



A  
DREAMSPINNER  
PRESS

*Day Dream*

# JOE AND THE PRINCE

P.A. FRIDAY

JOE was (there were no other words for it) short and plump. Well, to be fair, he could more accurately have been called short-ish and plump-ish. Indeed, in many another family, Joe's five-foot-six-inch frame and rounded figure would perhaps hardly have been noticed. Unfortunately for him, however, Joe was blessed (or possibly cursed) with two lithe and beautiful older sisters. Selina, the oldest (twenty-five and a highly rated new lawyer) was slim, blonde, and three inches taller than her brother. Melinda (twenty-four with a blossoming career in modeling) was even taller and slimmer; her dark brown hair and bewitching green eyes made heads turn wherever she went. Mousy-brown, stockily built Joe, therefore, just Didn't Measure Up when it came to looks, and he knew it—his sisters had made sure of that.

"You haven't lost any weight, then," Melinda greeted him as he wandered into their parents' house that weekend.

It was Sunday, and Sunday lunch with the parents was a weekly engagement on the family calendar. In his diary, Joe marked it with a skull and crossbones (which, like so many things Joe attempted, was drawn inexpertly, albeit with commendable perseverance).

"You have," he said to his sister. Indeed, talking of skulls and crossbones, Joe knew that most people would look skeletal at Melinda's weight, but he couldn't deny that she was still unbelievably beautiful. "You look nice," he

added.

“I wish I could say the same for you,” Melinda retorted, pouring herself a glass of slimline tonic with the barest hint of gin. “Do you want a drink?” she added, and Joe nearly died of shock at being offered anything by his sister.

“Yeah, thanks, Mel. A glass of white wine would be great.”

“Oh, I wasn’t speaking to *you*,” Melinda sniffed, her eyes directed at a point behind Joe’s head.

Joe, turning, saw Selina. “Hi, sis.”

Selina ignored him. “Darling Mellie!” she exclaimed, pressing a kiss to her sister’s high cheekboned face and sounding as thrilled to see her as if it had been a year, rather than a week, since she’d last seen her. “A G and T sounds fabulous.”

“Slimline tonic?” Melinda asked.

“Of course.” Selina collapsed elegantly into a chair. “No need to be too light on the gin, though, darling. Where are Maman and Dad?”

(Joe had never liked the pretentiousness of calling his mother “Maman.” His mother, in return, had never liked him. He supposed it was not an unreasonable response.)

“Maman is just ‘assembling herself’,” Melinda replied. In other words, thought Joe, she was caking herself in makeup. “Father....” Melinda shrugged. “In the shed, I believe. You know what he’s like.”

“Yes.”

The sisters sighed in unison at the thought of their mild,

uncertain father. Joe, however, suspected that if he still lived with Maman, he too would need a bolthole. It had taken him several years living away from the parental home before he had realized that actually, women were not all like those in his family—and, indeed, that it was even possible to actively enjoy their company. (His friends were now waiting, as yet in vain, for him to come to a similar realization that not all families were like his.)

“Honestly Joseph.” Selina had seen him hovering in a corner of the room. “Must you stand around being useless? Go and get some hors d’oeuvres.”

“Wouldn’t it be politer to wait for the parents?” Joe suggested.

Selina took the deep breath of someone attempting with little success to stay calm before repeating (slowly, but with emphasis), “Go. And. Get. The. Hors. D’oeuvres.”

“Where are they?”

Selina rolled her eyes. “In the kitchen.” She glanced across at her sister, and as Joe left the room, he heard her say, “Honestly, I really think he’s getting worse.”

“Do you think he’s mentally deficient?” Melinda asked with equal audibility.

Joe winced slightly. It wasn’t as if he was unused to the casual cruelty of his sisters, but still it had the power to hurt him. He grabbed the two plates of exquisitely prepared food, only the wrappers in the bin betraying that his mother’s habit of buying classy food in order to pass it off as her own was still in evidence. He returned to the lounge to discover that the numbers were stacked even further against him:

Maman had appeared. Trying to look pleased, he went forward to greet her with a kiss, plates still in his hands.

“Hello Mother.”

His mother put out her hands to fend him off. “Joseph! My dress! Really, you should be more careful. Now, offer those to your sisters.”

Obediently, he presented them to Selina and Melinda in turn, then returned to Maman. “Nibble, Mother?”

“Sometimes I wonder where I went wrong with you. Hors d’oeuvres, *dear*.”

The “dear” was so evidently not true that Joe sometimes wondered whether she was intending to compare him to a hart. “Do you want one?” he asked, ignoring the correction.

“Certainly not. I don’t wish to spoil my figure,” she said primly. Then, as Joe dumped the plates on the side and put his hand out to take a treat for himself: “Oh really!” Her voice was critical. “I thought you were supposed to be losing weight. Keep away from those and go and find your father.”

Joe wondered if he’d ever find the courage to say, “No, *you* say I’m supposed to lose weight,” but somehow it never seemed worth the trouble. “Is he in the garden?” he asked instead.

“Go and look,” snapped three female voices at once.

Joe went.

His father was indeed in his shed. He looked up nervously as Joe entered and then sighed in relief.

“Oh, Joe. Thank goodness.” Had Joe wondered why he obeyed the summons to dinner each Sunday? Looking at his

dad, he wondered no more. They exchanged smiles of understanding. “Good week?” asked his father.

“Until now,” said Joe, grinning lopsidedly.

“It’ll get better again. Don’t listen to your mother—I never do. Time to go?”

“The public execution starts now.”

THE atmosphere at lunch didn’t improve. Joe hadn’t really expected it to. But the conversation, at least, took an unexpected turn when Melinda said suddenly: “Robbie Prince is coming to do a book signing in Elford next week.”

The chorus of responses demonstrated the importance of this news. Robbie Prince was well-known for writing exquisitely sensual erotic novels in which the heroines all looked like Joe’s sisters and the hero never looked like Joe. Although Joe considered himself gay, he had to admit that Robbie Prince had a way with words that made even heterosexual sex seem appealing.

“Robbie Prince? Really?” Selina leaned forward across the table in her interest, knocking the water jug with her arm so that it spilled a little. “Really, Joe,” she said, frowning at her brother, “couldn’t you find somewhere more sensible to put a jug? But anyway.” She turned back to her sister. “Robbie Prince? In Elford? Darling, we’ve got to make an appearance there! How can he resist us?”

Joe thought mordantly that “make an appearance” was an entirely accurate description when it came to his sisters.

Some women were content just to “go” somewhere, but not Joe’s sisters.

“Do you know,” said Melinda, preening herself, “Jeremy once told me I looked just like Nela, the Italian heroine of *Love No More*. And I’m sure if I’ve thought once, I’ve thought every time I read it that darling Robbie seemed to have taken you as his model in *Forever Forever*.”

Selina blew a kiss across the table at Melinda. “You’re so sweet.”

“Well, I,” Maman said, unusually offering a different point of view from her daughters’, “think it’s disgusting. Pornography wrapped in smart clothing, that’s all.”

“*Maman!*” Melinda was shocked. “Robbie is a *genius*. He... he....”

“Writes about what it’s like to be human,” Joe said unexpectedly. For although Robbie Prince’s characters were beautiful, they were yet portrayed as fallible and complicated; Joe had actually shed a tear or two after finishing the poignant *Never*—something he’d certainly never admitted to his family.

“Yes.” Melinda sounded almost indignant about having to agree with Joe. “Not,” she added, trying to pull ground back, “that *you* could possibly know about it. Human! Some days I wonder whether you even count as subhuman.”

“Melinda,” their father said warningly.

Melinda took no notice of him, preferring to turn the conversation back to the excitement of the visit of a famous author.

“Next Saturday,” she said to Selina. “I’ll call for you at twelve. We can do our makeup together and then appear in force. It’s hard to believe that he might not notice one of us; if we go together, darling, I don’t see how we can fail.”

“Actually,” said Joe, “I think I might drift along too.”

“You?”

Joe shrugged. “There’s no law against it, is there?”

“Gracious, the thought of you there!” Selina exclaimed. “I should think poor Robbie would give up writing if he knew that people like you read his books.”

“I never realized I was that important,” Joe murmured ironically.

“Joseph will certainly *not* be going,” Maman interrupted before Selina could respond to Joe’s gentle retaliation. “I need him.” She looked across at Joe, and he felt his heart sink. “You will be taking me shoe shopping, young man, not hanging around bookshops.”

“Can’t we go during the week sometime, Mother?” Joe knew as he asked what her answer would be.

“Certainly not,” Maman said with decision. “It would not be the same thing at all.” She pursed her lips. “I shall expect you here at twelve o’clock precisely, Joseph. And don’t be late.”

JOE accepted his fate with less than his usual resignation. Maman always had been good at finding reasons why Joe



shouldn't enjoy himself, and at first he had been flattered, thinking that his mother wanted to spend time with him. It had soon become clear, however, that she only chose to do so when it would interfere with his own plans. After that, somehow, the gloss had gone. Nevertheless, he tended to do as she asked, merely because refusing was more trouble than it was worth. But Joe wanted—wanted quite badly—to go to the signing. To meet the man who wrote those fantastic books.

What did Robbie Prince have that made him understand the minds of so many people? That made him able to write something which appealed to the likes of Selina and Melinda on a very basic level and yet had so many deeper layers of meaning as well? He wouldn't have talked to the man, of course; he left that sort of thing to his sisters (and Joe couldn't help agreeing with them that they would cause a sensation). But it would have been nice just to be there, to be reminded that there was more to life than a dull office job in the center of Elford, undervalued by bosses and family alike.

His rescue came unexpectedly, albeit not from an unexpected source.

The phone rang, and Joe answered.

"Hello?"

"It's me." The voice was low and conspiratorial and could only belong to one person: his father.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?"

"Not too bad, not too bad. Look, I'll have to be quick or your mother'll come through and ask who I'm talking to. I've

got you off the hook for Saturday, so you can go and listen to Roger King or whatever his name is....”

“Robbie Prince,” Joe said, in a spirit of accuracy. Then, suddenly realizing what his father had said, “What? How?”

“Your mother and I,” Dad said importantly, “are going out for the day.”

“And she took that over shoe shopping?” Joe asked. “Not that I wouldn’t prefer to go out with you,” he added hastily, thinking that it had not, perhaps, been the most tactful response, “but....”

“Ah,” his father said, “but you don’t know where we’re going. It’s an all-day spa-health-whatchamacallit break. Maman couldn’t resist.”

Joe was awestruck by the tremendous sacrifice his father had made. “You’ve offered that... and you’re going *with* her?”

“Fraid so,” said Dad. “She’s been trying to get me in a mud wrap for years. Never thought I’d see the day when I went in for it, but it just shows what you can come to.”

“Dad! Thank you. You’re amazing. Like one of those things from a story. A fairy godmother.” Joe was almost out of breath with gratitude.

“Think nothing of it,” said his father. “Just make sure you make the most of it and go to this signing thing. And for goodness sake enjoy it. One of us needs to have a good day.”

“Thanks, Dad. I will.”

So Joe went.

The bookshop was full, of course, and Joe only just

managed to squeeze in. Unfortunately, in trying to find a position, he ended up accidentally knocking over the ostentatious display of Robbie Prince's books and disappearing beneath them in a clumsy tangle of legs and pages. He wished at that moment that he could disappear more permanently, but then a hand was offered to him, and a man in his early thirties helped him to his feet with friendly unconcern for the mishap.

"Thanks," Joe said, torn between embarrassment and the realization that the stranger was extremely attractive, and that they were both in a bookshop and this was really not the right time to be getting an erection, thank you very much. "Erm, I'd better...." He waved a hand vaguely at the mess.

"Leave 'em there," the man said. "They looked silly all piled up like that, anyway. The floor's probably the best place for them."

Joe stared at him. He'd obviously come to the signing, but if he was that uninterested in Robbie Prince's books, it was baffling as to why he'd bothered. "Oh!" he said, seeing a light. "Have you come with your girlfriend?" That would explain it, of course: probably he had a beautiful girlfriend, just like the ones in the novels—just like Melinda or Selina—and he was only here to accompany her. Now Joe looked at him more closely, he realized that the man wasn't, in fact, conventionally attractive. Far from tall, dark, and handsome, the stranger was blond-haired and middling in height, only a couple of inches taller than Joe, in fact.

"Sorry?" The man looked confused.

Joe realized suddenly that he'd been staring and looked

away, blushing. “Or wife, or.... Sorry, I just thought you were a bit off about Robbie Prince’s books, wondered why you’d come to see him. Don’t you like the books?”

The man shrugged. “Not much. A bit simpering, and I do get bored of all those elegant and arrogant heroines.” Perhaps he wasn’t here with a beautiful girlfriend? Or, more likely, he was and, Joe thought, going out with one made him feel like he had quite enough of histrionics in real life. Joe couldn’t blame him; he could think of few worse fates than dating Selina—unless it was dating Melinda.

“Oh, but there’s so much behind it all,” Joe said, shaking himself out of his reverie. “There’s so much—oh, I don’t know, I’m not much cop at this sort of thing—awkwardness, and people doing good, bad, and silly things and not even knowing why. Don’t you think life’s a bit like that?”

“Yes,” said the man slowly, “I do.”

Joe smiled apologetically. “That’s why I came, really. To see the man who could write like that. He must be pretty amazing, I think.”

“What? Oh, him? No, really rather ordinary,” the stranger said absently. “Must go. Leave the books where they are—what’s your name?”

“Joe. Joe Ferviere.”

Silly, pretentious-sounding surname. (It had occurred to Joe more than once that the name had been his mother’s chief motivation in marrying his dad.) Joe waited for the man to comment, but instead he returned to the issue of the books.

“Just leave them. They’ll be fine.”

Joe couldn’t quite bring himself to follow this suggestion, but he realized that at least half of the people in the bookshop were staring at him, and he hastily made untidy piles of books on the originally beautifully laid-out display. He could hear a familiar voice behind him.

“What’s happening over there?” Selina. It would be. “Oh,” she said disdainfully, looking at the mess that Joe was attempting to recover, “it’s you. I don’t know why you’ve come, anyway,” she said, her voice loud enough to carry to most of the shop and bring her sister over to join the criticism. “You can hardly know anything about *literature*.”

“Quite right,” said Melinda, “and what’s more, I can’t imagine Robbie Prince wanting to talk to someone like you. Even before you destroyed that gorgeous display of his books.”

“You’re probably right,” Joe agreed, wishing he’d stayed at home.

“She’s not, you know.” It was Joe’s stranger again, whose voice carried quite as well as Selina’s.

Joe gave him a rueful grin. “Thanks, but it’s true.”

Beside him Melinda and Selina had fallen silent, presumably, Joe thought, with indignation about having been corrected by an utter stranger. Mostly men fell at their feet rather than defend their plain younger brother at their expense. But there was something else in the silence, and as everyone else turned to look at what was going on, Joe discovered the explanation.

“Hello all,” the stranger said. “I never know what to say

at these signings, so I thought I'd just leave an open house for anyone to ask any questions. Go ahead, ask me anything."

Joe's mouth fell open. It seemed his kind stranger was no other than Robbie Prince.

After that, Joe skulked in the background. He watched Selina and Melinda separately and then together attempt to chat up Robbie; watched as various other women vied for his attention; watched, watched, watched. Robbie was unfailingly polite, very cheerful—not to mention chatty—and apparently unaware of any attempts to seduce him. Finally even Melinda and Selina gave up, and after Joe had seen them safely out of sight, he started to slide toward the doorway.

"Hey, Joe!" A voice came from behind him, and Joe jumped, scattering the remainder of the books left on the same table he'd demolished at the beginning of the afternoon. "Sorry," Robbie smiled, strolling over.

"I ought to be saying sorry. It was bad enough messing up once without repeating it." Joe felt as if he was not so much blushing as turning a deep beet red from head to foot.

"Best thing for them." Robbie gave a grin and pushed the remaining few books onto the floor. "Fancy a bite to eat?"

"Erm."

"It was just a thought," Robbie said, his face falling.

"Yes," said Joe hastily, wondering whether he had enough money for anything other than chips, wondering what anyone would think if they saw him, Joe Ferviere, wandering about with Famous Robbie Prince. (Probably that

he was taking Robbie home to visit the sisters, he thought.)  
“I mean, erm, that would be great.”

Joe hadn’t, in fact, money for much more than a bag of chips, but that was okay, because it was also what Robbie fancied. They went and sat on the seafront, looking out at the waves and eating battered haddock and chip-shop chips. To start with, they didn’t talk much because Joe felt too awkward; then, because they were eating. After a while, Joe realized he was feeling comfortable with the quietness. It was so different from his parents’ house, where someone was invariably talking in order to hear their own voice. Come to that, his mother would never have something as vulgar as fish and chips to eat. When they’d both finished and disposed of the wrappers, they sat there a bit longer.

“I miss the sea,” Robbie said, staring out over the expanse of water. “When I was a kid, we used to live right on the front.”

“You don’t anymore, then?” asked Joe. “I can’t imagine living away from it, actually. It’s... it’s kind of reassuring.” He felt stupid the moment he’d said it. After all, how could an ocean reassure you?

But Robbie nodded. “I know exactly what you mean. I used to spend more time on the beach than in the house. It felt so much more like home. I could be myself there. There was this one big rock—I used to curl up against it with a book, reading and watching the waves roll in and out. And thinking. There was never space to think in our house.”

Joe could empathize with that. “Mine neither.” He gave a little laugh. “Although my sisters would tell you I don’t know how to think.”

“I think that’s very imperceptive of them,” Robbie said. “Not to mention rude.” Then, answering Joe’s earlier question, “No, I live in Illsbury now. Not so far away from the coast, I suppose, but somehow I never seem to get the time to come down.”

“I expect you’re busy. People to see, places to go. Book signings and all that,” Joe added vaguely.

“Yes.” Robbie exhaled, and Joe watched his breath make a cloud in the air. “Places to go, anyway. I don’t go much for big crowds of people I hardly know. You?”

“I don’t know.” Joe smiled ruefully. “I know I don’t want to try. I’m sure they wouldn’t go much for me.”

The sky turned a dusky gray over the sea, and Joe shivered a little. Robbie reached out his hand and took Joe’s, making him jolt with the shock.

“Do you mind?” Robbie asked quietly.

“I....” Joe realized he didn’t have words for what he felt. Probably Robbie, the writer, could have summed up in one concise but eloquent sentence the incredible feeling of their hands touching. Joe could not. “No,” he said.

“Are you cold?” said Robbie.

“Sort of.” The truth was, Joe was extremely cold, but this moment was too good for him to want to end it.

“Do you want to come back for a coffee?”

“Um....” Joe gulped and tried again. “Yes,” he added quickly, before he could lose his nerve. “Please.”

They held hands walking to the hotel. Joe wondered whether he had walked into some strange parallel universe,



in which the fact that he was holding hands with a world-famous author was not beyond the realms of likelihood. If this was a dream, he thought, he didn't want it to end. Robbie was staying at the Plaza, probably the poshest hotel in Elford. Joe hadn't even been inside the doors of the place before; now he was being led upstairs to Robbie Prince's private suite. *Definitely* a parallel universe.

"So," said Robbie, ushering him into the room and indicating the tea and coffee-making facilities. "Fancy a drink?"

"Actually," Joe confessed sheepishly, "I don't really like coffee."

"Me neither." Robbie smiled and added, "But I don't know whether that was just a hint that I should offer you tea. You can have a cup of tea if you want, but I was kind of hoping..." He trailed off.

Joe looked at him. It sounded as if Robbie was propositioning him, but Joe wasn't the sort of person whom *anyone* propositioned, let alone famous authors.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I can see I'll have to be a little more direct."

And Joe found that he hadn't misread the signals. Somehow—suddenly—strangely—*splendidly*—Joe found another man's mouth on his as Robbie kissed him hard and thoroughly. He found himself responding as if he knew precisely what he was doing, and incredibly, it felt as though he did, as though this was something he'd always known how to do. Robbie moved in closer so that their bodies rubbed against each other. Joe's painfully hard cock was

pressing against Robbie's leg; he could feel (amazing!) Robbie's erection and had a desperate urge to take it in his mouth. He slid down to kneel in front of Robbie and put his hand on the fly of Robbie's trousers.

"Yes?" Joe wasn't sure whether he actually said the word or merely thought it.

"Yes," Robbie breathed.

And for once Joe's fingers didn't fumble as he opened Robbie's trousers and pulled Robbie's cock from his pants; for once, he wasn't even thinking about what he "ought" to be doing, but just doing what came naturally. Tentatively, he licked the head of Robbie's cock, and Robbie gave a small moan.

"Yes," Robbie said again.

But Joe was barely listening; he was on a voyage of discovery. He ran his tongue down the underside of Robbie's cock, then opened his mouth to take each testicle into his mouth in turn. Then back toward the tip of Robbie's erection with a line of teasing kisses before he took the entire head into his mouth, his fingers closing around the bottom of Robbie's cock. Robbie's breathing was faster now. He had braced himself against the wall above Joe's head, and Joe could feel Robbie's body rocking slightly, as if to encourage him to continue. He had almost forgotten his own erection, caught up as he was in this new world of another man's body, but it seemed Robbie had not.

"Joe. Joe." Robbie's voice roused Joe, and he looked up, half-expecting that Robbie would tell him to stop, that he was doing it all wrong. Instead, Robbie smiled, his face

flushed a little with arousal. “Bed, do you think?”

“Yeah.”

Joe got clumsily to his feet, and Robbie led him toward the bed. He realized that he had taken Robbie’s hand instinctively; Robbie was gently disentangling his hand, but only in order to undress more thoroughly.

“Joe,” Robbie said quietly, “undress for me.”

Joe had a flashing moment of nerves when he remembered his rounded body. Perhaps his sisters were right. Maybe Robbie would take one look at him and turn away in disgust. But Robbie had come up close to him and was unbuttoning Joe’s shirt in between kisses, and he looked anything but disgusted by the body he was discovering. Robbie’s fingers unzipping Joe’s jeans and pushing them down over his hips almost paralyzed Joe with pleasure. He felt like he could do nothing but stand there and allow Robbie to do what he wanted—whatever he wanted. And his mind was just as paralyzed with the amazing thought that what Robbie seemed to want was *him*, Joe Ferviere. An ordinary Joe if ever there was one, yet at that moment Joe felt anything but ordinary.

“Now,” Robbie murmured, pulling Joe onto the bed, “where were we? As I recall, you were about here....” He guided Joe’s hand down to his cock. “...but it wasn’t just your hand you were using.”

“May I...?”

“Please,” said Robbie. “But there’s just one thing....” He smiled at Joe’s look of alarm. “I want to join in too.”

Joe opened his mouth to say “I don’t understand” before

realizing that he did. Robbie had slid around the bed so that Joe's erect cock was only centimeters away from his mouth, whilst his own cock occupied a similar position in front of Joe.

"You don't mind?" Joe asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"Geez, Joe, do I look like I mind?" Robbie demanded, hitching his hips forward to move his cock even closer to Joe and grabbing Joe's own hips to position himself.

"No."

Joe felt the insecurities flit away as he devoted himself to Robbie's beautiful, erect cock, taking it in ever further with each motion. And then—then Robbie's mouth closed around Joe's own erection, and Joe shuddered with the intensity of the feeling. Robbie's mouth was warm and wet and... and no doubt someone in one of Robbie's books could have done justice to the feeling, but Joe could only think that this was amazing, incredible, far better than he'd ever imagined. And then Robbie started sucking on the head of Joe's cock as if it were an ice lolly he was savoring, and Joe lost the ability to think at all. Robbie's tongue twisted and slid around the very tip until Joe had to pause in his own ministrations for fear of losing control. He groaned aloud, and the sound sent a shiver through Robbie.

"God," Robbie mumbled, then "Joe," and then "Yes!" as he came, some of the come sliding in rivulets from Joe's mouth as he tasted his first man.

It was too much. Joe, too, came, his eyes shutting as if his senses had overloaded. For a few moments, there was just the sound of his thumping heartbeat, the softness of the

bed, the smell of sex. Then Robbie's voice said, "Joe?"

Joe opened his eyes, suddenly back to everyday Joe; ordinary Joe; short, plump, useless Joe. Whom nobody in their right mind would want to be with, let alone someone as famous as Robbie Prince. Maybe Robbie made a habit of one-night stands in all the places he stopped at. Perhaps he'd felt sorry for Joe's pitiful existence and had sought to add a little color. Well, thought Joe resignedly, he'd certainly done that. And if that was all, it was still something. He might be one in a whole line for Robbie, but Robbie was his first and always would be. No, Joe wouldn't regret it for a moment.

"Thanks," he said awkwardly, wondering what the etiquette was for post-coital conversation.

"Thanks, yourself," Robbie said. Then, "You won't...."

"I know it was just one of those things," said Joe hastily. "I don't expect you to buy me flowers or anything, you know?"

Apparently despite himself, Robbie smiled. "Would you like me to?" he asked.

Joe grimaced. "Better than chocolates. My sisters would tell you I'm fat enough as it is."

Robbie sat up and swung Joe up into his arms. "Your sisters would be wrong," he said, kissing Joe again. "And as to 'one of those things'...."

But Joe had pulled away and was struggling into his clothes. It was okay for it to be a one-night stand, but he couldn't bear to hear Robbie actually say it, or worse, peddle some lie about how they'd meet up, when they both knew they never would.

“Thanks,” he said again. He smiled shyly. “It was—well, fantastic, you know?”

He pulled the door quietly shut behind him and managed to get all the way to the lobby of the hotel before noticing that his jumper was inside-out. Way to make an impression, he told himself ironically. Melinda would have sighed and said it was “just like Joe.” Not that she’d ever have believed he’d been to bed with Robbie Prince, mind you, even if Joe had intended to tell her.

It was raining now—not hard, but steadily—and Joe had used the last of his cash buying chips, so unless he stopped at a CashPoint, he was going to be walking home. But somehow, walking suited his mood, and he drifted aimlessly toward his own small, one-bedroom flat. Not in the same class as the posh hotel Robbie had been staying at, obviously; but then Joe wasn’t in the same class as Robbie. He opened the front door, kicked the local newspaper out of the way, and collapsed onto the sofa.

JOE didn’t discover he’d lost his wallet until the next morning. He searched frantically through all the pockets of his jeans for a long time after it had become clear that it wasn’t there. Sunday morning, of all the times to try and get your cards canceled, to work out what, precisely, you had in your wallet. Joe considered ringing around and decided that going back to bed and hiding under the duvet was a better plan.

He was up by lunch time, though—of course. Sunday

lunch with the family was an occasion only to be missed on pain of death. Melinda and Selina were both there when he got there; as usual when this happened, they both looked at their watches and clucked their tongues impatiently, even though Joe knew he wasn't late. He smiled at them, gave his mother the expected kiss, then listened to her criticisms of his hair ("too long") and clothes ("too scruffy") with resignation, and her description of the spa day ("Your father enjoyed every second.") with amusement increased by the look of pain on his dad's face.

"I don't know what *you* were doing at the book signing yesterday," Selina said pointedly as they sat down to lunch. "Can you actually read?"

Melinda laughed mockingly. "Of course not, but he can knock down a display table as well as anyone else." She turned to their mother. "Did we mention that he managed to push all of Robbie Prince's books onto the floor? And forced Robbie to take pity on him and pretend he didn't mind his clumsiness?"

"Honestly, Maman," Selina added, "it was just embarrassing. Heaven knows what Robbie must have thought."

*Well actually*, Joe thought defensively, *he didn't mind, and we went and had chips together*. Not to mention sex. He kept his mouth shut, however, and was saved from further criticism by the ringing of the doorbell. Maman frowned.

"Really," she said, "who is it who has no better manners than to call at what is clearly a family time?"

"I'll get it," volunteered Joe, half getting to his feet.

“Oh, no,” Selina snapped, “Not if Maman doesn’t want to be humiliated in front of the entire neighborhood. I’ll go.” Joe nodded and collapsed back into the chair. They could all hear Selina open the door, saying in a polite but frigid voice, “Can I help you?” They all heard, too, when her voice changed to a fluttery flirtatiousness. “Oh,” she said, her tone soft and girlish, “what a pleasant surprise. But how did you know where to find me?”

“I didn’t.”

Both Melinda and Joe’s heads turned suddenly toward the doorway at the sound of the voice.

“Robbie!” Melinda mouthed, getting hastily to her feet and joining Selina at the front door. “Robbie,” she greeted him effusively, “what a pleasant surprise. Now who has been telling you where to find me on a Sunday? Naughty things that they are; they *know* it’s my special family lunch, but I’ll forgive them since it’s you.”

Robbie coughed apologetically. “I was just wondering whether—well, whether Joe was here,” he said.

There was a moment of stunned silence from the girls, and Joe saw, across the table, an expression of frigid disbelief on his mother’s face. Then, Melinda said in a tone of disbelief, “Joe?”

“You came to see *Joe*?” Selina added, her voice squeaking with outrage.

“Is he here?”

Joe, who had been rooted to the spot by the realization that Robbie was here, finally managed to stand up, overturning his chair as he did so. There was a small smile



curving his father's mouth.

"Yes," he said abruptly, striding hastily to the doorway, not even stopping to correct the chair on his way. "I am."

Robbie looked across at him and smiled. "You left your wallet," he said, holding it out to Joe.

"At the signing?" Selina tried to get back into the conversation. "Oh, Joe, that's so like you. Always losing things."

"No, actually," Robbie said politely, "it was later. In my room."

Joe was not a vindictive person, but he couldn't help enjoying the looks on his sisters' faces. He heard a grunt of amusement emanating from his father in the other room; Joe had never told Dad he was gay, but it seemed he had been right in thinking he didn't need to. Automatically he reached out and took the wallet.

"Thanks."

"You said that last night," Robbie said. "Along with saying that last night was 'one of those things'. I'd hoped we might make it 'many of those things', but I thought you were probably giving me the brush-off. Then I found your wallet, and I thought—well, why not? I looked up 'Ferviere' in the phonebook, and it led me here. To you."

Frozen outrage was stamped across Selina's face; Melinda looked positively apoplectic. Joe said nothing. Not because there was nothing he wanted to say, but because he simply couldn't get the words out. If Selina couldn't believe this turn of events, it was nothing to Joe's incredulity.

Robbie smiled again, this time a little ruefully. “I’m sorry if I’ve broken the rules of one-night stands or whatever by finding out where you live, but to tell the truth, I haven’t any idea what they are. I don’t date much myself, what with writing heterosexual stories and being rather quiet and boring in real life, you know.”

“Me neither,” admitted Joe, and his sisters’ silence was broken by a contemptuous laugh—he thought from Melinda.

“Well, I’d quite like to see you again sometime, perhaps? Bore you again, maybe I should say. ”

“You don’t bore me.” Joe hesitated. “You don’t have to, you know,” he said awkwardly.

“I know. But if I want to?” asked Robbie.

Joe had never knowingly seen a come-hither smile before, or (to tell the truth) been entirely certain where “hither” might be. But there was definitely something beckoning to him from Robbie’s face. His sisters and his mother forgotten, Joe walked forward into Robbie’s arms, pressing his lips to Robbie’s. “Ah, well, if you *want* to...,” he said.

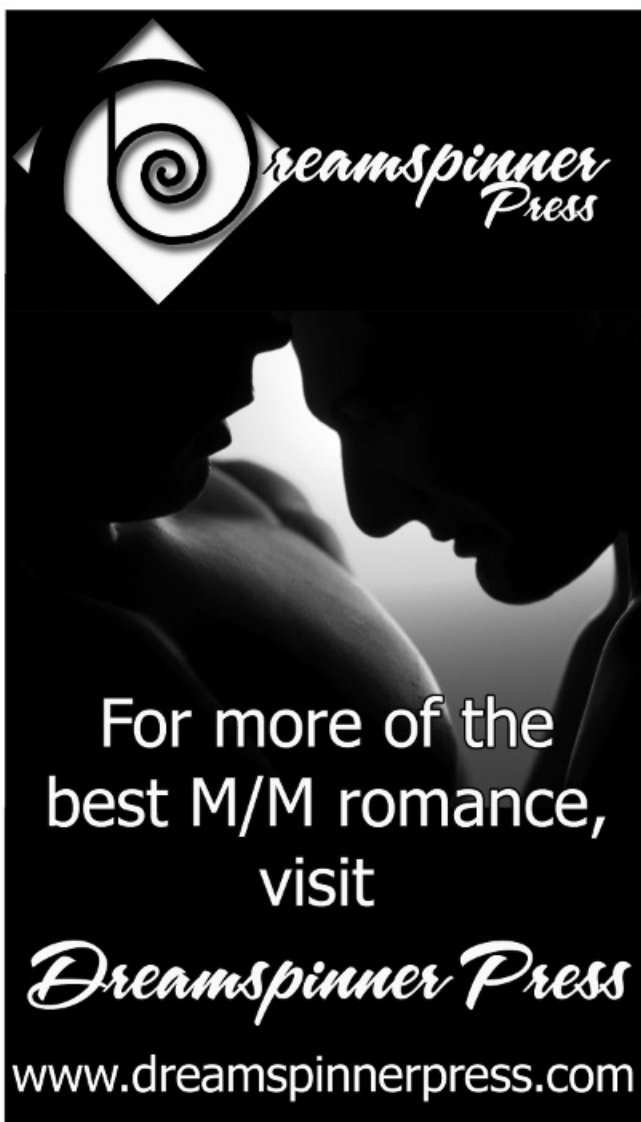
“Let me take you out to lunch,” Robbie said, his arms still around Joe.

Joe thought about the dinner waiting for him in the other room, the icy conversation he could expect from his family.

“That,” he said, walking out of the house without even one glance back, “would be perfect.”

P.A. FRIDAY lives in the UK with one partner, one child, and one cat and has a creeping paranoia that she is obsessed with the number one. The only time when “one” cannot be used to describe her, however, is in her writing: she fails dismally to write one sort of thing and, when not writing erotic romance of all sexualities, may be found writing articles on disability, pagan poetry, or science fiction. She loves wine and red peppers, and loathes coffee and mushrooms.

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Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America  
May 2010

eBook Edition  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-464-0