



*Damn it, a man shouldn't always have to be afraid...*

Alec Goodchilde has everything a man could want—except the freedom to be himself. Once a year, he motors down to an exclusive yacht club on the Cornish coast and takes the summer off from the trap that is his life.

When his car breaks down, leaving him stranded on the beach, he's transfixed by the sight of a surfer dancing on the waves. The man is summer made flesh. Freedom wrapped up in one lithe package, dripping wet from the sea.

Once a year, Darren Stokes takes a break from his life of grinding overwork and appalling relatives, financing his holiday by picking up the first rich man to show an interest. This year, though, he's cautious—last summer's meal ticket turned out to be more pain than pleasure.

Even though Alec is so deep in the closet he doesn't even admit he's gay, Darren finds himself falling hard—until their idyllic night together is shattered by the blinding light of reality...

Warning: One explicit m/m sex scene and a great deal of swearing.

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# Shining in the Sun

*Alex Beecroft*

## Dedication

To my amazing daughters, Rose and Ailith, who put up with the absentmindedness and strange preoccupations of an author mother as if these things were normal.

# Chapter One

The queue of traffic crept, grumbling and glistening, across the high moors above Perranporth. Alec re-peeled his back from the cream leather seat of his vintage sports car and let the faint wind riffle through his damp shirt. Idling forward in first gear, he wound the knob of the radio past random bursts of static and took a great drag on the summer air, letting the smell of gorse, hot roads and the sea fill him to the brim. He was on his holidays, and even a traffic jam was a treat.

In the back seat of the car ahead, a family battle waged among the sandy buckets, skim boards, wetsuits and windbreaks. Seat belts off, the children fought over the ledge along the back window and the opportunity to make rude faces at Alec for a few seconds, before being dragged away by their siblings.

Alec smiled at each in turn, took a mint out of the tin at his side and went back to twiddling the dial, narrowing down the stations until he finally settled on the genteel rhythm of the Pasadena Roof Orchestra playing “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”. Even with this traffic, he would be at the marina soon, aboard the *Lady Jane*, free of the world for a whole month, and nothing could take the sweetness out of that.

In the meantime, the top was down, the car was a sleek joy in British Racing Green, and if he was running away from his life, he at least had the escape all planned out.

Tyres hissing on softening tarmac, the queue picked up a little speed. Alec eased down the accelerator. Sparrows chirped above. Distant wind turbines lazily turned, dazzling white against the deep blue sky. Then, with a sensation like that of a lift reaching the bottom of the shaft—an antigravity moment—the power sucked away beneath him. The Morgan shuddered and kicked. Alec pumped the accelerator madly, clinging to the wheel and shaking it. *Oh not now, please.* And, suddenly, mulishly as ever, the engine died.

Ahead of him, the queue continued moving slowly away. Behind him the first horn blared. He forced his clenched fingers off the steering wheel and looked wildly to either side, as if a lay-by might have sprung out of the grass in the past few seconds. Nothing. To the left the fields were bounded by a tangled green hedge he could have reached out and touched without leaving the seat. To the right only the narrow oncoming carriageway separated him from another hedge. Tiger lilies nodded in the verges, looking exotic and orange. The sea shimmered up ahead, and a salt-laced wind ambled over the moor. He could feel the combined irritation of every driver in the tailback building up like a head of steam under the lid of a saucepan. Cooking in their disapproval, he turned bright red, opened the door and scrambled shamefacedly out onto the road.

Pushing the car as tight to the wall as he could, he wrenched on the handbrake and slunk around to pull the red hazard triangle out of the boot. Straightening up, he caught the gaze of the driver of the Volvo

Estate behind him and gave a helpless shrug. The man—a thin-faced, middle-aged patriarch in aviator sunglasses—beckoned him over with a languid “been driving all day, no energy left to be angry” motion.

“I’m so sorry,” Alec said, attempting to forestall any attempt at reproach, but the man was smiling, as was his plump, sandy-haired wife. Their three children scarcely glanced at Alec, engrossed in a video on the DVD player perched on the middle girl’s lap.

“Lovely car,” said the Volvo driver, in a Yorkshire accent redolent of the pits, cobbled streets and crusty fresh-baked loaves.

“I wish it could be a bit more reliable, though. I can see I need to install hazard lights.”

“Aye well. We’ll tell ’em in the village you’re ’ere. Happen there’ll be a garage we can stop at.”

“That’s terribly kind of you. Thank you. That would be marvellous.”

To the departing strains of “Hakuna Matata”, Alec climbed back in, dug *Foucault’s Pendulum* from the footwell and pretended not to flinch as each overburdened car behind his crawled past, their drivers looking at him with disdain as they went. Embarrassment shimmered like a heat haze over his head as he tried to concentrate on the labyrinthine plot. It would be good to be in Italy right now, unravelling the secrets of the Templars, particularly as there seemed more likelihood of getting a nice lunch out of it.

He weighed the tin of mints in his hand, wondering how long he would have to ration them, when the absolute worst thing that could possibly happen, happened. Vivaldi’s “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” came throbbing out from the glove compartment and jabbed him in the ear like a pointed stick. He held the mobile phone timidly in front of him and groaned. Oh this was the *coup de grâce*.

“Mother...” he sighed.

“Alec, darling.” The faint musical clink as she turned her numerous bangles travelled through the stratosphere and landed on him like chains. “I thought you were looking very tired last night. Are you sure this holiday idea is wise? I don’t like to think of you in that tiny, poky boat in one of your states.”

“Mother...”

“It isn’t too late to arrange something else. I can phone Francois today and get him to hold us a suite of rooms. Think of it, how nice to have a family holiday for once. Dubai is beautiful this time of year, and I know Georgiana would jump at the chance to spend a few days with you. I may even be able to persuade your father to come—he mentioned only the other day that the markets were very slow at the moment. Think of it, all of us together. You should want to spend some time with your family.”

The bangles looped around his heart, around the arteries and veins, closing them off, squeezing. Squeezing the base of his throat. He tucked the phone into his chin and began to play with the GPS on the dashboard, to keep him distracted from the strangling sensations within.

“Mother, we have this argument every year. I need...” *to get out. Away from you all. Please, just leave me alone.* “I need an occasional break. Some peace and quiet on my own for a while.”

“Anyone would think you didn’t care about us.” Jangle, jangle went the bracelets. Alec imagined she was curled up on the sofa, stockinged toes tucked into the gap between the seats as she combed her hair for comfort, a little fluffy mohair mermaid on a boulder of leather.

“It isn’t that.” He groped for explanations but they eluded him. “I do love you all, very much, but...”

“Well then, there shouldn’t be a problem. I must say it looks very odd, your suggesting that Caroline should go to New York with her friends. I’m your mother, you can afford to ignore me, but you shouldn’t treat your fiancée so callously. Come to Dubai and bring her with you. I’d be delighted if she came too, you know how much I adore her. And I’m sure the poor girl wonders what you mean to do in Cornwall all month without her.”

“I told her before I left.” Alec fumbled the stylus of the GPS. It dropped between his feet, and he ground the heel of his right foot into the toes of his left to avoid swearing even under his breath. “I’ll sail. I’ll read books. Mother, it’s just that...”

“No, no, I know that tone of voice. Very well, then. If you don’t want to come to us, we can always bring the mountain to Mohammed, so to speak, and come to you.”

“What!” All the bonds inside him tightened. He abandoned his quest to roll the stylus towards him with his toes and sat struggling to breathe, his hands clenched in his lap. *This is my time. My time. My one and only month of life. Leave me alone.* Even in the privacy of his mind the litany sounded pathetic, childish and contemptible. “Mother, you just can’t...”

A recovery van with the legend *Perranporth Motors* came into sight around the corner of the high street and drove swiftly up the hill. Alec took a deep breath and then another, concentrating on unknitting his muscles one by one from the scalp down.

“Oh, I know we can’t stay on the yacht. I don’t suppose Caroline would want to. I certainly wouldn’t. But we can meet for dinner. Do lunch. Wouldn’t that be nice? It’s long past time we finalized the wedding, but both of you are always so busy. What could be better than...?”

“Mother, I have to go, I’m on the road. I’ll...” *hide in my room until you leave*, “...phone you later tonight, when I’ve arrived. We’ll talk about this.” He stabbed the red button, then turned the phone off completely and struggled with the impulse to hurl it under the wheels of the oncoming van.

Further humiliation ensued as the van held up the oncoming traffic in order to do a three-point turn on the narrow road and come to rest a couple of yards ahead of Alec’s car. There followed one of those excruciating roadside moments with which he had grown familiar over his years of owning this beautiful, but temperamental, vehicle. Two mechanics in blue coveralls lifted the bonnet and asked him questions he couldn’t answer about the mechanics within.

“I don’t know,” he said, to a question about the differential. The differential *what?* “I’m afraid I keep meaning to learn, but then I get it fixed, and it works, and I forget again.”



A real man, of course, would have been able to repair the thing himself, using a rubber band and a paper clip he kept for the purpose in his shoe. At the very least he would be able to give a detailed account of the previous breakdowns, and what the problems had been then. Alec's father kept the service history of his cars in a row of leather-bound logbooks on the bottom half of the first bookshelf in the library, but Alec had rebelled against this as being far too twee-like. "I haven't a clue, I'm afraid."

"Never mind then, mate." The younger of the two recovery men had the high-pitched voice of a woman. Closer examination revealed that, yes, she was indeed a recovery woman. Her shorn hair and piercings, as well as the shapeless, oversized coveralls and big boots had misguided him. *Clearly*, he thought despondently, *even some women make better men than me*. "We'll tow you down to the garage and see what's up with it there."

Towed into Perranporth town itself and into a side street behind a wetsuit warehouse, he was given a Styrofoam cup of too-strong tea as he signed papers in the tiny, dingy office. Mechanics gathered round the car with all the professional admiration of crows around roadkill.

"Come back in about two hours," said the manager. "We should know what we're dealing with by then. We don't get too many Morgan Roadsters in the shop, as you can imagine, so that may slow us up some. They have their foibles, these old things, but you can't help loving them."

"Yes." Alec smiled with faint relief, finally hearing something which proved he was not entirely among aliens. "That's it exactly. It has character."

One o'clock found him standing on Perranporth High Street, wondering where he could find a fortifying lunch. He deserved something nice, with a half bottle of decent wine, in an airy discreet sort of place where the waiters wouldn't intrude. Somewhere peaceful, where he could think things through and unpick the tangle of gold wire that seemed to have lodged in his chest.

But the high street proved short on exclusive restaurants. His white boating slacks and blue yacht-club blazer fitted into the crowd about as well as Captain Cook's men must have blended in with the South Sea Islanders. Skimpy swimwear, lobster-coloured sunburn and dappled fat seemed the uniform of the day.

The sense of being out of place chased him away from the cowrie-shell necklaces and the swarming fast-food eateries. Next to a surf shop on whose white plastered front hung a disturbing sculpture—it looked like a woman drowning, but he imagined it was meant to be a sea nymph—a notice claimed one could cut through to the beach. That seemed preferable to sitting behind the black glass of the Chinese takeaway, eating limp noodles amongst dead flies and shrieking kids. He could walk along the beach for a couple of hours instead. Maybe get an ice cream, the sea at his left hand, blessedly and cleanly empty. A moral support he despised himself for needing.

The small path led past tourist apartments festooned with drying towels, to a narrow bridge over a shallow stream, clear as glass. Pavement gave way to fine white sand, and Alec took off his blazer, shoes

and socks, rolled up his trousers and his shirtsleeves. At once, better camouflaged, he felt slightly more at ease.

The sand slid soft and insinuating between his toes. The path branched, a larger half going down along the stream, straight out onto the beach. But he followed the smaller track up into the tussocks of long grass where the land fought the sea in irregular green sand dunes.

Light shone crystal bright. More orange tiger lilies bent down to the ground, whistled over by the sea breeze. Above, seagulls wheeled, their wings silver against the cerulean sky. Wind hissed in the grass and, beneath its high note, came the deep forestlike sigh of the ocean as it spent its last breath on the shore. The sound of it restored his smile. He *could* always sail straight to France this evening, as soon as he arrived at his berth. Anchor at Caen, spend the summer on the coast of France instead, leaving no forwarding address.

The sun kneaded the tension out of his shoulders. It would be unforgivably rude, of course, to allow his mother and fiancée to sweat and fume in St. Ives while he sailed off to Bordeaux. But it was pretty damn rude of them to deny him the one thing he asked for himself all year long, and then to expect him to thank them for it. Perhaps a week or so spent vainly waiting for him to return would finally drive home to his family that he had needs too.

In this defiant frame of mind, when he came out from the dunes to find the great sweep of Perranporth Bay before him, he was in the mood to appreciate it. He stood, gazing down, and took in a deep breath that tasted like courage. To his left, the stream meandered over perpetually damp sand in puddles bright as platinum. There, a hoard of children were skimming over the water like swallows on brightly painted skim boards, teaching themselves the astonishing balance needed for surfing.

If he followed the stream out to sea, it lost itself among tumbled rocks. Steps, green with weed to a point high over his head, descended precariously from a street of fine Edwardian hotels. Attached to the harbour wall, a great arch of stone stood out into the water. Waves echoed beneath it, tempting him to roll his trousers farther up and wade out, to pass through it. It should open, surely—like the doorways in the books he'd read as a child—into another world.

The long grass, on the other hand, suggested he should lie down and listen to the ocean. He should watch the butterflies go spiralling over his nose, and the crickets hop, bright green and self-obsessed, from tussock to tussock around him, until he was altogether soaked in sunshine and silence.

But then his stomach rumbled.

Fortunately, to his right, a large shack-like building covered with sea-weathered timber was surrounded by a crowd crammed onto picnic tables, eating burgers and chips. The smell of grease and spilled beer almost took his appetite away, but his aimless feet led him inside, regardless. Once there it seemed inevitable to buy fish and chips, and dare the house white at the bar.

The fruit machine and stained carpet drove him back outside, drink in hand. He wrestled himself onto the end of an uncomfortable bench and waited for his food to arrive.

The wine was cold enough for condensation to mist the glass and trickle over his hot fingers, and the meal when it came was not inedible. There was a distinct taste of onion rings about the batter, but the fish was surprisingly good, tender and delicate. He drank the wine quickly enough so that the chill disguised the taste, and watched the Great British public enjoy themselves on the beach.

In a line of multicoloured encampments, bright plastic windbreaks fluttered with a sound like sails in the breeze, and bathers struggled into or out of their costumes, performing the dance of seven veils with a towel. Beyond the children being buried up to their necks in sand lay a damp, tawny-coloured expanse on which the energetic were playing beach volleyball or flying kites.

Behind that, the sea, turquoise where it washed the beach, deepened rapidly to indigo blue. In the shallow foam, more of the endless variety of people were paddling and trying not to jostle. Children and their parents waded out to catch the waves, then launched themselves belly down on their bodyboards onto the shore.

Further out, the aristocracy of the beach, the surfers, rode the waves like swans. Once he had begun to watch them, he could not wrench his eyes away. The sun had lowered now from the noon and shone behind their heads, making them sharp black silhouettes limned with light.

One man had edged his way to the very front of his board and stood with his arms outstretched like the Spirit of Ecstasy on the bonnet of a Rolls Royce.

Alec only noticed that he had stopped eating when the fish fell off his fork onto his knee. Even then he brushed it away without looking down, heart in his mouth. Surely that wasn't possible? Why didn't the board tip up, hit its rider in the head and dump him into the waves? He watched with awe and fear, his spirit straining out towards the man, willing everything to go well.

But the surfer had no need of Alec's help. He had tipped his head back, laughing with joy. Something about that silhouette caught at Alec's chest with a painful thrill. The curve of the man's arms against the shining sky was numinous. His body defined perfection, from his bare feet, braced slender legs, the arch of his spine, the turn of his throat, to the streaming scarf of his long hair in shadow. Alec had sat here expecting tawdry delights, not expecting to see a god come up from the sea. His heart leapt into his throat as if he was terrified.

Some other force lowered his fork onto his plate; he forgot where his hand was, caught up in the vision. The surfer, *his* surfer, had now, slowly and gracefully returned to the centre of his board and skimmed over the creaming froth at the edge of the sea. He was coming to earth! Lightly stepping into the foam, he pulled his board up, tucking it beneath his arm.

Alec held his breath, sure that the inhuman grace would not survive on land, sure the swan would come down from flight and reveal its ducklike feet. But no.

The spray of the sea had taken on a golden hue in the afternoon sunshine, and still the surfer was nothing more than a silhouette, tall and lean, faintly shining as the wetsuit reflected the sun. Squinting

against the glare, Alec made out a shaggy head of hair, the dark strokes of long clean limbs. God! The man even walked like a flame.

He came closer. Colour slid across the edges of his silhouette. He was walking out of the haze like an ascended being materializing out of light. *Don't...don't let him be...* Don't let him be what? What was Alec afraid of? That the man would turn out to be ugly? Or worse, that he would become ordinary, like a mirage disappearing into the sand at the very instant that he was about to plunge his blistered, parched mouth into the water?

A last moment before the eye could fully register the details and then his surfer took another step, walking out of legend and into the everyday light. It was the shaggy hair that caught Alec's attention first, strawberry blond as eighteen-carat gold, tangled in wind- and salt-soaked curls around an open, smiling bronzed face. Alec breathed in deep. *God! Oh God.* For here was summer and holidays and freedom embodied in one lithe package, still glistening a little from the sea and striding up the hill towards him like all his dreams come true.

Of course, the man was not coming to him. Of course he wasn't, he was going into the café to buy himself a drink or to meet his friends. Any moment now and he would walk away, without the faintest idea that he had shaken Alec's careful world apart. He would go inside and meet his equally svelte, bikini-clad girlfriend and all the sun would be gone from the summer. He must not be allowed. Once, just for once in his life, Alec had to grasp and hold the chance for happiness instead of cravenly watching it pass.

So close now, Alec could read the make on his wetsuit, see the individual grains of sand that dusted the black material, the drops of water trembling on the points of his hair. Now or never. But Alec couldn't, *couldn't*. Could he?

He stood up. "Stop!" His mouth dried out as the surfer's dark, dark green eyes looked into his, startled and curious. Suddenly he felt an absolute fool. He was inviting a good kicking, at least. But damn it, a man couldn't always be afraid.

"Don't go past. Please. Sit down and drink with me. If you go past... If you go past, I think I'll die."

## Chapter Two

Darren took a step back, snapped out of his post-wave high. What the...? He'd heard some chat-up lines in his time but that won points for being the most desperate. As he rocked back, leaning on his board, Krissy gave him a head toss of exasperation and led the others inside. He could hear them laughing all the way to the bar.

"Are you buying?" he asked, testing the water.

The guy had still not sat down, was leaning forward over his table, all Hugh Grant floppy hair, starched designer shirt and pleading. He gave a slight wince, as though he'd been all primed up to duck a punch, and fell over his lolling tongue to say, "Oh yes. Yes, of course. Anything."

"Champagne?"

"If you like." Not a flicker of calculation in the blue slate eyes, only a kind of awe, like someone witnessing the second coming of Christ. Darren tilted his head to one side to see if that would make the expression look more like lust. It didn't.

The air crackled about him with the intensity of that stare. What the fuck? Had he caught himself another weirdo? Did he have some kind of "normal blokes need not apply" invisible sign above his head?

"I'm not sure it's the sort of place where you can get champagne though." The stranger dropped his eyes, gave one of those sweet, self-deprecating smiles all the rich boys must get taught at finishing school. What the hell was a man like him doing, anyway, having to pull rough trade off the beach when surely all he had to do was crook a finger and every strapping lad in his Eton rugby team would be on their knees in gratitude in seconds?

*This is the point where you run away. Yeah?*

"No, it's not. I'll have a beer." Darren didn't trouble with "thanks". They both knew the sort of thank-you acceptable in this game.

"Really? You will?"

Darren watched the blush smoulder slowly from the man's white open collar to the roots of his glossy coffee-brown hair, gobsmacked and annoyed with himself for saying yes. Annoyed with the stranger too, for giving him another chance to say no. *C'mon now, get it out. "No, actually I won't..." and walk away. C'mon now, Darren, you promised yourself.*

On the other hand, the guy wasn't a bad-looking trick. In fact he was gorgeous, his face all well-bred angles and perfect skin. When he looked down, as he was now, the blush turned brown eyelashes to bronze. They made soft little glinting fans over film-star cheekbones, gave him an inward, dreaming look as if he were up on a billboard, contemplating the scent of Eternity (bottled by Calvin Klein). If he was a harmless

rich loony, it couldn't hurt to take his money and give him what he wanted, could it? How many mental cases like Max could there be in the world, anyway?

"Really I will, but you'll have to be quick or I'll change my mind."

"Don't go anywhere. Please. *Please.*"

As he watched the man walk away—back straighter than a fire poker, bare feet frisking across dirty red tiles—Darren grounded his board and sank onto the bench. He pushed his fingers into the drying tangles of his hair, and as he did so, Krissy, bottled water and choc-ice in hand, slithered out from the crowd and propped a knee beside him.

"So you told him to go fuck himself, didn't you?"

She unzipped and peeled her arms out of her wetsuit, letting the top droop like a deflated twin about her waist. Sand and water droplets gleamed on her dark skin and scattered in the neat cornrows of her hair like diamonds. She caught him hesitating and cuffed him on the side of the head. "Didn't you?"

He pulled at the Velcro at his throat, fierce summer sunshine and shame roasting him together. "It's only a beer."

"Oh for Christ's sake!"

"Krissy, I..." Darren rubbed a hand over the back of his neck to conceal his frown, scarcely conscious of hitching forward over the phantom throb of long-healed ribs. He was remembering his Nan lying broken at the bottom of the stairs, grubby hospital corridors, the old lady soldier-brave, talking away to the nurse, her skin gone blue as whey. Thinking of wheelchair lifts, replacement hips. Rehab for Kyle. Something to shut Dad up, if only for a second. "I need the money."

"Not this much." She placed her hand over his, a capable, almost motherly hand. "Not enough to risk another Max."

"Yes, this much." At the name his body tightened up, muscles locking solid. *Pavlov's dogs—I hear his name, I get ready to be hurt.*

"I can get you a job at the office. They're always looking for someone to do filing, make tea."

If Darren looked up, he could see the stranger at the bar, nervously counting out change. Apricot-coloured afternoon sunlight drenched the man's hair, made it look edible as treacle toffee. The white slacks had an old-fashioned charm, discreetly suggesting the curve of a nice arse without going so far as to flaunt it. Something about the posture, the poise of that carefully laundered back implied a private gym, an athletics coach or two, who made the man's body their personal work of art.

He had a nice smile. Diffident, almost frightened. His teeth were crooked and slightly stained.

Despair slammed into Darren like a wave, sucking him down, slamming him, limp and helpless, against the lightless rock and ooze of seabed. *I stack shelves all year long, Krissy. This is my month, my one month of freedom. You don't understand.* "I don't want a job."

"I can help you. I don't have much spare cash yet, but—"

And now she thought he had no pride either. "I don't sponge off my friends."

"It isn't like I don't owe you."

He shook his head, trying to work the perfectly clear explanation in his mind out into words. *I give them value for their money. I pay my way with the assets I've got. I don't need your charity. Or your guilt.* "But you don't. That was a present, right? Just forget it."

The stranger had stopped, arrested on the way back to the table by the sight of the two of them. Glasses and beer bottles shook in his fingers, chiming. He looked stabbed to the heart, and Darren knew he couldn't get up now and leave. It would be like kicking Bambi just after his mother's death.

Max hadn't trembled, hadn't looked at him like he was the driver of the chariot of the sun. Max had smiled that "I'm going to eat you up" smile and beckoned.

"Besides, it's only a drink," he said again. "I'm thirsty."

"Prat." Krissy shoved him hard in the head, leaving him with a roaring sensation in one ear, and opened her choc-ice. The top fell onto the bench beside him with a splat and lay there like the droppings of an enormous albatross. She made a sound of disgust and stalked away, throwing a glance spiked with poison at the trick, who returned her the flinch of a smile.

"Am I interrupting?" The man was like a ghost, soft voiced, all in white, such a lack of presence it was hard to remember he was there at all. Darren wondered, if you walked round him at the right angle, would he disappear altogether?

"Krissy," he said. "She's a good friend of mine. Surfing buddy." And then, because his instincts had been all wrong about Max too, "I've a bunch of friends here. We look out for each other."

"That's good." The man sat like a schoolboy, tucking himself neatly into the bench beside his upturned leather shoes and folded blazer. "All I seem to have is family, and they... But you don't want to hear about all that. I'm Alec, by the way."

"Ryan." Darren concentrated on pouring his beer.

Condensation on the glass. Beads of sweet water reflected the sky. The beer was the colour of four o'clock sunshine and tasted of hops, bracing and tannin-sharp. Even with his eyes closed he could feel Alec's gaze on his mouth, like the stroke of soft fur across his lips.

He put the glass down, opened his eyes. Alec recoiled, dropped his gaze to his shoes. He was, charmingly enough, drinking straight from the bottle, and it gave him a behind-the-bike-sheds air of schoolyard guilt, as though he'd been caught smoking by a teacher. "I don't know what to say," he confessed to the tabletop.

It was on the tip of Darren's tongue to reply, "You don't do this much, do you?" but that could be interpreted as disrespectful, and disrespect got you... Shit! He stiffened at the memory, rubbed one wrist and then the other.

“Are you all right?” Alec reached over, his cool fingers making stripes of sensation where they lay across Darren’s wrist. The skin was healed, but the pattern of hot, cold, hot sent a fizz of terror through him nevertheless.

“Not really. Shit, this was a bad idea.” He struggled out from the bench-and-table combo, grabbed his board. “Listen, mate, um, thanks for the drink but...”

Alec scrambled to his side, rangy as a greyhound, vibrating with regret and concern. “Maybe we could go for a walk?”

“What for?” Darren tried not to hug the fibreglass for comfort, ashamed of himself for being scared of this wet paper bag of a man but unable to stop.

“All these people make me nervous too.” The smile looked genuine enough. The look of awe warmed into something human, sympathetic, as Alec gave a small jerk of the head that might have stood in for a wry laugh. “I come here for the sea. Out there, where it’s clean.” He pointed at the great hump-backed glistening roll of the ocean.

Out, beyond where the toddlers shrieked, a lost balloon went sailing, red as poppies, into cloudless blue sky. An amber haze above the waves looked sweet as peach juice. Oh God, he could be there. He could be out there, on his own, nothing but him and the board, sun on his back and the moon tugging him forward on the crest of a wave. Flying, flying and never falling, at one with the sea.

“Yeah. Me too.” *So what d’you need me for? If we’d both rather be out there?* But he waited while Alec gathered up his shoes and socks, tie and blazer, something holding him in place—fellow feeling, or stupidity.

“I’ve never... I’ve never tried it. Surfboarding I mean. It must be wonderful.”

Darren laughed and looked up properly for the first time. Really looked at the man opposite him. Kind eyes. Indoor skin, already pink across the nose, a kind of high-stepping, gazelle-like grace. That faint sense that he wasn’t the only one terrified here. What the hell, it could hardly be *worse* than last year.

“You want to try? I can show you.”

Alec beamed as if he’d been offered the Holy Grail. This was no finishing-school smile. Too wide for his face, it stretched the skin of his cheeks into furrows, displaying the unexpected glint of a gold filling. “Oh yes please.”

“We’ll have to go shopping first. You can’t go in the water in that.” Even as he said it, the picture of Alec in dripping-wet white linen suggested itself, that modest drapery clinging to the curves and planes of him, gone half-transparent and tugging at prick and nipples. Dark nipples or pink? It was hard to tell with that mid-brown hair—could be either.

Darren walked away from the tables, up into the sparse grass of the first dune, stood looking down at the rainbow of holiday makers, the withdrawing water, wet sand like hammered silver above it. His hair tapped his cheek, stiffened with salt, and the nuclear reactor of the sun made his skin itch with heat beneath



the black armour of his wetsuit. Riding the moment, his fast-beating heart steadying, he breathed in the heat haze—*this could be okay*—and unzipped.

Alec's soft intake of breath faded into the hiss of the breeze, but he had on that look of religious ecstasy again. Darren made a strip show of peeling back the thick neoprene and watched to see if the expression would change. Alec's indigo eyes rounded, flicked shyly across the length of his torso, and fixed in desperation on his necklace of wooden beads. He found himself almost insulted. It deserved something more. A compliment. A touch. Hell, he'd settle for a leer. But if Alec wasn't going to react at all, what the hell was this about?

"I..." Alec took a half-step backwards, his body inclining away from Darren, his hands coming up to cover his nose and mouth. Running away, now Darren had just decided he might have a taste for this? How bloody typical.

But Alec's hands fell. "Yes. Yes. Let's...do that," he gasped in a flustered, breathless voice. The sound of it twisted the pit of Darren's stomach with desire.

Another long pause, until it became apparent to him that the man was frozen in place. Then Darren took him by the elbow, pulse hammering beneath his fingertips, and steered him gently along the path, out onto the high street. He tugged them both into the first clothing shop they came to, much more conscious among the crowds that Alec looked like a refugee from Ascot or *Brideshead Revisited*. It felt as if everyone was watching them, drawing the obvious conclusion.

"Here." Darren pulled out board shorts printed with white and green hibiscus flowers, thrust them into Alec's hands. The man stirred slowly from his paralysis, clutched them like a child's security blanket to his chest, while Darren added sandals and sunblock and wondered how he raised the question of his tab. Time to find out exactly how much he was worth.

"I like your..." Alec's glance flickered to his chest. He thought it stopped this time at the bright ring of flames tattooed around one nipple, but it was gone before he could be sure. "Necklace. I like your necklace."

"Get one? There's loads." He ran his hand through a display of trinkets, sharks' teeth and shells clattering. Behind the counter, Mrs. Blake pushed down her half-moon glasses to give him one of her looks over the top. Mr. Blake dumped an armful of children's shortie wetsuits on top of the rack and scowled. The old man's disgust made him feel better about the whole business, perversely enough.

He unlooped a string of black beads, tan cork and white shells, and draped it on top of the sandals. Cream skin and chocolate-covered caramel beads—if he was going to have to bite there later, he might as well make it look tasty. Besides, this was almost fun. Max would never have let him choose clothes, would never have worn a thing Darren didn't have to plead for and...and why was he even letting the bastard in his thoughts like this? Surely it was time to move on?

“D’you want a wetsuit? How long d’you wanna be out?” *It’s only an excuse, right? We go somewhere private, find a dune to lie behind and you ask for what you really want.*

Though it was hard to think of Alec stuttering out the words. “I don’t... I’m not...”

The poor lad clearly didn’t do decisions well. “We’ll come out when you’re cold then, yeah? Stick ’em on, and we’ll bung your own stuff in a bag.”

Darren leaned a shoulder against the lintel of the changing room, listening to the rustles behind the stripy curtain. Trousers fell with a clank of keys, and then the soft weightless descent of pants. “Alec?” He slid the whisper into the cubical while the man was naked.

“Yes...Ryan?”

Darren fought off a sudden feeling of seasickness. This was the part that made him feel bad, dirty. Not the sex but the trade-off. He wasn’t a whore, whatever his father said, but this... It felt close. “Can you help me with something?”

“What?”

“I owe the old girl for some stuff. You can’t lend me...?”

The concerned voice changed to blithe. “Oh, is that all? Yes, of course. Let me pay it for you. It’s no trouble.”

Darren tipped back his head to rest against the plywood and hugged his ribs. So he’d been right from the start. It *was* that kind of an arrangement. He didn’t know why it ached so much to find it confirmed.

## Chapter Three

“You want to watch him,” said Mrs. Blake at the till as Alec handed her his card. She scowled at Darren, and defiance prompted him to wind an arm around Alec’s back, prop his chin on the shoulder newly clad in an emerald tie-dye T-shirt. Alec’s blush welled through every pore and scorched his own cheek. “He’s only after one thing.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Alec said stiffly. His muscles tensed beneath Darren’s fingers, but he didn’t move away. That little frown must be saying “don’t interfere”, Darren thought with some relief as he watched the well-kept fingers key the pin number into the machine. 1371. He repeated it to himself as Mrs. Blake folded up Alec’s clothes and bagged them, putting the expensive leather shoes sole-up on top, glaring at him all the while.

“She’s not fond of you,” Alec remarked as they came out onto the sandy street and brushed past the queue at the kebab van.

“No,” Darren agreed. “Old witch. She’s happy enough to take my money—or yours. I won’t be going in there again. It’s not like she’s got the only clothes shop in Perranporth.” The arms of his wetsuit brushed him across the back of the calves. Seawater had dried into salt on his skin and he felt grubby and itchy. Mrs. Blake’s stare had a slowly penetrating quality. It carried on working even when she wasn’t there. “Listen, I’ll pay you back, yeah?”

Two children with ice cream cones brushed past Alec. He stepped into the gutter and gave a tight smile at the bumper-to-bumper traffic inching its way along the street, all glitter and fumes. “It’s really no problem.” He turned his head suddenly, transfixing Darren with an innocent, slate blue gaze. “Call it a tuition fee.”

The money was part of the deal but letting him treat it as something else was a kindness that twisted something inside him, around the level of his heart. “For the surfing? Yeah, that’s cool.”

He led Alec back the alternative route, past the sweet shop and the car park, and the place selling Fistral Bay Lifesaver jumpers at ten pounds a go. The crowd eddied around Alec in his new clothes as though he was one of their own. If there were stares still, it was now only out of admiration. The green of his T-shirt lightened his coffee-coloured hair to a soft bronze, and the thin, stretchy material clung to his torso, outlining defined muscles and the beautiful long line of spine, sweeping in an elegant S from lithe shoulders to that perky arse.

When he’d come out of the shop, he had walked like a man playing dress-up, but as he passed the skim-boarders, got his feet deep in the warm sand, all the tight contours of his body began to relax. The tensed shoulders dropped, the clipped, nervous stride lengthened.

“You look good like that.” Darren took the plastic bag out of Alec’s hand, hitched his board more comfortably onto his other hip, and offered what must have been his first smile of the date.

“I feel...” Alec looked down at himself, the baggy cropped trousers and bare feet, white ankles, white biceps. A shell glinted like pearl in the hollow of his throat. He looked up again with newborn innocence flavoured lightly with delight. “Different. Ridiculous. But...”

“More at home?”

Alec’s laugh was soft, apologetic, but his eyes shone. “Yes. Much.”

Out beyond the rock, Krissy, about the size of an ant, black against the burning water, was instantly recognizable by her style. She was a long way out, where the big waves formed over the reef, Tim and Jordan and Carl with her. He watched her pivot off the lip, a sparkle of spray like Christmas glitter against an almost white sky. Envyng her, he walked farther down the beach, damp sucking sand about his toes, to where cliff and rock pools met.

They left the sunbathing crowd behind with the dry white sand. Cliff shadow fell cool over his sunburnt face. A family with nets and buckets full of rock-pool fish studiously ignored him as he laid the board down on the margins of the sea. He looked up to find Alec, hands on hips, looking out at the horizon with a knowledgeable eye. This seemed a different Alec. Here, in near solitude, he appeared less fragile, less anxious. Solidity poured into him, as if he only became real when no one was watching.

“According to the flags this is not a good spot.”

He looked bigger too, more sure of himself. Darren reached out a hand to take Alec’s arm and pull him towards the board. But something about that new confidence made his nerve fail. He drew his hand away, uncertainly, without touching. Rubbing his fingers around his wrist to soothe remembered aches, he thought, *Shit. And this is where it all goes wrong.*

“I know. I reckoned you’d want to practice how to stand, how to get up *to* standing, here where no one’s watching. We’d not go in deep.”

“You must think I’m mad.”

*Well, yeah.* Darren took a step back, gauged the best angle to run. *But I kind of hoped you were harmless with it.* “Why?”

“Don’t go past, I think I’ll die’?” Alec’s laugh too had expanded, grown warm and wry. It sounded genuine, honest, likeable. But then, so had Max’s honey-coated charm. “Dear God. It was a bit...stalkerish, wasn’t it? I’m not like that.” He turned away from the sea as it retreated before them both in its long, gentle afternoon withdrawal. His smile was that sweet, closed-lipped affair, all warm eyes and head-tilt that Darren felt had to be trained in. Nothing that heart-stopping could have come about without years of practice, surely?

“I’m not *normally* like that,” Alec corrected himself. “It’s the combination—it’s you and the summer. They made me brave. For a moment, at least.”

The hairs stood up on Darren's arms, and the skin down his spine prickled, as it did when he felt the perfect wave build beneath him and knew it was now or never to catch it. Make the wrong move and it would drill him into the ocean bed, gone for good. *What the...?* "Yeah." He tried to swallow and couldn't quite manage it. "It does that to me too. The summer, I mean. You gotta ride the wave while it's there, because the rest of the year's gonna be shit no matter what."

Alec's mouth fell slightly, and if it was possible the intensity of his gaze picked up, blue laser bright. "Oh God, you too? It's as though this is the only month I'm alive. I spend all the rest of the year being what other people want me to be. I'm not normally like this, because this is really me." He took a step forward, hand out.

Darren's heart drummed against his throat. The crawling sensation up his back intensified as all over his body his skin decided it had to be awake for this. He could feel it building like static electricity, streaming off him into the sky. Clouds should be boiling right now. If he let that outstretched hand touch him, lightning would follow the circuit, arcing down through them both, coring him out and leaving him gutted and smouldering, changed beyond all recognition.

He flinched away, dodged round the back of the board. "Hell, yeah. We must've been separated at birth, 'cause I know exactly what you mean."

Alec took his hand back, looked at the palm and rubbed it slowly across the hollow of his hip. The moment passed, and in the undertow Darren cursed himself for missing it. Before last year he would have flung himself recklessly into that wave. Not any longer. "Come over here. Are you right-handed or left?"

The sun, low on the horizon, shone orange as a streetlamp as he positioned Alec's feet on the board. Alec's hand braced on his shoulder as he felt the cling of the wax and the tilt of the board beneath him, not at all balanced on its three stubby fins. "You have to...get..."

Darren pulled ankles farther apart, pushed down on corded thighs in lieu of explanations, manhandling Alec into position. The threat of lightning crackled in his finger ends, his face so close to Alec's thigh he could feel the heat of it, welcome now that the day's warmth was draining away. He ducked his head and pressed his cheek to the soft cotton shorts. Waited for the hand on his head, the low-voiced, anxious command to "suck me".

It didn't come. Alec wobbled and laughed, spread out his arms like a child pretending to fly, and for a long poised moment, muscles working beneath Darren's exploring fingers, he was balanced on the nose and a single fin. "Shit!" said Darren, tension wiped out of him by admiration. "You know you might just be okay."

After that performance he had no hesitation over getting the board in the water and Alec with it. He zipped his wetsuit closed once more as insulation against more than cold and pushed out to waist height. Swell tugged and nudged him. The lips of the waves curled over, all golden and crinkly as toffee paper.

Above, a dozen seagulls flamed like phoenixes in sunset's fire. Alec yelped and hopped. "Oh, oh God, you didn't tell me it was this cold."

Darren laughed, forgetting money and tricks and broken bones. He shoved Alec in the chest while he hopped and watched him go over in a flume of flying topaz spray. Alec emerged with his well-cut hair looking thick and slick as an otter's pelt, the new T-shirt clinging to cold-peaked nipples, and a sputtering laugh that hovered somewhere between play and accusation. He scrambled, streaming, to his feet and launched himself at Darren in a rugby tackle that took Darren's knees out from beneath him.

The sky streaked overhead—a brief blurred image of cliffs and cloth of gold—and the sea came up to meet him. Grey underwater light, lances of sunset glitter through the ripples, and that first breathtaking chill of his dry wetsuit soaking up water. Then he emerged to find Alec laughing in glee and—bless the man—holding on to the board so it wouldn't float away.

This laugh suited the new, private Alec, whose existence he'd only just begun to suspect—unaffected, unashamed. Darren liked it. Lunging back he got an armful of Alec's narrow waist, his head jammed up against Alec's breastbone. They went tumbling together, Alec's heartbeat racing beneath his ear like the throb and hiss of the sea. Arms about him and long entangling legs between his. They wrestled, slippery in the surf, tumbling and laughing, breathing in the gold and flames of the sunset.

He let Alec win, lay under him, surrendered, while the froth of ripples tickled up him and teased his hair. Moving his hands he placed them carefully on Alec's back. It seemed a moment for care, a moment suspended between two futures. The body above his was warm. Goose bumps stood out under his fingertips, but beneath the sea-chilled surface the core of Alec's heat welled out in a delicious tide over his belly and groin. Closing his eyes, he waited for the expected kiss. And waited again. Alec's interest wilted against his hip. Looking up, puzzled, Darren smiled. "You got me."

"But what am I to do with you now?" Alec rolled off, sat hugging his knees, the leash of the board still in one hand. He watched the waves as though they worried him.

"You really don't know?" Darren scrambled up onto his knees, leaned over and took the leash out of Alec's hand. The fingers opened reluctantly, as if Alec clung to more than a board. What was going on here?

Sun, deep red as a flaring ember, touched the sea. He expected to hear the thunderous hiss and boil as it quenched itself, but only a chill, wilderness-scented wind came from it. Sand hollowed beneath his knees. What *was* going on? Could it really be that Alec didn't know the score? They both had the same board but were trying to play different games?

"I think I've said before that I'm not really like this." The goose bumps Darren had read like Braille beneath his fingers now stood out visible on the smooth white skin of Alec's biceps, swept down the length of his arm. Silver-steel droplets of water splashed off the ends of his hair, darkening his T-shirt as fast as it

dried. Closer to the town a ghost of sunlight still toasted determined sunbathers, but here beneath the shaggy brown cliffs, night came early.

Rising, Darren pulled at Alec's arm, hauled him to his feet. "C'mon, it's getting too cold. How about we get some tea, and you can tell me what you're really like."

Back at the car park, he opened the van and slid the board inside, fished out a towel for Alec, who stood looking at it as though he didn't know what it was. Possibly he didn't. He'd be the big-white-monogrammed-fluffy-towel type. Not the type for a second-hand Star Wars beach towel, with the pile worn off, that hadn't been washed for a week.

Darren heard his phone ring, somewhere in the chaos of the back, and dived inside to fumble under duvet and mattress for the little flash of phone-charm in the dim.

Finding it, he thumbed it open, leaned back on the wall and watched the amusing performance of Alec struggling out of his wet gear in the tent of a towel he seemed reluctant to hold. Flashes of pale skin and muscle met his admiring gaze. "Yeah?"

"Is he gone?"

"Fuck, Krissy. No and I can't talk now."

"You're at the van?"

"Yeah."

"And he's there too?" Her voice scaled the octave. He peeled out of wet neoprene and flung it over the passenger seat.

"Yeah."

"Oh you loser. Now he knows what it looks like. Probably got the registration. He can follow you home, Darren. I thought we agreed..."

Darren sniffed the armpits of his cleanest shirt, hiding his face in a reflex action, even from her. "He's...he's *different*, Krissy. He's okay."

"You are *such* a loser. Get me his number, yeah? If you can't look after yourself, I'm going to call him, put the fear of God and lawyers into him."

"I don't need..."

"Please. Please, Darren." She was about to launch into some long impassioned account of how scared she'd been over the whole Max business. How insensitive of him it was not to realize that he had friends. How he'd cut her off last time, and look what happened. He could hear it all, rushing down the airwaves towards him. And yes, it was nice to have friends but...

"Sure, yeah, I'll do that," he said, just to make her stop.

"You will?"

He pulled the shirt on, wriggled out of his swimming trunks with the absurd feeling that if he displayed the goods on offer to their best effect, no one would be watching. It was...kind of nice to belong to himself again, to feel as if it was his choice whether to put out or not. "Promise."

Dinner was pie and chips, sitting up on the hill on the edge of the park where the massive, brushed-steel sundial still caught a glint of gold on its thrusting tip. The boulders in the flowerbeds might have been made for sitting on, warm as firebricks against the backs of the legs. The pair of them squeezed close together on one, dangled their feet into waves of deep blue lavender, the scent of it spilling drowsily out into the night air. Below, the beach lay almost fully exposed by low tide, turning by slow degrees from a sheet of gold to a sheet of silver. The arch and rock island stood dry, sinister against a fading sky, but farther out the waves still rolled, turquoise and sapphire, indigo and silver, limned with flickering diamond.

"So, tell me who you really are, then." Darren licked vinegar and crumbs of pastry from his fingers, and budged an inch or two closer so that he could feel the press of Alec's thigh and hip against his own. He toed off his flip-flops and let them fall into the flowers.

"Well." Alec ate with a wooden fork, like a maiden aunt. He smiled at Darren's feet. "I'm Alec. Er, that is, Ptolemy Alexander St. John-Goodchilde."

Darren choked on his beer. "No shit? That's something to run away from right there."

Alec's quiet blue gaze grazed the side of his jaw, the smile on his lips. "Indeed. And my sister is Georgiana Cleopatra."

"Oh, that's so not right."

"It was a measure of what they expect from us."

A soft, dry little remark. Darren might have laughed again, if he had not caught the frown—the same frown that had been leveled on Mrs. Blake. Two creases about the brow and a darkening of the eyes. It wasn't turned on him, but it made him falter nevertheless.

"My father built a business empire out of nothing more than obsession and cunning." Alec's lips compressed at the sides. "So naturally he wanted imperial heirs. I've been breathing business deals since I was six. I have stocks and shares in my blood." He drove the wooden fork deep into the flesh of a chip. "It's exactly as interesting as it sounds."

"You sound like you hate it."

"I don't *hate* it, exactly. I can do it. I'm competent enough, and"—the fork emerged out of the other side of the chip, tore the paper bag on Alec's knee—"I suppose the thing is that it's easier to do what they want than to fight about it. It's not so very horrible that it's worth defying my father and hurting my mother to make it stop."

"But you have to have a break, yeah? You have to have the summer off," Darren said to show that he understood perfectly. Stocks and shares sounded pretty dull to him, and he'd folded the lids down on one



too many microwave dinners on the factory assembly line to know exactly how it felt to be driven mad by the sameness of it all, the grinding, endless fucking tedium of work.

“Yes.” Alec’s frown washed away, the smile glimmered out once more. “I hand over to Gordon—that’s my second in command—and come down to the marina in St. Ives. I have a yacht there—the *Lady Jane*—and she’s like another world. The whole month is like another world, to tell the truth. A world I chose, instead of merely being born to.” His voice softened, puzzled and gentle. “I don’t normally tell people this. They don’t understand. But this month is all I have of myself. Everything else is for other people.”

“I always thought...” The first stars were being born, wobbly and pale in the band of sky above their heads. Down by the pub, the roar of voices and laughter mixed with the deep, catarrhy rumble of touring motorbikes. But here Alec sat on the boulder as white as a wave top, the shirt and slacks picking him out against the darkening night, quietly pouring out the secrets of his heart. Darren breathed in and let the breath go, relaxing into the stillness. Perhaps he might try a personal remark after all. “I always thought when you had money you could do anything you liked.”

Alec drew up one leg and laced his fingers about the knee. His head turned fully to focus on Darren’s face, those dark blue eyes the exact colour of the sky. “Did you?”

“Yeah.” Darren caught the gaze and smiled for no other reason but that he was content. He waved a chip in illustration of his point. “Me, if I had the money, I’d have my own shop here. A surf shop.”

“Hm.” Alec bit into his pie and looked surprised. He licked the overflow of curry sauce from his chin and fingers, managing to convey by body posture alone that he was terribly sorry, and he wasn’t normally so uncouth. “I wouldn’t say there was a lot of demand. You’d have three or four competitors in the same street.”

“They’re for kooks.” Darren tried to remember if he had ever sat like this with any of his summer sponsors, just talking, warm and peaceful and private together. *What am I to do with you*, Alec had said, as if he’d never done this before. More than that, as if he had no idea he was being offered companionship for pay. Could he really believe they were...what? Going out? Becoming friends?

The thought hurt like peeling a scab off a half-healed wound. “I mean,” he said, scrunching up his chip paper to cover any flinch, “I’d mend boards and kayaks, and I’d run a school—lot of kids coming through here who want to try at least, who’d love to sign on for a couple of days tuition. I’d sell proper gear—not the tourist tat—and in the winter I’d go to Tairapu and Bells Beach. Show the world we do have surfers in England after all. Maybe win some prize money and plough it back in to the shop.”

“That could work.” Alec finished his chips and looked around for a bin to put the paper in. “Though the present economic climate is not the best for starting out in a new business. Particularly one not based on providing a necessity.”

He might claim not to like his work, Darren thought, but it seemed the work suited him. Alec's eyes narrowed when he talked shop, his face and voice sharpened, making Darren wonder if "I'm competent" was some kind of modest upper-class understatement.

Alec hopped off the boulder onto the path, reached out a hand for Darren's wadded-up rubbish, and stuffed it with his own gingerly into the top of the nearest overflowing bin. It was the maddest thing to get choked up about, but Darren had to turn aside to swallow down the lump in his throat. He ran each bead of his necklace through his fingers from the carved pendant and back again before he could be confident he didn't look like he was about to cry.

Rich guys didn't do this kind of thing, didn't tidy up after you or listen to your mad ramblings about stuff that was never going to happen. They didn't spill out their souls and tell you that you were more real than the rest of their life. Rich guys bought you and the best you could hope for was that they'd give you back in good condition after they were finished.

"Surfing *is* a necessity." He crouched down to retrieve his shoes from the flowerbed. The blast of lavender in the face was like walking into one of those posh herb shops where you could buy a small bag of nettle leaves for a fiver. Today had been a bit like homeopathy, in fact. They'd hardly said a thing, hardly done more than walk together and paddle and eat chips. Nothing earthshaking. And yet that tiny dose of...whatever it was. Friendship? It had worked its way through his whole being, changing everything.

Maybe he should give up on the idea of tapping Alec for as much money as he could get and let this thing build at its own pace? Be ready to catch it or happy to let it go, both at once if he could?

"Like yachting is a necessity, yeah? You might not die without it, but you sure as shit wouldn't be alive."

Alec stuffed his hands into his pockets and gave a soft noiseless laugh through his nose, and Darren wondered if it was too late now to say "you've got a spot of..." and lean in to lick imaginary curry sauce from the corner of that neatly bow-shaped mouth.

"So," he said, thinking of Tall Trees Nightclub in Newquay, lancing yellow lights through purple smoke, music that made you fly till dawn, the beautiful people off their heads with the beat and the booze. In his all-white gear, Alec would flare under UV light like a well-bred angel, and damn if he didn't need something to unbutton him, let the hidden man out.

The month stretched before Darren, full of promise. Maybe Alec was in a whole different league from Max? Maybe he was the kind of bloke who could share the summer, instead of just paying for it? "What should we...?"

His phone buzzed in his back pocket, making his bum tingle. He flicked it out with a smile and the voice on the other end mulled all his hopes in three whining words. "I need money."

*Fuck you.* Tucking the phone between ear and shoulder he turned away from Alec's curious gaze and hissed, "Go fuck yourself, Kyle. You could try phoning some time you *don't*."

“Don’t jerk me around, dickhead.” Kyle’s voice spat like boiling water from a kettle, bursting out in jets of rage and fear. In the background of the call, a thrash metal band shouted something angry to the shredding steel of their guitars. The racketing clack of a train passing told Darren that his brother had gone to ground in the shed outside his squat, and that meant that Kyle had pissed someone off and been thrown out again.

“Like it’s any skin off your nose if your latest pansy boyfriend gets to pay a bit more for his tail tonight. You got money and I need it. Couple of thousand should cover it.”

Darren kicked at a stone in the path, breathing hard, trying not to throw the phone as far as he could over the edge of the path—watch it sail out, twinkle like a star before it smashed to smithereens on the harbour road. Satisfying as it might be, it wouldn’t help. “I’m not your personal...”

“Whore”? No? Could’ve fooled me. You still with that Max? Put me on to him, he’s an okay guy for a fucking shit-stabber. He’d pay me off like that.” The distant sound of fingers clicking, and Darren shook with a tidal wave of desire to stamp on them and break each bone individually under his heel.

“I said no, Kyle. Piss off and die.”

The distant radio clicked off. In the silence after, blinds rattled over the plastic shed window. “You don’t...” Kyle lowered his voice, whispering. Something landed on top of the microphone and slithered off with a scraping, hessian noise. “You don’t understand. They’re...”

A boom on the distant door. He could hear the shed tremble and groan, Kyle digging deeper into his pile of sacks, whimpering. His anger broke and frothed away into concern. “Hey...are you...?”

A rending, tearing sound. He grabbed the phone in both hands as if he could hold back what sounded like axes, chopping through the planks. Kyle’s breath hissed fast and panicky down the line. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, okay. I shouldn’t have said that stuff. You’re an okay guy, Darren. You’re my brother, yeah, you’re my family. My own flesh and blood. I know you won’t let me down. Listen, I *need* the money. I’ve got to say I can get it to them tomorrow. I didn’t mean to diss you, okay? It came out angry ’cause I’m fucking scared, Darren. Two thousand. It’s not much. *Please*. They’ll kill me!”

Darren tasted the vinegar of the chips, rancid as bile in his throat as he fought not to be sucked in again. What was he supposed to believe? It wouldn’t be the first time the little bastard had staged something like this to get one over on him. But it wouldn’t be the first time he’d been in trouble with a dealer either.

“They’re coming through the door, Darren!”

Ah, what was the point? What was the point of hoping for anything? Four weeks away from this kind of shit, was that too much to ask? And yet how could he listen to that whining desperation and say no? “Yeah fine. Listen, don’t worry. I’ll get it to you tomorrow. In the morning.”

## Chapter Four

Alec fished in his blazer pocket, leaving greasy streaks on his phone and wallet before bringing out his handkerchief and wiping the oily residue of chicken tikka pie away. Who came up with these things? Chicken tikka masala *pie*? He'd had to have it merely because it existed—the very thought of it made him want to laugh—and now the taste of it tangled with the red of sunset and Ryan's astonishing amber hair until he hoped he'd never be able to eat curry again without being warmed by the memory of both.

The night deepened and a cold breeze across his back made him shrug the blazer on, its satin lining chill against his skin for a moment before it warmed. He thought again of that moment when they had lain together in the shallows—flying surf and spray and laughter, his own astonishment that he was still capable of frolicking in the waves like a child. It had been innocent, hadn't it? It had, right up until Ryan yielded unexpectedly, and he found himself lying on top of the man, nose to nose, hip to hip, their panting breath synchronized, the sun and sea turning into honey and treacle around them, melding them together, all sticky sweet.

He looked over to where Ryan had retreated, found him making frustrated, aborted steps as if he was trying to run away, phone tucked under the curtain of shaggy hair. His brown T-shirt hung from the points of his shoulder blades—his shoulders so hunched that the bones stood out like wings. *Message from home.* Alec knew the feeling. *What I wouldn't give to say "piss off and die" to my own beloved mater sometimes.*

He smothered laughter again and leaned down to brush glinting grains of sand from between his toes. The flecks were tan and gold as the skin just below Ryan's jaw, the patch of skin with its gleaming stubble he had so nearly leaned down to capture between his teeth.

Holiday irresponsibility and carefree happiness wound together through the rush of lust. Oh, what if he had done it? What if he had touched his mouth to Ryan's neck and felt the heartbeat through his lips? What if he had let himself feel the warm, breathing resilience beneath him of a body as big as his own, solid and heavy and muscular as he was? What if he had rolled them both over and felt it on top of him, pushing him hard into the sand?

What would that make him then?

Anger drew Ryan's skin taut over the skull, made him look what he sounded like—aggressive, common. Vulgar and dangerous as a pit bull terrier. Alec brushed each speck of sand meticulously from his feet and pulled on his socks, bending forward over the erection that had troubled him on and off all day. What did that make him? Something too inconvenient. His mother had plans for him. Caroline had plans. And he...he dreaded to hurt either one of them.

He put on a black, shiny shoe and laced it carefully. His self-restraint seemed to have got stuck in his chest, like that damn asthma again, closing up his lungs. He could feel it all folding in together, an open book closing, a press being wound slowly down. Today would make a beautiful flower, orange as a Cornish lily. He could feel it crumple at the edges as the board came down on top of it, and the pressing screws tightened, flattening it, drying it out. At some point, ten years from now, he would turn the page back and look at the pressed day, carefully preserved and remembered. Dry and flat, the juice squeezed out. Brittle and perfect and dead.

Ryan's angry pacing brought him once more close to where Alec sat. He stopped, tucked the phone into his shorts, and turned his back, rubbing his fingers over his face. His shoulders lifted and lowered in a sigh. Alec forgot consequences again, stood up with his other shoe unlaced, off balance in a holiday flowerbed, and smoothed both hands soothingly over those knotted shoulders.

"Ah!" said Ryan, his jump and twitch caught in Alec's exploring fingers. He sniffed and gave a tiny shaky laugh that encouraged Alec to dig his fingertips in, dig in his thumbs and coax the hard muscles to relax once more.

Soft brown T-shirt and amber curls over his hands. The bunched shoulders sagged and he stepped closer, dragging his shoe over by the toe. Years of wondering and cautious glances—in the boating-club locker room at Cambridge, and earlier, at school in PE changing rooms and showers—and still he'd never touched another man like this. The slope of the shoulders was different from a woman's, heavier, bigger, beautiful. The texture was rougher, the muscles resisted his strength and he had no fear of pressing too hard, of accidentally causing harm.

He edged nearer until the closeness was an unbearable film of fire over his chest and groin, even his kneecaps tingling at the faint wash of body heat. So close and he could smell salt, beer and vinegar. The breeze flickered through red-gold hair, lashing his face, tickling his lips.

*What does he think of me? What...what are we doing?*

Ryan turned, looked at him, and his thoughts stopped as they had when the man had walked out of the sea. Green eyes, dark as holly, the look in them sliding away from his grasp. Fear? Guilt? A kind of anguish? It disappeared too fast for him to pin down, gave way to the wary caution of this morning. Seeing that expression again made him shiver, step away, certain that after all he had done something wrong. He *had* caused pain, even if it was not physical.

"Listen." Ryan's mouth turned almost comically down at the edges. "I wanna move the van up onto the hill here. Are you coming?"

"I..." Alec's breath caught at the thought of Ryan leaving. He couldn't go now, when they had lost something. He couldn't go while he was hurt. "Yes, of course."

Perranporth's streets heaved with people. A queue out of the pizza shop mingled in an unruly scrum with the queue for the kebab van. The theme tune of "Saturday Night Fever" spilled out over bell-bottomed drinkers at the Anchor's '70s theme night. Pounding drum and bass followed them up the high street as a blue BMW cruised past with all its windows down. With the easing of midday's bumper-to-bumper traffic, the crowds had begun to spill out onto the road. Energy blew in on the cool breeze and a feeling of carnival lifted Alec's steps once more until he was all but prancing with pride. *Look at me, everyone. Look at the man I'm walking beside.* How they all must envy him.

A similar thrill overcame him as he climbed into the passenger's seat, dislodging empty crisp packets and the deflated gritty form of the wetsuit. As they drove out of the centre of town, up to the half-empty car park on the breast of the hill, he reflected that it was very much like going to France after all. None of his family would find him here. The scuffed seat with its stuffing leaking out around his knees, the peeling plastic dashboard, they were—good Lord—they were the furthest he'd ever been from home in his life. And he loved it.

Ryan idled the van to a gentle stop on the edge of a ditch full of bulrushes. He hauled up the handbrake and sat, eyes closed, rubbing his wrists one by one, around and around as if he was turning a prayer wheel. Alec wriggled in his seat, the cracked case of a tape splitting further under his heel in the footwell. He lifted it up apologetically and revealed used gum wrappers wrapped around lumps of hardened chewed gum, a drift of sand and a coffee stain. A plastic bag, shoved into the pocket of the door, overflowed with empty biscuit and pot noodle packets. "Let me..." He scraped out the detritus beneath his feet, dumping it on top. They had passed a bin on the way in. "My mother says I..."

Ryan's closed eyes pinched more firmly shut and the well-cut oval of his lips all but disappeared. Alec put the bag down, guiltily. "What is it? Are you...?"

"Listen, I'm sorry, yeah?"

The events of the day passed like a yellow blur behind Alec's eyes as he wondered what he'd done. Something dreadful. Gingerly, he stretched a hand towards Ryan's shoulder, but the other man's resolute, angry sigh and suddenly open eyes made him draw it back unwanted.

Pain scuttled into a corner in Ryan's gaze. Alec caught only the flick of its tail before a hard amusement replaced it. Even Ryan's voice sounded harder, hollower, as he went on. "It is a bit of a tip, isn't it? But you don't have to do that. I'll rake it out when I get home."

"No, please, I like to." Alec bent his smile to the task of putting things right between them. Whatever Ryan had decided to do, it couldn't be that tragic, surely? Not with a scented summer night outside and...and a clean van. He watched with relief as his reassurance did its work. The braced line of Ryan's back softened, his lips reopened like a flower. They were pink as an English rose against his golden tan, and their quirk upwards made Alec want to cheer. He fumbled round in the litter instead, stuffing

everything in his bag, opening the door and slipping out into the night, feeling like an unlikely knight errant.

From the rise by the side of the bin, where the car-park attendant's hut stood shuttered, Alec looked down on the ribbon of road winding its way along the hill below, on the white painted Edwardian mansions that lined it at one side, and the sea at the other. Almost directly below, the sundial glinted silver and the ever-present wind bent over the beds of lavender, laying them flat against the ground. The smell gusted up the face of the hill like spray from a breaking wave.

Footfalls gently whispered across sandy soil and grass. He was turning when Ryan's arms slipped about him. His shoulder collided with the yellow skeletal fish on the front of Ryan's T-shirt, which gave him a quizzical look.

The kiss that must have been intended for the crown of his head landed on his temple. It might have been the clapper and he the bell, the way he rang with it. A sweet shock vibrated through every particle of him, echoed in his chest and trembled into silence at his finger ends.

"Ah!" he said, thought whitening out in sensation as Ryan shifted behind him to align himself better, chest to Alec's back. Alec's buttocks nestled into the curve of Ryan's groin. He could feel the press of his own thin linen slacks and Ryan's numerous pockets and zips, keys and change and the hot, smooth bulge of his swelling prick.

"Sokay," Ryan murmured into the nape of his neck, breath stirring the little hairs there, making him shiver all over. "You don't have to do that." His hands burrowed under the blazer's rough wool, stroking over Alec's stomach. Splaying out wide, they pulled Alec gently but inexorably back against him. There must be electricity in the palms of them, the fingertips poured out gentle sparks of need into each millimetre of skin over which they slid. Ryan touched his lips and then his tongue to the back of Alec's neck, and harbour path, sea and sundial swam into steel before him as his eyes unfocussed and slid shut. "You don't have to do anything."

*Oh God.* Alec's life unravelled under Ryan's hands. His own cock stiffened, needy and demanding, and Ryan's hand slid slowly down his belly to cup it, heat welling through his palm. The firm slow press filled Alec's backbone and belly with writhing prickly pleasure. Summer was here, beating on his back, boiling in his veins and balls.

All at once, he thought of his father, his share portfolio. Whist foursomes, wedding plans, his mother's tears and hopes for grandchildren rose up to blot out the sun. He thought he stiffened with realization, but instead found himself pushing into the hard encircling fingers.

"The car! Oh, God, I...oh...I never called back for the car. And they'll be..." A kiss just beneath his ear, the laving press of Ryan's tongue down the side of his neck and the words skittered away. He groped for them as if they could shield him from this—oh—this glory. "Shut. They'll be shut now."

"You can stay with me."

He thought his heart stopped, then started up again different, stronger, the wisps of his old life smoking away from it. He could do this, perhaps? The summer was his month, Ryan's month. They could both escape together. "I..."

How did you say it? *I've never done anything but look before. Can you be gay if you've only ever looked? Can you...? Am I...?*

He arched his back. His arse felt as hot and tight as his prick, wanting, needing to be touched. Ryan's spare hand undid the buttons of his shirt and slipped inside, found his nipple and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. The sweet hot lance of pleasure made his knees weaken, his mouth fill with the taste of copper.

A horn blared into the night, shocking as a face full of water. The windows of the great white motorhome with which they shared the car park wound down, and an elderly head with a military-looking moustache bristled at them. "Ahem! Do that somewhere private, can't you? We've got children in here."

As the window glided through its stately motorized rise, Alec caught the private "bloody queers" that followed, and a kind of firework of joy exploded beneath his breastbone. He should be embarrassed. He should be. But he was not.

Ryan gave him one last squeeze before flipping the man the finger in a friendly sort of way. "You okay?"

"I'm... Actually I'm amazing."

The laughter eased something tight in Ryan's face, made him look again as he had when they'd wrestled in the spray. It clicked with Alec suddenly that he must have been offering himself then too, and that was worrying. Why would he do that, so early on, long before either of them knew what the other was like?

Ryan took his hand and dragged him back towards the van. He fiddled with the key, unlatching the back doors with a metallic thud and crunch. Alec looked at the darkness within—suggestions of duvet cover crumpled on a foam mattress. The suspicion that Ryan might be forcing himself to do what he thought was expected of him, what he thought Alec wanted, made him splutter and die inside like the Morgan. "You don't have to do this, you know. Today has been the most wonderful day of my life. It's only that...I like being with you. I don't need anything more."

Ryan's back stiffened and stilled. His hand froze on the bolt of the door. His eyes pinched closed again, and Alec caught the movement of his free hand towards his wrist. He settled his own fingers there instead and felt the shock of the touch shudder through the other man like the trembling of a struck gong.

"I need to." Ryan looked down at the encircling fingers. His amber curls concealed his eyes. The ends of his mouth rose jerkily out of their emoticon downturn. "I need to...Alec."



Ryan peeled each finger away individually, then raised Alec's hand to his lips and kissed the palm, pressing his face into its curve and nuzzling. Absurdly touched, Alec pushed his other hand into Ryan's hair, rubbed soothing circles over his scalp.

The tangled hair smelled like the sea. Alec lowered his nose to it and breathed in deep. The gold of the afternoon, captured in the curls, flowed into him. Colours on the edge of his vision sharpened, and his lips tingled as the salt-stiffened elf-locks brushed against them.

Ryan licked the centre of his cradling hand and he yelped, the jolt of erotic lightning making him straighten up and bang his head on the top of the van. When Ryan laughed, he was glad he'd done it, accidental or not.

Letting himself be pushed into the cavelike dimness of the camper van's body, Alec squirmed onto the thin foam mattress inside, got his feet in and leaned forward to unlace his shoes. The van dipped beneath Ryan's weight as he too sat, pulled up his feet and swung the metal back door closed.

And then they were alone together in the dark.

Polyester sheets under both his supporting hands, Alec leaned against the plywood cupboard behind the driver's seat and swallowed hard. Was this the moment when Jekyll turned into Hyde? When all Ryan's pinched and sullen aggression—the foul language and the repressed violence he'd shown on the phone—got turned against Alec? What was he doing, putting himself in the power of a man he didn't know, like this? Was this the point at which he disappeared, his dead body turning up beneath the pier a month later, when the police had tracked his credit cards to wherever it was Ryan normally lived? Maybe his mother was right to think he should not be allowed out without a responsible adult to take care of him.

A rattling shake in the corner, and then he heard the tearing noise and gunpowder-sulphur smell of a match. He gasped a breath that plucked like hooks at his lungs, remembering that his inhaler was locked in the glove box of the car, inaccessible in Perranporth town. Then the match caught, and the flare of honey-gold light flickered over the cup of Ryan's hands, spilled out and up to gild his full lips and glow through hair the colour of the centre of the flame.

Ryan touched the match to a cheap candle, set upright on a saucer crusted with wax, and the doubled light threw soft umber shadows into the corners of the van, revealing a stack of dog-eared library books bookmarked with car-park tickets. Damp towels. Dirty washing in a bowl below the single gas ring. The dragon-neck shadow of a teapot on the curved white metal wall. A rolled-up duvet and a pillow warm beneath Alec's right knee.

A little smile graced Ryan's face now, and in the candlelight, he might have been a lost angel, luminous and resigned, trapped in a caravan on a council estate, in a faded T-shirt and flip-flops. The tug and fish-hook pull at Alec's chest eased and a new kind of fear filled its place. It was so silent he could still hear the sea. *Am I really going to do this? I have no idea whether this is a good idea or not. What if it's a terrible, terrible mistake?*

“Let me take those for you.” Ryan removed the shoes from where they’d been strategically balanced in Alec’s lap, laid them in the corner by the door where his wet shoes stood on a grate above a tray of sandy water. Ryan’s voice was brown and gold as the light, a woodwind baritone that seemed too deep, too resonant, to come from so lean a frame. It filled the cramped and squalid space with mystery, and Alec, vibrating in harmony, forgot doubts and thoughts together, remembered only that he was glad to be here.

“And your jacket.” Ryan crawled slowly over on hands and knees to Alec’s side. *Lionlike*, thought Alec, with that tawny hair loose on shoulders that flexed with muscle and movement. *I’m going to let him eat me up. I think I want him to.* The thought scalded up his face in a blush that made the itchy woollen collar of his blazer prickle intolerably against his neck. He angled his head to let Ryan sweep cool fingers beneath the material and ease the heavy garment so that it slid in a tide of rough warmth down his arms.

“You want a drink?” Ryan turned his back as he folded up the blazer carefully, stroking the nap of the pockets. Opening a cupboard, he stowed it inside, his arms and head disappearing for a moment behind the door. Then he stuffed one hand into his pocket and with the other brought out a bottle of gin to flourish. The inch of liquid in the bottom sloshed against the glass in protest.

“I don’t...” Now the blush had passed, Alec was conscious of night’s chill seeping through the thin metal walls. The candle flickered and he thought his breath filled the shade with steam. That might have been an illusion, but certainly his thin shirt did nothing to keep him warm. His nipples tightened with the cold. Ryan looked down at the outline through the fabric and licked his lips. Alec’s heartbeat jerked and sped. “Ah, actually...maybe I will.”

“It’s like living in a fridge.” Smiling, Ryan worked the button of his cargo pants out from the buttonhole. They slid slowly down, opening a gap of tanned stomach and muscle-ridged hips beneath the fraying edge of his T-shirt. The zip went *sssh* as it opened as if it too shared Alec’s breathless awe. “Get under the duvet there. Maybe you could take some stuff off too, yeah? Unpeeling socks is not my thing.”

“Oh God.” Alec leaned forward and tugged his socks off, and as he did so, the change in his trouser pocket jabbed him in the crease of the leg. He grabbed the duvet and flicked it out over the van floor. All at once, he was sitting in a bed. *Oh God.* Worn polycotton threatened to tear under his fingertips as he pulled the coverlet up under his chin. His hands trembled as he eased the leather of his belt through the buckle. His own knuckles, pressing against himself as he slid his zip down, had never felt so good.

The harsh material of the sheet below grazed against his unprotected legs, but that too felt fine, so he pulled off his boxers and wadded them into the pocket of the door, unbuttoned his shirt. The bed smelled of Ryan, of salt and sand and sweat, and some primitive instinct in him made him want to roll himself all over it and make it smell of him.

“Got no clean cups.” Ryan lifted the duvet and slid in beside him. He leaned over Alec to wedge the open gin bottle into the side pocket of the van, and that quick, almost impersonal, touch of belly and chest, trapped buttons between them, fleeting press of hot skin and fabric, made Alec jerk with shock, his breath

coming short. What if he had an attack? What if Ryan thought he was a prat? He wished he could say “be gentle with me”, but he knew it would sound like a joke.

Bare legs against his own, long, strong legs with crinkly hairs that pulled against his skin with delicious friction as Ryan sat up to tug his T-shirt over his head and fling it on top of the shoes. Golden light sleeked Ryan’s skin, made the ring of flames, tattooed about one pink nipple, seem to flicker and glow. Alec thought of gods and fire and mischief, of Loki the trickster. For Ryan’s dark green eyes were almost black in this indefinable, intimate gloom, the coal-black burning core from which the beauty of his body leapt up like a flame.

It was a strange place to have an epiphany, mostly nude and scared on the grubby floor of a camper van, but who said the divine could be imprisoned in a church? Who said it couldn’t be worshiped like this? With every particle of his trembling and yearning body, he longed for the god to touch and burn him up.

Ryan took back the gin, the press of his chest against Alec’s a deliberate slide now, like the drag of raw silk. “So we’ll do it like this, yeah?” He tipped the bottle up, the line of his long throat tempting Alec out of his paralysis. Alec’s trembling fingers alighted there, soft as snow, but felt no swallow. Instead, Ryan shifted in close, slid his hand into the hair at the back of Alec’s head. Stroking up until he cradled the skull, he drew Alec’s mouth to his.

Such a soft kiss! A sweet touch of smooth, juniper-flavoured lips. The merest brush of them and a syrup of fire poured down Alec’s backbone, made him close his eyes and arch up, all his doubts silenced. The kiss deepened. The candle flickered, topaz as the hair that swung forward to enclose Alec’s face. Ryan’s other arm snuggled itself about him, hugging him tight, naked skin to naked skin. He opened his mouth to gasp, pleasure penetrating every pore like summer sunshine, and as he did so, Ryan angled his head, fitted their lips more closely together and let the gin spill hot and intoxicating into Alec’s mouth.

Alec swallowed, and the warm rush of spirit reeled through his veins, told him he could do whatever he liked. So he eased his exploring fingers down Ryan’s lovely throat, across the hard ridge of collarbone, down again until he could plunge them into the ink flames. He let himself lean slowly back until he lay, surrendered, shirt splayed white about him. And maybe he looked like the virgin sacrifice he felt he was, because Ryan gave a soft *ah!* of laughter—like someone who couldn’t believe what he was seeing—and said, “Salright, Alec. It’s gonna be fine.”

“I don’t...I don’t know what to do. I’ve never...”

Ryan hooked a leg over Alec’s hips, sat down gently in his aching lap. Alec arched up, speared with shock and pleasure and guilt, choked on his own spit and coughed his way, undignified, to the end of the sentence. “Never done this with a man before.”

Ryan’s bollocks pressed against the base of his prick, and Alec let out a surprised breathy laugh at how soft the touch was, how unexpectedly tender. He opened his eyes and found Ryan had leaned forward,

planted a hand on either side of his chest. The new position knocked the heads of their cocks together in a heartbeat of tingling shocks, utterly forbidden, tormenting, nowhere near enough to satisfy.

“You don’t mean that.” Ryan’s expression, in the semidarkness, might have been arousal, might have been horror, wide eyed, his mouth fallen open, his breathing fast and shaky. “No way.”

Alec smiled until his cheeks ached, finding something joyous about his own complete ignorance. How funny all this was, and how wonderful. He swept his hands down Ryan’s chest, the skin so hot in the van’s nighttime chill, no different from a woman’s skin, but the flesh beneath it so resilient, so unyielding. “I’m sorry.”

Ryan’s belly was taut, and his lean hips outlined by an arrow of muscle that invited Alec to trail his fingers down, find the upper thigh and the sweet, smooth crease where leg met groin. Ryan’s balls drew away from his fingers, tightening.

Alec took a deep breath and palmed them, kneading, the way he liked to do to himself. He liked the feel, and the liberty to touch like this was a heady rush of power and pleasure. “I won’t be very good, I’m afraid.”

Ryan’s eyes seemed to blur as they darkened. He licked his lips and now his expression was unmistakable, drugged with desire. “Sokay. You don’t need to do anything. Just enjoy.”

He pulled away, the blast of cool air and the loss of contact making Alec shiver and wonder what he’d done wrong. But Ryan was only leaning over to the door pocket, pulling out condoms and a tube of strawberry-flavoured lube. There was a wry, kind humour about the way he handed one to Alec, gave him an encouraging smile. “You want to put it on me? Check out the goods before you buy?”

Ryan knelt, carefully, as though it was something he’d been taught to do, leaning back, his elbows together, his hands flat on the floor between his feet. The posture drew all the lines of his body into high relief, planes of gold and shadows of amber in the candlelight, his jutting prick completely exposed and undefended, surrendered to Alec’s desire.

“I...” Alec fumbled with the wrapper, leaned forward, fascinated and enchanted by the other man’s cock. He hadn’t been sure if he’d like this but oh, he did. Very much so. Reaching out he closed his hand around it, feeling the weight, the roll of foreskin over the head as he stroked. Like his but not, more slender, with a faint curve upwards, the end of it a couple of shades pinker than Ryan’s lips. Hot in his palm like...like nothing else in the world. He leaned closer in and kissed the head, the rim of it caught between his lips, the skin smoother than satin over a core of steel. Ryan caught his hair, pushed him away before he could slide his mouth over it, taste and feel the shape with his tongue.

“No.”

Alec looked up, imploringly. How unfair to go straight from the first realization you *had* a desire to being told it wasn’t allowed, no passing Go, no collecting 200 pounds. When was he ever going to get the chance again? What could it hurt, tasting? Just a little bit?

“You can suck me if you want, but not without a condom.”

It wouldn't be the same. Ryan was so beautiful, with his eyes so stunned and concerned, his body like a dancer's, and his cock leaping at the thought of Alec's mouth. Alec nuzzled closer, getting his nose into crinkly red-gold hair, breathing in a scent like salt and meat and cream. He swiped his tongue, catlike, up one puckering ball. No idea why he wanted to do this. He simply did, and for the moment that was all that counted. “But you're so perfect.”

Ryan took the condom from his hand and rolled it on, firmly. “You don't know where I've been. You don't know anything about me.”

“I trust you.”

Ryan shook his head and kissed Alec, running his tongue along the points of Alec's teeth, touching the tip of it to Alec's tongue and withdrawing in a teasing flicker as his hands independently rolled the second condom onto Alec's dick. “Yeah,” he said, drawing away, “far too much. I am negative but...”

Belatedly the thought of HIV occurred to Alec with a lurch of sickened surprise. He hadn't associated it with himself at all—it was something that happened to other people, an outcome of a lifestyle he didn't share. It hadn't occurred to him that he was taking his first tentative steps into that world right now, and he should do nothing to undermine Ryan's habits of care.

“Things'll maybe look different in the morning.” Ryan pulled the duvet up beneath his chin. The candle flared and guttered, bright light drawing thin lines of pain like brackets in his cheeks. “You'll be glad I said it then.”

“I'm glad now.” Alec lay back down, and with a hand about the back of Ryan's neck, drew him close to lie beside himself. He touched the creases at the side of Ryan's mouth with his tongue, smoothing them out, kissing them away with light feathered kisses that made Ryan laugh, and then growl and fight to catch his lips. Millimetre by millimetre, Alec aligned their mouths, fascinated by the scritch of stubble that made his lips tingle and burn, sensitive to the lightest touch. When Ryan grew tired of his teasing, cradled the back of his head and made him kiss properly, their lips hard against one another, tongues deep, the authority of the touch made Alec burn with need. It was so different, so good, to be with a partner who took the lead without thinking, who would *make him* do what he wanted to do, who would look after him for a change, rather than expecting it to be the other way around.

Ryan rolled on top, hands around Alec's wrists, weight pinning Alec to the mattress. He was hard everywhere and heavy, only enough yield between them that their cocks did not hurt where they pressed together. He caught Alec's earlobe between his teeth, closed them gently and tugged.

“What d'you want, Alec?” Blunt bites down the side of Alec's neck, making him tingle all over and squirm beneath the imprisoning hips, pushing up against the smooth belly and the hard shaft and the hot, hot head of Ryan's prick. “You tell me what you want and I'll give it to you.”

Ryan moved down. Harder bites over Alec's shoulders, deep, sucking kisses over his nipples.

“Oh!” Alec’s body pulled tight at the touch like a rubber band. “Oh,” he said, incredulous. *No one’s ever kissed my nipples before. Dear God what I’ve been missing.*

“No questions.” Ryan exchanged a hand for his mouth, rolling, pinching—soft at first, and when Alec threw his head back, offered his throat, harder. The pain and pleasure mixed like darts of steel tipped with heroin, and Alec groaned out loud, writhing. “Anything you want.”

“I don’t...” At some point he had closed his eyes. He forced them open now. The candle was dimming, but lights in the houses on the other side of the car park shone faint through the windscreen, picked out the sweat on Ryan’s face, made him shine, silver-gilt. His eyes were all pupil, dark and hot with desire, and in the depths of them still that edge of something like fear—a tiny vulnerability that belied his predatory crouch.

Alec breathed in, a long, smooth gasp of awe and delight. Once more the moment turned numinous around him. No wonder the ancient heathens had worshipped their gods with sex. Something about Ryan’s face, his beauty, his strength, his...terror touched Alec in a part of his soul he had not known existed before. The force of that “anything” hit him and echoed in all the hollow places inside. He found himself reflecting it, in a communion of surrender and trust that petrified and elated him. “I want you...to...” Oh, even the vulgarity of the word was like something ancient, animal, instinctive. Something he had lost in his life until this moment.

“Fuck me.”

Ryan’s voice was soft, smoky, his small smile tender. “You’re supposed to ask for something difficult.”

“It’s all I want.”

Ryan’s face drew close to his, and the word was warm as steam on Alec’s mouth as Ryan’s lips shaped it over his own. “Okay.”

Lube was pouring silver in the tricky twilight light. Ryan drizzled it, syrup-like, over Alec’s whole body, lay down and rubbed himself in it with a luscious, silky slide that made Alec feel as if every inch of his skin was as sensitive as the head of his prick, as if he could feel Ryan everywhere at once. He thrust up hard, hungry and impatient to feel that oily tide of bliss over and over again.

Ryan laughed. “Easy, tiger.” He grabbed the pillow gingerly between greased thumb and forefinger and dragged it under Alec’s hips. Alec raised his bum in the air with a flutter of nerves and anxiety and strange neon thrill in the pit of his stomach. There was still time... Ah! More lube like a clinging brush of velvet down the cleft of his arse, and Ryan’s fingertip gently circling, sliding, no more pressure than a kiss. There was still time for him to say “stop”. To get up. To go home.

“Mmmnh,” he said. But—God—who’d have thought that would feel so good? Would get so deep inside him and wake up the small of his back and the pit of his stomach and tingle all the way up to his

bruised nipples and make them *crave*. He pushed up and the finger slid inside, and all his thoughts imploded, leaving only a hollow that wanted to be filled.

Ryan's smile had become wicked, sharp and focussed. He turned his hand and Alec's spine curved with pleasure. Heat boiled up and swept in a prickly, sweaty tide, from his balls to his fingertips, aching hunger roiling inside his lungs, in the marrow of his bones, deep and dull and ravenous in every particle of his body. "Oh. Oh *please*."

"You've been wanting this a long time." An accidental scrape of fingernails as Ryan pulled his hand away, nothing more than a white-silver burst of sensation in the dark black and crimson of Alec's need.

"Yes," he gasped, not sure what he was agreeing to. Just yes. Yes to all of it. His cock throbbed and the stretch of his arsehole burned, as Ryan entered him, with a thin, tight thrill of pain and rapture. "Oh yes."

Ryan's slick hand slid like a wet mouth over the head of his cock, and he bucked up, yelling, as the sharp stab of ecstasy joined the darker, deeper, more velvety bliss of being fucked in the arse. Ryan laughed again, slid in all the way and held there, unmoving, unmerciful, as Alec begged him for more.

"You know." He leaned down and sucked the pulse point in Alec's neck into a round rough bruise. "I really like you, Alec."

"Please don't talk. Please just do it."

Not such a happy laugh this time, but Ryan pulled away, thrust back harder, and it was like going under beneath the power of a wave of bliss, tumbled helplessly in the spume of delight. They became the sea and, later on, the sky as well.

## Chapter Five

Moonlight above turned the windscreen into deep grey satin. Inside, the candle had long guttered out. Alec lay on his back and watched light the colour of paled lead slide across the night. It caught the smudge where his heel had rubbed rhythmically against the inside of the window, and turned it to silver. He shook with a silent laughter of joy at the sight, imagining the man in the motor home watching it through his net curtains. He'd been loud and appreciative, and the poor man could scarcely have helped overhearing it.

It was so quiet now he could hear the *hoo* of a distant owl, and the long soothing *ssssssh* of the sea at the base of the cliff. Ryan slept beside him, on his stomach, one hand tucked childlike under his cheek, his mouth half-open and his breath a peaceful sigh in the same rhythm as the ocean. His curled-up knees touched Alec's hip and his other arm was flung across Alec's chest, heavy and warm, the hand curving around the rise and fall of Alec's ribs.

Alec didn't dare move. Didn't want to move, sodden and limp and glowing as he was. He wondered how the deep invasive soreness of their lovemaking could fill him with such calm. Such peace!

Inside, as well as out, his endless treadmill seemed to have slowed to a stop, the clamour of reflexive apology and self-justification, the careful monitoring of thought and deed and hope, all switched off and still. He poked gingerly at the edges of his soul and it seemed for a moment the white enclosing walls would break, tumble him out, helpless and ugly as a fledgling, into the colour and fresh breeze of life.

Ryan rolled over onto his back, began to breathe with a small, comfortable snore. Alec's hip and chest immediately protested the loss of contact. Shuffling onto his side, he draped his own arm over Ryan's stomach, felt Ryan sigh and settle again. Ryan's face was a pencil sketch against a charcoal background, soft with satisfaction and slumber. Watching it, Alec too fell asleep.

When he woke again, the inside of the van was already baking in the morning sun, and Ryan, fully dressed, sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed, Alec's mobile phone in his hands, thumbs on the keys.

Long appreciation of that lanky body and a swelling chorus of memories took precedence over the need to ask "...what?"

Ryan dropped the phone on the duvet, looked up with a constrained smile. "Thought you wouldn't mind me knowing your number." He turned his back to fiddle with the gas ring, where a red tin kettle hissed itself towards a whistle. "I promised Krissy I'd... Nah, well...that's a long story. D'you wanna cup of tea?"

The morning after. His god of fire turned back into a stranger who proffered tea. It was almost too much to process, but Alec dragged his pleasantly aching body into a sitting position and tried. "Tea?" *My number. He wants my number!*



“Yeah, you know, with milk and that.”

“I...yes, I... Please.”

“Thought you’d be over that.” Ryan filled two mugs with water and added milk powder from a jar. “The stuttering, like.” He handed Alec a chipped mug where a tea bag floated in thin white liquid amid specks of powder.

“Oh no.” Alec laughed, giving up on the attempt to keep the duvet cover pulled up to his throat and taking the mug by the rim. “That’s me, I’m afraid. Better get used to it.”

He wondered if this was how it was done, between men? Was that enough to tell Ryan that Alec’s world had swung into orbit around him, that Alec needed him like the earth needed the sun?

“Heh, yeah.” Ryan ducked his head to open a cupboard and remove a flimsy wire contraption and a half a loaf of supermarket-value white bread. Putting a slice into the wire cage, he balanced it on top of the gas ring. Alec’s heart did a strange flip-flop of joy. Tea and toast. How domestic. How reassuringly, wonderfully mundane.

“So can I...would it be all right if I had yours?”

Ryan’s smile was tight with strain. He bent his head over the phone and his long hair curtained him, shadowing the expression in his eyes. Alec could sympathize with the sullenness in his voice. What business did the sun have, anyway, rising so early, forcing them out into another day? “Sure. I’ll add it now.”

Once Alec was dressed, they flung open the doors of the van and ate molten margarine spread on pallid toast, with their legs dangling out into the pale gold and blue of the morning. Cars began to roll into the car park and decant early-rising tourists. Alec put off looking at his watch for as long as he could. Perhaps if he didn’t acknowledge time, it would stop passing. It was Ryan who said, in the end, “The garage will be open. Maybe you should go get your car?”

Obediently Alec picked up a shoe, laced it on, dipped his cheek to rest against that drawn-up knee, and fought panic. No. He couldn’t do this. Everything had been so perfect, so mythical, almost. He’d found Avalon, the Blessed Isles, and if he once set foot in the mortal realm again it would all turn into dreams and ashes, leave him to wander bitter reality with nothing left but regret.

And now he was being an idiot. He had to go. *Come on. Even Ryan thinks you’re being pathetic.* But he couldn’t. He couldn’t let go—it would all be snatched away the moment he did. “I don’t want to leave you. Dear God. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’m not like this.”

“Yeah, we’ve had that talk.” Ryan’s hand was gentler than his words, settling on the nape of his neck, unmoving. Just there, big and warm and comforting. “But look, you’ve got to go sometime. You got my number. When you’re out of the shop and you’ve got your car, call me.”

He must be breaking every dating rule imaginable and then some, making himself look ridiculous, but he didn't care. Ryan had already weathered him at his most bizarre and needy without a flinch. Maybe he would do so again. "Come with me?"

There was such pain in Ryan's laugh that Alec flinched, grabbed the other shoe and concentrated on the bow, trying to demonstrate that no, really, if it bothered Ryan so much to be asked he hadn't meant it, honest.

"Shit." Ryan shoved the door with both hands. It recoiled, bouncing on its squeaky hinges into his forearms. He did it again. "What are you, a lost puppy? Go home, okay? I've got stuff to do. You can't just turn up and expect my life to belong to you, like snapping your fingers. I'm not your *slave*, okay?"

"That's not...!" Alec grabbed his blazer, vaulted out of the van, holding it in front of him like a shield, while all the peace of the night shattered into shrapnel around him. Why did he do this? Why did he get these things wrong all the time? "It's not... Ryan, that's not what I meant."

At the sound of his name, Ryan started. His eyes widened as they fixed on Alec's face and all the anger went out of them. He stilled the creaking door, crumpled back to sit with his head in his hands.

Alec dropped the blazer onto the grass, sat next to him and wound both arms around him. There was a moment of stiff resistance and then Ryan turned, laid his shaggy head down on Alec's shoulder, and huffed a bitter laugh.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I know I'm being stupid. I don't expect you to do anything you don't want to, it's only that..."

Ryan pushed himself away, drew his thumbs across Alec's cheeks as if checking for tears. He sighed. "Nah, I'm the one who's sorry. You get your car. I've got to go meet m'brother. But phone me this evening, yeah? Maybe we'll go out, have a drink. It's not the end of the world."

Have a drink? Alec thought about taking Ryan to the yacht-club mess, where all his many sailing acquaintances would be drinking Dom Pérignon before they moved on to the hard stuff. The idea of him walking in amongst the lounge suits and cocktail dresses in T-shirt and Hawaiian shorts, with Ryan on his arm, was terrifyingly attractive. Maybe a day apart was a good idea after all, would let him come to his senses, help him to stop feeling as if he simply fallen down the rabbit hole into an altogether more magical world than his own.

The thought niggled him as he walked out of the car park, as he turned at the gate to wave. Ryan waved back, looking drawn, his face very white beneath its tan, his smile pasted on. *Going to meet his brother*, Alec thought, rubbing a thumb nervously over the phone in his pocket. Was it his brother to whom he'd said "piss off and die" yesterday? If so, no wonder he looked unhappy. Alec himself could feel the golden chains winding themselves tighter around his throat the farther down the road he walked.

Cars poured themselves past him in first gear, edging up the steep hill. He thought the drivers all looked at him as they passed. A heat haze rose over the shining bonnets already, but the morning breeze

skirled from the sea and cooled Alec's face. The light was still the pale lemon of sunrise, and his feet felt light beneath him. He touched his phone again, curled his hand around it, as if he could feel Ryan's number coded inside. There was something he could ask tonight, when he phoned. He could find out about Ryan's family, his troubles, work out some way of ending them. It was always so much easier to solve other people's problems, and Ryan was right—the judicious application of a lot of money often did the trick.

Alec's pace picked up as he rounded the curve at the base of the hill, coming into early-morning streets still sleepy under their coating of sand. They couldn't go together to the yacht club—that was a stupid idea. But maybe Ryan knew of somewhere, had somewhere he liked to go, where it wouldn't matter if they were seen in public together?

Maybe they could come back to the van again, or he could take Ryan onto the *Lady Jane*. Oh yes. He smiled at the open door of Perranporth Motors, took a deep breath and walked in. The smell of grease and dust and petrol enveloped him, but he was thinking of the swell beneath the yacht's keel, the sea dark under them and the cabin like a private world. He could finally break out the champagne Ryan had asked for yesterday. A man like that shouldn't have to settle for beer.

"Mr. Goodchilde. We thought the fairies had spirited you away." Mr. Green wiped his hands on the flanks of his overalls before offering one for a handshake. Alec stepped back in confusion. The picture of himself and Ryan together again had seemed so real that for a moment he'd been away again in that other world. It made the man's comment seem disturbingly prescient. The fairies? Was that some kind of hint?

An automatic fear and guilt plucked at his chest, and breath came short for a second before he remembered it was the summer. For this one month, he could be whatever he wanted to be. No one was watching. If he wanted to be a gay businessman with a beautiful lover, he could be. Why not?

The thought made him beam with pride. He shook Green's hand with unnecessary fervour. "Something like that," he said. "Yes. I do apologize for not letting you know. So how's the car?"

"The car is champion, Mr. Goodchilde." Mr. Green opened a side door and led him out onto the garage's small forecourt, where Alec's Morgan shared a lot with a battered black Audi. At the sight of it, Alec pictured Ryan in the passenger seat. Surfboard strapped across the back, they could motor up into the hills, onto the close-cropped grass where the wind turbines swept the sky. He could put together a picnic of bread and cheese and olives, of clotted cream and strawberries and a couple of bottles of oaky-tannin white wine, and they could lie beneath the silent, slowly turning fans, in the sunshine and the heathery moorland breeze, and kiss the day away.

Mr. Green had begun to say something technical about oil leaks, bearings, camshafts and bushings. He leaned forward as if to emphasize that it was very important Alec should follow the explanation of which part of which rod had been unclipped from where. Alec nodded and thought about how the marigold colour of Ryan's hair would look against the dark green of the car's paintwork.

“Well.” Some alert portion of his mind noticed that the spiel had died down, told him he might want to listen to this part. “You should be fine for another five thousand miles, but you might want to get that replaced when you get home.” Mr. Green wiped his hands again and reached in for the clipboard on the back seat, which he passed to Alec with an apologetic shrug. “Parts are hard to come by, and I’ve had to charge you for garaging too, overnight, you understand.”

A trifle over a thousand pounds. Alec gave a small inward shrug. It had been worse. He reluctantly let go his grip on his mobile and wondered for the first time why he couldn’t feel the brush of his wallet against his knuckles. “Do you take plastic?”

“Oh yes. Let me go and get the machine.” Green ambled off to his office, and Alec took the phone from his pocket and felt around, extracting a parking ticket and a chewable toothbrush. He felt in the corners, as though his wallet might have shrunk to the size of a ten-pence coin and jammed itself into the lining. How strange. It must be in the... But the left-hand pocket held only keys and change. Could he have put it into the inside pocket?

A passing tourist looked at him with sympathy as he struggled to get his hand right to the bottom of the inner pocket of his blazer, and it was that brief look of commiseration that started the panic. No wallet in here either, only his yachting license and the harbour master’s permits. Mr. Green returned and stood watching his dance of agitation with a newly stony brow. “Oh no, I...” He patted down his trouser pockets, all of them empty because Caroline didn’t like the way carrying anything in them spoiled the line of the garment. “Oh no, I was on the beach and it must have...”

But no, he’d paid for dinner at the chip shop. He remembered the touch of the wallet as he felt in his blazer for a handkerchief, curry sauce on his lips and fingers. His fingers that were now trembling. A blush seared its path over his face. The wallet must have fallen out in Ryan’s van. It would be lying there now, somewhere among the bedding and books, crisp packets and dirty laundry. A kind of homesickness came over him at the thought. He closed his eyes and felt rough nylon sheets on his cheek, the phantom warmth of Ryan’s hand curled around his ribs. He’d known something like this would happen! He’d known it. If only he could have stayed there.

But he hadn’t. He’d let Ryan go, and with him all his luck. “Um.” He reached into the glove compartment for his inhaler. “I think I’ve...dropped my wallet at the...um...hotel where I stayed last night. I...” He thought of the long climb back to the car park under baking summer sunshine. Would Ryan even be there any more? He was going to visit his brother, and Alec had been too stupid to ask where his brother lived.

“Ah.” Mr. Green tapped a nail idly on the screen of the card reader. “Well, we can wait while you look. If it’s a way out of town, I can get one of the lads to drive you there, help you find it.”

One of the lads sauntered out now for a cigarette. It was the recovery woman, the top of her overalls tied around her waist, her arms in their skimpy T-shirt almost as muscular as his. Shaven patterns gleamed

in her cropped hair, white lines amongst the black stubble. Alec shied from the thought of explaining any of his problems to her. She must already think him such a limp flower. He slid his phone open and thumbed it on, paged through the contacts until he found Ryan's number listed discreetly under *Surf guy*. His heart did a strange stutter and skip at the sight. It seemed too long since he had last heard Ryan's voice, so he called.

It rang and rang, and with each ring he felt heavier. He called off while he could still stand up under the weight and looked at the sleek silver gadget in his palm as if it had betrayed him. Useless thing.

A seagull landed and crapped on the black Audi. White and yellow droppings ran down the wheel arch. Alec's breath caught in his throat, he coughed but could not clear the obstruction. No need to panic yet. Ryan must be driving, that's all. "Let me call my people at St. Ives. One of them can be here in half an hour with my cheque book."

At the phrase "my people", the shaven-headed woman raised mocking eyebrows full of piercings, but Mr. Green tucked the card reader into the pocket below his paunch and said, "You do that, son. You can wait in the office until he comes."

"Thank you!" It was past lunchtime when Mrs. Davis, the caretaker of the *Lady Jane*, arrived from the marina with Alec's cheque book and passport, but she had very efficiently sorted everything out within the next five minutes. The car was his again, parked by the side of the road with its engine idling and the hood down. He waved her off and got in. The cream leather seat creaked beneath him comfortably. The Morgan smelled wrong after its night in the shop, but the walnut steering wheel was familiar in his hands. He waited for the feeling of satisfaction he normally experienced just sitting, surrounded by it, but no comfort came. So he edged it cautiously away from the garage, impatient to flee from the scene of his humiliation.

He drove out of Perranporth past the car park where they had stayed last night. A queue of vehicles fifty deep trailed back from the turnoff and clogged the road. On an impulse he joined it, spent an hour inching up sticky tarmac, start-stop-starting all the way up the hill. When he turned into the dusty field, drove up and down the lanes and found Ryan's van was not there, he had to pull into an empty space and stop, crouched over the wheel as if it had hit him in the stomach.

He phoned Ryan's number again, ring ring, ring ring, his heart hammering fast and the little dry coughs piling up under his breastbone, waiting for him to dare to breathe too deep. Sliding the phone shut, he looked at the back of the sedan in front of him, craned his neck to see the patch of bulrushes in the drainage ditch beside which they had parked last night. His fingers felt stiff. The cavity of his chest filled up with darkness. Where was Ryan? By this time he could practically have driven to Edinburgh. Why wasn't he answering?

Vivaldi's baroque tones spilled out suddenly over his hands. The phone vibrated with excitement in his grip, and he gave it a shaky smile in return. Oh thank God. Ryan must have found the wallet. This would be him phoning back to tell Alec it was safe. To arrange to meet up this evening and pass it over.

"Darling, *where have you been?*"

Surprise caught him in the throat, closed his windpipe. His lungs laboured and his eyes streamed as he fumbled in his pocket for his inhaler. Jamming it between his clenched teeth, he took a first narrow, shallow gasp and then a second, deeper. Inside, against their will, the errant ventricles unwound from their spasm. He counted to ten, breathed again, deeper, concentrating on the smooth inrush of air. The phone on his knee said "Alec?" and then "Alec!", and then "Ptolemy, answer me at once."

His ribs hurt. His face hurt. The inside of his chest felt like a hanging carcass, and each breath grated it with metal wires. Damn it. Every bloody time was worse than the last. He didn't want to have to do this any more.

Habit made him take one more dose from the inhaler and then raise the phone like another drug to his mouth. "Sorry. Bad...timing."

"Oh my God, Alec, are you very ill? Where are you? I was so worried when you didn't answer last night. The marina said you'd never arrived and your phone was off and I was quite frantic with worry. Can you hear me?"

His back ached with the burden of drawing in air, and the panic curled about his stomach, infected his brain. *Can't breathe! Can't breathe!* But he forced himself upright, counted again, sucked in another gulp and tried not to choke on it. "I'm all right...fine. I..."

*Count, breathe, relax. You're not dying yet.* The thought of his mother breaking out the family helicopter, being here in ten minutes' time with soup and sympathy, Caroline a well-groomed shadow behind her, spurred him into a determined recovery. "I broke down. The *car* broke down. I stayed the night with a..." *Friend?* The plastic edges of the inhaler creaked ominously in his hand. He loosened his grip slightly but dared not put it down. *Friend? Lover?* "A...a man I met. A surfing instructor."

"Dear God." His mother's voice thinned, lost all that musical roundness she had worked so hard to acquire over a lifetime of amateur dramatics and theatre-studies courses. "Alec, are you all right? He didn't...hurt you?"

"Mother!" Alec flung open the door and scrambled out to fumble with the hood of the car, raising it through jerky stages, clipping it on with clumsy fingers. He shut himself inside again, rolled up the window so that none of the people coming and going in the car park outside could possibly overhear the embarrassing nonsense his mother was talking. So that he could shut it out himself. "For crying out loud, Mother. I'm not eight. I don't need protecting from strange men any more."

"No?" A rustling sound like the path of a snake across desert rock whispered down the phone line. He recognized it as the sound of her running her fingers through the millions of tiny silver and glass beads of

the necklace she had bought in Nairobi last year. Then came a click and slither as the matching bracelet hit something hard—her desk, he thought, listening as she pulled over a ledger. Faintly, behind the hum of the connection, the plummy voice of a Radio Four announcer read out the weather forecast, and he hoped, without much conviction, that she wasn't checking to see if storms were due on the Cornish coast.

Papers rustled and then his mother said—her voice a shade colder, angry because she had been upset, “Your bank has been on the line to say they’ve stopped your card after two unexpected withdrawals of over a thousand pounds each. At cashpoints in Plymouth, this morning. I presume you know all about that, then?”

Alec lowered his head carefully onto the rim of the steering wheel and closed his eyes as he thought again of his missing wallet, and a morning of unanswered calls. Funny, he'd have expected another attack in reaction to his mother's words. Not this sudden limpness as if he'd been knocked out, as if he was having some kind of out-of-body experience. “What...what's my bank doing talking to you?”

“Don't try to change the subject, young man. Whoever took the money used your business-expenses card. When the bank couldn't contact you, they called Gordon. He couldn't get through to you either. So he asked me if I'd heard from you, and I got the whole story from him. Then I phoned the marina.” The click of ceramic hardness in his mother's voice told him she was hurt that he had dared to take that tone with her. She had no need to shout—the note of precision said it all. “They informed me you'd lost your wallet.” It made no sound, but he could imagine the grey eyes narrowing to slits, her idle hand drawing her painted nails across the tabletop, like a cat flexing its claws. “So...this man you stayed with. How well do you know him? Did you check your pockets when you left?”

The laugh came out like a cough, explosively, making his eyes water and his breastbone throb, and yet he couldn't find anything funny about the situation at all. No. He wouldn't believe this. Ryan was not answering his calls because he was busy or he was driving or—horrible but perfectly believable—he was sick of Alec's whiny, clingy neediness. There could be nothing more sinister than that. He wouldn't believe anything else of a man so angelic. So wonderful.

“I...I'm sure it's all a complete misunderstanding. Let me phone him up. I'm sure...”

“Oh, Alec.” The creak of leather seat and leather-upholstered writing desk as she leaned forward, planting her elbows, lowering her disappointed head onto one manicured fist. The edge of ice thawed from her voice and weariness took its place. “I know you don't want me interfering in your life any more and, goodness knows, I understand that. But you honestly don't seem capable of looking after yourself. You're fortunate that this escapade has only cost you a couple of thousand pounds and nothing worse, but goodness me, it could have been dreadful.”

It could have been. Yes, it could—he could have lost his heart as well as his wallet. A kinaesthetic memory came over him: the pressure of Ryan's chin on his shoulder, arm around his back, Ryan's smile an inch from his ear as the man watched him key in his pin number. It all fell together, damningly.



“I’ll be so much happier when you have Caroline to take care of you. She’s finishing up at her conference on Friday, so I’ll pick her up and we’ll come down to meet you first thing on Saturday morning.”

Alec could even pinpoint the exact moment of the theft—Ryan folding his blazer, placing it in the cupboard, the concealed hand putting something in his pocket while the other distracted him with the bottle of gin. Not even an accident. Not even a case of finding it tumbled into a corner and being overwhelmed with unasked-for temptation. It must have been completely deliberate from the start. And then they’d...

“Alec? Are you still there?”

No. No he wouldn’t believe it. Couldn’t see how to believe it and remain himself. Sometimes it felt as if he picked his way with infinite care over a thin sheet of ice beneath which a pit descended lightlessly into horror. If he believed this, the ice would break and he would slide through and begin to fall.

He closed his eyes and felt the glare of summer sun burning into the leather and plastic enclosure of the car. Sweat tickled down his temples and soaked the back of his shirt. He drew the membrane of his little white world more closely around him, suffocating but safe. “Yes, I’m still here. I was thinking. I...” *don’t want you to come*. He couldn’t say it, couldn’t stand to hear that tone of hurt disappointment twice in one day. “I’m going to the marina. Then I’ll phone him. I expect there’s just been some sort of mistake.”

Her sigh enveloped him like scalding steam. “Oh, Alec, you’re a good boy, but far too trusting. Sometimes I wish some of your father’s ruthlessness had rubbed off on you. You wouldn’t see him giving second chances to thieves.”

*Because my father is such a good role model*, thought Alec bitterly. But that was another subject that made the ice creak beneath his feet. Best not to approach it, not to let his mother get onto a subject on which she could talk for hours. “I have to go now. My parking ticket’s running out and I don’t want to talk while I drive.”

“Well then, I’ll see you on Saturday.” The rustle of diary pages and the jingly music of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* “I do hope you can avoid being taken advantage of until the end of the week.”

The phone sat smugly on the passenger seat all the way to St. Ives. “Taken advantage of,” it seemed to be saying, regular as a ring tone. He showed his membership card to Mrs. Davis, who stood in summer skirt and cagoule in the gatehouse. Parking his car in the marina car park, he waited while the staff unloaded his trunk and hurried the bags and briefcase and laptop to the *Lady Jane*. As so often in the afternoons, after a brilliant start to the day, the skies had greyed and the rain drawn in. A seagull, on the boat’s prow, shivered its feathers reproachfully at him as he climbed aboard, as if it was all his fault.

Always before, coming down the teak steps into the cabin—brass gleaming at him, everything neat and orderly and clean—had been like reaching a haven. Like pulling the sheets over his head in bed and knowing for a luxurious few hours that nothing could touch him. Soon he would be switching on the lights,



making a cup of tea, sitting down to listen to the rain on the windows as he read a good book with a mug of tea by his elbow and nothing to do for a month.

What was it now? Now that he had met his summer, his perfect freedom, his god of fire, and been betrayed? If Ryan had been a lie all along, what was left?

The phone lay on the table, mute as a brick. He must not be more of a coward than he already was. He turned the water pump on, filled the kettle and set it to boil. Then he squeezed between the table and the bank of seats, sat down and redialled Ryan's number.

"Hello?" said a woman's voice. Alec's lips tingled and his hands felt heavy and clumsy.

"Could I speak to Ryan please?"

There was a pause, filled with crackly static. He thought perhaps she sighed. "Sorry, I don't know anyone of that name. I think you must have a wrong number."

"I'm terribly sorry to have bothered you," he said with some effort. His face too seemed to be changing to clay. He imagined it slipping slowly off, falling onto the table and lying there, watching him with mocking eyes. *He didn't even put his real number in the phone. I've been so bloody stupid. So stupid!* The feeling of being turned to cold unbaked clay was subsumed in a red-hot rush of humiliation. *An easy target, an easy mark. God, Ryan must have thought I was so damn stupid. He must have been laughing at me all the time.*

His mother was right, he wasn't fit to look after himself. He wasn't fit to be let out alone. He was a useless, bloody fuckup who couldn't get anything right and needed to be looked after by his *mother*. And how pathetic was that?

## Chapter Six

“Took your sodding time about it.” Kyle’s hand reached through the three-inch gap in the door, gripped hard round Darren’s wrist and pulled. Darren scraped his shoulder and knee and the tip of his chin on the splintery wood as Kyle hauled him inside and, at the restraint around his wrist, his hand turned cold as it still did, even now, a year later.

He shook his brother’s touch off, a kind of nausea in the pit of his stomach, a kind of weight, like that *Alien* film—as if he’d swallowed something live and it was growing in there, all acid and teeth. The time would come when he couldn’t ignore it any more. It would burst out and tear him apart. But for now he thrust it back down and said, “Fuck off, Kyle.”

“Did you bring it?” Kyle peered up through his stringy hair, his eyes red rimmed. He’d taken to cowering as if to a career, hunched forward protectively over ribs that had been kicked one too many times. Acrid sweat patches yellowed his grey shirt.

One of the squat’s many thin cats wound its way around Darren’s ankles. The stench of month-old cat litter tray seeped in from the kitchen.

“I thought you said they’d thrown you out.” Darren’s alien parasite squirmed in his chest. He didn’t know if it felt like fury or despair, maybe the two things were the same. Had Kyle been lying all along? Had he fucked up his chance with Alec, his last chance of being a decent human being, over Kyle playacting the victim? Not even a real emergency? “Thought you were hiding out in the shed. What happened to that, eh?”

“Come into the kitchen. Look, I’ll make a cup of tea, okay?” Kyle looked as thin as his ever-increasing army of cats. Sores around his mouth cracked as he gritted out a smile. There were bloodstains, brown as sauce, down the arms of his shirt. When he turned his head to look over his shoulder, the movement brought three perfectly circular burns beneath his jaw into the light.

Some of the fury faded, but if anything it made Darren feel worse, taking the floating, fiery top off his discomfort, leaving him with the sickness, the heavy pressing weight in his chest. Was it better to have a lying fuckwit of a brother, or one genuinely in debt to the kind of men who would do something like that? “Are they cigarette burns?”

Kyle’s lower lip wobbled when he laughed. “It’s nothing.” He retreated, picking his way across the wood-wormed floorboards down the corridor to the kitchen. “They were just... They were kind of pissed at me, ’cause I made them wait ’til today. But it’s fine now, as long as you brought...”

Darren pushed the hanging wallpaper out of his way. Spores of black mould dusted his fingertips and he wiped them on his shorts, remembering the shared moments of their childhood. Some nights, concerned

neighbours would drop Kyle off at Nan's house. Some, the police would do the same, with their yellow reflective vests and big hands and awful voices. Some nights, Dad himself would bring the kid round and dump him, tear-stained and spitting angry, in their laps. "Get this useless piece of shit off my hands. All he does is eat and piss the bed and whine."

Nan would say, "That's all right. You come and live with us, son. You'll be happier."

And, even though he didn't want to share his room or his things, he'd say so too. "It's better here, Kyle. It's clean and quiet and *he's* not there." *No one'll call you a useless tosser here, even though you are one.* "Stay this time."

Kyle broke stuff and shouted and punched Darren in the head. "Don't you say a fucking word about my dad!"

And Darren would cover his face with his arms and try not to yell, "What's it to you what I say about him? *He doesn't want you*, you tosser. He hates you too."

Then he'd wake in the middle of the night to find the window open and the other bed empty. Kyle'd be long gone, halfway home to their dad's house. Darren didn't need to remember the feeling of helpless frustration and rage from those days. Here it was still. Very much the same, but stronger with age. You could not help Kyle. No matter what you did, he'd run back to the things that were destroying him, open armed, desperate for more.

"Yeah," he said dully. "Yeah, I brought the money."

"Knew you would." Kyle held back the ragged bead curtain that dangled across the kitchen doorway. "Knew I could count on you. We've had our differences, eh, but...but you wouldn't let them kill me. You wouldn't, would you, Darren?"

The door, taken off its hinges and laid across a hole in the kitchen floor, boomed like a drum under Darren's feet as he ducked through, into the odour of cat shit and unwashed pans, and stopped short at the sight of the man who lounged on the one chair, booted feet propped on the kitchen table.

Just when he thought this day could not possibly get any worse. All at once the creature in his stomach weighed like lead, and his skin seemed to thin, leaving him prickly and vulnerable and heavy with dread. "What are you doing here?"

"You wanna mind your manners, Darren Stokes. That ain't no way to talk to your old man."

His father swung his feet down and stamped on the ground as though he was kicking its teeth in. He wore designer knock-off jeans and an England striker's football shirt, over the collar of which his tarnished silver hair curled greasily. His forearms were blue and green with tattoos—a bulldog, an anchor, a naked woman and a skull.

"I didn't know if you'd come." Kyle contradicted himself between one breath and the next. But he must have remembered the offer to make tea, as he turned to hover ineffectual hands over the mass of dirty crockery in the sink. Twisty things swam in the bucket of water that stood nearby—the water supply had

long been disconnected—but Kyle turned the taps anyway and looked at the dry faucet incredulously. “So I asked Dad. I was desperate, Darren. They were gonna kill me.”

Darren wound his fingers into his hair and tugged. He might have spent this morning play-fighting in the surf with Alec instead of putting up with this. But it made no sense to think about that now. It just made everything infinitely worse. “Kyle, you fucker. You know where Dad’s going to get that money from. I told you not to ask him. You asked me and I said yes. You knew I was coming. You didn’t need...”

Their father gave a rasping chortling laugh and slapped a pension book in a blue floral cover onto the fire-blackened surface of the table. “Thought I’d drop by and pay you a visit. Thought you’d turn up when Kyle called, and I reckoned, as you don’t ever visit your old man, I’d use this chance to see you. You want to wipe that look off your face. Anyone’d think you didn’t like me, Darren. Your own father.” He put on an affected voice, cocked a limp wrist and quoted his only piece of Shakespeare with a relish undimmed by a thousand repetitions.

“Oh, how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have an ungrateful child.”

It was like a doctor hitting you in the knee with a mallet. He didn’t mean to respond. Didn’t want to respond. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t had this conversation a million times before. But he’d crossed his arms and mumbled, “Like you’ve ever done anything I could be grateful for,” before his brain caught up with his mouth.

Stokes stiffened. His voice took on that awful edge of parental authority and disapproval that even now some part of Darren could not help but cringe beneath. “Gave you your life, didn’t I? Is that nothing? Fed you, raised you, let you live with that old bitch when I could have brought you home. Could’ve gone to the courts and had the Social insist you had to live with me. My own flesh and blood. They’d’ve been all over the idea of us living together. Playing happy families.”

Darren exhaled a sharp, hard sigh, in lieu of replying. He could say *Oh thanks, Dad. Thanks for dumping me on Nan like a pile of dirty washing, when she’d raised her own kids and wanted a bit of peace. That was really generous of you. Of course I’m more grateful to you than to her.* But what would be the point?

Stokes flapped the pension book between his hands and riffled through the pages. “Shit,” he said, meditatively. “What a family, eh? Can’t even fight back, can you? Should never have left you to be brought up by a woman. You’ve got no backbone. Soft as jelly, you are, fucking nancy boy. At least Kyle here shows me some respect. Always stood by me, Kyle has. Like a limpet he is, couldn’t scrape the bastard off.”

He pushed his chair back and stood up, hands on hips. These days the top of his head reached only to Darren’s ear, but it didn’t seem to register with that little child inside, that his father was smaller than he was. The personality took up the whole room, took up the whole house, like a bomb crater with Stokes

ticking away in the centre of it. There had never been violence between them—there'd never been any need. Stokes could do a better job with words than most men could with their fists.

“So I brought your Nan’s pension book in case you’d grown some balls in the last month and were going to try and weasel out of helping your brother this time. Your Nan’s had a long life. Long easy time of it, sponging off the government. Why shouldn’t she pay to keep her grandson out of trouble?”

Darren bent his head, squashed his lips together. *Because she won’t have money to eat. Because they’ll cut off the electricity. Because, you sick fucker, she’s your mum, she’s not a fucking cash machine.*

“What a family,” his father repeated, rocking back on his heels. “Must’ve been that cow, your mother’s fault, that you turn out a junkie and a queer. Fucking useless, the pair of you.”

Kyle took a cup from its place wedged in the side of the stack of crockery, registered the slide too late, made high-pitched *Oh! Oh!* noises as he tried to push the avalanche of dirty pots back into place, dislodging yet more of them. Cups and plates rained about his feet and shattered, spattering cold baked beans and bacon rinds. Kyle crumpled with it, sank to his knees, picking up shattered pieces, trying to fit them back together. “Oh God, oh God, they’re going to kill me.”

At times Darren thought his father had a point.

“Listen.” He took the wad of fifty pound notes out of his pocket. Two thousand pounds. Two thousand pounds of Alec’s money, warm as flesh. His own first steps on the road to hell, minus the good intentions.

“Pay the dealer off, then get yourself clean, Kyle. Check yourself in somewhere. I can’t keep doing this. I won’t. This one time was too many.” He fought to let go of the notes, watched them fall onto the table like his hopes. Like his self-respect.

His father picked the bundle up, leafed appreciatively through the thickness of it. “Pays well, then,” he said. “Sucking cock.”

The alien larva in Darren’s chest uncurled, opened its mouth, started to chew its way out. He backed away towards the door. Toxic, they were, the pair of them. The longer he spent in their company, the more he could feel himself getting eaten away. “You are a sick piece of shit,” he hissed, trembling with misery and shame.

His father smiled the smile of a man who knows exactly how deep his words cut. “What? Your latest boyfriend’s not too happy with this? You just drop your trousers and bend over, I’m sure he’ll change his mind.”

*I hate you,* Darren thought, *but you know that, don’t you? And if I say so, you’ll laugh, ’cause that’s what you want.* “Why don’t you shut the fuck up?”

“For you? Because you say so? My son the faggot? My son, the dirty little cocksucking freak? You’re good for bringing in the cash, I’ll give you that. But you’re a whore, and I’ll speak to whores however I

like.” He paced closer, poked Darren in the centre of the chest. Darren took another step away, stumbling on the edge of the laid-flat door, fighting revulsion and fury.

“Don’t fucking *touch* me, Dad, I’ll break your jaw.”

“Oh, big talk for a little girl.” Stokes deliberately stepped forward and did it again, harder. “I know what your problem is, with your library books and your surf board and your summer holidays. You think you’re too good for us. But you’re nothing but a filthy whore, and if you’re going to fuck men for money then I want my cut.”

It felt like a hand, clamped tight around his nose and mouth. For a moment he couldn’t breathe for rage, suffocating on it, his ribs bending outward under the strain of keeping it inside. One of these days... One of these days he was going to take a baseball bat and break every bone in this man’s body. “I swear, Dad, I’m going to...”

Stokes laughed, harsh and mocking. Caught up in the sphere of hostility, Kyle shuffled back into the corner where a wreckage of cabinets met the wall. What he was seeing through his blurred, dilated eyes, Darren didn’t know, but his voice crackled with panic. “Don’t... Don’t, Darren. Just shut up, okay? Fucking freak! Don’t.”

“You’re going to do what exactly?” Stokes jabbed the finger hard back into its bruise over Darren’s breastbone. But it was the other hand Darren watched with despair—the hand that lazily waved the pension book under his nose. “You sold your arse to get this money. You can do it again. Or you know who I’ll take it from instead.”

“Gonna fucking kill you, that’s what.” The words shocked Darren even as he said them. He thought they shocked his father too. They had both felt, for a moment, the solid wall of certainty behind the words. Not an idle threat. He meant it.

Stokes blinked, mouth hanging open. Halfway crawled into a cupboard, Kyle let out an unsteady, high-pitched laugh. Darren, appalled at himself, turned and walked out, slamming the door shut behind him, clearing the rubble of the garden in two strides and breaking into a sprint as soon as his feet hit the pavement.

He’d said... The tarmac was soft beneath his thin sandals. He vaulted over the earth bank at the end of the street, scrambling up and into the thin patch of woodland beyond.

He’d really thought... Leaves hung limp and stained from the wilting summer trees. Carrier bags tangled about his ankles and he kicked them off without breaking stride, skirting two stained mattresses and a burnt-out car, tumbled together across the path. It hurt to breathe, like someone had stitched his throat closed with fishing line, but he couldn’t slow, couldn’t stop running.

He sped out onto Haywood Row, turned into the snicket, the long narrow path between houses that rose out of the estate and slanted up to where the middle classes had their neat, quiet gardens. The thought

of murder pursued him all the way. God! He'd really meant it. For a moment there, if he'd had a knife, maybe... Murder—the worst crime in the world—and he was already a thief.

The thought tripped him—literally tripped him up—and for a moment he was a tangle of feet and flip-flops, panic and sweat, hurtling towards the road. He landed hard, across the curb, half on the pavement, his shorts torn and his knees dripping red into the gutter. He lifted his stinging hands and shakily examined the grazes, while a little old lady with a dachshund under her arm leaned down to peer at him. “Are you all right, love?”

Scrambling off the road, he backed into the warm green metal box of a telephone-exchange junction that stood humming to itself by the pavement, pulled up his legs and curled into a ball. He felt the whiffle as the dog sniffed his bloodied knee and he tried to raise his head and say, “Fine. I’m fine, thanks.” But it was too much of a lie.

A thief. He hadn’t killed his dad. Maybe, if push came to shove, he wouldn’t really do it—maybe he’d turn and run away instead until he outran even the thought. But he *had* stolen Alec’s money.

The old lady’s slow footsteps drew away from him. He could hear a second woman join her. Their shadows stretched out from them and cooled the top of his head. “But I don’t think he’s very well, dear.”

“Probably one of those druggies up from the estate. You don’t want to go near him, Mum. What if he’s dangerous?”

He thought of Kyle and his dad, and then of lavender. Beds of lavender swaying in the sea breeze, the evening light sharp citrus bright off the pointing tip of the sundial in Perranporth Harbour. Yellow light shining on Alec, dripping like the seawater from the seal-pelt thickness of that caramel-coloured hair. Alec’s eyes had been the exact colour of the evening sky as he looked in Darren’s face as if he saw something holy there.

What had he seen? Darren wanted to know, wanted to be able to see it himself. He thought of blue dusk, and Alec’s office pallor set off by that outspread white shirt, smooth and cool in contrast to Alec’s skin. Oh, how he had thrown himself headlong into sex. All fear and determination and then suddenly, shameless, needy fire. The look of astonishment on his face as he came, as though he’d finally figured everything out.

And okay, Alec was a privileged bastard who had everything handed to him on a silver plate. *Everything*—looks and wealth and security and a loving family—and he could fucking spare a couple of thousand pounds. But...

But it still made Darren a thief. It still made Darren the kind of man who’d see all that undefended innocence, offered to him with frightening levels of trust, and kick it in the teeth and rob it. Just like Kyle would have. Like his father would have. Christ, they were turning him into one of them. He was as bad as them.

Something cold pressed against his ankle, the dachshund's inquisitive nose. "Here, love," said the old lady's voice over his head, while sunlight sloshed through a plastic bottle of water by his ear. Blue and yellow and white light danced across the side of his face. He uncurled slightly, reached a shaking hand up for the bottle, his tentative glance tangling in blue-rinsed hair and hairnet, a face like a russet apple, wrinkled after winter storage. "There now." She smiled.

Across the road, her daughter and an epicene young man who might be her son-in-law stood outside the corner shop, watching him. From here he could even see the van, parked under a streetlamp where it would be less likely to have the tyres slashed or the petrol tank knifed and set on fire. The sight strengthened him. He pulled himself together enough to say, "Thank you."

"Some of the lads from off the estate giving you a hard time?"

Twisting off the cap, he drank cold, clean water, poured it over his knees and hands to wash the dirt out. If only he could wash off the guilt as easily. "Yeah. Something like that."

"You need help? Should I call the police?"

*The police. Fucking hell, the police!* He scrambled to his feet as if goaded, his legs cramping and a zinging pain going through the left calf—he'd definitely pulled something in there. Suppose Alec had already found out the money had been withdrawn in Plymouth? Suppose he'd gone to the police, given them a description of the van? Krissy had been right all along—he should never have taken Alec to the van. What if the guy had been more switched on than he seemed? What if he'd read the number plate?

"No!" He limped halfway across the road, empty of anything but a couple of kids on bicycles, and felt like even more of a complete bastard. "I mean, no thanks. That's my van over there. I'll just...I'll just go home."

He drove on autopilot out of town, parked in the car park of the big supermarket on the edge of the motorway junction, and huddled up in the front seat to watch the sun go down. It flared at the edge of the world, round and red and sullen as a lit cigarette. He thought about the people who had made the burns on Kyle's jaw, and what it would be like in prison—stuck in a cage with men like that and no chance of running away.

How likely was it, really, that Alec had noticed the registration number? He didn't seem like that kind of man. How likely was it that he'd phoned the police at all? Told them he'd picked up a boy called Ryan on the beach, spent the night with him?

Darren's stomach squirmed with nausea. Some of it might have been hunger—he hadn't eaten since breakfast, when they'd sat together in the back of the van and Alec had gathered him up close, stroked his hair, comforting him against what he was about to do. *God, he was such a shit. How could he? How could he have gone through with it? Why didn't he tell Kyle to fuck off?*

*And let Nan starve.*



No, the chances were Alec had not called the police. Chances were, Darren had got away with it. As long as he kept away from Cornwall for the rest of the summer, to avoid meeting Alec again by accident, he should be fine. Maybe he could drive up to Devon, try the beaches up there, put this behind him. Just forget it. Forget it ever happened.

But how likely was it that anyone would ever again look at him the way Alec had? As if they saw something wondrous? Something *amazing*. He laughed. Like that was *ever* going to happen again. Because hey, he *was* a piece of shit, and even Alec knew that now.

## Chapter Seven

At first, Alec thought it was the radio, some Oprah-style talk show he hadn't been aware of. He heard the sound of voices raised in anger, cut-off sentences and scuffing noises, and waited for the presenter to segue in with a cheery "On that note, here's the Boomtown Rats with 'I Don't Like Mondays'."

It didn't happen. He became aware of the frozen stiffness of his neck. His face felt ironed. When he tried to move, his cheek peeled from the leather like clingfilm from a rasher of bacon. The leather? What...?

His mouth had dried so thoroughly a layer of skin inside had died. He nudged the inside of his lips and a thin, stringy membrane, like the white layer on the inside of a hard-boiled egg, came off on his tongue. "Ohhh, God." Tea, where was the tea?

Raising his head he found he had indeed fallen asleep hunched in a corner of the bench sofa. He looked at the table where his laptop bag lay unpacked, his suitcase on the floor by his feet, his feet still in their shoes. The fog of muzzy unhappiness in his head and heart gave a swirl at the sight. He hadn't gone to bed. He hadn't even taken his shoes off. He had sat here all night until he passed out from tiredness. Why?

Memory returned like a chronic pain. Putting his head in his hands, he stretched his aching back and rubbed the sofa creases from his face. Then he wriggled out to put the kettle on. He never had made that tea, last night, never had got up again, the cord that connected his willpower to his body severed at the source. What was the point? Thirst drove him now. He made the tea and drank half of it. Halfway down the cup it turned into ashes, lost its flavour. He put it on the table and forgot to pick it back up again.

Shoes. They should come off. Maybe a shower? He should wash and shave, get dressed in fresh clothes. A new day had started and yesterday's disappointments were behind him. Today he could do new things, make better decisions. It was not the end of the world.

He leaned down and unlaced one shoe, watched it fall onto the carpet, watched it bounce, the way it came to rest, the way the laces slid and then settled. Watched the sunlight make patches on the floor, and dust spiral in the down-shafts as if it was waltzing. There should be colours, but he couldn't summon up the enthusiasm to see them.

His sense of smell niggled at him. He smelled strange. Different. He put his head into the unbuttoned neck of his shirt and sniffed the frowsty unwashed smell of two nights without a shower. Misery followed the breath down his throat as he realized the scent was Ryan's sweat, dried on him. Ryan's smell of beer and chips and strawberry-flavoured lube goaded him back to his feet, drove him the ten paces across the living room to the curved teak sliding door that concealed the yacht's small bathroom. There he paused, with his hand on the latch, and drew up a long, itchy, sandpapery sigh.

Turning his back to the door, he wrapped his arms around himself and slid slowly down until he was sitting on the floor. He didn't really want to wash. He'd been a fool. He'd let a thief with a pretty face walk all over him. Ryan was probably laughing about it with his mates even now. The millionth iteration of sickness and helpless humiliation swept over him, left him exactly where he was—alone, on the floor, too pathetic to move.

It had been a lie from start to finish, and it had been the best day of his life. He didn't want to wash the smell of it off. What did that say about him?

Way over on the table, buzzing to itself like a huge fly, the phone began to ring. It would be his mother. He watched it vibrate, wriggling itself across the tabletop. She would say, "Well of course you must go to the police." And he would say, "Mother, it's too embarrassing."

But if he did go to the police, might they be able to find Ryan for him? The thought was a glimpse of land in the fog—something solid there, if he could only get to it. Among all the millions of people in the country, he couldn't find Ryan again himself, but the police could. They could find him, bring him back, and when they had, Alec would drop the charges. He would take Ryan aside and talk to him, nothing more than that. All he wanted to do was talk to him until he understood. He wanted...he wanted their time together not to end this way, not to end with Ryan laughing at him. Not to end with Ryan—beautiful, angelic, perfect Ryan as a common thief.

But the police would ask him why he'd gone with this stranger in the first place. He imagined his mother, his fiancée, sitting in the police station, being informed about Alec's sexual misadventures. "Does he have a habit of picking up rough trade, miss? Are you sure this money wasn't a payment for the young man's services?"

"God." His voice caught in his throat, his lungs like two clusters of lead weights in his chest. "Oh God, what am I going to do?"

He should wash it off, leave it. Nothing had happened. Nothing important had happened at all. There was nothing to stop his life from going on as it always had from this day forward until he died of it. If he could only pull himself together, Caroline and his mother would not have to know, would not have to suffer the pain and disappointment of finding out what he was like.

*What about Krissy?* He raised his head as the idea struck him, and his heart bounded in his chest. Yes, he would recognize Ryan's friend again—there were not that many black women surfers on the beaches of Cornwall. Surely he could go back to Perranporth and wait for her to turn up? She'd been on the phone to Ryan as they changed at the van. So she must be a close friend, the kind of friend who would know where to find him next. The kind of friend who might be able to arrange a meeting, if she could only be convinced of the need.

His cramped legs ached as he struggled to his feet. Krissy. Yes! He'd find her and make her see he meant no harm. Surely she would understand he needed some kind of resolution, the opportunity to say

goodbye, at least. Some way of moving on from here that didn't involve such massive betrayal, such shame.

And what *was* that noise? The reality-TV clamour of earlier had quietened down while he sat pondering, but now it broke out afresh. Shouting voices echoed into the cabin, breaking its tranquillity into angry pieces. He recognized Mrs. Davis's wound-up, indignant tones. "Calm down! Everybody calm down please!"

It sounded closer than earlier. He could hear footsteps boom on the jetty, the jingle of a security guard drawing a set of handcuffs from his pocket and dropping them with a clatter on the ground. "Come here you little..."

"Don't you fucking lay a hand on me!"

Alec stopped breathing as a great bubble of inspiration, exaltation, battle madness—he didn't know what—lifted him off his feet. He was halfway up the steps to the cockpit before normal human operation resumed, leaving him fumbling with the latches of the door with over-hasty, clumsy fingers.

He threw it open to bright air, summer sunlight, the diamond glitter of the sea. White yachts nodded at their berths all around him, and below, on the silver-weathered wood of the jetty, a security guard in a royal-blue blazer wrestled with the lanky, amber-topped form of Ryan the surfer.

"Oh my God," Alec shouted, throwing open the gate in the safety rail, lifting up the aluminium gangplank with distracted ease. "Oh my God. Ryan."

Their faces turned up to him. Ryan seized the distraction, wriggled out of his jacket and tore away from the guard. "This man says he's found your wallet, Mr. Goodchilde," said Mrs. Davis with a sniff of disapproval. "Says as how he won't give it to us. I says he will if he knows what's good for him."

Ryan's face was drawn and white, his eyes bloodshot. "They wouldn't let me in. Wouldn't let me see you. They says it's too *private* for the likes of me. That fucking wanker..." he danced away from the security guard's lunge, "...tried to fucking handcuff me. But I didn't want to give it to them and then just go away, yeah? I wanted to give it to you." Fear and pleading shone naked for a moment in Ryan's green eyes, more unguarded than Alec had ever seen them. "I wanted to give it to *you*."

Alec's smooth process of connected thoughts stopped for the second time in one morning. He set the gangplank down between the jetty and the yacht without taking his eyes off Ryan's face. There was a long silence, broken by the ting of ropes, slapping against the masts of the other moored vessels. Then Mrs. Davis cleared her throat, and it dawned on Alec that he should be replying. In the back of his mind he knew his mother would want him to say, "Call the police, please, Mrs. Davis", but his mother didn't realize and would never understand how absolutely, ridiculously impossible that was.

"Yes, of course," he said. An ache about the cheeks told him he might be smiling too much. There was a telltale prickle in his eyes. He blinked and looked at the marina staff, both of them disgruntled and dishevelled in the freshening breeze. "It's all right. This is a friend of mine."

“Well I’m sorry if I done wrong to suspect him, Mr. Goodchilde.” Mrs. Davis smoothed her floral-print skirt and tugged at the hem of her matching blue jacket. “But he doesn’t look like the kind that would be a friend of yours. And with a mouth like that on him. He wants to moderate his language before he’s allowed in a place like this.”

“Mrs. Davis,” said Alec coldly, “I don’t pay you to make personal comments about my friends.” The rebuke slipped past his guard before he could second-guess it. Even the staff seemed to think he needed to be told how to live his life. As he saw her stiffen, sniff to herself in outrage, the urge to apologize bubbled up and burst at the forefront of his mind. But to apologize would be to keep her here, and he wanted her gone. “I’m sure I’ve kept you long enough.”

Her face hardened. “Yes, sir. You know where we are if you need anything.” She plucked at the security guard’s wrist and muttered, loud enough for Alec to hear, “like rescuing from that little toe-rag”, before they both turned their backs and walked away.

Once the door of the office had closed behind them, Alec sighed, took the couple of steps up to the top of the gangplank, and gazed at Ryan, only gazed, as if it was all he needed to do in the world, hunger and thirst and shelter and sleep forgotten. But Ryan looked rough, his face gilded by stubble the colour of eighteen-carat gold, his forearms from elbow to palm bruised and scored with long red scrapes. He made no move forward, as frozen as Alec, standing with that loose louche grace of his at the very edge of the jetty, heels out over the sea.

“You’ve only got one shoe on.”

Alec looked down in surprise and saw indeed one shoe, one blue-striped sock. “Yes. I was going to have a shower.” He ducked his head again with a self-conscious laugh—because of course it made loads of sense to have a shower fully dressed with only one shoe on. The confusion segued into a hot, full-body prickle as the thought of finishing that shower, with Ryan, intruded into his embarrassment. “Why don’t you come up and—”

“I don’t want to go to prison.” Ryan edged farther back until he was balanced on the edge of the wooden jetty like a diver on the end of a board. He dug into his pocket, brought out Alec’s wallet and held it out. “Promise you won’t call the cops on me.”

Alec toed his other shoe off, slithered on the gangplank in his socks, aware that Ryan’s words were perilously close to a confession he neither needed nor wanted to hear. “I, I’m not going to, Ryan. I... you. Why would I?” He stripped off his socks, toes digging into the warm metal of the slope as he eased himself slowly down onto Ryan’s level. There. Warm, rough wood underfoot, and he was blocking Ryan’s exit back through the office and the gates. As he paced gently forward, Ryan watched him with the look of a deer surprised in a field, raised head and wild, wary eyes. Ryan’s outstretched hand held the wallet in front of himself like a shield. One false move and Alec thought he’d drop it, turn and dive into the marina waters, be speeding out to sea, with that swift and powerful surfer’s stroke before Alec could bend to pick it up.

Ryan was still in the same T-shirt he'd pulled on the morning after, the faded indigo tie-dye making his hair look vivid as sunrise. Alec's eyes prickled again at the thought that he too must have spent this last night sitting up in his clothes, sleepless and heartsore and confused. "It's okay," he said, reaching out and tugging the soft leather wallet from Ryan's fingers. He should check the cards, the notes, he knew it. But no. Not now. He put it away unopened in his back pocket. "It's okay. You...you just found it in the van. I expect I dropped it somewhere. It was...it was kind of you to bring it back."

Ryan looked at his empty outstretched hand and gasped. His head lowered in a flinch, as if someone had caned him across the shoulders. "Shit!"

The thick, nasal sound of his voice encouraged Alec to step forward and wind both hands about one of his biceps, pull gently, encouragingly forward.

At the feel of warmth, of firm resilient muscle beneath his fingers, that silent explosion of joy, of invulnerability went through Alec again. *I was lost and now I'm found*, he thought, not stopping to wonder what he meant. It felt right. It felt as if Ryan had rescued him. The sun had risen after all, and the summer was back on track. "Come and have some breakfast."

Ryan followed him like a sleepwalker. Maybe it was, after all, only a dream. It had that inevitable quality, as if neither of them could possibly do anything else. As Alec refilled the kettle and brought out a second mug, he had to keep looking in the porthole in front of him for the reflection, had to keep checking to be sure Ryan was not a hallucination, that he really was there. *He came back. He came back*. It was too good to be believed. The guts it must have taken. The bravery. *He thought I'd turn him over to the police, and he still came back*. It was very hard not to take the sweet, oh so sweet, leap to *and he did it for me*.

Alec stirred in milk. The lid of the sugar bowl gave a comfortable clink as he lifted it. "Sugar?" Two lumps for himself. He turned with a mug in each hand. "Ryan? Do you take sugar?"

"Darren," Ryan said, taking his head out of his hands. "I'm sorry, yeah? I'm really sorry. And my name's Darren."

## Chapter Eight

Darren edged to one side, displacing cream and gold scatter cushions. The sofa was white leather, or maybe the palest shade of ivory, and the carpet that yielded beneath his sore feet was only the barest bit more biscuity, a pale clean tan. He felt sure he must be spreading dirt with every movement. The table in front of him was of some golden brown wood that gleamed with polish. Alec put down cork coasters before sliding a mug of tea in front of him.

It was hard to believe any of this. No way could this be true. Alec was...what? Happy to see him? How was that possible? Maybe it hadn't hit him yet, the betrayal? Maybe he was waiting to demand some kind of reparation? Something *special*, in a Max sense of the word, where *special* meant inventive ways with clamps. Could he take that again? He'd promised himself never. Never again. And yet here he was, giving out his real name, letting himself be trapped between table and chair, with nowhere to run but into the cuffs of Alec's pet security guards.

Or maybe, Christ! Maybe Alec really meant it, and he didn't yet know about the two thousand pounds? Maybe he honestly did think Darren had been a concerned citizen, brought him his property back without a second thought? Could he play that line? Could he claim he'd taken the wallet with him to Kyle's to keep it safe, left it on the table when he went out to the shop, and Kyle must have used the card behind his back? This was all Kyle's fault, after all, why shouldn't he carry the can for it?

"Darren?" Alec edged onto the corner of the sofa, sitting very prim and contained, back straight, legs together, the mug held delicately as if it was a priceless antique. Or maybe it was Darren he didn't want to shatter, moving with such slow deliberation, such a sweet, curious, nonjudgmental smile. "Not Ryan?" The starstruck, luminous look to his face faltered, a crease of bemusement between his brows. "Why?"

He looked like he'd slept in his clothes, Darren thought, and tested to breaking point the ability of his ironed linen slacks to resist the outer world. Damp under his arms and creases in his shirt like crumpled-up newspaper. He hadn't shaved either. Without thinking about it, Darren reached up and drew his fingertips through the bristly bronze stubble to and fro. Soft one way, it fought him the other, dragging prickly and rough across his exploring palm. If he turned his head, he could watch the strengthening morning light glint amongst it in highlights like scattered glitter.

"It's a long story," he said.

Alec closed his eyes, turned his face up to encourage the petting hand. "Stay a long time and tell it to me."

It was like that moment on the jetty—when Alec had *thanked him* for taking him for a ride, for seducing him and using him and stealing his money, for taking his innocence to pay for Kyle's drugs. It

went through him like a thrown spear, the jolt of impact and a strange kind of agony. “Fuck!” He drew his knees up, clamped his hands behind his head and squeezed his eyes tight shut as he fought the urge to burst into tears.

The click of a mug against the table, and the sofa cushions changed shape, tilting him slightly to one side. He could almost feel the space in the air like a presence where Alec had been sitting, where he was sitting no more. Uncurling with a start of fear, he saw Alec had moved to the opposite wall, was minutely straightening a vase of orchids on its specially made shelf. Sunlight poured gold green through the still water and the white petals gave out a heavy, earthy sweetness.

The sudden withdrawal goaded him to speak, frightened that after so much forgiveness, he had finally gone that one step too far. “I had a bad time,” he offered, “with a...a guy called Max. He...” God, he could still feel it, the moment he opened that door in his head, still taste the antiseptic and rubber, tubes down his throat, no way to shut his mouth, no way to swallow. Lowered voices and lots of headshaking down the end of the bed, and it took a week before Darren could stop screaming at the sight of a medical mask.

Alec’s hand closed gently about his shoulder and he jerked as if zapped by a taser, hurled from past to present so fast he could have thrown up from the jolt.

“Ah.” He tried hard not to cringe. It didn’t hurt. Honest it didn’t. If he could just hold tight a moment...

The moment passed. Alec’s thumb, stroking along his shoulder blade turned from a torment into a patch of comforting warmth. Darren rubbed his wrists to make sure the blood was still getting through. His hands were warm, thank God. Yes, the fingers still worked, still moved, he could feel his own touch.

“He hurt you.”

“Yeah.” Darren looked away from the intent, deep blue gaze. He thought it still held awe mixed in with the pity, and he didn’t feel strong enough to be looked at with awe. “He was a rich guy, like you. I thought...I thought if I didn’t tell you my real name, then when you turned out to be a nutter too, I could disappear. You’d never be able to find me. I’d be safe.”

The leather of the sofa creaked as Alec sat. The air between the two of them filled with static electricity. Darren could feel the movement of Alec’s tentative hand as a wave of prickly pressure long before it touched him. It hesitated, drew back, gained strength and landed just above his ear. He thought it was meant to be a reassuring pat on the head, and the clumsiness struck him as puppyish, adorable.

“You *are* safe,” Alec murmured. He turned away, stood up again, striding to the centre of the deck, while a flood of unbecoming angry red blush crept up the back of his neck. “I was...afraid. That night. And you looked after me. You—you made it wonderful.” He stared at his bare feet as if wondering where his shoes had gone. “I...won’t hurt you, Darren. I promise.”

All of a sudden it was too much for Darren to take. If he didn’t talk about football now he really would end up crying, and Alec—look at him, the great wet streak—would probably join in. They’d end in



some huge dark swamp of angst and self-pity. Probably sink the boat under them with the power of their combined misery. Darren pushed his hair back out of his eyes and laughed. After a moment Alec joined in, chuckling along with him, and maybe they were separated at birth at that, because he knew in his bones that Alec understood exactly what he meant by it.

“Listen, did you say there was a shower? Can I use it?”

“Of course.” Alec’s smile could have powered the lights of London, a megawatt beam that creased his cheeks and squeezed his eyes into slits of glimmering lapis lazuli. He pulled out a deep drawer concealed beneath the sofa and brought out a huge, deep-piled, cream and gold towel, hugged it to himself as if reluctant to part with it, or more likely as if he was nervous. “I was thinking, why don’t we go to France? We could sail through the night, get to France in time for an early lunch at Saint-Malo, wander around the market and the chateau. Switch off our phones and get away completely. What do you say?”

Darren pulled at a corner of the towel. It came rushing towards him in a tide of fluff, so soft he could scarcely tell when he’d started to touch it. He suppressed the urge to bury his dirty face in it. France? Hell, that would be an escape and a half, and wasn’t that what summer was all about? *And if I say the wrong thing and he leaves me there, marooned, no money and no way back? Maybe even that wouldn’t be so bad.* “I’ve never been abroad,” he said slowly. “Well, yeah, I went to the hypermarket in Calais once, but that’s not the same, is it?”

“Would you like to?”

Darren looked around the living room, so opulent, so colour-coordinated down to the towels. Shower and kitchen and steps up to the control room—whatever they called it—the place where you drove the thing. Through the kitchen, the door of the bedroom stood closed and potent. This was a private world, like his van. He thought again that maybe he and Alec understood each other on some level deeper than words. What the hell. “Yeah. I think I would.”

The shower door was gleaming chrome and misted glass. It slid closed silently, leaving Darren trapped in a kind of tube, like the suspended animation capsules of a dozen different sci-fi films he’d watched in the small hours as he wound down, coming off a late-night shift. He turned his face into the stream of clean silver water, welcome and cool against his skin in the sticky humidity of another hot summer’s day.

He soaped himself down, cleaning the stinging cuts on legs and arms and wondering if he had time to wash his hair. Could he get the foam rinsed off, so that he could see again, before Alec found some excuse to get in the shower too? The muscles of his back had not yet unclenched themselves from their “God, I thought about Max” rigor. He could feel the movement of the water over them like the drag of thousands of

tiny hooks, and it wasn't as though he could actually say no if Alec chose to join him, but he didn't want to be blind with soap and foam when it happened.

Two thuds outside made him stiffen with his hand on the tap, turn the water down so he could peer out of the thin transparent swirl that edged the translucent door. He shouldn't be so jumpy. He hadn't been this jumpy for months. Yeah, but for months he'd kept his head down packing crates of frozen ready meals all day long, stacking the shelves of the local supermarket in the evening, going home to Nan's to scrape a miserable five hours of sleep before he did it all again. He hadn't risked himself like this for months, and he'd promised himself, he'd promised Krissy, he never would again.

It didn't help that they hadn't talked. He'd thought it would—that it would be bliss to be accepted back like nothing had happened. Except that it *had* happened, and he didn't know what difference it made. Would Alec hold it over him? “I can always go to the police, you know,” whenever he wanted something Darren didn't want to give? How much repayment would he expect, and in what kind? Darren had tried to make things up to Max with the only coin he possessed, tried to give the poor, sadistic bastard value for money, and look where that had got him. He didn't want, if possible, to turn this into the same kind of deal.

With a high-pitched whine utterly unlike the sound of a car, the yacht's engine roared into life. The shower floor trembled beneath his feet and from outside the walls came a chuckling, rushing sound as the whole room began to tilt and sway gently up and down. They were underway, and that meant Alec had to be at the wheel. Had to stay at the wheel whatever the temptation. It meant this downpour of cool, bright water belonged to Darren alone. *His* shower, his time to shave and clean his teeth and dress, untouched, no strings attached. Bloody hell, would wonders never cease?

Out of the shower, free of the prickling itch of dried-on sea salt, he towelled his hair and prowled through the living quarters of the yacht, touching things. A full set of glasses in the kitchen, brandy and port, sherry, wine, whiskey and champagne, twinkled like portable stars in the glass-fronted cabinets. He pulled out cupboards to marvel at the space-saving intricacies of them, hinged into corners no human hand could reach.

His bare feet sank silently into the soft carpet of the lounge as he drew an appreciative hand along the white leather sofa, the combined drinks-and-TV cabinet, everything clean and orderly and beautifully made. Books with hand-tooled bindings were held snug behind sliding wooden panels. He was almost afraid to touch them, but he recognized the authors: Agatha Christie, P.G. Wodehouse, Alexander McCall Smith... Gentle, familiar books, despite their grandeur.

Splaying a hand on the bedroom door, he breathed in and pushed it open. You couldn't miss the bed. The carpeted floor curled up into carpeted walls in the triangular space, cupping an oval double bed, under a russet-brown silk coverlet. Padding close, he reached out, touched crisp white linen sheets and silk as smooth as butter. Portholes on either side of the room drenched it with moving, lapping yellow light. The silence felt private, contemplative. Safe.

“Hello.” Alec smiled as Darren emerged onto the upper deck, and Darren felt for a moment as if he’d stepped into an advert. White waves curled away from either side of the yacht’s prow. The sea glowed green as emerald and a fine spray swept in on the bracing wind to spatter his suddenly hot face. Alec sat behind the wheel, the breeze blowing back his bronze hair and flattening the shirt against his chest. He was barefoot too, lounging in his seat as if the starch had gone out of him, as if he’d left his brittle anxiety in a heap on the distant dock. “Do you mind taking over here while I clean up?”

Darren stepped up to the wheel. On impulse he unbuttoned Alec’s shirt and kissed the hollow of his throat, worked his way up until he could touch his lips against Alec’s fallen-open mouth, capturing the bottom lip and then the top between his teeth. That was...nice. He liked Alec’s smell. He liked the shape of his mouth and the salt-chapped roughness of his lips. Closing his eyes, he pushed his cheek against Alec’s cheek and shivered all over at the scratchy drag of beard. “I don’t mind. But I don’t know how.”

Alec raised a hand to touch his lips as if he could feel the kiss still on them. “Ahh. What? Yes. Oh, er...it’s fine. It’s fine—it’s on autopilot. There just needs to be someone here in case anything unforeseen happens. Strange currents, unexpected tankers, people blown off course in sailing dinghies. That sort of thing. Come and get me if there’s any trouble.” The blush didn’t suit him at all—stood out in patches on his cheeks as if applied by rouge, and that thought made Darren smile a great Cheshire Cat grin. Alec in rouge? Nah, maybe not.

“You need to sit up here and keep an eye out.” Alec slid out of the seat, watched a cormorant on its great black wings angle to catch an updraft on their left-hand—port?—bow. The bird folded itself up like a dart and plunged into the sea. Alec’s gaze followed the bird down from sky to sea, then slid across the surface of the deck until he was looking at his feet again. “You don’t have to do that, you know. Kiss me, I mean. I don’t...know what’s going on between us. That night—it might have been a great mistake. You really shouldn’t think that you have to...”

He had, he’d stepped into an advert, a fantasy. Life didn’t get this good, or at least, not for more than the few perilous minutes you could snatch, balanced on the top of an arch of raging water. But fuck him if he didn’t catch those minutes when they came. He curved his hand about Alec’s chin, nudged the man’s face into the light and pulled him in for a long drowning golden kiss, sunlight warm, ocean deep. Their lips parted with a little liquid noise and he sighed, feeling the tingle in every muscle, in every pore. “Maybe I want to.”

And there, totally untouched, unsullied by what he’d done, was that look, the one he’d risked the police and prison for, the one that said, “I can’t believe someone as perfect as you exists in this world.” It all but broke his heart.

## Chapter Nine

Saint-Malo's narrow grey streets thronged with tourists. Alec leaned his shoulder against the painted door of the gelaterie and looked at the brightly coloured, smiling summer crowds. Bijou shops lined the road, their elegant grey facades laden with window boxes which overspilled with trailing purple and orange blossom. At the end of the street, in the town's central square, the cathedral sat blocky and unimpressive, and all the more charming for it. This didn't seem like a good place for grandiose piety.

"They made their wealth from piracy," he said, following the thought wherever it took him. "They used to rob British ships in the Channel, in the days of sail. There's a museum, in fact, if you fancy...?"

"Look at this, it's mad!" Darren had crouched so close to the counter his nose almost touched the glass. "*Rice*-flavoured ice cream! Stracciatella? Is that like chocolate chip or what?" As he straightened up, beaming, Alec reflected that something had changed in his face, an edge of hardness had been set aside and wonder replaced it. He looked younger, boyish even, darting from shop to shop, exclaiming over the strange customs and even stranger food of this, his first foreign country. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"A tall-ship museum. Do you...?"

"Oh what, like pirate ships?" Darren's attention strayed back to the gelaterie. He gave a full-body, appropriately Gallic shrug and stuck both hands in his pockets. "Yeah, okay."

Drawing out a handful of British coppers, Darren bent his head and counted the coins in his palm. Then he sighed and turned away to squint against the glare down into the harbour. Alec waited, wondered if he would ask—if he would ever ask for anything again—and felt slightly bereft when he did not. When Darren forgot himself he was as happy as a big dog, taken for a run in a new field, but every so often he remembered, went silent and careful and dutiful, on his best behaviour.

It had been there the first day too, Alec remembered, looking back on it, that same oscillation between genuine feeling and what he thought was expected of him. Alec had been too dazzled to notice it then—he'd been, in fact, a self-centred, oblivious, privileged fool. A "rich guy", like the last rich guy Darren knew. He should have seen from the start to what quietly frightened extremes Darren was going in order to figure out the rules and keep to them.

"So," he said, "do you want to try the rice or are you going to go with something a little safer?"

Darren's smile stopped traffic. Literally—Alec was conscious that the two immaculately dressed French matrons coming out of the cool inner recesses of the shop in a swirl of blue cigarette smoke, had paused on the doorstep for a long moment to admire.

"No way. The more bizarre the better. And I want to try snails and frogs' legs and all that. They do eat frogs' legs, right? And like *horse* and stuff?"

Alec laughed and stepped up to the counter to order a cone of rice ice cream and one of kiwi fruit for himself. They strolled farther up the street to be out of the way of other customers and stopped outside the peeling green doorway of a house that separated the butcher's from the patisserie. The scent was all France, sunshine and aniseed, fresh baked bread and dust, Gitanes and dried cherries soaked in calvados. As he watched Darren's rapt face he could almost feel again the strangeness and the enchantment of the country, so long ago lost for him beneath familiarity.

"It's...it's okay, really. It's not bad. Weird, though."

His own ice cream was green in the mouth. It tasted of water and freshness, a faint citrusy palate-cleansing tang, and the thought and taste came together into a moment of renewal, of newness. It was a wrong feeling for summer—more of a spring feeling, a start to the year, resolution making, this-time-it-will-all-be-different hope. He shook it off, disconcerted. It was summer he had here, distraction, escape. Not hope. Especially not change.

"I'm sure we can find snails," he said. "Let's hunt round the restaurants, find somewhere for lunch—though at the rate we're going it will probably turn out to be dinner. There's a lovely one I know, out on the walls."

Darren peeled himself away from the patisserie window, where he had been stooped over the array of minicakes, the petits fours and fruit tartelettes, glistening with apricot glaze on their pristine white plates. His tall, lean body had a boneless quality, an effortless, liquid way of moving that belied the muscle beneath. "They're like, I don't know, brooches. Like little pieces of jewellery. You wouldn't want to eat them—I mean what a waste."

He tilted his head to one side, newly washed amber hair brighter than the gilded letters of the shopfront. It looked softer than it had when Alec had touched it last, the salt roughness washed out. Waves replaced the spikes he had kissed. "You look happier," said Darren, leaping from one topic to the next as he had rushed headlong from one sight to the next ever since they'd arrived. "And no more stuttering? I thought I was supposed to get used to that? I kind of miss it."

No more stammering? As he led Darren uphill towards the town walls, the thought was a moth hole of darkness in Alec's day. If he picked at it, how much would unravel? The only time in his life when he did not stutter was when he spoke to his employees.

Employees! The thought was as cold as the shadow of Saint-Malo's great defensive walls. They plunged gratefully into the chill, ice creams already a vanished luxury, and climbed and climbed again the many granite steps up onto the parapet, where they could walk surrounded by sky, look down on the market from which they'd come with the smugness of height and distance.

A gay couple passed, hand in hand. Darren's eyes rounded. He came over to where Alec was leaning his hip on the sun-warmed masonry, looking down, and stepped close enough to rub shoulders, slipping his

hand into Alec's hand. Alec looked down at their interlaced fingers, tears coming to his eyes. *Employee?* God, no.

He had avoided the discussion, thinking it was out of compassion, out of his great, saintly depths of forgiveness. And now he was holding it like an unacknowledged secret power over Darren's head. A kind of emotional blackmail, something to make himself feel stronger. No wonder Darren felt he didn't know the rules. No wonder he still felt, on some hard-taught, accurate level, that he needed to.

"Why..." But it wasn't all about blackmail and the balance of power. Some of it was about cowardice, how very much he didn't want to have to face this. He breathed in, tightened his hold on Darren's hand—wider, bonier, stronger than Caroline's, rough and warm. "I should have asked you. Why...what you wanted the money for. You didn't have to... I could have... If you'd asked."

"Shit!" Darren pulled his hand away, turned through a hundred and eighty degrees and walked away to the wall on the opposite side of the walkway. There he could look out over the railway station and the steady stream of container lorries leaving the harbour terminal, outside the old town. He set his hands on the wall and lifted himself up to sit atop the ramparts. The sea breeze blew his hair into his face, covering it, but he made no effort to brush it back. Alec's confidence that this was the right thing to do plummeted as if it had fallen off the edge. "You *did* know."

"My m... My bank stopped the credit card after the second withdrawal and notified me. I knew I hadn't lost it anywhere else. And I knew you'd watched me put in my PIN." It did—it unearthed too many dangerous things, it stirred up the murk at the bottom of what had once been clean water until he could barely stand to touch it. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned it after all. Too late now. He set his elbows on his own side of the wall and hoped the masonry would be strong enough to hold him up. "Did you...did you plan to rob me from the start? Was the sex...was I *paying* for that?"

"You asked me, remember?" Darren pulled back his hair, took a hair tie from around his wrist and leashed it furiously. "You were the one with the 'sit down, I'll give you anything, don't go past or I'll die'. I was just minding my own business having a fucking holiday."

Alec's lungs put out their claws. He breathed in, coughed, counted to ten while he tried to smooth them back down, tried to buckle the cap over his unwanted anger a little more tightly. "And then you stole my wallet."

"Fuck you!" Jumping down, Darren strode away, his long legs taking him swiftly past the tall lichen-stained buildings, around the sweep of corner and out of sight.

*Stupid. Stupid*, Alec thought. *Oh, you handled that really well*. He couldn't run after, not while the coughs were knocking against each other in his throat like freight wagons at a depot, coupling on. After a dose of inhaler, a round of deliberate relaxation of each muscle, as they had taught him in the gym, he followed more sedately. Darren couldn't go anywhere after all. He had five pounds and thirty-four pence in his pockets, and that wouldn't buy him a ferry ticket home.

And maybe that was part of the problem.

Sure enough, when he passed the elegant apartments, he found Darren leaning on his elbows again, looking out to sea. He looked towards Alec, but not at him, as Alec came to his side. “I’m not a whore.”

“I never said you were.”

“No? ’Cause that’s what it sounded like.”

Alec replayed the conversation in his head, acknowledged that, yes, that *was* what it had sounded like. All at once he felt grimy and flat as one of the circles of chewing gum trodden into the path underfoot. “I didn’t mean it that way. Honestly. I just wanted...I wanted to know why you did it—what you needed the money for. And I thought it was important to tell you I knew, so that you wouldn’t...” He leaned over and closed his hand around the outside of Darren’s clenched fist. “So that you wouldn’t worry. You didn’t keep it for yourself, I can see that. Is someone...? Oh I don’t know. But maybe I can help?”

Darren bowed forward as if his stomach had cramped. His indrawn breath was a snorting gasp of laughter that made the closest bathers on the seashore below look up, startled. “You.” The laugh speeded up like a vintage car engine sputtering into life. “Are not real. None of this is real. I’m in a hospital bed somewhere with tubes in my head, and pretty soon now I’m going to wake up and find it hurts everywhere. Because you...” The shape of his mouth changed, and the laugh turned back into something like a choke of tears. “You are too bloody good to be true.”

Alec had to look out at the sea, the offshore fort bulking there on its own grey island, the causeway beginning to show beneath a receding tide. The dome of the sky had turned pink in the west, and flecks of salmon-coloured clouds floated over a deeper luminous rose. It was beautiful, and Darren was beautiful in it, and it was good of him to think the best, but he had no idea. Sometimes Alec successfully pretended to be a good person, a good son, a good fiancé, a good...friend? But it was superficial at best.

*I thought you were my summer. I thought you were specially made and provided entirely for my pleasure. It didn’t even occur to me that you were a real person, with your own needs. And I bet if you hadn’t done something so outré, it never would have done.*

“That’s so far from the truth it isn’t funny. But listen, why don’t we go to the Brasserie du Sillon for dinner—it’s one of my favourite places. We can order the seafood platter. Which is, um, very weird indeed.” He rolled his eyes. “Lots of different things in shells. And you can tell me about it.”

Darren tucked himself into the far corner of a corner table and spread a napkin on his knee with defensive precision. The place looked nice enough, rustic brick walls and big windows. Glasses on all the tables glittered like spun gold in the tawny topaz light of late evening, and the diners’ faces glowed. Darren pulled at the suede soft material of his new trousers and tried not to look ill at ease, dressed up, on display.

Alec had returned the favour of their first day out and had taken him clothes shopping, disguising him as a member of his own world. They’d spent an afternoon in designer boutiques and tailors, taken the spoils

back to the boat to change. And yes, looking at the place, he couldn't have come here in torn board shorts and three-day-old T-shirt, but he'd still rather have got a takeaway and stayed in the boat. This reminded him too much of trying to live up to Max's standards. Sit quiet, shut up, don't call attention to yourself. Try to make sure no one remembers you were ever here.

But the big windows at least looked out on the sea. He could watch the endless changing breakers and drink lemonade and hopefully get through the evening without messing up too much.

"Here we go." Alec rubbed his hands together and smiled up at the waitress, who solemnly set down between them an enormous platter heaped with... Darren's attempts at nonentity did not survive the claws. Shit! She was beaming with pride over having scraped every shell-covered monstrosity off the bottom of the sea and piled them high in a basin, covered with steaming sauce. He was sure he must look like a kid in a horror film—big eyes, hands creeping up to cover the fallen open mouth—because Alec grinned like a madman and announced "Grand plateau de Saint-Malo" as if he'd made it himself.

"It's like fucking Cthulu in a bowl."

"Oh God." Alec burst into laughter and dropped his bread roll, having to root around for it, somewhere under the table by his feet. At the sight, Darren relaxed slightly. He'd sworn, he'd made Alec look a prat, and Alec was still laughing.

"Dear Lord. Yes it is, isn't it?" Alec gestured with the recovered roll, obviously at a loss where to put it. "Listen, this is for two, so dig in. Do you read a lot of Lovecraft then?"

And all of a sudden it was easy again. "I read anything, me. I'm always saving for the summer, and reading's cheaper than going out. It's mostly secondhand stuff, five for a pound at Oxfam, and you take what you can find. Lots of Mills and Boon, Jilly Cooper. Michael Moorcock. But yeah, I got a complete works of Lovecraft once. Thought it was great. It's dead useful to know the word squamous when you've got to eat a meal like this."

Alec grabbed the pincer of a thing that looked like a tiny lobster. He broke its back with relish and disassembled the armour, leaving it broken and empty on his plate, eating the flesh from his fingers. He sniggered again and moved to one side as the waitress filled up their glasses with white wine. Taking a quick look at the other tables to be sure this was the right thing to do, Darren got his fingers into the bowl too. It was hard to be worried about your manners when you were knuckle deep in buttery sauce, cracking open defenceless sea life and eating stuff that tasted like fishy, salty chewing gum.

A half bottle of wine later, they wiped their hands on hot scented towels. As the plates, piled high with empty shells, were taken away, they ordered dessert. It was easier by that time to talk about anything, everything. The light had dimmed to silver and when the waitress lit the single candle between them, Darren wondered if this was a date. A proper date? Dinner and conversation? In public? Fuck. Who'd have thought it?



“You were going to tell me about the wallet,” said Alec at last, gently, looking as inoffensive as a man can, who is smiling across a spoonful of chocolate mousse.

“It’s all a big mess.” Darren examined his Coupe de Fraises au Sucre, which had disappointingly turned out to be nothing more exotic than a dish of cut-up strawberries. “I dunno where to start.”

Maybe with Nan coming round when he was four and finding him playing with the lighter fluid and matches, while his father and Kyle lay stoned and drunk, giggling at him. How she’d thrown a fit and taken him away to grow up with her?

Maybe with Max, walking into the bar at Tall Trees like James Bond, like there was an invisible spotlight that followed him around to highlight his blond, hard-bitten good looks. All the girls putting down their drinks and breathing fast, preening. And then that lazy compelling gaze lifting and settling on him?

No, earlier than either of those. Back when it wasn’t even his own story to tell. “My dad, right. He’s a shit. He always reckons we ruined his life, me and Kyle. Our mum left him, you see, when I was little. Just buggers off one day. He’s twenty-five and he’s thinking to himself, ‘okay, I can go back to school, make something of myself’. ‘Cept he’s got a ten-year-old and a four-year-old to look after. So he gets rid of me on my Nan, and he tries to do the same with Kyle, but Kyle won’t leave him.”

It all makes sense when he tells it like this, makes “he’s a shit” sound judgmental, pitiless. But yeah, he’d have pity, if it helped. It doesn’t. “So Dad blames Nan for not being able to make Kyle stay with her, and him and Kyle have this weird love/hate thing going on, and he’s a shit to Kyle, and Kyle’s a mess.”

“Kyle is your brother?” Alec actually looked interested, leaning forward, his face intent and absorbed. He’d dressed for dinner in a green silk shirt that softly shimmered in the curves of his muscles and shaded the blue of his eyes with hints of aquamarine. Darren longed to stop talking, lean over and tousle Alec’s over-neat hair, make it stand up in spikes for the candlelight to gild.

But he’d made a decision when he came back that this thing was worth being vulnerable for. In which case, better get it out while he could.

“Yeah, that’s right. And when I say he’s a mess I mean like *really* a mess. Well, he needed money ’cause he owed his dealer for crack, and his dealer was going to send someone round to break his legs or his neck or something. He needed two thousand quid, quick, and he asked me ’cause I’d been able to get hold of money before. ’Cause of Max.”

When Alec drank, his lips would glisten for a moment. He would lick them, the flash of pink tongue sending a pleasurable jolt through Darren. Then they would slowly go dry, and he would mentally urge Alec to drink again, repeat the process. The longer the evening went on, the harder it became to concentrate on anything else.

Which was good, because Alec’s brows drew together in his small, stern frown, and he said, “What about Max?”

And that was not a story he wanted to think about, let alone tell. Not even when they took away the wine and brought coffee thick with cream, with two fingers of calvados making the air above it shimmer with a vapour of alcohol. He watched Alec sip and wished he could lick the moustache of cream away himself, instead of answering. It would be so much easier. More fun for both of them too. Max...well, he'd maybe not got quite enough distance from that to tell it cleanly. He tried, though.

"I thought he was a fucking dream come true, at first. Rich, clever, handsome." *Like you.* "I wanted it to work, so bad." Ah, shit. No, this was not working. He could feel all the regrets, the horrors, the darknesses opening like doors in his mind, unlatched by talking about it. *What if you turn out to be like him? Why would I want to tell you anything about me?*

"Um..." His grip slid on the cup as his fingers numbed, and he put it down fast rather than drop it. What was the shortest way he could say this? Get it over with fast? "He liked to hurt me. And then he'd give me presents, right? To make it up to me, or something."

It had started off with "I'm sorry. Here, buy yourself something nice" and ended up with a relationship that was very much like Max paying for it. Five hundred quid in the morning and Darren would be too embarrassed, too scared, too indebted to feel he had a right to say no to anything. The more it went on, the more scared he'd been, and the more he'd felt like a well-paid whore. And—now he thought about it—the angrier and the more disappointed, the more frustrated Max had become. Too brusque, too overwhelming to reason with. And the more he'd desperately wanted it to go back to the brief sweetness of the beginning, even though he should have known it never would.

Darren shivered, cold all over, his hair stirring as a wave of goose bumps travelled down his back, and Alec reached over, touched his fingertips across the table. "Why did you let him? Why didn't you just leave?"

"I dunno." The sides of his mouth ached. He could feel something stuck in his throat, like they'd left the tube from the ventilator in it and he couldn't ever pull it out. He had dreams like that. Pain in his stomach and his lungs filling up with blood. And he really was a whore, because, when it came down to it, the biggest reason he'd stayed was the money. The luxury of having a way to pay his bills, pay off Kyle's problems, buy stuff for the house and for Nan, put Dad in his debt. And... "Krissy, I guess."

"What?"

"She..." She'd been in her final year at uni, as penniless as he was, with a pupillage at the local barrister's chambers lined up for when she passed. Her parents had been scrimping and saving and working double shifts to pay for their own needs and hers too. And then her father lost his job. "*I'm going to have to drop out,*" she'd said, looking grey about the mouth with the ashes of dead dreams. "*They don't have enough money to pay the mortgage. They'll lose the house if I don't start earning now.*"

“Don’t,” he’d said, with a kind of sacrificial thrill, while—inside—the bigger part of him was going *fuck, no. Fuck no! I can’t!* and his life felt like it was made of tissue paper and he daredn’t breathe too hard in case it tore. “Don’t chuck it all in. It’s only a couple of months, isn’t it? I can get the money.”

She’d said, “Don’t do anything stupid,” and when they took him off the morphine, in hospital, and he’d been recovered enough to tell reality from the hallucinations, she’d been the first person he saw. Looking torn between utter devastation and the wish to kill him herself.

Even the coffee now smelled of rubber. Alec’s bemused pity illustrated that he hadn’t managed to explain anything at all. But the restaurant had turned back into an ordeal and he wanted badly to get out of there, find a bed to huddle up in, sheets over his head. “I don’t want to talk about this any more.”

“Of course you don’t.”

Darren’s gaze was fixed on the backs of his hands lying on the table like they didn’t belong to him. He flexed the fingers to be sure he still could. The table rattled as Alec stood up, dragged his chair silently over the carpet and sat next to him. An arm around his shoulders—that was comfort, not restraint, he reminded himself—and he tried to laugh and lean into the touch. His attempts must not have been very convincing, for Alec removed the arm at once, reached down instead to take Darren’s hand between his own.

Pins and needles like tiny fireworks in his fingertips and then warmth. He could feel it come alive again—a whole year’s healing in a matter of seconds—and he looked up as the waitress brought Alec the bill.

It hadn’t been much of an explanation. Well, shit, he wasn’t ready to explain. But he’d like to do *something* to say thanks. Something that didn’t involve the easy option of sex.

“Miss? Can I borrow...how d’you say ‘Can I borrow your pen?’”

“No need, monsieur.” She brushed back a ringlet that had escaped from her ash-blond plait and handed him the biro. Scribbling his real phone number on one of the napkins, he folded it and tucked it into the pocket of Alec’s trousers. Alec coughed hard and flamed as red as the lobster.

When she took the pen back, the waitress doodled a heart on the edge of her pad, and flipped it at Darren with a wink, making him feel almost human again, relaxed enough to smile.

Later on, they lay wound around each other in the yacht’s big bed, the day’s champagne ebullience and difficult honesty quieted down into tenderness. Hand jobs and cuddling and cups of cocoa, and they argued about whether it was good that the TV series of “The No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency” had a gay character who wasn’t in the book, or whether the fact that he was a stereotypical camp hairdresser was worse than not having him at all.

With Darren’s socks next to the porthole, his shorts hanging out of the overhead locker, and the new clothes scattered in a telltale trail from door to bed, the cabin looked more homelike. It looked like he belonged there.

“What about Cancale?” said Alec suddenly, lifting his head from where it rested in the hollow of Darren’s shoulder. “Tomorrow, I mean. We could have a lazy morning, motor up there in the afternoon, eat their famous oysters for dinner.”

“Oysters, eh?” Darren waggled his eyebrows suggestively to cover a flush of embarrassment. Was that another day he was being offered, far away from all his problems in this magical, charmed little world of privilege and affection? “You reckon I need a bit of peppering up?”

“That’s not... That’s not what I meant at all.” Out of his floppy Eton old-boy clothes, Alec was pale and expensively sculpted. You wouldn’t think he was real, but for that nervous jitter, the sleep in the corners of his eyes and his rumpled hair. A love bite nestled purple in the hollow of his throat, giving Darren a small glow of pride at his handiwork.

“I meant there’s no need to go back yet. Why don’t we take a few days? A week perhaps, and do the coast. We could go to Dinard—take the moonlight walk through the Jardins du Montmarin. It’s lovely—the orchestra playing and the scents of the night-blooming flowers under the stars—but I’ve never had anyone to share it with before. And the day after we could go to the beach at Val-André and rent some boards and you can give me lessons. What do you say? Would you like to do Brittany with me?”

“No way would I want to do Brittany, not even if I *was* straight.” Darren’s flippancy returned with a vengeance on a wave of unexpected happiness. He ducked the pillow Alec aimed at his head, wriggled down and kissed both brown nipples one by one, by way of apology. “You wanna do me instead? And tomorrow we’ll go eat oysters and keep my strength up.”

Alec’s smile, oh God the smile was dazzling—that sweet, diffident, delighted smile. It made him feel like he’d won a gold medal and this was his minute on the pedestal with the crowd cheering and the anthem playing loud. He linked his hands about Alec’s waist and rolled the man on top of him, Alec eager and clumsy and speechless with joy.

When they had done, and Alec fallen asleep, Darren lay on his back and studied the ceiling. Silver light dappled it from the moon on the wave tops. As they swung around the anchor chain, the golden lights of Saint-Malo swelled in one porthole, mixed with the moonlight, and then receded, in a slow, regular oscillation as though the *Lady Jane* breathed in, then out. Sleep tugged luxuriously at the edges of his mind and seemed to radiate out from Alec’s heavy hand, lying spread in the centre of his chest.

He turned over, and the sheets beneath him were cool and crisp, lavender scented like Nan’s airing cupboard, like the gardens in Perranporth in the summer. Alec’s hair looked dark in this light, and sleep had left his face smoothly innocent. Darren traced a finger down the line of his jaw, followed it with little kisses, and smirked when he did not wake. *Shagged out, bless him.*

It was hard to believe that only yesterday morning he’d been off his head with terror, sure Alec would call the cops on him, that this would be his last day with no record—that he’d end it in a holding cell, green

walls and metal door and concrete. Instead he'd found what? The kind of fairy-tale ending every poor boy dreamed of? *No way can it be true. No way.*

But the yacht roused and settled beneath him. On the harbour side, snatches of Euro-pop blew from a nightclub's open doors. Alec shifted closer in his sleep, closing the distance between them, snow-coloured skin warm and slightly damp against his own. And he thought, *But why the hell not? I took the big risk, coming back. How much more dangerous can it be to let yourself fall in love? Just a bit?*

Pointless to think it, really. It wasn't as though he had any choice. It was already too late.

## Chapter Ten

*A week later*

“It’s dolphins. Fucking dolphins.” Darren had found the binoculars in a built-in case by the wheel and was watching the sleek rounded backs of the animals leaping and tangling in the water outside the harbour gates of St. Ives.

“Porpoises,” said Alec, concentrating on weaving his way among the other motor cruisers, yachts and sailing boats coming in and out, heading for the marina.

“No way. They’ve got like *noses* out to here.” Darren gestured, enjoying the wrangle and the spray and the fact that here inside the harbour the slightly uncomfortable swell had diminished enough to make breathing easier. He took one look at Alec’s intent face and broke into laughter, because damn, *dolphins*.

They’d made breakfast at eleven in the *Lady Jane*’s small but high-tech galley. Full English, in a celebration of returning home. All the works, scrambled egg and beans and sausage and bacon and fried tomato and toast. Too much coffee to counteract the effects of too much “farewell to France” traditional Brittany cider the night before, while Alec ran on deck and cast them off. All of which might have been the cause of some of Darren’s discomfort with the swell on the way back.

When they were out in the middle of the Channel, Alec had let him drive? Sail? *Steer*. And the power in his hands, the flat smack and splash as she hit each breaker, spray arching over her like wings, it felt as sublime as the thought that he was being trusted with Alec’s hidden heart, the home he went to when, for such a short time each year, he was allowed to be most himself.

But for coming into harbour, threading between outbound craft, Alec had taken over the wheel, leaving Darren free to admire the wildlife and feel pampered and happy and not ashamed to show it. “So what are we going to do for the rest of the day? You fancy getting among some real waves? Flat as a fucking crepe, that French sea.”

He lost sight of the dolphins’ black and silver heave, as the *Lady Jane* threaded gently between long fingers of jetties where other craft nodded, tied tight. Sunbathers on pristine white decks watched Darren as he slid past, his hip propped against the rail. The smoothing water below now scarcely rippled as the *Lady Jane* passed. “I could take you down Newquay, run you past Krissy—let her give you the once-over.”

The truth was he’d like them to meet. Just about the two people he had most time for in all the world. And for certain sure Krissy could be scary as hell if she started quoting Latin at you and sizing you up with that nothing-but-the-truth sharp barrister eye of hers. But this time she’d be happy. No way could she look at Alec and see another disaster like last year. No way she could look at him and not approve.

Too much silence from Alec's quarter. Darren put the binoculars down on the wheelhouse and turned to look. Alec was staring straight ahead, his gaze as fixed as a pointer dog's on the plate-glass folding doors of the marina office. He looked like a man who was turning into paper, folding himself into origami angles, fragile and friable and prone to crumple. "Oh my God."

"What is it?" Darren lurched for the rail as the boat struck the jetty, clinging on with both hands and listening to the smash of unsecured plates down below. "Alec?"

"Oh my bloody God!"

Grabbing the rope, Darren jumped down onto the quay from which he had so nearly been removed by force a week ago. He tied the painter to one of the many heavy steel rings set into the decking, and scrambled back up to turn off the engine, ease Alec's hands off the wheel. A look sent him running down to the cabin, sprinting back up again to press the inhaler into Alec's nerveless hand. "Alec, what is it?"

Alec breathed in, in a series of tiny painful bursts. The glass door of the office slid open and two women emerged, the older with the same caramel-coloured hair as Alec's, swept up and pinned beneath a broad-brimmed hat that might have graced the enclosure at Ascot. The shadow cut across her face, he could see only a slice of chin and the edge of a mouth outlined in frosted pink lipstick. Something about the cut of her dusk-rose linen dress, so pressed and pristine, prepared him for the moment when she tilted her head up and caught his eye.

He stepped back from the rail. Not a wrinkle on that expensively preserved face, but her eyes were old with disillusionment and cold with disapproval. She looked down, wrapped the long string of pearls twice around her finger, and it wasn't until he'd gulped in a startled breath of seaweed-scented air that Darren realized he'd stopped breathing for a moment.

The other woman stepped out of her shadow. She too might have descended from a high-society magazine, her short platinum blonde hair artfully feathered around razor-blade cheekbones, her blue blouse and cream linen slacks suggesting she had dressed for boating. *Sister?* Darren thought, dread heavy and indigestible in his belly. *He said he had a sister, didn't he?* Her gaze on him was faintly admiring, puzzled, and the corners of her mouth were taut.

"Alec?" he asked, reaching out to try and touch Alec's arm. The man ducked away, kept his head bowed, his eyes turned aside. He set the gangplank down on the jetty with a hollow, metallic thud.

There was a kind of shake building in the pit of Darren's stomach, like a badly balanced washing machine on a spin cycle. He didn't know if it was laughter or fury—a bit of each, a little pinch of despair. *I should have known. What was that I was thinking about happy endings? I did know. Please tell me she's your sister. Even if it's a lie.* "Alec, you going to introduce us?"

"Yes, Ptolemy." The older woman's voice was perfectly modulated, all rounded vowels and snapping consonants, level and cold and, he distantly realized, as furious as he was himself. "Why don't you do that? Do I presume wrongly if I suppose that this young man is the reason you were not here to meet us, though I

specifically told you we would be here this morning? Do you know how many better things we both have to do than to spend five hours cooped up here waiting for you?”

“It *was* very hot,” said the second woman, in a faintly apologetic tone, as if she felt her companion had stepped over the line and it was her job to smooth things back to normal. “And boring. We only had one book between us and that was *War and Peace*, so you can imagine...”

Alec had not yet dragged his gaze away from his shoes, and all of a sudden Darren wanted to seize him with both hands and shake him. Fuck them for turning him back into this beached jellyfish of a creature. Fuck him for letting them.

“Well?” he said pointedly. *Deal with this, Alec, whatever it is.*

“Mother.” Alec winched his gaze up to rest on the taffrail by her elbow. “This is Darren. He’s...been teaching me how to surf. Darren, this is my mother, and, um, Caroline.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Darren almost laughed, though no longer for joy. “My fiancée.”

Alec’s mum made a darting movement with one hand as she swivelled to rake Darren down again with a pointed slate blue look. She needed no more than that to make him conscious that he’d put on his old T-shirt this morning—the one he’d already worn for three days in a row, and slept in and rubbed the bacon fat from his fingers on the corner. She had the air of a woman startled that anything so cheap should dare to form part of her world. “Oh, *this* is the surfing instructor you mentioned when we were discussing the loss of your wallet?”

The hairs on the back of Darren’s neck stood up. Fucking hell. This woman could give his father a run for his money, and in better style too. She’d made the whole week disappear in one sentence, left him right back where he started—in his rightful place, outside, accused and ashamed.

“Well, I must applaud him for having the honesty to bring it back, albeit considerably lighter. I presume that’s what you’re here for, *Darren?*” She made even his name sound cheap, and he wished—so strongly it left the taste of blood in his mouth—that he’d never told it to any of them, that they didn’t have it to pass around among themselves and laugh at. *Stand up for me, Alec, you wanker.*

“I’d best be going.” The words were thick, glued to the inside of Darren’s mouth. He had to use all the muscles of his back to force them out. “Leave you to your fiancée. It’s been kind of *fun*. Shame we can’t do it again.”

He was halfway down the gangplank before Alec’s flinch registered. When it did, he felt only a savage stab of satisfaction. *Yes, flinch, you fucking wanker. You fucking deserve it.*

Caroline’s face was turned to his. A scattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose broke her groomed perfection, made her look human. She gave him an eye roll of sympathy, looking worried, and he stood on the back of his flip-flop, almost fell again as hatred for her boiled his blood from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair. How dare she fucking well be *nice*. Rich and beautiful and privileged and liked by the family and perfect and female and fucking *nice*. Bitch!



“Darren...” Alec’d better watch himself, Darren thought, walking away with long furious bounding steps, not troubling to look back. He’d better learn to school his tone. That little whine was never going to fool his mum there was nothing going on. She was needle fucking sharp, she was. Good luck to him for hiding what he was from *her* much longer. She’d ferret it out of him.

Maybe she already had. Maybe Alec had a habit of picking up rough trade in the holidays that she knew all about. If he’d conveniently forgotten to mention his fiancée, it made sense to think he’d lied about everything else. Maybe Darren was only the latest of many.

He brought his keys out of his pocket, fumbled them and dropped them on the car park’s groomed gravel surface. Someone had carefully smoothed it this morning until it gleamed like a lake. Flags on either side of the huge wrought-iron gateway fluttered green against the deep blue summer sky with a sound like wing beats. All the cars glittered in the sunlight, parked in their neat lines. Jags and Bentleys, Porsches and Lamborghinis drowsed in sleek elegance around his rusty, filthy van, and he wondered how he’d managed not to notice that everyone here must think he was shit. How could he fit into this world? He couldn’t. He couldn’t. It was mad of him to have ever thought he could.

He dropped the keys again, swung and punched the lock as hard as he could. The pain was like dipping his fingers in acid. It crawled up his arm, burned all the way to his shoulder. He reeled away, clutching his split knuckles with the other hand, doubled over, panting, “Ah, ah...fuck.”

The third attempt succeeded. Conscious that Mrs. Whatsername and that bastard of a security guard had probably watched the whole performance, maybe even caught it on the closed-circuit TV to giggle over repeatedly, he flexed his painful fingers, turned the engine on and drove away.

“I hate to say I told you so, but...” Krissy slid onto the sand outside the National Surfing Centre and fished the tea bag out of her cardboard cup of tea.

“I thought he was different.”

“Yeah, but we’ve established you don’t have any sense of self-preservation, or taste.” Krissy had come from work, her dark grey suit jacket and pencil skirt out of place amidst the swimwear-clad tourists. On the powder-white beach sloping down from the surf centre, this summer’s class of neophyte surfers wobbled together, looking stiff and startled by the pinch of their suits, and Darren felt sure she’d arranged to meet him here because it always gave them both a warm rush of nostalgia to watch the newbies’ glee when they finally got it right.

Today, not even that was working.

“That’s not fair. I mean Alec wasn’t...he wasn’t into all that kinky stuff. I never...got the impression I was being paid.” Shit, he’d caught Alec’s stammer, and didn’t that twist the knife? “I just—it probably

wasn't his fault, you know? If I got the impression it was more than it was. Well shit, you know, that's my fault. I'm just..."

Krissy slipped off her shoes, put them next to her briefcase—that was a new thing this month, all sculpted leather and complex locks, and they were still wrangling over whether it would be pretentious to put her initials on it or not.

"You're just a hopeless case, I know," she said. "Listen, none of these rich men are coming here to find a relationship. They're not going to pick up a boy on the beach and take him home to mama, you know? I thought that was what you wanted too? A fun little fling to brighten up your year, pay for your drinks. No names, no pack drill. You got out of it with no broken bones this time. I count that as a win."

Darren watched his own cup of tea go cold. "Yeah, but..." He buried his fingers in the sand, wincing as it clung to the scabs on his hand. "I really liked him. I guess he's... I mean, being in the closet, right, it's killing him. I can see it. It's like he's got a slow puncture, you can see all the air going out of him and you can't do anything about it."

"You did not just compare your boyfriend to a blow-up doll?" Krissy undid the tight collar of her formal blouse and gave him the kind of smile that said it would have been a laugh if she hadn't been trying to be tactful.

Darren snorted. "I was thinking a tyre, but yeah, it's close. And I wonder, you know, where's he going to be in two years' time, when he's fucking married to that bitch, and he's got a kid, and he can't get away even for the summer. He's going to go fucking mental."

"Let me give you a hint." Krissy snapped open the lid of the briefcase and brought out a thick document, headed with the chambers' logo. "You're not supposed to care. So the guy's painfully in denial. He's made it amply clear that it's not your problem. How about we go clubbing on Saturday, my treat, and you can find yourself someone better? Someone a bit less attached, okay? Now listen, I've got something important I want to talk to you about, and I want you not to freak out, all right?"

Darren shifted on the sand and tried not to feel resentful. He wanted to talk about Alec for the rest of the day, the rest of the week, maybe. But fair enough, what else was there to say? *You knew you were a summer fling. You were supposed to be fine with that. What's the difference between a month and a week? Not much.* "What is it?"

"You can read, can't you?"

He sighed, too fed up to make an issue of it, and looked down at the official-looking document.

*Interviewing Officer: Are you Darren Stokes?*

The past reached out of its neatly typed pages, numbing his hands, making his heart stop and then lurch into life again with a heave like a man vomiting.

*Witness: Yeah*

*Interviewing Officer: Now, Darren, would you like to tell us what happened? (For the record, a comprehensive list of Mr. Stokes's injuries is attached.)*

Darren scrambled to his feet and backed up against the grey stone wall of the surfing centre. "What the fuck are you doing, Krissy?"

"It's a witness statement," she said, her alto voice soft as it would be in court, questioning a nervous victim. "I've been collecting the evidence in my spare time and making a case against Max. I think I have enough to get a conviction if we take him to court. I know you declined to press charges at the time. You were...fragile. You couldn't face it, and that was okay. But now you're stronger we can still do it. I can lodge a private prosecution."

She picked up the bundle of flapping pages from where it had fallen, shook the sand off and smoothed it flat. "It pisses me off that he got away with it, Darren. I want to see you get justice. I want to see him put inside for what he did."

"No. No way!" Darren clapped both his hands over his mouth, pushing back the outcry, covering up the carrion-crow caw of dismay. "No way. I don't want this. I don't want ever to see him again. I mean it—I want it to be *over*. I just want it to be finally over."

Krissy stowed the documents back in her briefcase, traced the zigzag line of one cornrow with her fingertip, and said, gently, "I won't do it if you tell me not to. It's your choice. But you never told me what you were going to do."

Distress scored two creases above the bridge of her nose. She pressed the heel of her hand there as if she could hold it down by force. "When you said you could get the money, I didn't think you meant anything like that. I thought, you know, safe and sane and willing, that kind of thing, and it was your own business. But I'd *never* have said yes if I'd known. Not in a million years. And my parents! It was hard enough to persuade them to accept the cash when they thought all my friends had chipped in. My mum would kill me if she ever found out I'd got the whole lot of it from you, let alone that you earned it by..."

She sucked her lips in, bit down on them, her eyes glimmering with tears. "He hurt you because of me, Darren. And maybe I'm up to my ears in student debt and can't pay you back yet, but I can see you get justice, make sure he's punished for what he did to you. I've got to do *something*. I can't live with myself if I don't."

"And me? What about what I can live with?" Oh God, this was unbelievable. No Alec, extra Max. Sharing a courtroom with him. Listening to his smooth voice tell the world what he'd done—what Darren had allowed him to do, newspaper gossip columnists writing it all down. Nan's concerned neighbours popping round with casseroles and puerile curiosity, explaining it all to her in detail. And Max—Max had employees, he could hire goons. Did she honestly think he'd fight this fairly? Bloody hell, given what he did for fun, what would he do when he was serious?

Krissy rubbed the moisture from her eyes, smudging her knuckles with pearl-coloured eye shadow. “I think it would be good for you. You want it to be over, and this would make it over. Give you closure. Maybe once you’ve beaten him, you can stop being so scared—put it behind you properly.”

It felt like food poisoning, that sinking heavy squirm you get when you suddenly realize whatever you ate is going to come back up. “Absolutely fucking not. No way, Krissy.”

She picked up her briefcase and stood, smoothing down the impractical skirt. Her mouth was set and angry. He thought she dealt with life like she did with the waves, reckless, determined, taking them on like she’d something to prove. “At least think about it, okay? I should tell you... I don’t know whether it makes a difference, but he keeps phoning me.”

“What!” Up above his head, on the promenade above the beach, strolling tourists were unwrapping ice creams. The surf school had abandoned beach for sea, and kids with spades were filling up the empty space with sandcastles, and wasn’t it like his luck that he was the only one in the world for whom this was now a place of nightmares come true.

“He was asking for your new number, where he could find you. I wasn’t sure whether I should tell you or not. I thought you’d be upset.”

“Upset.” He spun to face the wall, rested his forehead on damp grey stone, wishing hard that he and Alec had stayed in France forever. “Damn fucking right, I’m upset. Has he got my number then?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t tell him anything.”

“So he’s looking for me? And if he tracks down my dad? Or Kyle?” He wrenched his phone out of his pocket, jabbed it off with clumsy fingers, opened the back and pulled out the card. *There. Let’s see you call me now. Fucker.* He was minimally thankful for the warning. Even for Dad, who, if Max did get hold of him, would probably spend months haggling over the price. “Except he doesn’t *need* my number, does he? He’s only got to come down here, check the beaches. Fuck, Krissy. I didn’t press charges. I didn’t get him into trouble. Why’s he doing this? It’s supposed to be over.”

“It’s obviously not over for him.” Krissy knew better than to touch him, but she leaned her shoulder on the wall next to him, getting algae on the sleeve of her white silk blouse. “But you don’t need to worry. If I bring this prosecution, there’ll be an automatic injunction against him contacting you. He’ll have to stay away or it will look bad in court. And then we’ll win and you won’t have to even think about him again for years.”

## Chapter Eleven

“Darling. You are being ridiculous.” Alec’s mother unpinned her wide hat and put it on her knee. He supposed her elbow ached from holding it on against the rush of air in the open-topped Morgan.

“There’s a car park on North Street I haven’t tried yet,” he said, gritting the words out. His jaw seemed to have stiffened and locked. He dismissed thoughts of tetanus. No, this was only the rigor mortis spreading from his lungs to his face, as he died a little more inside.

It was all happening again. Perhaps Darren had given him the right number this time, but the phone was always off, so what difference did it make? He’d disappeared as thoroughly this time as he had the last, leaving Alec growing increasingly frantic as the week went past, and with scuff marks on his mobile from throwing it across the room. He knew he was being a bastard to his family. That was obvious from his mother’s anger and rapid-fire peppering of orders and questions. Obvious too from the way the tracer programmes caught Caroline’s ISP number all over his websites and blogs, looking for clues. And he was sorry. He *was* sorry. It was not giving him any kind of a thrill to be this much of a git, but a drowning man had to kick, didn’t he, if he was ever going to get back up into the air.

Alec alternated between hoping that one day they would understand, and fearing that they never would, even if he explained it all in detail. Which he was not quite ready to do just yet.

“That is *it*, young man. You have tried my patience enough for one day. Stop the car here, and we’ll walk.”

Here was the A3059 leading out of Newquay to the north. If he stopped here, the two of them would have to walk three miles, through barren concrete streets stained with weather and misuse, before they could even find a taxi rank. They would stand out amid the graffiti-covered billboards, the vandalized phone boxes and the debris of the street like violets thrown to wither on a hot stone.

His mother knew that, of course. She knew he couldn’t take her up on it, or she would not have made the threat. He was to fall in line now, to explain himself at once, to stop being so selfish as to look for the one thing he needed most of all in the world right now, to stop trying to lead his own life and let her lead it for him.

And he should. He really should. This was not their fault. Except—white fury flashed in the turmoil of his emotions like lightning—apart from the way that it really *was*. Everything had been so perfect! Had he asked them to come? No. In fact he’d asked them to stay away. If they were allowed to ignore what he wanted, then he was bloody well allowed to do the same.

The traffic lights turned green and he pushed farther up the street, turned left into the multistorey car park's entry lane, stabbing the button for a ticket. The barrier drew itself up in the middle, crinkling the poster for a strip club that had been pasted over the joint.

He wasn't going anywhere until he'd found Darren's van. Who would have thought it—that being brave enough to defy his mother did not come with any feeling of elation. He wasn't proud of himself. It simply seemed inevitable. He *had* to do this. Leave Darren to think that he'd lied? That he'd led him on, dishonestly? Well...

Well, perhaps he had. But that couldn't be the end of it. He couldn't live with the thought that even now Darren was writing him off as one more spoiled rich boy who had hurt him, one more bad experience to put behind him. No. He might have searched for days—not a glimpse of the van in any of the obvious places. *Please, God, say he hasn't left Cornwall altogether*—but he was damn well going to keep looking for as long as it took.

And then he'd explain, somehow. That part he wasn't so sure about—how could he explain it to Darren when he did not understand himself? He'd explain that just because he had a mother and a fiancée did not mean he didn't want Darren too. He'd find some way to express the feeling that Darren was *essential* to him, that he could no more do without Darren than he could tear off his own skin.

That made sense, didn't it? He couldn't not...oh. His chasing thoughts wound down to silence as he revved up the endless slopes of the car park, past flickering bulbs in broken cases. He couldn't not... Oh, it would come to him, what he wanted to say, if he could only find Darren again in order to say it to him.

Heat spiralled up from the charmless flat surface of the car park's roof. The sky pressed down on it like a steam iron. The curved, funnel-like hoods of the extractor fans blasted out even warmer air, scented with petrol fumes. He'd looked in every bay, and the van was not here.

"Did you hear me, Alec?" His mother poked him in the thigh with a long, lacquered fingernail. "Drop this stupid obsession of yours, or let us out."

Rolling into a clear spot, Alec jammed on the brakes, stopped the engine. "That's fine. Here you are then. You can get out here."

"I...I beg your pardon?"

"Granted." It was unfair. His heart should be beating wildly and sweat prickling over his forehead. He should be trembling with nerves and exhilaration and guilt. And undoubtedly, on some level below awareness, all of that was there, twisted up like the spring of a clock, vibrating inside him, but all he could currently feel was impatience. "You should be safe enough here. I can call you a taxi to take you back to your hotel. I'll wait with you until it arrives, if you like."

She drew up her feet, curling into the seat as she would on the sofa at home when his father had said something especially cutting. Turning her face to one side, she brought a pack of cigarettes out of her bag. Her diamond-coated lighter filled the car with rainbows, as remorse and concern for her and stubbornness

fought in Alec's chest. He was going to relent, he could feel it; the apology built up like a head of steam, ready to burst out, scalding.

Biting his bottom lip to keep his mouth shut, he threw open the car door, scrambled out and half-strode, half-ran to the edge of the roof, where a waist-height wall, painted white at the top, was all that separated him from hundreds of metres of fall, straight down.

Hot wind dried his damp face. If he looked out he could see the great slab of moving light that was the ocean, clean and almost uncanny, like the entrance to a wormhole, in that sci-fi series, the portal to another world. Looking down showed him Newquay spread out like Google maps below, the elegant, dilapidated buildings of the town centre, the seafront and the beaches and the other car parks.

God, why hadn't he thought of this first? All the confusion and anxiety disappeared in an eye blink of hope. He paced the square of roof, peering down, north, east, south. South! Was that... There, behind a chippy and a joke shop and a place that sold postcards, on a scrap of waste ground, that white roof with the rust stains where iron had bled like blood from the roof rack. Oh God, yes it was. It really was.

Relief unwound the spring so fast it left him trembling, joyous, for a second before the worries returned and started to crank everything back up. Darren's van, but no Darren in it. Would he stay here overnight? If not, then Alec would have to sit in the chippy and wait for him to turn up, try and grab him before he left. But if he was there for the night, then Alec could relax a bit, take the girls somewhere nice to make it up to them, and come back in the evening...

"I don't know what's going on." Caroline leaned her elbow and a hip against the wall next to him. The wind tousled her fine hair and fluttered the wide legs of her trousers like flags. "But you've made your mother cry."

Alec rubbed both hands over his face, rolled his stiff shoulders to try and avert the headache he could feel building in his neck.

"I'm sorry." He wished painfully that he could tell her what he was thinking. "I know I'm being a complete arse. I *am* sorry, Caroline. All I want..." *need, is to be able to touch Darren, feel the heartbeat and the living warmth, when I apologize.*

But it was not the sort of thing one could say to one's fiancée.

"I've never heard you speak like that to her before." Caroline nudged a discarded burger carton with the tip of her soft leather shoe—khaki as her trousers. "I didn't think you were capable of it." She turned to lean back against the wall, running the crystal beads of her necklace one by one through her fingers. "She's only here because she cares about you, you know that."

Gentle, patient reasoning, inexorable as the screws of a press being turned a quarter turn an hour. He sighed, and let his hand linger on the wall where he could stretch out his fingers and at least look as though he was touching Darren's van. The stone was warm and prickly rough beneath his palm. "I do, Caroline. I

understand. Honestly...it's only that I've told her again and again that this is my month off. This is the time I have for myself, far away from the family and all the obligations and the politenesses and the..."

A deft flick and Caroline upended the plastic carton, tipping out half-eaten burger into the rain gutter. Mayonnaise splattered the yellow line drawing of a walking man that pointed the way to the lift. "She thinks," she said quietly, "that you're her son and that you love her and want to see her. I don't suppose she thinks of herself as an *obligation*. I know she can be hard work sometimes, and that she demands more of you than anyone's really capable of giving, but can't you even be polite? For the sake of civility?"

"She's just so..." Alec looked for clouds in the luminous hot dome of the sky but couldn't find any. "She doesn't give me space to breathe."

"She's lonely." Caroline laid a reassuring hand on his arm. A narrow hand, fingernails painted pink and white in the French style. A delicate hand, so very easy to hurt. "Your father." Her patient voice flexed and then dropped with resignation. "Well, he is what he is. And your sister is in Egypt, and you've moved out to your flat. She's alone in that big house with no one to look after, and you're the youngest. You can't really blame her for not being able to let go, especially when you're..."

"Such a walking disaster?"

Caroline laughed and smudged the mayonnaise with her toe to give the yellow man a moustache. "Incident prone."

Slipping her other hand beneath his elbow, she hugged his arm, the touch of her small firm breasts invasive, unsettling. He tried to control his backwards flinch, but she must have felt it through her fingertips. "And me? Are you running away from me too? Am I another obligation you need a month every year to recover from?"

*Yes* almost slipped out, accidentally. He wetted his lips but it didn't help him to discover the right words. *Yes* was the truth. But then again, it wasn't. She liked sailing. He'd even considered selling the *Lady Jane*, buying a true yacht—a yacht with sails—so that he and Caroline could crew it.

He liked her, from her gentle responsibility to her Monty Pythonesque flashes of absurdity. If she would come and help him wine-snob around the regions of France, provide wry and inaccurate subtitles to their pretentious films, maybe talk some business in the evenings—because her catering firm was braving the recession in a way that really should be examined and laid out as a model for all. If she would do that and not think about marriage, their future together, the family they were going to have, then she would be welcome.

He took a deep breath and the words *Caroline, I think I'm gay* filled his mouth, paralysing his tongue. He could feel his face contorting around it, as if he had bitten into a lemon. His mother would be devastated. The first words out of her mouth would be something like "Oh, darling, I've failed you." She read all those out-of-date psychology books—absent father, dominant mother, of course she'd blame



herself, and he wasn't sure he could do that to her. Not when Caroline was right and all her infuriating protectiveness was nothing worse than an excess of love and misery with nowhere to go.

And Caroline, with her waiflike looks, even her hair baby fine, her wrists like twigs, her waist he could almost span in two hands. Sometimes he looked at her arms and wondered how she didn't break apart. She was like a glass ornament, he almost feared to touch her. How *could he* be honest with her? He couldn't hurt her like that any more than he could punch a puppy for trying to lick his face.

"I...Caroline, I..." To give him strength, he turned for another look at Darren's van.

With a click, the voice and flute of Jethro Tull singing the sordid ballad "Aqualung" warbled into the silence as his mother fiddled with the car radio.

"I see," said Caroline quietly and walked away.

## Chapter Twelve

From the settee in the living room, Krissy's dad looked up from his paper and nodded as Darren came through the door. Her mum bustled out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel, and gave him a brilliant smile.

"Hey, Mrs. Clarke," said Darren, finding himself unable to return the smile. He envied Krissy her parents and their little knickknack-filled house with the lace tablecloth that came out ceremoniously at mealtimes; everything was so well scrubbed and well used and loved. He envied her the warm smell of jerk spices and furniture polish that clung to the entrance hall, but most of all he envied her her mother's smile. He'd met his own only once and that was in the courts while the judges decided which one of his parents they could fob him off on. *I don't care what his father does with him*, she'd said, *but he's not staying with me*.

"Hey yourself, Darren Stokes." Mrs. Clarke favoured him with the raised eyebrow of scrutiny before putting down her floury tea towel and enveloping him in a squishy hug. A woman who loved her food, she had the roundness and the gravity of a little planet. "So you back for the summer? Come in, come in. You staying for tea? I have brown stew chicken and dumplings. You know I always make too much for the three of us to eat alone."

He sat at the kitchen table to wait for Krissy to finish getting herself glammed up for an evening's clubbing. He'd made it to Saturday night without seeing either of the men who currently alternated in his relay of misery, and an evening of boozing and dancing and maybe getting laid sounded exactly the thing now. You couldn't worry too much about the state of your heart when you were puking up your guts face down in the gutter.

"Peas and rice?" He looked up with what he hoped was a friendly, eager expression as she put down a mug of tea on a coaster in front of him, and she laughed.

"I can make peas and rice if you like. You look like a man sorely in need of some good food, your face so long you have to hold it up with both hands, like this." She mimed him carrying his chin like a sack of grain and he gave a dutiful flick of the lips in return.

"Sorry. It's just...I'm so in trouble. You know that man? The one I was with last year?"

Mrs. Clarke stiffened, turned away to run the hot water and soak a dishcloth under the tap. In the living room, the click and sudden sound of *Newsnight*, unnecessarily loud, indicated that Mr. Clarke didn't want to hear any of this. Krissy's parents were not entirely at ease with the thought of their daughter's gay friend.

“That man who beat you up?” Mrs. Clarke wiped the flour off the kitchen top where she had been making dumplings, returned the cloth to the sink and then lifted the lid on the pot of boiling water to check they were cooking right. It kept her eyes away from him.

“Yes. Krissy...Krissy means to take him to court. Maybe put him away. She wants me to testify and stuff.”

“She’s a good girl.” Mrs. Clarke straightened up, pulled tight the ends of her apron and retied it as if she was girding her loins for the conversation. She sank down into a chair opposite him. “That law firm, they’re lucky to have her. You know they sent her round a bottle of champagne for Christmas. In a sparkly bag, with a red bow on top. They know they’ve got a good thing there.”

Darren drank his tea and fetched a deep breath to try and fill the hollow of his chest. The scent was amazing—chicken and ginger and garlic, coconut and nutmeg and thyme. It didn’t entirely numb the pain, but it helped. It certainly helped. “I know. She’s shit hot—”

She rapped the kitchen table with a no-nonsense slap and he remembered—no cursing, no bad language. “Sorry, Mrs. Clarke. I mean, I know Krissy’s blood...*very* good at what she does. I’m sure if anyone could nail him, she can.”

“Well then. But you aren’t pleased? My daughter takes time out of her important career to make sure you get justice and you aren’t happy? You’ve got someone fighting your fight for you. You’re a lucky man.”

“I don’t want to fight.” He rubbed his thumb along the rough, soft surface of a wooden table that had been scoured within an inch of its life.

“You’ve got to. This man, he hurt you. Are you going to let him get away with that? You have to stand up for yourself, or who will?” She picked up her nurse’s watch that lay pinned to her blouse and checked the time, got to her feet with a grunt of effort and went away to pick oven gloves out of a drawer.

“I can see where Krissy gets it from,” Darren said, uplifted despite himself by her take-it-on attitude. If only he could have some of that for himself. He thought about Alec, the timid cringing flinch with which he had received his mother, not even trying to defend himself, to stand up for what he really wanted. *Christ, what a pair of doormats we are.* But thinking about Alec was even more painful than thinking about Max. “Me, I get in trouble, I like to run away. Run as far and fast as I can until it’s nowhere to be seen. I want to be able to forget it. Move on.”

Mrs. Clarke opened the oven. A gust of hot, pastry-scented air heralded a tray of star-shaped gizzadas, heaped high with a mix of soft grated coconut, nutmeg and butter. She waved a spatula at him as she decanted the open-topped pies from their tray onto a cooling rack. “And when it comes right up behind you? Some things you can’t run away from. You’ve got to face them head-on. You think Krissy got to be some hotshot lawyer by backing down from a fight, and her a woman, and black? You got it too easy all your life, that’s your problem.”

This time Darren really did laugh. “Oh yeah? You try being gay and working class.”

“Are you playing the oppression Olympics with my mum?” Krissy lounged around the doorframe in an outfit that was an eyeful of sparkles. Purple shimmery minidress with a diamante halter-top, over skintight jeans. Eye shadow like butterfly wings. “And you a pasty white boy with two thousand years of privilege behind you?”

“Two thousand years of being burned at the stake if anyone found out.” He tried to be amused at Mrs. Clarke’s headshake of parental disapproval.

“So, have you thought about it? Do we take him on or not?”

He wasn’t sure. If he prodded at that part of his mind, he couldn’t tell what hurt the most. It was all a case of “Oh my God, stop it, it hurts.” He’d have liked to talk it over with Alec. That was maybe the worst part—how much he wanted to be back on the boat, lounging on the sofa in his underwear and socks, talking about made-for-TV movies and philosophy. Alec would have known what to do. One rich guy to another, he’d have known where to apply pressure, where to buy out witnesses and lawyers and police. He’d have...

He’d have gone off with his *nice* girlfriend and washed his hands of the whole thing.

But Krissy, she had him in her house. Her mum and dad knew his name, knew his problems, and if they didn’t exactly approve, they hadn’t chucked him out yet.

With a rattle of pots and cutlery, a plate full of brown stew chicken and dumplings appeared in front of him. Mr. Clarke, folding his newspaper, came in from the living room and sat at the head of the table. Krissy pulled out the folding chair from the pantry and sat next to Darren, looking concerned, as if she understood how hard it was for him, but she really did honestly think it was the right thing to do.

And maybe her mum was right, and she *could* put the bastard away? Wouldn’t it be kind of...*satisfying* to see the wanker get what he deserved? Wouldn’t it be something to stand up to at least one of the parasitical bloody users who made his life a misery and send him where he belonged?

He dug into the stew. It seemed blander than usual, and the dumplings were like chewing on wallpaper paste, but it was hot and free and tasted like domesticity—the kind of family he would like for himself. “I’m coming round to the idea,” he said. “Maybe I should learn to be less of a doormat, at that.”

“Was that a yes?”

“It was a ‘gimme another week or so’. I’ve been thinking more about Alec than Max this past week, to be honest. I’m sorry. So where are we going? Tall Trees?”

“Sailors.” Krissy grinned and pinned on a pair of earrings so long she could have tied them together around her neck. Darren scraped the last morsel from his plate and pushed it away in time to make way for a cooling gizzada with a lump of clotted cream melting into the top.

“Okay, but if I pull, you keep your hands off him. I don’t think I can take a repeat of last time.”

“And I don’t think I want to be hearing this.” Mrs. Clarke flapped her napkin at him with a pointed snap. “If you’re going to talk like that, you can do it outside. Go on! And you be back at a decent hour, young lady. I don’t care how old you are. You in my house, you go to bed before midnight. Understand?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“You expect to pull in that?”

Darren looked down at his jeans and the Lacoste T-shirt he’d found in a charity shop and kept folded in a drawer for special wear ever since. “What’s the problem?”

The summer evening had finally drawn in, and streetlamps poured yellow-orange light over the chip wrappers that blew up Fore Street from the harbour. A crowd outside the Sailors Arms pub laughed and roared their conversations loud to be heard over the whining grind of house music spilling out into the street. Multicoloured fairy lights painted the upturned faces pink and blue, gold and green.

“Your trainers,” Krissy yelled. “Bargain basement or what? And those jeans are...”

The neon sign on the quaint, seaside bed-and-breakfast frontage of the club next door flickered and flashed into light, glowing with blue and white stylized waves and a golden palm tree, like the spiky-leaved saplings that stood in pots on either side of the door. Darren wasn’t sure what made him look, but a movement in the multicoloured shadows grabbed his gaze, whipped his head around, almost against his will. Was he still so attuned to Max’s body language that the way he would get up, drape his jacket over one shoulder, was instantly recognizable even in the half-dark?

“Krissy!” He seized her arm, hauled her back around the corner into the obscurity and shelter of Chapel Hill.

“What the...?” She wrenched herself away, looked at him at first with outrage and then with increasing dismay. His mouth had filled with the taste of tin and copper, like he’d been sucking a two-penny piece. His breath raced and raced, he couldn’t suck in enough air with each tiny gasp, and the shudder of his lungs reverberated through his whole body, shaking him hard. He raised his hands to force shut his jaw, to stop his teeth from chattering, and he could not feel his skin with his fingers.

“Darren? What is it?”

No, he’d seen Alec do this. He knew how it was done. He should close his eyes... *But what if he comes round the corner? What if he sees me and I don’t see him?* Close his eyes and count to ten. Now a deeper breath. And again. He twined his fingers together and blew on them, chafed his wrists. Maybe there was still some feeling there. Shit, they’d been healed six months or more. They were fine! It was his stupid, cowardly fucking head that was the problem. “Look. I think it’s...”

He sidled to the end of the street, clinging to the darkness, looked round the staid Victorian rooming house on the corner, and panic skewered him again, making his guts cramp and his heart stop. Neatly cut

platinum hair, dark glasses and designer stubble, Gucci loafers, bespoke Savile Row suit. Max moved like a lizard, torpid and slow, and then a sudden serpentine fluid rush as he reached out and tugged the boy beside him down by the collar. Darren could almost smell margaritas and blood and the wood smoke and resin scent of aftershave, and at the vivid memory he staggered away, fell to his knees and threw up his dinner in the gutter.

“Darren.” Krissy grabbed his shoulder, then his hair, holding it out of the way, and he wanted to hate her for being so much stronger than him. So fucking unmoved. But the gesture stopped his resentment dead. “What is it?” she insisted. “Are you...?”

“You.” He coughed, wiped his mouth with the handful of long grass that was forcing its way out of the pavement in front of him. “You see I can’t. I can’t face him. I can’t go to court and be in the same room with him. Not like this.”

Krissy stepped backwards, wiping her hands on her jeans, her eyes widening. “Oh God, is that him? He’s *here*? I’m sorry, Darren. I didn’t think—”

“You din’t think he’d come here with his fucking goons and try and shut me up for good?”

“I didn’t think he’d try looking for you at the nightclubs, though I should have. It should have been obvious.” Her speech had gone clipped and formal, as if she was in court, and he recognized the narrowed eyes and thinned lips of a woman beginning to get seriously annoyed. “And you didn’t tell me anything about goons. There was intimidation? Threats of harm? Oh this just gets better. When did this happen?”

Darren lurched to his feet. His nose and throat felt peeled, he was about to piss himself with terror, and this was not the moment for a fucking cross-examination. Maybe there hadn’t been goons *yet*, but he was bloody certain there would be, if Max ever got his hands on him again. Somehow the scream that was tearing his diaphragm out through his mouth got itself turned about as it forced its way up, emerged as uncontrollable, machine-gun-like laughter.

“Hahahahaha,” he gasped. “I am so fucked. Hahahahaha.” He turned about, staggered back up Chapel Hill, and clung on for dear life to the open door of the first off-license he could find. Booze, that was what he needed, the stronger the better, and lots of it.

“It’ll be fine.” Krissy tried to ease his panicked grip from the frame, push him aside so the steady stream of customers could get in and out. “It’s going to be all right. He didn’t see you. We can go somewhere safe. I can...get a restraining order put on him, making sure he never bothers you again.”

Darren’s laughter gave him cramps between every rib, made his face ache and his teeth hurt. “You think the courts’d put an order on *him*? He’s the respectable businessman, I’m the fucking gay rent boy. They’ll hand him the truncheon and cheer him on.”

Around him, the holiday-making crowd was drawing away, watching him warily. An instinct of self-preservation cut the laughter off mid-spasm, let him straighten, careen into the shop, stand in front of the counter, wiping his hands over and over down his flanks to make sure they were still there.

“Don’t want no trouble, mate,” said the shopkeeper as he passed Darren a litre of vodka, snatching the notes out of his hand as if he expected Darren to take a swing at him. *Yeah, he was drunk and disorderly*, the man confessed, scrubbed and in his best suit, in front of the jury in Darren’s head. *You can’t believe a thing he says, Your Honour.*

“Me neither.” Darren tucked in his T-shirt and put the bottle down it, hugging it to him with an elbow—in case his hands got worse. Krissy met him at the door, chewing her lip.

“I didn’t realize you were still so...” she gave a sniff, wiped dusky violet sparkles off her eyelids, “...so...I’m sorry. You’re right. There’s no way you’re ready to sit through a week-long court case in the same room as him. Why don’t you come back with me, stay the night on the sofa?”

The laugh tried to escape again, but he choked it down, pressed eyes and nose and mouth closed and swallowed the whole lump down like an aspirin embedded in a teaspoon of jam. *Okay, calm down, you’re scaring her. And you’re drawing attention.*

“Sokay,” he said eventually, the bottle’s hard edges against his ribs giving him courage. “Not a fucking invalid. Don’t need to be mothered, okay. Just going...” *home.*

He had some pride, after all—and no desire for Mr. and Mrs. Clarke to see how seriously pathetic he could be. “I’m going back to the van. You should go home too. I don’t think he met you last time, did he? But he’ll have looked you up. When you were finding your evidence, doing your research, you bet he noticed you checking up on him. He’ll know everything about you by now.”

“I know everything about *him*.” At his more business-like tone, Krissy relaxed enough to bring a compact mirror out of her bag, even up her smudged makeup with the air of a knight adjusting his armour. “Max is legitimate in every way, Darren. All above board. He’s never been associated with any kind of violence or crime, and he has no known underworld connections. He’s got a share portfolio stuffed with Christian businesses and charities. Are you sure you’re not—”

“Being paranoid because he half-killed me?”

“Well...yes. Because there’s a difference between consensual play that gets out of hand, and a man enlisting goons to silence his opponents. Everything I’ve seen of him—”

“Oh fuck off. Go play Quincy with someone else’s fucking life.” Darren had had it with her bloody reasoning, with her courtroom nitpicking of every bloody thing he said, as though she couldn’t switch off the barrister in her for a second. She’d wished Max back into their lives with her stupid plan for revenge, and now she could damn well deal with him. He pushed past her and ran away, ignoring her “Darren!” and her “Fuck you too,” until he’d lost himself amid the Georgian tenement houses, the evening dog walkers, and the stream of partygoers heading the other way.

Darren dodged into the alley between the Golden Moon takeaway and Tribal Tattoos, worked his way past broken chairs and empty soy-sauce boxes, and reached the van about two seconds before his guilt could catch up with him.

She'd been doing what she thought was best.

Fuck her!

She might have a point.

Fuck that!

He blew on his fingertips to make sure they were warm, and still he almost dropped his keys as he scrabbled at the lock. Crawling inside, he was more than ever aware of the squalor of it. His space, and it was about the same size as Kyle's shed. As he unscrewed the top of the vodka and took a long drink, fierce hot spirits stinging down his throat, he had a sudden stab of pity for his brother. *Looks like this is where we both end up—crawled into a cupboard, praying no one'll notice us. Only the drug-of-choice to tell between us.*

The vodka did its work, even that first gulp. All his clenched muscles shuddered and eased. His breathing slowed, and he slumped more comfortably against the wall, tipping his head back to rest, and as he did, he heard the crack and jangle of someone stepping on a discarded tin can outside. A stumbling footfall crunched the mix of gravel and broken concrete. Oh God yes, he was like Kyle—his sins were catching up with him. There was someone out there. He could hear them coming.

Shit. Why'd he come back to the van? Max must've known he'd only got to look for the van. Easier than finding one carrot-topped head in a crowd, and Max, oh yeah, Max was very much the sort of man who'd record registration numbers.

Darren capped the bottle with shaking hands. He opened the cabinet he'd built across the back of the seats, dug through the debris; there were cans of soup, plasters, suntan cream, a ripped wetshoe he'd been meaning to sew back together. Oh fuck. He thought about Kyle, the cigarette burns under his chin, thought about Max and ball gags, the whistling smack of a wire coat hanger, pulled out into a whip. The sides of his mouth ached and watered.

There. There it was. He pulled out the cricket bat from the depths just as the doors rattled.

*Oh shit.* Right until this moment he'd hoped he'd misheard, hoped it was only some tramp passing through. *Not Max. Not Max. God, please not Max.*

Getting up to a crouch, wedging his trainer-clad feet into the dimples of the floor, he prepared to spring. The door rattled again. He thought he smelled aftershave, scented soap, leather, blood. And then the handle began to turn.

The door opened, scarcely a crack, and Darren struck out, slamming it with both hands, catapulting it open. There was a thud and grunt. A dark shape went reeling away, and Darren leapt down, stabbed out with the bat as if it was a broadsword, got the bastard in the shoulder and again in the stomach.

Max curled forward over the blow, collapsing to his knees and then on to his side. Darren had a moment of fierce, exultant triumph hotter and purer than the vodka. "Yeah!" he shouted. "That's for me, and for the guy in the collar, poor bloody sod. Now piss off."



But Max curled into a more pathetic ball, nothing to be seen of him now in the shade of the chippy, in his dark clothes, except the white blur of a hand clutching at his pocket and the white blur of an averted face. But the sound—the rasping, tortured wheeze of breath made Darren take a step forward, bat clutched defensively in both hands. That didn’t sound right. That sounded *awful*. *Oh fuck. Tell me I didn’t kill him. Oh fuck. God!*

“Are you...?” He came another step closer, gaze held by that questing hand. This close he could see a gunlike object outlined in the fabric of the pocket. A tiny pistol, maybe? Except...

Hard to tell in this dim, but did the man look taller than Max? Slimmer? Maybe his hair a shade or two browner? Realization struck. He gave a gasp that seemed to last an eon, just as the man wrenched the inhaler out of his pocket and raised it to his mouth.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Alec?” Darren dropped the bat, lunged forward, falling to his knees so that he could get both arms around Alec’s shoulders and haul him up off the trash-scattered sharp gravel of the ground. “Alec. For fuck’s sake. I’m sorry.”

Alec’s face was contorted with pain and concentration. His body shook in Darren’s arms, the tiny frantic movements of his ribs like a fallen bird trying to beat its wings.

“Shit. Shit.” Darren smoothed Alec’s hair out of his face, brushing stones from his shoulder, his cheek. He pulled the blazer open, unbuttoned Alec’s shirt—oh it was the green one, the one Alec knew he really liked. He’d come all dressed to apologize. Oh fuck.

Alec’s ribs did not give against his hand when he pressed them, though Alec gave a yelp and flinched away. The collarbone felt whole, and his belly didn’t curve out, felt comfortably cool—no build-up of blood there, nothing punctured. “You okay? God, I’m sorry. I thought it was—”

“No it’s...” Alec swallowed, gingerly straightened up a millimetre at a time. “That was a bit extreme, but I probably deserved it.”

“You wanker! I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Oh, excuse me.” Alec had regained enough breath to sit up unaided, wave his hands at himself in silent demonstration of the fact that Darren would have and in fact *had* knocked him down. His blazer, slacks and face were white on one side with concrete dust, and there was still more gravel in his hair.

For a moment, Darren had no idea what to do. He was aware of the sea on the other side of town, of the roll of traffic down each of the three streets that bordered this oasis of junk. A fox barked in a garden, and outside the chippy someone was singing Abba’s “Waterloo” with immense enthusiasm and very badly.

Then he reached out and shook the remaining stones from Alec’s hair. They fell, pattering onto the pavement, and the warm silk brush made his hands feel supple, sensitive. A rush of something sublime travelled down his arms and unwound everything inside that had been clenched tight against the pain. “Didn’t expect to see you again,” he said, smiling. “I thought you were Max.”

“So you thought you’d get yourself arrested for assault?” Alec caught his exploring hands and held them tight against his face, leaning his unbruised cheek into Darren’s palm. He closed his eyes and drew a long, relieved breath.

“Yeah, Mr. Engaged Man. Like you’ve got a right to complain about how I deal with my life.”

It should have been bitter. Alec obviously expected it to be bitter. He opened his eyes and gazed up at Darren with regret written all over his face. But the anger wouldn’t come. It had been such a shit day. He’d

felt so lost, so fucking scared and useless and empty, and now Alec was back and everything was okay. Look, he was even smiling.

“What d’you say to going inside, having a drink and a bit of a chat? Maybe fucking each other through the floor after?”

Alec heaved himself onto one knee, let Darren help lift him to his feet. He gave a rueful laugh, and then a snort, clutching his ribs. “Ow! It...” The smile widened. Even in the dark Darren felt the impact of that oddly innocent gaze. “That sounds like a plan.”

“So you see.” Darren waved his teacup for emphasis, the vodka swirling to the brim and droplets spraying through the dim amber light of the single candle. “He puts me in hospital. It’s touch and go whether they ever get the blood flow back to my hands or have to cut them off, and I’ve got broken ribs and punctured lung and ruptured whatever. And they’ve got me on the morphine, so I’m having these amazing dreams—and when I say amazing, I mean fucking awful. So when the police comes round, I’m thinking I never want to see the bastard ever again. I tell them to piss off, I don’t want no court case. Then I go home, change all my phone numbers and try to forget about the whole thing.”

“Mm-hm.” Alec’s stomach and ribs still ached, but the discomfort was swallowed up in the warm, drifting intimacy of the sphere of brown light, the circle of Darren’s arms.

He shifted slightly, and Darren broke off to say, “You okay?” again and skim a hand gently over Alec’s abdomen. It was sobering to think how he’d learned exactly what to look for.

“Yes, I’m fine. So this Krissy—she’s your friend. The one I saw at the beach?” Alec nodded to himself, pleased with this eloquent description and his grasp on what seemed an increasingly complex situation. “She wanted to make sure he gets tried like he ought to have been?”

“Sright.” Darren set his vodka down long enough to plump up the duvet cover that was serving for a cushion behind him. He leaned back, loose-limbed and graceful, and Alec fitted himself into the gaps left by Darren’s side. *Best jigsaw puzzle in the world.* Pulling the man’s T-shirt over his head, he laughed quietly at the muzzy tousled look he received as a reward. With his own shirt untucked, undone, they could lie touching and he could feel Darren’s skin, warm, resilient, breathing, better than any bandage, against his bruises. He rested his face in the angle between Darren’s shoulder and neck, and lost track of what he was going to say.

“Well that’s good. Isn’t it?”

“Yeah, right until he comes round here and tries to shut me up for good.”

“No. No, that wouldn’t work.” There was a flaw in Darren’s argument. Alec took another sip of vodka and felt himself float on peace, contentment. In the dark like this, especially with the van swaying as it was, this could be his yacht, his little world. They ran together in the centre, he and Darren. He’d never met

anyone before, not even Caroline—especially not Caroline, these days—where being together with them was more comfortable than being alone.

He hadn't quite followed Darren's explanation, too distracted by the faint golden haze of the air, and the way vodka and candlelight made an oriental palace out of a tatty old duvet and a foam mattress. But the gist of it was quite clear. This Max, this cross between a caveman and an evil emperor, had to be stopped, and Alec was exactly the perfect man to do it. "Cos see, if he comes here and hurts you, he's going to be in trouble when he wasn't in trouble before. He knows you're not going to make trouble for him, so why's he going to make trouble for himself by stirring it all up again? Besides. You've got me now. You'll see. Tomorrow, I'm going to get my people on it. I'm going to get Gordon to dig up every bit of dirt on the man he can find. And he can find a needle in a hatstand. Me and Krissy, we'll put him away for you. No problem."

Darren pulled an end out of the rolled-up duvet and wrapped it around his shoulders, settling Alec more firmly against his chest and tugging the quilt closed about them both. He rested his chin on the top of Alec's head. Alec could feel the movement of Darren's throat as he swallowed the last gulp of vodka in his cup. It was very warm here.

He opened his mouth and pressed it to the "V" of Darren's neck, hearing the heartbeat, feeling the damp silken smoothness of skin. The tingling prickle of sparse hair on Darren's chest felt strange and wonderful and right against his lips. Darren was shaking...no, laughing to himself, trembling, silent, helpless laughter that filled his eyes with tears.

"What's so funny?"

"You, taking on Max?" Darren snorted, widened his eyes at the noise and pressed a hand over his nose as if to keep from doing it again. Laughter reverberated through his body, shivering through the bones and sinew of Alec's back, making him giggle in sympathy even though he knew he should be insulted.

"I can be scary," he said. "I can be intimidating. Just cos you've seen me at my most happy-go-luckiest doesn't mean I'm not ruthless when I have to be."

Darren had bent his head and was covering the back of Alec's neck and each shoulder with lazy, warm kisses, breaking off now and again to snigger. Oh, it was lovely, and Alec was very tempted to shut up and maybe undo his trousers and take them off, so that Darren could do the same to his whole body. But it seemed important that Darren should know. "I'm not the pushover you think I am."

"Yeah, right. And that's why you're gonna marry some chick when what you really want is me."

"Caroline's not 'some chick'," Alec said quickly. The outside world had intruded on his haven with a sickening lurch and his stomach felt the heavy beginnings of the killer hangover that was sure to come in the morning.

"Nah, she's *nice*, isn't she?" The laughter drained from Darren's voice too, but his hands were still gentle, tender with Alec's bruises, skimming in long, possessive, wondering strokes over the plains of his

flanks, his stomach. He drew his fingers up Alec's thigh, his palm pressing between Alec's legs, rubbing his eager cock through the soft, velvetlike nap of fabric. "An' I'm not nice."

That too was lovely. Ooh, more than lovely, amazing. Alec pushed up against the pressure, while need and desire coiled like great snakes over him through the sweet syrup gold of his drunkenness.

"Is nice what you want?"

How did Darren expect him to talk? To think, even, when he kept pushing like that, the tug and the following pressure of fingertips that he could feel skimming over the arrowhead of his cock through two layers of fabric? He unbuckled his belt, wriggled out of trousers and underwear, threw them at a random corner and then giggled at the thought of them lying there, crumpled and creased all night long.

The van had taken on its usual nighttime chill. When he dived back into the cocoon of bedding, the heat of Darren's skin took his breath away. He leaned in to kiss and Darren play-fought him, keeping his face away. He got an arm behind Darren's head, and then Darren broke the hold, pushed him away. He snaked his other arm behind, got intercepted, and for five minutes or more they wrestled, laughing like schoolboys at the silliness of it, until he ended atop Darren. Both of them breathless and smiling as they had been when they had lain together in the spray.

This time he knew what to do. Suntan oil in a glove pocket of the van, cold at first, and Darren laughed and squirmed as he smoothed it over them both. It turned warm and slippery soon after, as they rocked together, sliding like eels, his prick trapped against Darren's belly, rubbing against Darren's hard, hot prick, until he wasn't sure whose pleasure jolted through his spine. He grabbed and clung and thrust. He'd not meant it to be this fast but bloody hell he wasn't going to be able to... Oh!

They came almost together, hot, thick liquid spreading between them, teasing, drawing out the final shudder and flutter of bliss, and it wasn't until Darren was wiping the mess away with one of his discarded shirts that it occurred to Alec what he had done, right in the middle of a conversation about his fiancée. "I don't want to hurt her," he said.

"Heh, yeah." Darren laughed again, hauled him into the middle of the mattress and flicked the cover over him. "And like, you're not going to do that by marrying her and carrying on behind her back with nameless rough trade. Yeah? She's supposed to sit at home while you go on your shagging holidays in August? Set you up for the rest of the year. And that's not gonna hurt her?"

Darren pulled a two-litre bottle of water out from under the sink, brought it and his phone into bed with them. Alec's head had already taken that turn from expanding to contracting, the band around it lightly uncomfortable now, promising misery. He took the water gratefully and drank as much as he could bear. "Shouldn't let you say these things to me."

"Yeah, but someone's got to, haven't they?" Darren plucked the water from his hand and drank with the air of long practice. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and lay down, propped on his elbow beside Alec. The sound of his breathing mingled with the faint hiss of traffic outside. The candle in its

saucer guttered wildly, burning down to its end, and in the flaring light Darren leaned over and kissed each of Alec's bruises with such soft touches they made him shiver.

"Listen, I know I'm only a summer lay. That's not what this is about. It's not about me." He opened the back of his phone, slid the card into its place and snapped it closed. "Except that I like you, Alec. I don't want to see you fuck up your life, and I reckon you don't really want to fuck up hers. Why don't you tell her the truth? See what she says."

Alec swallowed, felt water and dread fill his throat, and for a moment it was as though he was drowning. Suffocating. Panic and fear flailed within him. He wanted to clutch Darren's hand to keep him safe. Or to hit him and tell him never to say such things again. A weight landed in his palm, and he closed his fingers around Darren's cheap pay-as-you-go phone. At the feel of it something cracked inside, the white membrane of his life tore and he was petrified. He wanted more than anything not to have met Darren, not to have realized what he was, to be able to climb back inside the egg and seal himself shut in it.

But life had an instinct of its own. He keyed in the numbers with drunken fingers and waited while it rang.

"Hello?"

Okay, now he was falling, full of sick exhilaration and guilt and dread, and he really should have been more drunk for this. "Caroline."

There was a long pause, and then the sound of a cupboard opening, the rattle of glasses and the glug of liquid. "Do you know where I am?" she said, throwing him off balance. She wasn't supposed to lead this conversation. All the others, perhaps, but not this one.

"Um...no?"

"I'm on the *Lady Jane*." And yes, the sound was the creak of the yacht's leather sofa as she sat, and the raised voices of the people in the *Higher Interest* moored next door having one of their periodic quarrels by the music of Chopin.

"Oh. Oh, I..."

"I felt bad about putting you on the spot like that this morning. It's obvious you're under some kind of stress. So I thought I would come round, bring you some dinner, and we could talk about things."

"That was...very..."

Darren worked one arm beneath Alec's head, slipped the other around his chest. The hand, curved about his ribs, heavy and comforting, anchored him against the undertow of grief and guilt. Caroline had an edge to her voice like his mother got when she was angry, scalpel sharp and eloquent.

"But you weren't here. So I waited two hours and then I ate it myself. Scallops of veal with lemon and capers on angel-hair pasta. Except that after two hours the pasta had turned to glue. You left your phone off all day, by the way. I presume that was to make sure we had no possible way of contacting you. So where are you now?"

"I'm with Darren." He hit the bottom with a jerk. No pain yet, but he was sure that would come later, after the shock. Her long indrawn breath felt like it echoed inside his skull, a never-ending hiss of something not quite like surprise.

"Darren?" she asked.

"The guy you met last Saturday. At the yacht."

At the mention of his name, Darren leaned in and silently kissed Alec, at the ticklish point where sideburn turned into beard. He thought, *Bloody hell. Darren was right. She'd have turned into a little copy of Mother. She wouldn't have been able to help herself. I would have driven her to it, being craven and evasive, leaving her angry and alone and unhappy.*

"I presume you're not having surfing lessons at four o'clock in the morning. So you are...?"

"I'm...I'm..." He took a deep breath, coughed and rested his forehead against Darren's. Even in the dark he couldn't help but feel that Darren's long hair glowed with stored sunlight. He could feel the radiance of it even through closed eyelids. The warmth and the spinning, vodka weightlessness made it a tiny bit easier to say, "I'm gay."

Fear swirled and then settled in him, like the flecks in a shaken snow globe. Outside the little glass world of it, he could sense relief, even joy, waiting to push itself through any available crack. When he'd said the words, he hadn't been at all sure he was speaking the truth, but now they were out they felt solid and certain as the tides.

"I see." Caroline blew out an angry sigh. He heard her swallow, and then the clink of her glass hitting the tabletop, the slosh and glug as she filled it up again. "Should I pass over the fact that you thought it was appropriate to tell me this in the middle of the night? On the phone? On your *boyfriend's* phone?"

Guilt bit hard. Yes, he was hideous, a disgusting person, and he didn't want to be doing this, didn't want to hurt her. Why couldn't she see that it was only the thought of her welfare that had brought him to it? "I had to," he said, the full force of self-hatred held away from him by Darren's encircling arms. Darren liked him—he had said so—and therefore Alec could not be entirely worthless.

Darren liked him, and therefore Alec would, *must*, be able to find something inside himself that was unyielding enough to push back. "I couldn't have done it face to face. I'm not...strong enough. I needed...I needed to be with Darren so I could be brave enough to tell you at all."

Caroline laughed, the sound of it tinny and crackly and very far away. "Do you know how pathetic that sounds? I'm not the Loch Ness monster! And Christ, Alec, I thought you liked me? I thought you respected me, at least as a friend."

A light in a paper lampshade shaped like a squid came on in one of the buildings that ringed this wasteland, shining through the windscreen of the van, washing watery over Darren's smooth, expressionless face. His eyes were closed and he might have been sleeping, but he had curled his arm

around so that he could rest his hand in Alec's hair, and the fingertips still moved, mutely reassuring, against Alec's scalp.

Alec frowned. In so far as he had expected her to do anything, it was to freak out and deny he could possibly be gay. Not to doubt that he liked her at all. "I asked you to marry me, didn't I? Of course I like you. You're my best friend and—"

"Then where the hell do you get off thinking you can make me your beard?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. Christ, Alec. That's for thick girls, girls who'll be happy to spend your money and keep your house and go through a series of expendable lovers, and lavish all their time on their cats. I thought you knew I wasn't like that? I thought you..." She swallowed. He could feel her anger crumbling into grief, and chased the words to tell her it had never been like that for him. He'd thought she was...

"I thought you were the best I could do."

"Oh!"

At her gasp, he replayed the sentence, rethought it. Bloody hell. "I didn't mean it like that," he scrambled to explain. "Caroline, I meant you were the best, the best person I knew, the one I had the best chance with. I didn't mean..."

"Oh, just go away, Alec." Even grief had now been swallowed up by weariness. Her voice sounded flat, squashed like a spider under his shoe. "Go away. I don't want to listen to you any more."

"Wait. Wait, you didn't—" But the ring tone was already droning in his ear. He took the phone away and looked at it reproachfully while over in the squid-lit room someone put on Slipknot and turned it up loud.

Darren opened his eyes. In the bluish light they were wave-coloured, the colour of the sea beyond the beach's shelving edge. "You okay?" he whispered.

Their noses touched at the tip as they lay side by side. If Alec tilted back his head at the perfect angle, his lips were grazed by Darren's scratchy stubble, and Darren's breath washed hot and cold and hot again across Alec's mouth. Even with Slipknot augmenting the growing headache he felt, physically, at home. Content. "Maybe slightly scared. Exposed. Does it...does it get easier?"

Darren gave a huff of laughter. "Yeah. Yeah, it does. You got something solid to stand on, yeah? Like having a board under your feet. You own it now and you can't be outed, you can't be blackmailed, you can't be fucking shoved around. Not as much, anyway."

"And Caroline? I really didn't want to hurt her. I don't want her to think..."

"You really like her, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Then you should listen to what she said. She's not angry you're gay. She's angry you nearly pissed her future down the toilet by marrying her. Give her a couple of weeks, she'll be thankful you got up the



courage to do this now, and not fucked up ten years of her life and two point four of her children down the line.”

It was a wonder the flats opposite did not shake themselves down to the rage and rhythm of the music. It made all kinds of black hollownesses open up in Alec’s head, jagged spaces full of darkness. He shifted closer as Darren kissed his nose, nipped his top lip between wide, dry lips, smooth as butter. “Mmm,” he said, sleep pressing him down, the bed swaying gently beneath him and his mind spiralling off in silver lines to lose itself in the drumbeat. “*You...make things...easy.*”

“Yeah.” Darren laughed again, intimate and sceptical. “I’m the expert in everything, me.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Someone was shaking the van. Nnh! Oh God. Someone was fucking battering the van with dustbin lids. And sunlight blazed like spilled lemon juice through his eyelids, making his eyes stream and sting. Darren disentangled himself from the duvet. What the...? His supporting hand hit something glassy and slithered out from beneath him. His stomach and his heart lurched together and he was falling, the vodka bottle spinning away to clatter against the doors.

Alec's red-rimmed eyes pinched shut. He grabbed the quilt, turned over, hoiking it up to his ears, leaving Darren curled naked and half-hard, exposed to acid sunshine and the curious gaze of dustbin-lid-man and his friends. He remembered why he'd switched from vodka to gin the last time.

Squinting against the light he opened both eyes, discovered that the noise was in fact only his phone, ringing where it had fallen last night just under his ear. He sat up, suppressed the lurch of nausea and thumbed it on. "Nnh? Yeah?"

"Hello, dear, is that you?"

At the sweet thread of his grandma's thin voice, Darren grabbed his T-shirt, bunched it in his lap, covering himself up. He swallowed, to try and get his fuzzy mouth and throat working again. "Nan. Hey. Sorry I—"

"Oh dear, I woke you up?"

"Hey, no," he said, cheerfully as he could manage. Where was the...? Oh yeah, there. He picked up the water bottle they'd half-emptied last night, trying to sober up and quick. Nan did not phone unless there was a good reason. "It's no problem. How are you? You okay?"

"I'm wondering if..." Was there an extra layer of trembling in her voice? A shake that wasn't quite down to age? "I'm wondering if you could come around some time this morning. I don't like to interrupt you during your holidays, but..."

"Don't be silly. You can call any time you like." He was already finding underpants, wriggling into his shorts. "What is it?"

"Your father..."

*Fuck!*

"Says he's calling round today. You know what he's like. And he's been very, well, very insistent, that I sign the deeds of the house over to him."

A wave of sickness and panic washed over him. He clamped his hand over his mouth as his body tried to heave. Kept it down, except for the part where he broke out in a cold sweat and his mouth filled with spit. "Did he say what time he was coming?"

He nudged the mound of navy- and white-striped duvet with his toe, provoking a grumble of protest, pulled the T-shirt over his head, juggling the phone between both hands.

"I...I managed to persuade him to come after lunch. Darren, I'm so sorry to do this to you, but I want you to have the deeds. I... Well, you know I find it hard to say no to him. If you had them, if they weren't in the house any more, I could tell him I couldn't sign them because they weren't here, and it would be perfectly true."

"Yeah, no, I get it." Darren grabbed the cover and peeled it out of Alec's clutching hands, distracted for a second by the sight of him rolling onto his stomach, hiding his face from the light. The planes and shapes of his back were painted by pearly light, the dip of spine dark, the curve of his buttocks creamy pale. He couldn't help but run a hand down from the hard muscle of Alec's shoulders, across the bone and bumps of his spine, to the smooth swell of arse. Alec writhed a little, opening his legs and breathing out a long *mmm* of approval.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

It took all the self-control he possessed to turn the petting stroke into a pinch, firm and bruising and very effective. "Ow!" said Alec, wide awake and resentful in no time.

"I've got to go to my Nan's. D'you want me to go to the chippy, get you a coffee before I kick you out?"

Alec struggled into a sitting position, shoulders propped against the curving metal wall, looking absurdly vulnerable in his dishevelled nakedness. "Oh," he groaned, massaging his forehead. "Oh my God. Tell me I didn't dump Caroline over the phone last night."

Shit, he'd forgotten that. He'd forgotten Max and Krissy and Alec's fiancée and all the rest of the world. Darren found toothpaste, under the stand for the gas ring, and brushed his teeth with the flat, plastic-tasting water that had been slowly turning lukewarm overnight. Opening the back doors to spit confirmed that the sunshine of moments ago had turned to rain. He could smell wet concrete and slowly warming fish fryers. A knot of rage seethed under his breastbone. What the fuck had happened to his retreat? To his one month of sand and surf, sex and dancing and fun? His family had to cram a year's worth of angst into a fortnight—*his* fortnight—and now he had Alec's problems to worry about too? How fair was that?

"She kind of dumped you when you told her you were gay."

"Oh my God." Alec wrapped his arms around his head, drew up his knees and attempted to make himself invisible. It didn't work. Darren picked up his shirt and trousers, flung them at him one after another, feeling like a complete bastard and all the more angry because of it. Any other time and he'd be there, giving all the sympathy he had to give. Why, why the hell, was his life conspiring to fuck up this one good thing before it even had a chance to get going?

Alec raised a draped sleeve and gave him a kicked-puppy look, all big eyes, his bottom lip nipped between his teeth. "Did I...? Was that not what you wanted me to...? Did I do something wrong?" And he

found himself trembling with the desire to shove the man nude out of the back of the van and drive off. *Painkillers. Maybe the morning would look better after painkillers, and coffee. Lots of coffee.* Sucked then, didn't it, that he didn't have either.

"I've got to get to my Nan's before my father does, yeah? Cos otherwise he'll take her house. So you need to get dressed, and out. Now. Please."

Obediently, Alec dragged on his shirt, stood up to pull on underwear, giving Darren an eyeful and mooning anyone watching out of the back windows of the flats opposite. Darren half-hoped Slipknot-guy would think it was aimed at him, but he didn't have the resilience to smile about it, not with Alec still looking like someone had replaced all his bones with elastic and he couldn't hold himself up.

"It's going to be like the last time, isn't it?" Alec said, head bent as he examined the slow progress of his trouser button through its buttonhole. His voice sounded as though he had got a cold. "When you went to see your brother. And I won't know whether you're ever coming back or not. Are you going to drive off and leave me with the fallout?"

How could a guy who had everything be so very needy? Poor, messed-up, neurotic bastard. A kind of exasperated affection welled out of the part of Darren he'd thought he kept only for his family, let him lean forward and get an arm around Alec's chest, squeeze, reassuringly. "It's been one of those summers, yeah? Everything's going to hell. You seriously *want* me to come back? I'm bad news."

"I seriously..." Alec took a deep breath, pressed a hand to his bruised stomach. His lip strayed back between his teeth, whitened as he bit down. "Actually I seriously want to come with you. If you'll let me. I don't... I feel better when you're there."

Headache and hangover still swirled in Darren's guts. The rain did nothing to soothe the brightness of the morning. Light still burst mercilessly from the white concrete like the white flash of an exploding bomb. All the spreading puddles did was to add jagged edges of sparkle. Darren's skin itched and his heart might have been pumped full of lead, it weighed so heavy. But still...that was kind of sweet. Cowardly, yeah—running away from the flack his late-night announcement would have caused—but sweet.

"I guess if you're going to run away it's nice to have someone to do it with. C'mon then. My Nan's something else. She's kind of like my mum. I grew up with her." Would that make Alec the first man he'd ever brought home? Christ, it would too. "I think she'll like you."

"I'm so glad you're home."

As he came from the hall into the kitchen of the tiniest house Alec had ever seen, the old lady struggled up from the chair by the window. Her metal walker took up almost half the floor space, forming a cage between her and the outer world. She leaned on it, resting for a moment, regrouping from the effort of standing, then raised faded eyes to his face. Her thinning hair too had no colour to it, but the bones of her face, beneath the wrinkled loose skin, drew the same bold, elegant lines as Darren's.

“You aren’t my grandson.”

Alec felt abashed by her, and a trifle uncomfortable, as if he’d been caught smoking behind a memento mori in the cathedral. There was something very slightly transparent about her, like Frodo after the Ringwraith’s knife. “No, madam. I’m—”

“This is Alec.” Darren came through the doorway behind him and leaned out so that he could be seen. Alec looked down, self-consciously, as Darren put out an arm and curved it around him. Warm pressure against his waist, and Darren’s fingers spread over the top of his hip, possessively. “My friend.”

As Mrs. Stokes’s eyes lit with understanding, Alec felt marked, claimed. He wasn’t sure he liked it.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, well in that case we must go into the front room. I’ll make tea.”

Outside the kitchen window, a pyramid airer loaded with laundry twirled slowly in the breeze. A regimented line of cabbages, beneath careful netting, faced the leafy luxuriance of potato plants and carrot-tops. White butterflies reeled above the water butt. Inside, the place hadn’t been decorated since the ’70s. Brown and orange circles, faded now, cavorted on the walls. Someone had painted the cupboards orange to match. A loose-leaf tea caddy hung from one of the walls, and on a buckled metal tray beside it sat a stainless-steel teapot and a strainer in a matching stainless-steel bowl. It made him feel overdressed, faintly ashamed.

“Let me take the deeds out to the van first.” Darren tossed his jacket on the kitchen table, squeezed past Alec. He grabbed the pile of papers that lay on the floor beside her upholstered chair, and squeezed back again. Unnecessarily demonstratively, Alec thought. “Then I’ll come back and make the tea. No sense you doing it when I’m here.”

Alec’s head still hurt, even after the two-hour drive. When this was over, and they’d driven back, he had Caroline to talk to. He’d hoped this trip would give him time to sober up, think things through, so that he would know what to say to make things better for her. But at the moment he felt so overwhelmed by Darren’s unexpected relatives, he found himself cravenly wondering whether maybe...maybe Caroline wouldn’t remember what he’d said at all? Maybe he could go back and things would be normal again, and he would be...back to choking to death on his life.

“Shall we?” Mrs. Stokes said, moving the walker an inch forward, shuffling after it. He took the hint and backed out through the narrow, tiled hall, into the only other room downstairs. About the same size as the kitchen, it was filled with furniture—mismatched chairs under home-knitted rugs, a plastic table beneath an exquisitely embroidered lace tablecloth. A clock ticked on the mantel above a scrubbed, empty fireplace, and three ranks of photographs lined every wall.

Despite the summer outside, it was chilly in here. The chair he sat on smelled of mildew. In the corner, behind a vase of service-station silk flowers, a camp bed stood folded up under a quilt the twin of the one in the van. A nylon tunic with a supermarket logo on the pocket lay ironed and folded on top.

Darren ran and leapt and smiled through at least half of the pictures: ginger haired as a boy; a sullen angel of a teenager; scrubbed, embarrassed and tidy in white coveralls, with his hair in a hairnet, accepting a plastic trophy in front of grey factory doors.

Alec put his head in his hands. It weighed a ton, and his thoughts needed pushing through it, as if he was pushing them laboriously uphill. He kept letting them go, accidentally, and they ran back down and crushed him.

Seeing the house Darren had grown up in put a new complexion on everything. The van had seemed a bohemian choice. Its penny-pinching insides looked like a statement—a philosophical attachment to minimalism. A boast that its owner was above the petty materialistic things of the world. He'd never thought anything of it.

But this house said something else. There was a musty smell and the cheap carpet made the silk fibres of his trousers stir and try to stand up with static electricity. No doors hung from the doorframes of either kitchen or sitting room. So it was possible to see out into the stub of hall and admire the balding draught excluder along the bottom of the front door. A bright yellow tub of ant poison nestled beside the mat and added the perfect finale to this scene of squalor.

Darren's life flashed before Alec's eyes. A life composed of pathetic bric-a-brac in a two-up, two-down hovel that hadn't been painted since the Middle Ages. Not even a room of his own. No one, *no one* grew up sleeping in the living room these days, surely? The impact of it was like watching fairy gold turn into dust, seeing how blind he'd been, how much he'd overlooked.

*It's me you want*, Darren had said, almost in the same breath with which he persuaded Alec to ruin his engagement, his carefully planned future. *I'm not a whore*. But he lived here. In this pinched, faded and drab prefab world. Who wouldn't want to escape from this, by any means they could manage? So that was why he had taken up with Max, put up with whatever beatings or abuse that lay behind the genuine fear. It was because Max could give him all the freedom and luxuries that money could buy. Max could give him money.

And that must be the only reason why... The nausea returned, roiling in his stomach like boiling tar. His lungs felt thin as the pages of books, dry and shrivelled. The empty space around them ached. And that must be the only reason why he had taken up with Alec too.

*Are you paying?* It was all there, the first words out of Darren's mouth. Alec had been too naïve to realize that when he replied, *Yes, anything*, he'd got himself a kept man, a toy boy. Not a friend at all.

Mrs. Stokes finally made it over the threshold of the living room and began working her way towards one of the chairs. Darren was visible as a flash of marigold-coloured hair in the hall before he ducked into the kitchen. "Well now," said Mrs. Stokes, parking her walker before one of the chairs and lowering herself gingerly down. "I will admit I'd been hoping for great-grandchildren, but you seem like a nice boy."

“I’m sorry?” Alec said, shocked out of his unpleasant thoughts. The old lady had an apron on, with a duster in the pocket. Her thin white hair was pinned high in a bun. Her limbs dithered as she moved, and her reedy voice was sweet. He felt she ought not even to know of such things as gay people, let alone be eyeing him up like a matchmaker trying to place an available bride. “You *know* that Darren is...?”

“Gay, dear? Of course I do. It was always rather obvious. Better than what his father is, or his brother, for that matter. He’s a good boy and he’s had grief enough in his life. I hope you’re going to change that.”

Darren brought in the tray. A teapot covered with a knitted cosy, the shape of a woolly hat, stood beside mismatched cups and a plate containing two biscuits to share between the three of them. He noticed Alec’s gaze and smiled unconvincingly. “Not feeling much like eating, yet.”

But Alec suspected he was being offered all the food in the house. It was like squatting in the hut of the chief of a savage tribe—he would have to eat, even if he was being given live grubs. Fortunate then that the biscuits were merely stale and chipped custard creams.

Terracotta-coloured tea tasted of tannin mixed with wood shavings. Alec took a sip for the sake of manners, put it down again with a clatter, and caught Darren watching him with a puzzled, worried frown. “Mrs. Stokes, I’m not sure how you expect me to... I think you may have got the... I haven’t actually known Darren very long.”

Was the old lady in on the act too? Did she see him as a convenient source of revenue? Oh no, surely not. Someone so cobweb-like, so near to her final accounting, would not be involved in... His dazed thoughts balked. He wished for analgesics, or the chance to go back to bed until the headache and the muzziness were gone. What exactly *was* he imagining here, anyway? That this poor, frail old lady was pimping her grandson out? Deliberately. Knowingly? Wasn’t that rather a ridiculous thought?

“Well you know, dear, he’s never brought anyone to the house before. And you must like him or you wouldn’t have come.”

“Nan,” said Darren uncomfortably, fidgeting on the edge of his wickerwork chair. He tried to catch Alec’s eye. When Alec evaded his gaze, Darren’s mouth compressed into a thin line. Those dark green eyes became almost black, hot with resentment and defiance. “Alec’s not—”

“This is all a bit of a shock for him, I can see that.”

Alec placed his half-eaten biscuit back on the tray, watching his fingers, studying the chipped plate and the buckled metal tray with its olde worlde faux map of the world peeling from the top. He was being rude. Darren saw it, the old lady saw it, he knew it himself, corrosive as guilt inside, bitter as the tea.

He was being insular too, unthinking. Snobbish, even. People *did* grow up in places like this, and undoubtedly they weren’t *all* drug addicts, prostitutes and pimps. Besides, Alec’s mother would have something to say about not being polite to the help. “I...am sorry, Mrs. Stokes. I’m not feeling too well this morning and I’m a little out of sorts... I...”

If only he could get away. If only *they* could get away, he and Darren, go somewhere private to talk. This always seemed to happen when other people got involved—he doubted himself, his own instincts, even his own desires. Had everything been his own naivety, none of it—so sublime, so complicated—actually real?

“So when are you going to make an honest man of him?”

Darren catapulted out of his seat, slammed his sloshing teacup down on the plastic table, making the legs bend. “*Nan!* Fuck.”

Well that was not planned, Alec thought, noticing with an oddly detached humour that tearing at one’s hair was not confined to Victorian melodrama. Darren had got hold of two handfuls of his long curls and was clutching them, speechless. His mouth worked for a moment, and then he said again, “Fuck,” and strode into the kitchen and back, standing at the doorway with his fists on his hips, like Superman confronting the villain of the hour. “*Nan*, for fuck’s sake!”

All the loose skin on her seemed to gather up, pulling back together like the darns straining at the elbows of her jumper. She had a look as sharp as flint and she turned it on Darren now. “I won’t have that language in my house. Go and wash your mouth out, young man.”

Darren retreated, cowed, though the look he levelled at Alec as he went said “help” and “this is all your fault” and “why the fuck did you have to come anyway?” Alec couldn’t remember ever meeting a man with more eloquent eyes.

He must have got that from his grandmother because, faded as it was, her gaze too spoke volumes. She was finding all of this diverting. A wicked twinkle danced among the creases and crow’s-feet. She took a sip of tea, looked up again as the windows rattled with the deep boom bass sound of music being played deafeningly loud from a car stereo outside. And, as she did, the impishness was blasted away. She flinched. The patches of warm blood in her cheeks drained, leaving her corpse yellow.

“You’ll have to forgive my impatience, Alec. I don’t expect to last the year out. Time is not on my side.”

Alec opened his mouth to reply and the delivery of words from his brain failed somewhere around nose height. “I’m,” he started, as silence returned, unsettlingly loud, and a car door slammed. Darren re-emerged from the kitchen, tea towel in his hands. Then the front door trembled in its frame and the short hall of the house filled up with knocking as with barbed wire.

“Ah, bloody hell.” Darren pressed the tea towel to his face, covering his expression with a veil of performing frogs. The knocking redoubled, shaking the window now too, driving the neighbour’s dogs into a duet of fury.

For a moment the three of them seemed suspended, as in a film. Alec turned to watch the door, half-expecting it to grow tentacles or for the Blob to slowly seep in from beneath the sill.



“Isn’t anyone going to...?” he said, at the same moment as Mrs. Stokes began laboriously hauling herself to her feet and a scratching sound heralded the lock turning as if by itself.

The rain must have stopped. Now knives of sunshine stabbed in—jangling in his aching skull, bouncing off water-slick pavement, wet, grey-stone houses, empty yards and polished silver BMW. Then a form outside eclipsed it and, in the sudden darkness, the door burst open, rebounding off the wall, revealing the cause of the deep dip in the plaster, the radiation of cracks in the right-hand passage wall.

“Have I come at a bad time?” The man, framed in an arch of dazzling light, had the look of a pub-quiz lothario. Long hair the colour of tarnish curled over the open collar of a fake designer shirt. A gold sovereign dangled around his neck on a chain as wide as Alec’s finger. A rounded paunch, and a bulldog tattoo on the wrist of one arm like a bruise, beneath three bracelets of heavy gold. Something in the back of Alec’s mind said “football hooligan”, and a jolt of fight-or-flight adrenaline made him feel sick all over again.

“Why, Darren, I din’t know you’d be here. Specially din’t know you’d brought a guest.” The sweetly mocking tone in that cigarette-roughened voice made the hackles stand up on the back of Alec’s neck.

“Yeah, well, we’ll be going now.” Darren flung the tea towel onto the kitchen table, drew himself up. Brittle iron blackened the gaze he threw at Alec, pleading for something. “Right, Alec? We’ll be going right now.”

“Alec?” The man in the doorway pushed his hair back behind his ears, leaving furrows glistening across the top of his head. He took out the pack of cigarettes that distended his top pocket and lit one. “Ain’t someone gonna introduce us?”

Outside, the morning’s rainfall steamed up from the pavement in spirals. Within, the hall filled up with curlicues of smoke, and the cheese and peanut smell of old sweat.

“This is m’dad,” said Darren darkly, his flexible face dragged down at the corners by sullenness. “And Dad...Alec’s none of your fucking business.”

His father? Alec swallowed. The man had not stepped any farther into the house than the doormat. There was no way out of the door, except by going past him, and he had such a presence! Fire in one hand, the gnarled knuckles of the other curled around a Union Jack belt buckle. It was rather hideous when he smiled, and the expression pulled his face into a shape that resembled Darren. Was this what Darren would look like in twenty years’ time? Horrifying. “Um...excuse me. I...we were...just going.”

Mr. Stokes took a step forward. He was grinning now, smoke-stained teeth brown in the ugly twist of smile. “You’re this year’s Max,” he said with slow amusement. “Fuck me. He never did bring them home before. But this is much better.” He indicated a seat with a great sweep of hand, a spraying arc of ash. Wetting his lips with his tongue he put on a false, mock-polite voice. “Do sit down. Perhaps we shall have some tea?”

Unconsciously, at the mention of tea, Alec looked at Mrs. Stokes. She had fallen back into her chair, and her eyes were vacant, her face empty and sunken. Stokes followed his gaze, shrugged. “The old bitch is senile. Needs to be put in a home. That’s what I come about. But now I’m here, I think it’s a good idea if you and me has a bit of a chat. Sit down, Mr...?”

He moved into the living room, his reeking aura pushing Alec backwards. The edge of a seat nudged him in the backs of the knees, and Stokes took another step, crowding Alec towards the chair. Behind him, Darren rubbed his wrists one by one as he eyed the door. “I...” said Alec, damp and cigarette smoke making his lungs tighten within him. He coughed for a minute, short, dry wretched coughs that took his mind off the fact that Stokes had come even closer, crowding into his space. As he did so he thought, *My father wouldn’t take this. My father would be as polished and machinelike as he ever gets. This... oik would break himself like a monkey punching a hedge trimmer, trying to do this to him.*

“I...” He coughed again, made a sudden lunge sideways and got the side table with the Majorcan flamenco-dancer doll on it between himself and Darren’s father. “I don’t think I will.”

“Suit yourself.” Stokes shrugged. His smile took on a new level of self-satisfaction as he rubbed his chin with a scratch of stubble. “You stand then, while I tell you what I wants you to do for me. Firstly, I don’t want no piddling little presents this time. No two thousands here and there. I want my car paid off. I want a house, somewhere nice. No cheap shit, neither. Something decent, that’ll impress the ladies, yeah?”

Darren had not yet closed the front door. He stood in it, back braced, as though he pushed it open against a tide of incoming water, and breathed in, a soft, slow hiss through gritted teeth. “You remember what I said to you last time, Dad. You try it and I’ll—”

“I’m just telling the gentleman where he stands.” Stokes lowered himself into Alec’s vacated chair, spreading his arms wide across the back of it. “You see, Alec, my Darren has this way with the poofters. Fucking useless he might be but they’re round him like honey, giving him presents. ‘Oh, Darren, suck my knob an’ I’ll give you a thousand pounds.’ And he...he loves it. He can pick ’em a mile off, flaming little queer that he is.”

Darren laughed twice, explosive *ha*’s that sounded as if he’d been kicked in the stomach. Looking away, Alec caught the old lady’s flinch, as if she had started to talk, thought better of it. Afraid? Or ashamed?

He wished now he had sat down after all; it would have been easier to absorb this when his legs weren’t trembling under him. They’d stopped at a service station on the way here, got coffee, but had not been able to face food. Now his stomach formed a negative pressure in his belly, and the matching void of his chest ached around emptiness. His head throbbed, and he thought for a moment he might crumple inwards, implode, vanish in a pop of darkness and wasted dreams.

Sidling out from behind the table, he grabbed on to the soiled wood of the living room doorway, Bakelite light switch nudging his finger ends. This was worse than the cricket bat to the shoulder. His soul was more tender to assault than his body.

Half out into the street now, one scuffed trainer on the doorstep, Darren raised his gaze from the skirting board, even the red-gold vibrancy of his hair looking dim around a face gone green. *Guilt?* Alec thought, withering inside.

“See he’s good at picking the types that don’t want their families or their work to know. And I can arrange that, no problem. You get to fuck him, I don’t tell anyone. Call it...a management fee, okay?”

Not the old lady, but the father! Oh God. He’d been thinking it earlier, thinking this very thing, earlier. That it was, that it might be a-a plan. Some kind of um, oh God, some kind of escape from poverty and nylon, stale food and disgusting plates. He’d been thinking it—he really had, and now...

Darren licked his lips, and the gesture that had always given Alec a jolt of surprise and joy now reminded him of Stokes.

Straightening up, Darren looked Alec in the eye, as he had that day at the marina—scared, resolute—and Alec said, “Is that true?”

He had time to hear his words twice—the shape of them in his mouth, and then the sound, independent, reaching his ear a moment later. In that second they transformed from innocent enquiry to betrayal. He thought of Saint-Malo and the taste of ice cream under blazing sunshine. The memory of it was sweet on his tongue. The first thing Darren had wanted badly and had not asked him to pay for. Since that day, he had spent what he wanted to spend, paid for only those things he wanted to pay for. Darren had asked for nothing.

Alec’s thoughts dazzled with this realization, as his eyes had been dazzled with the sea under the bows of the *Lady Jane*, when they had done Brittany together and it had all been laughter and first love.

And then Darren’s punch smacked him in the nose. He reeled back, clutching his face, coughing. He hadn’t even seen it coming. All of a sudden his legs were trembling, a hot lava of pain spreading out from the centre of his face. His nose throbbed with a deep, panicky ache, telling him how fragile it was. Blood pooled in the hollow of his hands as he gingerly touched the bone, sure it was broken. He’d played rugby, yes, at school, but no one had ever hit him in the face before and the sense of violation, vulnerability—the sense of a forbidden boundary shattered—made his chest shake despite himself, his eyes fill with tears.

He blinked them back, fumbled for his handkerchief and stanching the blood. By the time he raised his head, it was to find the front door flapping in a grit-laden wind. The sound of an engine, retreating down the road, dwindled like his pride. “Darren...? Darren!”

*You got something solid to stand on, yeah?* Darren’s words from last night echoed in his painful head in reproof. *You own it now and you can’t be outed, you can’t be blackmailed, you can’t be fucking shoved around.*

Were those the words of a man who was in cahoots with his awful family to fleece his paying customers? No. The throbbing in Alec's face joined with his pulse until he felt his whole body was a wound. No, of course they weren't. He shouldn't have entertained the thought. Darren was no more responsible for his family than Alec was for *his*. *Oh God, what have I done?*

He walked out into the middle of the narrow street, ran down to the turn-off where the estate met the grubby 1960s shopping precinct. There was no van in sight, but as he passed the hairdresser's peeling pink frontage, the phone in his pocket burst into "Ode to Joy" and he snatched it up like a lifeline.

"Alec? Alec, darling, is that you?"

He'd thought he had already plumbed the depths, gone so far down into lightlessness that the pressure had begun to crumple him. This proved there was still farther to fall. The note of tears in his mother's voice was like the first crack in his diver's faceplate, telling him that there was a time to panic, and it was now.

"Mother. What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's..." She squeaked. He could hear a strange metallic rumble and then she blew her nose. He was already looking for a taxi rank—no such luck, obviously. Dear God, if his mother was blowing her nose on toilet paper, things were serious.

The muffled wiping noises segued into a gulp. "It's... Oh Alec. Please...please come back. I can't—not over the phone..." She broke off to sob. He covered the phone with both hands, pressing it to his ear in lieu of putting his arms around her.

"Mother, please tell me what's wrong. What can I do?"

"It's—it's Caroline," she gasped, and despite the two hands he almost dropped the phone. He lurched away from the hairdresser's, flyers and crisp packets and the forlorn white paper from portions of chips tangling around his ankles, as his other life caught up with him.

Caroline? He'd phoned her in the middle of the night. She'd been upset. He'd upset her. He'd destroyed in one message the life she'd been hoping for this entire year. He'd rejected her, gracelessly. Accidentally insulted her. Now he remembered the gurgle of liquid into cut glass. Twice. The tinny innocent scritch of a bottlecap unscrewing. She'd been drinking. Wine, or something stronger?

"What's wrong with Caroline? Is she all right?"

His mother's voice was thick, as if she'd been crying all morning, a nasal, miserable whine. "Alec I can't... I need you to be here. I need to be able to see you."

What if she'd been drinking hard? What if she'd started an hour after he should have shown up and hadn't stopped until it was all gone? What if she went up on deck after, to dry her tears, to look at the stars and get some perspective, and the cold dawn air made her head spin, sea swell and drunkenness tipping her over the rail into the ink-black water beneath. All the neighbours stirring in their bunks at the splash, maybe checking the time, going back to sleep as she drowned. Marina staff finding her floating, white hair and white trousers and blue bloated face, tossing up like driftwood against the harbour gate.

“Yes,” he said. Beneath his breastbone a scream was trying to force its way out. The pressure of keeping it bottled up made his own voice tight. “Don’t worry. I’m on my way. I have to phone off now, ring for a taxi. It—it will be all right. Bye. Bye then.”

He keyed in the number of a taxi firm, looked at the rubbish in the gutter. A gust of wind skirled through it, blowing it swirling and rattling in hundreds of pieces down the street. Yes, that was exactly how he felt. *Caroline. Oh my God.* But there was Darren too to think of. If he left now, upped and disappeared, after the vile thing he’d said, would Darren ever forgive him? Would he ever come back?

He gave the taxi firm Mrs. Stokes’s address, bent and picked up the driest, least vile piece of paper from the gutter. It was a flyer for a ceilidh at the Pig and Whistle (live music, pub skittles, drinks half-price before nine). The back, unprinted and unstained, would do very well.

The door still creaked on its hinges, fallen not quite closed enough to latch itself. Darren’s father’s BMW still squatted in the street. Pulse hammering and the fog in his head lit white with suppressed panic, Alec leaned on the bonnet of the car, brought his fountain pen from the inside pocket of his blazer. But what to write? *I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.* Was that powerful enough to undo betrayal? *I was hungover and stupid. Please come back. Missing you, and my nose hurts.* Too self-absorbed?

As he pondered, a shabby blue Audi with *Plymouth Cabs* printed in white on its doors turned the corner, drew to a halt a bare foot away. “You wanted a taxi?”

“Yes. Give me a moment.”

Nothing but the truth, then. They’d surely run through every form of deception known to man. Maybe it was time to start being honest. Caroline would have told him so if she...

No. Clamping down on that thought before he ended up crouching in the road, hands over his head, rocking to and fro, he wrote the message and folded it. Swallowing hard, he eased the door open and sidled back into the musty-cabbage-and-ciggy-smelling dim of the hall. He felt like a burglar. Standing, taking in the silence, he could hear a clock ticking somewhere, and then an irregular muttering of thuds and footsteps upstairs.

The darkness eased slightly, and his unsettled heart gave a great lurch as the white blur framed in the doorway of the living room became Mrs. Stokes, her wary eyes staring at his face. She raised a warning finger, set it to her lips, and whispered, “Darren’s not back yet. Better leave.”

An empty shoebox came hurtling down the stairs and bounced off Alec’s shoulder. “*He’s upstairs,*” said Mrs. Stokes, unnecessarily. “Turning out drawers. I told him I didn’t think the deeds were in the house, but of course he doesn’t believe me. Better go, dear, before he comes down.”

“I’ll just...” Alec waved the folded note at her by way of explanation. Diving into the kitchen, he slipped it into the pocket of Darren’s coat. On the way back he paused again, struck by the white frame of the arch into the living room, the way the old lady in her chair looked like a mummy bricked up in her

pyramid, only the eyes alive. “Tell Darren that Caroline... Oh. Maybe not. Never mind. Will you be all right? With *him* here?”

She gave him a young girl’s smile, puckish and amazingly merry. “Oh yes, dear. He may shout, but there’s a lot to be said for being deaf.” Yet still it was the imagery of death that he carried away with him. Death rode dark by his side in the back of the cab, entombed or drowned depending on the moment and his mood.

Outside the hotel door the coiled spring that had led him thus far unwound its furthest and stopped. Alec found himself looking at the carved and gilded square, reading *Rm 104* over and over. It had been unbearable, on the way, not to know. Now it seemed unbearable to find out.

“Excuse me.” A chambermaid rolled her trolley of new towels past, covered porcelain bowls that smelled of soap and roses jangling on the tray beneath. He heard her pass—noisy and meaningless as life—down the corridor and disappear at the end. Silence returned, until at last his arm moved of itself and knocked.

As the chain inside clattered open and the lock thudded back into the magnolia wall, Alec squinched his eyes shut, concentrated on his breathing. Long, slow, deep breaths, if he could manage them. It would be so much easier if the room didn’t smell of Caroline—that cool white-almond-and-lily scent.

“My God, you look worse than I do,” she said.

His eyes snapped open. There she was, leaning in the doorway, wearing mint-green board shorts and a white blouse, mint-green leather loafers to match. Without makeup her lips were pale and her eyelids papery.

Alec recoiled the full width of the corridor, caught his heel in the curtains behind him and clutched at the window ledge to keep upright, while the wheeze that underlay his every breath made its move in the plot to take over his world. “I thought you were...aaah...”

“Hold on.” She patted down his pockets for the inhaler, handed it to him and watched while he took a dose. Everything inside started to uncurl, to expand. It started in relief, moved through joy but could not be stopped there.

“I thought you were dead!” he croaked, lurching forward to hug her tight, to reassure himself by touch that she was still really here. “Oh thank God, I thought... I was so... And listen, I’m so sorry. I’m really sorry about last night—about all of this. I didn’t mean for any of it to happen. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you, and I was so terrified that you’d had an accident, or maybe even...”

Caroline was slender and still in his arms. Instead of returning the hug, she pushed him away gently and rolled her eyes. But her expression had softened into amused exasperation. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Mother made me think...” He fell silent. It was scarcely worth finishing that sentence. His mother had numerous ways of getting him to do what she wanted. Making him think that some dreadful accident had befallen his fiancée was not the lowest she had ever stooped. She was in her own way every bit as ruthless as his father, and he fell for the emotional manipulation every single time.

“Oh,” said Caroline. “Oh. Yes, well. Welcome to melodrama mansion. Won’t you come in?”

Alec scarcely recognized what he was feeling now. The emotion had built and built over the holidays, over his whole life, like a gas leak in a closed room. Now someone had opened a door and applied a match. Stuffing the inhaler deep into his pocket, he strode into the suite of rooms, found his mother on the sofa surrounded by tissues. “Albinoni’s Adagio” throbbed slow and mournful from the stereo, doing its best to turn the crocuslike saffron-painted room into a suitable scene for a family tragedy.

Alec switched it off. “You made me think she was dead.”

His mother wore grey—a draped dress of grey linen that might have understudied as a toga. She’d have drawn a fold of it over her head if she could, he thought, thinking of funerary statuary, stele, the mother of Christ at the foot of the cross. She had set the scene so well he half-expected the pearly gates to be floating outside the window over the moony dazzle of the sea.

But they were real tears, turning her eyes bloodshot, swelling her nose. “Caroline said you were...she said you told her you were...”

“Gay. Yes, Mother. I think I am.”

“Oh, my poor baby. What have I done to you?”

Perhaps there was only so much guilt in his makeup to spare, and Darren and Caroline had got all of it. He certainly couldn’t find it now. He knew what she wanted, of course. *It’s not your fault. Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean it. I don’t want to hurt you... I’ve changed my mind, I’m not gay at all. Yes, it was all a silly phase. Of course the marriage is still on. I’m sorry I ever had an independent thought.*

He sneaked a glance at Caroline. She looked weary and brittle, but she saw him looking and raised an ironic eyebrow. Encouraged, he said, “I fail to see why it is any of your business, Mother. It’s certainly not worth making all this song and dance about. Being gay is neither illegal nor immoral, and as far as I know you can’t inherit it from your parents. Now this has come as something of a shock for me too, so I’d appreciate it if you left me alone to deal with it in my own way. I will report back when I have something constructive to say.”

Turning on his heel he marched out, slammed the door behind him, held on to the windowsill again to stop himself from kicking the wall. As he did so, he heard the door open and shut. Caroline tucked a hand into the bend of his elbow. “Interesting speech. Slightly pompous, but I can’t fault the sentiment. Was it addressed to me too, or can we go and have lunch? I hear The Loft does an excellent dry toast with aspirin on the side.”

The fury burst in a firework of laughter. Alec covered her hand with his own—it felt natural to do so, now that she knew it wasn't a poor substitute for something else. "You really are the best. And if only I was attracted to women, I'd marry you like a shot."

"After spending some time with your family, you'd have to catch me first." She cocked her head to give him a sideways smile that belied the bags under her eyes. "So. Lunch?"

"Lunch."

The relief of having her restored to him as a friend buoyed him up all the afternoon. It was not until he was back in the *Lady Jane*, forcing himself to make grilled halloumi and salad for supper while the laptop booted up, that the feeling of new self-confidence waned and worry about Darren took its place. Darren's phone remained off, but—now he knew about the situation there—that was no longer the shock it had been.

Darren would come back, probably, as he had come back after the theft, as Alec had come back to him after the revelation of his engagement. And if he didn't, well at least Alec knew where to start looking for him. Mrs. Stokes would be his ally there, he thought, remembering her with a fondness that surprised him. In the meantime, he had made other promises that he could fulfill without leaving the comfort of his sofa.

Shot of espresso in one hand, he fired up spreadsheets and stock portfolios and reached for the phone. Gordon was, as always, working late at the office.

"Gordon? I need you to do some checking up for me. Max Mortensen of Pinnacle Investments—I need you to dig me some dirt."

He made cocoa for bedtime and sat on the edge of the round bed to drink it, wondering if Darren had got his note yet and, if so, what he would do about it. But it was the other number he called, last of all. "Are you...Krissy? This is Alec, Darren's friend. I may have some information for you."



## Chapter Fifteen

*Fucker*, Darren thought, as his hands juddered on the steering wheel and blood seeped into his palm from the split knuckle. *That fucker*.

He wasn't quite sure which one he meant. His father, for being the vile piece of pond-scum lowlife that he was, or Alec. Oh yeah. It was Alec. Alec who had been given the choice to believe Darren or to believe *that man*, and had chosen that man. *How could he? How could he, the fucking bastard?*

At the thought, his grip tightened unevenly on the wheel, sending the van lurching out into the centre of the road. The oncoming lorry swerved to avoid him. A kind of premonition went through him like a bullet. He could almost see the blue, plastic-sided container lorry jack-knifing across the road. He wouldn't be able to stop in time. He'd crumple against the steering wheel as the waterfall of smashed windscreen poured over him and the van bored itself into the oncoming tyre. The innocent family behind him would cannon into the back of him. Then the lorry's unstoppable momentum would turn over their car, send them spinning into the opposite carriageway like a ball into skittles.

Slamming on the brakes, he wrenched the wheel back, swerved onto his own side of the road and careened past. The lorry got its tail end under control, accelerated away, horn blaring and the driver shouting obscenities through his open window. The car behind overtook Darren, its lighter, shriller horn joining the din.

As soon as he found the next turnoff, he left the road and stopped in a long, suburban leafy street. Unbuckling, he hurled himself out of the door to pace off the adrenaline. He shook and cursed at the top of his voice until the insane energy had drained and the shakes subsided, and a low cold sickness had replaced it in the pit of his stomach. Then he sat back down in the driver's seat and thought about being hungry and how very much he wanted to go home.

Maybe he should phone, see if *that man* had left, if it was safe to come back? The thought brought the whole morning back into focus. He remembered bringing Alec into the house, the pride and excitement he'd felt. Nan still looked to him how she'd looked when he was six, gold and red and copper hair swept up into one of those twisty styles at the back. Maybe a bit of silver in it—but only enough to make her look wise. She'd been rounded and comfortable then, and that's how he saw her now, half queen, half mother. He'd always thought she dressed well—things that matched, bold flowery blouses over rebellious slacks. He'd always been proud of the house, so tidy, so clean, welcoming and cheerful and, yeah, maybe a bit small but did they really need anything bigger?

And then Alec had walked through the front door and the look on his face...

The shivers started up again. He looked around for something to eat, found a mostly empty jar in the door pocket and rubbed a finger around the inside, sucked the burst of too-sweet artificial raspberry-flavour jam from his finger, and fought the tears that were welling up and making the pavement blur in his sight.

Just the look on Alec's face had been enough. It took away the years and years of nurture and love, all the hard work and hard times bravely borne together. It made him see his Nan as a balding old woman with liver spots on her clawlike hands, in second-hand polyester slacks and a jumper darned to cobwebs.

He'd been so conscious then, under Alec's shocked gaze, of cramped squalor, the smell of his own cheap deodorant, the geyser over the sink. *Oh my God, do they not even have central heating?*

He'd brought Alec to share with him something that he loved, and Alec had felt contempt.

*He's a fucking rich boy. Deep down, they're all the same. They don't understand nothing. He thinks he's so fucking brilliant, and he thinks I'm... He thinks I'm a whore. Or he wouldn't have believed it. Is that true? Wanker!*

Cars on the dual carriageway flicked across the end of the road, the sound of them oddly peaceful, like the sound of a perpetual wave coming in. At the thought, he badly needed the sea, needed to be out there, empty of everything except the swell of the water and the burn of his muscles and the long scary exhilarating thrill of speeding helpless towards the shore. Even when he dreamed of flying, there was a board under his feet holding him up.

Darren felt in his shorts pocket for his phone. Maybe he should call Alec and ask if that man had gone yet. He could ask at the same time if there was some kind of apology Alec would like to make. It could be, couldn't it, no more sinister than the fact that Alec had been taken by surprise? It could be that when he'd thought it over he'd see his reaction for the insult it was. Hurt feelings aside, the man had dumped his girlfriend only last night for Darren's sake. Would he really have done something like that if he wasn't at least a little serious about this thing? Alec had done a lot of forgiving in this relationship. Maybe it *was* his turn.

No phone. Oh yeah, that was right, it'd been raining and he'd put it in the pocket of his denim. Now where...? He opened the back of the van, looked in at the wreckage inside. That swerve had sent the kettle flying. It lay on the floor in a puddle with board wax splurged down one side and a dent in the other. The duvet was soaked, the sleeve of his wetsuit tacky with wax.

"Uh," he said, too numb to react, and was bending down to lift the quilt when memory flashed on the vivid picture of blue material spilled over orange cupboard. Oh yeah, of course. It had been raining when they arrived, he'd had his phone in his jacket pocket, and he'd left his jacket at Nan's.

Down the side of the mattress a glimpse of blue plastic proved to be the tail end of a packet of rich tea biscuits, soft and stale with age, mashed into quarters and crumbs. He opened the doors wide and ate the biscuits, scarcely aware of the taste beyond a faint impression of gluey sweetness. If it had rained in this happy suburb at all, even the evidence was gone. The sky loomed heavily blue above and a dove called *coo*

*coo, coo coo* from one of the sycamore trees that lined the road. The houses creaked to themselves as though the sun was warming their old arthritic bones.

Yeah. Alec'd proved himself before. He deserved another chance. Darren swilled the gummy mixture down with the last drops of tepid bottled water. Shoots of fondness cracked the concrete car-park barrenness of his soul as he thought about what Alec would be doing now. Panicking, probably. Hanging on to his inhaler with both hands as he worked his way through defensiveness and self-hatred and the knowledge that Darren had taken the car and marooned him. Poor bastard.

He'd probably be a quivering wreck of gratitude when Darren got back, desperate to be forgiven. *Better bloody had be. Or else!*

The food and the flare of defiance and hope carried him back to the house. Actually maybe it wasn't hope exactly. More like the state where pain recedes enough to allow rational thought. But when he drew up outside and his father's car was still there, even that precarious calm thinned and tore like a wet paper bag.

He picked his way over clumps of long grass, dandelion heads, like the shaved crowns of monks, sticking up amongst the tumbled bricks of the garden wall. Rebuilding that was a job he'd been meaning to do for so long he'd stopped even seeing it. It did look a bit rubbish, to be fair.

There was a kind of stir in his belly and chest at the thought of seeing Alec again. Not only fury or disappointment, something almost good. Despite everything, he was still looking forward to it, still anticipating, with a kind of uncurling flutter of joy, being in the same room as Alec, being able to touch that otter-pelt hair, if he wanted, being within range of that diffident, heart-melting smile.

Cautiously pushing the door open inch by inch, he found it snatched out of his hands. It hit something metallic with a rattling clang. He took a step back, ready to run and saw Nan behind her walker in the doorway. "You can't come in," she said. "Not now."

She shoved a plastic carrier bag at him, his jacket neatly rolled up in the bottom, a slice of cake and a packet of crisps on top. "You need to go. He's in the back garden, looking in the privy, but if he sees you, he'll remember you were here first. He'll guess I gave the deeds to you. Please, Darren, you need to go."

"But, Alec," he insisted, the pleasant flutter turning into a knock like a badly tuned engine. They'd done well with apologies so far—both of them. Where was Alec anyway? Why wasn't he bursting through the door with a long explanation in a convoluted stutter and maybe a bunch of flowers? "He needs a lift back. I've got to..."

"It's like a fucking madhouse in here." Darren's gut clenched as the sound of his father's voice bellowed through the house. A shadow moved on the frosted glass of the back door, and Darren ducked into the cover of the front door, staying out of sight. "Who the hell is it now?"

"It's just Sangeeta from number nine, dear." Darren's Nan made go-away motions with the hand not clamped around her walker. "She says Aarif's bike has lost its wheel and can she borrow a spanner?"

“But Alec...?” Darren put his head down, whispered it urgently.

“Not here. He left moments after you did.” Her brow creased and she twisted her hand to and fro on the metal bar, making a squeaking noise. “Something about Caroline?” The frown deepened. He could almost see her chasing down some elusive thought gone to ground so deep in the tangle of neurons it needed bloodhounds to sniff it out. “No, that’s not quite...is it? Oh what...?”

The kitchen door squealed, dragging across the lino, shedding putty from around its shaking window. “Tell her she can fucking buy her own fucking spanners, or d’you want me to come out there and tell her myself?” The shadow had darkened to a solid thing. Darren caught a glimpse of arm as the door ground reluctantly open and then his Nan said, “Please go,” and shut the front door in his face.

Infected by her urgency, he flung the bag with his coat in it onto the passenger’s seat, drove to the nearest trucker’s café and parked in the car park there while he tried to process what this meant.

Alec had...gone back to Caroline? Yeah, that made sense. *He thinks I had blackmail in mind all along. He thinks I picked him up entirely so I could bleed him dry of cash.*

He could almost feel the weight of the two thousand pounds in his hands, soft, well-worn cash with a kind of warmth to it. The thud as it hit Kyle’s table sounded like a heartbeat in his mind, repeating over and over. *And—shit—why wouldn’t he think that? Apart from the blackmail part it was... Maybe he was coming down with a cold, because his throat felt like sandpaper when he swallowed, his nose felt swollen and blocked. Apart from the blackmail it was kind of true. Take his money, give him sex in return? Why wouldn’t he think that? It was pretty much what you did to Max.*

Oh, there was a scary thing. A thought that made him feel sorry for Max, ’cause the bastard must have known he was being used. Maybe he didn’t know how to get out of it either? Maybe even he wondered sometimes how it had all gone so horribly wrong.

So Alec was like punishment? Like a learning experience, to teach him what he’d done wrong with Max? Alec had gone back to Caroline, and maybe she’d tell him where to get off, help him find some nice Oxbridge bloke with a school tie. And Darren, yeah, Darren would have learned a valuable lesson about not mixing sex and money. And the story would have a fucking moral ending and all would be right with the world.

Well fuck that. Darren put his elbows in the crucks of the steering wheel and his head in his hands, and sat for what seemed like hours, too broken to move. What the hell was the point? This had been what his Nan’s Mills and Boon novels called “the One”, and he’d screwed it up. So what was the point of doing anything from now on?

It was his bladder that got him moving again, undignified though that was. Desperate for the loo, he went into the caff, had a good wash in the facilities. Then he ate sausage, chips and beans, and tea in a polystyrene cup with the label dangling down outside, mentally thumbing his nose at Alec’s snobbery.

Maybe he'd drive to Dover, get on a car ferry and find casual work in France. How hard could it be? Yeah, or maybe he'd drive to Dover, get on a car ferry and drive to India. There'd be some hippy commune there, left over from the sixties, wouldn't there, where he could grow a long beard and chase enlightenment and get some free love or whatever they used to call it.

He finished the tea, stabbed at the bag with a plastic spoon until all the leaves came oozing out, and reckoned he could read his fortune in there easily enough, lack of psychic powers notwithstanding. Nothing. No future. Where was he going to get the money for a ferry ticket? A passport? Whoring himself out was starting to look like the root of all evils, but what else paid enough?

Bringing out his wallet, he found it empty. Counting his change gave him three pounds twenty-eight. How the hell did you run away from your whole life on a sum like that?

A shadow fell across his table, dimming the glint of the new fifty-pence piece. He looked up, and his stomach made a swooping drop. A big guy had stopped a few paces away and was standing, watching him speculatively. The guy's buttons strained and his shirt gapped over his beer belly. A quick impression of cut-off sleeves and muscle, multicoloured tattoos, buzz-cut mouse-coloured hair and intent stare was enough to make Darren drop his gaze fast—shit—and check his outfit. Was he looking particularly queer today? Was he giving out "defenceless homo, please beat me up" vibes? It didn't seem unlikely.

The guy squeezed into the seat opposite, smiled. "You need a lift anywhere?" and Darren had to laugh, shaky with relief and misplaced adrenaline. God. Talk about a fucking sign!

"Out of the country?" he asked.

"I can do that. See that rig?" The guy pointed out the window to the great white articulated lorry with *Trans-Europa Budapest* emblazoned along the side. "That's mine. You can come along, warm my seat, no problem."

Darren looked out. The weather had closed in again, the sky a heavy grey that mirrored his mood. It would be a thick, dark night, with drizzle seeping through the perished rubber seals of the van, soaking through the quilt. His pillow would smell of Alec, and he'd lie there and shiver, watching the ceiling, wondering how a man could go from being stuck on, limpet tight and annoying, to walking out without even leaving a message, all in the space of a quarter of an hour.

*Maybe I shouldn't have punched him? Maybe that's what he couldn't take? Too sensible to put up with that kind of shit. He wouldn't have really thought I'd been blackmailing him, would he? He'd have given me time to explain. Wouldn't he?*

But he wouldn't, and he hadn't. Alec had left, no message, no second chance. It had to be the punch, didn't it? He'd forgiven so many other things. He wouldn't really have thought...

*Oh fuck him.*

Darren looked back at the trucker. Who wasn't so bad, even if he was currently eating the last slice of Darren's toast. Darren'd kind of gone off food anyway. The guy had nice hands, good teeth and patience. He wasn't pressing for an answer, even if his smile was starting to look a bit strained around the edges.

"Yeah," Darren said. "Why not? I could do with a change of scene. What's your name?"

The guy flicked the scuffed name badge clipped to his top pocket with his thumbnail. His black-rimmed grey eyes crinkled at the edges with a kind of paternal tolerance, as if making allowances for an unpromising child. "Kevin," he said with a hint of unnecessary emphasis. "D'you seriously need to know?"

*Wanker*, thought Darren, but he still pushed his plate away and followed as Kevin left, swinging out of the glass and steel doors a pace behind the man. "Not really."

"Good. I'm not looking for complications."

"No shit." Damp air swirled about him as he came out into the car park. Wind blew drizzle into his side, lifted the arms of his T-shirt and stroked clammy fingers over his shoulders and chest. The *Trans-Europa* rig lay like a cold-drake curled across five car-parking spaces, drowsing, and goose pimples trickled down Darren's arms and itched across the back of his neck. "Neither am I. Let me get my coat."

He pulled the deeds for his Nan's house out of the glove compartment with distaste. Everything had been going so well until then, he couldn't help blaming the papers for where he found himself now. It would serve them right if he left them in the rain, tossed them under the truck's monster wheels as he sped away. But no, scratch that stupid thought. None of it was Nan's fault, unless she could be blamed for being born poor and trying to make the best of it.

The rain picked up, turning from drizzle to downpour. He shoved the deeds into the plastic carrier bag, brought out his jacket and squirmed into it, its damp arms sticking tight to his damp flesh. Across the car park, the truck rumbled into life, and yellow headlights blazed through chill grey water, shining upon him like one of those beams from heaven beloved of classical painters. The cab glowed gold, warm and steamy. Darren thought how good it would be to rest on its broad seats, windscreen wipers flicking, radio playing, getting farther and farther away from all his problems.

He grabbed his phone charger and phone, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and tried to ignore the tiny voice that told him this wasn't his best idea ever. As he did so, something crinkled beneath his fingers. What was that? Money? No, it felt too slick and glossy for cash. What then? As he drew it out, rain fell on a picture of two guys with fiddles, a buck-toothed girl with a small drum, and an unconvincing wreath of shamrocks. Not his scene at all. Why would he have put this into his pocket?

Reopening the driver's door of the van, he sat inside to be out of the rain, smoothed out the flyer and turned it over, and his train of thought stopped as if it had launched off the end of a broken bridge.

*I've had to go—family emergency. Didn't want you to think I believed what your father said, though. It's just that meeting you has been the kind of wonderful good luck one finds very hard to accept. It's so much easier to think it's all been a big lie than to credit that fate could be so very kind.*

*I was an idiot and I'm very sorry. Please forgive me?*

*I think I love you.*

*Alec*

Darren read the message through another three times, lingering on every word until stray rainfall began to wash them away. There was a low rumbling, guttural thunder, and the *Trans-Europa* rig rolled slowly forward, running lights shining, mirrors standing out like antennae around its head. It drew level with him, and a long way up, above his head, a door opened on warmth and yellow light.

"You coming?" Kevin yelled, leaning across and propping the door open. The vibrations of the engine made the car park shake beneath Darren's feet, made it hard to breathe. He sniffed furiously, trying not to show he'd been within a hair's-breadth of breaking down in tears.

Was he going? It wasn't only Alec—who after all hadn't apologized for the important thing, hadn't apologized for looking at Nan like she was a scary old witch. It was Max too, whatever reason had set him sniffing round again. "It's not over for him," Krissy had said, but it would be—it really would be—if Darren left the country. There'd be no need to face him ever again, no need to face Krissy and admit that yeah, maybe he was weak, so what? No need to tiptoe around Alec's expectations and piss off Alec's family and always let him down.

Mrs. Clarke might expect him to fight, but running away was so much easier. It didn't hurt after a while. You got used to being without whatever it was you'd lost. And dignity and pride? When had he ever had those things anyway?

He smoothed the flyer again, looked down at the words smudged across the paper, the blue ink come off on the side of his palm. Go back? Face everything? Take it all on, fight it and win? It was all very well for Mrs. Clarke to say it, she was brave. He wasn't. He just wasn't.

"The cab's getting fucking wet. You coming or what?"

"No," he said, his insides screwed up with terror and resolve and that little bit of joy that had rubbed off the paper like the ink. "Sorry. Changed my mind."

## Chapter Sixteen

Darren pulled at his tie—Alec’s tie, in fact, silk like the bonds Max had tied around his wrists. The ones that had seemed so mild and soft at first, until they’d tightened under his weight, and slipped and tightened and slid and tightened, turning thinner, softer than wire, until the hands had gone numb and he couldn’t feel them dying on the end of his arms. He rubbed his fingers now and blew on them, and as he did so one of the waiters leaned over and said, “Is there something wrong, sir,” in a tone that meant, *Please stop dirtying the cutlery*.

They’d all been there, at the yacht, when he rolled up, deliberately nonchalant, in the afternoon, the next day. Now, while he stirred carrot and ginger soup around his bowl, keeping his head down and his eyes protected from Alec’s mum’s basilisk stare, he relived it all in a slow hot seethe of humiliation and misery.

They’d looked so matched, sitting up there on deck in their teak and brass reclining chairs, with their glasses of red wine and their expensive tailored clothes. All of them had that same air of leisure and good food and good health and good opportunities, the smugness of people who couldn’t conceive of having less than a fiver in their pocket, and no future.

True, Alec’s face had glowed with joy, like someone had flicked the light switch on behind his eyes. There had been a moment there—like the TARDIS, it was bigger on the inside—when Alec’s smile was all that mattered. It had felt, for that very long instant, like he’d just come home from the end of two double shifts, kicked off his shoes, and been brought a cup of tea. No work tomorrow and the knowledge he could sleep ’til noon. Alec had looked the same, relieved, redeemed. And then his mother peered over the rail and grimaced. “Oh, darling, your bit of rough is back,” and things had gone downhill from there.

The restaurant had been Caroline’s idea. If he was trying to be fair, he could admit that it was an attempt to get them into neutral territory, somewhere public where they could not be blatantly rude to one another. But it was hard to be fair when he was still smarting from the consternation that ensued when they found out the only restaurant-suitable clothes he possessed were the ones Alec had bought him in France. The trousers had to be recovered from the yacht’s laundry basket, and the shirt from Alec’s bed, where he’d been sleeping in it ever since.

It would have been sweet, maybe. In other circumstances. Right now, though, all it did was add to Darren’s wish to be able to sink through the floor, come up again in China or Australia—somewhere no one knew who he was. It was kind of hard to be fair to any of them when he was sitting in dirty clothes, next to Alec’s chair, with Alec’s hand reassuringly, possessively on his knee, and even the waiters reflecting contempt at him like polished mirrors around Mrs. Goodchilde’s sun.



“So what do you do for a living, Mr. Stokes?”

He looked far enough up to focus on the pink diamonds of the ring on her middle finger. She had pink nails to match, and a cerise linen suit with buttons that twinkled like the ring. When she tapped the table the pads of her fingers did not touch the wood, only the ends of her nails made a sound like a dog clicking across a lino floor.

“Just stuff,” he muttered.

“I beg your pardon?”

He raised his head higher, looked her in the eye. If you crossed Ming the Merciless with a fluffy kitten and then dyed it pink, this was what you might get.

“*Stuff*,” he said again, louder, leaning to the wrong side as the waiter swooped in to remove the soup, nudging the man’s arm and making him drop the spoon so carefully balanced on the top bowl. It fell with a riotous jangle, spattering orange liquid over the gold-inlaid white marble floor, making all their neighbours turn and look.

The waiter picked it up with a sniff of disdain and looked at it as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. He caught one of the other soft-footed, white-gloved staff, and leaning in as if he was speaking of something indelicate, he said, “Monsieur has mistaken his spoons. Please bring him a new dessert spoon.”

Next to him he could see Alec’s lips inching downwards at the edges, that frown of his that made him look as sour faced as his mother, deepening in its creases. Alec squeezed his knee. He thought it was probably an attempt to reassure him everything was okay. But it wasn’t. It really wasn’t. It made him look that much more like a toy boy. A parasite, feeding off Alec’s naïve goodwill.

*I could be in France by now. Eating frogs’ legs and frites in some French transport caff. Bottle of wine, Kevin holding me down by the scruff of the neck for a quick fuck, no questions asked, no complications. And instead I’m here being shafted a whole new way.*

Was Alec worth this? Was anyone?

Mrs. Goodchilde gave a bright, false smile. “Your school then. Where did you go to school? I presume you *did* go to school. I believe that is still compulsory, though these days one can never be quite sure.”

Alec squirmed beside him as though pincers were being applied to his nether parts. “Mother!”

She had a stare. Darren watched it in operation, half thankful it wasn’t turned on him, half vengefully glad to see Alec flinching under it. If she hadn’t looked like a woman who’d never lifted a finger in her life, he’d have guessed there was an ex-teacher there. She had the kind of stare that said, *Sit down, you stupid boy, before you disgrace yourself any further.* It smouldered like spilled acid, eating its way gently inward, corroding and burning anything it touched. There’d be pain and shame, and then the shock wore off and the anger would fill its place, visceral, boiling anger that made him want to jam the fucking fish-knife through the back of her hand and make her swallow the wrong fucking spoons one by one.

And then he'd catch himself thinking it and be ashamed again.

"I'm just taking an interest, darling. I gather that *this* is the reason you've suddenly decided you're gay. Ruining, I may say, not only Caroline's life but—from what I can see—your own too. I'm simply trying to ascertain whether, apart from being ornamental in a slightly vulgar way, this...person...has anything else to recommend him."

"Mother, if... He's... If you could only hear what you sound like, you'd—"

"Because it seems to me that if you *have to* suddenly start experimenting with boys at your age, then someone like Bernie Goldstein would be much more suitable. He's a nice young man. Polite. Neat. *Clean*. And his father has a very extensive portfolio in the City."

Darren looked down the table for support. Caroline's head bent over her hands as she industriously scraped the polish off her thumbnail, her ears and the back of her neck pink with embarrassment. Alec too hunched over, watching the hand that was clamped so tight around Darren's leg that Darren could feel the bruise spreading from under it inch by inch farther as the moments passed.

At the adjoining tables, forks hovered in midair and conversation had stopped. He could feel himself being examined out of the corners of a dozen politely averted eyes, and all the smiles around the room seemed aimed at him. *Ill-educated, uncouth, gold-digging rent boy. How dare he come in here and inhabit the same space as us?*

Darren edged his chair back as waiters brought in a second course, unrecognizable pink and white stuff, arranged in a tower with curls of something glossy brown fountaining out the top. A swirl of green gunk and a swirl of white formed a kind of yin/yang symbol around the base of it. Even their food was fucking pretentious, artificial, messed about with, dishonest.

The waiter leaned down confidentially and, hovering his fingers over the cutlery, murmured, "Monsieur uses this knife now."

The smarmy little, uncalled-for insult was the last straw. The rage that had been building all afternoon broke its bounds and poured like lava up his spine. "Oh fuck you!" He sprang to his feet, watching all the heads turn, all the horrified glances from the tables full of hypocrites, because it didn't matter how rude you were so long as you did it in a lowered voice, and he was breaking the rules. "Yeah, and you too," he said, turning to look at them all.

"Darren..." Alec half-rose, reaching up for him, and he stepped away from the grasping hand, the pleading look.

"No. I'm not interested in talking to you at the moment, *Ptolemy*. I've taken enough fucking abuse for one day, thank you." He was trembling, he could sense them all waiting for his back to turn to sniff and reassure one another that oh, how very uncouth that young man was, and after they had tried their best to make him feel at home.

Alec's mouth opened and closed. He looked like he'd been kicked in the gut—green and drawn and miserable. “But, Darren, I—”

And even now there was something about the guy's helpless devotion that held him back from the big gesture, from the final severing of all links. He couldn't do it, he couldn't kick the guy while he was down. “Look. Tomorrow, yeah? Tomorrow, without *them*. We'll talk.”

“Please don't—”

Darren turned his back and walked away.

“Oh dear me, what an oik.” Alec's mother sank back into her seat, tucked her napkin onto her lap, and cracked the arch of pumpkin crisps on top of her crab salad with her fork. Alec dithered for a moment, then scraped back his chair and struggled through the knot of concerned waiters, following Darren's retreating footsteps into the entrance hall.

The tall, lithe form blocked out the sunlight from the door for a moment. Darren's shadow streamed back, fluid and weightless and graceful, to touch Alec's feet. He thought of catching it in his hands. It would feel like cotton, worn thin. It would feel like Darren's T-shirts, so old and battered, used and reused, they felt softer than suede.

The shadow flowed down the stairs after Darren. Alec hurled himself after it, caught up outside the impressive double doors as Darren paused as though he was waiting for that very thing. “Gonna have to give up running away from you,” he said as the doorman pretended not to listen, and Alec struggled with what to say. “Gets less convincing every time.”

“Please do.” Studious impassivity or not, the doorman's presence added an extra thrill as Alec leaned forward and kissed Darren on the edge of one eyebrow. It was not the best aimed of kisses, but he felt tremendously daring and proud nonetheless. “Not run away, I mean.” He smoothed with his fingers the red-gold hairs his lips had mussed, and gave a *hmn* of laughter. “I am sorry about that. Both of us have the most appalling families. But we do all right when they aren't there, don't we?”

Darren rubbed his eyebrow, clearly embarrassed, as if the kiss had left a telltale mark, but his lips twitched up at the corners. “Yeah, we do.”

“Do you mean that about tomorrow?”

“When do the stiffs go home?”

“The stiffs?” Alec successfully quashed his inner laughter at the name, reached out his hand to brush free the amber curl of hair that had insinuated itself in the corner of Darren's smile. “Tomorrow night at the latest, I think.”

Darren evaded the caress, caught his hand and folded into it his borrowed tie. “Then I'll be round at the yacht Wednesday morning. Still a week and a half of August left, and it's all ours.”

“Promise?”

“I keep running away.” Darren laughed. “And then I keep running back.” He stepped down the final two steps into the street, gave a little, amused flick of his eyebrows. “Weird, eh? Anyone’d think I loved you too.” And, turning, he was gone, swept past in the multicoloured summer crowd.

Alec felt invulnerable as he returned to the table—encased in an armour-plated exoskeleton of joy. He snapped his napkin like a whip, sat down and smoothed it over his knee. “Mother, that was uncalled for.”

“Someone has to look after you, darling. He is a nasty little parasite who is only after your money.”

How funny it was to hear her say it. Alec looked up and saw marble tables, white, minimalist plates, everything of the best quality, everything as perfect as it could be. Even the sun was filtered into a polite milky glow by shutters of moonstone over the windows. And yet the last time he’d heard this opinion voiced it had been from Darren’s father. An ugly opinion from an ugly man, it surely didn’t get any prettier when dressed up in finery, like a pig in silk. The trappings of civilization clearly did not guarantee a civilized opinion beneath.

And maybe their absence did not guarantee a character of poverty or ignorance.

“That isn’t true.”

“I think you’ll find it is. Now, Alec, you’re being ridiculous. This is nothing more serious than a temporary infatuation caused by the thought of marriage. A lot of men go slightly wild when they believe it’s their last chance, and I suppose it’s a great deal better to get it over with now than when you’re finally wed.”

Alec thought she’d stopped. He began to marshal the right words to tell her she had it entirely wrong, but it turned out she had merely been breathing in. “However, this has started to become an embarrassment, and I believe that’s enough. Tomorrow we’ll begin making arrangements for your marriage to Caroline, and I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense.”

Caroline caught his eye with a wild look, as though she was torn between outrage and hysterical laughter. He found himself chuckling in return.

“I think you’ll find there’s nothing very funny about any of this.”

“Do you want to marry me, Caroline?”

Caroline leaned down to bring her laptop out of her bag, powered it on. “Mrs. Goodchilde, if you give me a moment I can show you a spreadsheet of fourteen young men I consider better matches than your son. From two of whom, I may say, I’ve already had offers. I think Alec’s window of opportunity, so to speak, has already passed.”

“That’s... Oh, but, Caroline!” Alec’s mum stuttered. “That’s outrageous. You can’t abandon my son in his hour of need. Two other offers? What are you talking about? Have you been leading on other men behind his back?”

Caroline smoothed her short hair back behind her ears, untucked her legs and stretched them out beneath the table, leaning back as she did when she was settling down for a movie marathon or a long

friendly gossip on the phone. “This hasn’t exactly caught me by surprise. We have been engaged over a year now, Mrs. Goodchilde. A certain lack of enthusiasm had already become apparent. I felt I was at liberty to research alternative options. It’s a Girl Scout thing—I like to be prepared.”

“I have to say”—Alec was a bit shocked himself—“Mum was right about you organizing me. Good Lord. Do you time-manage your dreams?”

She took the wine out of the cooler, poured herself a glass and then one for him, giving him a quick, encouraging smile. “I would if I could get the little arrows to stick. But I was thinking last night how glad I was that the bomb has finally dropped and we can all move on now.”

“Can you...forgive me?” Alec asked, still buoyed up by Darren’s confession and emboldened by the fact that he thought he already knew the answer. “I honestly didn’t know—not really—until I met Darren. That is, perhaps I did know, but it...it hadn’t become real. I...it wasn’t...”

The net book powered up with a sound like a fly circling. Caroline tapped in her password and looked at him, eyes clear and fond. “He makes you brave.”

And he could have kissed her then, out of sheer gratitude. He grinned back. “Yes. That’s it exactly. I wasn’t brave enough to admit anything to anyone—even to myself—until I met him.”

“I’m not getting in the way of that,” she said. “Of course you’re forgiven, you stupid arse. Just don’t do it again.”

At the end of the table, Alec’s mother brought out a cigarette, lit up, despite the glares and cleared throats of other diners. Her face was set, but rainbows shattered and sparkled and spun from her lighter as her hand trembled.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. G.” Caroline looked at her with concern, reached over to pat her other hand, lying open and empty on the table. “As far as I’m concerned the engagement is off.”

His mother inhaled sharply, let the smoke out with a long shuddering hiss, and at the same moment a white-gloved waiter bowed by her side and whispered, gently, reverentially. “Madame, the restaurant policy is not to allow smoking on the premises. The other guests...”

He proffered a saucer and she stabbed the butt out, grinding it in semicircles until it was perfectly flat. The shudder worked its way to her bottom lip, left it trembling. “Well, all right, Alec,” she said carefully. “So you think you’re gay. I suppose that doesn’t have to change anything. I can still find someone nice to look after you. Give me a week or so and I can ask my friends if any of their sons...”

Inside, it felt as though he stretched, and the hole in the membrane tore from top to bottom, tumbling him out at last, wet and newborn and free into the real world. “No, Mother. I know you mean well, but please stop this. I’m fully grown-up now, and it’s time you started respecting my ability to make my own decisions.”

She gaped, and even the trembling of her lips paused, her eyes shocked. The snap of surprise echoed back at Alec. Oh, and here it was finally, joining the knowledge that he was beloved, the knowledge that

she had no power over him but what he chose to give her. Not the panic he'd felt at the car park, not any more, but a liberating certainty, cold as steel. Not a thrill at all, but a responsibility.

It was she who looked away in the end, dropped her gaze to her lap, rolling up her napkin with shaking fingers. The flood of tears, that he'd interrupted at the hotel, began again and overspilled. She pressed her hanky to her nose and made an inelegant, piglike snuffling noise. "I know," she sobbed. "I know I do. Even the..."

"Even the bad ones. Yes." Alec drew off the napkin and let it fall to the table, easing his chair out from underneath. His breath came tense and tickly, but the cough held off, waiting. Anger and hope and old, patient, protective love drove together inside him in fission reactions of emotion.

"Ah...you never..." she sniffed, sobbed again, "...never seemed to have any idea what you wanted. I had to choose for you, and I'd stopped hoping you'd ever—"

He paced slowly up beside her, wondering if this was real, or if it was another twist of manipulative guilt. But no, she wouldn't crumple like that, bow forward over puffy bloodshot eyes and streaming nose if she was doing it for sympathy. Sympathy required decorative, tragic tears, not this wet, pitiable collapse. Didn't it? He held out a hand uncertainly, waiting for the snap and shock as he touched the live wire of her anger. But it didn't come, and he laid his hand gently on one thin, shaking shoulder. "Mother..."

"I stopped— I thought you'd never grow up. Never have the guts to take a stand. I'm...ah." Fresh tears welled and fell into the minted pea puree, and he stopped, held still in case an incautious movement should disturb the sense of revelation. A very old balance shifted, and everything teetered breathless on the cusp of sliding into a new shape. Then the miracle happened, and life started up again, changed. "I'm proud of you," she said.

Alec swooped down and wrapped both arms around her, and at the touch she turned, clutched at him, and buried her face into the breast pocket of his jacket. "But you won't make me go away altogether, will you? You won't move somewhere foreign and far away, and only let me see you once every five years, like Georgiana?"

She'd been every bit as scared as he had, he realized with a jolt. She'd seen Caroline as a way to keep him, steady him down, create for him, perhaps, the life she'd wanted for herself. She'd fought tooth and nail, with every stratagem at her disposal, because she was afraid of losing her son. *Oh, Mother.*

"Maybe if you can let go ever so slightly, I won't have to run so far away to get some freedom." He returned the hug, resting his cheek on her hair for a moment before pulling away.

"I understand," she said, and as he brushed face powder and lipstick from his blazer she took out a compact and tidied herself up, until she could say with a grimace, "I know I have to give you up so that someone else can take you. But does it have to be this *lout*?"

Alec turned towards the door. The heavy golden panels blocked his sight, but he imagined looking out, down the stairs, down the long dreary streets to the sea, where Darren kicked up the waves, all poise

and athleticism and honesty and that eager, generous heart of his. What could class or breeding or politeness possibly have to equal that? “I think it probably does.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Alec's mum leaned out of the open window of the smart car Caroline was so proud of, that Alec privately felt looked like a sneaker on wheels. "Take care of yourself," she called and managed with obvious effort not to make it sound as though she didn't believe he was capable of it. "And I'll hope to see you at your father's birthday if not earlier. I'll be inviting Miriam and her family."

"Good luck." Caroline waved, then put her foot down. They gently rolled out of the hotel car park, into the stream of cars jostling to get first place at the beach, while Alec stood waving and looking after them until they turned the corner and were gone. He dug his hands into his pockets and sighed. Really, gruesome though it had been, that could have gone worse.

It wasn't until he was halfway through folding down and clipping back the awkward canopy of the Morgan, that it occurred to him that the only Miriam he knew was Miriam Goldstein, mother of the infamous Bernie. He slumped into the front seat, put his head in his hands and laughed. *Thank God*. It was good to know his mother had rallied. She was plotting again. Foreseeing a future full of groomed and well-connected young men, he felt surprisingly positive. It meant that the collapse of last night had not been permanent. She was not as easy to wound as he had feared. Well, that was...really a relief. And as for the parade of better marriage prospects—Darren might enjoy individually saying "fuck off" to each one.

But Darren had said they had a week and a half, as though that was as long as he expected this thing to last. As though he still thought of himself as merely a summer lay, expected September to find them apart, back in their own separate universes. As if nothing had really happened at all.

But Alec...well, the world had changed for him the very moment Darren stepped out of the sea. He'd been scrambling ever since to catch up.

Driving out of St. Ives into Newquay, he turned the radio on. A guitar riff throbbed into the sunshine, sweet and sensual and poignant, as Don Henley sang in his life-roughened voice about the boys of summer, lost chances, regret and hope.

Alec sang along, the song and the moment and the August sunshine made, minted and polished specially for him. Today he felt as if he was the centre of the world, and he did not intend to make the same mistake as the singer, and throw that all away. Tomorrow, Darren was coming back, and in the meantime, there was shopping to do, there were plans to put in place.

Once everything was done that could be done, and only the prospect of returning to an empty yacht ahead, Alec drove up, out of town and onto the moors. Ten o'clock and night had already drawn in. The



day's sporadic rain clouds had blown out to sea and the sky was a great sheaf of silver-grey scattered with stars. Above Newquay he tucked the Morgan into a passing place and switched the engine off, laid the top of the car down and sat watching the ghostly blue and bone light of a gibbous moon touch the views with elfin mystery. A wind hissed over the gorse and heather, and the poppies in the fields, curled up tight for the night, laid down against the ground under the breath of it.

How many days since he'd arrived? He counted them three times; it didn't seem possible there could be so few, while he could be so changed. Across the dry stone wall from him a sheep baaed, and a car went past him down the road, its back seat almost entirely taken up by an inflatable dolphin. He watched its lights dwindle below him, and Newquay's lights come on, street by street, until it was a gold and diamond net flung down on the darkness, next to the glimmering sea.

With a whisper of crinkling plastic, the bags settled in the boot of the car. It was the one in the glove compartment, however, that seemed to bend the world around it like a black hole, making Alec feel...strange. He had passed through a sea change, a life change, and everything around him felt new, unsettled. It would all slot itself back into normality—a changed normality—given time, he supposed. But that time had not yet come.

As he opened the glove box to look in at the jeweller's bag again, his phone, wedged next to it, began to ring. Curious. The number looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't place it. "Hello?"

"Is that Alec?" Krissy's voice asked, the combination of Cornish and Jamaican accents unmistakable, even beneath a note of terror. At the sound of it, instinctively, recognizing trouble, Alec reached over, buckled his seat belt, his stomach dropping.

"Yes, it's me." He started up the engine. Crows flew from the wall where they'd been watching him, and the starlings in the nearby tree wooshed up into the dark sky like an inky firework. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Behind the sound of her breathing, he could hear the soaring sopranos and synthesizer beats of loud dance music, the babel of a thousand voices yelling conversations over the noise. He fumbled with the headset, turning up the volume before edging out into the empty road. "I'm at Tall Trees," she shouted. "Darren's left and I've just seen Max."

"What?" Alec bellowed back, putting his foot down. Narrow stone walls lashed towards him, coming at him in the headlights like the tentacles of an oncoming octopus.

"Max is following him. And he's got two men with him. Big guys. They look like hired muscle."

"What?" Alec shouted again, swerving to miss a rabbit. Oh damn. Max! He'd totally forgotten about Max. How could he have done that? How could he be such a loser of a lover? "Why weren't you with him? How could you let him...?"

"I went to the loo," she said with cold anger. "It's on the second floor. You have to queue for hours. I saw them through the window, okay? You hear this?" A sharp thudding scarcely to be told apart from the

dance beat. “That’s me hammering on the window. But he can’t hear me and his phone’s off. Are you going to help or what?”

“Of course.” Houses flicked past the car now. The road widened and acquired pavements. A wash of orange passed over him as he drove into the radiance of streetlamps. “Where’s he going? Do you know? How am I going to find him?”

“I don’t know,” she yelled, her voice crackling with frustration and fear. “I don’t know. But maybe he’s gone down to Fistril Beach. Maybe he’s gone down there to look at the sea. If he hasn’t... We’re never going to find him until it’s too late.”

Why had he left the nightclub? Darren held himself back from running, barely, strode as fast as he could up Tolcarne Road, shouldering through the stream of clubbers making their way towards Tall Trees. Why hadn’t he stayed there, where there were people all around him? Where he couldn’t be beaten up or threatened without everyone knowing about it. Why hadn’t he stayed there where Krissy was?

He turned the end of the road, dived across Edgcombe Avenue, swerving between cars with no attention left for the risk of being run over. Hell, being run over might be a plan, actually—get whisked off to hospital. They didn’t let people into hospital that you didn’t want to see. They’d kept the bastard out well enough last time.

But flinging himself under a car seemed extreme. He put on a burst of speed, swerved past an oncoming Saab, reached the other side, and swung through the wrought-iron gate of Trenance Leisure Park. Sprinting past the miniature railway, he went to ground behind the café, squeezing in between the industrial-sized wheelie bins.

Setting his back to the wall, he wetted his lips, panted open-mouthed and silent for a few seconds, letting his head fall back and his eyes close. But all that did was to show him—on the cinema screen of the inside of his eyelids—a replay of the glimpse of Max in swooping yellow and blue club lighting, back-lit by strobes, that had made him abandon his jacket on his chair and run for it. It really had been Max, hadn’t it? No one else had that silhouette, no one else walked like that, moved like that—all confident reptilian grace, steel bones and chill, a dragon in human form. Yeah. Yes, it must have been him.

With a snap, white floodlights beat into his cheek as a door opened and a gaggle of elderly men began setting up the manicured lawn for a nighttime game of bowls. Fucking bastards. Did they not know he was trying to hide here? He nudged the bin with his foot, rolling it forward a couple of inches so he could peer between its plastic side and the café wall, and watch the road. There was still the faint hope that Max had not seen him, though—God—he’d been on the dance floor under the full blaze of lights, hands above his head and riding the music like a wave. All because he was an idiot and he wanted to prove to Krissy that he wasn’t the coward she thought he was, and then the music had been amazing and he forgot everything. He just forgot.

Cars poured along Edgcombe Avenue, turning it into a river of moving light. Dark shapes on the other side walked out, came into focus, and Darren's heart stopped. Yes, there he was. It seemed impossible that Max would have to do such a mundane thing as wait to cross a road. Cars should stop for him—he should part the river of traffic like Moses parting the sea. Pale hair, dark suit, eyes like smudges of coal beneath sandy brows. He was too far away for Darren to judge his expression, but the charisma came across, the power, like a blow to the head. Darren's throat grew rigid as plastic and his stomach lurched. But no. *No*. This time he was not going to throw up. This time...this time what?

A second man stepped up behind Max, a man with a shaved head, a face like a joint of beef and a shabby suit over a body that looked like it was made up entirely of knuckles. Oh shit. Darren's hands prickled with sweat. Oh shit! And there was a third man, there, still in the shadow of Tolcarne Road, something bulky under his arm.

Darren's legs turned to water. He tried to hold himself up by the wheelie bin, but his hands had lost all feeling, he couldn't grip with them. He lurched into the wall, started to slide down, and thought of Kyle, scrunched up in his cupboard, and then of Alec—of tomorrow, of ten more tomorrows that he was not going to let anyone take away from him.

*Me and Krissy, we'll put him away for you*, Alec had said, inarticulate and confident and endearingly drunk. And yeah, he'd laughed. He'd laughed then—he'd laugh now if he wasn't so shit scared—but what if they could? What if they could at least do *something*?

The cars parted. Max paced deliberately, unhurriedly, across the road, his goons following like imperfect echoes, all the menace, none of the beauty.

The three of them reached the pavement, began walking up towards the gate of the park, and wobbly legs or not, Darren hunched down and made a run for it. Skirting the spot-lit lawn, he flitted through shadows, kept to the hollows of the grass, desperately hoping his brown shorts and T-shirt would be invisible in the evening gloom. He reached the wire fence of the zoo and flashed on too many German concentration-camp films, half-expecting the floodlight to pin him down, the machine guns to racket across the endless *ssssh* of passing cars.

Down to the zoo, and there was a footpath, cutting through under limp-leaved sycamore trees, lined with nettles and dusty blackthorn hedge. He sprinted to the end, turned left on to Towan Blystra Road and ran towards the sea. Loos—there were public toilets at the end of Highgrove Road—maybe he could hide there, get there fast, lock himself in and hope it wasn't the first place Max thought of looking.

No, but he would, wouldn't he? They'd both shared that—they'd both felt better behind bolted doors. Max'd know he'd head for somewhere secure, somewhere he could shut and lock the world out.

Oh fuck. The slap of sandal on pavement and the gritty rush of his breath must be ringing all round the town. Max could follow him by sound alone. That meant he mustn't go somewhere he'd be trapped.

There were three of them, they could cover more roads than he could, he knew for damn sure Max could run as fast, though maybe not as long. But how well could any of them swim?

Ducking back into Edgecombe Avenue, he ran for the sea.

As he passed below the first streetlamp, Max's voice cracked across the evening's peace. "Darren. Stop this. I only want to talk."

Oh yes, sure he did. All three of them—Max and his bodyguards—they just wanted a nice chat. He stopped, long enough to look back, and Max's smudged-ash eyes caught him. "Darren!"

Old, remembered pain bloomed everywhere, his breath coming jagged and hot as agony arced through his ribs. He hunched forward and his phone jabbed him in the stomach. Grabbing it, holding on with his slippery, untrustworthy fingers he turned and fled, feeling the gaze on his back like laser sights.

Swinging round the corner into Tregoss Road, he hurled himself into the shelter of a townhouse drive. A big Bed and Breakfast sign sprouted from the gates. The porch gave shadow dark as ink. He ran up the drive—*crunch, crunch, crunch* of gravel—and hurled himself down in the angle between porch and door. Thumbed the phone on, stabbed at the buttons, his useless fingers missing numbers, hitting wrong combinations. And then it vibrated in his hand and he slammed the big green button in the middle and squeaked "please!" in a voice he didn't recognize himself.

"Thank God. Where are you?"

"Alec?" He jammed the phone hard into his ear, whispering, "He's coming after me. Alec, please..."

"Sssh," said the voice on the phone. Alec sounded both more scared and more capable than he had ever seemed before. "I'm on my way. Where are you?"

"I don't... I mean, I'm..." Where was he? He couldn't remember. Couldn't remember the name of the road, couldn't remember the word he was supposed to say, the word that would make it all stop. What was it? Oh fuck, what was it? And even if he remembered it, no one was there, no one would listen. No one would make it stop, there was no one to help him. No one.

Footsteps slapped on the pavement up the road, and Max's voice murmured, very low, saying something to his cronies, all gravel and syrup and strength.

"Alec." Darren gripped the phone until the spikes of the USB port drove themselves into his finger and blood trickled down his cheek. Alec was someone, wasn't he? He would listen, wouldn't he? He would help. "I'm..."

The throaty roar of a sports car dwindled to a purr and then to silence beneath the sound of Alec's breathing. "All right. I'm parked in Towan Beach car park. Can you make it to the sea-life centre? I know where that is. I can come and get you from there."

"I...I don't know..." He wanted to weep, wanted to curl into a ball and rock and cry. But then Max would find him. He panted two, three, four times, winding himself up to action. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I can do that. I'm coming from Tolcarne Road. I'm going to try and get onto Cliff Road, so if I

don't make it all the way, that's where I'll be. Alec? I..." He should say goodbye. Just in case. He should say *I love you*. But when he tried it came out in a wordless sobbing gasp. "Never mind."

Eeling out from the porch, he minced gingerly across the gravel drive, trying not to make a single stone move beneath his weight. Getting into the back garden of the B&B, he stalked across scrubbed white paving, through the spiky shade of eucalyptus and palm trees. He took a run up at the back fence, launched himself high, got the toe of his flip-flop into the angle between fence and post and scrambled over the top just as one of the thugs set foot inside the gate and shouted, "There he is, sir."

"For Christ's sake, is this going to take all week? Get him!"

Speeding along Tolcarne Road, Darren reached the end, swung full speed into Cliff Road. Fairy lights glittered along the beachfront. He passed the toilet block, squat and tiled and Victorian on his right, and then the post office, shut up tight for the night, cheerful red GPO paint and 1980s adverts both peeling into the salty cold wind. All that swimming paid off as he flew across the green-striped turf of another crazy golf course, dodged the windmills and bounded down the steps cut into the cliff edge.

The sea-life centre too was shut up tight, a grey unfriendly bulk of frosted glass and steel. Scarcely a hundred metres of Towan Beach lay above water—high tide had barely turned.

Darren kicked off his shredded sandals and ran around the sea-life centre, concrete jarring his bare feet. No Alec. He sloshed his way through the shallows to the other side of the beach, where another set of steps rose out of the sea. And there, a dark form in a shabby suit stood barring the way.

"Shit!" He turned back, dashed for the way he'd come, and ran into the other goon, Max standing behind him, still—absurdly—carrying his briefcase.

"Finally," Max said, soft and satisfied, the angles of his face eased by a smile that didn't warm those dark grey eyes. "You're a hard man to talk to, Darren."

As Darren backed into the sea all three men closed in on him, the goons dashing from their places on the stairs. Max, between them, pacing forward slowly, reaching out in a gesture that on any other man would look like an attempt at reassurance, the offer of a master to let a nervous dog sniff his hand.

But Darren wasn't nervous, he was fucking terrified. He could smell it on himself, rank and acrid enough to make his eyes water. They could smell it too, probably. He wondered if it made them feel happy. If it made them feel good about themselves? And at the thought he remembered Kevin again, that odd moment in a car park in the middle of nowhere, when he'd decided to stop running away.

"You tell me—" It came out thin, wild, and the sound of it made him angry. He stooped down and pried one of the beach's many stones up out of its matrix of sand. It felt good in his hand. It felt good to have stopped, to turn around and stand his ground. It didn't even matter if he lost or won. Just not being scared for one frantic instant, that felt good. "You tell me why I should talk, when you don't know how to listen."

Max's smile disappeared. In darkness it was hard to read those dark eyes, but Darren tried like his life hung on getting it right. And maybe it did. Maybe it really did. Anger? Frustration? He stepped back as if shoved. "When?" Max asked, slow and dangerous. Then his temper snapped like a match into flame. "When did you ever fucking *try*?"

Max's anger still felt like running full tilt into a wall of knives—the shock of how solid it was, and then the burning cuts. Conscious thought snapped off like a light bulb being shattered, and Darren dropped the stone, turned and dashed for the water.

"Stop him!"

Both the heavies surged forward simultaneously. He evaded a clutching hand to the back of the neck. Water splashed and sucked away around his ankles. In the dark, the black-suited goons were decapitated heads scowling above explosions of white water. No point in trying to check where they were, it did nothing but hold him back. He set his head down and ran like a bullet train out into the waves, adrenaline making him feel weightless, on fire. One more step, maybe two, and then he could dive and swim, free as the dolphins, kicking up his tail in defiance.

A moment of sweet red joy, like a fruit exploding in juice, when he thought he was out and away, and then something cannoned into the backs of his knees, and a weight like a falling boulder came down across his back and crushed him into the sea bed. The waves closed over his head.

Both of them on top of him, pinning him down. His open eyes saw grey, salt, silver, as he tried to thrash, tried to squirm and turn and fight. Seawater pressed heavy up his nose, against his clamped lips. His eyes burned and fire and fury pulsed through every vein. Shit! Was this the plan, then? Fucking Christ, 'cause if it was... Oh, he could see it working. Dead surfer gets washed up on some random beach? Face full of grazes and lungs full of sand and water? Guy must have face-planted, knocked himself unconscious and drowned. That'd teach him not to surf without a buddy, the pillock.

Fucking shit, if that was Max's plan, if it really was murder, it would work. Absolute terror swept over him like a kind of madness. The guy behind his knees squirmed and his foot slipped in the man's grasp, he pulled and twisted and lashed out with it, something hard jarring against his heel, the shock of it travelling up his spine, almost making him open his mouth and breathe in.

Because he needed to breathe in. Dear God, he needed to breathe in. Black fire crept along the insides of his chest, his heart panicked, labouring, his mind was all white, and he flailed and kicked again.

Hands in the centre of his back, pushing him down, squeezing on the aching vacuum of his lungs, and then the pressure was gone, both of them heaving away from him, letting him get his feet under him, explode out into air, gasping and shuddering and streaming with water and snot and tears. But they were waiting there for him. He'd scarcely got to his feet before the hands were back, grabbing his collar and belt, wrenching and hauling at his hair.

He twisted and bit and kicked in blind rage, but the pair of them were solid muscle. He kneed one hard in the balls, and his knee crunched painfully into a protective cup. Before he knew it his arms were bent double behind his back, hoisted up high enough to force him to dance on tiptoes or break his shoulders. They walked him like that out of the sea, back up to where Max waited dry-shod on soft white sand.

Max lifted a perfectly manicured hand, his smooth fingers curling around Darren's jaw. He still wore the signet ring Darren remembered so well from so many square bruises. It rested in the corner of Darren's mouth like a link of chain. Darren swallowed, closed his eyes, concentrating on ruling his own body; he was not going to throw up, he was not going to piss himself. He would not give the bastard that satisfaction.

"Oh, Darren." Max's voice was gentle as the froth on the sea. It sounded regretful, if that could be believed. "Why do you make me do these things to you? Put him down, you two. I don't want him running away, but that's no reason to harm him."

The toughs stood like robots. They had the same necks, Darren noticed, bulging out at the back as if their brains had migrated. He tried to stop panting, tried to sink slowly down to the point where he at least had his weight on both feet at once.

The hand fell away, the scent of wood smoke and resin ebbing slightly as Max's footsteps retreated. Darren licked his lips and he could taste it there, like the residue of a kiss.

"I mean *now*, gentlemen."

With an air of reluctance, the toughs let go together, dropping Darren back to his feet. Rage aside, Darren's body seemed to have dissolved. He swayed, tried to catch himself, stepping forward, and his ankles turned under him, his knees seemed to slither away like jelly. He slid to an ungraceful heap in front of Max's polished shoes, and was seriously considering using his last iota of defiance to throw up over them when a woman's voice broke the silence above his head.

"I have all of that on camera, Mr. Mortensen. There isn't a jury in the land that wouldn't consider that intimidation."

Max sighed, bowed his head into his hand and pinched the bridge of his nose. "And here comes the cavalry. Why am I not surprised?" He looked up, with a pleasant, composed smile. "Is that Miss Clarke? Why don't you come down? We are *trying* to have a civilized talk, and perhaps your presence will make that easier."

Footsteps scattered sand to Darren's right, and a figure lurched out of the dark. Darren tried to scramble to his feet, away from this new threat, before the long arms caught him, and he smelled Givenchy—cedar and mint—and fear. "Oh my God, oh my God, Darren!"

Panic and laughter were briefly interchangeable. Darren made a sound he couldn't interpret himself, turned, got his head under Alec's chin, his arms around Alec's back, and held on for dear life. Only Alec

could make a rescue sound like a plea for help. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, settled for doing both, his scoured eyes streaming, his nose stinging. "Where were you? I got here and you..."

"I think I'll stay up here, thank you." Krissy's voice, breathless, thin with nerves, came falling through the dark like rain. Darren squeezed Alec tighter, but lifted his head and looked. Yes, maybe there was a suggestion of a shape at the top of the steps he'd come down, stars clustering around a poised head, and something white in her hand. The camcorder's light, or—if she was only bluffing about that part—the light of a torch. "I don't think I like your definition of civilized."

"Ah." As the sea drew away, Max set down his briefcase on an outcropping of green, algae-covered rock. Shrugging out of his cashmere jacket, he swung it around Darren's shoulders. The unexpected touch seared like a brand, briefly, and then blossomed into welcome warmth, unsettlingly comforting. *What the fuck? Why? Why half-drown him and then give comfort? Why didn't the bastard ever make any sense?*

"Miss Clarke, I'm sure they've told you about assumptions, and the unreliability of eyewitnesses. Are you sure you saw what you think you saw? Still, if it makes Darren feel easier to know he has at least one witness out of my current reach then by all means stay there. This is all about making things easier for Darren."

Alec got his feet under himself, heaved, and Darren came up with him, clinging to him, firm as a barnacle. He knew he shouldn't feel reassured. Alec could put up less of a fight than he could, if Max decided to drop that suave, affable tone and play heavy again. But his body didn't listen to reason—everywhere he touched Alec he felt okay, saved, safe. The illusion itself was enough to make him stronger. They stood unsteadily, getting used to balancing on four unstable, shaking legs.

The wind blew chill through Darren's soaked clothes. Cold water dripped from his hair down his back. He closed a stiffened hand clumsily around the collar of Max's jacket and pulled it tighter. The warmth, and the way the heavies had retreated, Max's gentle tone and Alec's arm, around him, allowed some human reason to penetrate the siren wail of his fear. "Making things easier? You chased me across town and then you fucking nearly drowned me. How is that making things easy?"

Max's alert gaze took one measuring sweep down Alec's body from top to toe, before it returned to Darren. He thought the look smouldered with something, but Max was always intense. It could be difficult to tell intense scrutiny from intense anger, even intense distress. "I wanted to talk to you. If I'd had my choice it would have been over dinner. Somewhere nice. Private. You can't think that I really want to discuss the intimate details of my private life in a situation like this—in front of hired muscle and your new boyfriend."

"I didn't fucking ask you to chase me into the sea."

"But you did." Max pinched his nose again. Recognizing exasperation, Darren took a step back. "Because you wouldn't let me do this any other way. Do you know how long I've been trying to talk to you?"



Going on what Krissy said, it was a safe bet to answer, “All year, yeah?”

The pressure of Alec’s arm around his waist tightened, as though Alec too was trying to stop him from bolting, and he thought reluctantly about how he kept running away from Alec and how Alec might have felt if he’d never run back again. But Max was nothing at all like Alec, was he? Stuff Darren did touched Alec—he had some power over the man, enough to reason with him, enough to feel confident enough to open his mouth and talk about the stuff that mattered. Max was not like that.

“Yes. All year. They wouldn’t let me into the hospital. Then when you were discharged, you disappeared. Every time I thought I’d traced a phone there’d be silence on the end of it, and the next time I called, the number would have been changed. I never did know your surname. I tried asking the police. I tried asking your surfer friends. I tried asking Miss Clarke. None of them would tell me where you were. None of them would pass a message on.”

So why was he asking for sympathy, like there was something soft in the middle of him that could actually care? Darren was supposed to feel guilty, was he, for seizing the chance to finally escape a relationship that had gone so wrong he didn’t have words for it? Well, ha bloody ha. “And after all that it still didn’t occur to you that I didn’t want to talk to you?”

“And it never occurred to you that I might *need* to talk to you?”

“No it fucking didn’t! What for? You knew I wasn’t going to get you in trouble, so what d’you need to talk to me for? What the hell else is there to say?”

Max passed his opened hands over his face, as if he was washing it. He sighed again, deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

The sea wind flattened the chestnut-brown shirt against Max’s body, betraying the fact that he was shivering. “I wanted to say that I was sorry,” he repeated with slow and careful deliberation. “I wanted to see for myself that you were all right. Perhaps even ask for forgiveness. Darren, it may not have occurred to you but...I don’t make a habit of putting people in hospital. I almost killed you, and that was as much a shock to me as it was to you.”

Incomprehension opened up a white space under Darren’s breastbone—a space for him to feel something if he could only figure out what it ought to be. This was...like the guy when they’d first met, when the fact that Max was overwhelming had seemed like a good thing. He’d thought it might be nice to have someone else take over, run his life for him, make the decisions he was so tired of having to make.

Max had tried to do that. Was it his fault it hadn’t been what Darren really wanted at all?

Oh fuck. No. No way was he having second thoughts now about whose fault this was. If he’d known his “having someone to look after me” had mapped on to “torture and terror” at the start, he’d never have signed up. “How come?” he said. “How can it be a shock to you when it was something you did?”

Max's eyes widened. His long indrawn breath was a hiss of revelation. "Darren. Tell me you did know what happened at the end there was an accident. Tell me you didn't think I did that deliberately."

The man's gaze was molten lead. The longer it poured over Darren, the heavier he felt. The more he wanted to say, "Yeah, yeah, of course I realized that," even though it was a lie—just to get Max to back off, look away. If there'd been no Alec by his side, holding on, studiously examining his shoes, he'd have caved like he always did, and said exactly what Max asked him to say. It was easier that way.

But that was how everything turned to shit the first time. He couldn't let it happen again. Not in front of Alec. "Yeah," he said, and swallowed, looking briefly up into Max's face and then away again. "I did think that. What? You *accidentally* strung me up by my wrists and then left me alone to feel my hands dying, not able to call for help and with no one there to listen even if I did?"

A pared fingernail of moon nudged into the evening sky and mingled with the lights of the seafront to wash the beach and Max's sickened expression in pale gilt light. On the steps down from the harbour walk one of the heavies turned back a courting couple who had been coming down to the sand to eat their fish and chips.

"The ropes were wrong," said Max quietly. "The knots were wrong. I know that now. I should have found someone to ask but I...I was afraid. I thought I could work it all out by myself. I thought, *How hard can it be? What can go wrong?*" He laughed, humourlessly. "Hindsight's a bitch, eh?"

Darren caught the laughter. It was hard-edged in him, like trying to spit out stones. "*You* were scared? What the fuck had *you* got to be scared about?"

Max looked away, fiddled with the locks on his briefcase. He had a hard face—a naturally impassive face—and it hadn't occurred to Darren before that that prizefighter's back of his could ever express vulnerability. Max was a vengeful god, not a man.

"I know this one." Alec's voice interrupted the overlong silence. His arm was still tight about Darren's waist, his hand spread with a kind of patient warmth over the ridge of Darren's hip, but his expression had gone from desperate determination to sympathy, and his tone was gentle. "I checked your shareholders. The Evangelical Alliance, the AFA, Focus on the Family. You couldn't risk any of them finding out about you—that you were gay, let alone that you were into bondage or whatever it was. They'd have pulled out their finances and you'd have been ruined."

"Well, everybody knows all about me. How pleasant." Max's smile looked like something bought out of a catalogue—one size doesn't quite fit anyone. "And you are?"

"Alec St. John-Goodchilde, of Goodchilde and Brown." Alec made an automatic, abortive gesture as if to step forward and shake hands. He looked young beside Max, smooth faced and soft, but there was a new dignity to him that Darren hadn't seen before. Max's ill-fitting smile became a fraction more genuine at the sight.

Darren wondered how much else he hadn't seen. God, the whole thing made his head reel, dizzier and more disorientating than being held underwater.

"You say it was all a mistake." Krissy eased her way down the far set of steps, curiosity reeling her in, though she kept well away from the goons. "But I don't see you explaining the broken ribs, the punctured lung, the ruptured stomach. You don't beat a man that hard and then claim none of it was your fault."

"I'm not claiming that, Miss Clarke. Of course it was my fault. It was my responsibility to make sure everything was safe, and I didn't do it right." Even on a lower step, Krissy was still above Max; he had to look up to face her, and the blue evening light picked out his expression like something stark from a noir film, ferociously, powerfully honest.

"I knew I shouldn't have left him alone. I did know that—I had a book that said so—but I was angry and I wanted to teach him a lesson, because he was so..." He laughed again. "Well, that's a separate question. But anyway, I closed the door and left him. I didn't understand how frightened he really was."

Darren let go of Alec and clutched at his hair. That quiet voice, all dispassionate and reasonable, and Max was fucking doing it again—he was being strong, unmovable, powerful. Rolling all over him like a steamroller, squashing him flat. Fucking bastard! He had no idea, did he, how bad that made Darren feel. "I was so *what*? I did every fucking thing you told me. I tried *so hard*, and it *hurt* and you got angry anyway. And I don't even know what you fucking want of me and I *never did*."

Two paces, and the moment Max was close enough to touch him, it was as though Alec didn't exist any more. Krissy didn't exist. Max eclipsed them both, effortlessly, maybe even without knowing he was doing it. He cupped his fingers around Darren's chin and made him look up. A brief snap like an electric shock as he looked in the man's ashy grey eyes, and he flinched, tried to look away.

"What I wanted of you, all along, was for you to enjoy it too." It was Max who broke the gaze, looking down, too polished and stonelike to be wearing that bittersweet smile. "I thought you were submissive, but it turns out you were only afraid. That was my fault too—I didn't know the difference in those days, that a submissive yields because he wants to, out of trust, not fear. I thought I must simply be doing something wrong. Or that you were. But you know, you could have said something. You could have said no. You could have set limits—I would have respected that."

Scared? Yeah. And it had taken Max all this time to realize it? Shame then, wasn't it, he still didn't understand...

"Sometimes," Alec again, answering for him because he couldn't. "Sometimes it takes so much courage to tell people what you genuinely want that it's easier to give in to their desires, whatever the consequences. That's when you need someone in your life who'll stand next to you and help you to be brave. Darren did that for me when I needed it, so I'm glad to be able to do it for him. With all due respect, Mr. Mortensen, you are a little overpowering. Could I please ask you to step back and give us both some space."

Oh fuck. Darren took a hand out of his hair and groped for Alec's hand, squeezing it tight. Christ, that had to be the most romantic thing he'd ever heard. Stupid, wonderful bastard. He should have known, from their mutual terror at that first meeting, how perfect it could be. The meek would inherit the earth, if the strong would obligingly go and fuck themselves first.

"Yeah." He looked up, caught Max's eye and steeled himself not to cringe. "What he said."

Max shook his head, smiling. Then he did walk away, back to the briefcase still balanced on its rock. He looked up sideways at where Krissy had reached the bottom step. Moonlight picked out pearly eyeshadow, the sweep of silver glitter and stars across her cheekbones, and the grim, sceptical line of her plum-coloured lips.

"Well, to continue answering your question, Miss Clarke. By the time I got back, Darren was in a..." a polite pause while he searched for a polite way to say *totally off his head with pain and terror*, "...an altered state of consciousness. He'd pulled one of the suspension loops out of the ceiling. He'd obviously loosened the second one too, because as I was trying to get him down without getting too much kicked, it gave way. He fell on the edge of a bench beneath, and that was what gave him the other injuries."

He sighed, dropping his hands gently to the lid of the case. "I'm not claiming that it wasn't my fault, because it was. All I am saying is that it wasn't deliberate."

A moment while he collected himself, hunched over like Atlas beneath the weight of the world, and then he straightened and his gaze hit Darren like a hard-bowled cricket ball. "It was the most appalling thing. I almost killed a man. I almost killed a man I cared about because I did not know enough to be safe. I'd tried to do this thing half-heartedly, secretly, and that just led to disaster."

Two sharp raps split the gentle susurrus of the sea. Max had snapped the locks of the briefcase. He opened it up, looked inside, his shoulders lifting and lowering in a deep, silent breath. "I couldn't stop needing it, any more than you could decide to stop being gay. So that meant doing it *better*. I've spent the year sorting myself out, replacing my unsuitable shareholders, finding a mentor to teach me, joining a community where I can get the help I need. I've even met someone...someone wonderful—"

"I'm happy for you." It came out surly, resentful, surprising Darren because he hadn't meant it to. He honestly hadn't intended to say, *Well, I'm glad you got a useful lesson out of it even if it was at the cost of me being fucked-up forever*. He had, unsettlingly enough, actually meant that he was glad it had at least worked out for one of them.

"Yes." Max took out something dark and rectangular from the case and held it out towards Darren. "It's not fair, is it, that I should get all the gain out of this, and you should get all the pain. That's why I've desperately wanted to talk to you. To say I'm sorry. Things have worked out well for me, in the end. I wanted them to work out for you too. To put things right."

The thing in his hand looked like some kind of box, except it was too floppy for that, wider on one side than the other. What was it? Darren drew away from Alec enough to walk forward, still holding on with one hand, bringing the man with him, reassuringly alive and warm and on his side.

“I thought about what I could do,” said Max and pressed the object into Darren’s sea-damp fingers, “to say it in a way that would actually mean something.”

Darren lifted the thing into the faint light of the distant window. The overspill of streetlights and headlamps, silver gold, picked out blood-red ink, a picture of a miserable-looking man in an extravagant periwig, and the words *Bank of England* and £50. When he moved the rectangle it riffled, held together by the neat paper wrap in the centre. The notes were crisp, all their edges lined up, smooth and warm as blotting paper against his cold hand. He turned the bundle over, and there was the Queen giving him a little reassuring smile on the back.

“What...” Words caught in his throat. He had to cough out seawater before he could speak, utterly bewildered. “What’s this for?”

Max turned the briefcase to show him a full layer of further bundles of notes, and more underneath. “It’s fifty thousand pounds, in cash. You see why I felt I needed to hire some guards. They were never intended to intimidate you. Only to help me get this to you safe and sound.”

A choked sound from the boulders beneath the cliff, and Krissy moved closer. The moon began to slip lower towards the waves, and the blue-pale light caught the horrified twist of her lips. “You can’t buy redemption, forgiveness. You can’t buy justice.”

“I am not trying to buy anything.” Max’s smile was as hard as concrete. “I am offering compensation for the injuries I inflicted. Call it a settlement out of court, if that makes it any easier for you.” The expression softened, becoming almost fond as he looked once more into Darren’s face.

“But I think you understand me, don’t you, Darren?”

*I’m sorry. Here, buy yourself something nice.*

“You don’t have to do this,” Darren said, feeling Alec stiffen with insult at his side, and yeah, he and Alec had a whole different relationship with money than he’d had with Max. A better one, maybe. But shit, if he and Max were going to do this, of course they had to do it in their own screwed-up way. ‘Cause if he didn’t take the money, Max would never believe he’d taken the apology. This wasn’t about payment, it was about the only way they had to communicate with each other.

Forgiveness or justice? There stood Krissy, like a sparkly version of that statue—the one with the scales that represented the impartial workings of the law. And there’d be some satisfaction in saying no, for the first time to Max, letting him feel at least some of the helplessness and fear and shame Darren had had to live with this past year.

But would it be justice or would it just be revenge? 'Cause Max had come back, facing the law, throwing himself on Darren's mercy the way Darren had with Alec after the wallet thing. What kind of a shit would he be not to offer Max the same kind of new start Alec had offered him?

Not the kind of shit he wanted to be, that was for sure. "You don't have to give me money, 'cause, yeah, I do forgive you. I messed up too, like you said. I knew it wasn't right, wasn't ever going to be right. I knew I couldn't be what you wanted me to be, and I didn't say nothing. So I don't need the money. You take it away if you like. It won't make no difference."

Max tugged the bundle of notes from his hand, replaced it in its hollow next to all its mates. He snapped the lid shut and smoothed the leather with a reflective, appreciative smile. "But I want you to have it. It will make me feel better if you do. Take it because you want to take it, and because I want to give it to you. It'll be the first time things ever worked between us the way they should."

He held out the case. And yeah, he was right, because Darren wanted it like fire. Fifty thousand pounds? Max had almost killed him, but now he was offering him a chance at a life. Come autumn, Alec would be gone, a good memory, maybe, but nothing more. Come autumn and it would be back to the grey, grinding, soulless hopelessness of his existence. But fifty thousand pounds? That was a future. A future in a smart case. And it would be good, after a year of terror, to finish with something that made them both happy, wouldn't it?

Darren reached out and took the money. "Just this once, yeah?"

Max laughed. "Yes. Just this once."

## Chapter Eighteen

“I had this fantasy we’d come here.” Alec parked the car in the passing place, got out and opened the boot, fishing inside for the bag. Darren unfolded himself from the passenger seat, still clutching the briefcase full of money, and squeezed out between the warm metal of the car and the hawthorn hedge. The haws had begun to turn red, reminding him of the oncoming autumn, of being alone again.

They’d dropped Krissy at her house, with the promise that tomorrow all three of them would go out together—his treat. No more interruptions or angst, just a night of flying high on the music, teaching Alec to let go his inhibitions and really dance. But that was tomorrow. For now they were up here, high on the moors above the sea, and he was still reeling with chill and shock, new understandings and new possibilities.

He followed Alec a hundred metres along the road to where a stile broke through the trelliswork of spiky branches. Climbing over behind him, he found himself in a cliff-top field. Warm, heather-scented air flattened the damp T-shirt against his back, flowed out over the cliff to slowly cool and fall onto the sea. The lights of a ferry bobbed like fallen stars on the glistening black expanse of water. The sky was pewter above, and the wave tops silver.

In the centre of the field a wind turbine turned lazily hundreds of feet above their heads. Alec put his bag down, brought out a mercifully monochrome tartan rug and spread it over the grass and gorse at the turbine’s slender white base.

He brought out a bottle of wine and a corkscrew, two plastic cups, plates, a baguette that had been rather maimed in the middle, a wedge of cheese, a see-through tub of green olives and another of black. When he put down the salt cellar of a full cruet set, Darren burst out laughing. “It’s a fucking picnic? It must be midnight. You’re mad!”

Alec’s face, which had been thin with anxiety, grooved between the brows with worry, eased. His smile crept out of hiding. “I had planned it for tomorrow. But I thought perhaps we needed something now.” He patted the blanket beside him. “Come here?”

Darren looked out at the sea again, all the jagged rocks between himself and it invisible now in the dark. He imagined himself spreading out his arms like wings. A run and a jump and he could be launching out into the void, with nighttime air whipping at his face and the horizon to welcome him in the morning.

Yeah, right.

The rug was soft as fur under his supporting hand as he lowered himself down next to Alec. The wind turbine turned silently, a swooping impression of pallor above, its stem humming with electricity. He

sipped at the wine Alec held out for him and it tasted of the same thing—sharp, cold wind and newness and power.

“You look different,” said Alec, settling himself against the white ceramic stem. He opened his arms and Darren crept into them, uncertainly. It was colder with his T-shirt on, so he tugged it off, leaned into the warmth of Alec’s chest. Alec gave a great theatrical shiver, then wriggled out of his blazer and draped it over Darren’s shoulders, silk lining and rough wool warm against his skin. The gesture reminded him of Max. Everything did, at the moment. He guessed that was going to happen a lot until he’d rethought the whole thing and all the shaken-up dust had time to resettle somewhere new.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” said Alec. “You look like someone from a disaster movie. You know? When the world has ended and all the running and screaming has stopped, and the sun rises and the credits roll. Like that. Are you all right?”

He closed his eyes, the faint *mmmm* of the generator getting into his blood, and kissed the side of Alec’s face, just under the ear, that place that always made him laugh. It worked again—he felt the vibrations of the chuckle through his shoulder and the spread palm curved around Alec’s ribs. Why was he doing this? Making things harder for them both, when he’d fucking had it with dishonesty and doubt forever more.

Summer holiday relationships? They sucked. Because it was going to hurt so much to gouge this one out of himself, like a lodged fish hook, at the end of the month. Maybe he should do it now, while the whole world was changing. Get it over with, while he was still kind of distracted and numb.

“I guess.” Opening his eyes he wriggled up to watch Alec’s face, but that too was a mistake—there was the sweet little smile, that concerned look he’d grown to rely on. “You don’t think I’m a whore. To take the money, I mean?”

The flare of shock, like a shooting star through those dark blue eyes, would have been a benediction if it hadn’t hurt so much. So obviously the thought had never crossed Alec’s mind. “Of course not. I see what you meant now, in France, about being able to pay for things because of Max. He made a habit of it, did he? Giving you money, I mean, and making it impossible to refuse.”

That startled a small snort of laughter out of Darren. He should have known Alec would get it—he always did. They were so much on the same page about everything. And wasn’t that a bummer, when you thought about it? “Yeah, just like that.”

“I think you’re...” Alec nodded to himself as if he was agreeing with whatever it was he hadn’t said. “I think you did the right thing. It must have been very hard, but for the record I think what you did was...*noble*. I admire you for it.”



This time the laugh was louder, though no less backed up with bitterness. “Noble? Not likely. See, it’s not money to me. Not really. It’s a future. It’s a way out. I wasn’t going to turn that down to get back at anyone. Cut off my nose to spite my face? Why would I?”

“No.” Maybe Alec could hear the rush of self-justification, doubt and regret and dread, because he tried to calm him, stroking his hair. “I quite agree. Very sensible.”

Of course, that made everything worse.

“See.” Darren tried to pull himself away. This was not the kind of thing you said while nestled into someone’s side like you belonged there. But he couldn’t. Not quite yet. “See, with this I can get a mortgage on that shop. Small-business loan, yeah? I can work my way out—no more breadline, no more eighteen-hour days of minimum wage and choosing between rent and eating.”

“I’m sorry.” Alec returned the kiss, his mouth cool and smooth on Darren’s cheek. “Sorry that I was so shocked.”

“Yeah, well it’s not meant to be pretty is it, poverty? If you’ve seen it, you understand why I want to escape. Get out permanently, I mean. Not just the summer, but all year round. I don’t want to live the rest of my life like that. No more Maxes, no more putting up with shit for the money. No more sugar daddies. Never.”

There, he’d said it. The words left him hollow. No sense of achievement, of finality. No cord cutting, no new birth. Nothing.

Alec’s legs, splayed around him, had dried his wet shorts enough to be a solid golden pressure of welling heat against his buttocks. The shirt between them was thin as gossamer. He could feel Alec’s ribs lift and lower with each easy, relaxed breath. There should have been a thunderclap and rain lashing out of a clotted sky. Instead, Alec cupped his chin and turned his face, and the kiss went on forever, all heat and need and wine.

At last he wrenched himself away, tried to scrabble out of the jacket, launch himself away, out, out onto the road and the long, long walk back to town. But Alec had caught his belt, was holding on tight. Fuck him! He hadn’t heard, hadn’t understood what Darren was really saying, and that meant he had to say it again, louder, more unmistakable. “That means you, Alec. No more sugar daddies ever. That means you too.”

“Please don’t go.” Alec kept hold, and Darren couldn’t bring himself to bend back the restraining fingers, break away by force. Not when leaving was the last thing he wanted to do in the world.

He subsided into the grass, tried not to resent the moon, hitting the blades of the turbine, making them look like angel wings, silvering Alec’s face until he too looked uncanny, otherworldly, heartbreakingly beautiful. “You see,” said Alec, “I feel the same. You...changed me more than you thought. I can’t do it any more either. No more having a single month in which I allow myself to be me. I want it to be the

summer all year round. I feel...after everything we faced down these past weeks, that we can do anything. Anything we like, as long as we're together."

Darren squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep in tears. He'd been wrong the whole year about Max. How could he believe his own feelings now? It was too fucking good to be true. It was not true. It couldn't be. "You heard me." He gritted his teeth, forced it out. "I said no more..."

Alec fumbled in his pocket. *Inhaler time, eh? Guess it's finally sunk in.* Darren bit his lip, got his feet under him, trying to force himself to make a second attempt at escape. Then Alec caught both his hands and squeezed. Every detail of Alec's skin felt imprinted in his palm, vivid and alive. Something hard there too, in the centre of it, warm and smooth as metal, round as a coin.

He drew back his hands, curiously, opened them and found a man's two-tone gold ring, deeply set with a tiny square-cut diamond. His mind did that blank thing again—stopping, waiting for this to make sense, not daring to jump to the obvious conclusion in case he made a total pillock of himself. "What?"

Alec grinned at his upturned face, his bafflement. "No more sugar daddies," Alec agreed. "I know. I'm glad. But how about a husband?"

Even the wind seemed shocked, going *oooooh* by his ears. He looked down at the picnic, untouched, half-unpacked. There was another blanket in the bag, and cream and strawberries, and down the bottom, on its side, champagne. Misery cleared out so fast it left a moment's vacuum while he felt nothing at all. "You planned this? Like a proposal?"

Alec laughed, nervously. "I meant to do it tomorrow. But then—after this evening—I couldn't wait. I couldn't let you be self-sacrificing and noble and run off like you were trying to do, leaving me alone. That would be the worst thing ever. So will you? Will you marry me? You can help me be brave, and I can help you...I don't know. Help you buy your father that house, perhaps. Somewhere in Australia."

Darren slid the ring onto his finger and admired the look of it on his hand. Too bloody posh for him, but then he wasn't a nobody any more. He was an entrepreneurial small businessman now—or he would be, soon as he got the shop organized.

It occurred to him that perhaps he should say, *I don't want to be a kept man at all. How about we put this off until I've got the shop up and running? Until I'm independent.* But he was independent now, even if "independent" did mean "risking everything on a start-up business in a recession economy". And really, hadn't he been sensible enough for one lifetime already tonight?

Besides, he knew better than to set conditions on the perfect wave. If you were lucky enough to be in the right place when it came along, you didn't argue with it, you just flung yourself out and caught it. Rode it home, laughing for joy.

"You know what," he said and poured the remnants of his glass of wine into Alec's lap—quickest way to get him to strip, so he could lick it off. Grab himself the summer holidays all year round? Make Nan

happy and Dad spit nails? Go home to Alec every evening, the pair of them lurching through life together, holding each other up all the way? “Yeah. You know what? Maybe I will.”

## About the Author

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Look for these titles by Alex Beecroft

*Now Available:*

Captain's Surrender

*Love? Might as well ask for the moon. But a man can dream...*

## Captain's Surrender

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Despite his looks and ambition, Midshipman Joshua Andrews hides urges that, in his world, make him an abomination. Living in fear of exposure, unnecessary risk is something he studiously avoids. Once he sets eyes on the elegant picture of perfection that is Peter Kenyon, though, temptation lures him like the siren call of the sea.

Soon to be promoted to captain, Peter is the darling of the Bermuda garrison, with a string of successes behind him and a suitable bride lined up to share his future. He seems completely out of Joshua's reach.

Then the two men are forced to serve on a long voyage under a sadistic commander with a mutinous crew. As the tension aboard the vessel heats up, their unexpected friendship intensifies into a passion neither man can rein in.

Intimacy like theirs can only exist in the shadow of the gallows. Both men are determined their "youthful curiosity" must die before it brings disaster down on them. Yet neither man can root it from his heart. Warriors both, they think nothing of risking their lives for their country. In the end they must decide whether love, too, is worth dying for.

*Warning: Contains some mild m/m sex scenes and some graphic violence.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Captain's Surrender:*

Peter bowed his head as if he was ashamed of his own smile. "It should still be said. I'm conscious you've trusted me with your career and received only privation in return. But soon I'll have the chance to show that your confidence was not ill placed, and I mean to make the most of that. You shall not regret your belief in me. I swear it."

Instinctively, Josh looked over his shoulder, to where the hatch grating lay in a pillar of faint striped light abaft the mizzenmast. There were no sounds of movement from the deck above, and no feet disturbed the grayish, filtered radiance. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn towards privacy, and he did not wish to be walked in on while he was struggling with the inappropriate joy of these words, or the much more inappropriate things he wanted to say in answer.

"You've already proved that, sir. The absence of a noose around my neck is cause enough for some loyalty, surely?"

"No!" One got used to Peter being still, measured, perhaps stiff, and forgot that he could also swoop into movement like a hawk. Josh found himself seized by both elbows before he'd registered the beginning

of the lunge. “Is that why you follow me? Out of a kind of self-blackmail? Out of fear? I thought...” He swallowed, looking almost sick with nerves. “I thought there was something more.”

Josh breathed in—a breath that seemed to take forever, while his heart paused, frightened, above the great abyss of the future. How easily he could ruin the modest happiness he had attained as Peter’s friend by misinterpreting, by leaping out unsupported into the pit.

“I thought you wanted to gloss over the incident,” Josh said, wiping his hands nervously against the skirts of his coat. Had he missed something? When they came to shore and took lodgings together, they had had a gentle, fearsomely embarrassed conversation about the unfortunate fate of Peter’s rather too well beloved tutor, Mr. Allenby, and then nothing. A few days’ awkwardness and then friendship returning like a balm. But had he read it wrong?

Had the awkwardness been in fact an inept, unspoken invitation? He fought off hope and guilt together. “Frankly, sir, when you kiss a superior officer without invitation, you feel unreasonably fortunate merely to be allowed to let the matter drop.”

Unexpectedly, Kenyon smirked. “I’ll remember that, next time I accost the admiral.” And Josh laughed, sure that he could now turn away, hide his flushed face in the shadows and let the moment pass, leaving him on an even keel again.

But Peter had not let go. It would have taken a saint to struggle against the grip of those long-fingered, elegant hands—and Josh was no saint. Though elbows did not normally feature prominently in his erotic daydreams, when they were separated from Peter’s skin only by a layer of cotton so thin that he could feel the roughness of rope burns, the callus left by a smallsword, he found himself obsessed by them, unable to concentrate on anything else.

“I admit I was a little...taken aback, at the time.”

They moved; Peter’s hands moved, sliding from elbows to biceps, and Josh had to bite his lip against the rush of illicit pleasure, the maddening desire to take the one step forward that would enable him to press himself against Peter, hot and tight together. God, he shouldn’t have thought of that.

“But the more I reflected on the matter, the more I confess I found myself...” Peter’s eyes had a trick of holding the light, as the sea will when the sun is bright, and Josh—oh how he wanted to swim, “...curious.”

No protestations of undying love. It was unsettling—it was almost real. “Curious?” Josh managed in a constricted, breathless voice that was as good as an admission of guilt. If Peter had any sensitivity at all, he *must* know how far he was pushing; he must have the sense to back off now, before it was too late.

“As to what you are willing to die for. I should like to know.”

There were a number of objections Josh could have made, and he did try. He honestly did. With his blood singing and his mouth gone dry he did say, “I...don’t wish to...mistake your meaning.”

Kenyon's right hand stroked over Josh's shoulder, came to rest on the back of his neck, the thumb moving slightly, raising the hairs on his nape in a shiver of delight. By themselves, his eyes had half closed, his face tilted up in mute offering, primed and waiting. He made a last-ditch defense. "I don't want you to do...anything you'd...regret."

And Peter closed the distance between them. They were touching, Josh could feel the planes of that hard chest, was surrounded, invaded by Peter's heat, his scent. Peter was looking down with wide eyes, his own breath coming ragged now, as Josh's fever infected him. "I should like to kiss you," he said, decidedly. "Unless you object?"

The man's voice was like being coated in molasses and licked clean. How was anyone supposed to object to that? "Christ no!" Josh leaned in, surrendering. "I mean yes, sir, kiss me. Oh, yes. Yes, *please!*"

*I shouldn't be doing this.* Peter snaked an arm around Josh's waist, pleased and intrigued by the way just this small touch made his friend's pulse quicken. He could feel the gasped breath fill the chest pressed against his, and it was uncharted waters from now on, with the forbidden lying like a reef beneath the surface—dangerous, exciting.

How different. He had been lucky enough to know two young ladies in his life, and it seemed natural now to gather his partner gently into his arms, to hold back, careful of her frailty, filled with reverence for a lover so small, so easily hurt. But Andrews was over six feet tall and broader across the shoulders than Peter was himself. Nothing soft about him, and delicate only in spirit. *I really should not be doing this.*

But he wanted to. The kiss they'd shared onboard the *Nimrod* had proved another difference. Drunk, faint, and taken by surprise though he had been, he would have needed complete insensibility to miss the fact that Andrews wanted him with a fury.

Both of the ladies Peter had courted had been respectable, and as such they were untainted by lust, accepting his advances out of generosity—pity even. He had always felt vile for imposing on them—a seducer and debaucher of innocent young women whom he had no real intention of marrying. A libertine, a ruiner of lives. With Andrews there would be none of that. No selfishness, no guilt.

He leaned in, barely having to tilt his head, and tentatively touched his lips to Josh's. That...wasn't so bad. Really, it wasn't. The mouth was warm and firm, the lower lip full, yielding, tempting him to bite. Shifting slightly to press closer, he licked it, tasting, and was rewarded with a little whimper that made him feel warm from head to feet. Mmm...yes, nice.

Josh's arms went around him, pulling him close. A strong hand was behind his head, a second splayed against his spine, stroking down. Easily as that, the balance shifted, and it was no longer him kissing Andrews, but Andrews kissing him—with an ardor that quite undid him. No one had ever, ever wanted him this much.



It dawned on Peter that he was not the one in control of this—the responsibility had been taken out of his hands. Unless he wished to struggle like a reluctant maiden, it wasn't his fault that the hand had twisted into his hair, the kiss deepened and heated, or that the pressure of a hard thigh between his legs had grown into something rather more than merely nice. It was bizarre to be on the receiving end of a tide of desire he couldn't equal, unnatural to be the one who had to be coaxed, pleased, seduced, but—God—the relief! The uncomplicated joy of it.

He heard himself make a low rumble of encouragement, almost a moan, and then Andrews was frantically shoving him away, the caressing hands holding him at a distance. Considerably more aroused than he had expected to be, Peter was ready to be angry at being toyed with, but the expression in Andrews' dark eyes was of fear, surfacing out of a deep, stunned bliss.

“Why...?”

“I heard something.”

*The fear of getting caught is half the fun.*

## Catch Me If You Can

© 2010 LB Gregg

*Romano and Albright, Book 1*

Lowly art gallery assistant Caesar Romano is freely out of the closet. Now he'd just like to get out of his Nana's guest room. Everything—his reputation and his financial freedom—is riding on the success of tonight's gallery opening. If only he could shake free of the past so easily.

A mysterious gatecrasher, Dan Green, looks like a promising addition to his pending new life—until Caesar's ex shows up and suddenly the opening disintegrates into a half-naked dance melee. When the glitter settles, a missing sculpture of Justin Timberlake has Caesar up to his eyebrows in extortion, intrigue and a wild sexual adventure underneath, inside, and on top of a variety of furnishings.

As the cast of suspects piles up, so do the questions. Like who's really blackmailing whom? And what does a stolen paint-by-numbers clown matter when Dan is so outrageously capable of blowing Caesar's resistance to smithereens?

*Warning: This book contains graphic language, sex, lies, intrigue, clowns, kleptomania, anal sex, oral sex, mutual masturbation, bad driving, good cooking, and the missing head of a Justin Timberlake statue. Not for the sour of disposition.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Catch Me If You Can:*

"Hey. Take a look at this."

Dan was in the second bedroom, a guestroom as beautiful as the rest of the place. A four-poster king-sized bed took up most of the room.

"What?" I grouched.

The front door rattled and, horrified, I grabbed Dan by the jacket. "I knew this would happen."

I dragged him toward the closet, but it was overflowing with neatly hung clothing and stacks of shoeboxes. I gaped in shock. "Ferragamo?"

Dan nodded toward the armoire. I shook my head.

We both stared at the bed.

There was a lot of clearance, given the thing had stairs. I lifted the bed skirt. "Slide under."

The front door opened to the sound of Shep's charming, lackadaisical voice as we scurried under the bed like the fearful intruders we were. I flipped the bed skirt down. There was barely three inches of space to see. Dan lay flat to better watch the hall, although what we would do if we were discovered wasn't clear to me. I just closed my eyes and concentrated on not hyperventilating.

"Calm down, Romano."

I peeked and Dan wasn't paying attention to the crack of daylight. He watched me. I swear he was laughing. I nodded stiffly. I'd have to accept that I was a source of entertainment for the demented detective.

Shep's voice got weaker momentarily—perhaps he'd gone into the bathroom or the kitchen, and another voice, this one female, filled the apartment.

"That's Estelle. His agent," I whispered.

She was loud. "I don't care. You need to do as you're told or this thing is going to fall through and this is a huge opportunity. You signed a contract, Mac."

"I know. I don't think anyone knows."

"Everyone knows. You could have warned me last night. I had to listen to him rant for half an hour. That bastard will sue us both. Don't fuck this up."

They were in the living room. The sound of feet on the wood flooring came nearer. Unless Estelle wore fancy man shoes, that had to be Shep. He went into the room next to us. A door opened. He was changing maybe.

"I'll deal with it. Caesar isn't going to tell anyone. He hasn't yet. And his family doesn't care. No one else knows. I was circumspect. It was just a stupid thing I did in college. It was years ago. It didn't mean anything."

I nearly popped out from under the bed. Dan grabbed hold of my wrist. "Be still."

Shep went on, "He was pretty insistent. I slept with him a few times, that's it."

I opened my mouth, and Dan's hand slapped down to shut it. "Shh." I nodded and his hand slowly slid away, his fingertips trailing my chin. Was he petting me?

The click of Estelle's heels faded, as did Shep's plodding, well-clad feet.

She snapped, "Who knew back then, Mac?"

"No one. No one except my cousin, Poppy. That's it. And Ce's family. That's all."

"No one since then, right? I need you to think about your answer because I'd rather be prepared to handle some kind of PR situation than get blindsided. A good offense is the best defense. I want full disclosure. You understand?"

"I..." Shep's voice wavered, and my breath froze as hope reared itself. Would he do it? Could he? And then that spineless dick lied again. "No one. I'm not...I'm not gay, Estelle."

Dan snorted quietly next to me. "She's an idiot if she buys that."

"As long as we're clear," Estelle said and then a door shut. Locks spun.

I lay under the bed, in the sweating darkness, royally pissed. Dan faced me, but his eyes were rolled up—he was listening while I was fuming and embarrassed.

"I think they're both gone."

I tried to scurry out from under the bed skirt. Dan grabbed my belt. "Wait. He may still be here."

I nodded and eased back onto the floor. Dan's eyes darkened, if that was possible. His frown line had reappeared. His voice turned serious. "How long were you two together?"

"Three years."

"Man. You sure know how to pick 'em. What a dickhead."

"It was just a stupid thing I did in college." My joke was undermined by the depth of Shep's betrayal. You'd think I'd have grown immune by now. At this point every one of my secrets had been laid bare to the good detective. There was nothing left to hide—which was actually kind of liberating.

We lay still, listening to the hall clock. I wanted to go home and forget this entire day. No. That was a lie. What I really wanted to do was take a hatchet to Shep's apartment and bust that mother up. Maybe Dan would turn a blind eye?

It was close under the bed. Naturally, there wasn't a speck of dust, only gleaming floor. It smelled of lemon and Dan's leather jacket. I hadn't noticed before, but his cologne was spicy—like cardamom. Sultry and tangy. His beard was filling in, a true five o'clock shadow that framed full and soft lips—the top one less plump than the bottom. A tiny scar marred the right side.

Dan stared intently back at me. He seemed as curiously interested in my mouth as I was his. Before I could catch myself, I licked my lips. His mouth lifted into a slow, hot, sexy smile. I bit my lip, waiting to see where we were going. Tension crackled between us.

He moved closer, taking up most of the space. It grew even warmer under the bed. "You know what I think? I think you're a smart guy and you dumped him for being a pussy. He's still pissed."

"Probably you're right."

Dan's mouth was very nice. Masculine and broad. Why hadn't I noticed that before? I had no idea what Dan's story was, if he was into guys or bi or yet another straight guy willing to fool around, but suddenly, I didn't care. I was pissed. Why that turned me on, I couldn't fathom. Dan didn't seem to be in any hurry to move away from me. Quite the contrary. He challenged me with his nearness.

I moved and his gaze went from my mouth to my eyes. Heat curled in my groin. Dan's eyes filled with interest, and something else. Amusement.

"Don't say a word," I grumbled.

"Who me?" The grinning bastard. "I won't say a thing."

I inched forward, scooting close enough to seal myself against him from groin to chest, letting our bodies align. Waiting to see what he'd do. His breath caressed my skin, and the moment drew out long. The clock ticked in the hall. His smug smile deepened, charming me despite how infuriatingly cocky he was. Strong thighs pressed into mine, and he wagged his brows like a fool. But he was hardening against my crotch and...that was a surprise. He found me more than amusing—he was attracted to me. Aroused by me. Or he was into the getting-caught vibe. Maybe a bit of both.

His dick nestled into mine, and his neck flushed a deep, telling red. With the space between us gone, in the sweltering darkness, I found a reason to lay my mouth on his, gently, finding those lips deliciously moist and minty. I licked them. His taste was sweet, maybe a hint of nicotine and coffee, but mostly he tasted of that gum he liked to share.

Dan laughed against my mouth. "You going to do something interesting, Romano? Or just nibble on me?" He thought he was so funny.

"If you'd shut up for half a second, I'll show you." I gripped him by the belt with one hand, and kissed him, my mouth sliding over his, my fingertips digging right into his pants. I tickled the head of his cock. Why not? I knew what I liked. I figured he liked it too, because he groaned in surprise. His lips parted, and his hips snuggled back. The big lug. I tongued him wantonly, feeling him give, his mouth opening wide to welcome me. A tingle ripped down my spine at this unexpected pleasure. He was delicious. Sliding my hips against his, all thought of Shep and Justin Timberlake and missing clowns disappeared as I did my very best to wipe that fucking grin off Detective Dan Green's face.

I suckled his tongue, rocking my whole body, working to make him harder. He had a nice, fat dick, long and broad, his bush wiry and wild. Sticky come pearled up. Yeah. He was right where I wanted him. I curved my fingers to stroke him in a firm grip that let him know I'd jerk him off and he'd never forget it, and he groaned again. Deeper this time.

And then that bastard flipped me over on my back with a fast move, trapping my hand in his pants and forcing the air from my lungs. "I see where you think this is going, Romano. You're used to leading guys around by their dicks, right? Like that pussy, McNamara. Guess again."

Holy shit. A blazing mix of shock and lust fried me as he rammed me into the floor, his mouth stealing the very air from my lungs.

*One hot night, one freeze frame...and one shocking surprise.*

## Tabloid Star

© 2009 T.A. Chase

As a bartender at the Lucky Seven club, Josh Bauer could take a different guy home every night...if he wanted to. Working three jobs, however, makes it hard to connect with anyone. One man, though, is too much temptation to resist. A steamy encounter in a back alley leads to an explosive night of sex in Josh's bed—a bed he isn't surprised to find empty the next morning.

What does surprise him, though, is the front page of a tabloid. Apparently his one-night stand isn't as anonymous as he thought it was.

Ryan Kellar's career is taking off. Advance buzz about his movie says it's a blockbuster, and going home with the gorgeous bartender is the perfect way to celebrate. And he thought he'd gotten away clean—until the picture in the paper shocks him into reality. Was Josh really just playing...or playing him for a fool?

Trust isn't big on their list right now, but as their worlds fall apart, it's all they have. At least until they figure out who took the picture. And why...

*Warning: Hot manlove, gratuitous licking of tattoos and dealing with stalking paparazzi.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Tabloid Star:*

Josh got there before Ry could land the punch he was swinging. "Hey, guys, can I get you something to drink?"

Bill's hazy blue eyes met his with a smirk. "Yeah, liquid courage might help my friend get lucky tonight."

Ignoring the sarcastic tone in Bill's voice, Josh made a point of checking Ry out. He admitted to himself he liked what he saw. Ry was tall with a lean muscular build, more like a runner than a weight lifter. The baseball cap Ry wore made it hard to tell what color his hair was and the sunglasses hid the color of his eyes, but his tight black jeans and dark blue T-shirt gave Josh a hint at Ry's body. Josh's cock twitched, interested even though Josh didn't tend to take customers home.

"Well, I don't know about needing any liquid courage. If your friend's looking for something, I'm sure he could find it quite easily here."

Josh winked at Ry and a surprised grin crossed the man's face. Shaking his head, Bill nudged Ry with his shoulder.

"See, I said you could have anyone you wanted in this club. Why not live a little and celebrate?" Bill picked up his beer and gestured into the crowd. "I'm going over to talk to that curvy redhead. I hope you brought cab fare, buddy, because we won't be leaving together."

Ry scowled, but mumbled, "Go get her, stud, and don't worry. I have money."

They watched Bill weave his way through the crush of people until he disappeared. Josh looked back at Ry to find the man studying him. Ry slid his sunglasses down and looked over them, tracing the length of Josh's body. Josh swore he felt heat from each part of his skin those dark brown eyes touched. The desire blazing in that glance told Josh Ry was looking for someone different than Bill was.

"You want something to drink?" His question came out husky and he swallowed, trying to wet his suddenly dry throat.

"Drink? Sure, I'll take a whiskey, neat."

Josh forced himself to walk away and grab a glass. He could feel Ry's gaze burning into his back as the man eyed his ass. Taking a bottle of the top-shelf whiskey, he filled a high ball glass and handed it to Ry, who slid his fingers along Josh's as he took the drink, shooting lust and blood to Josh's groin.

"Fuck," Josh whispered.

"Thanks." Ry's pink tongue peeked out, wetting his plump bottom lip and drawing Josh's attention to it.

Josh groaned and adjusted his cock, searching for room in his too-tight jeans. "What exactly are you looking for, honey? I'll be happy to accommodate you, but you have to be sure."

Ry checked him out again, his eyes lingering at the growing bulge at Josh's groin. Hesitation colored Ry's words when he leaned forward and whispered, "I think you know what I'm looking for."

He could tell Ry didn't pick up men often, or probably not at all by the way the man's gaze darted away from him the moment he uttered that statement.

"Pete, can you handle it for ten minutes while I take my break?" Josh didn't look away from Ry, shouting his question over his shoulder toward the other bartender.

"Sure, Josh. I've got it." The smile in Pete's voice told Josh his friend knew what was going on between him and Ry.

He moved from behind the bar, gestured for Ry to follow him and made his way through the crowd toward the back of the club. Josh hit the back exit door at almost a run, letting the metal door slam open as he yanked Ry through the doorway. As the door shut, he pinned the man to the brick wall and kissed him.





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