

A Stranger's Touch



Annie Brooke

A STRANGER'S TOUCH

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Another sound like laughter. "Are you hard? Already?"

Mesmerised by the slow and regular stroke of his hand through my hair—back and forth, back and forth—I nodded before I realised he couldn't see the gesture, though, of course, he could feel it. "Yes."

"Are you always so easily turned on?"

"Yes. I like my job very much. I enjoy sex."

"But I don't intend to touch your genitals today, or allow you to touch mine."

A throb of disappointment powered through me. "Can I touch you anywhere else? Please?"

This time his laughter was obvious. "A prostitute begging to touch a client? You are already doing so in any case, though not with your hands, so your question is unnecessary. You're an unusual man, Red. Robbie was right about you."

"What did he say?"

The man didn't answer at first. Instead, he simply continued to massage my head. I felt the tension begin to drift away, and breathed in the scent of him once more.

"Oh, Robbie said many things," he answered, when I'd all but given up hope of hearing his voice again. "Both in his words and in the silence of his thoughts. He said you were special, perfect for what I wanted to do with you...."

ALSO BY ANNE BROOKE

Give And Take

The Hit List

A STRANGER'S TOUCH

BY

ANNE BROOKE

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The air felt heavy, as if there was something weighing down on my shoulders that I couldn't shake off. It might have been my own fear. I didn't know. Odd how dark everything was, in spite of the torch I'd remembered to bring. It was shining at my feet, and the narrow band of light only increased the sense of darkness. I could hear the sound of my breath, though sometimes I fancied there was a faint hiss behind it, and I imagined someone else might be in the room with me. Someone who was pacing his or her pulse to mine. It made me shiver and I forced myself to regulate my breathing again.

I couldn't remember why I'd agreed to any of this.

No. I did remember. It was what Robbie had wanted. And the money. That always helped. The chair beneath me pressed into the

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back of my legs, and I shifted my position to try to get a little more comfortable. This assignment wasn't turning out to be quite as straightforward as Robbie promised me it would. And he tended to tell me the truth. Which wasn't bad for a pimp. In fact, it was one of his great strengths. He was pretty stylish in bed as well, I had to say. He was so damn good at knowing what tricks broke me open every time.

Whereas my great strength was doing whatever I was told to do.

Robbie had ordered me to dress sexy and tight—it had pissed me off to hear him as I always dressed sexy and tight. That was my job, wasn't it? But I hadn't let any of that show. I knew my trade, knew when to act pretty. He'd told me to come here, an empty house in the west of London. He'd said the door would be open, but the lights would have been cut off. He'd been right, too. I had to admit I'd been spooked as I'd followed his instructions—using the torch he'd given me to find my way upstairs and into the first room on the right, where, as he'd promised, I found a chair in the middle to sit on. I even wondered whether some crazy guy might leap out at me with a knife, or worse, but I kept telling myself that some clients liked the weird stuff, and Robbie had checked everything out. In the four years I'd been working for him, he'd looked after me and he'd never let me down. So I got on with the job and here I was.

Waiting for whatever was going to happen next.

And waiting.

It struck me that I had no idea how long I'd been waiting. Maybe the client wasn't going to show? That happened sometimes. Oh well, I'd chalk it up to experience, ring Robbie when I got out into the street and see if he had anything else for me tonight.

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With a small sigh, I began to reach down for the torch at my feet, and it was then that someone spoke.

“No, don’t move,” the voice said, and I froze.

Male, soft-spoken. Confident, too. I hadn’t had any idea there was someone else here, not really. I hadn’t seen him when I’d come in—he must have been in the shadows at the edge of the room. I thought the breathing had been my imagination. I’d been wrong.

Slowly, I returned to my sitting position.

“Hello,” I said into the blackness. “My name’s Red. I’m named for my hair, though it’s more golden than red. Robbie sent me.”

“I know who you are.”

I licked my lips. “What would you like me to do? I’m here to please you.”

A sound almost like laughter. “I’d like you to sit. And wait for me.”

“As you wish.” I tried to stare into the corner to my right where the voice came from, but I couldn’t make out his shape. No light at all came from the blacked-out window. I’d known from the outset that this job was going to be weird, but I hadn’t realised how weird.

What happened next was the strangest of all.

Something in the air shifted, and when I next heard his voice, he was standing right in front of me.

“Open your legs,” he said, “as wide as you can.”

I did so. He moved in closer, so he towered over me, between my legs. I breathed in deeply, catching the spicy smell of him. He reminded me of the sort of herbs my mother used to cook with, a long time ago. And limes, too. He smelt of limes. Another memory.

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“Do you like the way I smell, Red?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart beating faster at the way he’d guessed at my thoughts. “Yes, I like it very much.”

“Good. I spent a long time choosing it. I chose it for you.”

Questions crowded my tongue, questions it would, of course, be impossible to ask him. What he did next took them all away.

Slim fingers began to massage my skull. To my surprise, I groaned and my cock tightened in my jeans, straining against the zip. I thrust up toward the man. Our legs rubbed together. I shifted to keep the contact.

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given up hope of hearing his voice again. “Both in his words and in the silence of his thoughts. He said you were special, perfect for what I wanted to do with you. He said how much he enjoyed your body, touching your penis, entering your mouth and anus, and making you reach orgasm. He seemed to take a particular pleasure in that.”

“You talked about it?” I had no right to feel betrayed, of course I didn’t. I was Robbie’s property—he could talk about me to whomever he wanted to. Still, it felt private. And it was unusual to share so much with any client, especially a new one.

“Oh, yes,” the man replied. “I wanted him to tell me everything about your body, and he did.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to heal you.”

“But I’m clean. I’m not sick.”

“Hush,” he said, as if he was soothing a tired child. “There are more diseases in the world than merely physical ones. Can you not feel them inside you when I stroke you like this?”

His hands continued to work their magic on my scalp. From ranging over the whole surface of my hair, his fingers began to concentrate on one area alone—the right side of my head, toward the front. I gasped and my cock leapt once more in my jeans. Unable to help myself, I rubbed my crotch more powerfully against his leg. I was panting, desperate for him to touch me there.

“You see,” he crooned. “Your skull is divided into three essential parts. This area, on your right, is the seat of your lust and it consumes you.”

“Please, *please*,” I begged him, astonished to find my body already driving a path through to orgasm. And he only touched my hair. No other part of me. *How could he be doing this?* Any

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moment now, I was going to come, here where I sat and trembled, without removing one single article of clothing, without a shred of self-control.

“It’s all right, Red. Let it out. The power of it needs to be gone from you. For this, I am forbidden to touch you where you wish it, but you are permitted to touch yourself to help you on your journey. It is not ideal, but I will allow it. And there is so much of shadow in your soul.”

As he spoke, his hands upon me moved faster and faster. Needing no second bidding, I tore at my zip, my cock springing out, heat pulsating down the length of me. Only two strokes took me over the brink and my spunk shot upwards, landing, I imagined, on his body and splattering the chair and floor around us. I cried out as the pleasure of it broke me, something I tried never to do. Not even with Robbie. Not words, just a great shout and a falling gasp as I kept on coming. Over and over again, until there was nothing left inside me, and my fingers were thick with slime. A heavy salt smell hung in the air.

His hands stopped working my scalp, but he held my head, steadying me until the shaking stopped.

“I’m sorry.” I said. “Your clothes...I must have ruined them. Forgive me. I couldn’t help myself.”

“No matter. I accept it, Red. And consider yourself forgiven, deeply forgiven. You have done well tonight. Better even than I anticipated. You have given me everything you could and your lust is no longer your master.”

Then he let go of me and stepped backwards.

I was still unsure what this meant, if it meant anything, and what I should be doing. “Please? Can I pleasure you? There must be something I can do for you. Something you need.”

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He laughed. This time the sound of it made me smile in a way I hadn't smiled for too long a time. It was like cold water refreshing my face on a hot summer day.

"You have already given me everything I asked for," he said. "Your assignment is over for now, my friend. You have earned the money I have spent to hire you."

"But what..."

"Hush. I will leave you now. Behind you are tissues and a towel. Use them to clean yourself before you go. And thank you for your time, and for the beauty of your glorious hair."

I did not understand why he had not wanted to see me in the light if it was my hair that had brought him to me, but I made no comment on it. Each client was different. However, I couldn't help my question as I sensed him withdrawing from me. "Will I meet you again?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Do not doubt it."

* * *

"What did he do to you then?"

It was Sunday night, the day after my strange experience in the dark house. Robbie was lying on the bed, face up, as naked as the day he was born, but many times more beautiful. There was always something about the green of his eyes and the blackness of his hair that drew me. I stopped where I was kneeling between his legs, ready to start doing the things he liked me to do. I didn't know why he was asking the question now when he hadn't asked before. I sat back on my haunches and cupped his balls in my hand.

"You want to know that right now? Or later?"

He gasped when I touched him, but his eyes were shadowed.

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“No, tell me now. I can fuck you any time.”

I nodded. That much was true. From the very start of our partnership, I'd put myself entirely at his disposal. In every way. Frankly, yielding the responsibility for my own sexuality to someone I knew I could trust had been a relief. Up until then, I'd been battling with it, to little avail. The police had cautioned me for having sex in public toilets once, and I'd been up before the courts for soliciting twice. Even though there'd been many, many times they hadn't caught me when I was desperate for sex, prepared to take any chance I could to get it. Before I met Robbie, it had, in fact, all but overwhelmed me. I'd needed a firm hand, someone to control my life and my needs. I was more grateful to him than he'd ever know.

I told him what the client had done, leaving nothing out. He laughed when he heard about how I'd achieved orgasm.

“God, that must've shocked him. Honestly, Red, when you let go, you *really* let go. Your spunk goes everywhere.”

“Yes, well, I cleaned up as best I could, like he said. But it was strange. Not what I expected at all. And all that pseudo-spiritual stuff about forgiveness. That was odd as well, though I have to say he was right about one thing—I do feel different now.”

Robbie sat up on his elbows and began to massage my knee with his foot. “In what way different?”

I closed my eyes, partly to concentrate on that glorious sensation of his skin touching mine, partly better to answer him. “I don't know. I feel lighter, I suppose. As if whatever he was up to, he took something away from me.”

“Isn't that bad?”

“No. Not really. It's as if the thing he took away made room for something else. I felt as if something deeper inside me had room to

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stretch, fill the space.”

My pimp was silent for a moment, and I opened my eyes and looked at him.

He was smiling that particular smile he had.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, “but I know just what it is I’d like to stretch right now.”

Afterwards, while Robbie showered, I tried to make sense of what had just happened. If I’d known what the phrase meant at all, I’d have said it felt as if Robbie and I had made love. Not screwed, not fucked, not got each other off, but made love. I’d wanted him inside me, of course—I always did, at every hour of the day and night, no matter who else I was seeing to—but the incredible lust and need that always swept over me, driving out every other thought before it, driving me to orgasm, hadn’t been there.

Instead, I’d had time to delight in the feel of his warmth and hardness inside my arse, to take pleasure in touching him and being touched, kissing him, murmuring his name. When my orgasm came, it had been after his—a rare event, with him—and I’d felt every wave of pleasure, every delicious shake of my body, as if I was being handed a gift, rather than rushing to satisfy my hunger before I fainted.

I didn’t know what to make of it. And neither, I think, did Robbie.

He walked back in the room, towelling his hair dry. “That was different.”

“Yes, it was.”

He raised one eyebrow at me as he reached for his jeans, but made no further comment. He simply waited whilst I showered and dressed. Then together the two of us went through my appointments for the week. Most of it was the usual clients, with a

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couple of newbies in the mix. Robbie knew I liked that. He had other hookers—male and female—to run, even a posh escort business he didn't allow me anywhere near, and he aimed to swop things around where he could. He said it kept us sharp. Can't say I thought he was wrong either. And it suited me just fine. On the space in the book for the following Saturday, however, only a question mark was scrawled.

"What's this?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Hair Guy said he might want you again then, so I left the slot free. Just in case."

"But Saturday's my biggest earner day. I get how you might try out a weirdo once for a whole evening, if nobody gets hurt. But twice? With all that loss of cash?"

A stinging pain slashed across my cheek and the next thing I knew I was flat out on the floor, with Robbie on top of me, holding me down. "You questioning my decisions?"

He was half-joking, half not, the balance of it as changeable and as dangerous as the tide.

"No," I whispered, my heart beating fast. "I always do exactly what you tell me to do, in every way. You know that."

"And why do you do that, Red?"

"Because it's the only way I can survive."

He squeezed my wrists tight, digging in with his nails until I gasped. "Good. Then try not to forget it."

He let me go, swinging his body off me, but staying close. At my side. Slowly, I raised my hand and brushed one finger down his face. I wondered, not for the first time, which of his other whores he slept with, and whether he enjoyed them more than me. I'd never dared ask. Not because I didn't want to know, but because I didn't know how the answer might make me feel.

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Before I could stop myself, the other question, the one I'd been pondering on all night and most of today, slipped out of my mouth. "Why did you tell him about us, Robbie?"

He took my finger in his teeth, not hurting me, but holding me there. He ran his tongue across my nail before letting me go.

"Because he asked me when he rang," he said, "and I found I wanted to answer him. Something tells me he's not a man who understands the meaning of a refusal."

That much was certainly true.

* * *

All that week, something continued to feel different. It was as if I was seeing people more clearly and being able to communicate with them, physically, at a deeper level. My tips had never been so good. Robbie made no comment, though, as usual. He simply accepted the cash I handed over to him and gave me my usual percentage.

With all this, by the time I found myself sitting in that darkened room on Saturday night, I didn't know whether I was excited or apprehensive. Maybe both.

This time I didn't fidget, though. It never occurred to me that the mysterious stranger wouldn't be here. I sat on the chair, closed my eyes and waited. Somehow, time slipped away from me, and when he finally spoke into the silence, I didn't know how long it had been since I arrived.

"How have things been for you, Red?"

I smiled and stretched my arms upwards. It almost sounded like he was my boyfriend returning from holiday and asking how my week had gone. "Good. You?"

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“Ah, it doesn’t matter about me. The important person here is you. It’s always you. Remember that.”

Actually, I thought my job meant that the focus was always on the client, but I knew better than to argue the point. Even as he spoke, his voice moved around me so he delivered his final words from a position right in front of the chair. I felt my heart beat faster again at his closeness. Without a second thought, I opened my legs like before, and he stepped between them. The scent of him swept once more over my skin. My cock quivered, acknowledging his presence, but the urge for him to fuck me wasn’t overwhelming.

“Good, that’s good. You’re doing very well, my friend. You’re beginning to trust me. Thank you.”

A moment later, his hands were massaging my hair, caressing my scalp and drawing out a low appreciative moan that started deep in my throat. He chuckled. “Your capacity for physical enjoyment continues to surprise. You are indeed blessed.”

For a while, he was silent. When he spoke again, the question at first puzzled me. “Tell me, what did you find that was best for you in the week you have lived?”

“The sex,” I murmured after a few moments, entranced by the soft movement of his fingers. “I mean it’s always good, but this week it’s been...liberating.”

“In what way?”

I thought for a while, regulating my breathing to the rhythm of his hands. He didn’t seem to mind that I didn’t answer immediately. “It felt like I was giving them something. Something good. Not just getting what I needed. I felt connected. To their bodies. To them.”

“And they felt it also,” he whispered, as he moved his focus towards the back of my head. “Red, you have given more pleasure

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to your clients this week than you have ever given in a lifetime of offering your body. And in giving, you have also received. These good things have been pressed down and are running through your mind, through your blood and through your skin. I can feel it where you and I touch. But there are still shadows that lie beneath, here in this second area of your skull. So many and so deep. These, too, you must understand.”

The next moment, his hand gripped me, sending bright barbs of pain through my flesh. I cried out, tried to struggle, but he was too strong for me.

“No. You must not fight me. Trust me. Trust yourself. This part of your mind is the seat of your history. We need to see it all if you are ever to be whole.”

His voice, the madness of it, penetrated the wild keening of my thoughts. I was panting, hot tears threatening to spill over. I felt as if a knife were slicing into my head, over and over again, and through the gaps, memories and a haunting darkness flowed.

“Please, please,” I begged him, unable even to form the words that would make him stop.

He paid no heed, and the shafts of pain continued to punch into me. “Accept it. Let it come, Red. Let it come.”

One more wild moment of struggling, the impossible terror of it, and then I felt my mind and body yield. I gave myself to the pain he was visiting on me, let it plunge deep inside my bones and gut, my skin and blood. I stretched out my arms, as far sideways as they could go and opened my mouth as wide as I could get it, drawing in great gulps of air as the sweat poured down my face.

Then I was floating in a vast room where nothing dwelt. All was silence and the aloneness tore my limbs apart. The pain sang upwards, and I rocked in emptiness, not even sure who I was or if

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I'd ever existed. Then his hands rested upon my head, and the sum of all the things I had ever been—every act, every thought, every crime, every joy—lifted me upwards so I was no longer alone.

The strange fact was that it didn't frighten me. The past and all its secret roots usually lay in wait to make me stumble, and always when I least expected it. My mistakes, the times I'd been hurt, the times I'd hurt someone else and meant it. Acts, memories and people fused together in my mind and were now too hard to separate. I saw them all clearly and I found I was no longer afraid.

After a long time—or it seemed long to me—the stranger spoke.

“You see,” he said, “all that has gone before, the place of your history in your skull, is simply a foundation for what is happening now. It is neither good nor bad, but only what you allow it to be.”

As he spoke, a wave of exhaustion powered through me, and it was all I could do simply to nod. Unable to help myself, I slipped from the chair and onto the floor. My companion's arms held me, saving me from further injury and rocking me as I drifted away.

Just before I succumbed to sleep, his final words echoed inside me.

“You are accepted, Red, deeply accepted. Remember that.”

When I woke, I was alone and it was morning; somehow I could sense the freshness in the air that spoke of a new day beginning. Underneath my body, I found blankets and a pillow. I buried my face in the cotton folds and breathed in the scent of spices. He'd touched me somewhere other than my hair, I thought. He'd touched me.

* * *

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I didn't do anything else all the day that followed. Once at home, I simply lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling and out the window. There was nothing in the flat Robbie had allocated to me that reminded me of my past. No mementoes, no tokens. I'd put all that aside when I moved here. Robbie had helped me. He'd said the past meant what it said and it should stay there. I'd thought he was right, but now I wasn't so sure. Because yesterday, the past had risen to meet me and had not overwhelmed me with the secrets it held after all.

It was part of me. Both in rebelling against it and carrying it with me when I'd finally walked away, it was responsible for who I had become. However, I could not grasp what that might mean now.

I heard Robbie come in. It was raining outside and I heard the sounds of him shaking out his coat and a muttered curse. Usually, I would go and greet him, assess his mood whenever he came to me, but today, now, I didn't. Too much of my history was lapping like the sea around me. Maybe between us, too, though I couldn't tell. Whatever the reason was, I couldn't find the will to act in my customary fashion. Something had changed.

My bedroom door was open—I never shut it as I was happy for people to watch me sleeping or fucking or whatever. Not that Robbie had invited anyone to watch us recently or even join in—maybe not in the last year or so—though when we first met, he'd been keen. It struck me then that perhaps something had changed for him, too, and I'd never noticed it.

The sound of his footsteps thumped on the stairs and then I saw the shape of him in the doorway.

"You okay?"

He sounded concerned, enough for me to turn my head and

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look at him. His expression seemed less hard, something around the lines of the mouth and eyes, but I couldn't really pinpoint it.

"Yes," I said. "Tired, that's all. Yesterday was difficult."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. Well, yes, but nothing I couldn't handle, not in the end. It was strange. Like before, but more overwhelming. We didn't have sex or anything. I didn't get off either. There was pain, and I was frightened, then somehow my history, the past I've tried to run from, was all around me, and it was all right. I don't know how, but it was all right."

None of that made sense, of course. Even I could see that. I had no hope at all that Robbie would understand anything of what I'd tried so badly to say. I braced myself for his laughter or his questions, but instead he was silent.

Slowly, and keeping that green-eyed beautiful gaze all the while on me, he removed his shoes and socks and took off his shirt. Then he sat down on the bed and touched my arm.

"I'm sorry for the times I've hurt you," he said. "Lashed out when I shouldn't have. You're a good whore and a good man. I didn't need to do that."

I swallowed, felt the heaviness of his words in my throat, brushed my fingers over his in return. When I moved across on the bed to make room, he sighed and lay down beside me.

For a long, long while, we stayed in that position, hands lightly touching, saying nothing. And it was okay. It was all okay.

* * *

The third Saturday I met the stranger, I knew it would be the last time. My heart told me this. Not a part of myself I'd thought

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much about before, but it was the only way I could describe it. I longed to be with him, but then this fantastical series of meetings would be over, and I didn't want to think about that.

Funny how the week that followed lying next to Robbie on my bed, doing nothing but meaning everything, had been so full of—what was the word the stranger had spoken about?—acceptance. Yes, acceptance. Of myself, of Robbie and of those who came to me for physical pleasure and release. It felt as if when I touched them, I could touch the vibrations of their past as well, align that knowledge to the knowledge of my own history, then feel the links between us strengthen and grow.

I smiled to remember that.

And now, in the darkness and velvet promise of the old house, I opened my legs without even hearing his voice, trusting he was already here, waiting for me. At once, the air moved and he stepped inside the space I had created.

"I'm a prostitute," I said, my throat tight with the meaning of it and the words falling over themselves as I spoke them. "I'll always be a prostitute for as long as men want me. Please, I don't know whether you're some kind of missionary trying to save me, but I love what I do. I don't want to do anything else."

I found then that I couldn't speak.

The air shifted again, and when he answered, his voice was level with where I sat, no longer towering above me. "Funny how you never refer to yourself as an escort," he said, his tone puzzled, but gentle. "Many of your ilk do."

"I'm not an escort. I'm a prostitute. A whore, if you prefer. I don't mind. I'm not interested in going to parties, eating dinners, dancing. That stuff bores me. I just want to be close to my clients' bodies. I want them to fuck me. I want to make them come."

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"I know you do. It's part of who you are, Red, and above all things I do not wish to change that. You are a delight and a joy to me. We do not do the things we do together to change anything, but to make you more fully yourself. More fully alive. Do you understand now?"

I wasn't sure I did.

"I want to understand," I whispered. "Please, help me. I know I will not see you again after tonight."

As I spoke, tears crushed my words to silence. There were so many things I wanted to tell him. I wanted to beg him to let me go wherever he went, I wanted to tell him how I felt, ask how he felt, too. I could say none of it. Instead, I cried. He stood up once more, rested his hands on my head—the left side this time—and waited for me to finish.

Oh, of all the things I worshipped him for, the greatest of them all was this: how he let me be who I was, feel and think what I wanted to without interference. Nobody before or since, not even Robbie, had treated me with such honour. Though it was Robbie I loved.

After a while, I was calm again.

After another while, the stranger began to massage my hair. This time, his fingers gave me not pain, but a curious sensation of warmth. It felt as if golden coins were easing themselves through my skin and blood, melding together into a vast expanse of richness. When I blinked, the movement made colored sparks flash behind my eyelids. I began to laugh, although I didn't really know why.

"That's it," he said, his voice carrying an echo of the laughter I offered him. "Find your joy, Red, and live in it. It is your best and brightest gift. Even more beautiful than the glories of your hair."

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Because whatever happens, know that you are loved. Deeply loved.”

Something powerful surged up then from a place within that I’d never explored, and my laughter deepened and broadened until it filled not only myself, the stranger, and the room, but the whole of the street, the city, the world. The joy of it danced round the skies and sprang upwards to meet itself from the earth beneath. It was gold and the deepest red, the wildness of green and the brightest blue. It blinded me; it made me see. I could never describe it. And all the time, my laughter beat with the pulse of the air, the rhythm in his fingers. It tore aside the shadows of my life, and I stepped into sunlight.

Finally, the flood of it eased, whispering to me of promise and memory. I was myself again, but more so.

I smiled.

“You love me,” I said.

“Yes. I love you. We love each other. Has that not been clear to you all along?”

Without waiting for an answer, he took his hands away from my hair. The colour and warmth remained within.

As if I were as light and free as a child, the stranger leant over, put his arms around my back and under my legs and lifted me up from the chair. From instinct, I hugged his neck for safety and from need, feeling for the first time the heat of his skin against my fingers.

“You’re...you’re real,” I stammered, stupidly. “I was beginning to think you might not be.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Very real.”

I knew then what he would do, this last time we would ever meet.

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We spent a long time exploring each other there in the darkness, the rich murmur of laughter rising from one or the other of us in turn. I kissed and licked his neck, his shoulders, his chest. I stroked his balls and took his cock deep inside my mouth. He allowed me to take my fill of him. When he came, I swallowed him down with laughter and a sense of being present, right here, right now, for the first time.

When he made love to me, he was as gentle as somehow I'd known he would be. He knelt on the floor, lifted me up and lowered me slowly down onto himself, allowing me the time I needed to grow used to how he felt. His cock was long and slender in my flesh, penetrating my arse as if perfectly fitted to entering my body, and stretching me into the shape I was meant to be. He licked and kissed my face and neck, and I moaned anew at the warm delight of his tongue.

"Ah, Red, remember who you are. The lust, the history, the laughter," he said as his thrusting became more intense.

I wrapped my legs around him, becoming part of him, giving myself without holding anything back to the tides and demands of his body. Suddenly, we were there, together, in the place where everything was equal and everything was free. He gasped, cried out—words I could not catch—and then his warmth and wetness filled me up. I opened my mouth wide and laughed at the astonishment of it, just as my cock leapt against him and my spunk layered his chest. Almost as it had the first time we met. He laughed with me, smearing my juices over both our bodies. He smelt glorious. But even then the shadow of his leaving hung in the darkness between us, a pain I would have to bear.

"Yes," he said, still inside me. "You will have to bear it, but you are strong now. Enough for us both."

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“You...you give me such joy.”

“I know, and it is yours to keep.”

Carefully, he pulled himself from me and laid me down onto the carpet again.

“I wish I’d been able to see you,” I whispered. “You’re so beautiful. My hands and tongue tell me so.”

“You see me with your skin, and it is there that it counts for you. You will always have me, in your flesh.”

I lay spread-eagled, satiated beyond measure on the floor, feeling the buzz of carpet against my back and arse. My stomach and wilted cock were sticky with cum.

This was the end. I understood it. With all my strength, I treasured the final few moments he shared with me. A breath on my cheek and a light touch on my mouth, his lips to mine. I could feel his smile with every part of my body. When he spoke, I was ready.

“As I have told you and as I have done to you, remember. Beyond everything, I leave you yourself, Red, and contained within you all the life that is yours in abundance. Dwell in it.”

Then, as I knew he would, he walked out of the room.

* * *

It took me a while to gather myself together enough to leave the house. As I stumbled down the stairs, mind humming with confusion and—yes—delight, I realized that the gift I was taking with me was not sorrow, but joy. To my surprise, Robbie was waiting outside on the street. Under the lamplight, I could see the shimmer of his hair and the sudden spark of the cigarette in his mouth. When he saw me, he nodded and pulled the cigarette from

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his lips, crushing it under his boot.

"He left," he said before I could speak. "I watched him go. It looked...final. No more easy money there then."

"Yes. No more easy money."

Robbie reached out for my arm, drew me into his side. "You cold?"

"No. Just thoughtful, that's all."

"What happened?"

I told him. Everything we'd said and everything we'd done. He, more than anyone, had the right to know it. When I came to the part where the stranger made love to me and how I'd wanted, for a while, to be with him for always, even though it was impossible, Robbie gasped and gripped me a little tighter, but said nothing. After a while, I carried on, completing my story until there was nothing left I could tell him.

In the early morning city glow, everything around us seemed silent. Too early for people, too early for love perhaps, or hate. I took hold of Robbie's hand. He made a sudden movement, as if to protest, but I shook my head.

"Please," I whispered. "Everything I do and say and think is for you, and everything given to me, including love, is yours. Whatever has happened or will happen. You know it."

"Yes," he said. "I know it."

I kissed his mouth then, smiled with the well of laughter I carried within me now. He smiled back. I thought with pleasure of all the moments to come, with the men I serviced, with Robbie, and with everyone and everything I had yet to encounter.

Then we walked together out into the day.

ANNE BROOKE

Anne Brooke's fiction has been shortlisted for the Harry Bowling Novel Award, the Royal Literary Fund Awards, and the Asham Award for Women Writers. She has also twice been the winner of the DSJT Charitable Trust Open Poetry Competition. She loves reading dark and quirky crime novels and has a secret passion for bird watching and chocolate. Preferably at the same time. She once took a balloon flight in Egypt but spent most of the time screaming, and she hopes she never has to do it again.

To learn more about Anne and her writing, please visit her website at:

<http://www.annebrooke.com>

* * *

**Don't miss *The Hit List*
by Anne Brooke,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Jamie Chadwick is straight. Determinedly straight. Or so he keeps telling himself. His small conference business is doing okay and, even though he looks after his ailing father, he loves living in the countryside and life is good. Sort of. But the arrival of old college friend, David Fenchurch, who's just come out on the distinctly camp side of camp, together with Lucy Reid, his father's sexy new

physiotherapist, sets Jamie on a path he'd never dreamed of taking.

On top of all that, the unexpected return of long-lost family friend, Robert Trevelyan, himself openly gay, means that Jamie can no longer ignore the past he's kept hidden for six years. When Robert and David get together, Jamie's feelings begin to surface in surprising ways. Who, amongst the crowd of people set to blow his life apart, will make it onto his fantasy hit list? And in the midst of Jamie's own emotional battlefield, how can he keep things together at all?

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