In fact, I told myself bitterly, I'd just been chucking the pieces of my self-esteem at his feet and hoping he might be prepared to put them back together again. Apparently he wasn't, and I couldn't blame him. I also had a stupidly banal dilemma – was I supposed to sit here until he told me to leave, or would it be more tactful to see myself out? Not that our relationship had, at any point, relied on my having tact. We might as well end it in the same fashion as always. I stayed put.

There was silence.

Then there was more silence.

Then there was more silence still, until I had to say something because otherwise I was going to start screaming from sheer nerves.

"Jon..."

He turned around. There were tears on his face. He wasn't sobbing, but his expression was one of bleakness.

"I spent all that time," he said steadily, "believing that you trusted me. All through court, that was the one thing that kept me going. 'Mandy trusts me, even if no one else does.' Apparently I was wrong. All that time together, and the only reason you thought I stayed was...was what? Because I couldn't get anyone else?"

"I did trust you. You know I did."

He nodded. "Not a criminal, just a bastard. Thanks, Mandy."

“Jon, I—” I stopped, suddenly fearing that Jon’s tears were infectious, since it felt alarmingly as if I were going to turn on the waterworks effect. I somehow suspected that it wouldn’t impress him much in the circumstances. “It wasn’t that,” I said feebly. “I’m just... Look, I’ll see you again sometime.”

I managed to leave the house in an inelegant rush, with the horrible feeling that not only had I fucked up a decent relationship but I’d also hurt a rather more than decent (especially when he was being thoroughly *indecent*) man. Way to go, Mandy—but what did that leave me for a follow up? Alienating the witches? Throwing myself onto the railway, not only dying but also managing to piss off commuters by delaying all the trains? And yes, as it happens, I do make a pretty good watering can on occasion—I must remember to offer my services to a local garden center next time I cry quite that much. At least then someone could get some use out of it.

I’m ashamed to admit that I cried so long and for so much of the night that I had to call in sick to work the following morning. I’m not in the habit of throwing sickies, but frankly I would have been little use to them in that state. I decided to save everyone a lot of heartache—and myself the humiliation of almost certainly bursting into tears at work—and stay away. I did, however, gird my loins enough (which always sounds like a rude phrase, but unfortunately was not in my particular case) to go ‘round to Jon’s and try to apologize. But after having psyched myself up for the occasion, the man wasn’t in. As I hadn’t prepared for such an event, instead of posting a neatly phrased and elegantly written epistle in his letterbox, he got a page torn out of my diary with “Jon, I’m so sorry. I never meant that. Mandy.” Accurate, but not precisely the type of letter that gets your man rushing to your door to make up.

Or so I thought—which meant when the doorbell went that afternoon, I had to put down the mammoth box of tissues (a purchase all too familiar from the days just after Cheating Bastard left me) and open the door with the knowledge that my face was looking particularly plain and blotchy from Too Much Crying. Since, however, I suspected that the gas meter reader or the postman or whoever it would turn out to be

wouldn't give a damn if I opened the door naked but for an inflatable banana (well okay, maybe they would then) I didn't see the need to worry about it. When it turned out to be Jon, however...

"Oh God." I seemed to have a knack for saying precisely the wrong thing to Jon. Whilst I acknowledge that this is a unique talent, it was one I could really have done without, especially after last night. "Erm, come in," I added, after the sort of awkward gap which implies that you've wanted to say anything apart from that.

"Are you all right?" Jon asked—and I still swear it was *his* fault for asking such a damn stupid question.

"No," I said, and burst into tears and into his arms at almost the same moment.

When I had got over the stage of dampening his shirt shoulder and trusting that I hadn't rubbed too much snot into him, I discovered that somehow he had maneuvered me into my sitting room, and had both his arms around me. Which wasn't something to complain about, but...

"You hate me," I said in the pathetic tones usually only heard in a school playground. "And you should, because—but I didn't mean—and..."

Cunningly working out the only way in which he would possibly be able to shut me up, Jon basely silenced my protests by kissing me. And kissing me. And then, after that... well, actually, doing a lot more than kissing me, which ended with me screaming from a completely different reason to that which had seemed likely an hour earlier.

After we had paused to get our breath back (and Jon had spent at least ten minutes telling me about all the other things he would like to do with me given half a chance), I managed actually to say something sensible, which was probably a first for our relationship.

"Jon, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean what I said last night—well, I meant it about you being far too good for me—but I didn't mean..."

"I know," he said, holding me so close that I could feel his words vibrating through me as well as hear them.

"I..."

"Mandy," he interrupted me, a familiar teasing smile on his face, "I think it would probably be a better idea if you didn't go through that convoluted speech you have in mind. In fact, I'm certain of it."

"What you mean," I said ruefully, "is that I'll manage to say something offensive in the course of it. And the sad thing is, my love, you're almost certainly right."

"I am right," he agreed. Then, in a different tone, "Just tell me whether those words you said were true, Mandy – that's all I need to know."

I opened my mouth to say "What?" and the W was actually on the tip of my tongue (I swear, if you'd peered inside at that moment, you'd have seen it) when I realized the words he meant. I rolled on top of him, pressing my head down so that not only was my mouth at his ear but also he couldn't see that I had once again fallen prey to Soppo (or possibly Soggy) Woman Disease – aka tears.

"I love you," I whispered, realizing just how true it was. I'd started by lusting after him, gone on to counting him as a dear friend. Somewhere along the line, I'd managed to fall in love with him and there was this strange *rightness* about the feeling. I'd always held back from saying the words to Andrew, even when we were happiest. I'd liked him and trusted him and intended to spend the rest of my life with him, but it hadn't been like this – not this soul-deep *knowing* of another person.

"That, my darling," Jon said, his fingers going to wipe my eyes as if he could tell by instinct that I was crying, "is all I need to know." I managed, with a great effort of will, not to ask the obvious question, but once again he understood without my asking. "Yes," he said softly, "I love you. I love you very much indeed."

And there you have it, from beginning to – well, new beginning, I hope.

I am still fat and frumpy. I am damn near forty-one. And I am having the best time – and indeed, the best sex – of my life.

About the Author

Penelope Friday hates writing bios because she never quite knows how to describe the eclectic mixture of things she writes about. Her particular strengths are erotic fiction (of all sexualities) and articles on disability issues—but she also writes science fiction, romantic stories, articles on the Regency Period, articles on writing and a lot more besides. To find out more, visit her website or her blog at <http://www.t5m.com/penelope-friday>.

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