



Loose Id

Fling

I SPY
SOMETHING
WICKED

JOSH LANYON

I Spy Something Wicked

Josh Lanyon



I Spy Something Wicked

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Erotic Contemporary

Previous Title: *I Spy Something Bloody*

It's All Hallow's Eve and Mark Hardwicke's past has come back to haunt him. The Old Man needs Mark to go on one last mission to the wild, lonely hills of Afghanistan—a mission Mark knows he can't survive. Even if he does make it back, Stephen has made it very clear Mark is out of second chances. Should Mark place his lover and his own happiness before duty?

Especially when deep down Mark knows he doesn't deserve a happy ending.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play, intercourse, male/male sexual situations.*

Dedication

Sincere thanks to author Chris Quinton for the Brit-check.

Chapter One

The Glock was taped beneath my seat. I freed it, reached for the magazine in the glove compartment, and palmed it into the frame. I scanned the empty car park, the black windows of the house in front of me.

I spy with my little eye...

Nothing moved. The bronze autumn moon shone brightly through the barren branches crosshatching the bell-cast rooftops.

I turned off the radio in the dashboard console, cutting off Jack White midnote. “Dead leaves and dirty ground” was about right. I unlocked the door of the Range Rover, got out, and crossed the deserted lot, boots crunching on gravel, breath hanging in the chilly October night. There was a hint of wood smoke in the air; the nearest house was roughly eight kilometers away. A full five miles to the nearest living soul.

I walked past a large banner sign lying facedown in the frosty grass and studied the building's facade. Two stories of battered white stone. Broken finials and dentils. Arched windows—broken on the top level, mostly boarded on the bottom. The narrow, arched front door was also boarded up. Once upon a time, this had been some founding family's mansion; in the early part of the last century, it had operated as a funhouse. Now it looked like a haunted house. That was appropriate since I was there to meet a ghost.

I went around to the side of the long building, found a window where the boarding had been ripped away. I hoisted myself up and scrambled over the sill.

Inside, moonlight highlighted a checkerboard floor and what appeared to be broken sections of an enormous wooden slide.

According to Stephen, it was a long time, decades, since the place had operated officially, but it was still a popular place for teens to romance—and vandalize. Especially around Halloween. That was two nights away. I didn't anticipate any interruptions.

I proceeded, soft-footed, along an accordion strip of mirrors, some broken, some not, my reflection flashing past: a man of medium height, thin, dark, nondescript. The pistol gleamed in my hand like a star.

Down a short flight of stairs, a twist and a turn, another short flight down. I froze. At the bottom of the steps, a woman sat hunched over. She wore tattered French knickers and a blonde wig. It took a couple of seconds to realize she was covered in cobwebs. One of those mechanical mannequins. I glanced at her in passing and saw that someone had bashed her face in.

A floorboard squeaked. I spun, bringing the pistol up. Jesus. He'd arrived before me. I was getting sloppy in my old age.

The shadow raised its arms high. Hands empty.

"Christ on a crutch, Hardwicke. I don't think much of your taste in meeting places."

I lowered my pistol. "Malik."

He was still bitching. "Really, old boy. Don't see why we couldn't have done this in more comfortable surroundings. Some place civilized where we might have a drink and a chat."

Why? Because I thought I might have to kill him. But I wasn't so socially inept as to say that—for all Stephen thinks, I'm lacking in the social graces. Instead, I replied, "I like my privacy."

"So I gathered. May I put my hands down?"

"Yes. But keep them where I can see them."

He suddenly laughed. "Christ on a crutch! You think I'm here to twep you!"

"Good luck with that."

He was still chuckling; I didn't find it nearly as amusing. "You think the Old Man ordered an executive action against you?"

"How should I know?"

"Just the opposite, mate. He needs your help."

I relaxed a fraction. "Sorry. I'm no longer in the help business."

"Private citizen, eh? How's that going for you? I should think you'd be climbing the walls with boredom by now."

"You don't know me."

“Course I do. You're just like me. Like all of us in The Section.”

“I'm not in The Section. I'm retired. Happily retired.”

“So we heard. Decided to get married and grow roses. Think I'd prefer Oppenheim Memorial Park. You know, the lads have a bit of a wager going on how long you'll last in the private sector. Granted, you've lasted four months longer than I thought you would. Tigers don't change their spots.”

I didn't bother to correct him. Not about the spotty tigers, and not about the fact that I was quite content in my role as private citizen.

Mostly. According to Stephen, I still had a lot to learn about “coloring between the lines.”

Malik was saying, “You must have seen the news. You must know what's going on in Afghanistan with Operation Herrick.”

“I watched the UK death toll pass two hundred.”

“That, yes. But I mean what's happening with the Old Man. The heat he's taking from the cabinet and the ministers.”

“Nothing he hasn't faced before.”

“It's different this time.”

If I had tuppence for every time I've heard that.

“No.” I was already turning away. “I can't help.” This was a promise I wasn't going to break. Not for anyone. Not even John Holohan.

Malik cried, “Hear me out at least, can't you?”

His vehemence surprised me. I faced him, saying nothing. I didn't want to hear it. Wasn't going to let it change anything. But...I owed John this much; I'd hear his emissary out.

Malik said, “He's fighting for his survival.”

Welcome to the club, I thought. I didn't say it.

Malik was Anglo-Indian, a few years younger than I was, and quite good-looking. Medium height, slim and dark; just the way John liked 'em. I should know. He was saying earnestly, “You know what the political climate is like these days. What the media are like. They're making him the scapegoat for two decades' worth of gutless policy and bad decisions. They're trying to make him pay for policies he fought tooth and nail to prevent.”

I did know. But ever the hard man, I said, “Everyone has to pack it in sooner or later. Even the Old Man. Did he think they were going to let him run forever? He must be near the mandatory age of retirement as it is.”

“We're not discussing retirement. We're talking about disgrace, scandal, the ruin of a brilliant career. Is that what you want for him?”

I had no answer. I didn't want that for John. He didn't deserve that. But I had given my word to Stephen. And I was never going to disappoint Stephen again. Never give him grounds to regret giving me that second chance.

“If you do this for him, he'll never bother you again.”

I nearly laughed—although it wasn't funny. “Do you know how many times I've heard that?”

“Look, Hardwicke, it's the world we live in. Promises...well, there are no guarantees in this life. If anyone should know that, you should.”

“You're not helping your case.”

“He wouldn't ask if there was another way.”

“Right, well speaking of that, why didn't he come himself then? Why'd he send you?”

“They're watching him. The media. The other agencies. He can't step outside his door without someone from the press trying to snap his picture. It's chaos. We can't operate like that. The Section requires secrecy to remain effective.”

I could not afford to care about this. To even ask the question aloud was an indicator to both of us, but I heard my voice, reluctance evident. “What does he want me to do?”

“He wants you to go back to Afghanistan. Use your influence with Pashtun tribal leaders in Helmand to back our play. To support British and NATO forces against the Taliban in Operation Sword Strike.”

“I can't go back there!” Whatever I'd expected to hear, it wasn't this. Maybe it was naïve, but I was genuinely shocked. No one knew better than John Holohan why I couldn't ever return to that region.

“You've got the friends; you've got the network.”

“My contacts are dead. My network was blown with me. There's a price on my head.”

“No one's asking you to stay in. It's just a-a cakewalk COA. Touch base and config alliances for the big push, then bombshell out.”

I'd forgotten how much I hated the self-important acronyms and slang. I stared at his fierce face, and suddenly it all made sense.

“Jesus. You're in love with him. You're in love with John.”

“What of it?” I could see him bristling. “Not the first, am I?”

No. Not by a long shot. Nor the last, though I didn't tell him so. I said, “Your opinion on this is not exactly objective.”

His Adam's apple jumped in the wavering light. “No, I'm not objective. Neither should you be. Not with what you owe him.”

“I don't owe him fuck.”

Malik's mouth curled into a semblance of a smile. “You wouldn't be angry if you didn't believe it was true. Listen, you know—we all know—he let you walk away unscathed. He didn't have to do that. He even saw to it you got your full bloody pension.”

I was shaking my head, refusing this, refusing what he was asking. My death. That's what he was asking.

“No one else can do this,” he insisted fiercely.

“Then it won't be done.”

“You ungrateful, sodding bastard. And he holds *you* up as the paragon of loyalty!”

“Go to hell.”

That was my cue. My exit line.

I didn't move.

And as the seconds passed, and as we stood there, furious, breathing hard, glaring at each other, I saw Malik's face change. Saw him recognize that I had not turned and walked away when I should have.

That I was considering it.

I said slowly, unwillingly, “When do you need an answer?”

“I can give you forty-eight hours.”

I clenched my jaw on the things I wanted to say. I needed to think. Think hard. As much as I wanted to refuse—I wasn't sure I could. I said at last, bitterly, “You'll have my answer in forty-eight hours.”

I let Malik leave first. Waited with the faded clowns and broken toys for his footsteps to die away, listened for the faraway growl of his motorbike to be swallowed by the hungry autumn night.

Silence settled. Sank its claws in.

I couldn't go home yet. Couldn't face Stephen. Not till I'd figured out what to tell him. What was it Dickens said? *An idea, like a ghost, must be spoken to a little before it will explain itself.*

A shadowrun. A black op. That was what the Old Man was asking. Sending me in as an illegal, naked into hostile territory. Knowing I was blown, knowing there was a price on my head, he was asking me to go back. Yes, that would take a little explaining. To Stephen—and to myself.

When I decided it was clear, I headed back to where I'd parked. The Range Rover's headlights blinked as I pressed the key fob. In that flash of light I saw a shadow detach itself from the trees and glide toward me. I laced the Rover's keys between my fingers like makeshift brass knuckles, and when he grabbed me, I went with the momentum, using it against him, flipping him over. He landed on his back in the dead leaves, his breath expelling in a hard *oof*.

I knelt on his scrawny chest using my left foot to grind his flailing right hand into the ground, my right pinning his left wrist. With my free hand I pressed the point of the longest blade in my key ring against his carotid artery.

“Surprise, surprise,” I said gently, and pressed a little harder just to make my...point.

He wheezed in panic, his eyes bulging. Clearly an amateur. I studied him in the colorless moonlight. Narrow nose; close-set brown eyes; a small mouth; lank, greasy dark hair. An unlovely specimen. I didn't know him.

He blubbered something lost in spit and snot.

“Didn't catch that,” I said. And then, “Don't move if you don't want an emergency tracheotomy.”

He held still—if we didn't count the trembling—and I felt around, found his wallet, flipped it open, and checked his driver's ID.

Bradley Kaine.

It meant nothing to me. Age 31. No occupation, but I'd already guessed it: loser.

I made a mental note of his address.

“I'm trying to think of a good reason not to punch a hole in your throat, Bradley. Nothing occurs to me.”

More inarticulate protests.

“What were you doing here? Planning a spot of B and E? Nah. Nothing worth stealing in there. Waiting for some poor old wino to roll? No. Winos are in short supply here. Waiting to rob some kid and his bird? Hmm? That's it, I bet. A spot of robbery and rape?”

He frantically shook his head.

“Course you were. Nothing personal, right? It's what you do. What you are.” The temptation was to kill him, this miserable scrap of an excuse for a man, this predator who waited in the shadows for someone smaller, younger, weaker.

Someone like me—but without my peculiar brand of skills.

I said harshly, “You weren't out here stargazing, we both know that.”

He gibbered something, little flecks of spittle hitting my face.

He was revolting. The perfect companion for an already bad day. I clenched my keys so hard, my hand shook, denting his clammy flesh. It was all I could do to control the disquieting urge to give release to the rage and frustration churning inside me.

He began to cry. The pungent stink of ammonia reached my nostrils. In his terror he'd pissed himself.

“Shut it,” I bit out. “I'm going to let you live. I'm going to give you a second chance. If I ever see you here again, I will kill you. Got it?”

He nodded feverishly.

I took my keys out of his throat, eased my boot off his hand, stood, and stepped back. He continued to lie on the ground, sobbing.

Pitiable. But I felt no pity. Something terrible had had happened to me over the years, had killed something inside me. Were I Stephen, I would feel compassion for him. I would hope that this was a turning point in his life. But being me, I only thought that it was probably a mistake to let him go. Even if it was dark enough to obscure my features, not so many blokes with English accents hanging about. I felt no compassion. I was letting him live because I knew that was what Stephen would do.

* * * *

I parked in the tree-lined circular drive of the white Victorian mansion. The lights were on downstairs, the curtains wide open. It was like looking into a doll house or a stage set. Downstairs I could see Buck curled up on the sofa in the den. The bookshelves where my books now crowded Stephen's. My paintings symmetrically arranged around Stephen's. Upstairs, Stephen walked from the bathroom into the bedroom. He wore a pair of pale green pajama bottoms. He was toweling his hair.

I sighed. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't get Stephen to take the concept of security seriously. Granted, he was better than he had been; he remembered to lock the doors now, at least. But that was just to relieve my mind. When I'd tried to explain why this was so important, bewilderingly, he'd apologized and said, "I know you need to feel secure. I promise to be more careful." As though it were about *my* safety. About my *feelings*.

I ejected the magazine from the Glock and dropped it back into the glove compartment. I bent, re-taped the pistol beneath the seat, got out of the Range Rover, locked it, and went quickly up the stone steps to the long, covered porch. There was a pyramid of resin jack-o-lanterns at the base of one of the posts, electric eyes and smiles glowing brightly. Black rubber bats on string hung from the porch rafters, stirring in the breeze.

As I locked the front door behind me, Buck came to greet me, tail wagging while he growled in that way of Chesapeake Bay retrievers. He'd been shot back in May when a team of assassins hired by a senior Taliban commander had come calling for me, but he was doing fine now. A little stiff in the mornings, but—as Stephen had gently teased—who wasn't?

Upstairs, the stereo was playing. I could hear the music drifting down the staircase: simple, intensely emotional, and somehow fragile. Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. An appropriate soundtrack for the return of old ghosts.

Trailed by Buck, I went around checking windows and closing curtains. I was relieved to see that while Stephen hadn't bothered with the curtains, he had at least locked everything.

In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of milk and leaned against the sink while staring out at the black diamond glitter of the lake behind the house. I hadn't been able to spare time for dinner, but I wasn't hungry. It had been a long day. I was taking courses at the University of Shenandoah, their Career Switcher Program, which was designed for people like me, frustrated teachers who hadn't completed the training curriculum but had “considerable life experiences, career achievements, and academic backgrounds that are relevant.”

Apparently I'd have been better off reporting to the target range every day and practicing my Pashto. In the mountains of Afghanistan they have a saying: *A wolf cannot outrun its shadow.*

I tried again to think how I would tell Stephen, how I would explain what I was considering, and I decided that it would be better to work it out in my mind first. I was too angry and confused just now—and Stephen had zero tolerance for the Old Man even at the best of times.

I washed the glass, rinsed it, and set in the sink. I turned out the lights and went upstairs.

Stephen was in bed, reading the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

He glanced up, and smiled, and my heart did that little flip it always did. He was so...beautiful. At fifty he made everyone else look callow and crude. Tall, lean, broad shoulders and long legs. His hair was prematurely silver, but it just emphasized how young and handsome he really was. He looked like the quintessential doctor on the telly, a man you wouldn't think twice about trusting with your life or your heart.

I went to him and he kissed me, but as our lips parted, his green eyes were searching. He said, “You're late.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

He was waiting for an explanation. That was one of the difficult things about being with someone. Accountability. I just wasn't ready to discuss Malik's proposition with him, and I didn't want to lie, so I said nothing.

When I didn't offer an explanation, Stephen, patiently explaining the customs to a foreigner, said, “You should have phoned. I was worried.”

“I wasn't thinking of that.”

His mouth quirked wryly. “Obviously not.” He was still studying me, looking for clues. “Have you eaten?”

I shook my head. “Not hungry, really.” I added quickly, as his brows drew together, “Not for food.”

I loved the way the concern in his face gave way to that wicked grin. He tossed aside the journal and, reaching for me, murmured, “Oh yeah?”

I mimicked that soft Southern accent, “Oh *yeah*.”

In the soft autumn darkness we came together, arms sliding around each other, holding each other close, entwined. The ghostly music tailed off, and there was nothing to hear but the slide and rustle of sheets and our rough breathing.

“I need you,” I said. “I need you so much.”

“You just take what you need,” he urged me in that sexy whisper.

Always generous, though he insisted it was not generosity to give me what he wanted for himself. I tried to go slow, tried to be generous too, but I was tense and unhappy and a little frantic. I was rushing even as he tried to gentle me, kissing and caressing; I sped through the mechanics of preparation. There was almond oil in the bedside table. I uncapped it and slicked it over my cock, and then more slowly, tantalizingly over the thick length of Stephen's. Touching him like this, having the right to this intimacy was a joy in itself, and watching him writhe languidly against the sheets...was so beautiful. Sometimes he took the little bottle from me and insisted on petting and pampering me too, but tonight he simply submitted, and I was soothed by his acquiescence.

I fought the longing to give in to simple lust and just take him without more preliminary than that. Stephen was bigger than me, maybe even stronger than me, so there was something unstinting, even tender in this deliberate surrender to my own hunger. I trailed my mouth down his heaving chest; I rubbed my face against the silky, pale hair. I used my tongue to probe his navel, and Stephen squirmed sensuously, offering a husky chuckle.

Sometimes we made the foreplay last and last, but tonight I was too wound up and needy. After a very few minutes, I urged him onto his knees and guided the head of my cock into the

black velvet heat of his body. Stephen cried out sweetly as I impaled him, and then we were moving together. That feeling of being one, of union, of being so deep inside Stephen that I was part of him...I craved that as much as the physical release. But the physical release was exquisite.

Sometimes it scared me how good it was between us. What had I done to deserve it? Nothing. Not a damn thing.

Stephen's hips rose and shoved back, allowing me to thrust more deeply. It was frenetic and fierce—and way too fast. His uninhibited moans gave way to a sharp, sobbing cry as I emptied myself in pulses of warm salty fluid. Trembling, slick with sweat and other, it was all I could do not to crash down on him and knock him flat to the mattress. It didn't matter; he rolled over and with urgent hands pulled me up against his warm, powerful body.

“Sorry. Did you come?” I mumbled, guiltily, stroking his hip, seeking evidence.

“What do you think?” He was quietly amused.

We kissed and cuddled for the brief minutes before Stephen dropped off. I drowsed for a while, head on his chest, soothed by the sound of his heart beneath my ear.

And then I remembered Malik and all hope of sleep fled.

I began to go over our meeting again.

How could the Old Man ask this of me? He knew better than anyone—

It was very simple. I was going to refuse. I had to. I had given my word to Stephen. If I ever let him down again, it wouldn't matter if I survived Afghanistan or not. There wouldn't be a place for me in Stephen's home or heart.

I listened to the peaceful tenor of his breathing.

Carefully I slipped out of his arms. I inched open the bedside cabinet drawer, pulled out the pistol I kept there, and went downstairs.

At the kitchen table I spread out the things I needed to clean the G18. Not that it needed it. Glocks can shoot extreme amounts of ammo before cleaning is required, and I hadn't fired this one since I'd been to the target range the previous month. But I found the takedown and cleaning soothing, my hands moving automatically as I field stripped the pistol.

I racked the slide a couple of times. There was no round in the chamber; the magazine was upstairs in the drawer, but that's not the kind of thing you ever want to be get careless about. I aimed at the window over the sink and pulled the trigger to release the firing pin.

"What are you doing?" Stephen asked from behind me, and I nearly knocked the table over.

How the hell was I supposed to survive in the field when these days I wasn't even aware of someone coming up behind me in my own home?

I don't think I concealed my start from him, but I managed to drop back in the chair and say calmly, "Did I wake you? Sorry. I couldn't sleep."

"So you're cleaning your pistol?"

I shrugged. "It relaxes me."

He pulled the chair to the side of me out and sat down at the table, studying me. His eyebrows made a silver line of disapproval.

I grasped the slide, pulled it back, and pulled the release tabs.

I said, "It really only needs minimal lubrication for proper function. The main thing is to avoid getting oil or solvent into the striker channel."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I could feel him watching me.

"Is everything all right?" he asked finally.

I met his eyes briefly. Nodded.

"For a spy, you're not a very good liar."

"Ex-spy." Neither of us smiled. I said, "I can't lie to you. I don't want to try."

He eyes darkened. "What's going on, Mark? I thought when you got home you seemed strung up."

I shook my head. "I have to work some things out in my own mind before I try talking to you."

He said dryly, "Is it that hard to talk to me?"

"No, of course not." I put the gun down, but my hands were oily, so I ended up spreading them, palms up. "I...I'm just used to...keeping my own counsel."

“I know. That's not exactly what being in a relationship is about.” He was giving me a long, narrow look—a look I hadn't seen since I'd returned bloodied and battered from Afghanistan the last time. “All right. I'm not going to try to wrinkle it out of you.”

His chair scraped back. I looked up quickly. Stephen didn't appear angry, just tired.

“Let me know when you're ready to talk.”

“I will. I promise.” He turned away, and I said, “Stephen, it's nothing to do with us.”

“Oh, for God's sake, Mark,” he said disgustedly. He didn't bother to glance around as he left the room.

But when I crawled into bed two hours later, he sleepily welcomed me into his arms.

Funny thing, that, because I had never liked being held when I slept, but with Stephen there was something comforting about curling up against him. I liked his arms wrapped around me, liked the heat of him all down my back, the warm breath stirring the hair at the nape of my neck.

I loved him. That made all the difference.

Chapter Two

When I opened my eyes the next morning, it took me a few seconds to place myself after the violent chaos of my dreams. Uppermost was relief to realize that the nightmares had been just that, that the dangerous labyrinths I'd been wandering were imaginary. Then I remembered Malik, and my body seemed to freeze.

I turned my head, but I knew Stephen was already up; I could hear him humming in the shower. But I continued to stare at the indentation his head had made in the pillow next to mine. The sheets where he'd lain were still warm, and when I hauled his pillow over to me, it carried his scent. I pressed it close to my face and breathed in deeply.

Picturing Stephen walking in and seeing me, I gave a shaky laugh and shoved the pillows and blankets aside.

The bathroom was warm and steamy and scented of something pleasantly herbal. It used to surprise me that Stephen went in for all these posh bath gels, but his days were spent in an antiseptic environment, so maybe it wasn't so surprising.

I pushed open the frosted glass door and followed him into the shower. He glanced over his shoulder, surprised, as I crowded in with him. His hair looked like molten silver plastered against his head, and his eyes were shining green as mallard feathers.

"My turn," I said.

Stephen laughed as he always did at my aggression. A little disconcerting that, but nice too. Nothing about me frightened Stephen.

"What did you have in mind, bath mitt or back scratcher?"

In answer, I presented my back to him and straddled my legs to give him easy access.

"I see." He kissed my nape, and I shivered.

He put one hand on my hips and used the soapy fingers of his other to ease his way into me. Dear God, I loved the feel of that, of his long fingers moving inside me. It didn't get more personal than that, did it? That informed press of fingertips on spongy flesh. Nothing clinical about it, nothing medicinal, just...informed.

"Yeah, you're ready," he murmured.

I moaned. I loved his cock too—although I'd never enjoyed bottoming. Good manners require taking turns, but I'd never got much out of it. It was just a way to get what I wanted. But I loved being fucked by Stephen. Loved the way it filled me up, left me with no room to think of anything but Stephen.

"You are *sweet* as a peach." He groaned, shoving into me.

I steadied myself with a hand against the wall and raised my face to the steamy spray.

I loved the feel of him all down my back, loved how hard he held me—how hard he fucked me—I could feel his heart pounding against my back, our bodies warm and wet and slippery together. I reached behind to try to touch him, to urge him closer still. He hung on tight, and I rocked and pushed back into him—a brisk, vigorous fuck to start the day.

We were still panting, laughing as he turned off the taps; I opened the shower door, grabbed a towel, and handed it to him. He scrubbed the pearl gray plush against his face.

We made room for each other as we toweled off, went through the routine of shaving and brushing teeth.

"What's your schedule like?" I asked. "Can we meet for lunch?"

"I think so. Don't you have class today?"

"The professor's off sick," I said, lying. I watched myself in the mirror, watched the razor gliding up my throat in brisk, smooth strokes. No point killing myself to complete course work if I wasn't going to be around for the final.

"I'll call you when I know for sure."

I nodded.

He moved past me into the bedroom. I heard the brisk slide of drawers.

* * * *

I spent the morning going through papers, locating the shoes—the false passports—I used when traveling for The Section. I told myself I was just making sure everything was in readiness if I did decide to go ahead, but in fact it felt uncomfortably like I was making sure my affairs were in order. All that double-checking bank books, insurance documents, my will, verifying the i's were dotted and the t's crossed. I was simply making sure—if I did decide to return to the field—that everything was where Stephen could quickly find what he needed. I continued to tell myself I had not made up my mind.

I *hadn't* made up my mind. And yet when I tried to imagine telling Malik no, tried to think how I would phrase it, the picture wouldn't come. I couldn't visualize it. What I *could* visualize—only too easily—was myself on a plane.

Through the floorboards I could hear Lena Roosevelt vacuuming the study. I closed my eyes, thinking how unfair it was that I hadn't had a chance to get bored yet with these little details of domesticity. But that was just feeling sorry for myself. Embarrassing.

I finished going through everything and went downstairs with my copy of *Nicholas Nickleby* to read in front of the fire while I waited for Stephen to phone.

“Aren't you having breakfast, honey?” Lena asked, poking her head into the study. She was a large-boned but very thin black woman of a robust seventy-something. She had sharp, striking features that hinted of a mixed and intrepid heritage. She wore a brown wool dress—always dresses—and sensible shoes and iron gray hair in a tight bun. Old-fashioned wire spectacles perched on her pointed nose. I don't think she was overly impressed by me, but she adored Stephen, and so she was always briskly kind.

“I'm supposed to meet Stephen for lunch.”

She studied me over the tops of her specs, nodded crisply, and withdrew, leaving me to the adventures of the idealistic and impulsive Nicholas Nickleby.

I read for a while, my stomach growling now and then. The house was redolent with the pumpkin pies baking in the kitchen. Lena was a wonderful cook, which more than made up for any flaws in her personality—such as not liking me. It was so easy to start to take all the lovely things in this house for granted; things like good food and warmth and comfortable chairs. Wouldn't be much of any of that in Afghanistan.

Stephen called around ten o'clock.

“Bad news,” he said briskly. “I can't make lunch. Hart is calling an impromptu staff meeting. He's concerned that all these sick people with costly medical conditions are messing with our performance rates and profit index.”

“Right.” I knew my disappointment was all out of proportion. I swallowed it down and said, “Well, I'll see you tonight then.”

Something must have crept into my tone, though. I felt Stephen's hesitation, and then he said, “I'm sorry, Mark. I'm disappointed too.”

“Not important.” I tried to laugh and, to my horror, heard it catch in my throat.

I could hear his name being paged in the background noise. Stephen said, “I'd offer to take you to dinner tonight, but I've got that damn scholarship trustee meeting. What about tomorrow night?”

“Halloween.”

“Hell. Mark—”

To my relief, my laugh sounded normal that time. “No worries. It was just a thought.”

Someone came up to the phone and I heard him turn away briefly to answer a question. He came back on the line and said, “Okay. I'll see you tonight.”

For nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own; and from morning to night, as from the cradle to the grave, is but a succession of changes so gentle and easy, that we can scarcely mark their progress.

I had read somewhere that *Nicholas Nickleby* was a turning point in Dickens's writing career. It was his third novel but his first true romance. Nicholas is a hero in the classic mold: young, poor, brave, mostly noble. He gets on my nerves like no other Dickens character, including that poor little rat Oliver Twist. The novel was probably the wrong choice for my mood—*A Tale of Two Cities* would have been more like it—but I have a thing about finishing what I start.

By five o'clock, I was down to the last chapters of the novel—and no closer to making my decision—as I settled down with one of those frozen chicken pot pies and a glass of milk. I heard the front door screen bang.

I experienced another of those uneasy flashes. How had I missed a car pulling up outside the house? That kind of obliviousness was liable to get me killed when—if—I went back into the field.

I tossed the book aside and went to the front hall. Stephen, framed by the doorway, was making a fuss over Buck, who was wriggling all over in puppylike ecstasy.

“Hey, what are you doing home early?” I asked, surprised.

He straightened and came toward me. “Hi. I thought I'd take my lover to dinner.” He put his hands on either side of my face and kissed me with what felt like disconcerting intentness.

When he released me, I tried to joke, “Do you suppose he'd mind if I tag along?”

But he wasn't letting me laugh it away. “You choose. Where would you like to go tonight?”

“Now I feel like an idiot. You didn't have to skip your meeting to have dinner with me, you know.”

“I know. I wanted to. It dawned on me this afternoon how little time we've had together lately.”

“You're busy. You've got a lot of commitments. And I've got”—I changed that in time—“one hell of a lot of homework.”

He seemed to examine my face. “You've worked so hard these last months. I don't think I've even told you how proud I am of you.”

This was much worse than being neglected. Not that he'd ever neglected me; the most he could be accused of was being occasionally preoccupied. “Don't, Stephen. Really.” And I meant it. “I'm happy. The happiest I can remember. I wish—”

I wish it could have lasted forever.

I cut that off.

* * * *

We ate at La Peu de Cuisine in Winchester. It was a charming little French restaurant; Stephen and I had had our first official date there nearly two years earlier. The service was, as always, impeccable, the food excellent, and the atmosphere suitably romantic: pale blue linens,

crystal chandeliers, oil paintings of the Pyrenees on exposed brick walls, and large, comfortable and private booths.

Stephen had the Dover sole and I had the foie gras-stuffed guinea hen. We ordered a bottle of chardonnay from the terrific wine list, and I listened to Stephen rant about having spent the morning on the phone with flunkies at an insurance company while trying to get the necessary approval for tests one of his patients urgently needed. It was so blessedly normal that I could almost convince myself that this was how the rest of our life was going to be.

"People don't understand. Insurance company clerks are determining who can live and who dies. Insurance company clerks are playing God."

"And that used to be your job."

He glared at me, then registered the teasing in my voice. He expelled a long breath, managed a rueful grin. "It did, yeah."

"So what kind of perks does God get?"

He laughed and reached for the wine bottle. "Not enough to make up for the lousy hours." He topped my glass up.

"You don't have to get me drunk," I said. "You can have your wicked way with me anytime you like."

He grinned, very beautiful in the candlelight. I thought again how lucky I was. Even if it was all ended, I had been lucky. Most people never got close to this.

"So what did you do today?"

"Today? Today I skived off. Read mostly. Tried to teach Buck to roll over and play dead."

"Did you succeed?"

"No. He's not much for tricks."

"How are your classes going?"

"Piece of cake."

Stephen was still smiling, but he sounded serious as he asked, "Are you bored, Mark? I don't mean today. I mean in general."

"No. Of course not."

He scrutinized me as though not completely convinced. “I know how quiet it is around here. How dull it must be for you. It's only reasonable that you might get frustrated, fed up.”

“I'm not. I don't.” I was truly startled that he could think that. It was almost funny given my idea of heaven would have been to spend the rest of my life living and loving quietly with him. In fact, I'd have taken that over heaven any day—let alone the place I was probably destined for.

“It's a drastic change from the last decade.”

I shook my head. “You know better than anyone the shape I was in after that last op. I've no desire to go back.”

I realized that this was the time to tell him of my meeting with Malik. To tell him what the Old Man wanted. To warn him that, desire or not, I might have to make one last run. But, gazing at his smiling face across the table, my courage failed. I knew, knew with absolute certainty that no matter when or how I broached it, such a conversation was not going to go well.

It didn't matter how hard I'd worked to prove myself over the last five months. Two years of insecurity and resentment lingered as was proved by this very conversation.

I needed to tell him, but I needed to find the right moment. The problem was that my moments were running out.

He changed the subject. “You didn't eat much dinner. Do you want dessert?”

“I was thinking we might head home. There's that pumpkin pie Lena made today.”

“Ah. Pumpkin pie means fresh whipped cream,” Stephen said, his grin utterly frank and utterly sexy.

My jeans were suddenly far too tight—and not from eating too much dinner.

We ran into Bryce Boxer on our way out of the restaurant. Bryce was Stephen's ex, the man Stephen had turned to when he decided I was a lost cause and it was time to move on. He was, as Stephen had told me one too many times, a very nice guy. Not Bryce's fault that I disliked him intensely. That evening he was dining with a short, stagily handsome Latino man—I pegged it as a first or second date. They were awkwardly attentive with each other.

“How are you, Bryce?” Stephen inquired, pausing by their booth.

“Stephen!” When Bryce gazed up at Stephen, his heart was in his eyes. For the first time I felt a flicker of empathy for him. I knew how it felt to lose Stephen. I'd been gutted when it had been my turn.

Bryce introduced his date, we chatted briefly, and then Stephen yielded to my silent urgings and we said good night. When we were outside on the pavement, he commented, “He seems nice enough.”

“Who?”

“Alan.”

Bryce's date. I'd barely registered his name. Once again I felt that glimmer of unease. I was supposed to notice things. Without trying.

“I don't think he's right for Bryce, though,” Stephen was saying.

My empathy for Bryce vanished in a stab of irritation. “Why not? He seems just the type to go in for jazz festivals and Sunday brunch at the Regency Room.”

“There's nothing wrong with those things.”

“No. You seemed to enjoy them, certainly.”

He gave me a level look. “I did enjoy them. Bryce is a caring, decent guy. And he's a lot of fun.”

I laughed. I didn't mean for it to come out so derisively, but I could feel a mounting wave of aggression as it occurred to me that with me out of the way, Bryce would have a clear field again.

Stephen's expression changed. “Don't tell me you're jealous.”

I mocked, “Of Alan and Bryce?”

“Of Bryce and me.”

I turned my profile to him. Stared stonily at the windows of the cafes and shops we passed. “Why should I be? Or are you saying you still have feelings for him?”

“Of course I'm not saying that.”

“No?” I could feel his gaze though I declined to meet it. “But you and Bryce are still friends. Even after you broke it off with him.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you didn't want to be friends with me.”

“It's not possible for you and me to be friends and not lovers,” Stephen said. “The thing between us is too intense for that.”

I didn't have an answer for that; I happened to agree with him.

We continued in silence toward the car park. Farther down the street several young yobs sat on a cement wall drinking beer and yelling commentary to passing cars and the occasional pedestrian.

Stephen touched my elbow. “Let's cross.”

“Why?”

He didn't bother answering.

I said coldly, “I'm not giving way to those cretins.”

“This isn't the time or place for macho posturing. They're drunk and stupid and I'm not in the mood for it.”

Or for me. That was clear enough.

We crossed the road and continued on our way, but as I could have told Stephen, the thugs on the cement wall recognized that evasive maneuver for what it was and were, accordingly, encouraged.

Two of them jumped down and started across the road encouraged by the jeers and calls of their mates. One of them was a big, beefy blond guy in a checked shirt, and the other was tall and lanky with a baseball cap that read *Lynchburg Hillcats*.

“What are you two, queer?” shouted one of the geniuses still perched on the wall. He threw an empty beer can, which bounced off the bonnet of one of the parked cars.

“Hey, faggots!” called the blond ape crossing the road. “Our side of the street not good enough for you?”

Narrowly, I watched their approach.

“Oh for God's sake,” Stephen said. “Just ignore them.”

“I don't want to ignore them,” I said, peeling off from him.

“Mark!” He grabbed for my arm, but I slid out from under his hold and advanced toward the muscle-bound point man—who’d managed to wedge himself between the bumper and fender of two closely parked cars.

The object of my interest gazed with wary surprise as I strolled up to him.

“D’you have a problem?” I inquired.

When you know how to handle yourself, it communicates itself—much the same way that fear communicates itself to a wild animal. His piggy eyes flickered uneasily at this direct approach, but he was used to intimidating people with his size, and his mates were watching, so he threw back his shoulders, blustering, “Yeah. I got a problem. I got a problem with a couple of fag—”

“I’ve got a problem too,” I said, and I rammed the heel of my hand under his chin, which shut him up and knocked him to his knees in one swift move. “I’ve got a problem with not being able to walk down the street without a parcel of fucking idjits harassing me and my friends.”

He was shaking his head like a bull that had mistakenly crashed into the arena wall. He tried to pull himself up. His companion joined him and tugged on his arm, saying, “Let it go, Eric. It’s that crazy limey bastard!”

I recognized my friend from the fun house the night before.

“Why, hello, Bradley,” I said. “I thought I told you to stay out of my way.”

“You’re a goddamned psycho,” Eric said thickly—he’d bitten his tongue and was bleeding from his mouth.

“D’you know, I get that a lot.” I rested my hands on my hips and waited, ready for someone to push his luck. Frankly, I’d have welcomed it.

Eric’s face suffused with rage and he tried—though only halfheartedly—to pull free from Bradley’s grip

Stephen shoved between us. “It’s *over*,” he warned them.

None of us needed Stephen telling us that, but I did find it mildly amusing that he apparently thought I needed rescuing. The skinny bastard was already hauling Eric—who was only too grateful for the excuse to abandon the field of battle—across the road to their comrades, who were on their feet protesting loudly the unchivalrous treatment they’d received.

"Night, Bradley. 'Night, Eric," I called.

Stephen grabbed my arm and hustled me away; I didn't struggle.

"What the hell were you trying to do?" he was saying furiously under his breath. "You can't take on five of those assholes!"

"It wouldn't be five very long."

He stared at me in horror. I almost laughed. "I didn't mean I'd kill them," I said. "I mean they wouldn't last long in a genuine fight."

"There would only have been a genuine *fight* if you'd provoked one. They're drunken loudmouths. Why couldn't you have just ignored them?"

"Because you crossed the street to avoid them," I yelled, suddenly losing my temper. "Why the hell should *we* cross the street because of a pack of drunken loudmouths?"

His hand tightened on my arm, and he gave me a little shake. "What's the matter with you? You can't tie into every drunken bully because he offends your sense of order. Never mind the fact that *you* hit *him* first. That asshole could have you up on assault charges."

If it had been anyone else, I'd have jerked free and spelled out the facts of life for him. But it was Stephen, so I stood quietly in his custodial grasp, controlled my lousy temper, and restrained myself to a short, "It doesn't work that way, Stephen. He knows he started it whether you do or not. I was not the aggressor."

We got into the car. I stared out the window while waiting for him to start the engine. It was dark by now, and the only stars in the sky looked inferior grade and out of range. I realized that I was shaking. Not with fear, not even with anger, but from the effort of controlling myself, of controlling that tidal wave of adrenaline and aggression. Stephen was right. There was something wrong with me. I wasn't fit for civilization anymore. I didn't belong with someone like him. I didn't belong with anyone.

Why had I pretended to myself that I could do this? Why had Stephen bothered to pretend that he thought I could do this? It was like trying to cram the genie back in the bottle. I was what the years and my experience had made of me, and I couldn't stop being that just because...I wanted to. Pathetic to even try, really.

My bleak thoughts had traveled so far afield that I'd nearly forgot Stephen was still sitting next to me. I was startled when he said quietly, "I do know they started it. And I know you think you were acting in my defense."

"But?" I continued to stare out the window. In the ominous green of the car park lights, I could barely discern the outline of the last ragged leaves on the trees.

"I guess what bothers me is I'm not sure if I was more worried over what they would do to you or what you might do to them."

I nodded. That confirmed my own thoughts on the matter, really. "You needn't worry about me."

"Don't I?" He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "One of them knew you. The one you called Bradley. What was that about?"

I considered what to tell him, mentally holding up lies and half-truths, trying to think if they would fit, and having to discard them as wrong for the occasion. I said finally, "He tried to mug me one night."

"What?"

"It's not a big deal, Stephen."

"When did this happen?"

"It really doesn't matter."

"When did it happen?" That was his medical emergency voice. *Scalpel, nurse. We have to amputate immediately.* "It was last night, wasn't it? That's why you were so wired. So angry."

"Yes. It happened last night."

I could feel him trying to read my profile in the gloom of the dashboard lights. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I said bitterly, "Don't worry. As you can see, I didn't do him any lasting damage."

"Mark..." he protested. "That's not what I meant. I'm not placing the welfare of those animals over you. My concern is for *you*. For what it does to you when you—"

"Lose it?"

There was a sharp silence.

“Knock off the self-pity, Mark,” Stephen said, and now his voice was grim. “Your reactions aren't always in proportion, your perception of threat is sometimes off, and we both know it. If you prefer to sit there feeling sorry for yourself, I don't know what to tell you. My sole concern is for you. Believe it or don't.”

He turned the key in the ignition and the radio came on. A woman's voice, husky, familiar.

Isn't it rich? Isn't it queer? Losing my timing this late in my career...

“Send in the clowns?” I nearly laughed.

Chapter Three

The answering machine was blinking when we arrived home. I instinctively knew who had left the message before Stephen reached to press the button, and I made my face blank as Malik's mechanical voice filled the front hall.

"Mark. Dicky Malik here. It appears that I'll be flying back to London sooner than anticipated. Need to know your answer, old boy." A pause and then, "I won't remind you what's riding on this."

Careless bastard. Or was he trying to manipulate me into a decision? I glanced at Stephen, and the pain on his face shocked me.

"Who's Dicky Malik?"

"Someone I used to work with."

He said nothing.

"Do you think I'm having an affair? It's nothing like that."

"An affair?" He sounded stunned. "No, of course I don't think you're having an *affair*. But something is obviously going on. Why haven't you—why didn't you just tell me?"

"I don't understand the question."

"That makes two of us. I don't understand why you're trying to hide this, whatever it is." He drew in a sharp breath. "Or am I being stupid? It's what I originally thought, isn't it? You're not happy."

"Why would you say that? I *am* happy." I could hear the fear in my voice and knew Stephen could hear it too—Christ knew what he'd make of it.

"Then what's going on? What are you doing?"

The two inevitable questions. Not like I hadn't had time to prepare for them. My mouth opened and nothing came out.

Not exactly reassuring. I could see Stephen absorbing this—the fact that I'd apparently been struck dumb—and trying to decide on the best approach. He said carefully, almost painstakingly, “I know it's not easy for you, Mark, but it would help if you could talk about what's going on. I mean that it would help *me*.”

I nodded, reached out tentatively, and brushed his hand with mine. “Please. I can't bear to fight with you.”

He moved his hand away. “Then stop lying to me.”

“I'm not lying. I'm not ready to talk about it yet because I don't know—”

I broke off. He was shaking his head in steady repudiation—very angry but absolutely controlled.

He turned and went upstairs.

I wanted to follow him, but I was afraid he might shut the bedroom door in my face. I couldn't have taken that. Instead, I went into the study and poured myself a scotch. I knocked it back and then, out of stall tactics, went slowly upstairs.

The door to our bedroom stood open. Stephen was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

He didn't look at me, but Buck, curled in front of the fireplace, thumped his tail in welcome.

I sat on the edge of the bed, not touching Stephen. He continued to gaze bleakly up at the ceiling. I could imagine the tenor of his memories: my meltdown because he hadn't been able to spare the time to take me to lunch, then the argument over Bryce, then the near brawl in walking back to the car, and last but hardly least, the discovery that I'd been in contact with an old work mate. I probably seemed about as shaky a romantic proposition as they came.

Well? Wasn't I?

I looked down at my hands resting with deceptive calm on my knees.

“I'm losing you,” I said. “I don't know what to do. Everything is”—my mouth dried so that I had to get the words unstuck from the roof of my mouth—“going wrong.”

“Everything isn't going wrong.”

When I glanced at him, he was watching me, his brows knitted. “What exactly were you expecting? That we would never disagree? That we would never be tired or irritable or too busy for each other?”

I shook my head. I wasn't sure I could explain—wasn't sure I had the courage to tell him what I felt was true. That I was there on sufferance, that he fully expected me to fuck up once and for all, and that, once that happened, he'd be able to cut me loose. Tell himself he'd given it every chance and it just wasn't meant to be.

More and more I had the terrible certainty that I was on borrowed time, that nothing I did would be enough to make up for my previous betrayal—and that when he learned about the impending one...

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mark, but it takes more than love to make a relationship work.”

I waited for him to say something else, but that seemed to be all he had to say on the subject. At last I rose and went to the doorway. I glanced back, but his eyes were closed.

I thought about his expression as I sat on the sofa, sipping my second scotch and absently petting Buck.

Probably better for Stephen if I took the opening given me and gracefully departed. What had I ever brought him but trouble and heartache? For that matter, what had I ever brought anyone—barring the Old Man—but bad luck? I'd long ago outgrown the notion that I was somehow to blame myself for my parents' death—or my uncle's—but I didn't seem to be a very lucky person to love. Some people simply have that cosmic target painted on their back; I seemed to be one of them.

Was this more of the self-pity Stephen had accused me of earlier?

Possibly.

I drank some more.

It occurred to me—belatedly—that I was making an already difficult situation more difficult by not talking to him. Stephen had basically told me this himself. As angry and upset as he was, my inability to confide in him was multiplying the trouble tenfold.

Not that telling him what was going on was going to solve our problems, but *not* telling him was a guarantee of disaster.

I understood this intellectually, and yet I continued to sit there, sipping my second scotch and postponing the climb upstairs.

Not the way I'd envisioned the evening playing out. But that was my fault, not Stephen's. I'd fucked it up, and instead of fixing it—assuming that was possible—I was making it worse with every word I said. Or, more exactly, every word I'd failed to say.

It occurred to me that one reason I was afraid to have this particular conversation with Stephen was the superstitious dread that if he broke it off with me, I would have no real incentive for getting myself home alive and in one piece.

It was a new experience, realizing that I was such a coward.

I finished the last mouthful of my drink, forced myself off the sofa, and went back upstairs.

Stephen was still lying on the bed. His eyes were shut, but he opened them when the floorboard squeaked. They looked red-rimmed, and I wondered if he had been crying. My heart seemed to twist in my chest. I could take anything but that.

"You're right. I have to talk to you," I said from the doorway.

He said acerbically, "That will make a nice change."

I opened my mouth, shut it.

He sat up, wiped his eyes with the edge of his hand, and said, "Sorry. That was uncalled for. It's no easier for you than it is for me. I know you're trying."

For all the good it was doing. But I put that thought out of my mind. I said, "Thursday. Last night."

He didn't look at me and his voice was flat, "The night you were late because you were getting mugged. Yes?"

No, this was not going to be remotely easy. Still hovering in the doorway, I replied, "I was mugged that night. I haven't lied to you. But I was late because I met Malik. The Old Man sent him to talk to me. He needs a favor."

I saw his face change, and it was all there: anger, cynicism, confirmation. “Yes?” That chilly single syllable could have been chipped off an iceberg. He'd been waiting for this. Waiting months for it, apparently.

It occurred to me how funny it was that I was supposedly such a brilliant negotiator that I had to be dragged out of retirement, and when it came to trying to explain myself to my lover, I could barely articulate. It was always like this when I tried to talk about the things that mattered to me personally. And about the only thing that mattered to me personally was Stephen.

So I stumbled on, trying to explain. “He—things are—the situation is critical—”

“Spare me the press release.” I realized it had been easier when he wasn't looking straight at me. The black fury in his eyes caught me off guard. “He wants you to come back to work for him, and you've agreed.”

To my astonishment, I heard myself say, “I haven't agreed. I won't agree unless you give me permission.”

“*Permission?* Who am I? Your father? Do whatever the fuck you want, Mark. It's your decision.”

I stepped back into the hallway as this time Stephen got up and left the room.

I needed to sleep, but no matter how I tried to relax, tried to empty my mind, my thoughts kept chasing round and round—like those cartoons of ghosts whirling round and round until they form a solid white ring. Like a tornado. Or a noose.

It was hours before Stephen returned to bed. I lay perfectly still, eyes closed, modulating my breathing. The mistake most people make when they're faking sleep is they lie too still. I felt Stephen move to stand by the bed, stare down at me, and I murmured and tossed onto my side. He pulled back the blankets and crawled in between the sheets—staying well to his side of the mattress.

For a few moments, we lay there in silence. I willed him to reach out. If he made any gesture at all, gave me any opening...

But he did not, and in a short while I could tell he was asleep.

I lay there watching the bold, gold face of the moon tangled in the trees outside the window. I watched till the moon drifted away and the stars faded and the sky paled and the sun rose.

At about six thirty I felt Stephen wake, although he didn't move.

I said, "I have to give the Old Man my answer today."

"We both know what the answer is." He sounded weary.

"It's...not just my decision."

His laugh was an echo of its normal self. "You're learning. You've memorized the right things to say even if you don't believe them."

After my struggle to reach this point of emotional epiphany, his brusque rejection left me bewildered. "I thought that was what you wanted. What you were telling me. That this had to be a joint decision."

He turned his head. Despite the fact that he occasionally fretted over the age difference between us, this was the first time he'd ever looked old to me. There were lines in his face, an emptiness in his eyes that didn't come from lack of sleep. I had done that, and it sickened me.

"It has to be more than lip service. You want to go. I'm not going to stop you."

I elbowed into a sitting position. "I *don't* want to go. I feel like I owe him. He let me walk away when I asked. He didn't have to do that. He could have—"

Stephen sat up too. "You don't have to explain. I told you last night I understand how boring all this is after the life you've led."

"No. You don't understand. This—what I have with you, what we have here together—is exactly what I want. What I dreamed of."

He said impatiently, "Then why are you throwing it away?"

"I'm not. If I do this, it's because I have to, not because I want to. And it will be the last time. I promise you that."

He threw back the covers, got up, reaching for his maroon bathrobe. "You promised once before, yet here we are."

"I couldn't foresee this."

"That's funny. I could."

“Stephen...don't.”

Maybe he heard the pain in my voice; I couldn't conceal it. Certainly I could hear the pain in his as he cried, “What do you want from me?”

What *did* I want from him? Besides reassurance that if I did this, it wasn't at the expense of our life together. And how could he guarantee that? I was ashamed to even ask.

When I didn't speak, he said in a voice of goaded frustration, “Jesus Christ, Mark!”

He slammed into the bathroom, and I went downstairs to put the coffee on.

A few minutes later I heard him and Buck on the staircase; then Stephen called from the hallway, “I'm going for a run.”

“Be careful,” I said automatically.

He didn't answer.

The house was uncomfortably silent after they left.

On weekends Stephen permitted himself a big, cholesterol-laden breakfast, and I placed bacon in the frying pan, moving automatically around the kitchen, trying to analyze my situation objectively, strategically.

It seemed to me that at least part of what I was fighting was Stephen's own insecurity about us. Astonishing as it was, he was genuinely uneasy about the twenty-one year age difference between us, failing to understand how much I needed his centered maturity, how attractive I found his assurance, his wisdom, his—usually—unruffled approach to life.

From the first time I'd seen him, smiling across the ugly, flaming centerpiece at some tedious State Department dinner, I'd wanted him—loved him, if there was such a thing as love at first sight. If anyone had grounds for insecurity, it was me. The last time I'd screwed up, Stephen had done his level best to replace me with good old Bryce Boxer. In fact, if I understood the situation correctly, the only reason Stephen had let me back in his life was because good old Bryce had basically insisted that Stephen needed to work out what he really felt for me before they could be together. I had Stephen because Bryce was foolish enough to send him back to me.

Bryce would be only too delighted to pick up the pieces this time.

As for our life being boring...

That was like arguing that warmth and light and love and happiness were boring. Suffice it to say, I'd had all the excitement anyone could handle for one lifetime.

But although this was all very clear in my mind, I didn't know how to communicate it to Stephen. I thought I *had* communicated it. Maybe not in words. I wasn't particularly good about explaining my feelings, but surely he could tell in every other way?

Somehow—I had to figure out how—I had to make him understand this in the little time we had left.

When he came back from his run, his hooded sweatshirt was wet from the fog.

“Coffee's ready. Lena left a jar of apple butter for the toast,” I said. “Did you want your eggs fried or scrambled?”

He poured dog food into Buck's bowl and said carefully, “Actually, I was thinking I'd go into work.”

My mouth dried. “I thought you had today off.”

He said something I didn't catch.

“What?”

“I'll be home for dinner.” He went on through, his feet pounding on the staircase as he jogged upstairs.

I found myself unable to call after him, form my protest. We had so little time left.

Less than I'd thought. What had Dickens said? *Life is made of ever so many partings welded together.*

I put the frying pan on the floor next to Buck's dish, grabbed my jacket, and walked down to the lake.

Chapter Four

It had been a long day. A long day and a bad day.

The phone rang several times, but I didn't pick up and no one left a message. When it rang at four, I heard it out, waited for Stephen's voice to tell me he wasn't coming home, but once again there was only silence.

Stephen arrived a few minutes later bearing a bottle of wine and Chinese takeaway.

"Trick or treat." He kissed me briskly on my startled mouth. Cool and minty fresh. I loved the clean, male taste of him.

"Trick?" I inquired doubtfully, watching him set the little cartons on the tile counter.

He shook his head. "Treat. Happy Halloween."

"I'd forgotten all about it."

"Not a big holiday where you come from. Why don't you open a bottle of wine?"

I felt a bit like a sleepwalker as I opened the wine, poured it into two glasses. I handed Stephen his glass.

Meeting my eyes, he said wryly, "You look like you think I might have booby trapped the egg rolls."

"This morning you weren't speaking to me. Tonight it's Mongolian beef. I can't help wondering if this is the condemned man's hearty last meal."

"No." He sipped the wine, swallowed. "I'm sorry about this morning. I've got a heck of a lot of nerve lecturing you about talking and then walking out on you. I just...needed time to think today."

I braced myself for it. "And?"

His gaze held mine. “I’m not going to hold you to the promise you made me. If you feel this is what you have to do, then”—he drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly—“I accept that.”

It took a second or two to absorb that my first and foremost reaction was sick disappointment. I realized that I’d hoped he would refuse to let me go. That he would deliver an ultimatum, somehow come up with a legitimate reason for why I couldn’t leave. All day I had put off phoning my answer to the Old Man in hope of this.

I didn’t let myself show any of that, though. I said, “And assuming I survive, will I still have a home to come back to?”

He said quietly, “Don’t joke about not surviving. Do me that much of a favor.”

I’m not joking. But if he was as worried as he clearly was, he didn’t need to hear my own fears.

I got plates out of the cupboard and spoons from the drawer. We sat down at the table, dished out the food. Stephen talked about his patients and the med center while we both picked our way through the Chinese food.

It was completely normal and utterly weird.

Stephen said suddenly, as though feeling his way through a maze, “Do you feel I’m neglecting you?”

“No.”

But he was still thinking this over. “I have been busy, but...” Whatever he read in my expression changed his own. He said uncertainly, “Maybe this is partly my fault. I’ve been trying not to smother you, making sure you had plenty of time—room—to be confident that you aren’t making a mistake.”

Protecting himself in case I bailed on him once more. Yes, I understood that.

I said, “I don’t think you believe me when I say I don’t want to go. I’m not bored or frustrated living here. I was happy. I *am* happy.” He opened his mouth, and I headed him off. “Maybe you’re right and I’m having some problems adjusting to civilian life, but...I *want* to adjust. I want to teach. I want to be your lover and wake up with you every morning and go to sleep next to you every night. I *want* what we have here.”

Stupidly, I was getting choked up again. It was with relief that I heard the doorbell ring, although in my experience, doorbells ringing unexpectedly at eight o'clock at night rarely signal anything good.

I half rose, but Stephen reminded me, "Halloween. I'll get it."

Was he afraid I might lose it and blow away the little ghosts and goblins invading our front porch?

After yesterday evening, he probably was.

Buck and I followed him to the hall where we could watch. A chorus of high voices cried, "Trick or treat!"

And so it began. Over the next several hours, I watched Stephen handing out gobs of autumn-colored packages of candy to swarms of kids. He was terrific. I'd never had even the slightest paternal inclinations, but it gave me a funny, warm feeling watching Stephen with his little neighbors. He admired costumes and made bad jokes all the while handing out ungodly amounts of sweeties.

Had he wanted kids? Was that one of the sacrifices he had made in order to be true to who he was? There was still so much I didn't know about him.

The ghosts and goblins and miniature Transformers eventually trickled off and stopped. Stephen turned off the porch lights.

He finished off the last of the wine and I drank my scotch as we sat in front of the fire in the study.

"Did you want to go up?" he asked, and I realized I'd been miles away, staring into the flames.

I gazed at him, and his expression seemed odd to me. As though he were waiting for something. What?

"I'll lock up downstairs."

He nodded and left me to it. I went through the house checking windows and doors, turning the lights off, locking up.

I had felt good earlier, watching Stephen with the kids. Now I felt drained and melancholy. As though I were doing all this for the last time, saying good-bye to the house and the all the

things in it, which was silly because Stephen had promised me that I could home again, that I was not leaving for the last time.

Bryce would not be stepping into my shoes, but I wondered who would remember to lock Stephen's doors and windows with me gone. Who would take care of him? It wouldn't occur to Stephen that he needed taking care of too. Or that I was the person to do it.

The bedroom light was on, Buck dozing in front of the fire, Stephen sitting up in bed. He wasn't reading, though; his arms were folded across his knees, and he was staring out the window at the moon in the magnolia branches.

I stepped out of my jeans, tossed them to the antique hope chest at the foot of the bed, pulled on my flannel sleep pants. He dragged the blankets back for me, and I slid in beside him on sheets warm and scented of him.

He turned out the light. I felt something close to a wave of panic that we were just supposed to close our eyes and go to sleep, but to my relief he reached for me. I went to him gratefully, holding him tight. He stroked my bare back.

"Did you call him? Malik. Or Holohan? Whichever it is."

The last thing I wanted to talk about. I shook my head, face pressed to the hollow of shoulder and arm. He smoothed his hand down the curve of my spine, his touch lingering over the shifts of muscle and bone as I tried to control my breathing.

He said slowly, "You're shaking."

I tried to laugh.

"You *don't* want to go, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Then why the hell are you going?"

"I..."

He sat up, dislodging me, and turned on the light. I put my hand up belatedly to shield my eyes.

He said tautly, "Why are you going, Mark? Why are you doing this?"

"I owe him."

“Bullshit.” He said it so fiercely I fell silent. “You gave him ten years. For ten years you risked your life and sanity for him. You’ve been beaten, stabbed, shot. How the hell do you figure you owe him another minute more?”

“He’s fighting for his political survival.”

“His political survival? Against your life? *Our* life. No. That’s not an even exchange. You don’t owe him a goddamned thing more. He was your employer and he used you until you weren’t of anymore use, and then he cut you loose. And you think because he let you keep your pension—that we don’t need, by the way—he did you some great favor? Anything he did for you, he did because it was convenient to him.”

Partly that was true. Partly...no. But I didn’t argue it with Stephen because he was getting angrier by the minute without my help.

“Why?” he demanded again. “It was one thing when I thought you wanted to go, but—”

“Because I don’t deserve this.”

I’m not sure who was more thrown by that outburst. Stephen’s eyes did a funny little triple blink as if the information was coming into his brain too fast to process. But he questioned calmly enough, “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You know what I *am*. You said it yourself.”

“Mark—” Whatever he had been about to say, he cut off. In that other voice, the quiet, calm voice he said, “I know what you did for a living. Is that what you mean?”

All at once I was so tired I couldn’t see straight. I rubbed my eyes and said, “I don’t know. Do you think it’s a coincidence?”

“What?”

“Everyone I love dies.”

“Mark, you can’t honestly think—yes, for the record. I do think it’s a coincidence. Sad, tragic, and...inevitable. Because we all die.”

“You know what I think? I think you’re right. I think I’m not fit for civilized society.”

“I never said that.”

I closed my eyes.

“I never said that. I don't believe it for one minute. You did the things you were ordered to do because you believed you were helping to make the world a safer place, that you were protecting the people who needed and deserved protecting.”

“That the ends justified the means.”

He said with complete certainty, “You don't believe that. You've done things you don't want to talk about, but you did them because you believed there was no other choice.”

He sounded absolutely positive about this, which was especially strange given that earlier in the evening I'd been thinking there was still so much about each other we didn't know.

Maybe not the important things, though. Maybe we did know those things.

“You are *not* one of the bad guys.”

I opened my eyes, scrutinized his face, tried to see if he really meant that or not. “And I don't know anyone who values peace, who understands how fine the line is between chaos and civilization more than you.”

“Yesterday evening,” I began.

“I don't know that your instinct was wrong,” Stephen admitted. “I know that like most people, I'm slow to recognize danger signals, that *my* instinct is to avoid violence, not meet it head on. Not escalate it. I was afraid for you. I'm afraid for you now. That's why I was—and am—angry.”

I considered this uncertainly. Afraid for my physical welfare or mental welfare or spiritual welfare or all of the above? Did it matter? He was right to be worried. I was.

Stephen said, “Did you sleep at all last night?”

“No.”

He gathered me against him again. “No wonder you're talking nonsense.”

Not nonsense, though. Nice of him to pretend that it was, but it wasn't, and we both knew it.

Stephen continued to hold me. *Cradle of arms*. Where had I heard that phrase before? Sentimental twaddle. But lovely too. I suppose he thought I might sleep, but as exhausted as I was, I couldn't let go enough to sleep. I needed to get up and make my phone calls. The last

obstacle had been removed. Stephen would accept my decision and at the end of the job would still let me back into his life. So this was victory. This called for celebration.

I lay there dry-eyed and hollow.

What use would I be to the Old Man—to anyone—as I was? Didn't anyone see that I was different now? That I *had* changed? I'd lost my edge—filed it down in an attempt to live safely with Stephen in his world—and now it was gone. Even Stephen, who knew me better than anyone on earth, apparently did not see this fundamental truth. Maybe it didn't exist. Maybe I hadn't changed at all.

Safe to say the world had not changed. I closed my eyes. Listened to the steady pound of his heart, the slow breaths—as peaceful as when he slept. He wasn't sleeping though. He stroked my hair.

Finally—I have no idea how much time passed—I whispered, “What if I did just choose this?”

“What?” He lowered his head to better hear me.

“If I do have a choice, can't I choose this?”

“Yes.”

He said it immediately as though...as though there were no shame in it, as though he wouldn't think worse of me for shirking my duty, for letting down a friend—for letting down the Old Man, who had been so much more and so much less than a friend.

“Yes,” he repeated as though he himself didn't have serious doubts about us, about the wisdom of letting me back into his life.

He wasn't judging me; not his style. But I still wanted him to understand that it wasn't just funk. That the decision was at least partly practical. I said, “I'm so *tired*. I don't think I have what it takes anymore. I'm not...absolutely sure I could...make it back. If I risk leaving you again.”

His arms went so tight around me, I gasped. But when he managed to speak, his voice was even, quite calm. “I'd say that pretty much answers the question, wouldn't you? You're not going anywhere.”

There was a prickle at the back of my eyes.

“No? I don't think it can be this simple. I don't think I can—”

"I can," he said flatly. "I can and I will. It will be my pleasure." He sounded very Southern. I almost laughed except I wasn't sure it would be laughter. Stephen was the only person in the world who thought I needed protecting.

Did people like me get happy endings? Doubtful. It was hard to steady my voice. "Do you think we're going to make it?"

He paused too long before saying, "Do you?"

"I feel like I'm..." I had to stop. I tried again, and it was easier with my eyes closed. "I feel like you don't believe in..." This? Us? Me? "That you're going through the motions because it's the fair thing to do, to give me a chance to see for myself that it won't—"

"What?"

I opened my eyes at the affront in his voice.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Before I could answer he went on, "You think I'm doing this, *living with you*, on a trial basis? What would be the purpose of that?"

I started to speak, and he said—still sounding decidedly pissed off—"If we don't make it, it will be your choice, Mark. Your decision. Not mine. I'm in for the long haul. As far as I'm concerned, this is *it*."

The few times I'd tried to imagine having this conversation, it hadn't gone like this: with Stephen offended, even outraged at the idea that he wasn't fully committed to making it work. But then he would think that, wouldn't he? Even if I was right? He would certainly be giving it—

"No," he said flatly, and my eyes jerked to his face. "Whatever you're thinking, whatever you've convinced yourself of, no. You're not here on sufferance. I love you. I love you so much it scares me. It's not reasonable to care this much for anyone, but...I do. And believe me, if it was possible to talk myself out of it, I'd have done it long before I ever let you move in here. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Christ, I've killed for you. And I'd do it again. I *love* you."

I clenched my jaw against the emotion threatening to tear out of me, wrapped my arm around his neck, and buried my face against his throat.

"I love you," he said again, very softly against my ear. "And I'm not letting you sacrifice yourself. Not to Afghanistan, not to an ex-lover, and sure as hell not to some noble ideal. So say good-bye to the past and all those ghosts who have you convinced that you don't deserve to be

happy.” His lips found mine, a soft kiss on my tight mouth, and my own lips relaxed. I kissed him back.

And as tired as I was, I realized that I wasn't *that* tired. That there was, in fact, life in the old boy yet.

Stephen glanced down at the prod of my erection and smiled a slow, gentle smile. His hand moved down to free himself and then me, and his equally hard cock slid against my own.

I kissed the thin skin of his neck, nipped delicately as Stephen responded, then harder. I could feel him smiling as his mouth trailed hot and silky, leaving a trail of wet from throat to nipple. He licked me, his tongue rasping against the sensitive points, and I gasped. When it was good between us, it was wicked good.

The bed springs *pinged* as he shifted around, and when I pried my eyes open, he was crouched over me, his breath warm on the head of my cock.

I spy with my little eye...

“You don't have to do that,” I said quickly.

“You always say that,” Stephen said. “I never understood why. I thought you were the only guy in the world who didn't like it. Well, guess what? I like doing this for you. So you're just going to have to get used to being loved.”

His mouth closed on my cock, hot, wet, luscious. He began to suck me, taking my swollen, pulsing prick deep in his throat.

Say good-bye was about right. I arched my back and cried out—and wondered dimly if they heard me all the way to London.

 THE END 

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Dangerous Ground
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Josh Lanyon

Josh Lanyon is the author of numerous novellas and short stories as well as the critically praised Adrien English mystery series. *The Hell You Say* was shortlisted for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. In 2008, Josh released *Man, Oh Man: Writing M/M/Fiction for Kinks and Ca\$h*, the definitive guide to writing for the m/m or gay romance market. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on his next manuscript.