



# Something About Trevor

by Drew Hunt

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## *Something About Trevor*

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*For my friends. Without you, this book—and my life—would be much the poorer.*

### Chapter 1

"I've got a spare room," Trevor said, shimmying up to the lunch table.

Paul panicked. "Oh, no, it's fine. I'm sure I—"

The look of sadness on Trevor's face as he turned away and made a quick exit from the staff canteen did little to quell Paul's alarm at being invited to stay at the home of the Town Hall queer. He couldn't. What would his mates at the cricket club say? Paul shook his head to try and clear it. His gaze fell upon the disapproving face of Sandy, the filing clerk.

"Did you have to say it like that? Be quite so obvious?"

"But he's—I'm..."

Sandy's expression darkened. "What's that supposed to mean? Have you forgotten I'm a lesbian? You don't seem to have any problem around me."

"But that's different. Eh, you're a woman and—"

"Men! And they say we're the emotional and irrational sex." Shaking her head, Sandy asked, "How well do you actually know Trevor? Have you ever stopped and had a conversation with him, found out what he's really like?"

"Uh, no." Paul realised he hadn't. Trevor's somewhat unorthodox appearance, his long curly brown hair, his brightly coloured artist's smocks, the bangles on his limp wrists had all put Paul off from approaching the guy.

Sighing, she said, “No, didn’t think you had.”

Pushing his half-eaten meal away, Paul sighed in resignation. He knew Sandy was right. His reactions to Trevor were wrong, but, he couldn’t help being uncomfortable around men who minced or flamed or...

“Fuck!” He slammed his fist on the table, causing the cutlery to rattle and the water in his glass to slosh over the side. He wasn’t sure what he was madder at, the situation with Trevor, and how he’d have to go eat humble pie, or the mess his house was in.

He’d come home from a weekend with the lads from the cricket team. Someone had suggested they hire a minibus and go down to Dover, catch the ferry and load up on cheap booze from the hypermarkets in Calais. However, the light rain that had been falling when he’d set out had turned into a severe downpour. As the river was already close to overflowing its banks, the extra rain resulted in a foot of water flooding the ground floor of Paul’s house.

Sandy put a reassuring hand on top of his. “Has the water done a lot of damage?”

Paul nodded. “Last time it took over three months before the place was habitable.”

“Oh dear.”

“I’m not looking forward to all the re-decorating, sorting out new carpets, furniture and...”

“You should have sold the place after last time.”

Paul smiled ruefully. “I was told that it was a fluke, a once in a lifetime thing.”

“Oh.”

“And if that wasn’t bad enough, the bastards at my insurance company told me this morning I was under-insured.”

“Oh, Paul.”

“I’ll be okay. Though it’ll probably eat into my savings to get the place all fixed up.”

“Sorry. I wish I had a spare room to offer you, but as you know my place is tiny.”

“I know, and thanks. Something will turn up. I’ll ring round my mates this afternoon. One of them’s bound to be able to put me up.”

\* \* \* \*

Replacing the phone in its cradle, Paul dropped his head into his hands. No one seemed to have room. Thommo said he could have his couch, but Paul was all too aware of the lumps and broken springs. He’d sat on the uncomfortable piece of furniture often enough when Thommo invited the guys round for beer and televised sport.

Paul was no snob. The last thing he could call himself would be house-proud, but Thommo’s place was a tip. His last girlfriend had walked out on him six months earlier, no doubt because she was fed up with cleaning up after him.

Looking at his watch, Paul realised it was almost knocking-off time, and he’d got precious little work done. Putting a couple of executive summaries in his briefcase, he straightened up his desk and prepared to leave.

Standing in the corridor at the exit to the part of the town hall which the public weren’t given access to, Paul waited his turn to sign out. He heard Trevor’s annoyingly girlish laughter behind him as he shared a joke with the girls from the typing pool.

After reaching the head of the queue, Paul signed his name and his time of departure then stood to one side. He might as well get his apology to Trevor over with. Trying to remain calm, he watched as several staff members signed out, then it was Trevor's turn. Did he have to wiggle his hips so childishly as he bent to sign his name? One of the girls reached out and pinched Trevor's bum cheek, causing him to squeal in mock indignation.

"I'll have you know, my arse is a woman-free zone."

"Such a waste," she giggled.

The merriment continued for a few more moments.

Eventually Paul took hold of himself and spoke. "Uh, Trevor, could I have a quick word?"

"Sure, sweetie." Trevor gave him an uncertain smile.

Paul gritted his teeth, hoping his discomfort didn't show. Focussing on a spot just over Trevor's left shoulder, he said, "Look, um, about earlier."

"Yeah?"

Trevor wasn't going to make it easy for him. A small voice in Paul's head announced, *Why should he?* Paul cleared his throat. "Look, um, what I said, it wasn't right. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. Honestly I didn't mean to, I've had a bloody awful day, but that's no excuse, and..." Paul ground to a halt.

"That's okay. I understand."

That was the worst of it; Paul knew Trevor really did understand. "Thanks, uh, I'm not, I mean, I don't..." Paul closed his eyes momentarily. "Look, can I buy you a drink or something, you know, to apologise properly?"

Trevor's eyes widened for a second. "Why, Mr Harrison, I do declare."

"Uh." The camped up impression of Scarlet O'Hara was lost on Paul, who was too busy panicking to appreciate it. He knew this had been a mistake.

"So where you taking me? I don't need to go home and change into something more suitable, do I?"

*Oh, God,* Paul thought.

In a more normal tone, Trevor said, "It's all right, Pauly, I was just pulling your leg. I really would like to go out for a beer, male bonding and all that good stuff."

"Uh, yeah. Um, The King's Head all right? They do a pretty decent pint."

"Okay."

"You gonna follow me in your own car?"

"I don't drive, I get the bus to work."

"Oh right." Paul was reminded of Sandy's words, he really didn't know Trevor. Heck, he couldn't say exactly what Trevor did for the Council. He thought it was something on the top floor, but, other than that, he wasn't sure.

Walking through the set of double doors, protected from the outside with a digital lock to prevent unauthorised access, Paul followed Trevor into the public part of the building. The Victorian architects had spared little expense on the high vaulted ceilings, multicoloured terracotta tiled walls, opulent lighting that once used to be gas powered, and intricate ironmongery of the balustrades to the wide staircases. Looking up at the late afternoon sun shining through the large stained-glass window at the turn of the stairs, Paul couldn't help the small frisson of awe that shivered through him. He liked how the spinning wheel motif was repeated in the stonework, stained glass and tiles.



“Obscene example of municipal profligacy, isn’t it?” Trevor announced, startling Paul out of his reverie.

Still looking at the window, Paul said, “You think so? I kinda like it, though I’m no expert on architecture.”

Trevor growled. “The town fathers wasted thousands of pounds on this hideous example of Victorian gothic revivalism, when they should have spent the money to keep the poor, sick and aged out of the workhouses. After all, most of them had fed their working lives and health to the monster that was the woollen textile industry. And it was that industry which provided the money for all this.”

Paul was surprised at Trevor’s vehement anti-capitalist outburst. He was more of a liberal himself, though in truth he wasn’t terribly interested in politics of any colour.

\* \* \* \*

Paul spent much of the journey to the King’s Head worrying. What if anyone saw him with Trevor? He tried to think, did any of his mates drink at the King’s Head? Why didn’t he suggest somewhere else, somewhere further out of town? Then he mentally slapped himself. Trevor seemed like a decent bloke, if a little on the campy side. His musings were cut short as the drive to the pub took less than five minutes.

“What do you fancy?” Paul asked as they stood at the bar waiting to be served.

Trevor raised a thin, no doubt plucked, eyebrow.

Paul had his usual half of bitter. He was driving after all. Trevor said he’d have a campari and soda.

After paying for the drinks, Paul steered them to a booth. He tried to convince himself there was no particular reason why he chose one at the very back.

“Thank you. This is nice,” Trevor said, leaning back in his seat.

Paul forced a smile. “Yes, it is.”

“Did you manage to get yourself sorted out with somewhere to stay?”

“Oh, uh, Yeah. I’m gonna crash at a mate’s for a few days.” Paul conjured up an image of Thommo’s lumpy couch.

“That’s good.”

Paul noted that Trevor didn’t offer his spare room again. He wasn’t sure if he’d have accepted if he had.

The pub was busy, even for a Monday afternoon. Paul wondered what he could say. He felt the silence between them growing more uncomfortable.

“So,” Trevor started. “Is your house badly damaged?”

Paul sighed. “Yep, the whole of the downstairs will have to be dried out, re-decorated, then there’s all the kitchen equipment.”

“Oh dear.”

“But what I’m most bothered about are all my LPs.”

“Yeah? You into vinyl?”

Was Trevor trying to imply something kinky? Paul was beginning to regret asking the bloke out for a drink.

“Okay, I know some hi-fi aficionados decry the advent of compact disc, but come on, all that surface noise? Give me CDs every time.”

Paul relaxed as they began a long discussion about the merits of CDs versus vinyl. He mentioned his collection of classic rock albums. Trevor snorted. “All that noise.”

“So, what do you listen to?”

“My dear, I’ve got the most complete collection of Broadway and West End cast musicals this side of the Pennines.”

*Oh, God*, Paul thought.

Trevor laughed, loudly. “Relax, I was pulling your leg. Some classic rock is okay, but I’m more into the middle of the road stuff, Queen, Celine Dion, even some Frank Sinatra.”

“Uh huh.” Paul could cope with that.

“Even got some light jazz, Ella Fitzgerald, that kind of thing.” Shifting in his seat, Trevor added, “Look, if you’re worried about your LP’s getting damp and warping, you could always bring them round to my place and I’ll store them for you.”

“Really? That would be a help, thank you. It’s not so much the discs themselves, more the covers.”

“Course, if your music collection was on CD, you wouldn’t have to worry,” Trevor smiled.

His drink almost finished, Paul asked Trevor if he wanted a second.

“Thank you, but it’s my round.”

“Honestly I’d much rather do it, my apology, remember?”

Trevor looked as though he was going to argue, but caved. “It’s not necessary, but thank you.”

As he waited at the bar, Paul couldn’t help but wonder why he’d offered to have a second drink. Thinking about it, he realised he actually enjoyed Trevor’s company. Ever since they’d left work, Trevor, for the most part at least, had behaved, well, normal.

There wasn't the usual sibilance in his voice, nor any limp-wristed mannerisms. *If it wasn't for his strange get-up, he'd just look like a regular bloke.*

\* \* \* \*

Driving to Thommo's, Paul was glad he'd made the effort to apologise to Trevor. Sandy had been right, he wasn't such a bad bloke once you got to know him. He had been surprised at Trevor's knowledge of history, particularly the industrial revolution as it pertained to their part of Yorkshire.

He'd been in stitches by the end of their second drink. Trevor had told a very risqué story about a visit the church choir Trevor was a member of, had made to a song festival in Manchester. Trevor was such a keen observer of humanity, pointing out the quirks and oddities in his fellow man. Paul had actually been disappointed when their drinks were finished.

He'd offered to buy Trevor a third, saying he'd have something non-alcoholic as he was driving.

Trevor had let out a shrill girly laugh, making Paul cringe. "I won't be responsible for my actions if I have another."

Paul had nodded. "Yeah. I best get going myself. Better see what state Thommo's house is in."

Trevor looked like he had been going to say something, but must have decided not to.

Arriving at Thommo's, Paul moved a collection of empty lager cans from the coffee table and a pile of dirty clothes from the sofa. "See you tidied up for my arrival."

"Piss off," Thommo said, sorting through the clothes, no doubt deciding if he

could get another day's wear out of any of them.

"Got any food?" Paul realised he was hungry.

"Didn't you have anything at the King's Head?"

"Huh? How—"

"Baz saw you at the bar."

"But, uh, why, how."

Paul worried Baz had seen him with Trevor. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think Thommo would be the most tolerant of people. Then he mentally slapped himself. He'd only gone out for a bloody drink with Trevor, he wasn't his boyfriend or anything.

"Baz rang me and happened to mention he'd seen you. What's wrong? You look like summut's spooked ya."

"Don't know what you mean, and no, I didn't have anything to eat at the pub. Thought my new housemate would have been slaving over a hot stove to make a meal for me, especially as he doesn't have anything else to do all day."

"Piss off. There's some pizza from yesterday in the fridge if you want that."

Paul knew Thommo was a stranger to the workings of his kitchen appliances. He existed on a diet of take out meals whenever he was between girlfriends.

Going into the kitchen, Paul noted the pile of unwashed crockery overflowing the sink and spilling onto the worktop. Opening the fridge he spied the pizza box on the top shelf. The only other items in the fridge were cans of lager, and something green and unpleasant lurking at the back of the bottom shelf. Paul didn't feel brave enough to investigate. He hoped whatever it once was hadn't poisoned the pizza.

Picking his way back to Thommo's living room, narrowly avoiding tripping over

various bicycle parts, a broken ironing board and a partially dismantled home gym, Paul knew he couldn't stay there for more than a couple of nights.

"So, your place a total disaster area, then?" Thommo asked before turning on his TV. The huge plasma screen set was the only concession Thommo had made to modernity.

Paul bit back his first thought. "Yeah. Fucking take months to get it sorted."

He settled himself on the sofa, its springs twanging. Thommo had wisely headed for the armchair.

"Told you you shouldn't have bought a house on a flood plain." Thommo had seen a programme on the Discovery channel about house building, and ever since considered himself an expert on the subject.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Pizza okay?"

Thommo always got anchovies, Paul hated anchovies. He picked them off the pizza, but the thing still tasted of salty fish.

"Want a drink?" Thommo asked, getting to his feet.

Paul hesitated. He'd had a hard day, but knew Thommo would want to drink until one or the both of them passed out. Unlike Thommo, Paul had work in the morning.

"Nah, better not."

"Suit yourself." Thommo ambled toward his kitchen. Twenty seconds or so later Paul heard a can being opened, Thommo soon emerging with lager in hand. "More for me, then. Good idea of Baz's going down to France. This little lot will last me a couple of months easy."

Paul winced. Thommo had filled two large supermarket trolleys full of cases of lager. He was amazed the customs let him through with it all. But Thommo's comment about how he was hosting a stag party for a mate seemed to satisfy the official and they were waved through. Paul knew none of them were getting married, but wisely kept his trap shut.

\* \* \* \*

An insistent bleeping brought Paul out of unconsciousness. He opened his eyes, only to snap them shut again. The sunlight was too bright. He turned his head, immediately wishing he hadn't. He let out a piteous moan. "Jesus."

Rolling carefully off the sofa and landing on his hands and knees, Paul immediately clutched at his head and groaned. "Why do I get myself into these situations?"

The previous night he had watched Thommo sink a couple of cold ones before his resolve broke and he asked if he could have one. One led to two, then three, Paul losing count after five.

Needing to piss something fierce, he used the sofa to help him climb to his feet. The room swayed, making Paul close his eyes. "Never again," he croaked. His mouth had the texture of a wrestler's jockstrap, not that he had any personal knowledge of such a garment.

He was reminded of his need to piss. Walking quickly to the bathroom, he kicked aside the empty drink cans that lay in his wake.

\* \* \* \*

"You don't look at all well."

“Uh!” Paul grunted, lifting his head from his folded arms and opening his eyes. He’d no idea how he’d got through the first hour of work. Somehow he’d survived on sheer will power as well as about a gallon of black coffee.

“I said you don’t look at all well,” Trevor repeated.

Paul bit back a sarcastic comment as he looked at the red and green loose fitting smock Trevor was wearing. “Too loud.” Paul wasn’t sure if he was referring to Trevor’s clothes, or his voice.

Trevor laughed. “You taken anything for your headache?” he added in a softer tone.

“Don’t have anything,” Paul mumbled, resting his head back on his arms. Maybe he should go home sick. Then he realised he didn’t have a home.

“Be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Paul sighed. He sent up a prayer to be delivered from his world of hurt.

He was almost asleep when someone touched his shoulder.

“Here, drink this.”

“Huh?” Paul lifted his head, slowly. Trevor swam into focus, he was holding out a glass filled with a greyish coloured liquid. “What is it?”

“Something that’ll make you feel better. Though I warn you, doesn’t taste too nice, so best drink it down in one go.”

Paul wasn’t sure, but Trevor looked determined. Accepting the glass he wondered at how he’d spoken more with Trevor over the past couple of days than in the previous three years.

Not having the energy to argue, Paul downed the whole thing in a couple of



swallows. "Oh fuck." He burped and thought he was going to throw up.

"Try and keep it down," Trevor said before mincing off. Paul was so concentrated on not vomiting that he didn't wonder at why Trevor had shown up in the first place.

\* \* \* \*

Lunchtime, and Paul was at his usual table. Sandy sat to his left, as usual, eating her usual rabbit food. "I'm surprised you don't grow long ears, eating all that lettuce."

Sandy looked down her nose at him. "Sooner eat this than the carnivorous poison you insist on putting in your body. Do you know that minced beef will remain in your gut for eight hours?" She pointed an accusatory stick of celery at his plate.

They'd had this discussion many times. Paul wasn't going to give up his meat pies, and he knew Sandy wouldn't stop eating her salads.

"And I'm surprised you're able to face anything given the state you were in earlier," she said before chewing on a carrot stick.

"I feel fine. Must be all the nutritious meat I eat. Makes a man out of me."

Sandy rolled her eyes.

Paul spotted Trevor leaving the serving line. He wanted, needed to show Sandy he wasn't the arse-hole he'd behaved like the day before. "Hey, Trevor, over here." Paul saw Trevor had opted for the chicken curry. "I need reinforcements against the vegan vigilante here."

Trevor smiled and set down his plate. Paul got an odd look from Sandy which he pointedly ignored.

"Feeling any better?" Trevor asked.

"Yes thanks, much better."

"I knew mum's secret recipe would do the trick. Never fails."

"Oh?" Sandy said. Paul cringed.

"I saw Paul looking under the weather this morning, and—"

"More like he'd been brought through a hedge backward," Sandy put in.

"Yes well. He was looking poorly so I decided to mix him up one of mum's old cures. They've been handed down from mother to daughter for generations in my family."

Paul schooled his features. There was no way he was going to comment.

"But I'm an only child, so my mum had no choice but to pass it on to me," Trevor added with a wink.

"Oh right." Sandy started in on her sliced cucumber. "So what's in this secret recipe? Wouldn't be minced lambs kidney or anything like that?"

"Huh?" Trevor gave Sandy an odd look.

"Ignore her. She's on another of her *meat is murder* tirades."

Trevor looked confused, but didn't comment. The three of them settled down to their meals, exchanging brief remarks about the morning and their respective workloads. Paul felt comfortable in Trevor's presence, much more than he thought he would. Sandy had been right, but there was no way he was going to tell her that. He'd never hear the end of it.

\* \* \* \*

It was no good. He couldn't find a place anywhere. In-between his various work-related tasks, Paul spent the afternoon ringing round his mates, trying to find somewhere to stay.

He'd been offered the spare room at Simon's, but that would mean living with Sylvia, Simon's ball and chain. Paul could only stand Sylvia for short periods. He knew if he had to go live with her, he'd soon be hauled off to prison for grievous bodily harm. Either prison or a mental hospital. How Simon stood her constant nagging and whining he'd never know. Simon once admitted it was worth it because Sylvia was a tigress between the sheets. Somehow Paul couldn't picture the stuck up, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth Sylvia so much as allowing Simon to sleep in the same bed as her, let alone...Paul shook his head. Imagining the sex lives of his mates was a sure sign he needed to get laid.

He'd even called a couple of local hotels. They had room, but he balked at the prices they were asking. A call to his insurance company confirmed what he'd already suspected. He wasn't covered for the cost of hotel accommodation. He determined to change insurers when the policy was up for renewal.

\* \* \* \*

"You putting in some overtime, then?"

"Huh?" Paul tore his attention away from a dry as dust report on the need for more car parking spaces in the town centre. "June, sorry, I was miles away." Looking at his watch, Paul saw it was a quarter-past five.

"Cause it's not like you to stay later than you need."

"Uh, no. Had a lot on today and got behind."

June was fat, frumpy and fifty. She was the unofficial office mother-hen. Paul knew the woman meant well, though he was always careful never to put himself in a position of having to hold a long conversation with her.

“Still no luck finding anywhere?” June was well-connected to the office bush telegraph.

“No, not really. Most of my mates either don’t have room, or I can’t stand their other halves, or they live in pig sties.”

June laughed. “I’d offer you our spare room, but our Sammy and Gail often come to stay at weekends.” June was proud of her two grand-daughters and lost no opportunity to tell people about them at great length.

Fearing she was about to launch herself into a monologue about their latest exploits, Paul intervened. “Have you read this rubbish?”

“I typed it.”

“Oh, sorry.”

She smiled. Paul knew he hadn’t offended her.

“Why don’t you take Trevor up on his offer?” June was adept at going straight for the jugular.

“Well, uh. I turned him down yesterday, it, uh, wouldn’t sound right me asking him now.”

June waved away his protests. “He’d be glad to put you up. Though he hides it well, I know he’s rather lonely. I was only telling our Jill the other—”

“I’ll think about it. But given the time, I better get going, and I’m sure your Bert will be wanting his tea.”

June nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then. And think about what I said about Trevor.” June went on her way.

Paul decided he’d take the report back to Thommo’s and write up his

recommendations there.

\* \* \* \*

Paul was the chief planning officer for Leadstone Borough Council. When most town and borough councils were absorbed into large metropolitan district authorities in the early 1970s, Leadstone managed to remain unscathed. The Council had jurisdiction over Leadstone itself, as well as all the villages in the Lea Valley.

\* \* \* \*

Loud laughter greeted Paul as he let himself in through the front door. He could also hear a TV sports commentator doing his thing.

“Shit,” Paul grouched, as he fell over a set of weights.

“That you, Pauly?”

“Uh yeah.” He didn’t think he’d broken anything, but was sure there’d be a bruise the next morning.

“Come through, man. I’ve invited the guys round to watch the cricket.”

*Wonderful.* Paul took off his jacket, but there was nowhere to hang it. Going into the crowded room, he spotted several members of the local cricket team sitting on the sofa, leaning up against it, or just spread out on the floor. “Hey, guys.”

He received a number of greetings, but mostly they were too interested in the television to pay him much attention.

“What’s the score?”

“The Aussies bowled us out for 190,” Thommo complained. “My grandma could bowl better than this lot.”

“Your grandma’s in a nursing home,” one of the guys said.

“Exactly.”

The crowd of spectators at the cricket ground roared. Paul watched as the camera focused in on the umpire who shook his head.

“Fucking hell. That was plumb LBW,” Pete said, crushing his empty lager can and aiming it at the waste paper basket. It missed, but no one attempted to retrieve it.

Paul enjoyed watching cricket well enough, especially the heightened tension of one day internationals, but maybe he was getting old. He just wanted to relax, have a meal, do his work and have an early night.

“We ordered a curry, should be here soon. I got you a lamb biryani, hope that’s all right?”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.” Paul’s hopes for a quiet evening were well and truly dashed.

\* \* \* \*

*At least I’m not hung over,* Paul thought as he got ready for work on Wednesday morning. His night’s rest had been interrupted several times by snores from Pete who had collapsed on Thommo’s floor and refused to go home.

The “hot” water was at best tepid. Paul showered quickly. The cold water was the last straw. He was determined he wouldn’t spend another night under Thommo’s roof. He’d just have to swallow his pride and ask Trevor if his spare room was still vacant.

## Chapter 2

To say dinner was uncomfortable would be an understatement. Trevor had seen *straight man out of his element* behaviour too many times to be amused by it. He'd lost count of how often he'd played the game of touching the other person's knee and observing the reaction.

Usually the straight guy struggled to work out if it was merely an innocent contact, or...But Trevor didn't want to try any of that with Paul. Not least because Paul's reaction could be to thump him. Trevor liked Paul. The man, all six foot two of reasonably well-formed, but not overly bulging muscle. His dirty blond closely-cropped hair. His light blue eyes. And if that wasn't enough, the man had dimples when he smiled. Trevor had to shake himself. No, despite Paul's evident physical attractiveness, Trevor knew he wasn't going to go down that road again.

"Look," Trevor set down his sandwich. "Relax, will you?"

"What?"

"Paul." Trevor shook his head. "Yes, I am a gay man, which means I like men."

Paul looked like he was about to flee. Trevor imagined him running out of the house, his hands moving swiftly between his arse and his wedding tackle, not sure which was in greater need of protection.

Stifling a smile, he continued. "But I'm not after you."

Paul looked even more panicked.

"Shit," Trevor said under his breath. He was supposed to be putting the bloke at ease, not making the situation worse. Paul had barely taken more than a couple of bites

out of his panini, and if there was one thing Trevor was uncomfortable with, it was wasting food.

“Okay, a bit of a history lesson. All you never wanted to know about gay relationships, and were too afraid to ask.”

“What? I—”

“Paul, it’s obvious you’re uncomfortable with me. I thought we’d at least broken the ice over the last couple of days, but I was wrong.”

“No, I—”

“Just listen.” Trevor took a sip from his wine glass and began. “I’ve had two significant relationships in my life. The first was with, well, I suppose you could call him my childhood sweetheart. Gary was big, strong, sporty, had muscles in all the right places.” Trevor could see, despite himself, Paul was paying attention. “What was even more special about Gary was that he cared. He knew I was somewhat vulnerable back then and in need of, well...in need of a protector. As I’ve told you before I’m an only child. How I wished I’d have had a big brother who could look out for me, fight off the older kids, stop them from teasing and...Mum and dad had me late in life. She was forty-two when I was born. Dad died of cancer eight years later. Mum never quite recovered.” Trevor knew he was wandering off topic.

“Gary wasn’t just my boyfriend, he was my big brother, my protector. All I am now, I basically owe to him.”

“You, uh, you talk about him in the past tense,” Paul put in.

Trevor sighed. “We were together for, oh I don’t know, ‘cause it’s difficult to say when we first became an item. He’d been a part of my life since I was about seven or



eight.

“He moved in next door just before dad died. We soon were inseparable. We grew up together, shared all our secrets. I’ll spare you the more intimate details of what we did.” Trevor didn’t look up to see if Paul was relieved. It wasn’t important.

“Then on 6 June 1991, something, or rather someone, happened.”

“Huh?”

“I thought Gary and I were it. However, knowing that Gary was bisexual caused me no end of sleepless nights and...But Gary would always say he was with me and that was that. But as I said, 6 June. Her name was Lisa Threadgold.” Trevor tried to remain calm. “She took one look at Gary and set her cap at him as my mother used to say.”

Paul nodded uncomfortably, probably wondering what on earth Trevor was going on about.

“Within a couple of months Gary would occasionally go out without me. You have to understand we didn’t exactly live in one another’s pockets, but it was unusual for Gary to sneak off without saying where he was going. I tried not to dwell on it, though this was made more difficult because I could tell Gary was ill-at-ease over something. I wanted to ask him about it, but me being the chicken I was back then, didn’t ask, just in case I didn’t like his answers.”

“Uh huh.”

“Eventually things grew so bad that I plucked up enough courage to ask what was wrong. At first Gary said I was imagining things. But I’m nothing if not persistent. Gary then broke down and told me he found Lisa attractive. They’d met a few times.

Inside I was dying, but I held things together. I asked Gary what he wanted to do. He said he didn't know. He loved me, but—"

Trevor closed his eyes. Despite the passage of time it still hurt to talk about it. "He stopped seeing Lisa. Things were okay for a couple of months, but Gary went into a depression. I did everything I could to show him that he was loved, that he meant the whole world to me."

"But...Oh fuck." Trevor wiped at his eyes. "I'm not going to cry, I'm not." Sniffing, and regaining control, "It was the third of September. Funny how both dates were also significant during the Second World War. Anyway, the third of September. We'd gone for a walk. Something we often did during the warmer months. Neither of us was well off. We didn't much care for pubs and clubs. Walking helped keep us fit. We walked past a kids' playground. I remember the leaves on the trees had just started to turn. Funny the sorts of things you remember. There were some kids playing on the swings. One little boy climbed up the steps of the slide, but somehow got stuck. He started to cry. His dad, who we hadn't seen up until that point, picked him up and comforted him."

"I happened to look over at Gary. His gaze was fixed on the dad comforting his son. I knew then that Gary wasn't cut out for the life of a gay, childless man."

"Couldn't you, um, adopt or whatever?" Paul asked, obviously taken with Trevor's story.

Trevor shook his head. "Wasn't really possible back then. And I think even if it was, it wouldn't have solved the main problem. So anyway, we got home that night, and I told Gary I was setting him free. We argued, ended up sleeping in separate beds. But...deep down we both knew it was the right thing."

“Lisa had met someone else, but she wasn’t too happy with him. Within six months of Gary moving out he was engaged to Lisa. About a year after that they were married with a kid on the way. I got an invite to the wedding. I went but couldn’t stay. I know it’s customary to cry at weddings, though I don’t think the custom extends to ex-boyfriends of the groom.

“Now and again I’d see Gary around town pushing his daughter in her push-chair. We’d say hello, but I needed to keep a distance, to, well, keep myself sane. I’d just come out of the supermarket one day, trolley full of the weekly shopping when I almost ran into a double-buggy thing. Gary was there along with Lisa. His family seemed complete now he had a son as well as a daughter. They, all four of them looked really happy. I was polite. The obligatory questions about what we were all up to were asked and answered. It was obvious Lisa didn’t know how close I’d been to Gary. I was happy for him but not so happy for myself. I’d just broken up with...well, more about that in a minute. So I got out of there as quickly as I could.”

Trevor stared at his hands which were folded in his lap. He too had lost all interest in the toasted sandwich, which lay half-eaten on the plate in front of him.

“I don’t know what to say, other than I’m sorry,” Paul eventually said.

Trevor looked up at Paul, touched by the man’s genuine concern. “Thanks. I didn’t see Gary again, someone said they moved away. I think that was probably for the best. After the park incident it took me over a year to pull myself round, but I managed it. I started going to gay clubs, finding men, just for casual...Well you get the idea. Eventually one night stands grew boring and I set about finding something more meaningful. But, well, that’s not so easy. Gary was a hard act to follow.”

“Surprisingly fate did strike again. Amazingly it was at the supermarket where I would later see Gary and his family. As I did my shopping I got talking with a couple of guys in their late teens. They’d just started at university and were looking for somewhere to stay. Don’t know why I was so impulsive, it’s not normally my nature, but because I got on so well with them, I offered them my spare rooms. Uh, cutting out all the gory details, we, well, uh, things developed between the three of us.”

Paul’s eyebrows shot up.

Ignoring this, Trevor went on. “Neither Sam or Ollie were anything like Gary. That was good, what I needed. In fact if anything I was more the protector, or at least the home-maker. Both were a few years younger than me. Well anyway, not long after they finished their degree courses, I—” Trevor started wringing his hands. “I came home from work and—” In a rush he said, “I came home and found them sitting on the sofa together. They’d decided they wanted to be an exclusive couple. Meaning goodbye Trev.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Hurt like hell, I can tell you. Though looking back on it now I suppose the writing was always on the wall. Ollie and Sam had known each other for a while before I came on the scene, both had gone to the same schools. They were about five years younger than me, and...Well we just weren’t as compatible as I pretended we were.

“I get a Christmas card from them every year. They moved down to London, Ollie got a job with the BBC, and Sam does something highly-paid in advertising. They seem really happy together.”

“Oh Trevor. “

“They keep inviting me to go down and stay with them, but I can’t. I’m happy for them, glad I could be there to sort of bring them out into the world, but it still hurts that I was cast aside.”

“I bet.”

“So, that’s my history. I’ve been burned twice and am not interested in going through it all again. Basically what I’m saying is I’m not looking to hook up with, get my claws into, or however you want to put it, with anyone. So you’re quite safe.”

Paul didn’t say anything for a few moments. “Both Sandy and June told me that you were lonely, and I suppose I misunderstood, and...Shit I’m sorry. Thanks for telling me all that.”

Trevor smiled. “I want you to treat this place as home while you’re here, and to do that you need to be comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll try not to get too enthusiastic about my need to be a homemaker. Though, having said that, I’ll be running the washer tonight, so if you’ve got any dirty clothes I’ll stick ‘em in with mine.”

Paul laughed, the tension of earlier dispelled.

\* \* \* \*

“Be careful with that box, I don’t want you breaking a fingernail or anything.”

“Fuck off,” Trevor said before hefting the large carton of LPs.

It was Saturday morning. Trevor had offered to help Paul salvage what he could from his wrecked house.

“Sorry.” Paul was smiling, as was Trevor.

“When you said you had a record collection, I didn’t think we were talking about a—” Trevor groped for the right word. “A whole bloody vinyl archive.”

“One of my few vices.”

Trevor set the box in the boot of Paul’s car and raised an eyebrow. Paul put down his own box. “And what might these other vices be? Do any of these boxes contain, uh, leather pants, motorcycle jackets or—”

Paul laughed. “Are we talking about my vices or yours?”

Trevor had the good grace to look sheepish. “A girl can dream.”

“Come on, there’s loads more inside.” Paul turned away and went back into the house.

Trevor stared after him. At times he wasn’t sure what Paul was thinking. The bloke could joke around, the fingernail comment being a good example. Then he’d close up and want to change the subject. Trevor shook his head before going back inside.

The place was in pretty bad shape. The air was musty and damp. Trevor’s shoes squelched as he walked across the sodden carpets. A thin layer of mud seemed to coat everything.

Trevor found Paul staring at something on the wall. When he got closer he saw it was a framed album cover of The Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper*.

“Wow,” Trevor said in awe.

“It’s signed.” Paul pointed to a couple of signatures. Trevor was able to make out *Ringo* and *Paul*.

“Do you ever play it?”

Paul shook his head. “Too precious. Got the music on CD though.”

Trevor bit down on the first comment that sprung to mind. "Feel free to hang it in your room back at my place."

"Thanks." Paul reached up and reverently took down the picture frame and walked out of the house with it.

\* \* \* \*

"This is bloody heavy." Trevor had hold of one end of the sofa helping Paul wrestle it outside.

"Wimp." They dumped the sofa in the middle of the lawn.

"The skip I arranged is still coming this afternoon?" Trevor wiped his hands on his jeans; the sofa was filthy from the silt which the water had carried along with it.

"They said they'd be here at about two o'clock."

Trevor looked at his watch. "Best get a move on, then."

"It's very good of you to offer to help like this."

"What are friends for?" Trevor got a buzz out of helping, being of use.

"Thanks. Uh, Thommo, Pete and Baz said they'd help out this afternoon. In fact they should be here soon."

"That's good." Trevor went back inside to see what else needed to be dumped. He hoped the dining room table and chairs could be saved, though they'd need a good clean.

He heard Paul squelch into the room behind him. "You gonna hire some of those industrial de-humidifiers?" Trevor said pointing at the walls. The lightly patterned wallpaper had a foot high grey border. The paper had bubbled and was peeling in places.

“Uh, yeah.” Paul seemed distracted. “They’re coming on Monday with any luck. I’ll have to see if any of my mates can be here to let the guys in, though. I used up all my holidays at Easter, and—”

“That’s all right. I’ve got loads of leave left, I could see to it. Give me a chance to really get down to some serious cleaning.” Trevor found himself rolling up his sleeves in anticipation. He never could identify why, but he always relished the idea of a good top to bottom clean out.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Rubbish. Besides as I said, what are friends for?”

Paul looked even more uncomfortable. “Uh, yeah. Speaking of which, my friends will be here soon. You want me to drive you back to your place? Give me a chance to unload the car.”

“Um, yeah.” Trevor wondered what was going on. He tried to pass it off as just his imagination. “Whatever.”

Trevor took a deep breath and turned his back on Paul, hoping it looked like he was just getting ready to leave. He couldn’t help the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. He’d done his best to be of use, but it seemed Paul would only permit this when it was convenient.

“Trev?” Paul put a hand on Trevor’s shoulder.

“Yeah?” Trevor didn’t turn round.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Why should anything be wrong?”

“Because—” Trevor heard Paul take a deep breath. “Please, Trev.”



Schooling his features, Trevor turned back to Paul.

"I'm sorry. Look, um, Thommo, he's, well he's likely to say something, and," Paul seemed very interested in a spot on the soggy carpet. "I didn't want him, or anyone to upset you."

"Oh I see." Trevor wasn't sure he did.

"I'm fucking this up, I know I am. Look, many of my mates aren't exactly tolerant, or—"

"You just didn't want them to know you're living in the same house as a poofter."

"No." Paul shook his head. "It's—"

"Don't worry, Paul, I understand." In a quieter voice he added, "All too well."

Trevor left the dining room. He walked down the hallway and headed out the front door.

The ride home was made in silence. Trevor, despite having faced rejection, ridicule and downright hostility many times, couldn't understand why Paul's behaviour hurt so much.

Pulling up outside Trevor's modest semi-detached with its small garden, Paul shut off the engine, but made no move to get out of the car.

"Trev, I—"

Usually Trevor would say something at this point about how it was all right, how the other person shouldn't worry. But he wasn't feeling especially charitable, so he stayed silent.

Turning in his seat to face Trevor, Paul continued. "I've messed this up, haven't I?"

Trevor permitted himself a slight smile.

“Though it doesn’t excuse my actions, I, uh, well I was brought up to reject...ridicule anything that wasn’t normal, I mean...Oh fuck, I’m making this worse!”

Paul ran a hand over his face. “Look, Trevor, I’m sorry. I’ve upset you, and that’s unforgivable given that you’ve opened your home to me, offered your help, and...”

Trevor couldn’t hold out any longer. “It’s okay.”

“No, damn it, it isn’t. You’re a good man, and I’ve proved what a stupid unthinking moron I am. I’m sorry. Look, I would be more than grateful for your help this afternoon and on Monday. That’s if you’re still willing to offer it after how I’ve behaved. I’ll try and keep the other guys from...saying stuff they shouldn’t.”

“Thank you for your apology. I know you mean it. And as for defending me in front of your friends, it’s sweet of you to offer, but you don’t need to. I’m used to people reacting negatively. It’s, well it’s a part of life.”

“But it shouldn’t be like that.” Paul was getting mad, though Trevor didn’t know if it was at himself, Trevor or society in general.

“I’m quite capable of dealing with anything that comes my way. A few well aimed comments or a flip of the wrist usually sends the homophobes running.”

Paul sighed.

“And if that doesn’t work, I can stare at their crotches and lick my lips. Just like they’d ogle a woman’s breasts. That never fails.”

Paul tipped his head back and laughed. “You’re bloody amazing.”

Trevor smiled. “Why thank you, honey.”

“Don’t you start on me.” Paul gave a light punch to Trevor’s shoulder.

“Ouch, that hurt.”

“Wimp.”

“Bully.”

“Lightweight.”

“Brute.”

“Shirt lifter.” Paul got a horrified look on his face.

Trevor acted quickly. “No, it’s fine.” Looking directly into Paul’s green eyes, Trevor repeated himself. “Just shows how comfortable you are around me. That makes me feel good.”

“Thanks. I do, feel comfortable around you I mean.”

Trevor smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell your mates what you just said.”

Paul blushed and shifted in his seat.

“Come on, let’s get your records unloaded,” Trevor said to break the uncomfortable silence that had descended. “Then we’ll need to get back for the skip.”

“Thanks,” Paul said quietly.

\* \* \* \*

“Bloody hell! Who’d have thought a bit of water could do this much damage?” Pete said as soon as he and the other guys entered Paul’s house.

“Thanks for coming round,” Paul said. “These carpets are ruined. Will you give me and Trev a hand to rip ‘em up and dump them in the skip?”

“Sure,” Baz said, following Paul into the kitchen.

Pete went off to use the toilet, leaving Trevor alone with Thommo.

“Uh,” Thommo said as he eyed Trevor, who began to bristle at the bloke’s obvious dislike for him.

“Hi, sweetie.” Trevor wasn’t going to budge an inch.

Thommo flushed and began to bluster.

“It should be a lot easier to get things going now there’s plenty of big, strong men to help.” Trevor scanned Thommo’s over-weight and out of shape body. He licked his lips suggestively, though Thommo’s red hair and straggly beard were a complete turn off. “Maybe you could help me onto, uh, I mean with the dining room table.”

“Fucking hell! I...”

Pete returned. “The dining room you say?”

“After you.” Trevor gestured with his hand.

He’d already pegged Thommo as bigoted and somewhat stupid. Trevor was thinking of slotting Pete into the *cute but clueless* category.

As they processed down the hall, Trevor spied their buttocks. Thommo’s were fat and flabby. Pete’s held distinct possibilities however. High, tight, and the guy was wearing a pair of jeans which he must have had to grease himself to get into. *Down, boy* Trevor said, giving himself a severe talking to.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a long time since Trevor had enjoyed himself so much. Homophobe baiting was a much under-rated sport. As he’d suspected, Thommo was all mouth and no action. He was also rather out of shape. Trevor, though not an expert on the game of cricket, wondered how someone in such poor shape managed to maintain a place on the team.

“If you two would lift the sideboard and put it over there,” Trevor pointed, “then we can begin rolling up the carpet.”

“Sure, mate,” Pete said.

Trevor enjoyed watching the man’s muscles bulge as he effortlessly lifted his end of the large piece of oak furniture.

“Fucking hell, what’s he keep in here?” Thommo said, struggling to lift his end.

“Oh come here, I’ll do it,” Trevor said nudging Thommo out of the way. The sideboard was heavy, but he had no problems with it. “Now for the carpet. Do you think you can cope with that?” Trevor challenged Thommo.

“I’m not gonna be pushed around by a bloody fairy.”

“Please yourself.”

Trevor and Pete managed to pull the carpet from its grips and started to roll it. They had to move the sideboard, then the table, over the rolled up carpet onto the bare concrete. Thommo, probably not wanting to be shown up by a limp-wristed queer grudgingly helped to move the furniture.

“Okay, let’s get this thing out to the skip,” Pete said once all the carpet had been rolled up. “Pity it’s ruined, this was a good carpet.”

Trevor nodded. “A quality piece of shag pile, eh, Thommo?”

Thommo dropped his end of the carpet and advanced on Trevor, who began to think he might have pushed the Neanderthal too far.

“How’s it going, fellas?” Paul came into the dining room. Thommo changed direction and steamed past Paul.

“What’s got into him?” Paul asked.

“Don’t think he appreciates Trevor’s form of wit,” Pete said, also lowering his end of the carpet. “Maybe you should stay out of his way for the rest of the afternoon, Trev.

Usually Thommo's pretty harmless, but he can go off on one if he's pushed too far.

Trevor nodded as he did a rapid re-evaluation of Pete. The guy wasn't as clueless as he'd first suspected.

\* \* \* \*

"Okay, it's not what I would listen to by choice, but...Well it's not bad."

The evening had turned cool, so Trevor had lit the log effect gas fire. Paul was stretched out on the sofa, Trevor was in the arm chair.

Paul had asked if he could hook up his turntable and listen to one of his LPs. He opted to play The Who's rock opera *Quadraphenia*.

"You just wait, I'll convert you before you know it."

A lazy smile grew on Trevor's face. "Funny, I was just thinking the same about you."

It seemed to take a couple of moments for the penny to drop. Paul looked panicked, then laughed. "Fuck off."

Trevor cackled. "Got you worried there for a bit."

Paul nodded. Evidently deciding a change of subject was in order, Paul said, "We got a lot done this afternoon. I noticed Thommo kept avoiding you. Thanks for not going out of your way to bait him. "

"He was too easy, I soon got bored. Pete seemed quite a fun guy, though."

"Yeah, he's a good mate."

"Hopelessly straight. I didn't pick up on any vibes on my gaydar about him."

Trevor couldn't help liking Pete's easy going nature.

"Gaydar?" Paul asked.

Trevor did his best to explain.

“You’re not, uh...” Were Paul’s cheeks growing red? “Sweet on him or...?”

“Relax. I told you I’m not interested in straight guys. Too much chance of getting hurt.”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose.”

“Did I ever tell you my dad was a cabinet maker?”

“Huh?” Paul turned to face Trevor, who realised he’d leaped to another train of thought.

“Sorry. I was thinking about your wooden furniture. I think the damp only did minor damage. They should dry out okay, though you might need to have them re-polished.

“Uh huh.”

Trevor looked over at Paul, who seemed to be dozing off. The bloke had worked hard all day. Trevor felt an unaccustomed sense of contentment flow over him. Paul seemed comfortable with his sexuality. Trevor liked Paul, but wasn’t attracted to him. The mere fact there was someone else in the house who didn’t mind being fussed over was another plus. As the music continued to play in the background, Trevor hoped it would take a while before Paul moved out.

## Chapter 3

“Don’t you two look domestic?”

“Huh?” Paul said, halting his progress down the supermarket aisle.

Over the past month, he’d effortlessly fallen into the routine of doing the weekly supermarket shop with Trevor on a Thursday evening. Trevor didn’t have a car, so it seemed the right thing to offer his services. Trevor had steadfastly refused to accept any money for putting him up. Paul had argued, but Trevor had remained resolute. The only concession Paul could wring out of his five foot seven house-mate was that he be allowed to pay for the groceries.

“Didn’t think you knew what the inside of a supermarket looked like,” June said, taking an interest in the items in Paul and Trevor’s trolley.

“What? How did you think I ate when I was still living at my place?”

“Takeaways.” June’s gaze locked on a box of fish fingers.

“Paul’s a great cook. He made us a delicious beef casserole the other night,” Trevor said, his voice going up an octave. The lisp was back. Paul sighed, he had come to realise Trevor adopted his camp persona whenever he was stressed. It was his self-defence mechanism.

June raised an eyebrow, and was that a smirk on her face? Paul realised he’d put a protective, or was it a calming, hand on Trevor’s shoulder.

“You’ll have to excuse us, I don’t want this lot to thaw out before we can get it home.” Paul moved forward, hoping Trevor would follow. He did.

“Thanks,” Trevor said once they’d turned a corner and were slowly making their



way down the cereal aisle.

“Sor-right, mate. June means well, but she’s a busy-body.”

“Yeah.”

As they continued shopping Paul wondered why he’d touched Trevor like that. He concluded he’d just become so comfortable in the man’s presence. Sneaking a look at his housemate, Paul was surprised Trevor had toned down his clothing. He wore a light blue button up shirt, a black pair of trousers. When had he started dressing more soberly? Paul didn’t know.

They’d just concluded the argument of Weetabix versus Shredded Wheat when Paul’s mobile phone started chirping.

He’d no sooner pressed the answer button than Thommo growled, “Fucking Jim’s gone to look after his fucking mother cause she’s broken her fucking hip.”

“Huh?”

“You deaf? I said Jim’s bugged off to visit his fucking mother.”

Paul didn’t think it wise to point out that Thommo hadn’t repeated himself exactly, He’d omitted at least two *fuckings*.

“Oh, I see.” Jim was the cricket team’s best seam bowler. Hell, he was the team’s only seam bowler.

“Yeah, she was up a step ladder reaching for something. Jim’s mother, I mean. Stupid cow.”

“Oh dear.”

“Never mind oh dear, if we can’t find a replacement bowler by Sunday, we’ll have to forfeit the match.”

Trevor took over pushing the trolley as Thommo continued to bend Paul's ear. Paul tried suggesting possible replacements, but either Thommo had already tried to persuade them, or he'd previously fallen out with them and they'd refused to ever play on the team again.

"Look, mate, I'm in the middle of the supermarket, can I give you a ring back later?"

They'd reached the beers, wines and spirits by the time Paul had managed to end the call.

"Bad news?" Trevor asked.

Paul shook his head and provided Trevor with the salient points of the conversation.

"Gary was an opening batsman at our school. As far as I know some of his records still stand."

"Uh huh. But you say he moved away, and it's a bowler we're short of." Paul was only half listening to Trevor. He was always mildly uncomfortable when Trevor talked about his past lovers, even though he never went into intimate details.

"Gary said he put his success down to all the practice he put in. I used to have to bowl at him for hours."

"Really?" Paul's ears pricked up.

"It was a long time ago. I—"

"Would you be willing to, uh, I mean if you're not busy..." Paul couldn't understand why he had suddenly become so excited.

Trevor shook his head. "I never played competitively, I mean I never had a place

in the school team, I was—well, it would have made things too awkward.”

\* \* \* \*

Paul watched amused as Trevor paced the twenty-two yard strip of ground that was the village cricket pitch. He looked for all the world like he knew what he was about.

“Bit green.”

“Well, uh, we don’t exactly have a full-time ground staff. This isn’t Lords, ya know.” Was he sounding defensive? The village of Littleborough was hardly the centre of the cricketing world, and couldn’t run to a massive cricket ground with first class facilities. Heck, they had to bribe someone every week to cut the square and put the roller on the pitch.

“Hmm.”

“What?” Paul was definitely impatient now.

Trevor got up from his knees after poking at the ground with a key. “Not bad.”

“Never knew you were such an expert.” Sarcasm as well. Paul would have to watch himself. Trevor was here on his insistence. Although hesitant at first to join the team, Trevor soon agreed once Paul had said they really needed his help.

Trevor raised an eyebrow. “Just cause I mince, honey, doesn’t mean I don’t know a Yorker from a full toss.”

Paul sighed. Trevor displaying his campy side was a sure sign he felt threatened. “I’m sorry. It’s just I thought you said you never played at school or anything.”

“I didn’t, but Gary was such a perfectionist.” Looking round the small ground, Trevor said, “Shall I bowl an over or two at you? Just to see if I can still do it?”

As Paul went back to the car to put on his pads and grab his bat, he wondered

what the hell was happening. Trevor hadn't seemed the kind of bloke who would know anything about, let alone be able to play, cricket. Yet again the man had surprised him with his hidden depths.

After pushing the three stumps into the ground and laying the bails on top, Paul turned to face Trevor before getting into his stance. He grounded his bat a couple of times, prodding at a few loose spots in the turf.

"I'm not convinced I can still do this." Trevor tossed the ball from one hand to the other, sounding hesitant for the first time since they'd arrived.

"Sorry, mate." Paul knew his comments of earlier had dented Trevor's confidence. "We need you. If you don't play this Sunday we'll have to forfeit the match."

"Bloody hell, nothing like putting on the pressure."

"Sorry."

"At least there's no special services this Sunday. I'm sure the vicar won't mind me missing evensong."

"Thanks." Getting back into his stance, Paul wondered if he should be wearing a box to protect the family jewels.

"I'll just deliver a few balls, mix them up a bit, see what I can still do, okay?"

Paul nodded and watched Trevor begin his run up. He saw a flash of arms, heard Trevor grunt. The ball came towards him. It pitched wide, Paul extended his bat. The next thing he was aware of was a sharp clatter. "Huh?" He looked behind him at the splayed stumps. The bugger had clean bowled him first ball. But how? Paul couldn't believe it. "Fuck!"

"Hell, this pitch has some turn in it. Thought I'd bowled a wide for sure."

“You weren’t the only one,” Paul said, shaking his head.

“Think I should try something a bit less dramatic?”

Trevor seemed less confident at pace bowling. He didn’t possess the necessary strength. The faster balls he managed to deliver often misbehaved, went wide.

“I need more practice, I’m incredibly rusty,” Trevor said, before he bowled an unplayable ball that struck Paul to the side of his pad. Fortunately the ball had little power behind it and did little damage. “I think any umpire worth his salt would say that was leg before wicket, wouldn’t you?” Trevor sounded rather smug.

Rubbing his bruised shin, Paul had to agree.

“Uh, have you had enough?” Although Paul was certainly impressed at Trevor’s bowling, he was getting kind of hungry, and wanted to go home.

“You sure? We’ve only been at it for half an hour. Gary used to want me to—”

Why was Paul so uncomfortable at Trevor constantly mentioning his ex? “Okay, just a bit longer, then.”

“Want me to try a bouncer?”

“No. I don’t have a helmet.” Bloody hell, was there any type of ball Trevor couldn’t bowl?

“Okay, keep your hair on. I’ll try some off-spin.”

Paul shrugged. This bloke was a fucking bowling encyclopaedia. He wasn’t exactly sure what some of the terms meant until Trevor demonstrated them.

Much to his surprise Paul could deal with spin quite well. He sent several deliveries to the boundary, Trevor having to take a long walk to retrieve the ball each time.

“Hey, how come I have to do all the fielding?” Trevor protested after the third four had been scored.

“Someone has to.”

“Bastard,” Trevor said, getting into position again.

Trevor began a short run up, the ball left his hand, pitched, it looked like it would swing outward, Paul prepared to play it, but the ball unexpectedly turned inwards. Paul felt the ball hit the inside of his bat before he heard the familiar sound of the stumps collapsing.

“How’s that!” Trevor raised his hands in triumph.

The cheeky sod had bowled him again. “How’d you do that?”

“I thought I’d lost the knack.”

“You can bowl googlies?” Paul stood at the crease, totally amazed. He thought only professional cricketers could deliver a wrong’un.

Trevor was all smiles, really proud of himself. *With good fucking reason*, Paul thought.

“Yeah. You have to sort of deliver it out of the back of your hand.” Trevor got the ball back and tried to demonstrate to Paul how to hold it. “You need to have the top joints of your index and middle fingers across the seam, with the ball resting between a bent third finger and the thumb. See?” Trevor held the ball up for Paul’s inspection.

He nodded.

“At the point of release, the palm of your hand should be open towards the sky, with the back of your hand facing toward the batsman. See?”

Paul had never seen Trevor so enthusiastic about anything. Truth was, Paul

wasn't a bowler, and didn't really understand, but was loath to show his ignorance.

"Your wrist should be 180 degrees to the ground, whilst the seam of the ball should point towards fine leg." Trevor used his other hand to point behind Paul to the fielding position.

"You gotta use your third finger to do most of the work, turning the ball anti-clockwise on release.

"Took me hours to master it, but Gary kept on at me till I got it right. But then once I did the bugger never knew when I'd slip it in. Didn't exactly get him out every time, but it did enough times to shut him up." Then Trevor's face fell. "But all the bowling skills in the world weren't enough to keep him."

Trevor's ebullient mood of a few minutes earlier had totally evaporated. Before he knew it, Paul had an arm round Trevor's shoulder, giving him a squeeze. Trevor stiffened.

"He's the one who's lost out, mate." Paul squeezed again before letting go.

Trevor seemed to shake himself out of whatever had seized him. "I suppose. Though I could never give him the one thing he really wanted."

"Oh?"

"Children."

Paul felt awkward. He didn't know what to say, how to comfort Trevor. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Trevor still looked down.

"Want to practice bowling some googlies at me? You'll fucking destroy Eastly on Sunday with 'em. "

"You think?"

Paul nodded enthusiastically. He couldn't remember the last time Littleborough had beaten those smug bastards.

"Okay." The smile was back, albeit tentatively.

\* \* \* \*

"No way! No fucking way!"

"Fine." Trevor turned on his heel and made for the door.

"No, Trev, wait. Oh fuck." Paul pulled at his hair in frustration before whirling on Thommo. "He's a damn good bowler, best this team'll ever see."

"He's a poofter, that's what he is. And I ain't sharing a dressing room with him. Fuck, it isn't safe. One look at my privates and he'd...he'd..."

"I've got news for you, honey," Trevor said, sibilance at full force. He had one hand on the door knob, the other against his hip. "I wouldn't even let you fuck me with someone else's dick." He flounced out, slamming the door behind him.

The others in the room who had previously been standing around saying nothing, burst into laughter.

"That was funny."

"I'll have to remember that one," a second player said.

Paul couldn't get the crestfallen look on Trevor's face out of his mind. It'd taken him hours of persuasion to get him to agree to join the team. Even after his amazing performance on Thursday night, Paul still had to convince Trevor that his services were needed. He had to pull out the *Please do it for me as a personal favour* card. And in a matter of seconds fucking Thommo had ruined it. Paul felt like cleaning the bloke's clock.



“And who the hell else is gonna play? You got someone lined up? Someone who can actually bowl?”

“I’m not changing in the same room as a bloody fruit.” Thommo crossed his arms over his chest.

“Okay, fine. Go and tell the captain of Eastly that we can’t raise a team.”

Paul followed Trevor out of the changing room, the door closing with a satisfying bang behind him. “Who the fuck does he think he is? The best bloody bowler this team has ever had—” Paul didn’t know which was the stronger emotion, sadness, anger or his sense of failure. He’d failed Trevor. No wonder the guy never put himself out to help people if that was the sort of reaction he got.

Paul found Trevor sitting on the pavilion steps. He tamped down on his anger and sat next to him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Trevor sighed. “I knew it was a bad idea.”

The bloke looked more glum than Paul could ever remember. His anger started to build again. It wasn’t as if Thommo was some shit-hot batsman, the bloke’s average was laughable. Any delivery that didn’t sit up and beg to be hit usually beat him. Paul was willing to bet Trevor could bowl the guy in less than an over. Shit, he’d done that to him and Paul considered himself a better batsman than Thommo.

“Uh, could I have a word?” Pete asked, coming out of the pavilion.

Paul and Trevor turned to look at him. “Thommo was bang out of order in there,” Pete said, pointing his thumb at the door. “We’ve had a team meeting.”

“Oh?” Paul said. He noticed Trevor had lost interest in the conversation and was

just looking at the outfield.

“Yeah. Half the team threatened to walk out if Trevor wasn’t allowed to play.”

“And what did Thommo have to say about that?”

Pete blushed. Paul could imagine what he’d said.

“Uh, well he realised he didn’t have much of a choice.”

“So?” Paul said, becoming more interested.

“Trevor, if you’d agree to bowl for us, you’d be very welcome. Only—”

“Yes?” Trevor said.

“Well, uh, at first Thommo wanted you to change in the toilet over at the White Horse.” Pete pointed to the pub on the other side of the cricket ground.

“No way,” Paul put in.

Pete held up his hands. “That’s what the others said. So Thommo had to climb down. He’s the one who’s changing over there. So…” Pete put a hand on Trevor’s shoulder. “Will you bowl for us?”

“Only if Thommo offers Trev an apology,” Paul said before Trevor could open his mouth.

“That’s—I’m not sure he’ll agree to that.” Pete shuffled from one foot to the other.

“It’s okay. He’d only be saying it under duress, so it wouldn’t mean anything anyway,” Trevor said, looking down at his shoes.

Paul was ready to interrupt, to insist that Trevor get his apology, but Trevor looked at him and silently pleaded not to make a fuss.

“Oh, all right,” Paul mumbled.

“So you’ll play?”

Trevor nodded.

“Thanks, mate.” Pete slapped Trevor on the back before helping him to his feet and leading him back into the pavilion.

Paul was left alone on the pavilion steps, marvelling at the rapid change of events.

\* \* \* \*

Eastly won the toss, and elected to put Littleborough in to bat. As openers, Paul and Pete made their way out to the middle to a smattering of applause from the tiny crowd dotted around the ground.

“He’s not a bad bloke, that Trevor.” Chuckling, Pete added, “Really put Thommo in his place.”

“Yeah.” Paul wondered if—Nah, Pete had a girlfriend, he wasn’t interested in Trevor in *that way*. “He’s brilliant at bowling. Off-breaks, Yorkers, even the odd googly.”

“You’re kidding!”

Paul smiled, proud as punch of his house-mate.

\* \* \* \*

Eastly’s bowling attack wasn’t exactly the best in the village championship, but Pete still managed to edge a fast paced ball. It went straight into the waiting hands of the fielder at second slip. They were twelve for one.

Thommo came to the crease, his bulky frame barely contained by his cricket whites.

“Thommo,” Paul said, nodding in his captain’s direction.

Thommo ignored him.

Paul tried to put aside his personal animosity; he'd been friends with the bloke for years. "You need to watch that guy's top spin. It's deceptive," Paul said, pointing at the current bowler.

Thommo shrugged, giving Paul the impression he wasn't going to take any notice. As they were in the middle of the over and the batsmen hadn't crossed, Thommo was on strike.

The Eastly bowler ran up, bowled, Thommo swung at it and missed. The wicket keeper caught the ball and tossed it back to the bowler.

"Told you he was fast," Paul called out from the non-striker's end.

Thommo made no comment.

The next delivery came. It was a top spinner. Thommo swung at it, but didn't hit it cleanly. Disaster struck. The fielder was in a perfect position to pluck the ball out of the air.

"Fuck!" Thommo said, banging the toe of his bat into the pitch.

"Told you."

Thommo glared at Paul before storming off the field.

Littleborough scored seventy six runs before their allotment of overs was used up. Paul had been caught and bowled in the tenth over by an innocuous looking ball that he sent directly back at the bowler, who caught it.

Fortunately the overs ran out before Trevor was forced to come to the crease. "I might be able to throw 'em, but I'm crap at hittin' 'em," Trevor had told Paul the night before.

The two teams assembled at the White Swan for tea. The pub usually put on a

good spread, and Paul was looking forward to eating his meal washed down by a pint of best bitter.

“Think we’ll be able to defend our total?” Pete said, queuing up behind Paul at the bar.

“It’ll be tight. Their number three is quite handy. Didn’t he score a half century when we played them last year?”

Pete nodded. “Where’s Trevor?”

“Uh, gone to the bog, I think.” Paul wondered why Pete was asking. “Here he comes now.”

“Don’t tell me, it’s my round.” Trevor sounded chipper. Was that a smile he sent Pete’s way? “What’ll you have?”

“No, it’s mine,” Paul growled before Pete could open his mouth.

Pete shot him a surprised look.

Paul ignored Pete and turned to Trevor. “You’ll be having your usual?”

“Please.”

“Three pints of John Smith’s, love,” Paul said to the barmaid. At least Trevor no longer asked for campari and soda. He was sure Trevor had only ordered that drink a month ago to see if he could get a reaction.

Once Paul had paid for their drinks they made their way into the function room where the pub’s management had set out an assortment of buffet food. Thommo had parked himself by the top table, stuffing as many sandwiches into his mouth as he could.

“Think we’ll beat them?” Pete asked Thommo, gesturing with a sausage roll at

the cluster of Eastly players huddled in the far corner.

“Dunno,” Thommo said round a mouthful of food. “Course it would have helped if you hadn’t got that leading edge.”

Paul rolled his eyes. Thommo could hardly complain at anyone else, given his own poor performance at the crease. However, he chose to keep his comments to himself.

\* \* \* \*

Eastly’s innings progressed, and Paul grew increasingly anxious. As predicted, their number three was chalking up a handy score. Paul wondered when Thommo would toss the ball to Trevor to give him a chance at bowling. Thommo occupied his usual fielding position in the gulley. He demoted Trevor to the third man boundary and deep mid-off when the bowling was from the other end.

After the batsman had scored a second four off the over, Paul had finally had enough. As the fielders repositioned themselves for the next over, Paul walked up to Thommo.

“They’re running away with it.”

Thommo grunted.

Paul realised this was the first thing his friend had said to him since the incident in the changing room. Assuming a grunt counted as speech.

“We need a change in the bowling. Why not give Trevor a go?”

Thommo shook his head as if to dismiss Paul. “I’m the captain.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Paul said more loudly than he had intended. Several people turned to look at them. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You might have gone all queer, mate, but some of us still prefer cunt to cock.”

Paul was close to thumping Thommo. He had no idea the bloke was such a moron. “If you don’t let him bowl then I’m walking off this field right now. And when I tell the others—” He let the threat hang in the air, unsure whether the others would follow through on their promise to ditch the team.

“You wouldn’t.” But Thommo looked uneasy.

“Mate,” Paul tried a more conciliatory approach. “Trev’s not a bad bloke. And no, I’m not turning gay. I’m just realising that some things I used to think were—” Why was he telling Thommo all of this?

The umpire looked in their direction. “Are you ready to continue?”

Paul glared at Thommo, who sighed before turning in Trevor’s direction and gesturing with the ball at him.

\* \* \* \*

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Pete said to Trevor as he high-fived him after Trevor had sent his second batsman back to the pavilion in as many overs.

“Bloody hell, where did you learn that ball?” Paul slapped Trevor on the back before returning to his fielding position.

Trevor had a smile a mile wide on his face. Paul noticed with satisfaction that almost everyone on the team had gone up to him and said something encouraging or just patted him on the back or shoulder. All the team except for Thommo, who resolutely kept his distance, a blank expression painted on his face.

The quick fall of wickets scared the Eastly batsman into playing defensively, which drastically cut the scoring rate. The match, which at one point looked like it was

heading toward defeat, now seemed much more balanced.

Trevor took up his mark to begin the final over. Eastly were seventy for four. They needed 8 more runs to claim victory, but had only six balls in which to do it. Paul was nervous, but maintained an outward confidence.

“Come on, Trev, you can do it!”

A few of the others also called out encouragement.

Trevor began his run up, faster than usual. He bowled, the ball pitched just outside the off-stump, and the batsman drove it toward extra cover. Eastly had run two before the ball was fielded and returned to the wicket keeper.

Paul wandered closer in to catch a quick word with Trevor.

“Fast bowling isn’t your strong suit, mate.”

Trevor’s face fell. “Sorry.”

“But your spin is bloody lethal. Show ‘em, Tiger!”

Trevor’s face lit up. He nodded as both men went back to their places.

The next two deliveries were slower, although the batsman connected, he could only push the ball directly at a fielder.

Three balls remained, Eastly needing six runs to win.

Trevor pulled out his googly for the next delivery. It surprised the batsman who slashed at it. He got a thin edge and the ball went toward the gulley.

“Catch it!” came the cry. Thommo got a hand to it, but couldn’t hold onto it, the ball falling to the ground.

The batsmen ran a single.

“Fuck!” Paul said under his breath.



Trevor's penultimate ball was hit hard toward Paul at deep mid-on. He picked it up and threw it under-arm at the wicket keeper, who caught it and smashed it into the wicket. The batsman who was running hell for leather toward his crease didn't get there in time, and was run out.

The small crowd clapped enthusiastically.

"They still need a six to win," Paul said under his breath, preparing himself should the ball come his way again.

Whilst the new batsman came to the crease and took his stance, Thommo altered the field, sending as many men out to the boundaries as possible.

Trevor bowled the ball, an in-swing. As the batsman needed to score a boundary, he gave an almighty swing, but didn't connect. The wicket keeper caught the ball.

The match was over. Littleborough had won by six runs. All the players crowded in to congratulate Trevor, who lapped up the praise. Even Thommo managed to find it within himself to pat Trevor on the back and nod at him.

"Bloody hell, mate. You did it," Pete said, hugging Trevor to him. Trevor looked uncomfortable and didn't return the hug.

"You were brilliant!" Paul wrapped an arm around Trevor's shoulders. Trevor treated him to a shy smile; however, he seemed more relieved when Paul let go of him. "God, Trev. I can't believe it. Brilliant, just brilliant!" Paul was beside himself at what a difference his friend had made to the team.

The two batsmen shook Trevor's hand before doing the same to the other members of the Littleborough team. As the sun sank over the horizon, the players left

the field.

\* \* \* \*

Spirits were high in the dressing room. As far as Paul could tell, no one seemed to mind that Trevor was gay, they just changed out of their whites into their street clothes as usual. Paul looked over at Trevor who, rather surprisingly, seemed quiet.

Trevor stood up, exchanged a few quiet words with a couple of players before approaching Paul. "I'll head home now."

Paul was shocked. Not only at what Trevor said, but the quietness in his voice. "Aren't you gonna stick around? We usually go to the pub for a round or two when we win. You—"

Trevor shook his head. "No, it's okay. You stay and enjoy yourself."

Trevor left the changing room, Paul watching him leave, concern growing at whatever was wrong.

Paul finished changing and extricated himself as quickly as he could from the conversations that had sprung up around him.

\* \* \* \*

"What's wrong?" Paul asked, spying Trevor sitting quietly in his front room.

Trevor sighed. "Nothing."

Paul looked at his friend. Yes, unlikely as it was, Trevor had become a friend. "You're not ill or anything?"

Trevor shook his head.

"The guys couldn't stop talking about you, how well you bowled."

Trevor allowed himself a small smile.

“You’ve guaranteed yourself a permanent place on the team, despite any objection Thommo might have. He’d have a bloody riot on his hands if he blocked your place.”

Trevor shook his head. “I’m not joining.”

“What?” Paul stared at him. “Why not?”

Trevor let out a long breath. “All this sporty camaraderie, slapping one another on the back in true macho fashion.” Trevor shook his head again. “It’s not me.”

“Huh?”

“And besides, I don’t want to rock the boat. Yeah, I managed to get a couple of wickets, but was it all worth it? I, or rather my sexuality, caused a rift in the team.”

“No it didn’t. Everyone,” Paul corrected, “Almost everyone would support you joining the team.”

“I don’t want to take what’s-his-name’s slot.”

“Jim? He’s not much of a bowler. You’re miles better than him.”

Trevor still wouldn’t budge. “I don’t want to cause division or upset for you, for the team. No matter how good a bowler I am, there’ll be people who think of me as a shirt-lifter first, and a cricketer second.”

“But—” Paul didn’t know what to say. “You can’t, I mean—” Paul ran a hand through his hair. “Shouldn’t you stand up to them, do what you want despite the prejudice of others?”

“I hear what you’re saying, and I can agree with it, up to a point. But as I said, I don’t want to be a member of the cricket team. It’s not me. I only bowled for Gary because he asked me; it was something we did together as a couple. Then today I helped

out because you'd have had to abandon the game if I hadn't have stepped in. But mostly I did it because you asked me to."

"But, Trev."

"No, Paul, please just drop it. I'm not playing again, and that's the end of it."

Trevor shot Paul a determined look, which silenced Paul's protests. He only managed a weak, "It'd be a shame to waste such a talent."

"I think I'll have a bath, then an early night. I've got a lot on at work tomorrow, we both have."

Paul watched Trevor leave the room, various emotions swirling round in his head.

## Chapter 4

“What’s wrong?” Paul gave Trevor an appraising look. “You haven’t been, uh, well, not yourself lately. You’ve not changed your mind about joining the cricket team?”

“No, I told you I’m not interested in the bloody cricket team!” Trevor snapped. It had been a week since the match, and Paul had managed to bring up the subject of him becoming the team’s spin bowler almost every day.

“Whoa!” Paul held up his hands. “So if it’s not the unmentionable game of willow hitting leather, what’s the matter? It’s not like you to be like this.”

“It’s nothing.” Trevor knew he’d spoken too quickly.

Paul raised an eyebrow, but remained silent.

The two were sitting at the breakfast table, Paul with his usual bacon sandwich. Trevor, not being hungry, had a cup of tea.

Paul’s continued silence and penetrating gaze unnerved Trevor, who squirmed in his seat.

“There’s nothing wrong.”

“Uh huh.” It was obvious Paul didn’t believe him.

“It’s nothing. It’ll pass.”

Paul’s expression softened. “You know you can tell me anything, and it won’t go any further.”

Trevor bit his lip. He had been amazed, gratified and somewhat uneasy at the comfort and closeness that had grown between the two of them.

“We better get a move on, you’ve got that meeting of the planning sub-committee

this morning.” Trevor knew he was changing the subject, and judging by the look Paul gave him, Paul knew it, too.

\* \* \* \*

When Trevor entered the canteen at lunchtime, he got his food and sat down opposite Paul and Sandy.

“Is that all you’re having?” Sandy asked, looking at the lone sandwich on Trevor’s plate.

“I’m not hungry,” Trevor mumbled.

He heard Paul clearing his throat, but didn’t look up. Paul must have changed his mind because his next words were aimed at Sandy.

“Has Mr Brandon’s collection got as far as the filing department?”

“What?” Sandy laid down her stick of celery and turned to Paul. “It’s not like you to be interested in retirement presents.”

“Mr Brandon was behind me getting my first job with the Council. I thought about buying him a separate gift.”

“That’s nice. Have you any idea what you should get him?” Trevor asked.

“Not really. Could you maybe help me pick something? You gay blokes are supposed to be good at shopping, aren’t you?”

Paul chuckled but Trevor didn’t join in. He wanted to, he knew Paul was only pulling his leg, but...

“Trev?” Paul put down his fork and looked over at him.

“Sorry, I—” It all got too much. Trevor pushed himself away from the table and bolted out of the room, not caring that his chair had toppled over.

Trevor headed straight for the gents' toilets. Finding the room empty he locked himself in a cubicle, sank down on the toilet seat and buried his head in his hands.

The outer door creaked. "Trevor? You in there?" Paul's concerned voice drifted over the top of the partition.

Hollowly, Trevor said, "I'm all right."

Paul sighed. "I don't think you are, mate."

Trevor didn't answer.

"We haven't known one another for very long, but...Well, I—You're a mate and I don't like it when my mates are unhappy.

Trevor sniffed. "Thanks. I'll be okay in a minute. You don't need to stay."

"I want to. Even if it means people will start talking about me for hanging round the gents' loos."

Trevor couldn't help the short bark of laughter that bubbled up from his throat.

"See, made you laugh."

"Thanks."

Trevor tore off some toilet paper, blew his nose and flushed the paper down the pan. Opening the cubicle door he saw Paul's concerned face. Fortunately Paul didn't crowd him, allowing him to get to the sink to wash his hands.

Once Trevor had dried himself Paul turned him round and looked at him seriously. "Can you tell me about it?"

Trevor hesitated before shaking his head.

"Is there anyone you could confide in?"

Trevor thought about it, but couldn't come up with anyone. He shook his head

again.

Paul sighed. "You admit there is something bothering you." It wasn't a question.

Trevor nodded.

"I can only repeat what I said earlier, if there's anything I can do to help, you only need to ask. I, uh," Paul stared briefly at the floor. "I'm not at the root of whatever it is, am I?"

"No, no, not at all." Trevor was anxious to reassure his friend.

"I suppose that's something."

"Yeah." Trevor didn't know what to do. Paul didn't seem in any hurry to get it out of him. He just stood there, offering his silent support.

Biting his lip and before he could chicken out, Trevor said, "I've found a lump."

Paul's concerned expression didn't waver.

"Down there," Trevor pointed between his legs.

"You mean, in one of your uh, balls?"

Trevor nodded, he felt his face going red.

Someone else entered the toilets and saw the two of them standing there.

Before the newcomer said anything, Paul took hold of Trevor's elbow and guided him out through the door, along the corridor and into his office, closing the door behind them. Showing Trevor to a seat, Paul took the one next to him. He didn't say anything, just gave him the space to talk.

"I—My dad died of cancer."

Paul nodded as if he understood. "And you've been afraid of it ever since, just in case it..."



"I'm scared. I'm only thirty-two."

The hand that Trevor only then realised had been holding his throughout, tightened slightly. "How long? I mean, when did you first notice the lump?"

"Just over a week ago. Saturday."

"The day before the cricket match?"

Trevor nodded.

"Oh Trevor! Why didn't you say anything? I mean—"

"I hoped it would go away if I ignored it. It wasn't too painful at first, just a swelling. But it's gotten bigger."

"You have to go see your doctor about this."

"No, I—"

Still in the same calm voice, Paul said, "You have to, love. This can't go on like it has."

Trevor fought a battle within himself. He hated going to the doctor. There'd be tests, a hospital stay. He began to tremble; he didn't think he could do it.

"Trevor," Paul's thumb was rubbing his knuckles. It felt very comforting. "Who's your doctor? I'm going to give them a ring, see if they can see you today."

"No, it's too late for today, they won't have any free appointments."

"We'll see about that. Now which surgery are you registered with?"

Deep down he knew he had to get this sorted out. He couldn't continue with such levels of pain, even though it hadn't been as bad that morning. At thirty-two the thought of death terrified him. What had he achieved so far in his life? Trevor was ashamed to realise precious little.

“Trev?”

Paul’s calm persistence won through. Trevor gave Paul the name of his doctor.

Trevor had distant memories of his dad, a big powerful man who always seemed to be laughing. Then came the sickness, the need to always be quiet around him. Although he suspected he was sheltered from the worst of it, Trevor could still remember seeing his dad lying in a hospital bed, his yellow skin contrasting horribly against the white sheets.

The sound of arguing only partially broke through Trevor’s reverie. Disinterestedly he looked over to see Paul talking on the telephone, gesticulating with his free hand. Eventually Paul put down the receiver and approached him.

“I’ve got you an appointment this afternoon at 5:30.”

“Oh, I—” Trevor didn’t know. It was too soon. He wouldn’t have time to mentally prepare himself.

“Can you hang on for a minute? I need to have a word with someone.”

Trevor nodded absently as his mind went back in time to his dad’s funeral. The church had been packed. He never realised so many people had known his dad. He recalled the big oak coffin next to the altar. Trevor had wondered if his cabinetmaker father would have approved of his mother’s choice of casket.

It was obvious even to a young boy like him that the vicar had never met his dad. Trevor’s overriding memory of the day, however, was how the service seemed to drag on and on.

Trevor had been afraid to stand too close to the graveside, in case he fell in. By this time his mother was an emotional wreck. He did what he could to comfort her, but

fortunately one of his aunties stepped in.

“Okay,” Paul said, coming back into the room and sitting down next to him. “I’ve had a word with Mr Brandon. He’s agreed to let you have as much time off as you need. He’s also—”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary. I’m sure I can—”

“We’ll see. The time off is there if you need it.” Paul squeezed Trevor’s upper arm. “He’s also agreed to let me take some time off to—” Paul raised his hand to silence the protest that hadn’t quite made it to Trevor’s lips. “And I’ll be taking you to the doctor’s. I’ll stay in the waiting room if that’s what you want, but you’re not going to face this alone.”

That was it, Trevor couldn’t hold in his tears any longer. Paul was being so kind. He wasn’t sure why, but he was glad.

“Hey now.” The voice was just as soft, just as caring.

“I’m sorry. Bloody hell, what must you think? Stupid queer crying over the least little thing.”

Paul grabbed his arm tightly. “Firstly,” the voice was harder now, “I don’t think of you as a stupid queer, and this is hardly an insignificant matter.”

“You’re so kind.” He lapsed into silence, then he remembered something. “But you’d arranged to go out with Cindy this afternoon.”

“I’ve already called her to cancel. She only wanted me to go clothes shopping with her, you know what women are like.”

Trevor didn’t really, but wasn’t going to remind Paul of the fact. Cindy was, well, essentially Paul’s girlfriend, though Trevor noticed he never used the term. They’d been

going out occasionally for about a month. Trevor liked Cindy; he thought she was good for Paul.

“You ready to go home yet?”

“But the appointment isn’t until this evening, I could stay—”

“It’s all arranged.” Paul stood up. “You’re hardly going to be able to concentrate on work, are you?”

Trevor didn’t respond.

“And before you even say it, no you’re not going home on the bus by yourself. I’m taking you home and staying with you.”

“Thanks.”

He had to be strong, because there was no one he could lean on, he had to do it all himself. He wasn’t comfortable about leaning on Paul. The guy was kind, considerate, not to mention drop dead gorgeous. Trevor could, if he allowed himself, fall very heavily for Paul. Shaking his head he got to his feet. “All right, I’ll go quietly.”

“Good, because I didn’t fancy having to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of the building.”

“Damn, I should have held out. I could have had all my caveman fantasies fulfilled.”

Paul shook his head. “Daft bugger.”

Trevor was surprised his friend hadn’t pulled a face or said something truly disapproving. He knew Paul didn’t like it when he camped it up.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting in a deep cushioned chair in the hospital outpatient’s waiting room, Trevor

reflected on the events of the previous couple of weeks.

First had come the visit to his doctor, an understanding older man who had done his best to be reassuring. That the guy had pulled out all the stops to get him an urgent appointment with a urologist didn't exactly ease Trevor's fears.

"You want a cup of tea?" Paul nudged Trevor's arm. A volunteer had wheeled in a drinks trolley and was busy doling out Styrofoam cups.

"Uh, I'll have an orange juice if they have any. Here, I'll—" Trevor reached for the wallet in his back pocket.

"I'll get them."

Paul had been a brick. Trevor knew he'd been moody, one minute high as a kite, the next down in the dumps. But through it all Paul had been supportive, understanding and at times obstinate in not letting him wallow. Trevor felt he was beginning to rely on Paul a little too much for comfort. He promised himself that once the immediate crisis was over, he would have to shore up his defences again. He mustn't allow himself to depend on Paul. The man was straight and would be moving out within a month or so. The repairs to his house were going well. Trevor had helped out when he could, but was ashamed to realise he hadn't been that much use the past couple of weeks.

It had taken three days of forced inactivity since he'd told Paul about the lump before Trevor felt like climbing the walls. On the fourth day he had announced to a reluctant Paul that he would be going back to work the next day. Privately Trevor had to admit he wasn't as productive as maybe he ought to have been, but Trevor knew he was better off working and trying to take his mind off it.

The second medical visit came a week after seeing his doctor. Trevor had to

have an ultrasound scan. This passed off without incident. Trevor knew there would be no needles, something he hated. The only mild discomfort had come from the cold gel the technician had spread on his scrotum to aid better contact with the probe. Later Paul had told him the lady tech was hot, but Trevor admitted he hadn't even noticed.

"They didn't have orange, so I got you apple juice." Paul handed him a small carton with a straw wrapped in cellophane stuck to the side. Trevor had no more than punctured the little foil circle in the top of the carton before a nurse called his name.

Trevor's heart began to beat rapidly. With one hand Paul took the apple juice from him, and with the other gave his hand a squeeze.

"Want me to go in with you?"

Trevor nodded and got to his feet. As they made their way down a short corridor, Trevor felt like the condemned man shuffling toward the scaffold.

"They're not going to execute you, Trev."

Trevor lessened his grip on Paul's hand. How did Paul know what he'd been thinking? Why was he still holding the bloke's hand? Why hadn't Paul removed it?

"Just take a seat, Mr Pierson," the nurse in her pressed light blue and white uniform told him, giving him a small smile. "Mr Barraclough shouldn't be too much longer."

"Thanks," Trevor finally let go of Paul's hand, immediately missing the contact.

"Why'd you reckon surgeons are called *Mister*, but physicians are called *Doctor*?"

"Dunno."

Trevor didn't want to talk, but still mulled over Paul's question. He thought the practice had begun way back, when physicians were university educated and were the

only ones who could be addressed as *Doctor*. Surgeons didn't have a medical degree so couldn't use *Dr* and—Why the hell was he thinking about stuff like this anyway?

They had to wait about ten minutes, most of which was spent in silence, before being ushered into the presence.

The urology consultant had the bedside manor of a lump of wood. Cold didn't even come close. Trevor sat nervously in a chair, Paul sending him reassuring glances as Mr Barraclough read medical notes, examined ultrasound films, at no time looking up, speaking to or even acknowledging that Trevor was present.

After scribbling something down, Mr Barraclough capped his fountain pen and looked up. "Are you sexually active, Mr Pierson?"

"Why, you interested in a quickie?" The remark left Trevor's lips before he could stop it.

The balding, slightly overweight doctor's eyebrows shot up so high Trevor thought they'd go all the way to the top of his head.

"Trevor, behave," Paul said softly.

Still bristling at the doctor's unexpected question, Trevor said, "No, doctor, I'm not sexually active."

The guy looked at Trevor, then Paul with a disbelieving expression on his face. "Go into the next room, please, and strip off below the waist."

Paul shot Trevor a look, quelling his reply. Trevor got to his feet and deliberately minced into the adjoining room.

Lying on the examination couch while the urologist did his poking and prodding, Trevor wondered if it was a prerequisite for all doctors to have cold hands.

“Does it hurt if I press here?”

“Uh, not really.”

“And here?”

“Ouch!” Did the bloke have to squeeze quite so hard?

Despite the clinical nature of the examination and the likelihood of impending doom being announced, having his unaffected ball played with was mildly arousing. He knew though that there was no danger of him getting hard.

“Hmm,” the doctor said, but didn’t add anything more constructive. He continued to poke and palpitate. Trevor was growing bored, not to mention cold. The window was open and the resulting draught was chilling.

Trevor asked the urologist why the left side of his scrotum had inflated to such an alarming size, and why it felt so heavy.

“Each testicle is held in a sac. In your case the left one has filled up with fluid. It’s a way for the body to protect itself.”

“Oh right.”

“You say the amount of pain you’re experiencing has diminished?”

“Yeah, almost gone now.”

“Hmm.” Back to the clear and concise communication.

The examination continued. Did the bloke secretly get off on fondling his patients so much?

Eventually the man nodded, withdrew his hands. The examination was mercifully over. Trevor was told he could get dressed.

Back in the consulting room Trevor found Mr Barraclough writing. He sat down



and waited. Eventually the consultant opened a book and leafed through a few pages.

“I’d like to have a closer look at this in the operating theatre.”

Trevor felt his blood run cold. He had been afraid this would happen.

“I—”

“There’s really nothing to worry about, Mr Pierson.”

“Easy for you to say, you’ll be on the blunt end of the scalpel.”

“Quite. It may be necessary to remove the entire testicle, but I won’t know that until I see what’s happening.”

Trevor shuddered. “Do you think it might be, uh, cancer?”

It wasn’t until later that night as he lay in bed, sleep having eluded him, before Trevor realised the surgeon hadn’t given him a direct answer.

\* \* \* \*

“I didn’t think it would be so soon.”

“It’s best it gets sorted out.” Paul’s calm voice never changed.

“Suppose.” Trevor slumped further down in the passenger seat.

They were on their way back from the hospital. Trevor got that disconnected-with-reality feeling again. It seemed to be happening more and more. He knew the doctor would recommend surgery, he just knew it.

He couldn’t tell Paul how scared he was, how once they opened him up they’d find incurable cancer. How...Paul wouldn’t understand, he couldn’t.

“It’ll be all right, you’ll see.”

“Yeah.” Trevor wasn’t convinced.

“Uh, your dad...he didn’t have, uh, testicular cancer, did he?”

Trevor shook his head. "No, he got a tumour on his liver."

Paul took a hand from the wheel and gave Trevor's knee a squeeze. "So there's no link, no reason to think that what your dad had is related to your current problem."

"Suppose."

"The chances of what you've got being cancer are really small. And didn't you say your pain is less than it was last week? That's gotta mean—"

"And when did you get your medical degree?"

The car fell silent.

"I'm sorry." Trevor truly was. He knew he'd been hell to live with for the past couple of weeks. "You're right, I know I'm over-reacting. Sorry."

"I understand." Paul continued trying to be positive, "Remember he said he might not have to take the whole thing."

Trevor didn't feel especially comforted by that remark.

After a brief silence, Paul asked, "You wanna go for a pint?"

"No. I'm not in the mood to be out in public."

"How's about I get some cans in then, and we can get drunk at home?"

"Yeah." The idea had merit, two buddies dealing with a problem by trying to drown it in alcohol. It wasn't Trevor's usual style, but why not. "Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

Trevor hadn't had a minute's sleep all night. He couldn't claim it was because of pain from the wound: that seemed to be behaving well. It was kind of interesting to have a succession of people wanting to take a look at his dick. Okay, they were more interested in the small bandage next to his dick, but a boy could dream. Except Trevor

didn't dream because he'd been kept awake all night. The bloke in the next bed kept coughing repeatedly, bringing Trevor back to full wakefulness just as he was about to drift off. If his bed-neighbour's bronchitis wasn't bad enough, the nurses at their station in the corridor outside his bay kept up a steady stream of talking all bloody night. Hadn't they got anything better to do than chin-wag? The final straw came about 2 am when a patient directly opposite started having a heart attack. Alarms went off, nurses and doctors ran into the room, turning on lights. Trevor had kept his eyes shut, wishing he was anywhere else. After they got the bloke stabilised, they wheeled him off to the coronary care ward, turning off the lights as they went. However, Trevor knew he wouldn't have a cat in hell's chance of getting any more sleep.

Paul had loaned him his iPod, so Trevor spent the rest of the night listening to soft jazz, praying for the morning to arrive. The sleepless night gave Trevor's mind too much time to mull over the past twenty four hours.

\* \* \* \*

Paul had driven Trevor to the hospital and stubbornly refused to leave him. Secretly Trevor was touched, but again felt his resolve not to get too used to Paul's kindness beginning to crumble.

"No wonder we're called patients," Trevor grouched as he sat on the made bed, unsure if he should change into pyjamas and get under the blanket.

It was more than an hour before someone showed up to officially admit him, telling him that yes, he could get changed, giving him a God-awful gown that fastened up the back. At least he was able to put on his dressing gown, which covered his exposed arse.

Trevor again told Paul to go home, back to work or his own house to check on the progress of the various repairs. There seemed little point in him just sitting by his bed waiting. But again Paul refused to budge.

When an orderly showed up bearing a razor, Paul decided that maybe he ought to leave after all.

“Don’t want to see my pubes being removed, eh?”

Paul said he could live without the experience. Ever since Paul had moved in, Trevor had been scrupulous about not making his guest feel uncomfortable. He made a point of never hovering whenever Paul took a bath or got changed. Therefore his remark surprised him. *At least it got him to go*, Trevor thought.

The orderly set about shaving the upper part of his legs, a process Trevor quite enjoyed, despite the man’s clinical approach. Then he was told to move his dick aside so he could get at his bush.

“But why, uh, I mean my scrotum is already shaved, why do they want me to be smooth there, too?”

“The doctor will make his incision here,” the orderly pointed to a spot about an inch above and slightly to the left of the root of Trevor’s dick. “They will want to take as much of the chord as possible, just in case.”

Trevor didn’t need to ask in case of what. He wished he hadn’t asked his question.

Eventually it was his turn to go down to the operating theatre. The two porters were efficient and cheerful, but their joking around didn’t lift Trevor’s mood. He merely settled himself on the trolley, closed his eyes and began to pray. The pre-med pill the

nurse had given him to help him relax didn't seem to be having any effect. He still felt tense, panicked even.

Apart from feeling an initial scratch on his wrist, Trevor knew nothing of the next hour or so. He had vague memories of waking up in the recovery room, a nurse smiling down at him. "All over, Mr Pierson, someone will be here soon to take you back to the ward."

"Thank you," Trevor croaked. He'd been told the anaesthetic would make him hoarse, but it would soon pass.

"Are you feeling okay? Any pain?"

Trevor assessed how he felt. In truth nothing hurt, which surprised him. "No, I'm fine, thanks. Will I be allowed to go home tonight?"

The nurse looked up at the clock. "That'll be for Mr Barraclough to decide, but because you were last on the list and it's getting late, he'll probably want you to stay in overnight, just in case."

Trevor hated the *Just in case* part. It could cover an endless number of scenarios, none of them very pleasant. He was about to ask how the operation had gone, what exactly they'd taken away, but part of him didn't really want to know, the other part knew the nurse wouldn't tell him, saying the consultant would answer all his questions in the morning.

Sure enough her next words were, "Mr Barraclough will see you on his rounds tomorrow, he'll be able to answer all your questions then. Try not to worry."

Had his face showed how worried he was? Trevor smiled and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

The breakfast cart being wheeled into the ward was the most welcome sight Trevor could remember. It meant morning had arrived; he would soon be released. Removing his headphones, Trevor sat up in the hard-as-concrete bed and attempted to mound his pillows into something comfortable and supportive. The pillows had other ideas. After doing the best he could, Trevor reclined and awaited the culinary delights that would be breakfast. His cynicism was not disappointed. The offerings were bread and butter with either marmalade or jam. They didn't run to toast. He was also offered a bowl of cold cereal. The only items that were above room temperature were tea or coffee. He'd sampled the tea the evening before, so chose a cup of coffee. On tasting the bland beverage, obviously made from an inferior brand of instant powder, he wished he'd opted for a glass of milk. Still, eating and drinking passed some time, though it seemed hours before the surgeon showed up.

Firstly Mr Barraclough stopped at the next bed with its coughing and wheezing occupant. The dark blue uniformed ward sister drew the curtains around the bed. The thin piece of material did nothing to prevent the whole ward from being able to hear what was said.

"Well, Mr Smith, I removed your prostate yesterday."

A cough mixed with a grunt was the only reply.

"Although we'll have to wait until the samples I took are examined under a microscope, it's likely you'll require further treatment. I'll discuss this with Dr Henson, your oncologist."

"How long?" the man coughed.

The blood pounding in his ears, along with his elevated breath sounds, prevented

Trevor from hearing the consultant's reply. Trevor thought he was going to throw up.

"Mr Pierson, good morning." Mr Barraclough appeared at his bedside and took hold of his chart.

Trevor thought it was decidedly not a good morning. He merely nodded, but couldn't persuade himself to uncoil from the protective ball he had assumed.

"May we have a look at your bandage?" the doctor asked.

Reluctantly Trevor unwound himself, all the while wishing the doctor would just speak the dreaded words of his impending demise.

"Excellent." The doctor gently prodded around the still pristine white bandage. "As you know we had to remove the entire left testicle. Though we'll have to wait for the histology department's verdict, I'm pretty sure the tissues had necrotised, but this hadn't spread."

"Huh?" It took Trevor a moment to translate the words. He'd read everything he could get his hands on concerning testicular diseases, but his current state of mind didn't allow him to think as clearly as he normally would. "You mean it died? It wasn't, isn't cancer?"

"I'm confident there was no tumour."

"Fuck. Oh, uh, sorry." Trevor didn't know whether he wanted to cry, laugh, dance for joy or kiss the surgeon. "Why, uh, why did it die?"

"Any number of reasons really. Infection, possibly the testicle didn't grow properly in the first place. We don't know."

"I see." It didn't really matter, he was cancer free. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

The surgeon went on to explain that Trevor could come back at a later date so they could insert a false testicle into his scrotum, but Trevor told him that wouldn't be necessary. There was no way he was letting himself go under the knife again.

Once the medics had moved on, Trevor reached for the bedside phone. He didn't care that calls made from the instrument were expensive, he just wanted out of there as quickly as possible.

"Paul? It's all over. Can you come and get me?"



## Chapter 5

“Sor-right, I’ll get it.” Paul walked down the hallway and opened the door. He had become so comfortable staying at Trevor’s, he thought nothing of opening the bloke’s front door.

“Doris?” He wondered why Pete’s grandmother would be visiting Trevor.

“Oh hello, Paul, love. I’d forgotten you were living here.”

Doris’ lined face looked even more worn than usual. She stood wringing her hands, looking upset.

“What’s wrong? Uh, come in.” He stood aside for Doris to enter. Taking her coat he asked, “Would you like a cup of tea? Trev’s just made a pot.”

“I’d love a cup, thank you.”

Paul showed Doris into the front room. That, and offering tea, were such ingrained customs, he didn’t even question his actions.

“I’ll just go get the tea and tell Trevor you’re here. I take it you’ve come to see him.”

Doris nodded.

In the kitchen, Trevor was already setting out a third cup. He must have heard Doris’ arrival.

“I’ll see to this, you go be with Doris, she looks upset.” Even though he’d drunk tea at the Mitchell’s many times, Doris had always been *mother*, so he had no idea if she took milk and sugar. Getting out Trevor’s sugar bowl, Paul added it to the tray.

Carrying the tea things into the front room, Paul found Doris quietly weeping and

Trevor doing his best to comfort her.

“Doris? What’s wrong?” Paul set down the tea things and approached.

“Eric passed away yesterday afternoon,” Trevor told him.

“No.” Paul couldn’t believe it. “I only saw him a couple of days ago. I was walking past your house...He was digging the garden. He seemed—” Paul shut his mouth, realising he was rambling.

Doris nodded. “He always loved his garden. I called him in for his tea yesterday and I found him collapsed over his gooseberry bush.”

“I’m sorry,” Trevor said, squeezing Doris’ hand.

“He always got first prize for his gooseberries at the flower and produce show.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Paul had to stifle a laugh.

“Doctor said he’d had a massive heart attack and wouldn’t have suffered.”

“That’s something,” Trevor said lifting the teapot and beginning to pour. “Sugar?”

“No thanks. But I’ll have a drop of milk.”

Trevor added milk and handed the cup and saucer over.

“Thank you. He loved his garden. I know he’ll want his ashes buried there.”

Paul winced. He wasn’t sure he would want to eat anything grown in the garden after...He shook his head, he was being stupid.

“I’m so sorry, Doris. Eric will be greatly missed in the choir,” Trevor said quietly.

Doris nodded. “That’s why I came round.” Taking a sip of her tea, she continued, “Eric always said he wanted you to sing a solo at his funeral.”

Paul saw a number of expressions pass over Trevor’s face. He wondered if Trevor would be up to it, he’d only been out of hospital for a couple of weeks.

“You’ll do it?” Doris asked, looking steadily at Trevor.

“Uh, yes, ‘course I will.”

Doris looked relieved. “Thank you. That’s something else I can cross off my list. I’ve got to see the butcher and order a boiled ham for the funeral tea. And I better put in an order for five dozen bread rolls at the bakers. Eric always liked their white rolls, they were soft enough he could manage them with his false teeth.”

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the discussion of death, and Doris’ matter-of-fact treatment of it, Paul got to his feet. “Uh, I’ll leave you two to it. Doris, I’m sorry about Eric, he was a good bloke.”

“Thank you, love.” Doris gave him a weak smile.

Up in his room Paul stretched out on the bed. He was deciding whether or not to turn on the radio when his pocket started to chirp.

“Hullo?”

“Paul, it’s me.”

“Uh.” Paul couldn’t place who *me* was.

“Geraldine. You remember? The King’s Head last Saturday?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. It’s been one of those days.”

He’d gone out for a drink with Thommo and Pete, but Thommo had spent most of the evening sniffing round the new barmaid, leaving Pete and him alone at the dart board. Partway through their game, Pete had nudged him and told him that a woman had been giving him the eye for the past half hour. Paul hadn’t believed him, but looked round to see a thin looking woman, probably in her mid-thirties. She did seem to be interested in him. Or at least her shy blush as she was caught staring seemed to

indicate she was interested.

“Go on, talk to her,” Pete encouraged.

“But we haven’t finished the game.”

Pete shook his head, took the darts from Paul’s hand and propelled him in the direction of the woman.

Geraldine had long black hair. As they talked, her deep, husky voice got Paul’s cock interested.

“I was wondering if you had any plans for the weekend,” Geraldine murmured down the phone. Paul had to adjust himself in his trousers. That smoky voice was surprisingly alluring.

“I, uh.” Paul was a little taken aback at Geraldine’s forwardness. Usually he was the one who suggested to his date they go out. However, with Trevor’s illness he’d found himself staying in for the past few weeks. His reluctance to leave Trevor alone of an evening had finally caused Cindy to basically dump him. Paul realised he wasn’t overly broken-hearted.

“You still there?” Geraldine asked.

“Oh, uh, sorry. Look, I don’t know if I’ll be free. Can I call you back? I just need to check with my housemate.”

“You’re housemate is a lucky person to have such a considerate friend.”

“Oh, I—” Was he blushing?

They talked for a few more minutes, Paul’s erection showing no signs of going down. Mentally slapping himself, he concluded the conversation, hung up, visited the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and went downstairs to talk with Trevor.

Doris had gone home. Trevor was in the kitchen washing up the tea things. This, more than anything, was an indicator that Trevor was back to normal. While the possibility of testicular cancer had hung over him, he'd lost much of his overly-fussy ways. Paul was glad the bloke would be okay, but he sort of missed the quieter, even slightly clingy Trevor.

"Was thinking about going out Saturday night with, uh, a friend."

Trevor looked up from the sink, "You need to get out more."

"You sure you'll be all right? I haven't made it definite. I can just as easily cancel."

Trevor lifted a soapy hand out of the dish water. "Don't be silly. Anyway, I had a phone call while you were upstairs. I'll be going out myself on Saturday."

"Oh?" Paul couldn't ever remember Trevor going out anywhere unless it was to choir practice.

"The *gentlemen of the choir* are going out and having a few drinks to remember Eric. I said I'd join them."

Paul smiled. "Good, cause you don't get out much, either. I'll go and ring her, um, them and tell them I'm free."

Climbing the stairs to his room, more for privacy than anything else, Paul wondered why he didn't want to let on to Trevor that he had a date.

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday evening saw Paul paying Pete a visit. They were good enough mates that he didn't need to knock on Pete's door before entering. He found Pete sitting in his living room polishing something.

"Hey, mate." Paul felt awkward, he didn't know what to say.

Pete looked up from his labours. "Thanks for coming round, mate."

"Sor-right. What on earth you got there?" Paul patted Pete's shoulder before settling himself in an armchair.

"My trumpet."

"Oh, right." Maybe Pete needed to occupy his mind with something. Paul guessed cleaning his trumpet was as good as anything.

"When our Mary and me were kids, Granddad wanted us both to learn to play an instrument. She picked the violin, but she didn't stick at it. Thank God. Sounded like someone was trying to strangle a cat. I kept thinking the neighbours would call the animal rescue squad on us."

"So why'd you choose the trumpet?" Other than cricket and the odd game of darts, Paul realised he and Pete had rarely just sat and talked.

"Uncle Sam was a member of the colliery brass band. I used to go listen to them practice. When his lungs got too bad I sort of took his place in the band. This was his trumpet." He stroked the instrument fondly.

"Uh huh."

"So anyway, Gran asked me if I'd play something at Granddad's funeral, and—"

"Yeah. Doris came round to Trevor's yesterday to ask him to sing something at the funeral."

"I know. She's got it all organised. Me and Trevor are going to play something together. Or at least he'll be singing and I'll be playing."

While he'd been talking, Pete had reassembled the instrument. Bringing it to his lips he blew into it.

“Bloody hell.” Paul covered his ears.

“It’s not that bad.”

“Hearing you play from the band stand in the park is one thing, but in here?”

“Sorry.”

As Pete continued to reminisce about his granddad, he dismantled the trumpet and put it back in its case.

When the conversation flagged, Paul suggested a stroll down to the King’s Head for a drink. “Do me a favour though.”

“Yeah?”

“Leave that thing here.” Paul pointed to the trumpet case.

“Fuck off.”

\* \* \* \*

Nervous, why was he nervous? Paul looked at the reflection staring back at him in the bathroom mirror. His hair had got rather long. He made a mental note to go to the barber’s next week.

Opening the cabinet, Paul glanced over the array of bottles of aftershave. Picking one up, knowing it belonged to Trevor, he hesitated.

Leaving the bathroom momentarily, Paul shouted down the stairs. “Trev, you mind if I use your Jean Paul Gaultier aftershave?”

Coming out of the living room and looking up the stairs, Trevor said, “Wow, she must be special if you’re going to all that trouble.”

Trevor scanned Paul from head to toe, making him feel self-conscious.

So what if he was wearing a new black silk shirt and his best pair of jeans? “You

don't think it's, uh, too much?"

"No, not at all." Sighing and in a lower voice, Trevor added, "She's a lucky lady." He then turned away and went back into the living room.

Rubbing a generous quantity of the aftershave on his face, Paul wondered at Trevor's quietness. Was he all right, should he stay at home? Then he remembered Trevor said he too was going out. *Must be later*, he thought, easing his feet into his dress shoes.

As he drove to Geraldine's house, Paul couldn't help thinking back over the past few days with Trevor, and how the guy had changed. Gone was the morose, quiet and reserved Trevor, replaced with a more bouncy and admittedly campy version. Paul sighed. He suspected something was bothering his friend, but all attempts to enquire as to the cause were brushed off. The change from sad to happy, but strangely more distant, came about after they'd gone to the hospital for Trevor's post-surgical check-up.

\* \* \* \*

In the waiting room prior to the consultation, Trevor sat nervously biting his nails.

"Stop it, you'll make them bleed." Paul slapped Trevor's arm.

"Sorry."

"Come on, Trev, you know they're gonna tell you that it wasn't cancer. The doctor pretty much admitted as much when he discharged you."

"But there's always a chance he could have been wrong."

Paul rolled his eyes. "Nothing like looking on the bright side, huh?"

"It's all right for you, you're not the one who—" Trevor had started to raise his voice. People were looking at him. "Sorry," he said little above a whisper.



Paul reached over and gave Trevor's hand a squeeze. "It's all right, mate."

Paul had grown used to, even appreciated, the times when Trevor leaned on him for support. It touched something deep inside Paul, his need to protect, keep safe.

Thankfully their wait wasn't too long. Trevor had initially been appalled that the doctor was a woman. However, when she left the consulting room to answer her pager, Paul leaned over and said, "Relax. At least when she examines you, you won't get a stiffy."

This resulted in a small grin, and Paul feeling pleased at being able to cheer Trevor up.

Sure enough, the doctor gave Trevor a clean bill of health. Paul received a tight hug and a profound thank you from his housemate as soon as they'd exited the doctor's consulting room.

\* \* \* \*

Pulling up outside Geraldine's house, Paul was about to unfasten his seatbelt and go get his date when he saw Geraldine tottering down her garden path in a pair of high heels. Keeping the seatbelt fastened, Paul leaned over to open the passenger-side door.

"I appreciate a man who comes on time." Geraldine touched Paul's cheek before leaning over and delivering a chaste kiss on the same spot.

"You look nice." Geraldine had on a simple yet stylish off-the-shoulder black dress with a colourful scarf tied loosely around her neck.

"Thank you," Geraldine beamed. Running her eyes appreciatively over Paul she said, "You look very handsome, too."

Paul blushed. “Uh, I thought we could go see a film, and then maybe have a drink somewhere? Unless you’d rather—”

“That sounds lovely. Thank you.”

Paul reminded Geraldine to buckle up before he started the car and drove toward the town centre. He’d had a quick look in the paper; the local three screen cinema didn’t have much to offer, but he hoped they’d find something.

Paul walked round his car to open Geraldine’s door, an action which earned him another kiss. Geraldine accepted his proffered arm and they made their way into the brightly lit cinema foyer.

After loading up on snacks, which Geraldine insisted on paying for, they moved to the entry doors to the downstairs screen. Paul had given the choice of film to Geraldine, who chose something mushy and romantic. He didn’t mind.

Though after an hour and a half he was ready to revise his opinion. He kept resisting the urge to consult his watch. Paul found himself stifling yawns and making a determined effort not to fidget, though it wasn’t easy. The plot was thin, the acting wooden and the kissing scenes overly long. Geraldine seemed to be enjoying it, though.

When the action, though Paul knew this was stretching the term, moved to the interior of a church, he began to take more notice. Didn’t films like this usually end with a wedding? His spirits rose even further when someone in a white dress walked down the aisle. Despite the swell of organ music from the film’s soundtrack, Paul still heard a nearby snuffle. Turning his head to Geraldine he saw she was dabbing at her eyes.

“I always cry at weddings.”

Thankfully as the happy couple left the church, bells ringing and choir singing,

the end credits began to roll. Paul did his best to hide his relief.

“I’ve wanted to see that film ever since I saw it was coming out, but I didn’t want to go alone. Thank you, Paul. I know you were probably bored silly. Next time you can choose what we see.”

Paul admired Geraldine’s confidence that there’d be a second date. “Are you hungry? The Black Swan over in Hollerton does great food.”

“I could eat a horse.”

Geraldine daintily took Paul’s hand as they exited the cinema. It had started to rain, so Paul told Geraldine to wait inside while he got the car.

Paul only paid scant attention to Geraldine’s occasional chatter as he concentrated on driving. Although the rain was coming down fairly hard, the windscreen wipers were easily able to keep things clear. Paul’s mind wandered to Trevor, and how he was getting on. This would be his first evening out since his operation. Paul hoped he’d be all right. Trevor had seemed to tire easily and usually turned in just after the headlines on the BBC Ten O’clock News.

“...then after he was run over I got Rupert.”

“Huh?” Paul realised he hadn’t been paying attention to what Geraldine had been saying.

“My cat. Rupert. He’s a Siamese. He’s a sweet boy, but has an unhealthy interest in my umbrella stand.”

Paul tried not to speculate what form the *unhealthy interest* took.

Within a few moments they’d arrived. “I’ve tried to park as close to the doors, but—”

"It's fine." Geraldine unhooked her seatbelt and was out of the car before Paul could exit himself.

"What would you like?" Paul asked once he'd found them an empty table in the crowded pub. "Didn't think it'd be as busy as this."

Geraldine looked about and seemed a little nervous. Paul worried that she was maybe claustrophobic.

"A Campari and soda would be lovely."

As he made his way to the bar, the density of bodies seeming to increase exponentially the closer he got to it, Paul couldn't help recall the last time he'd bought that drink.

The Black Swan, even though it was in the middle of nowhere, had a reputation for good food and reasonable prices, something which the locals appreciated.

Once he'd got the barmaid's attention and purchased his drinks, Paul started to wind his way back to the table.

"Fancy seeing you here."

Paul turned to his right and saw his house-mate. "Uh, could have said the same for you."

"It's the choir's usual haunt." Trevor looked happy. Obviously the evening out was doing him good.

"Best get these to, uh, the table."

Trevor smiled and began to follow him. "Good crowd in tonight."

"Yeah. How many did you come with?"

"About a dozen. Though some of them look as though they ought to have been

tucked up in bed with their hot water bottles hours ago.” Trevor indicated with his pint glass a group of four older men looking as though they were half asleep as they leaned over a small table.

“Trevor!” Paul was glad to see his friend was re-gaining some of his sharp-wittedness.

Arriving back at his table, Paul set the drinks down. “Damn, I forgot the menus. Geraldine, this is Trevor, the bloke whose house I’m staying at.” Turning to Trevor he was about to continue with the introductions, but the stony look on Trevor’s face stopped him.

“We’ve met.” Trevor’s voice was cold, and if the looks he shot at Geraldine could kill, she’d be six feet under.

“I, uh. I think I need to go and powder my nose.” Geraldine looked upset. She stood quickly, grabbed her little handbag and almost ran to the toilets.

Paul was about to ask Trevor what the hell was going on when he saw that the man had set off in pursuit. To Paul’s utter amazement Trevor followed Geraldine into the ladies. Paul stood up to follow, but then thought better of it. There was no way he was entering that room. He knew Trevor was gay, but...He couldn’t get his head round how blatantly Trevor had just marched in there. What the hell was going on?

Paul sat down again, took a long pull from his pint of bitter and watched the door for either Geraldine or Trevor to emerge.

He didn’t have to wait long. Geraldine opened the door and stepped out into the main room, closely followed by Trevor. If the latter’s aggressive gestures were any indication, Trevor was furious about something. Not stopping to analyse the fact that

he'd never seen Trevor angry before, Paul made his way across the room.

"It's wrong! You know it is!" Paul heard Trevor say as he drew near.

"What the hell is going on?"

Glaring at Geraldine, Trevor said, "Well? Are you going to tell him?"

"Tell me what? What the hell's going on?"

"Oh Paul, please take me home." Geraldine turned away from Trevor and all but buried her head in Paul's shoulder. He put a protective arm around her and could feel the slight woman shaking.

"Trevor?" Paul glared at his house-mate.

"Please, Paul, I don't feel very well," Geraldine's muffled voice announced.

Trevor scoffed.

"Okay, love, let's go." Paul renewed his glare at Trevor. "I'll speak to you when I get back from taking Geraldine home."

"I'm sorry, but I—" It was a bit late for Trevor to go all apologetic.

"Save it," Paul said before leading a highly distressed Geraldine across the room, numerous curious gazes following them. He didn't care.

As he drove Geraldine home, he made gentle enquiries of his passenger, but she remained tight-lipped.

Pulling up outside the modest terrace house, Paul cut the engine. "I'll see you indoors, make you a nice cup of tea, and then maybe you can tell me what on earth happened back there."

"No, please. It's okay. I'm all right now. You get off home, I know Trevor will be waiting for you."

“He can wait!” Paul said, taking Geraldine’s hand and giving it a light squeeze.  
“I’m more concerned over you.”

“No honestly, Paul, it’s best if you go home now. I just want to say how much I’ve enjoyed being with you. Whoever ends up winning your heart, well...she’ll be a very lucky woman.”

Paul didn’t understand why she was saying all this, but any questioning was cut short when Geraldine alighted from the car, leaned in, gave him a surprisingly deep and strong kiss before withdrawing and closing the passenger door firmly.

Paul sat in his vehicle watching Geraldine make her way up to her front door, unlock it and go inside. Part of him knew he ought to get out of the car, go see if she was all right, but something made him hesitate. After a few moments of indecision, Paul started the car and headed back to Trevor’s, determined to get some answers.

\* \* \* \*

Paul was no sooner through the front door before Trevor was at his side.

“I’m sorry for ruining your evening like that. Though you probably didn’t see it, I agonised over whether or not to say anything.”

Paul tried to remain calm, but when he remembered how distressed Geraldine was, his anger rose. “Was it because you were jealous? Because you couldn’t stand to see me happy, because you’ve been after me yourself?” The more Paul said, the louder his voice became. It was a physical effort, but he closed his mouth, determined to hear whatever Trevor had to say.

“No, no. Paul I—” Trevor was getting upset.

“What the hell is all this about, then?”

“Geraldine, she’s, well she’s a he.”

Paul’s instant reaction was to laugh out loud. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Paul, I’ve never lied to you, not ever.” Trevor began to pace up and down the hallway. “As I said, I agonised over whether or not to tell you. But I had no choice.”

“Trevor, what the hell makes you think Geraldine’s a, a—”

“Have you slept with her?”

“That’s none of your fucking business!” Paul’s voice got even louder than before. He felt his fists clench, it took all his effort not to march over there and...

Trevor kept his eyes firmly on Paul’s. “Because I have!” Trevor too was angry now. “Though back then he was known as Gerald! Damn it, Paul, did you think I enjoyed making a spectacle of myself back at the pub? Do you think I liked seeing someone I’ve come to regard as a good friend being made a fool of? Well, do you?”

The hallway went silent. Paul couldn’t think. This was surreal, messed up. “Fucking hell!” Now Paul was the one doing the pacing. He also began pulling at his hair.

In a much quieter voice, Trevor said, “Paul, you’re a really decent bloke. Over the past couple of months you’ve helped me more than you could ever know. Not just with my cancer scare, either. Having you here has—Well it’s made a big difference. I had to tell you. Okay, maybe I should have gone about it differently, but—”

“I can’t...I can’t talk about this now.” Paul continued to pace. “I’m going to bed.”

As Paul passed, Trevor reached out to take his arm. Paul brushed it off.

“I’m sorry,” Trevor said.

Turning momentarily he saw a single tear run down Trevor’s cheek. Paul froze in



place. Emotions warred inside him. He should go comfort Trevor. None of this was his fault. But he couldn't. He was still processing the idea that he'd taken a man out on a date. He'd been kissed by a man, and had kissed the man back. Turning away, Paul slowly made his way up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Sleep eluded him. The night dragged on. He didn't think the morning would ever arrive. Images of Geraldine, her deep voice. Hell, no wonder it was deep. Paul felt foolish, angry, confused. Foolish that he had been taken in. Angry at Geraldine, no, Gerald for lying to him. Paul's confusion arose because he was more upset about the lie, than because he'd kissed another bloke. The kisses had been, well...Paul didn't want to go there, but his mind seemed to have other ideas. No, he wasn't revolted at having kissed a man. He wondered why that was. He wasn't gay, he was sure of that. Women, real women, still attracted him.

Turning over to lie on his right side, Paul punched his pillow and tried again to go to sleep. He must have managed it because the next thing he was aware of was waking up in a brightly lit room. Squinting at his alarm clock he saw it was just after ten. A jolt of fear swept through him. He was late for work. Then he remembered; it was Sunday. As he sank back to his pillow, his relief was short-lived. Memories of the previous evening flooded back. Trevor, his friend and house-mate. The bloke had been put in a horrible position. How had Paul reacted? He'd shouted at him. Hell, he'd even accused him of breaking him and Geraldine up because he was jealous.

"Oh, God!" Paul knew he had to get dressed, go downstairs and do some serious apologising. That last image of Trevor, the tear on his cheek. "Fuck!"

Paul pulled on the pair of jeans he'd worn the evening before, but thought better of wearing the silk shirt again. He found a creased white T-shirt. That would have to do. Barefoot, Paul made his way to the bathroom. After relieving himself, brushing his teeth and eventually giving up on trying to do something about his bed-head, he went downstairs.

Trevor was nowhere to be found. Paul felt deflated. He sank down on a kitchen chair and looked around. Trevor's kitchen was neat as ever. Everything had a place and was in it. The floor looked and smelled as though it had been recently mopped. Over the couple of months he'd lived with Trevor, he knew that whenever the man was stressed, he cleaned. Paul's theory was strengthened when he opened the cupboard that held the dried cereal. All the boxes were lined up alphabetically. The tins and packets on the other shelves showed similarly precise placement, too.

\* \* \* \*

He was early. Paul didn't usually do early. However, Trevor had to get there at least half an hour before the kick-off, or whatever you called the start of a funeral. So Paul sat there, three pews from the front, twiddling his thumbs.

At least he and Trevor were talking again. He thought for a while there he'd fucked things up totally. Though, Trevor was still quiet around him, more distant than usual. Paul didn't like it, but it was better than them not talking at all. And they'd gone through a couple of hours of that the previous day. Paul had offered to give Trevor a lift to the church. "After all, I'm going there anyway."

"I usually ride my bike," Trevor said.

Paul had a sudden mental image inspired by something George Orwell had

written about old maids cycling to Holy Communion. He pushed the vision away, because he didn't think his friendship with Trevor had been repaired sufficiently to share that titbit.

So Paul had driven him to the church, then Trevor had disappeared off somewhere to get robed up, or whatever it was choir members did.

Within a couple of minutes the big doors at the back creaked open. Paul turned round to see a tall, thin, white-haired old man enter. But instead of coming down the aisle, he settled himself at the organ. After twiddling with a few knobs he began to play softly.

To fill the time, Paul read through the order of service. Not being a regular churchgoer, he was unsure of what most of it meant. He was able to spot Trevor's name in a couple of places. He hadn't realised Trevor would have two things to sing. *Behold, I Tell You A Mystery* and *Recitative from Messiah*. Paul didn't know it. The only thing he knew from *Messiah* was the *Hallelujah Chorus*, something he suspected wouldn't exactly be suitable at a funeral.

Immediately following that was *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, also from *Messiah*. Paul didn't need the order of service to tell him that this was where Pete would do his thing. Further down the agenda he saw something else that Trevor would perform. *Goin' Home* set to the music of *The New World Symphony* by Dvorak. The name seemed familiar, but Paul couldn't recall exactly what it was.

The church slowly began to fill with people, Paul recognising only a few of them.

The choir entered through a side door, Paul spotted Trevor in his white surplice with a red high ruffled collar. As the choir took their seats the congregation quieted.

“I am the resurrection and the life saith the Lord; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” The vicar walked up the aisle followed by the coffin, which was being pushed along on some trolley contraption.

*And we're off*, Paul thought as he tried to make himself more comfortable.

Paul was pleasantly surprised at how much he got out of the proceedings. He couldn't exactly claim he enjoyed himself, funerals weren't meant to do that. But right from the start it was obvious the vicar knew Eric very well, and was able to inject an air of friendly intimacy to the proceedings. At all the previous funerals Paul had attended, the vicar didn't know the departed from Adam; and his words always came across as banal and impersonal.

Sure there were still lots of prayers and passages read from the Bible. Paul had to watch what everyone else did so he could kneel, stand and put his hands together in prayer in all the right places.

Trevor's first solo was a revelation. Paul had never heard Trevor sing before.

*Behold I tell you a mystery,*

*We shall not all sleep,*

*But we shall all be changed*

*In a moment,*

*In the twinkling of an eye,*

*At the last trumpet.*

As the order of service predicted “The Trumpet Shall Sound” followed on immediately.

Although Paul was no expert, Pete seemed to do a darn good job, he heard only

a couple of wrong notes. His trumpet seemed loud, but not uncomfortably so as it echoed round the stone walls. Trevor and the guy playing the organ didn't seem to make a single mistake though. Paul was awed at how deep and clear Trevor's bass voice was. He was surprised that someone of Trevor's relatively small stature could produce a voice like that.

If Paul was touched by Trevor's first couple of numbers, he was totally blown away by his final performance.

The organ began quietly. Paul remembered he'd heard the Dvorak tune on various TV commercials. Then Trevor began, and Paul was totally transfixed.

The tingling that had begun at the back of Paul's neck spread throughout his entire body.

When the organ sounded a final chord there was total silence. No one seemed to move. Paul half expected a round of applause to erupt. Gradually people began to mutter quietly.

The old lady who had sat next to Paul nudged him in the ribs. "Here, love." She handed him a tissue.

It took Paul a couple of seconds to realise his face was wet with tears. Wiping them away, he felt foolish.

"Did you know Eric well?" she asked softly. The vicar had already begun talking again.

"Uh, yeah," Paul whispered back. He couldn't explain to her why he'd cried. Heck, he couldn't explain it to himself, either.

He operated on autopilot for the rest of the service. There was a hymn, some

more praying. He had no idea if he did everything he was supposed to.

Finally the church began to empty. Paul followed along like a lost sheep. He shook the vicar's hand and left the dark interior of the church emerging into bright sunshine. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust.

"You okay?" Trevor said touching his arm.

"Your song, uh, hymn."

Trevor looked at him curiously. "Which one? The Dvorak?"

Paul nodded.

"It was one of Eric's favourites. I hope he'd have approved."

"I'm sure he would. God, Trev, it was beautiful. You were," Paul swallowed. "I had no idea. It was amazing."

Trevor tilted his head to one side. "Uh, thanks. Listen, we ought to be making a move."

He'd forgotten he'd promised to drive them both to the crematorium. Without even thinking about it, Paul put his arms around Trevor and gave him a tight hug before releasing one arm, leaving the other around Trevor's shoulders. "Come on, then, you'll have to give me directions, it's been years since I was there."

"Uh, okay. You sure you're all right?"

Paul shrugged. In truth he had no idea.

## Chapter 6

Trevor wasn't lonely. He wasn't missing Paul. The empty space on the sofa of an evening didn't bother him.

"Oh look, see that pig fly over next door's garden shed?" Trevor grumbled as he slumped into his armchair. There were only so many times one could re-organise the kitchen cupboards before it bordered on obsessive compulsive disorder.

He'd had the pleasure of Paul's company for over two months. The rational part of his brain told him it was a good thing Paul had moved back home when he did. He was becoming all too used to having someone else around the place. Someone to cook and clean for, someone to talk to, someone to laugh and joke around with.

Trevor blinked rapidly, he absolutely refused to shed tears over this. Paul needed to get back to his own place now it was dried out and re-decorated. It was right, proper, good. So why was he missing the guy something fierce?

Even though it wasn't cold, heck it was well into June, Trevor levered himself to his feet, got out a blanket, stuck on one of Paul's LPs that he hadn't taken home yet, and curled up on the sofa. The music was a little too up-beat for his taste and the occasion. Nevertheless Trevor closed his eyes and snuggled into the blanket and tried not to dwell on what could never be.

If he was honest with himself, he knew he shouldn't have offered his spare room to Paul. After some initial discomfort on Paul's part, the guy had settled down, his usual kind good-hearted nature shining through. Trevor had to constantly battle with himself not to fall deeply for the man. No matter how kind, gentle, or protective the bloke was,

he was also straight. Things got awkward when he had the cancer scare. He needed to lean on someone and Paul had been willing to be that someone.

“As Mum used to say, *If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.*” The tears came then. Trevor couldn’t stop them. Paul, big, strong, kind, loveable Paul with his blond hair, his well built body and his dimples. “God, those dimples!” Trevor sniffed.

\* \* \* \*

Turning up at work the next morning, Trevor got a few odd looks from his work colleagues. So what if he’d gone back to wearing his out-sized artists’ smocks? Though the brightly coloured garments probably didn’t go with the bags under his eyes.

“You look like you didn’t get much sleep last night,” Trish, his office partner said, taking off her coat and hanging it up. At least she didn’t make any comments about his clothing.

“I had a hot date with a police motorcyclist. He rode me bloody hard until the small hours.”

Trish looked shocked momentarily before bursting out laughing.

“Guess you were celebrating having the house to yourself again.”

“Damn right. I had to put off my regular gentlemen callers when Paul lived with me. I wouldn’t have wanted the creaking bed-springs to keep him awake nights.”

“You’re awful.” Trish shook her head. Trevor knew she didn’t believe a word he was saying, but she was good enough to play along.

“What you smiling about?” Trevor asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Come on, spill it.” Trevor’s grin widened. He could sense something was afoot.



“You know how much I love juicy gossip.”

“It’s nothing, honestly.” Trish looked coyly at him.

“Uh, huh.” All he had to do was wait. He knew Trish couldn’t hold out much longer.

“Well, uh, it was just you talking about Paul. He’s so...so—” Trish got a dreamy look on her face.

Trevor quashed his own feelings. He’d had plenty of practice. “Oh?” He giggled, thinking he could have some fun with his friend. “You’ve been carrying a torch for the Planning Manager, then?”

“Oh no. I—” She was flustered. “He’d not look twice at someone like me.”

Trevor immediately felt sorry for Trish. “What do you mean, *somebody like me*? You’re really pretty.” He was unaccustomed to paying women compliments. “You’re bouncy, uh, sweet.”

“You think so?” She brightened.

“Of course. And I happen to know Paul is free at the moment. His last relationship with Cindy ended, and the one with G...well, uh, that was a non-starter.” Powering up his computer and logging in, Trevor knew he’d probably said too much.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Paul’s a nice man. He deserves to be happy.”

*Don’t we all?* Trevor thought. Out loud he said, “Have you ever talked to him? I mean not just about work stuff?”

“Oh, no! I’d be too...No.”

Trevor thought if he couldn’t have Paul, then Trish ought to be given as many opportunities as possible to have him.

“Would you like to swap lunch hours? Paul has the same hour as me. You could—”

“Oh no! Trev, I couldn’t.”

\* \* \* \*

Taking the later lunch slot had the extra benefit of being able to avoid Paul. Working in the quietness of Trish’s absence, Trevor realised avoidance would be the best policy. Soon enough Paul would move on with his life, his friends and a new girlfriend. If Paul and Trish did make a go of it, would Trevor be able to cope with news about what Trish and Paul had done the previous evening, what Paul had said, what Paul thought about...?

“There you are.”

“Huh?” Trevor’s reverie was interrupted by Paul coming into the office.

“Didn’t see you at lunch. What’s-her-name said you’d swapped lunches. Why?”

Paul looked concerned.

Was he also disappointed? *You wish*, Trevor told himself. “I, uh.” Trevor couldn’t think of what to say.

“Is she, Trish, is she all right? I mean—” Paul blushed. “She seemed a bit, well, obvious.”

“Obvious?” Trevor didn’t have to fake his look of surprise.

“Well, uh, she—she almost—God, this is embarrassing. It was almost as though she was, well, offering herself.” Paul whispered the last two words.

“Really?” Trevor had no idea Trish would go to such lengths, and so quickly. “I wouldn’t know, me being gay.”

“Yeah, well.”

“She’s a nice girl.” Adopting an obviously false parental tone in order to mask his true feelings and intentions, Trevor continued, “You could do a lot worse than set your cap at Patricia, our Paul.”

Paul smiled, even chuckled. For a moment Trevor was carried back to the many evenings the two had just sat and talked. He’d often been so absorbed in their conversations that hours had flown by without either of them seeming to have noticed.

“Oh, hello again,” Trish said, entering the room and immediately zeroing in on Paul.

Was she fluttering her eyelashes? Trevor thought back to Paul’s comment about Trish being obvious.

“Uh, Trish.”

Feeling mischievous, Trevor said, “Paul was just telling me what a great time he had at lunch today.” Trish smiled and Paul frowned. “He was asking me if I knew what sorts of films you liked, weren’t you, Paul?”

“What?” Paul’s frown turned to disbelief.

“Really? Oh.” Trish began to make doe-eyes at Paul. “There’s that romance just come out with him off that American drama show. I’d love to go see that one.”

Did Paul groan?

“There you are, then.” Trevor was undaunted. “I’ve read the reviews. You’ll have to let me know if it’s worth me going to see it,” he said looking at Trish.

“I...Well I’ve got a lot on this week what with me moving back and—”

Trevor was about to offer his help with whatever it was, even though doing so

would break his resolution to keep his distance. However, he was saved by Trish's next comment.

"It's all right, I could help you. I'm really good at homemaking."

Paul looked trapped. He managed to escape by muttering something about being late for a meeting before hightailing it out of the office.

As he prepared to take his own lunch, Trevor began to rationalise. Did he feel guilty for what he'd done? Partially, though he was comforted by the knowledge that Trish really was a nice girl, and Paul could do a lot worse.

\* \* \* \*

Trevor was just settling down to a late afternoon snack of beans on toast. He'd lost all interest in creating anything more elaborate after Paul had left, when the doorbell rang. Expecting a door-to-door salesman or the Jehovah's Witnesses, he rarely received visitors, Trevor took his time answering. In fact the doorbell had just stopped ringing for a second time when he turned the lock.

"Paul?" Trevor was surprised to see his former housemate.

"Hi, I was just passing and—" Paul seemed nervous, a fact born out by the toe of his left shoe rubbing the doormat.

"Come in. Why'd you ring? Don't you still have a key?"

"Oh, I didn't think it was right, not now I don't live here any more. In fact that was one reason for me coming round. To give you back your key." He pulled out a bunch of keys and began to fiddle with them.

Trevor was about to tell Paul to keep the key, but then he remembered his decision to maintain his distance. "Thanks. Uh, have you eaten? I was just—"

“No, I haven’t. That smells nice.”

Trevor tossed out the sad looking beans on toast and raided his fridge, coming up with the ingredients for a Spanish omelette.

Pushing away his empty plate, Paul rubbed at his belly. Trevor half expected his table guest to let loose with a deep burp.

“Thank you. I’ve missed your cooking.”

“You’ve been gone less than a week.”

Paul shrugged. “Listen, why’d you set Trish on me? She’s becoming a real pest.”

“Sorry. She’s lonely, I thought you’d be lonely and—” Trevor ground to a halt.

“Sorry.”

“I can’t get out of taking her to the pictures this weekend. Have you any idea how boring that film is?” Paul went on to tell how he’d previously sat through the same film with Geraldine.

“Oh, Paul, I really am sorry.” Trevor was. He’d acted impetuously and now regretted it. “I’ll try and calm her down, steer her away from you.”

“No, I think it’s best you leave well alone. Goodness knows what you’d have to tell her.”

“If you had someone else, that’d put her off. Trish is a firm believer in not encroaching on other people’s territory. Whatever happened to Cindy? She seemed like a nice enough woman.”

“Things had sort of grown stale between us, but neither of us seemed to want to call it off. Eventually Cindy did, and I think we’re both happier she did.”

The two moved into the living room and unconsciously took up their usual spots,

Trevor in the recliner and Paul on the sofa.

\* \* \* \*

Although it tested his new-found resolve—for the next couple of weeks, every time Paul suggested he and Trevor “do something together”—Trevor always managed to come up with an excuse not to go. He could tell Paul was confused, even hurt, but Trevor had to be strong. When Paul had called round that time, he’d ended up feeding him and then kicking back and talking with him, listening to music, etc., and they’d lost track of the time, Paul not leaving until past ten.

Despite his promise not to interfere, Trevor managed to get Trish off Paul’s tail by telling her that Paul was still hung up on his old girlfriend, Cindy. He explained that the break-up, though amicable, was still affecting Paul.

“Maybe I could take his mind off of her,” Trish said.

Trevor could see the cogs turning. “Oh, no,” he was quick to add. “I think Paul’s hoping they’ll get back together. Cindy’s a nice girl, not a patch on you of course, but if those two are destined to be together, then—” Trevor left the rest unsaid. He’d already stretched the facts beyond all recognition and was uncomfortable about deceiving Trish.

Deflated, Trish said, “Yeah, you’re right. I couldn’t live with myself if I stood in the path of destiny.”

Trevor kept his face neutral. He knew Trish consumed paperback romances at an alarming rate, clearly imagining herself as *the other woman*, a role he knew she’d be uncomfortable with.

“There’s someone out there just perfect for you. Mark my words.”

Trish sighed. “I wish he’d get a move on. The biological clock is ticking.”

Trevor laughed, relieved he'd managed to successfully derail Trish's master plan to get Paul down the aisle.

"What about you? A man as nice as you oughtn't to be alone."

Trevor's spirits sank. Trish often would jump on this particular band-wagon. "I'm happy as I am. I don't have to please anyone else, I can do what I want when I want and don't have to take anyone else into consideration."

"Bollocks."

Trevor's eyebrows rose. "Such language. And here was me thinking you were a *nice young lady*."

"Oh, Trev, if only you weren't gay, I'd have you down the aisle so fast."

Trevor smiled to himself. Although he'd got the identity of the groom wrong, he was dead on with the marriage thing. Trish was a good friend, but that was as far as it went. He had absolutely no sexual thoughts for Trish, or any woman for that matter.

\* \* \* \*

July was hot and humid. Trevor gave serious thought to buying air conditioning, but as he was totally useless as far as do-it-yourself was concerned, he decided to soldier on. He very quickly quashed the idea that Paul would be all too happy to install such equipment if he was asked. Trevor knew he couldn't go there. His distancing tactics were finally paying dividends. Paul rarely visited him anymore or asked if he was free to go do something together.

Trevor was surprised to get a call one day from Pete asking if he could come round.

"Uh, okay," Trevor said. He put down the receiver, wondering what on earth Pete

wanted.

Ten minutes later Pete arrived. Trevor invited him in and offered him a lager.

“Thanks. This bloody heat is killing me.”

Pete sat down, took off his baseball cap and mopped the sweat off his brow with a paper tissue. As he drank his beer, Trevor watched the muscles move under Pete’s tight sweat-dampened white T-shirt. He had to avert his eyes before Pete caught him staring.

“I know it’s not your thing, but we’re a bowler short this Sunday. Would you reconsider helping us out?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Thommo, you know what he’s like. And—” Trevor left unsaid his reluctance to be around Paul.

“I promise Thommo won’t be a problem. Please, mate, you’d be doing me, us, a huge favour.”

Trevor looked into Pete’s imploring eyes. He hadn’t realised what a deep shade of blue they were. And that cute puppy-dog expression.

“Uh, I don’t know. It won’t be a permanent thing, will it? I couldn’t—”

“But you’ll do it?” The look of hope on that face began to crumble away at Trevor’s resolve.

“If it’s just a one off, I might consider it.”

“I can’t lie. We might need you until the end of the season. Jake’s broken his arm and—”

Trevor tried to back-peddle. “I don’t know. I have evensong every Sunday and—”

Pete sighed. “Paul said you wouldn’t do it. In fact, he wouldn’t even bother



coming round to ask. That's why I'm here instead."

"Oh."

"You two fallen out? Paul's been a right misery guts this past month or so."

"Oh, no, we've not fallen out. He, uh, we were never really friends, so once he moved out we sort of got on with our own lives again."

"Oh, right. I've tried asking him what's the matter but he says it's nothing. Wondered if it was his break-up with Cindy."

"Yeah, could be. Look, maybe I can help out till the end of the season. There can't be that many games left."

"Really?" That bright smile was back again at full wattage. "Thanks, mate. You've saved my life."

Pete got to his feet. Feeling the conversation was over, Trevor also stood up. To his amazement he was wrapped in a muscular and slightly sweaty hug. The contact caused Trevor to instantly throw wood. Feeling hot, and knowing he was blushing, Trevor backed away and fanned his face. "You shouldn't tease a poor gay man like that."

Pete squeezed Trevor's shoulder and laughed. "I'll see myself out. Practice is tomorrow night at seven."

\* \* \* \*

Trevor was dismayed at how drawn Paul looked. Thinking back, he was surprised to realise he hadn't run across him at work for almost two weeks. Although their respective jobs (Paul in planning and Trevor in human resources) meant that unless something unusual cropped up, they wouldn't have any reason to interact. The

canteen during lunch was usually the only place their paths would cross. Trevor had kept to his late lunch schedule. Eating later seemed to suit him better.

“Trev.” Paul offered his former house-mate the ghost of a smile. “I’m surprised Pete managed to talk you into joining us. He must have something I don’t.”

*Ouch*, Trevor thought as he sat on a nearby bench and began to change into his cricket whites. “He had to twist my arm. Sorry, that’s probably a poor choice of words given what happened to what’s-his-name whose place I’m taking.”

“Jake, yeah.”

The two fell silent, but fortunately other people began to enter the pavilion, so Trevor was saved the chore of trying to make conversation.

Thommo kept his distance and thankfully didn’t voice his homophobic opinions. Part of Trevor was disappointed. He hadn’t had many opportunities to sharpen his tongue recently, and Thommo was such an easy target.

Practice began well. Trevor got a few tips from the other bowlers to smooth out his bowling action. Equally Trevor was able to pass on a few things he’d remembered about finger-spinning.

From what Trevor could see, Paul didn’t fare as well, however. Although he didn’t get an opportunity to bowl at him, he heard several comments from Thommo about Paul’s poor performance. This culminated in a stand-up argument in the middle of the pitch.

“I’ve forgotten more about batsmanship than you’ve ever known,” Paul said angrily.

Trevor had never heard Paul raise his voice, and judging by how everyone else

stopped what they were doing, no one else had, either.

“You seem to have fucking forgotten a lot, then. You’ve been bloody crap these past few games.”

“If I’m that bad then I won’t be missed when I don’t show up this Sunday!” Paul threw his bat to the pitch before marching off to the pavilion, a thunderous expression on his face. No one moved. Even Thommo seemed stunned at Paul’s reaction.

“You’ve really fucked things up this time,” Pete said to Thommo.

“Me? What the fuck did I do?”

Pete didn’t bother answering. He’d already set off in pursuit of Paul.

Trevor was torn. He hated to see someone he cared a great deal for be so out of sorts. However, he wondered what good he would be if he got involved. And though it pained him, he knew he had to maintain his distance. With great reluctance Trevor decided to do nothing, and continued bowling.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Thommo called it a night and the cricket team had ambled back to the pavilion, there was no sign of Pete and Paul. The pegs they’d used and the benches they’d sat on were empty. Trevor now wished he’d said something, done something to help. Though he was at a loss as to exactly what he should have done.

The pavilion had an air of subdued quietness as everyone got dressed in their street gear. Feeling uncomfortable, Trevor changed quickly and set off home.

From a distance Trevor could see someone sitting on his doorstep. He thought it was Paul come to explain what had happened. Trevor couldn’t help it, his steps quickened. He’d been given a second chance to help, and there was no way he would

squander it. However, as he drew closer, he could see it wasn't Paul. It wasn't until he'd reached the house next door but one, and the man had spotted him coming and stood up, that Trevor realised who it was.

His steps faltered. It couldn't be. Then after giving himself a mental shake he began walking again, his heart beating more rapidly. He opened his garden gate and made his way up the short path.

"Trevor, me old mate."

That well-remembered grin did something to Trevor's insides, leaving him weak and in a fog. Not quite believing what his eyes were telling him, Trevor reached out to touch the apparition. It was solid, it didn't disappear.

Using what little breath he could muster, he whispered one word. "Gary."

"I thought I'd come stay for a couple of days. Hope that's all right."

Trevor stared. He still had difficulty believing who was standing on his doorstep.

"Sorry to come unannounced." Gary shuffled his feet. "Things aren't so good between Lisa and me, and—"

Trevor still didn't say anything, he couldn't move.

"Trev? Is this a bad time?"

Partially snapping out of his trance, Trevor apologised and fished out his key, unlocked the door and ushered Gary inside.

## Chapter 7

Moving from room to room, Paul thought the house felt clean, fresh, new. It also felt empty, quiet, devoid of Trevor. He shook his head. It had only been, what, three hours since he'd left Trevor's?

He remembered the sad and disappointed look Trevor had tried to hide. Hell, hadn't he also been trying not to show how much he didn't want to leave? Over the weeks that he'd spent with Trevor, Paul had had to do a massive re-evaluation of the bloke.

There was much more to Trevor than he'd first thought. Before he'd stayed with him, he'd pegged him as a gossipy, limp-wristed shirt-lifter. Now...Paul sat heavily on his new sofa and stared unseeing at the freshly wall-papered walls. *Now I miss the hell out of him.*

"Fuck!" Paul said, getting to his feet and moving toward his drinks cabinet.

\* \* \* \*

Although falling asleep Friday night wasn't a problem, thanks to the distillers of Glen Fiddich whisky, Paul woke in the small hours and couldn't get back to sleep.

Saturday was spent getting his house in shape, a task made easier by help from Pete, but made more difficult by the presence of Thommo.

"Jesus, don't just drop them!" Paul shouted from the kitchen as he heard Thommo put down a box of LPs.

"They were heavy."

Fortunately none of the discs had suffered damage. "Uh, why don't you go down

the supermarket and get some beers in.”

“Oh, all right. But you’ll have to give us some money. I don’t get my unemployment giro till Tuesday.”

Pulling out a twenty-pound note Paul handed it over, knowing he wouldn’t see any change.

The rest of the move went off okay, especially as Thommo probably decided to take the long route back from the supermarket.

“Yeah, via his girlfriend’s,” Pete observed dryly.

“He still with her?” Paul asked.

“For the moment. Poor cow.” Pete opened a box containing a new pair of curtains. “Didn’t know red velvet was your colour.”

Paul wrinkled his nose. “They’re what my mother sent. Still, they’ll have to do until I can go out and buy some new ones.”

“They for the French windows in the dining room?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t get my old ones clean.”

“Want me to put ‘em up for you?”

“Would you?”

Pete smiled. “Course, but don’t you tell anyone on the cricket team that I know how to hang curtains.”

\* \* \* \*

Pete invited Paul out for a pint and a game of darts on Saturday evening.

“Maybe that bird will be there, the one who you got chatting to?”

Paul hadn’t dared confide in Pete about what happened with Geraldine. “Doubt

it.”

“No good?” Pete waggled his eyebrows.

“Not my type.” Paul changed the subject, and Pete didn’t seem to notice.

\* \* \* \*

Saturday night was just as sleepless as Friday’s had been. Paul had hoped his more moderate alcohol intake would stop him from waking early with a sore head and upset stomach. Although he suffered none of these ailments, he was left tossing and turning, unable to get to sleep. Around 2 am he decided to get up and potter around for a while. But little needed doing. Before he’d moved in, Trevor had vacuumed the new carpets, scrubbed the refrigerator which fortunately still worked after it had dried out. As did the washing machine. He’d not received the awful dining room curtains by that time, and Trevor was making noises about them.

“It’d not take me long to run you up a pair. I could even line them for you.”

Paul had politely refused. Trevor had done so much already. Trevor was only mollified when Paul confessed his mother had a spare set she was letting him have.

Fingering the red velvet, Paul wished he’d allowed Trevor to make him up a pair. “Though God knows what colour he’d have picked.” Paul immediately castigated himself. Before he’d moved into Trevor’s, he’d imagined outrageous colours on all the soft furnishings, fancy pelmets and frilly tie-backs. These images were soon discarded when he’d seen the quiet and understated décor Trevor had chosen.

Quickly rejecting the idea of watching something on the telly, Paul alighted on his bookshelf. The bottom row of books had had to be thrown away, but fortunately those higher up had survived, although many of them hadn’t appreciated being in a damp

environment. Picking out a western he'd read before—he sat on his new sofa, turned on the nearby standard lamp that Trevor had insisted on buying as a housewarming gift—and settled down to read.

\* \* \* \*

A hammering on his front door made Paul jump. Quickly coming to, he realised he'd fallen asleep on the sofa. The person at the door banged again, and this time started ringing the bell, too.

"I'm coming!"

"Bloody hell, you look rough," Thommo said.

"What time is it?"

"Just past nine."

"What the fuck you doing up so early on a Sunday morning?" Paul rubbed his eyes.

"Reminding you we've got a match at Elderwood this afternoon. It'll take hours to get there with the roadworks so I told everyone to set off early."

Blinking at the bright sunlight, Paul mumbled a response.

"And I need a lift. My car broke down last night. Bloody thing."

Paul opened the door wider to admit his guest.

"Any chance of a fry up? I'm starving."

"What's wrong with your own kitchen?"

"No clean pots. And I'm out of bacon." Thommo pushed past him and headed for the kitchen and started to open cupboards.

"Oi! Leave my kitchen alone. Five minutes and it'll end up looking like yours."



Thommo stepped back. “All right, you do the cooking, then. Bloody hell, you weren’t this house-proud before you stayed with that poof.”

Instantly Paul’s lethargy left him. The next thing he knew, he had Thommo up against the pantry door. “One more comment like that and it’ll be a hospital breakfast you’ll be eating.”

“Hey!”

Paul released his friend. “I’m just warning you. Trevor’s all right.”

Thommo looked as though he was going to give a sarcastic reply, but one look at Paul’s determined face made him reconsider.

\* \* \* \*

Paul’s mind wasn’t on the cricket match. He would be hard pressed to say where his mind was. The team slumped to an early defeat, being bowled out with at least ten overs left of the innings. Thommo wasn’t happy; although Paul wasn’t the only cause of their lack-lustre performance, Thommo seemed to aim most of his criticism in his direction. Paul didn’t have the energy to defend himself.

Thankfully, Thommo got a lift back with someone else, leaving Paul to drive home alone with his thoughts. As he passed Trevor’s house he saw that a light was on in the front room. He pulled over, unhooked his seatbelt and then just sat there. Why had he stopped? He had no reason to visit Trevor.

Taking a deep breath, he belted up again, started his car and drove home. Thankfully, exhaustion allowed him to sink into unconsciousness soon after his head hit the pillow. He didn’t dream, or at least if he did, he didn’t remember.

\* \* \* \*

Not questioning why he had a spring in his step, Paul found himself whistling as he prepared for work the next morning. A cup of coffee and a slice of toast was breakfast. Thommo had eaten all the bacon and eggs the day before. He even had the cheek to complain at how few eggs Paul kept on hand.

Making a mental note to visit the supermarket on his way home, Paul picked up his car keys and headed out. It seemed odd to travel to work alone after having Trevor in the passenger seat chatting away, making funny remarks at whatever they passed or at something the DJ said on the radio. Paul unconsciously turned his car and made a detour to Trevor's house. But on arrival he found Trevor had already left. Unaccountably deflated, Paul pointed his vehicle toward Leadstone and its town hall.

But once at work, a minor crisis soon swept him up in its complexity, consuming his attention for most of the morning. The elected leader of the Council wanted a whole raft of statistics concerning the potential extra revenue that could be obtained if the fees charged for requests for land purchases were increased. Paul hated having to prepare such tedious executive summaries. He suspected he could write whatever he wanted in the bulk of the report; all the elected officials would ever look at were the opening summary and the final conclusions.

He managed to finish the first draft by lunchtime and took it to the typing pool. Because the paper was destined for the leader's office, he marked the typing as urgent. "Which means I should get it back by the end of next week," he grumbled as he dropped it in the tray. He then headed directly for the staff dining room for much-needed sustenance.

Sandy was there munching on her celery as usual. Paul, who didn't mind the

occasional salad, would never indulge himself in front of her, however. He enjoyed the look of disapproval he always got when he put his plate of meat on the table.

“I was reading a report the other day that said eating beef causes male fertility to decrease.”

“That’s all right, I wasn’t planning on having any kids.”

Paul began hacking at his dinner; the chef had overcooked the roast. Paul thought back to the roast dinners Trevor prepared at weekends. The meat almost fell off the bones it was so tender.

Thinking about his former house-mate, Paul looked around, but couldn’t see Trevor anywhere. Some dumpy looking woman, all frizzy hair and flowing skirts, caught his eye as she left the serving line. Paul thought he knew her, but couldn’t put a name to the face. She made her way over, smiling and blushing at him.

“Hi, uh, is this, uh, seat taken?”

Paul, who was chewing his way through a mouthful of tough cow flesh, shook his head.

“Thanks. I’m Trish. You must be Paul.”

Paul nodded and finally managed to swallow. “Yeah, that’s me.”

He couldn’t remember the last time someone of the opposite sex got all giggly and shy with him. No, that wasn’t true. There was that girl in the sixth form. Paul smiled at the memory. God, what was her name? Over a period of a couple of weeks she had gradually sat closer. Touches that could have been passed off as innocent soon grew to unmistakable caresses. Everything Paul said was funny, or the wisest thing the girl had ever heard. She seemed to hang on every word. Paul remembered being both flattered

and more than a little uncomfortable.

Remembering where he'd seen what's-her-name before, Paul asked, "Don't you work with Trevor?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." She blushed, obviously recognising she'd been caught.

A glance in Sandy's direction saw the woman roll her eyes.

"How's he doing? I'd have thought he'd be here."

"Oh, he swapped lunches with me."

Paul felt a pang of...he wasn't sure. Refusing to label it as disappointment, he continued to eat, all the while feeling Trish's gaze on him.

"Did you do anything interesting this weekend?" Trish asked.

Paul wasn't sure the question had been aimed at him.

"My best friend and me went into Leeds, to a beauty parlour she knows."

"Uh huh." Why was she telling him all this?

"I thought I'd try a new hair style. Do you think it suits me? My friend thinks it makes me look younger."

"Oh, uh, yes. Very nice."

"You think so?" Trish patted her hair and beamed.

Sandy sounded like she was choking.

"Something go down the wrong way?" Paul asked. "I'd be glad to thump you. On the back."

Sandy recovered and continued chewing, obviously deciding to ignore Paul's remark.

The rest of lunch dragged. Trish kept trying to interest Paul in conversation, and

he kept answering distractedly.

\* \* \* \*

Instead of heading straight back to his office, Paul took a detour via Human Resources. Trevor was there, head bent, entering data into his computer. Paul was dismayed to see he'd gone back to wearing his garish artist's smocks.

"There you are."

Trevor started. "Huh?"

"Didn't see you at lunch. What's-her-name said you'd swapped lunches."

"I, uh."

Paul wasn't sure, but did Trevor look guilty, upset?

Remembering the rather uncomfortable meal he'd just experienced, Paul asked, "Is she, Trish, is she all right? I mean—" Paul blushed. "She seemed a bit, well, obvious."

Paul then grew embarrassed. Why had he gone off on that particular tack? Things got worse when Trish floated in and started up with the flirting again. The situation wasn't helped by Trevor egging her on, suggesting he and Trish go see that bloody romance he'd been forced to endure with Geraldine. Paul made his escape as soon as possible, ever more confused at Trevor's behaviour.

\* \* \* \*

The confusion continued. It seemed every time he asked Trevor to accompany him on some visit or other, Trevor always had an excuse not to go. Eventually Paul had to conclude Trevor wasn't interested in being friends. This was so at odds with the outgoing vivacious person Paul had lodged with.

\* \* \* \*

During an away cricket match, as Paul waited to go into bat, he got talking to a brunette called Natalie. He was immediately attracted to her. Natalie was both pretty and intelligent. Paul didn't like the air-head Trish type, nor the po-faced bluestocking school mistress variety, either. Paul wondered momentarily if Natalie was a bloke in a frock, but good sense prevailed. Even he wasn't unlucky enough to encounter two cross-dressers.

Because Natalie lived some distance away, he was able only to see her at weekends. It was during their second weekend together when he was able to confirm Natalie's womanly attributes.

The two had dined at the pub in Natalie's village. The heavy oak beams and rustic interior appealed to the country boy within Paul. He particularly enjoyed the horse brasses by the large open stone fire-places, and the prints depicting various hunting scenes along the walls. Paul got carried away with the pub's rural ambience, not to mention Natalie's pleasant company. Much to his surprise, when he stood up after they'd decided to call it an evening, he was a little unsteady.

"You okay?" Natalie asked.

"Uh, yeah. The landlord's best bitter must be stronger than I'm used to."

"Well, you would insist on having a third pint, just to see if the first two weren't flukes."

Paul rubbed his forehead. "Shit, I think you're right about me getting carried away."

Natalie smiled. "It's a good job I intended asking you to stay tonight then, isn't it?"

“Oh, uh.”

“I’m not letting you drive home.” She held out her hand. “Give me your car keys.”

Paul handed them over, they then walked steadily back to Natalie’s cottage. The cooler night air had revived Paul, who thought he might be able to drive after all.

“No way. My dad’s a policeman. He drummed it into me from an early age that I’d never allow anyone to drink and drive.

\* \* \* \*

Waking up the next morning alongside Natalie, Paul was glad he’d stayed over. They’d settled in front of the TV, but soon grew less interested in the late night movie, and more interested in each other. When Natalie had suggested they take things upstairs, Paul had made no objection. What had begun with kissing, soon became heavy petting, and then a frenzy of fumbling fingers as each had struggled to undress the other without unlocking their lips, until, at last, Natalie had reached down and took hold of his cock, which long ago had lengthened and thickened.

One thing had led to another, and after Natalie had covered Paul’s sex in latex, he had entered her soft yielding moistness.

As it had been some time since Paul had had the pleasure of being intimate with a woman, it didn’t take long before he spent himself in the sheath. As far as he had been able to tell in his post-coital haze, Natalie had also derived pleasure from the coupling.

Rolling out of the bed, Paul rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stumbled into the bathroom. Even a cursory scan of the small tiled room left no doubt this was a woman’s house. Glass and plastic bottles, lipsticks, powder compacts and goodness knew what

else seemed to cover every flat surface. It was a world away from the orderly neatness that ruled at Trevor's. Paul shook his head, wondering why he was thinking of his former house-mate right after climbing out of a beautiful woman's bed.

"You finished in there?" Natalie asked from the other side of the door. The handle turned, but Paul had bolted himself in. He'd unconsciously begun locking the bathroom door when he stayed at Trevor's and hadn't yet got out of the habit.

\* \* \* \*

As it had grown rather late in the morning before they'd managed to get themselves dressed and downstairs, Natalie suggested they have a light breakfast. Paul was playing in a cricket match back home in Littleborough that afternoon. Natalie also raised the option of having lunch at a restaurant she knew that was about half-way between their two villages, making it clear she'd be paying.

"I don't like the idea of you treating me, it's not—"

Natalie drew herself up to her full five feet seven inches. "You're not one of those unreconstructed male chauvinists, are you?"

Privately Paul had to admit he probably was. He'd been brought up in a very traditional environment where women stayed at home, brought up the family while the husband went out to work. Goodness knows what his parents would make of the likes of Trevor. Paul mentally slapped himself. Why did he keep thinking about him?

\* \* \* \*

They were seated in the conservatory dining room at the rear of the restaurant. The roof and all but the bottom couple of feet of the walls were glass. As the day was bright and sunny, the room with its dark mahogany chairs and tables covered in white



linen cloths was brightly lit. Being Sunday, the room was almost full to capacity. A family with two noisy children were in one corner. Paul was relieved they hadn't been seated next to them. Their table, midway along the far wall, was opposite that of two older men who were talking quietly whilst eating their roast beef. Paul decided he'd also have the beef.

Natalie started a discussion about the laws on Sunday shopping. Paul thought it was a shame people wanted to treat the day just like any other.

"Most people work during the week and can only do their shopping on a Saturday or Sunday."

"Most supermarkets open late these days, and some even stay open twenty-four hours, something else I don't approve of."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "You are unreconstructed. It's not as if your objection to Sunday opening is because of religious observance, you don't go to church regularly, do you?"

Paul shook his head, but remembered Eric's funeral, his mind zeroing in on Trevor's solos. To divert himself he looked over at the two men sitting at the next table. They'd finished their meals and had pushed their plates aside. They seemed to be discussing what to have for desert. Paul noticed the taller of the two, probably in his mid sixties, would occasionally touch the other's hand that was resting on the tablecloth. Paul got the impression they were a couple. He smiled at the thought that two people their age still were in love. He also began to wonder if they'd been together all their lives. The difficulties they must have faced back then...

"It's a disgrace!" Natalie hissed.

“Huh?” Paul’s attention snapped back to his lunch companion.

Natalie looked as though she were sucking on a lemon. “Those two queers parading their perversion where decent people can see.”

“Shush, they’ll hear you.” Paul took a quick glance at the two, who fortunately seemed to be oblivious to the conversation going on less than ten feet from them.

“I don’t see any harm,” Paul said.

“What? Surely you can’t think it’s right to...to—” Natalie’s voice was rising.

“Stop it!” Paul, said louder than he’d intended. The conversations that had been going on around them paused as people looked over at them. Even the kids in the corner fell silent. More quietly Paul added, “I’ve always believed in live and let live.” This, he realised, wasn’t exactly true, but since getting to know Trevor his views had undergone a real shake-up. “One of my best friends is gay. You couldn’t find a more loyal or genuine person.”

Natalie shook her head. “It’s wrong, against God.” Natalie aimed a look of total disgust at the two men. Paul didn’t dare turn to face them, they couldn’t be in any doubt now as to what he and Natalie had been discussing.

Fortunately their food arrived shortly afterward. Paul found he’d lost much of his appetite. The two ate in silence.

“Is everything okay?” The server asked about ten minutes later.

“Fine!” Natalie snapped.

Paul looked up and frowned at Natalie, then turned to the young female server. “Yes, thank you.” He hoped his smile was genuine. “Could we have the bill please?” He just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

\* \* \* \*

Paul was bowled early on in his innings. He mistimed a simple cover drive, the ball nicking his bat and being drawn onto his wicket. Despondently he made his way back to the pavilion, Thommo shooting daggers at him from the non-striker's end. He didn't care. Escaping into the dark and musty interior, he slumped onto the nearest bench and closed his eyes.

His parting with Natalie hadn't been friendly. Paul had always hated unpleasantness.

"I can't believe we're falling out over something as insignificant as this," Natalie had said as she got into Paul's car outside the restaurant.

"It's not insignificant." Paul hadn't wanted an argument.

"I can't believe you'd take the side of those two perverts over mine."

Paul had started up his car and pointed it in the direction of Natalie's village. They'd previously agreed that she would come to watch him play that afternoon, but Paul didn't want to be around her at the moment.

"I doubt very much they're perverts." Paul's resolve not to argue was waning.

"Please. Everyone knows homos prey on young innocent boys and turn them queer like them."

Paul's hands had tightened on his steering wheel. He had also begun to grit his teeth, too.

"Now they want to be allowed to get married to each other and have the state recognise it. It's disgusting."

Paul snapped. "Shut up! I don't want to hear it!"

Natalie had glared at him, but fortunately decided to remain quiet. He had continued to stare at the road ahead. It had been the longest ten miles he could ever remember driving.

Eventually the silent ride was over. Paul had drawn up outside Natalie's cottage, but had made no move to get out himself.

If Natalie had been surprised she'd been taken home, rather than to Paul's cricket match, she hadn't shown it.

"Give me a call when you've come to your senses."

Paul didn't reply until Natalie had got out of the car and had been about to shut the passenger door. "Goodbye, Natalie."

Driving back to Littleborough, Paul had been surprisingly calm. He'd known he couldn't live with himself if he continued to see someone whose views were so fundamentally different from his own. Idly he'd wondered if he'd be able to confide in Trevor.

After a few miles of consideration he had concluded he couldn't.

"You okay?"

Paul opened his eyes and saw a concerned Pete looking down at him.

Sitting up, Paul rubbed at his eyes. "Woman trouble, that's all."

Pete smiled. "Oh right. Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

"Something like that."

"You want to go sink a couple once the match is over?"

Paul thought about it, but decided he'd had enough alcohol for one weekend, so declined. "But you're welcome to come round to mine to just kick back if you want."

“Nah, can’t. I promised I’d meet someone later.”

“Oh?”

He smiled. “I hope my luck with the fairer sex will be better than yours.”

Pete had found himself single again when his ex found another man and asked for a divorce. He’d been devastated at the time, and only recently had begun to date again.

“Good luck, mate.” Paul got to his feet, slapped Pete on the back and left the pavilion in search of his car. He was suddenly tired, the thought of an early night becoming more and more appealing.

\* \* \* \*

He didn’t know why, but one evening he was returning from a meeting and found himself parking up outside Trevor’s house. Dismissing it as merely forgetting that he no longer lived there, Paul was about to drive off when he thought *what the hell*, and turned off the ignition. He’d not seen Trevor in quite a while. Obviously the bloke had moved on and was getting on with his life. Paul felt the need to reconnect.

Pressing the doorbell, he was soon ushered inside. Trevor insisted on cooking for him, Paul discovering for once he was hungry.

After they’d eaten, Trevor invited him into the front room. It was as if he hadn’t been away. The two sat talking for hours, though afterward he couldn’t recall much of what they’d talked about.

\* \* \* \*

Things only seemed to get worse for Paul as the summer continued. He found it increasingly difficult to concentrate at work, he wasn’t sleeping, and to cap it all, his

mother was threatening to come pay him a visit.

Sitting at the lunch table one day, staring at his half-eaten meal, Sandy piped up. "Come on, spill. You've been behaving like you've lost a shilling and found sixpence for weeks now."

The old-fashioned phrase, much beloved by his grandmother, raised a ghost of a smile.

"I've just been out of sorts. It'll pass."

Sandy stared at him for a few moments, then, pointing a carrot stick at him, announced, "You're coming round to my place tonight. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"No, I—"

"It's not up for debate. You're coming. I'll cook."

"Nut cutlets. What a mouth-watering prospect."

\* \* \* \*

As Sandy was a lesbian, Paul knew there was no ulterior motive to her invitation. He found himself soon able to unwind, despite the somewhat unorthodox menu.

"Don't you ever get sick of salad?" Paul asked as she dished up at least three different varieties of lettuce, along with some brown circular shaped objects that only bore a slight taste resemblance to beef burgers.

"It's good for you."

"So is jogging, but I wouldn't want to do it three times a day."

Sandy smiled. Paul was surprised she hadn't returned with a witty come back. "So, tell me what's been bugging you recently."

Uh oh. That explained the lack of a snappy response. “Well, uh—”

“I hope you know you can trust me. We’ve been friends for a long time now.”

“I know.” Paul took a big gulp from his wine glass, “Hey, this isn’t half bad.

Knowing you it’ll be from an organic winery where rustic yokels will have lifted up their skirts and trod the grapes as part of some weird fertility ritual.”

“Stop trying to change the subject.”

Sandy’s tenacity was relentless, making Paul squirm. “I don’t really know.”

Slowly, over the course of the meal, he recounted the events of the past few weeks, being as honest as he dare. Sandy’s gentle but probing questions increased his discomfiture.

After he’d finished telling his tale, Sandy sighed. “Oh, Paul, it’s so obvious.”

“Huh?”

Setting down her wine glass, she reached over the coffee table and took Paul’s hand. “This won’t be easy for you to take, love, but—” Sandy shook her head, then locked her gaze on Paul’s. “You’re in love with Trevor.”

At first Paul was shocked. Then there was a brief moment of humour. Anger was the next emotion on the roller-coaster. Paul tried to pull his hand from Sandy’s, but she held on.

“Think about it.”

Paul didn’t want to. He shook his head. “I’m not gay.” Of that he was absolutely certain. “I know I didn’t hit it off with Natalie, but I had no problems in the bedroom department. I was up for it, uh, in more ways than one. I...No, no. You’re wrong, I can’t—”

“Paul.” Sandy squeezed his hand. “Think about why you broke up with Natalie.”

“That was just because she was saying unpleasant and totally stupid things about a friend.”

“Yes, but before your house was flooded and you spent time with Trevor, you had very similar views to hers.”

Paul squirmed. He hated to admit it, but she was right. “That doesn’t mean I’m in love with him.”

“No, not within itself it doesn’t.”

“There then.”

“You said a minute ago that you weren’t gay. I agree, I don’t think you are. But human sexuality, human emotion isn’t as black and white as many people think. Or rather as many people would like to think. I could go on for hours about how people are forced to be pigeonholed into roles that don’t necessarily suit them. They agree to such roles because it’s what society expects. “

“But, I—”

“Paul, I’m not expecting you to agree with my assessment of what’s been at the heart of your, uh, unease. Or at least I’m not expecting you to admit it right this minute.”

He just sat there. It was as if he’d been kicked in the gut. Either that or the wine had been spiked, causing him to feel disconnected from reality. He felt cold, even though the room was plenty warm enough.

Sandy launched into an explanation of the Kinsey scale of sexuality, and how few people were totally straight or totally gay. “It might shock you to learn that I don’t entirely discount the possibility that I might find a man with whom I could settle down. It’s



unlikely, but not impossible. I suspect as far as Kinsey is concerned you're a one or a two. That means you're predominantly heterosexual, it's far more likely that you'll settle with someone of the opposite sex. But there's a small chance you could find yourself compatible with someone of the same sex. And in Trevor you've found that someone."

Paul still didn't say anything.

"Look, you've had enough for one day. You need to go home and have a very serious think. I imagine at the moment you're trying to discredit everything I've said, telling yourself it doesn't apply to you. And who knows, you might be able to pull it off. But if you do, I bet you'll be right back where you started. Right back in the middle of all your confusion."

Sandy got to her feet, Paul found himself automatically doing the same. She gave him a tight hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek.

"You'll sort it out, I know you will."

"Thanks," was all Paul could find to say.

"Will you be all right driving?"

Paul nodded his head.

"Okay, then. I'm sorry I had to put you through all that, but I couldn't see you suffering any longer."

"You knew? Before I even told you tonight?"

"I had a fair idea, but I needed you to confirm it."

"Oh." That didn't make him feel any better.

\* \* \* \*

It took two weeks of wrestling with his conscience, denying, refusing to face

facts, and plain old avoidance of the issue, before Paul was finally able to admit to himself that maybe there was something in what Sandy had said.

“Come off it, mate, you love him,” Paul said, looking at himself in the mirror. The reflection scared him. He looked drawn, there were dark circles under his eyes, small nicks on his cheeks where he’d cut himself shaving. “Bloody hell.”

Paul did his best to smarten himself up, though he wasn’t all that confident of his success.

Feeling more nervous than he’d ever been in his life, he drove to Trevor’s. Approaching a road junction, he almost rammed into the back of a car that had suddenly braked in front of him.

“Fuck, get a grip.”

By the time he’d parked up he was shaking. Most of him wanted to turn the hell round and go home. But he knew he couldn’t cope with the agony of denial any longer. He just wanted to hold Trevor, kiss Trevor, even make love to Trevor.

“Whoa!” Paul said aloud. Then under his breath he added, “Where the hell did all that come from?”

Feeling as though he was ready to toss his dinner, Paul made his way up Trevor’s garden path, and with shaking fingers, pressed the doorbell.

There was no answer. “Oh, shit no.” Paul didn’t think he would have the bottle to go home and come back another day. In frustration he banged on the door’s wooden panel.

“Hold on a minute!” Through the textured glass Paul could see Trevor approach. Opening the door Trevor looked surprised to see him. “Paul, uh, it’s not—”

“I have to speak to you. It’s important.”

Trevor hesitated. Paul prayed he wouldn’t turn him away.

“Uh, you’d best come in then.”

As they made their way down the short hallway, Trevor tucked his shirt into the waistband of his jeans. Obviously he’d had to dress hurriedly to answer the door.

“Take a seat. I’ll be—”

“Did you manage to get rid of whoever was—” A naked man walked into Trevor’s living room. Seeing Paul he halted. “Uh, sorry.”

“Paul, this is my old friend, Gary. We were, uh—”

“I—” Paul swallowed. He felt like the bottom had just fallen out of his world.

Gary reached for a cushion and covered his essentials. No one seemed to know what to say. Then Trevor took charge. Turning to Gary he said, “This is Paul, you remember I told you about him.”

“Uh, yeah, pleased to meet you. Gary offered his free hand to shake. Numbly Paul accepted it.

“Could you go back upstairs, love? Paul said he had something important to tell me. I’ll be up in a minute.”

Gary smiled, leaned over and gave Trevor a kiss on the lips before turning toward the door, his naked arse fully visible. “Nice meeting you, Paul,” Gary said before leaving.

“Uh.” Could this get any more surreal?

Turning back to Paul, Trevor asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I—” Paul opened and closed his mouth, trying to summon up the courage to say

what he'd intended to say. But Gary...Trevor's long-lost lover—"I...Well I thought Gary had, I mean isn't he married?"

Trevor looked confused. "Well, uh, yeah, but... Well, he and his wife are having problems and—"

Paul didn't want to know. He was too late. He felt foolish, hurt, confused. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come. This was a bad idea." His vision clouded by tears that were freely coursing down his cheeks, Paul bolted from the room and ran down the hallway. "I'm sorry. " He fumbled with the Yale lock, which finally released. "I'm sorry," he repeated. Paul sprinted for the safety of his car.

## Chapter 8

Trevor sighed. Charles Dickens was spot on. Having Gary stay with him really was a case of it being the best of times and the worst of times.

He sat opposite Gary, he in his recliner, Gary occupying Paul's former place on the sofa. Trevor wanted, itched to sit next to Gary, be held and feel safe in his arms like he used to. But he couldn't. Gary wasn't free, he had a wife and kids. Trevor sighed again.

"That was a deep sigh."

He hadn't realised he'd made a sound. "Oh, uh, sorry. Just thinking."

"About?"

"Stuff. What it was like back when we were kids."

"Yeah." Gary stretched up his arms, then reclined back on the sofa, Trevor eagerly drinking in the sight. "Come lay with me."

"I can't. We've been through this." Gary had been staying with him for a couple of days. So far Trevor had managed to resist all Gary's efforts to woo him. "You know I can't."

"It's just a cuddle."

"It wouldn't stay just a cuddle. Gary, you know how I feel about you. I've been in love with you since the first day your family moved in next door."

Gary didn't say anything for a moment. Then quietly he said, "I'm sorry." He looked so down-hearted.

Trevor hated to see the first person he had loved so sad. "I know things aren't

good between you and Lisa at the moment, but have you at least told her that you're okay, that you're safe?"

Gary looked confused for a moment, then his face fell. "I lied."

Trevor was the next to be confused.

"Trev, I thought I could do this, but—"

"What?" Confusion turned to concern.

"I lied to you. I'm...Lisa and I aren't having marital problems."

Trevor shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I...oh God this is difficult. Don't get me wrong, I love Lisa and the kids. They're great. But...but, well I miss not having a man. I miss not being able to love a man."

"Oh." Suddenly the room felt several degrees colder. Gary, his hero, the man he'd never stopped loving for the best part of twenty years wanted to use him, have him be the male equivalent of the other woman. Rising from his chair and making for the door, Trevor said, "Were you going to tell me? Or were you just going to fuck me then leave me again?" He paused in the doorway and turned to face Gary. "Well?" He sensed his voice was rising in volume.

"I—" Gary turned a pair of anguished eyes up at him.

Trevor almost melted and forgave him. Almost. "You were my life. When you left—" He shook his head, unwilling to revisit those dark images.

"You said it was all right. You let me go."

"Gary, I loved you. When people love someone as much as I loved, no, still love you, they put their happiness first. I knew Lisa and the likelihood of children would make you happy. Happier than I could. That's why I let you go."

Trevor turned into the hall and went into his kitchen. He needed a cup of tea—something stronger—hell, he didn't know. He felt betrayed. The wound that had healed years earlier was ripped open again.

Standing at the sink, looking out at the garden hidden in dark shadows cast by the advancing twilight, he felt a pair of arms wrap round him. "I'm sorry."

Trevor didn't have the strength to shrug out of Gary's embrace. "Why?"

Gary sighed. "Why'd I leave you, or why am I here now?"

Pausing, Trevor replied, "Both, I suppose."

Trevor felt Gary's head shake from side to side. "Leaving you was the hardest thing I've ever done. I knew you loved me unconditionally. And although you might not believe me, I loved you, too."

Trevor noted Gary didn't apply *unconditionally* to his statement.

"Part of me always wanted kids. You knew I was mainly straight."

"You also used to tell me that that didn't matter, you were with me."

Gary started rubbing the sides of Trevor's arms. Trevor remained facing away from him. It seemed easier to have this conversation whilst not looking at each other.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I regret leaving you more than you can know. But I can't regret the life I made with Lisa. We really are happy."

"Can't be that happy if you came looking for a bit on the side from your ex-boyfriend. Did you ever tell Lisa about your less than heterosexual past?"

Gary didn't answer.

Trevor turned to face him. "Did you? Or was I always going to remain your dirty, shameful secret?"

“Trev, don’t.”

“I think I deserve an answer. Though your unwillingness to give it speaks volumes.”

Gary sighed. “No, I’ve never told Lisa about me and you. I couldn’t.”

Trevor tried to summon up hatred for Gary. But looking at him, an older, slightly fatter version of the boy-man he’d fallen in love with, he couldn’t. Even though it had ended unhappily, Trevor wouldn’t swap the years of happiness the man had given him.

“It’s best I go. I shouldn’t have come. I’m sorry, I—”

The prospect of Gary leaving broke Trevor out of his lethargy. Without pausing to allow himself to change his mind, Trevor opened his arms, walked toward Gary and hugged him. Delivering a kiss to his lips, only the second they’d exchanged since he’d arrived, Trevor said, “Stay. Though I want you to call Lisa and tell her you’re safe.”

Gary looked confused.

“These past few years living by myself, then lately having Paul come stay, has shown me how fucking lonely I am. So, although I know it’s wrong on so many levels, I want you to hold me, kiss me and make love to me for as long as you can. Just for a while, I want—” Trevor felt the beginnings of tears. “I want to pretend that someone loves me. I want to pretend that I’m not a failure, unable to keep a man, or in Sam and Ollie’s case, men.

“Oh, Trevor, you’re not a failure. And I do love you. Very much. But you’re sure you want me to stay?”

Trevor shook his head. “I know what I’m asking is wrong, immoral, I’m helping you commit adultery, but—” the tears came then, “I don’t care. I just need you.”



Gary cupped Trevor's face in his hands. "I'm sorry, sorry that you're hurting, 'cause, God knows, you deserve someone. Someone a hell of a lot better than me. I promise I'll stick around for as long as I can. I'll do everything to make our time together the best. God, Trev, I fucking love you." Gary sealed his words with a kiss.

"Go on, make that phone call. I'll be waiting for you in my bedroom when you've finished."

Gary kissed him again before letting him go.

\* \* \* \*

"You're so beautiful."

"I'm not. I—" Trevor told Gary about his recent operation and how it made him feel less of a man.

Gary, who had been making a fingertip exploration of Trevor's stomach, began a trail of kisses down to his scrotum. Licking and gently biting the empty side of his sac, he said, "You're still beautiful and perfect and still the same Trevor I've always loved." Lifting his head to look directly into Trevor's eyes, he continued, "Nothing has changed, Trev. Nothing."

Trevor's throat closed up, preventing him from speaking.

After he'd rung his wife, Trevor thankfully being too far away to overhear, Gary had poked his head round the bedroom door, a look of apprehension mixed with desire on his face. "Okay?"

Trevor had smiled. "Come in, love. Everything all right?" Trevor hadn't wanted to speak Lisa's name, he'd prefer it if he could block her completely out of his mind.

"Yeah. I told her I was staying with a friend while I was working in the area." Gary

had previously told Trevor that he was a sales rep for *B&Q*. The guy who normally serviced the area had fallen ill, and Gary had seized the opportunity to take over for a while.

Trevor had nodded. That was the convenient part, he had thought, of working as a sales rep—one always had a reason to be away from home—although, he thought it would have been sexier if Gary worked for B & O selling high-end audio equipment, rather than pushing home improvement hardware.

“Good. Now come here, beautiful.”

Gary had blushed and began to take off his clothes, but just before loosening the waistband of his trousers he had looked over at Trevor. “Uh, you sure about this?”

Trevor had nodded. He had been far from sure, but had decided he’d work through the moral consequences another time.

Once he’d undressed, Gary had got onto the bed. His shy lack of confidence had soon given way to his natural take charge attitude. “Come on, strip. I want you naked, too.”

Trevor hadn’t argued. Gary’s self-assuredness, his possessive protectiveness had always turned Trevor on.

“I’ll give you exactly two hours to stop that,” Trevor moaned in response to Gary’s feather-light touches.

Gary leaned forward and licked the tip of Trevor’s nose. “Love you.”

\* \* \* \*

Waking up the next morning, Trevor didn’t need any time to work out where he was, or more accurately, who was with him. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d

dreamed about Gary, about the old days when his big blond buff angel was constantly by his side. Now, or rather for a little while, Gary was back. Trevor couldn't stop the couple of tears that leaked out of his eyes.

"Hey," a raspy voice announced before a soft pair of lips kissed away the moisture. "You okay?"

"More than you could know." Trevor returned the kiss. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

After more kissing, Trevor began to feel a large hard object pressing into his leg.

"You do it for me, Beautiful. Get me going every time."

Trevor melted at Gary using his old pet name for him.

Gary's kisses moved lower. First he caressed Trevor's neck, then across to his shoulders.

Trevor whimpered.

Lifting his head, Gary said, "I'm gonna treat you like a king for the next few weeks. I'm gonna make sure you never forget how special you are."

Gary's mouth fastened itself on Trevor's left nipple. It had always been more sensitive than his right. Gary hadn't forgotten.

Trevor ran his fingers through his lover's hair, maybe a little thinner than he remembered, though tinged with white, it was still as soft and glossy as ever. "Special. Love you." Trevor knew he wasn't making much sense, but he didn't care.

Gary began to lick out Trevor's navel.

Trevor's hands stroked across Gary's shoulders. "God, you've always had awesome shoulders. Wide...strong...powerful."

Although they'd done little more than give one another hand jobs the night before—Gary intuitively realising Trevor would have been uncomfortable with anything more—with the morning sun streaming through the parted curtains, Gary went down on Trevor's penis.

"Oh." Trevor almost sat up in the bed. It had been too long since he'd known anything other than his own hand down there.

Separating himself from his duties momentarily, Gary rose up and smiled at Trevor. "Let me love you.

Gary didn't wait for a response; in truth Trevor wasn't capable of verbalising one. Before Trevor could draw breath, Gary had gone down on him again, swallowing him to the root.

"Oh, fuck."

Was Gary laughing? It was difficult to tell with a cock in his mouth. Whatever he was doing, felt fantastic, sending Trevor ever closer to climax.

Then, just when he was about to be launched into orbit, the bastard pulled off.

"Not yet."

Trevor's inarticulate protests were mollified when Gary began laving at his ball.

While all this was going on, Trevor patted and stroked the parts of Gary he could reach. His hands roved over strong muscles. Evidently Gary still looked after himself.

Trevor's caresses were temporarily halted when Gary started giving his scrotum a tongue bath. Gary didn't mind he was no longer whole. He'd said so, he'd said he was still the same.

"All for you, Beautiful," Gary mumbled from between Trevor's legs.

The rasp of stubble from Gary's cheeks—he'd had to shave daily since his early teens—ramped up Trevor's passion, making him moan incoherently. However, everything seemed to change when Gary had snuffled and licked his way to Trevor's anus. It didn't feel right.

"No, stop."

Gary didn't seem to hear and carried on. Even though Trevor's body was still reacting to the awesome sensations, his mind had other ideas. Lifting his legs high, which momentarily gave Gary better access, Trevor rolled away.

"No, I don't want that. It's...it's too...too much. I'm sorry, love."

Gary hid his disappointment well. "If you're sure."

Trevor lay down next to Gary and cupped his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, I can't let you—"

He tried to find the words to explain. He knew his rule was irrational. He'd already crossed any number of moral boundaries, but that one was one he felt he couldn't allow to be breeched given that Gary was married.

"It's all right. I understand."

"Thanks. I know it doesn't make any sense."

Gary kissed him. "It's okay. I really do understand." Gary looked down and saw their cocks were lined up, almost touching. "Wanna try a double wank?"

Trevor grinned. "Okay." He reached down to take hold of both members.

"Uh, no. This is still my show."

Trevor smiled and let go. The warm feelings of security and love began to flow again as Gary resumed his natural role of being in charge.

\* \* \* \*

"You sure it's all right? You should be working."

"Stop fussing, it's fine."

Trevor, having plenty of holidays owing to him, decided to accompany Gary on some of his visits. Except Gary was more interested in long walks in wooded areas where they couldn't be seen, than actually visiting potential clients.

"Bloody hot." Gary loosened his tie.

"Yeah," Trevor said, grinning at his friend, then licking his lips seductively.

"You've got a one track mind."

"Ha. That's rich."

Gary spun Trevor round to face him and laid a wet kiss on his lips. "But true." Tracing a finger along Trevor's cheek, Gary smiled. "You're so beautiful."

Trevor was about to protest, but Gary put a finger to his lips.

"I was wrong all those years ago. I should have stuck with you."

"Don't, Gar."

Trevor experienced an uncomfortable mixture of sadness, envy and resentment whenever Gary began reminiscing about what might have been. Gary had made his choice, and they both had to live with it.

"Sorry."

They joined hands and continued their walk along the dirt path that wound its way through the woods, twigs snapping under their feet, birds singing in the trees, dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves. Trevor felt a deep down contentment. The past few weeks with Gary had been heaven. Although they'd not spent every moment

together due to Gary having to work, Gary had made those they had shared count.

A wasp momentarily distracted Trevor, who fended it away with a hand. Fortunately the insect decided to fly off rather than attack. "Hate wasps. There's no point to them."

"Don't they eat greenfly and stuff like that?"

"Suppose."

It was too warm to hold a discussion about horticulture and natural pest control.

They emerged from semi-darkness into a grassed clearing. Gary pulled Trevor toward a fallen tree trunk. "Want to sit a spell?"

"What, you not as fit as you used to be?"

Gary seemed to think about it for a few moments. "Suppose."

"I was thinking about you and the school cricket team the other week." Trevor went on to explain about his own brush with the noble game.

"You?"

"What, you think I can't do it?"

Gary kissed him before sitting on the fallen log, opening his legs and gesturing to Trevor to sit on the ground between his knees.

"I'm sure you were great. It's just I could never get you to play when we were kids."

"Yeah." Trevor settled himself and leaned against the comforting bulk of Gary's chest. "They didn't have anyone else, and Paul asked me, and—"

"You fancy this Paul guy, then?"

"He's straight," Trevor answered quickly. Too quickly.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Trevor didn’t reply, even though he knew he could tell Gary anything. Stretching his neck upward, Trevor looked at the sky. It was so blue, not a single cloud in sight. Lying there in the safe cocooning protection of Gary’s body, he answered Gary’s question about fancying Paul. “Not as much as you.”

Gary leaned down and kissed Trevor’s forehead. “I wish you had someone. You deserve so much. Happiness, love, someone who could...I don’t know.”

Trevor closed his eyes. Right now he had everything he could dream of.

Gary’s mobile phone chose that moment to ring, shattering the peace that had settled over them.

“You better answer it,” Trevor said, leaning forward.

“Don’t want to.” Gary had his eyes shut.

“Might be work.”

Sighing, Gary opened his eyes, took the phone from his belt and looked at the screen. “It’s Lisa.”

Gary made no move to accept the call.

Getting to his feet, Trevor began walking away. “I’ll just—” He let the sentence hang. Lisa calling had destroyed the delicate web of pretend that he’d managed to weave around himself and Gary. It had been a tenuous construction, but he still mourned its collapse.

Reaching the tree line, he could hear Gary talking into the phone, but wasn’t able to make out the actual words, which was a relief. He didn’t want to know the lies Gary was telling about how lonely he was and how he was missing her and couldn’t wait to



be back. Maybe it was worse not hearing the words, Trevor's mind supplying a much more unpleasant dialogue than was probably taking place.

Turning to face the trunk of an oak tree, Trevor wrapped his arms around its girth and attempted to seek comfort from its solidity.

"You all right?" Gary put a hand on Trevor's shoulder.

"What did Lisa want?" Trevor didn't really want to know, but it was easier than trying to give an answer to Gary's question.

"Oh, Peter fell and grazed a knee playing football at school."

"Do you," Trevor squeezed his eyes shut fearing the response, "need to go home and—"

"Heck no. Once he'd received the obligatory sticking plaster he insisted on playing the rest of the game."

Trevor smiled, thinking how much like his dad young Peter obviously was.

"Want to go somewhere for lunch? Then I really have to do some actual work."

Trevor let go of the tree, allowed Gary to hug him, then they walked hand in hand back to the car.

\* \* \* \*

"But it's too much."

"Rubbish, I get a twenty per cent discount, and you really could use one."

Trevor let out a breath. "True. But I'm paying for it."

"You don't need—"

"Gary, how are you going to explain a £300 transaction on your credit card statement to Lisa?"

Gary's face fell. "Shit."

"Exactly." It was obvious Gary, his sweet wonderful Gary, was new to deception.

Trevor took comfort from the fact.

They were at a branch of *B&Q* looking at split model air conditioning units.

"I'll pay for it, but I'd be very grateful if you'd install it. "

A cheeky smile lit up Gary's face. "Exactly how grateful?"

Without batting an eye, Trevor kissed him on the lips in full view of everyone.

Withdrawing, he added, "I'm a whole lot more grateful than that, but showing it would get us both arrested."

They put the unit on a low loading cart and Gary wheeled it to a check-out.

\* \* \* \*

"Phew, there's just something about a workman in low riding jeans," Trevor said, watching a sweaty Gary install his air conditioning unit.

"Perv."

"Yep, and I've got the hard on to prove it."

As Trevor's bedroom faced both south and west, it got very hot during the day.

The room was the ideal candidate for the air conditioner.

"What's that for?" Trevor asked.

Gary was standing on a step ladder, pulling a pipe through a hole he'd just drilled. "The pipe will carry refrigerant from the outside heat exchange unit to this baby here." Gary then held up a white box about the size of a VCR. "This will go on the bracket there," Gary gestured at a sheet of moulded plastic that he'd previously screwed to the wall above head height.

“Oh, right. I’m sure I wouldn’t have known where to start.”

Pushing the pipe into the back of the white box, Gary fixed the box to the bracket. He then descended the steps and treated Trevor to a sweaty hug. “That’s why you’ve got me on the job.”

“Oh, swoon,” Trevor simpered. “My hero.”

“Silly bugger.” Gary kissed him before climbing the step ladder again.

Trevor eyed the mess of brick and plaster dust, his need to clean growing stronger with every fresh accumulation. However, he managed to squelch the urge to reach for his vacuum cleaner.

After making a few more adjustments, as well as issuing the occasional swear word, Gary got down from the step ladder again and announced, “There, that should do it.”

“Really? I can switch it on?”

Gary handed him the remote control, pointing at a particular button. Trevor pushed said button. After a couple of seconds he heard a fan quietly begin turning. Then a cool wave of air washed over him.

“It works!”

Gary smiled broadly, obviously proud of his accomplishment.

“You’re so clever. Thank you.” Despite the dust and sweat sticking to his lover, Trevor wrapped his arms around Gary and began kissing him.

Breaking their lip lock, Gary said, “Want you naked.” After a further kiss he added, “Now.”

Trevor complied and was soon stripped out of his shirt and jeans, Gary helping

him out of his underpants.

“Now it’s my turn,” Trevor said reaching for the buttons of Gary’s shirt. “Your arms. So strong.”

“All the better to hold you with,” Gary growled.

The two fell on the bed, Gary devouring Trevor’s face while the latter attempted to separate his lover from his clothes.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. Gonna eat you up. Gonna show you so much love.”

“Oh, Gar. Love me. Make love to me.” Trevor realised what he’d said and the manner in which Gary could interpret it. He didn’t care. He wanted Gary in him. He wanted all his strong blond hero could give him. “Fuck me, Gar. I don’t care what I said. I just need you so much.”

Gary paused. Raising himself up on his arms above Trevor he stared down at him. “You’re sure?”

Trevor bit his lip, yes, he was sure. He nodded his assent, he’d worry about the consequences later.

Settling himself on top of Trevor again, Gary seemed to move down a couple of gears, taking things slow and steady. “Love you, Trev. Never stopped.”

Then from downstairs the doorbell went. Gary paused.

“Ignore it,” Trevor said.

They resumed kissing, licking and stroking each other. However, the doorbell rang again. Trevor growled low in his throat. Gary took this to mean increased interest and ramped up his loving.

“Fuck!” Trevor said when their would-be visitor began hammering on the door.

“Don’t think they’re gonna go away,” Gary said, licking broad strokes up Trevor’s neck.

“Yeah.”

They heard another round of hammering.

“Bugger it!” Trevor disengaged himself from Gary, got off the bed and made for the door.

“Uh, Trev?”

“Yeah?”

Pointing at him, Gary said, “Uh, I think you ought to put some clothes on before you see who it is.”

Trevor blushed. Though being greeted by a naked householder would probably convince any self-respecting Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon never to darken that particular doorstep again.

Stepping into his jeans and putting on his discarded and rather crumpled shirt, he said, “I’ll get rid of whoever it is.” Leaning down, Trevor kissed the head of Gary’s gloriously rampant erection, “Cause me and you have unfinished business.”

Running down the stairs to silence yet another round of hammering, Trevor called out, “Hold on a minute!” Reaching the door and opening it, he was surprised to see a rather ill-looking Paul.

“I have to speak to you. It’s important.”

Trevor hesitated, he didn’t want to be away from Gary, not now that he’d agreed to...However, something was definitely amiss with Paul, so reluctantly he stepped aside and let his visitor enter.

They'd just got to the living room, Trevor about to ask what had Paul so upset when, "Did you manage to get rid of whoever was—"

Spinning round, Trevor saw a naked Gary—a still-erect, naked Gary. Closing his eyes momentarily, he tried to compose himself. Some hope. "Paul, this is my old friend, Gary. We were uh—" Could this get any more surreal?

Turning to Gary, who had reached for, and covered himself with, a scatter cushion from the sofa, Trevor said, "This is Paul, you remember I told you about him."

Gary, bless his heart, tried to reduce the farcical nature of the situation by observing the social nicety of offering to shake Paul's hand. But the situation was beyond saving.

Trevor asked Gary to go back upstairs. The cocky bastard agreed, but before leaving laid a sloppy kiss on his lips. *So much for the social niceties*, Trevor thought, closing his eyes again. *Please, floor, swallow me up!*

But alas, whoever was responsible for causing floors to open wasn't listening. Turning to Paul, and hoping his voice sounded normal, Trevor asked, "What's wrong?"

Paul looked lost. Then he asked about Gary's presence. Normally Trevor would have told him to mind his own business, but the situation was far from normal. So he used the lie of Gary's marriage hitting a rough spot.

Paul, who had looked confused and upset ever since he'd arrived, appeared to get even worse. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come. This was a bad idea." He then bolted from the room, down the hall and out the door.

Trevor followed him as far as the door, wondering what on earth was wrong with him. It wasn't like Paul to get so emotional. Maybe someone in his family had died, or

he was in trouble, or...Trevor didn't know.

Closing the door, he walked slowly upstairs, still pondering Paul's strange behaviour. Gary was back on the bed, waving his dick at him. But Trevor had lost all interest in sex.

"What's wrong?" Gary said, sitting up.

"Dunno." He confided his worries about Paul, and how he was normally so level-headed.

Growling, Gary got off the bed. Trying to force his erection into a pair of underpants, he asked if Trevor wanted him to drive him round to Paul's house.

"I'm sorry about all this, Gar."

Gary shrugged and continued to dress.

"Maybe I'll try ringing Paul in a bit."

"Okay, whatever."

"Look, I really am sorry, but I'm just not in the mood any more."

Gary's look of irritation soon softened. He bent down and kissed Trevor. "I know, love. It's all right."

## Chapter 9

“Come on, I know you’re in there.”

Paul thought if he didn’t answer, Sandy would go away.

“Paul! Open this bloody door! If I have to stand here all evening I will.” The banging continued.

It had been three days since his disastrous visit to Trevor’s. Paul had driven home, though he had no memory of making the journey. After drawing the curtains he’d sunk into an armchair. Apart from visits to the bathroom and making cups of hot chocolate, the only thing he knew he could keep down, he hadn’t moved.

“I’m sure your neighbours will have something to say if I start stripping off all my clothes out here.”

Dimly Paul realised Sandy probably meant what she said. Most of him didn’t care. Trevor, the man who had invaded his thoughts more and more of late, was lost to him. He had come too late.

Sandy began *la-la-la*ing the tune from *The Stripper*. Paul, acting on auto-pilot, got to his feet and shuffled into the hallway.

“There you are!” Sandy announced. She had wedged open the brass flap of the letterbox, and was peering at him through it.

Paul advanced on the door, took off the chain and turned the knob on the Yale lock. Sandy pushed the door open. The sudden bright light of late afternoon caused him to cover his eyes with a hand.

“You look awful,” she said, pushing past him. “It’s like a bloody pigsty in here.”



And smells like one, too.”

Paul sighed, closed the door and slowly followed her into the living room.

\* \* \* \*

“There, that’s better,” Sandy said half an hour later when Paul came into the kitchen after taking a bath and having a shave. “You look somewhat human again.”

“Gee, thanks.” Paul’s voice was scratchy. These were the first words he’d spoken in three days. No, that wasn’t quite true. He’d had to call in sick Monday morning.

“Come on, sit down. I’ve made you something to eat.”

Once he was seated and a bowl of something grey green and partially liquefied had been placed in front of him, Paul wondered if whatever it was would be better off being used to fill the cracks in the concrete on his back patio. But having no resistance, he dipped a proffered spoon into the gloop, brought it to his lips, gave it an experimental sniff and then put the spoon into his mouth. Surprisingly whatever it was didn’t taste too bad. He took a second spoonful.

“Bet you haven’t eaten anything in days.”

Paul nodded in agreement.

To give Sandy her due, she held her tongue for at least an hour after barging into his house. Once Paul had consumed a second bowl of the strange soup along with a bread roll, Sandy seemingly couldn’t wait any longer.

“So, what’s been up with you?”

“I’ve had the flu,” Paul said, rising from the table.

“Rubbish.” Sandy got up and followed him into the living room. She drew back the curtains and turned to face him. After staring at him for several long moments, she

sighed. "You've wallowed with whatever it is for long enough. So out with it."

Paul sat in his armchair and lowered his eyes to the carpet, saying nothing.

"Is it about Trevor?"

Involuntarily Paul's gaze shot up to meet Sandy's. "Uh."

"What happened?" The sympathy was back in her voice.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have much choice, love. You can hardly go on like this."

Paul let out a breath.

"Did you decide not to tell him? You need to, you know, otherwise you'll never get any peace."

"When I went round there the other day, he had a visitor."

Obviously waiting for Paul to continue, and realising he wasn't going to, Sandy said, "Go on."

"They were naked, or at least Trevor had been. I—" Paul closed his eyes and tried not to recall the scene that wouldn't stop replaying in his mind. "He's got somebody. I was too late." He dropped his gaze lest she see his pain. "It's his best friend, Gary."

"You've jumped to the wrong conclusion. Gary's happily married."

Paul snorted.

"To my best friend, Lisa."

Paul shook his head. "I might not be experienced with what two guys can do with each other, but when I arrived, Trevor had obviously got dressed in a hurry."

"So?"

“And Gary was naked. Totally bare. I can’t remember what he said. But there was no doubt that they had just had sex, or were about to, or maybe both.”

“What? But—”

It wasn’t often Sandy was lost for words. Paul wished he was in a better frame of mind to appreciate it. “And besides, Trevor told me that Gary and Linda—”

“Lisa.”

“Lisa, were having marital problems.”

Sandy shook her head. “I only spoke to her a couple of days ago, she never said anything.”

“Well,” Paul shrugged, “Maybe she didn’t want to talk about it, I mean, it’s a bit personal.”

“We tell each other everything.”

Paul didn’t think he’d ever understand women.

“We’ll soon get to the bottom of this.” Sandy pulled out her mobile phone, pressed a few buttons before holding the device to her ear. After a short wait she said, “Hi, Lisa...I know...Yeah...I’m doing all right.”

Paul wondered how she could bring up the subject of the state of Lisa’s marriage without revealing why she wanted to know, as well as not causing any suspicion about why she was asking. However, he underestimated the cunning female mind.

“I ran into your Gary the other day.” She made a swooning noise. “He’d make any lesbian reconsider, you lucky cow.” She laughed and listened to whatever Lisa was saying. “Yeah...Oh he is? Yes, he said something about working in this area for a while...Uh huh...Uh huh...” Long pause. “Go on, remember, we don’t have any

secrets.”

Paul wondered if they were getting down to the meat of the matter.

Sandy’s face lit up. “And what does Gary say? Well I suppose... But you think he’ll be happy? Oh, no, sorry. Of course he’ll be delighted, and well done you. So, there’s no problems between the pair of you, then? Oh, no, no, not at all,” Sandy back-paddled. “It’s just when I saw him he looked sad. Probably because he was missing you.”

*Good save*, Paul thought.

“Oh really? You sure you can wait till then?” Sandy giggled.

Sandy kept talking, with Paul growing ever more anxious to know what Lisa had said. Finally, after about fifteen minutes of inane chat—how could women natter about such inconsequential topics for extended periods?—Sandy ended the call.

“Well?” Paul asked.

“Lisa believes their marriage is solid.”

“Huh? But Gary—”

“She told me they’ve been trying for another baby. She did a pregnancy test a couple of days ago, and it came back positive, only Gary doesn’t know yet.”

“If she’s not told him yet then maybe things aren’t all sunshine and roses between them.”

“No.” Sandy shook her head. “Gary told her he hoped to come home this weekend for a visit, she’ll tell him then.”

Paul wasn’t going to give up that easily. “Some couples try to have kids to hold their marriage together.”

“Not Lisa and Gary. Trust me, I’d know if Lisa was unhappy. Women’s intuition.”

Much as he wanted to dismiss Sandy’s beliefs, he knew he couldn’t. “So why would Trevor say that Gary’s marriage was in trouble?”

“He’s probably just repeating what Gary’s told him.”

“That lying, cheating—” Paul shot to his feet, feeling more energised than in days.

“That’s the spirit,” Sandy said, looking pleased with herself.

“Thanks,” Paul kissed her cheek before sprinting out of the room and down the hallway.

“Uh, aren’t you forgetting something?” Sandy called to him as he made it as far as his front door.

“What?” Paul returned to the living room.

She pointed to his car keys on the coffee table.

“Thanks. Now come on, I need to get there before that bastard tells Trev any more lies.

“Yeah, I’m not too pleased with him myself, sleeping around on my best friend.”

Sandy decided she didn’t want to witness “a testosterone fuelled disagreement,” so decided not to accompany Paul to Trevor’s. “I came round to get you out and about. I’ve done that.” Sandy climbed into her car. “Just give him a kick in the goolies from me for cheating on Lisa.”

\* \* \* \*

“If that smooth-talking bastard has lied to Trevor and is using him, I’ll—” Paul’s hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Once he pulled up outside Trevor's house and looked over at the neatly tended garden, he grew hesitant. Could he face Trevor? He'd be bound to ask questions about why he'd run out the other day. Trevor had left a couple of concerned messages on his answering machine. Paul had played them back a number of times but hadn't had the courage to ring him back.

"Best get it over with," he said under his breath as he unlatched his seatbelt and climbed out of the car.

Standing at the front door waiting for admittance, Paul couldn't help being reminded of the last time he had stood there, and what he found when he'd been let in. His thoughts were interrupted by the door being opened, by Gary.

Paul felt his anger rise. "Trevor in?"

If Gary was surprised at Paul's brusque tone, he didn't show it. "Uh, no, he's at choir practice."

Shit, Paul knew he should have remembered that.

"He should be back within the hour if you want to come in and wait. I—"

"No." But then he realised maybe he could tackle the problem from the other end. "Uh, actually I will wait."

Gary smiled and held the door open for him. As they walked down the hall, Paul couldn't help noticing how well built Gary was. His thick biceps strained the sleeves of his black T-shirt. Paul could see why Trevor would be attracted to such a man. The fact he was thinking such thoughts surprised but didn't disturb him.

Once Paul had settled himself on the sofa, a position he seemed to gravitate to automatically, Gary offered him a cup of tea.

“Not for me.”

“You don’t mind if I do? Just come back from the gym and I’m a bit parched.”

The remark caused Paul to look again at Gary’s muscular body. This time he was able to view it from the front. The man really was good-looking in a strong, solid sort of way.

Paul waited for Gary to finish in the kitchen. He didn’t have to wait long.

“You feeling okay? We were worried about you after—” Gary began.

“Not bad.” Paul decided to cut through the social niceties and go straight to the reason for his visit. “Trevor said when I was last here that you are having marital problems.”

“Uh, yeah.” Gary’s surprise at the question was obvious.

“But I happen to know that’s not true.”

Gary gave him an odd look.

“Did you know I work with Lisa’s best friend, Sandy? She called Lisa a few minutes ago. Lisa said you and her are, well, happy.” Despite his animosity, Paul didn’t think it right to disclose the news that he was to be a father again.

“Why, I mean, what’s all this got to do with you?” Gary too seemed to be getting angry. This fuelled Paul’s own emotions.

“Quite a bit, actually.” He stood up and began pacing. “Look, dick-head, you lied to Trevor. For the few months I lived here he’d often talk about you. It was obvious, even to me that he loved you, still loves you, and was devastated when you left him.”

“I—”

Paul was on a roll. Pointing an accusing finger at Gary, he said, “And I’m not

going to sit back and let you hurt him all over again. He deserves someone who'll love him, treat him right and who won't leave him when they've scratched their itch."

Gary raised an eyebrow. "Someone like you?"

Paul wasn't expecting such a come back. He sat down again on the sofa.

"I mean it seems obvious you care for him, might even love him. Is that it, are you in love with Trevor?" Gary's voice had moderated.

Paul open and closed his mouth a couple of times. It was on the tip of his tongue to deny it, to get up and thump Gary for even suggesting it. But just as the words were about to leave his lips he changed his mind. "Yes, I think I am." Paul nodded. He was surprised at how liberating speaking the words felt.

Gary smiled. "I could tell that wasn't an easy thing for you to admit." He got up from his chair and came and sat next to Paul on the sofa. "It's true that when I first arrived I told Trevor that me and Lisa were having problems."

Paul tensed.

"But." Gary laid a hand on Paul's left arm. "I soon realised I couldn't keep on lying to him. I won't deny that I came here with the intension of scratching my itch, as you put it. But, I knew I couldn't use him like that. You might not believe me, but I do love Trevor, I always will."

"So why—"

"Why did I get married?" Gary didn't wait for Paul's nod before continuing. "I wanted kids, a family. Back then gays couldn't adopt. Hell, I bet it's not that easy even now. And, much as I love and totally admire Trevor, I am sort of on the straight side of bisexual. Though I won't deny I hated making that decision, hated what it did to Trev, I



still knew it was the right decision.”

Paul didn’t say anything. He hadn’t expected Gary to be so open. A small part of him could admire Gary for his honesty, though most of him still railed at him for hurting Trevor.

In a quieter voice, Gary continued. “It’s something I’ll never be able to forgive myself for. You don’t need me to tell you that Trevor doesn’t go in for half-measures. He loved me, and I knew I was the centre of his universe. And though I love Lisa and could never leave her, she doesn’t love me with the same intensity that Trevor did.”

“If you can’t leave her, why did you turn up here?” Paul felt the urge to pace again, but stopped himself.

Gary let out a breath and continued to stare at the floor. “Because I was weak. A selfish bastard.” Gary looked straight into Paul’s eyes. “I’m ashamed of that. Remember what I said about being at the centre of Trevor’s universe? It’s heady stuff. I wanted some more of that. Craved it.”

“Even if it hurt Trevor when you left again?”

Gary nodded, not meeting Paul’s eyes. “I tried not to think about that when I accepted the temporary job to work this area. Only when I came face to face with Trev, when things started to become more intimate between us, I couldn’t keep up the lie about my marriage failing.”

“Yes, well.” Paul didn’t want to know about Gary and Trevor being intimate. “I’m surprised he didn’t toss you out on your ear when you told him.”

Gary smiled. “He almost did.”

Paul didn’t say anything.

“But, well,” Gary ran his hands through his uncombed hair. Paul remembered him saying he’d just come back from the gym. “The guy who serves this area will be back soon. I intended stretching things out for another week or two, but—”

“But you’d rather ditch Trevor and get back to your life of cosy domesticity.”

Gary winced. “Guess I deserved that. But yes, I need to get back home.”

“Poor Trevor.”

“Yeah.” Gary sighed. “He’s always known this was a temporary arrangement. I made sure he understood that.”

“How considerate of you.” Paul hoped his sarcasm came through. How could he be with his gay lover one minute and then his wife (whom he also claimed to love) the next?

“You admitted earlier that you love him,” Gary eventually said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had fallen between them.

There was no point in denying it now. “Yes.”

“He deserves a bloke like you. Though you’ll have the devil’s own job convincing him. You know,” Gary stretched, causing his T-shirt to ride up and reveal a flat ridged stomach, “the two of us are a lot alike.”

“What?”

“I mean you’re like me in that you’re not totally gay.”

Paul wondered how he knew. He was a little uncomfortable that Gary could read him so accurately.

“You’re not going to have him fall for you then dump him are you?” Gary challenged.

“What?”

“Because he doesn’t deserve that. He couldn’t handle it.”

“You’ve some room to talk.”

Gary nodded. “I know,” he said, quietly. “But I still love him and I won’t let you hurt him.”

Paul remembered saying something similar to Gary earlier in the conversation. “My feelings for Trevor are genuine, deep, and I promise I’ll do my best never to intentionally hurt him.”

“Guess I can’t ask for any more than that.”

They lapsed into silence again, so both started when they heard a key in the lock. There was only one person it could be. Paul’s heart began to beat more rapidly.

“Hi, honey, I’m home,” Trevor called out. “I stopped in at the butcher’s and got some of those sausages you like. I thought we could—”His words trailed off when he came into the living room. “Paul.” His smile increased, so did Paul’s heart rate. “Are you feeling better? I heard you’d taken time off work. I tried calling, but—”

“Hello Trevor. Yes, I’m feeling much better now. In fact, that was why I came round, to thank you for the messages you left.” Paul had said the first thing that came into his head. He silently congratulated himself for thinking up something so plausible.

Gary stood up and gave Trevor a kiss which made Paul feel uncomfortable.

Trevor accepted the kiss, Gary sat back down again next to Paul, who realised how strange the seating arrangements must appear.

“This is cosy,” Trevor said sitting in the chair opposite them.

Paul blushed, and despite his efforts to hide it, he was sure Trevor noticed.

“Good practice?” Gary asked.

“Not bad. Though with Gordon still recovering with his hip replacement, we’re struggling.”

Gordon, Paul knew, was the old man who had played the organ at Eric’s funeral.

“So Jeremy thought we ought to do Tallis’s *O Lord, Give Thy Holy Spirit*.”

“I don’t follow,” Gary said, creasing his brow.

Trevor crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, warming to his theme. “The anthem is sung a cappella. We can probably get a temporary organist to do the prelude, processional and all that, so long as it’s kept simple.”

“Ah,” Gary said.

“Uh, look, I best get off.” Paul had achieved what he’d set out to do, albeit not in the way he’d intended.

“You can’t stay for a cuppa and a bite to eat?” Trevor asked.

“No, my mum said she’d ring tonight, and if I’m not there to answer, she gets upset.” Paul relied on his quick thinking again, but this time thought his answer was lame. However, Trevor seemed to accept the excuse.

“It’s been nice seeing you again,” Gary said to a slightly surprised Paul.

“Uh. You, too.”

Gary’s handshake was warm and firm.

Though Paul didn’t think he’d ever like the man, he realised he no longer despised him.

“You must join us for supper one night,” Trevor said, making to rise.

“No, it’s all right, I’ll show Paul out.” Gary got to his feet and moved quickly to the

door.

“Yes, I’d like that,” Paul said to Trevor.

He saw a look pass across Gary’s face, it didn’t last long, and Paul was sure Trevor didn’t see it.

At the front door, Gary said, “Thanks, mate.”

“Uh?” Paul was confused.

They stepped out into the garden and began walking up the short path. “For not telling Trevor that we won’t get a chance to have supper together ‘cause I’ll be leaving. I’m gonna have to be careful how I break the news to him.”

Paul unlocked his car and got in.

Gary tapped on the window, Paul wound it down. “You’ll be there for him...when I go, won’t you?”

Paul felt sorry for Trevor and the disappointment he knew he would soon face.

“Yes. I don’t begin to understand you, but I can see you really do care for him.”

Gary squeezed Paul’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

Gary withdrew. Paul closed his window and drove off.

\* \* \* \*

Paul got a call on Sunday morning. Gary was on his way home to Leicester.

“Well,” Gary said through the slight static, “the deed is done.”

“How is he?”

Gary sighed. “Resigned. I left him itching to start cleaning. Whenever Trevor gets upset, he cleans.”

Paul nodded, then realised Gary couldn’t see him. “I know. Look, I’ve got to play

in a cricket match in a couple of hours, but I'll pop round and see him beforehand."

"Thanks. I know you think I'm a bastard, But—"

"You love him," Paul finished.

"Yeah. They say love hurts, and I've done my share of hurting Trev, that's for sure."

Paul didn't think this was the time for a lengthy discussion on relationship ethics. He couldn't agree with Gary's choices, but that was beside the point. Trevor was hurting, and Paul hoped he could do something about it.

"You still there?" Gary asked.

"Yeah. Look, I better get round there and try and undo some of the damage."

Paul heard Gary let out a breath. "Damage that I caused."

"Well, you said it." Paul wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"Can we stay in touch? Will you let me know how Trevor is doing from time to time?"

Paul wasn't sure.

"Well, think about it. Remember what I said. Keep at him, don't let him wallow. 'Cause he will if—" The line filled with static. "You still there?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, went into a short tunnel. Trevor's a top bloke. Just be good to him and he'll repay that ten times over. Listen, I best get off this thing. Please do your best for Trev."

"I will. Bye." Paul hung up. Running his fingers through his hair, he swore. Looking up at the ceiling he asked, "Why me?"

\* \* \* \*

Trevor was indeed cleaning when Paul turned up. However, his need to always make guests welcome took precedence, and Paul was ushered into the kitchen.

“Would you like something to eat? I was about to make myself something when you came round.”

Paul didn’t think this was true, but decided not to say anything. He wasn’t especially hungry but he knew preparing food would make Trevor happy. “Okay, but something light. Thommo convinced me to rejoin the cricket team.”

“He apologised then?” Trevor asked, cracking eggs into a mixing bowl.

“Uh, not exactly. Well, I knew it was as close to an apology as I’d ever get out of him. And ‘cause I like playing, I decided to come back.”

“That’s good,” Trevor nodded.

“You still bowl, don’t you?”

“Uh, well, yes, but I was planning to give today’s match a miss. I—”

“You should go. It’ll get you out.” He could tell Trevor was close to tears. He got up, approached Trevor, took the whisk from his hand and hugged him.

“It’s not fair,” Trevor sniffed.

“I know, Trev, I know.”

“It was only ever going to be a temporary thing. I knew that. But—”

“But it doesn’t stop it from hurting.” Paul rubbed Trevor’s back.

“No...doesn’t.” Trevor sniffed again. “Why’d I always pick men who leave me?”

Paul wanted to tell him that he’d never leave him, he’d be there for him, love him, keep him safe, but he resisted. It was much too soon for any of that.

“Tell you what. Let’s go for a drive somewhere. It’ll have to be quick though because of the cricket.”

“No, you don’t need to—”

“I want to. Come on, put your shoes on and we’ll go to the reservoir and walk round it. And if you’re really good I’ll shout you a ride on the electric train.”

Trevor laughed. The pair had visited the lake a few times, but on each occasion the little train that went through the nature reserve wasn’t running.

“Thanks.”

Paul gave him a final squeeze before letting go. “What are friends for?”



## Chapter 10

“What? But you’re...You can’t...I mean, you aren’t.” Trevor couldn’t form a coherent sentence.

He and Paul had just come back from a walk, a habit they had fallen into since Gary left. Trevor had first gone on such walks willingly, anything rather than sitting in that house alone staring at the sofa where he and Gary used to snuggle. Then Trevor had come to look forward to the walks, he and Paul quickly slipping into a routine that was safe, comfortable, cosy. Then by the start of the third week he tried pulling away, telling Paul he was busy. The old feelings of coming to rely upon, leaning on Paul were resurfacing. He was determined not to let that happen again. But then Paul let loose his bombshell. Trevor felt his world tilt.

Floundering, Trevor said, “This is silly, cruel. Paul, it’s not fair that you should—”

Paul leaned forward and laid a soft kiss on Trevor’s lips, silencing him. “It’s not silly and it’s not cruel,” Paul said, staring into his eyes.

“Wha—”

“Hush.” Paul put a finger over Trevor’s lips. “For a long time now I’ve had feelings for you. At first I didn’t understand what they were. Then when I worked ‘em out I was afraid of them. Though over time I...Well I thought, why fight them?”

“But, you.”

“Uh.” Paul shook his head. “Let me do the talking. All right?” Paul sealed his words with another kiss.

Trevor swallowed a groan. Paul’s stubble, it got things stirring down below.

“Let’s go and sit down. This could take a while.” Paul picked up Trevor’s hand and led him to the living room. Trevor made for his usual armchair but Paul shook his head and guided him to sit next to him on the sofa.

“I plucked up the courage to tell you how I felt a few weeks back, but when I arrived, Gary was here and—”

Trevor opened his mouth to say something but Paul leaned forward and silenced him with another kiss, and that stubble again.

“I felt as though the bottom had dropped out of my world. I’d discovered I was in love with you, had battled my demons about it, then finally decided to tell you, to ask you to...I don’t know,” Paul appeared nervous for the first time since his arrival, “But I was too late. I...well the pain was almost physical, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” Trevor said, not knowing what else to say.

“I went back to mine and basically hid myself away feeling right sorry for myself. But Sandy, who has been a real brick throughout all of this, kicked me in the arse and got me going again. You remember the day you came back from choir practice and I was here, talking to Gary?”

Trevor nodded.

“I’d found out about Lisa. She and Sandy are good friends. I thought Gary was cheating on you and I came over here to rip his head off for lying to you and—”

Trevor giggled, he couldn’t help it. “Two men fighting over me.” Then he remembered how serious the situation was and closed his mouth. “Sorry.”

“But despite everything Gary and I sort of came to an understanding. I’ll never be close friends with the bloke, but anyway. He said how much he loved you but that he

couldn't be with you."

Trevor was determined not to cry, he'd shed enough tears over that man to last a lifetime.

"I...well." Was Paul blushing? "I told him how much I had grown to love you and—"

"Really? Oh wow, that's—"

He was silenced by another kiss. "Am I going to have to gag you?"

"You kinky sod." Trevor smiled and God help him, but he leaned forward and initiated a kiss for the first time. Jesus, his body zinged with adrenaline. Paul looked momentarily shocked but soon recovered.

"Uh, where was I?" The man was dazed. He, Trevor had done that. He felt so proud. Trevor merely made a zipping gesture across his lips and smiled devilishly.

Paul shook his head, but was smiling. "Oh, yes. Gary said that he couldn't give you the love you deserved and after questioning me, finding out if my intentions toward you were honourable, he, uh, said he'd help me to, well, uh, woo you."

Trevor opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He rubbed at his eyes, this time trying to avoid happy tears.

"I knew I couldn't rush in and announce my love for you the minute Gary left, that wouldn't have been right. But he and I both knew that you'd be upset at his leaving, so that's why I've been hanging around recently and not letting you wallow.

Trevor felt a wave of...was it love?...pass over him. It scared him and he began to retreat.

"But this morning I woke up and I couldn't wait any longer. I'm in love with you,

Trevor Pierson.”

“No,” was Trevor’s only comment.

Paul’s face fell.

“What you said was...amazing, I’m very flattered, more than you can know. But, I can’t. Love you, I mean.”

Paul seemed to hesitate for a moment before speaking. “I know it’ll take time,” he took hold of Trevor’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “You’ll need time to learn to trust me, to be sure that what I’m saying is genuine.”

“Yes, but,” Trevor marshalled his thoughts, “You say you’re in love with me. I’m sure you believe that, but I know that when the next girl who catches your eye comes along I’ll be—” Trevor didn’t finish.

Paul squeezed his hand again. “No, Trev.”

“You can’t say that. I know because I’ve had...well let’s just say there’s a history of men leaving me. I know you’re sincere, Paul, and for that I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but it won’t work between us.”

“How do you know? Why won’t you give it a chance?” Paul looked upset. Trevor hated doing that, but he had to be firm and squelch this now before it got even more out of hand.

“Lots of reasons. The chief one being you’re not gay. Paul, you’re straight, you like women. Vaginas, breasts. You’re not gay.”

“I’m as gay as I need to be,” Paul shot back. “You’re right, I’m not gay in the usual sense. But as Sandy pointed out weeks ago, I’m in love with a person. A person that just happens to be a man. And trust me, I’ve thought about this, and thought and

thought. I'd never launch this on you if I wasn't totally sure." Paul lifted each of Trevor's hands and kissed the knuckles. "I know you've been hurt in the past and I promise I'll do my level best never to do that. I'll protect you from anyone who tries to hurt you."

Trevor got to his feet. "I'm not some pathetic simpering damsel in distress that needs the protection of a man. I've managed perfectly well these past few years without help. I like being alone. It's healthy. It's what I need. It's—"

"It's safe and it's lonely," Paul cut in over Trevor's objections. "I'm not going to trample over your feelings. I know you've done well for yourself alone. I know all that. But I want to make things better."

Trevor didn't say anything, but that didn't seem to deter Paul.

"Gary said it'd take you a while, and that's fine. I'm gonna be here, showing you every day that I'm genuine and am not gonna bugger off the minute some woman flashes her bits at me."

Despite himself Trevor couldn't help bursting out laughing at the mental image of a woman exposing herself to Paul in a desperate effort to woo him. Woo. That was what Paul was doing to him. This big, strong, gorgeous man sitting next to him wanted to woo him. "Oh, fuck."

\* \* \* \*

Paul had been as good as his word. But saying you loved someone, and actually showing it, were two different things. A small part of Trevor hated himself for making Paul prove his claims, but another part told him that he had to be sure. Trevor had asked if they could go out on a date, suggesting somewhere quite far away – he wasn't cruel enough to demand that Paul walk down the main street of their village holding

hands.

Paul had instantly agreed, though grumbled when Trevor said he would pay for his half of whatever they spent. "I'm not a simpering damsel, remember?"

So Trevor found himself all dressed up in his best suit, with Paul similarly attired (the guy looked stunning in a dinner jacket) eating in a pretty fancy restaurant, the waiters speaking in a French accent which Trevor had a sneaking suspicion was put on. He wished he'd remembered more of his schoolboy French so he could test out his theory.

"What you thinking about?" Paul asked from the other side of the candle-lit table. The flickering light enhanced Paul's features, making him seem even more attractive and wholesome than ever.

"Oh, not much really," Trevor lied. He didn't want to admit that Paul's attempts to convince him of his sincerity were having their desired effect.

"You're having a good time, though? I know the play wasn't what we hoped it would be."

Trevor smiled. He needed to put Paul at ease. "The play was fine. I enjoyed it."

"What, even when the leading man forgot his lines and the female lead's wig slipped?"

Chuckling, he said, "I know the play was meant to be a comedy, but I think some of the humour was unintentional."

There was a woman moving from table to table selling single red roses. Trevor studiously ignored her. He refused to put Paul to such a test. He needed to be sure that Paul loved him, not to see how gay Paul was in public. Trevor knew there were gay

people who were happy in long-term, committed relationships, yet didn't go around broadcasting their orientation.

"Uh, miss?" Paul's voice caused Trevor to look up from his tiramisu. Paul was gesturing to the flower seller who had just walked past their table. "I'd like one of those for my partner here if you don't mind."

Trevor knew his mouth had fallen open. Despite the promises he'd made to himself, he couldn't help flushing with pride at Paul's gesture.

"Certainly. You two make a lovely couple," the woman said handing Trevor the rose.

He held it, not knowing quite what to do with it.

Paul smiled. "I'm for real, Trev."

Trevor nodded stupidly.

"Here." Paul held out his hand and Trevor gave him the flower. After breaking off a portion of the stem he gave it back. "You can wear it as a button hole."

Trevor smiled, he hadn't thought of that. "Thank you. It...you didn't need to."

Paul took his hand. "But I wanted to."

\* \* \* \*

If Trevor thought Paul would woo him quietly and behind closed doors, he had another think coming. Within a day of the shock announcement, Trevor received a phone call from a female friend in finance.

"Is it true?" Before Trevor could ask what was true, his friend went on, "You and Paul. Are you two really an item?"

Shocked, Trevor asked where she'd heard the news. A complicated explanation

of who had told her and where that person had heard it ensued. It turned out that Paul had quietly confided in one of the biggest gossips in the town hall, swearing her to secrecy. Trevor later was able to confirm that it had taken less than an hour for the news to get to him. He had to smile at Paul's ingenuity, not to mention his determination.

"Yes, Margie. It's all true." He hung up before she could ask any more questions.

Trish, his fellow human resources assistant was green with envy when five minutes later her phone buzzed and she was given the news. After she had accepted Trevor's apology for having to find out second hand, there was no stopping her.

"You dog. I thought he was straight."

"Me, too," Trevor admitted.

"But I thought you said you could spot a gay man within—"

"Apparently not." He wasn't going to tell her Paul wasn't gay in the traditional sense. That was private between him and Paul.

"You're so lucky. Paul's—" She flopped down in her chair. "He's so handsome, just like—"

Trevor rolled his eyes. Trish was forever comparing men she'd seen with movie stars both past and present. "But I don't know if I want a relationship with him."

"What?" Trish had just opened a pot of low fat yoghurt, her latest get-slim-quick fad. The shock of Trevor's statement caused her to spill half of the pot's contents down her blouse. "But he's...Trevor, you have to." Trish was now dabbing at the spillage with some paper tissues, succeeding only in spreading it further. "Trust me, you'll regret it if you don't."



“Might regret it if I do and he leaves me,” Trevor said under his breath, but Trish didn’t hear.

As it was almost lunchtime, Trish went home immediately to change, and Trevor was left holding the fort. He’d just sorted out a dispute between two typists—each claiming the other always received preferential treatment when annual leave was negotiated—when Paul walked into the office and closed the door behind him.

“Busy morning?” Paul asked before laying his hands on Trevor’s shoulders, massaging them.

“Uh huh.”

“Where’s Trish?”

“She’s, uh, gone home because...Ooh yeah, just there.”

Paul chuckled before bending down and licking Trevor’s ear. So we’ve got the office to ourselves, then?”

“What? You can’t. I mean we can’t. Anyone could just walk in and...Oh God.” Paul had just found a tense muscle that had been bothering him all morning.

Kissing the top of Trevor’s head, Paul said, “I know we can’t, but it’d be fun if we could.” Moving to lick Trevor’s other ear, Paul added, “As I can’t tempt you into a quickie, how’s about we go out for lunch somewhere? I know this little out of the way pub that does a great steak sandwich.”

Trevor groaned, though if it was because of the thought of the pub, the meal or Paul’s massage he didn’t know, or care.

“We’ll have to wait for Trish to come back, but she shouldn’t be—”

“Sorry it took me so long, but—”

“Oh my God.”

Both of them turned to face Trish. Trevor expected Paul to pull away, deny everything or claim *This isn't what it looks like*. But that wasn't what happened.

“Trish, I'm sorry for getting carried away,” Paul said. “I just couldn't keep my hands off him.” Then Paul kissed a stunned Trevor on the lips before sauntering past an equally stunned Trish. Stopping in the doorway, Paul said, “Be back in five minutes, okay?”

Trevor nodded, and Paul departed.

“Oh my God,” Trish repeated. “I know you said that Paul was, but he really is...Oh my God.”

“Yeah, he is.” Trevor grinned stupidly; his lips still tingling from Paul's kiss.

\* \* \* \*

Friday night, and Trevor had suggested a visit to the pictures to celebrate their first month together.

“This film you want to see, it's not something, uh, all slushy, is it?” Paul asked, looking as though he might object.

Trevor smiled to himself. “Yes, the latest Barbara Cartland inspired romance. *White Lace and Taffeta* I think it's called.”

“Oh, God,” Paul groaned.

Trevor couldn't hold in his mirth any longer. “You should see your face. I was just pulling your leg, reminding you of when you took Geraldine to the pictures.”

“Don't remind me,” Paul groaned.

Trevor giggled. “I'd never do that to you. Honestly, I don't mind what we see, so

long as it's not one of those high budget action things that's heavy on explosions and light on plot."

A look of relief passed over Paul's face. "It's a date then."

They chose a comedy. Or rather Paul let him choose the comedy. Trevor had told Paul he could choose, but Paul was determined to let Trevor pick.

The film was all right, nothing outstanding, but it held Trevor's interest—although Paul's wandering hand as it kept missing the bucket of popcorn, probably held more of Trevor's attention.

"Give up, you'll leave a stain," Trevor hissed.

"On the inside or the outside?" Paul leaned in to his ear and whispered. Before withdrawing he licked Trevor's ear, causing him to shudder.

"Bloody poofs," a loud male voice called out behind them.

Trevor took no notice, but Paul immediately swung round in his seat.

"Who said that?"

"No, Paul, let it go. It's not important," Trevor urged. He could see they were drawing attention to themselves. "Please."

Paul turned back to the front, but remained tense.

Trevor was miserable through the rest of the film. Although he'd faced homophobia many times, Paul obviously hadn't. Was this the ultimate test? Would Paul decide loving him wasn't worth all the aggravation that would go with it? Trevor had fallen absolutely and completely for Paul. He had tried his hardest not to let it show, just in case Paul changed his mind and left him high and dry. Was this to be their last date? What could Trevor say to keep him? Was there anything he could say?

The film finally ended and the house lights came up. Paul didn't say anything as he filed out of the cinema, Trevor following him, becoming increasingly worried.

They emerged into a warm and humid evening. The sky was dark, though there was ample light from street lamps and shop windows. Trevor wanted to touch Paul, ask him if they were still all right, if there still was a *they*.

"Bloody queers! Fucking makes me puke," someone muttered behind them. As far as Trevor could tell it was the same voice which had taunted them in the cinema.

Paul sprang into action. Before Trevor could stop him, he had turned around and got one of the three men by the throat and backed up against the wall. A woman nearby screamed.

"What did you say, dick-head?" Paul said in a low voice through clenched teeth.

The other two men who were with the third moved in. "Hey!"

"Stay out of this, unless you want some, too," Paul addressed the other two, who seemed to be in their early twenties. The person who Paul had hold of looked to Trevor to be a few years younger.

"I'm talking to you, scum breath." Paul focussed his attention back on the man he had apprehended. "Did you say something to me and my boyfriend?"

The guy shook his head the best he could. He looked terrified.

"Paul, don't," Trevor said quietly. They were attracting a crowd. All Trevor wanted to do was go home.

"You upset Trevor here, and that upset me. So apologise, now! Otherwise I'll break your worthless neck." Paul shook the bloke just to emphasise his point.

"What's goin' on here?" an older male voice announced.

Trevor turned to see a security guard approaching. “Oh, shit,” he groaned before closing his eyes. This wasn’t happening.

“I saw everything, officer,” an older man piped up. “This one,” he pointed his walking stick at the guy Paul still had hold of, “said something to these two,” he pointed at Paul and Trevor, “and then he grabbed hold of him as you can see.”

“Yes, I think you should let go of him now, sir.”

Paul did so, but kept a wary eye on the man.

“Now, what did you say that caused this man to attack you?”

The guy coughed a few times then said, “Nothing, I didn’t say nothing.”

“That’s a fucking lie,” Paul growled.

“Officer,” the pensioner spoke up again. “He called them various uh, names, said seeing them kissing made him feel sick.”

The security guard raised an eyebrow.

“Well, fuckin’ ‘ell, they should be locked up and fuckin’ castrated for bein’ out in—”

Paul attempted to lunge at the man again, but Trevor had anticipated him and held tight to his arm.

“That’s enough.” The security guard turned to Paul. “Sir, you should not have attacked this, uh, gentleman like tha—”

“No, he fuckin’ shouldn’t. I want the police calling. I’m gonna press charges,” the youth interjected.

“Certainly, sir,” the security guard, who must have been at least sixty, continued. “But when the case goes to court, do you want everyone to know that a gay man

overpowered you and your mates? Also this gentleman,” he pointed to Paul, “Could press charges against you for what you said to him. My guess is that you wouldn’t get very far.”

“Fuckin’ ‘ell, this is—”

“Don’t make it worse, son. You and your mates go on home now and we’ll hear no more about it.” Turning to Paul and Trevor, “That all right with you two?”

“Yes,” Trevor said immediately. Paul was much slower in his agreement.

“Good, now scram.” The security guard turned his back on the three homophobes.

“I hope all this hasn’t spoiled your evening.”

“Uh, no,” Trevor lied.

\* \* \* \*

The ride home was made in silence. Trevor had no idea what was going on inside Paul’s head. Normally he’d fill such uneasy silences with talk, but what could he say? Was Paul breaking up with him over this? But, another voice counselled, *he defended you, in public, how honourable was that?*

“Paul?” Trevor eventually said. He hoped his voice wasn’t wavering.

“I’m sorry,” Paul loosened his death grip on the steering wheel. “That was quite a night, wasn’t it?”

Trevor nodded, but then realised Paul wouldn’t have seen the gesture. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry if all that made you uncomfortable. But I couldn’t let those bastards say those things. It’s not right.”

“I’m used to it. But I know, it’s not right.”

Paul pulled up outside Trevor's house, but made no move to get out of the car.

"Won't you come in for a bit?"

Paul sighed, but Trevor took the undoing of his seatbelt as agreement.

"You hungry?" Trevor asked, getting nervous at Paul's quiet behaviour. "I could rustle you up some cheese on toast or—" The rest of his words were stopped by Paul crushing his lips to Trevor's, his tongue demanding entrance into Trevor's mouth.

Eventually withdrawing, Paul said, "I love you, Trevor Pierson. And I don't care what you say, while ever I'm around, people aren't gonna get away with calling you, us, names like that."

Trevor felt a warmth spread through him. Paul had identified them as an *us*, a *couple* in front of strangers, hostile strangers, too. The last barrier fell away. Trevor had fallen.

"Please, take me to bed."

Paul didn't seem shocked by Trevor's words, but pulled back and looked deep into his eyes. "You sure? 'Cause this is for real, you know. Once we take this step as far as I'm concerned there's no going back."

Trevor swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "Yes, I'm sure." He dashed away the moisture that was beginning to pool in his eyes. He wasn't going to cry at a time like this. Though tears might be appropriate, even warranted, he was determined not to come across as weak and overly-emotional.

\* \* \* \*

Trevor didn't want to wake up. He had had such a wonderful dream. He imagined he'd finally succumbed to Paul's unspoken requests and allowed him to take him to bed

and make love to him.

In the dream, Paul had shown him an amazing combination of strength and gentleness. All the while they had made love Paul had looked at him, touched him, whispered words of love and tenderness. Though there were no rose petals spread on the bed or candles lighting the room, it had been beautiful and romantic.

Turning over, Trevor winced. His arse ached. Awareness slowly began to blossom. It hadn't been a dream. Paul had really made love to him, had covered his face and neck with butterfly kisses. He hadn't imagined the words of love and passion that had been whispered to him as he was sent hurtling toward one of the most satisfying climaxes of his life.

Still keeping his eyes closed, Trevor reached out a hand to touch Paul, just to get some extra reassurance that it had really happened. But his hand found only cold sheets. Opening his eyes, Trevor saw that the other side of the bed had been slept in, but was empty.

"Must be in the bathroom," Trevor mumbled. Languidly he got out of bed. Yes, his bottom definitely was sore, but a comforting kind of sore. The partially open bathroom door opened further at his knock. Paul wasn't inside.

Puzzled and if he admitted it, slightly concerned, Trevor went downstairs, uncaring that he was still nude.

"Paul?"

There was no answer. He wasn't in the living room, nor in the kitchen. He went back upstairs. Maybe Paul had gone into his old room for some reason. But no, that room was bare, the bed stripped to the mattress. Trevor sat himself on the bed, telling



himself that there was a logical explanation for Paul's absence. There just had to be. He was determined not to allow the fears that were gnawing at him to take over. But the longer Trevor sat there, the more his fears ate away at his certainty.

Getting to his feet he went back into his bedroom, studiously avoiding looking at the unmade bed, sitting with his back to it. Picking up the phone he dialled Paul's mobile phone. It took a few seconds to connect, all the while Trevor telling himself he was fine, Paul was fine, their relationship was fine. The connection was made and he heard the ringing tone. Sitting there, gripping the receiver, he waited, and waited. Eventually the phone went to voicemail. He hung up.

Falling backward onto the bed, he closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

It was true what they said, the birds did seem to sing sweeter, the grass looked greener when you were in love. Paul tried to whistle, but the stupid grin on his face kept returning, making whistling impossible.

He always liked staying in bed late at the weekend, reading the paper, watching the telly or having a long slow wank. But that morning, waking up next to Trevor, he felt energized. He needed to get up and about. Thinking it would be nice to make breakfast for Trevor for once, God knows the man had cooked him enough meals, he dressed and kissed Trevor's shoulder.

"Just gonna go shopping, love. Back soon, okay?"

Trevor mumbled something unintelligible and burrowed deeper into the blankets. Paul couldn't help but smile at how cute Trevor looked with his ruffled hair and untroubled expression. Looking down at his lover, Paul's heart filled with joy. Here, in

this person, he'd found everything he'd been unwittingly seeking.

\* \* \* \*

Paul had forgotten how crowded the shops and supermarkets were on Saturday mornings.

He hoped he could get everything he wanted from Safeway, but their selection of flowers left a great deal to be desired. He wanted red roses, but the ones on sale looked as though they'd be dead within the week. So it was a case of trying to find a florist, a shop he hadn't visited in years. Finding one, he then had the problem of locating a parking spot. Eventually parking up, Paul picked his way along the crowded pavements, weaving between pedestrians and old people pushing or pulling their wheeled trolleys. Though the worst were mothers with pushchairs, who insisted on travelling in panzer formation, three abreast so they could carry on a conversation with their friends as they walked.

"A dozen long stemmed red roses, please," Paul said once he'd gained the cool and quiet interior of the shop.

"They're not cheap I'm afraid—" the young lady shopkeeper said.

"I know, but—" Paul blushed.

"Ah, I see." The woman smiled.

Paul felt his silly grin come back.

As she wrapped the flowers, the florist said, "She's a lucky lady. Wish someone would buy me red roses."

"Uh," Paul hesitated, then went on boldly. "Actually it's a him. And I'm the lucky one."

“Oh.” It was the florist’s turn to blush.

Paul had had plenty of practice at announcing that he was in love with another man. Trevor’s reaction had been the most crucial of course, and despite a few hairy moments, Trevor had stuck pretty much to the script that Gary had laid out.

Paul had worried about telling his mates on the cricket team. As he suspected Pete was great about it, even razzing him about how it had taken him long enough. Thommo’s reaction was anti-climactic. All he got by way of a reply was a grunt followed by, “Thought you were,” before he shuffled off.

Thinking about it as he walked back to the car, Paul realised Trevor had kind of paved the way with the cricket team, therefore another gay player was hardly big news. Paul’s step faltered, but soon picked up again. If loving Trevor meant he was gay, then that’s what he was. It was only a stupid label.

The flowers safely stowed in the boot of his car, Paul headed back to Safeway, thinking how stupid he had been to not get the other things he needed while he was in there earlier. The radio was playing some golden oldie by a singer his mum liked. Paul started listening to the words and they spoke to him.

He remembered the previous night, how Trevor had felt in his arms. Strong, yet needful. That’s what he liked most about his lover. How he was so determined to be his own man, but there was that indefinable vulnerability about him that Paul couldn’t resist.

He’d been nervous, God, had he been nervous. Never having done anything sexual with a man before, hadn’t even seen another guy’s hard dick up close. Trevor had been warm, responsive, reassuring. Made Paul feel special, strong, protective. In the end things hadn’t been that different from sex with a woman. No, that wasn’t true.

There was something extra that seemed to make all the difference.

An angry car horn behind him brought Paul back to the present. The light had turned green but he hadn't noticed.

Since his previous visit, the supermarket car park had filled up and Paul could only find a spot in a far flung corner. He'd planned what to buy, champagne, though he knew it would have to be chilled in the fridge before they could drink it. Strawberries, he knew Trevor loved strawberries.

After queuing at the check-out, having his few purchases scanned, Paul was out of the building and half way across the car park before he realised he'd forgotten the cream. He tried to remember if Trevor had any, but thought he best play safe and get some. Coming to a halt, he debated whether he should put his purchases in the car and then go back to the supermarket, or take his bag back inside. Fearing they'd want to make him pay a second time for what he'd just bought, Paul thought it better to go on to his car.

Who knew they sold so many types of cream? He wasn't much into desserts, so had never paid that much attention to the stuff before. Double, whipping, ready whipped. Yeah, that one would do, save him having to whip it himself. Armed with his purchase, Paul joined the check-out queue again. The woman in front queried a buy-one-get-one-free offer, the till operator summoned an assistant who went off to check. Paul tried not to be impatient. But he wanted to get back to Trevor. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was well past nine and Trevor was bound to be awake.

Finally the assistant came back and the shopper decided she didn't want the tin of salmon or whatever it was after all. Paul was at the head of the queue now.

“Want any help with your packin’?” the till operator asked, sounding bored.

“Uh, I think I can manage, thanks,” Paul said, looking down at the lone tub of cream.

He paid, crammed the till receipt in his pocket and left the store.

“Fuck!” Paul said when he arrived at his car, and discovered he didn’t have his keys on him. Peering in through the window he spotted them on the front passenger seat. “Bugger it!” Paul slammed his fist on the car roof. What was the best plan of action? He had a spare set of car keys at home, but that would mean getting a taxi there and back and...No, he rejected the idea. He realised calling out the AA would be the best bet. But once again his pockets didn’t yield what he sought. Another look through the window revealed his mobile phone lying on the floor in the front passenger foot well. “Fucking hell” was added to the litany of oaths.

Trudging back to the supermarket, Paul dug in his jeans pocket for some change for the pay phone in the entrance. At least it hadn’t been vandalised.

“Is there a child or a pet in the car, sir?” the efficient and mechanical sounding telephonist asked.

“No, why?”

“I’m afraid then it’s a lower priority.”

“Shit. Oh, sorry. It’s just—” The now out and definitely proud Paul didn’t think it would serve any useful purpose to tell the woman that he needed to get back to his boyfriend as they had only had sex for the first time the previous night.

Paul had been feeding coins into the hungry maw of the pay phone, the last of his credit was about to expire when the operator told him someone would be with him

as soon as possible.

“Thanks.” Then the call was cut off.

Paul wanted to call Trevor, let him know where he was and that everything was all right, but he would have to get some more change first. Swearing in frustration he got a disapproving stare from an old lady who was waiting to use the phone. Paul headed straight for the tills for change.

“I’m sorry, but you have to buy something.”

Paul swore, but this time under his breath. He reached for a packet of chewing gum and slapped it down on the rubber conveyer belt. “And no, I don’t need any help with my packing.” Just to be awkward he pulled from his wallet the highest denomination note he could find. He wished he had a fifty, but had to settle for a twenty.

Armed with his change, he left the tills.

“Hey, you forgot your chewing gum,” The assistant called after him. Paul wanted to tell her where to stuff it, but chose to just carry on walking.

Back in the entrance the old lady was jabbering away on the phone, when she saw Paul she turned her back to him and continued talking. Paul waited, but the woman didn’t seem in any hurry to end the call. As she wasn’t putting money in the phone, Paul assumed the other party had called her back. “Just great!” he growled.

After what seemed an age, Paul looked at his watch. He decided he couldn’t wait there any longer as he didn’t want to miss the breakdown service.

\* \* \* \*

Finally, he was on his way back to Trevor’s. A quick shopping trip to buy some little luxuries had taken over two hours.

Hauling his hard won purchases up the garden path, Paul thought about knocking on the door, but remembered Trevor had given him his key back the other day, and now they were officially boyfriends, Paul thought it'd be okay to use his key.

"Sorry it took me so long, you wouldn't believe—" Paul turned into the kitchen, and froze. Trevor was laid on the floor with his head in the oven.

He didn't stop to think, he just acted. "Nooooo!" Dropping the flowers and his plastic bag of groceries, Paul dived for Trevor's ankles and pulled.

"What the—" Trevor sat up. His face was covered in dried tear tracks.

"You stupid fool." Paul shook Trevor's shoulders. "Why, I've only just found you, why'd you—" Paul pulled Trevor's smaller body to his chest and squeezed. His heart was beating so hard and he couldn't catch his breath.

Trevor seemed to recover first. "Where've you been?"

Paul loosened his grip and held Trevor at arms length. "I told you." Paul swallowed. "I told you I was going shopping to get us something nice for breakfast. Look!" On hands and knees Paul crawled to the plastic bag and started pulling out its contents. "Apart from the roses, I bought chocolates, strawberries, champagne." Paul was almost shouting. "Don't you fucking trust me? Even after all I said and did you thought about killing yourself?"

"What?" Trevor looked at him in shock then a light bulb seemed to go on in his head. He began laughing.

"I don't see what's so funny."

Trevor shook his head and tried to calm himself. "It's true part of me thought you'd left me. But then I remembered all you'd said, and, though I still wasn't absolutely

sure, I thought I'd give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Then why?" Paul gestured at the oven.

"I was cleaning it." Trevor held up his hands. He was wearing rubber gloves. How come he hadn't noticed them earlier? "And anyway, the oven's electric."

Paul sat back on his heels and realised he'd made a total prat of himself. "Oh, God."

Trevor pulled off the gloves and held out his arms. "Com'ere." Paul gratefully sank into the embrace. "We're a right pair, aren't we?"

Paul nodded. "It's just when I saw you, I—" Paul squeezed Trevor. "I thought I'd lost you, and just after I'd found you. You're mine, now and forever, and don't you ever fucking forget it." He cupped Trevor's face and kissed him long and deep.

"Yours."

"Forever," Paul reminded.

"Forever."

THE END



## *ABOUT DREW HUNT*

Having read all the decent free fiction on the net Drew could find, he set out to try his hand at writing something himself. Fed up reading about characters who were super-wealthy, impossibly handsome, and incredibly well-endowed, Drew determined to make his characters real and believable.

Drew lives a quiet life in the north of England with his cat. Someday he hopes to meet the kind of man he writes about.



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