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Competitive Nature

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

COMPETITIVE NATURE

Justine Elyot

Dedication

To Charlotte Stein.

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Wonderwall: Liam Gallagher

You Are Not Alone: Michael Jackson

Missing: Everything But The Girl

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Chapter One

The old place still smelt the same, like over-boiled vegetables sealed in varnish, and the zigzag of the parquet was like an old friend, but there were different, newer, more golden names on the Honours Board now. Hers was still there, if you looked hard enough... '1995–Head Girl – Elyssa Bradshaw'. The names that accompanied hers still gave her that little thump-thump of the heart when she didn't look away quickly enough. 'Head Boy – Jay Marriott'. Oh dear, what a blow that had been to 'Captain of Sports – Patrick Robertson'. At the time, she'd thought their strange friendship would never recover. And in a way, it hadn't.

"Do you think Jay and Patrick will come?" asked her old friend Juliet, helping her lug the punch bowl across the hall to a white-clothed table. "Do you still hear from them?"

"Oh, no. I haven't heard from them since, um, I think it must be at least ten years. I used to see Jay a bit, what with going to the same university, but we kind of drifted. You know how it is. Life gets in the way."

"It sure does. Let's not let it get in the way again, eh?"

Elyssa smiled. She would not have guessed that Juliet, the raver of her year, would be an interior designer and mother of four at the age of thirty-three. Juliet, though, would probably have accurately predicted Elyssa's path in life, she realised with an odd jolt of depression. Single, career-focused, travelling the globe from conference to conference, unable to commit to even a cat – it had been exactly what she'd wanted at twenty-one, but now...no point getting despondent. Life had got in the way of...life. That was what it did.

"No. I mean, everyone has email now. Facebook. No excuse to lose touch again."

"I'm holding you to that."

"Do you remember our first day?" Elyssa looked around at the handsome, spacious hall, taking herself back to the shy eleven-year-old hiding behind her fringe in the welcome assembly. "I thought this place was so huge. So scary."

"I remember old Vickers asking that question about how many pupils there were in the whole school. And Jay and Patrick's hands going up like a shot. Then Patrick got sent out for elbowing Jay in the ribs when he got chosen to answer."

Elyssa laughed, but there was a wistful pang behind the laughter, closing up her throat.
“And they were like that for the next seven years.”

“You were just as bad.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Oh, come on! You tore up that history essay you wrote when Patrick got a better mark.”

“I didn’t! Did I? Oh, actually, I think I did. God, we were donkeys, weren’t we?”

“Asses! But clever ones.”

“That’s an oxymoron. I’m more of an Oxford moron.”

“Morons don’t get into Oxford.”

“I don’t know. I did. Anyway, let’s change the subject! Did you or did you not snog Robbie Whitman at the Year Eleven disco? You never did confess.”

* * * *

Cackling reminiscence occupied the reunited friends for the next half hour, until the Hall was ready, the lights dimmed, and the top tracks of 1995 burbled discreetly from the disco unit in the corner.

“I just need to check my make-up,” said Elyssa, flitting out of the double doors.

Behind her, Liam Gallagher’s voice sang the opening lines to *Wonderwall*, words that always transported her back to the Sixth Form Common Room. *Yes*, she thought, freshening her lipstick in the ladies’ toilets. She really should have realised what she had to do by now. A memory of Patrick dancing with her on the beach after the Leavers’ barbecue, his cheek to hers, singing words that implied he considered her his saviour, sent a shiver through her and she held the cap and the lipstick apart, staring motionless into the mirror for as long as it took for the song to finish.

Gathering her strength, she capped the lipstick, shoved it back in her handbag and stepped briskly back into the hall, knocking a cup of punch from the hand of...

“Jay!”

“Elyssa!”

For a moment, careless of the spilled punch, they stared at one another while Juliet sighed and went to find some kitchen roll. He looked...almost...exactly the same, lanky and

high-cheekboned, with brown hair flopping everywhere and heavy-framed rectangular spectacles that might even be the pair he wore to sit his A-Levels. School uniform had never suited him. There had always been a Bohemian dandy waiting to burst out of the regulation blazer and stripy tie, and now he was embracing that side of himself in a baggy brown velvet suit and floral shirt.

Jay was first to recover. "How are you? What are you up to these days?"

"I stayed on at Oxford, went into research. I do some writing, a bit of teaching." Elyssa, always a tad more modest than her old friends, underplayed her stellar success in the world of academia. "How about you?"

"I'm well, thanks. I'm, uh, I do rocket science. It isn't brain surgery."

Elyssa laughed at the quip and poured herself a paper cup of punch. "Do you still play the guitar? Chess? All that?"

"Yeah, all that."

There was a silence, a tension, incongruously overlaid by Michael Jackson singing, *You Are Not Alone*.

"You hear anything from Patrick these days?" asked Elyssa.

"Oh, I wondered how long it would take for him to come up. What was that? Eight seconds?" Jay checked his watch, and Elyssa wasn't sure whether or not to laugh. Something told her that Jay might not be joking. "No. Not really. Not since...you know. God, how pathetic was that? Seven years of friendship. We should have had our fucking heads knocked together."

"I would have done it."

"It was you we were locking horns over."

"Well, you shouldn't have. It was a shame."

"Yeah." Jay looked her up and down, his eyes glinting behind the lenses of his glasses.

"A shame neither of us won the battle as well."

"I'm not a prize."

"You certainly looked like one. Sorry, shouldn't use past tense there."

Elyssa could not shake the awkwardness she felt. She wanted to throw her arms around him, to take him into the middle of the floor and dance, to get tipsy with him and laugh all night about the stupid behaviour of their schooldays, but something prevented her from making any kind of spontaneous gesture. Something she couldn't quite fathom.

"Are you...with anyone?" he asked.

Oh! That was it! She needed, really needed very much, to know Jay's status.

"No, no, not right now." She paused, hoping her question would come out in the casual tone she intended. "You?"

"Tonight?" Jay lowered his spectacles, peering over the rim at her.

"No...just...you know. Generally."

"I go to bed each night with the best lover in town."

"Jay! So you're single."

"Well, if you really are interested, I'm between dalliances."

Elyssa snorted. Jay had always been a romantic butterfly, sucking the sweet nectar from one flower then moving on to the next. He had cut a dashing swathe through most of the more sensitive Sixth Form girls until...until...that thing.

"You've never had a serious relationship?"

"I hate that word. Relationship. It's so official. You have to get yourself properly documented and stamped. You can't be a lover anymore, you have to be a *partner*. The first girl who introduced me as her partner never saw me again."

"You're nobody's partner, then?"

"No. Not since you and Pat, anyway. We were proper partners. Pardners. Like in the old west. Hip young gunslingers."

"Who were always trying to get one over on each other."

"You're saying that as if you think it's a bad thing. Competition breeds excellence. Ambition leads to success. A stranger is a networking tool you haven't yet met."

"Jay!" Elyssa was not as scandalised as she sounded. She remembered, quite fondly, all the outrageous aphorisms he used to come out with in the Sixth Form Common Room, showering them upon his adoring audience from the least-wrecked armchair.

"What about you, Bradshaw?" he asked, his voice lowering to that broken, dark chocolate tone that used to drive all the girls into his arms. "You haven't signed yourself over to some undeserving wretch, have you?"

"I'm single," she smiled, then she gasped at a tap on her shoulder and another voice from the past in her ear.

"You broke my heart," it said.

"Patrick!" Elyssa squealed.

This time she couldn't help herself. She accepted his grizzly bear hug, squeezing her eyes shut and enjoying the keenly remembered strength of his arms. He hadn't been the cricket and rugby captain for nothing. He was shorter than Jay – to his disgust at the age of fifteen, when his rival had overtaken him in height – but broader, more muscular and conventionally handsome with blond hair and a wicked smile.

"Jay," he said finally, with a formal little nod, once he'd squashed the life out of Elyssa and left her gasping for breath.

"Patrick. Good to see you. How did medical school work out?"

"Not bad, mate," he said, reaching over to shake Jay's hand. "I kept it up and now I'm doing brain surgery. It's not rocket science."

Elyssa, catching both of their wary eyes, burst into a peal of laughter.

"Oh my God. You two. You just haven't changed. Fifteen years and you're still – look. What's done is done. Can we enjoy ourselves tonight? Just for old times' sake? Can we all be friends again?"

Jay and Patrick unconsciously squared up, thrusting back shoulders, puffing out chests, Jay in his floral shirt and Patrick in his rugby top.

"We're grown men," said Patrick.

You got that right, thought Elyssa, resisting the temptation to lick her lips.

"We're gentlemen," said Jay. "And scholars. Including Elyssa."

"Is that sorted then?" she asked, hearing the opening chords of a favourite song. "Let's dance."

She grabbed a hand each and pulled them onto the slippery parquet, where they bobbed along to, *Missing*, by Everything But The Girl, until thirst drove them to the punch bowl once more.

* * * *

Much later, after hours of anecdotes and legends and jokes and catching up, the three of them sat out on the little grassy bank that had been 'their' spot of the playing field from Year Seven, taking in the summer night air and enjoying the novelty of each other's company. Elyssa lay back on the furred daisies and buttercups, and looked up at the moon.

"So we've all won the competition," she said dreamily. "We all win at life. Don't we?"

"All except one aspect," said Patrick gloomily.

Elyssa had heard from mutual friends that he'd divorced, unhappily, two years previously after rushing into marriage with a cardiologist.

"I never looked at another girl in that way after you crushed me so spectacularly," said Jay, his tone as droll as ever, but seeming to mask some genuine emotion.

"I did not *crush* you," said Elyssa. "I didn't do anything to either of you."

"Yes, and that's the problem!" exclaimed Patrick. "We wanted you to!"

"You *both* wanted me to," clarified Elyssa. "Thereby hung the dilemma."

Jay and Patrick both turned to her, looking down into her upturned face.

"Dilemma?" said Jay. "We always thought you didn't fancy either of us. That's what you told us!"

"Of course that's what I told you," said Elyssa, wondering if that last glass of wine had been such a good idea. It seemed to have stopped the discretion part of her brain and was letting all this stuff flood out without monitoring. "I had to tell you that, didn't I? Unless I wanted you to be at each other's throats. If I chose one of you, I had to reject the other. If I chose one of you, the other was doomed to be a third wheel, rolling along in our wake. If I chose one of you...the whole thing collapsed. I just couldn't do it."

The air became heavy with reflection. Elyssa was aware that her words might have changed the complexion of everything for her two former suitors. Both men had hinted at the remains of sadness, regret, disappointment, but slipping through that fog Elyssa sensed a possibility, one that almost seemed too difficult to name. It sharpened into ever more distinct focus until, like a thought bubble hovering over their three heads, preparing to latch itself on to them, it couldn't be ignored.

"So if you had chosen..." said Patrick slowly.

"Don't! Don't ask me! It's impossible. I loved you both. Still love you...love you both..." Elyssa thought she had better shut up. This was getting more and more difficult to laugh off and take back by the second.

"Still? Love us both?" Jay didn't seem about to allow any taking back of sentiments. He was sitting bolt upright, his silky hair endearingly rumpled.

Where Jay led, Elyssa knew Patrick would inevitably follow, and attempt to overtake, like a rat up a drain. Almost before his old adversary had the words out, she could see the cogs turning in Patrick's head.

"Elyssa, would you go out to dinner with me?" the brain surgeon gabbled, apparently in such a rush to get his bid in first that the words were almost unintelligible.

"No, with me!" exclaimed Jay indignantly. "Fuck it, Patrick, you knew I was going to ask her out! I had the idea first!"

"I said the words!"

"I've been planning this for months!"

"I've been planning it for years!"

"Stop!" Elyssa did not know whether to laugh or cry. She held up a hand, forcing Jay and Patrick to retreat from their imminent clash. "This is crazy. I'll go out with both of you. Are you both here for a few days?"

They nodded.

"Sister's birthday on Wednesday," mumbled Jay, while Patrick said something about catching up with his rugby club friends.

"Right. So that means I can't go out with Jay on Wednesday. Tomorrow's Sunday. Jay, tomorrow I am at your disposal. Patrick, I will go out with you on Monday. All details of activities are completely up to you. Surprise me. Excite me. Do whatever it is you feel you have to do with me. If I can make a choice by Tuesday...I will."

"Are you serious?" Patrick was staring, blue eyes popping.

"Don't ask me that. It's a never-to-be-repeated offer. When I wake up tomorrow, I'll undoubtedly regret it, but you have the right to hold me to it. Just now, right at this moment, I'm deadly serious. I couldn't split up your friendship when we were eighteen, but now that we're thirty-three, and the friendship has faded...well. What's stopping us?"

Jay and Patrick, recovering from momentary shock, met each other's eyes with grim determination. Patrick, ever the sportsman, was first to hold out a hand.

"Fair play, old friend," he said. "And may the best man win."

Elyssa knew that Patrick was sincere in the sentiment, but she had her doubts as to Jay's commitment to sporting values. He had never been one to shirk a dirty trick or two in the pursuit of love or high marks, and, while fifteen years might have mellowed him somewhat, she could not imagine anything short of a personality transplant changing that. She assumed he would take full advantage of his pole position in this little contest.

"Oh, the best man will win, Robertson," he said airily. "You can count on that."

* * * *

"Bloody, bloody hell." Elyssa pulled a face at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were watery and her cheeks florid. She had definitely taken too much of that punch, but her mother's full English breakfast still smelt as good as ever, and a few chugs of hot, sweet tea would put everything right.

Or rather, almost everything.

"Bloody, *bloody* hell," she repeated, more forcefully, cringing inwardly at the memory of the stupid challenge she had made last night. Was she truly going to go through with it? Wouldn't it be better to eat up and creep away early, pretending some work crisis or other? Her parents would be disappointed, since she didn't see nearly enough of them these days, but at least ritual humiliation and awkwardness might be avoided. Perhaps Jay and Patrick had both been as drunk as she had, and wouldn't remember. Or would be too embarrassed to...

These thoughts persisted throughout breakfast, but Elyssa was only halfway through her second sausage when the cheery bleep of her mobile intruded into the conversation she was having with her mother about family matters.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" her father wondered, lowering the Sunday paper.

"Oh, it won't be anything important. They can leave a message. Probably a work thing."

"On a Sunday?"

"There's no day of rest for the wicked," she joked, but her heart was racing fit to break the sound barrier. There was no way she could speak to Jay or Patrick just now. No way on earth. The phone silenced and she took a deep breath, gripping her fork tightly to stop it slipping through her trembling fingers.

The third time the tune rang, she couldn't fob her parents off.

"Okay, okay, I'm going to answer it," she huffed, retrieving it from her coat pocket and retreating to the farthest recesses of the living room, where she couldn't be heard from the kitchen.

"Elyssa! Did I wake you up? God, I've wanted to say that for years."

"Jay. Good morning." The sound of his voice had tightened her chest, making her greeting sound breathier than she'd intended, and she felt a rush of shocking desire for the low-toned lothario.

"Listen, are you up, seriously?"

"Just having breakfast."

"Ah, okay, that puts brunch out of the picture. Never mind, there is a Plan B. And a Plan C. And a Plan D. I could go on."

"No, that's fine. So...?"

"So, wait for the signal."

"What? The signal? What signal?"

"You'll know it when you hear it. Wait and watch, my dear Elyssa."

"Are you –?"

But he'd ended the call.

Elyssa wanted to feel cross and put out, but instead, she felt strung taut with exhilaration and curiosity. What the hell did Jay have planned? If she knew him at all, it would be something totally unpredictable, and possibly dangerous. Deciding what to wear was going to be the least of her worries.

She played it safe with jeans and a pretty cotton blouse, clipping up her mane of tawny hair and pulling on canvas deck shoes for a casual, summery look. She was *not* going to give him the impression she was making a big effort for him. The big effort was not hers to make. And yet, something at the core of her did want to pull out the stops for him, make him desire her with a fierce burn, make him unable to forget her.

"Play it cool," she chided herself. "If he wants you, he wants you. No extra coat of lipstick is going to make a difference. Look, Elyssa, you only live once, and you haven't even started yet. You want him. Take him."

Her internal pep talk was interrupted by the clear, clean jingle of a bicycle bell. She popped her perfume spray back in her handbag, peered out through the net curtain in her childhood bedroom and emitted something between a laugh and a scream. Jay was leaning nonchalantly on the wall, holding up a tandem bicycle by the handlebars, not even facing the house but staring off towards the end of the street.

Elyssa galloped down the stairs and flew through the front door, shouting a hurried goodbye to her parents.

“Jay!”

He turned around, peering over his rock-star cool shades and allowing a slow smile to light his features. “Ah. Madam. Your conveyance awaits you.” He bowed exaggeratedly, resting the bicycle against the wall, and stepping forward to take Elyssa’s arm.

“I have never been on one of these before, and it’s years since I rode a bike!”

“You’ll get the hang of it. It’s like riding a bike.”

Elyssa clicked her tongue and lightly slapped his forearm. “Come on then. Where are you taking me in this fairytale carriage?”

“It’s a bit of a magical mystery tour. I wonder if you can guess en route?”

Jay slid a long leg over the front crossbar and looked over his shoulder, grinning at Elyssa as she tried to get comfortable on the unfamiliar machine, still confounded by its appearance.

“I’m sure we’re going to topple this thing,” she said nervously. “What’s in those baskets? Are they heavy?”

“Heavy enough. Got your feet on the pedals? Are you ready? Hang on tight.”

It took some wobbling, some squealing, some lightly grazed shins and a lot of laughter, but eventually they set forth, sailing down the slope and out of town on to the verdant country lanes that surrounded the place where they’d grown up. Elyssa tried to guess their eventual destination, but every time she thought she had it, Jay took an unexpected turn. Over bridges and through tunnels they went, alongside the railway line for a stretch, then through a deep woodland. Just when Elyssa felt sure her knees were going to seize up forever, Jay swept around a corner into the grounds of the ruined abbey they had often visited as teenagers.

“I didn’t know you could get here that way!” Elyssa remarked. “I didn’t know it was so near to the forest.”

“I have the map of this county permanently seared on my brain,” said Jay, applying the brakes and leaping off the bike, helping Elyssa to follow him.

“You miss living here?” Elyssa almost staggered on alighting, her legs were like runny jelly.

Jay caught her, bringing her close to his side with a lightning-quick arm.

“Yeah, of course. It’s a beautiful place. I miss everything about it. Can you stand?” He chuckled, steadying Elyssa with a hand on her shoulder while he unloaded the baskets from

the tandem. "Let's go and sit down. We're not as young as we were. Our old joints are creaking."

They found a spot that they both remembered, a grassy knoll shaded by the overhanging section of ruined stone wall, where long, mournful windows with pointed arches let shafts of sunlight through to pierce the shadows.

"I came up here," said Jay, laying a cloth and spreading himself out on it beside Elyssa, "the night of the Leavers' barbecue."

"Oh." Elyssa felt a pang at the memory of that night. "That's where you went."

"Don't say you missed me."

"I did. I wondered where you were."

"You were busy in Patrick's arms, I believe."

"It was one dance, Jay. God, I can't believe you're still so...bitter about all that."

"I'm not bitter!"

Elyssa arched an eyebrow, intending to convey her disappointment at Jay's dwelling on their youthful jealousies and imagined slights.

"I was just so in love with you. I couldn't stay and watch."

"You daft thing." Elyssa stroked a strand of hair that had strayed behind the lenses of his sunglasses, brushing it out of his eye. "You don't believe nothing else happened with Patrick that night, do you?"

"If you say so, I believe you. Patrick told me different, though."

Elyssa gasped. "He didn't!"

Jay covered his face with his hands, groaning as if in pain. "It's such a disaster," he wailed. "Everything could have been different without the stupid competitive bollocks! Why couldn't we just be normal?"

"What's normal?" Elyssa's wry remark was taken seriously by Jay, who put a finger on her lips, took off his sunglasses and held her eyes in a steadfast gaze until she had to stop smiling and remember to keep breathing.

"Kissing," he said. "I think kissing is normal. When two people fancy the pants off each other. Want to try it out?"

Elyssa would have made some jokey comment about him being a fast mover if only she hadn't been struck dumb by the serious intensity of his stare. Instead, she found herself nodding mutely, letting him take her face in his long-fingered hand, holding as still as silence

itself while he moved towards her, that slow, inevitable glide and bob that ended with lips on lips. Oh, the warmth and the perfect fit of it. His mouth was the right one after all these years, feeling just the way she had dreamt it would each time she had kissed her own arm in adolescent practice sessions. She was so entangled in the sensation and the emotion that she made no attempt to resist when he laid her gently down and hovered above her on his elbows, deepening his reach, keeping her lips parted to accept his tongue while his fingertips massaged her scalp, setting a wild butterfly-riot of desire alight across her body. He smelt and felt and sounded and *was* so wantable, touchable, kissable that she wanted it all to go and on. His light cotton shirt against hers, cool on her skin. His knee finding a space for itself between her denim-clad thighs, their belt buckles clicking and locking together as they began to shift and grind a little under the lascivious direction of their starved kisses.

It was like being a teenager again, when the kiss, itself, was sufficient and need not — perhaps should not — lead anywhere. Jay and Elyssa sucked the sweet nectar from each other, the closeness they had finally achieved putting all of Elyssa's lonely nights into glorious context. Elyssa, pushing her tongue past Jay's teeth, was beginning to understand that this would not, after all, be enough. She was a grown woman now, and she knew where kissing could lead. She was not sure it was a good idea, and yet on another level, she was *so* sure that it was. The weight of Jay upon her pelvis, the brush of his heated skin on hers, the unmistakable lump that pressed into her groin, all these were pushing her forward, awakening desire that was entirely adult in nature. She knew she was wet, the damp transferring in patches to the rough denim of her jeans, and she was letting Jay nudge her thighs ever farther apart as they continued the ardent lip-lock. If the ghosts of monks or nuns walked this ground, they were getting quite a sinful spectacle.

It was the thought of those ghosts that finally prompted Elyssa to shy away and end the kiss, staring up at Jay's flushed face and clouded eyes in near-consternation.

"Oh, God," he said. "Am I going too far? Too fast? Shit, I had so much planned before this was supposed to happen. Picnic, champagne, a boat on the lake. We can still do those, can't we?"

Elyssa was touched by his self-flagellatory tone. It was clear that this was important to him.

"It truly is like being eighteen again," he moaned. "My hormones have gone into overdrive. I'm like a six-foot-four mountain of testosterone."

Elyssa put a reassuring hand in his tumbling hair. "Believe me, Jay, the oestrogen is doing its damndest here, too. It's okay. I'm just...overwhelmed. And a bit...well, this is, like, sacred ground, isn't it? Might not be the place..."

Jay's face lit with wicked purpose. "Oh! So it's the place, not the time?"

"The time is fine," she confessed, biting her lip, pained to be so bold.

Jay knelt up, straightening his back, and took a long view down towards the lake, shading his forehead with a hand. The sun was strong now, heading for its midday zenith. "The lake has some secluded spots," he mentioned offhandedly. "And I believe the ground there is as profane as it gets. Profane ground is what we're after, I think."

"Obscene ground, even," giggled Elyssa, sitting up. Mention of the picnic and champagne had made her hungry for more than sex. The only question was, what order should they do it in?

"Or there are some hotels in town. Would you rather...?"

"No. The shores of the lake sound good to me. As long as we stay away from the bit with all the fishermen."

"I know the perfect spot."

"I'm not getting back on that bike," she warned him, shaking her legs, which were beginning to ache.

"That's not the kind of ride I have in mind," he told her, taking the basket in one hand and her arm in the other. "Come on. Last one down has to strip off and jump in the lake."

Chapter Two

Elyssa, substantially shorter-legged than her prospective lover, lost that competition and, once they had found the perfect sheltered bank, overhung by trees that obscured them from the rest of the shores, she wriggled out of her jeans and blouse and kicked off her deck shoes.

"Are you coming in?" she asked breathlessly, padding barefoot down to the reeds, feeling the soft, warm mud squelch between her toes.

"Er, excuse me." Jay held up a lean finger and lowered his sunglasses to the bridge of his nose, glaring at her with mock-severity. "I think I said, 'strip off.' You're still clothed."

"Jay!" she whispered. This was real. Actually happening. Jay expected her to get naked in front of him. "What if...?"

"Nobody will come here. Nobody except you and me, that is." His lip curled, irresistibly devilish. "Now get those undies off and get in the water, because I'm coming to get you."

Elyssa squeaked and, crouching in the reeds, removed her bra and knickers, escaping backwards into the water, which was chilly but not unbearable, watching Jay throw off his jeans and shirt to reveal that long-limbed body, still pale but freckled and without a pinch of spare flesh on it. He had been, she recalled, self-conscious about it as a youth, and had loathed sports and games as a consequence. But now he seemed to care nothing at all for his excess height and leanness. He was confident, comfortable in his skin, and so very much more attractive for it.

She lay back and floated, letting the water lap over her skin, basking in the dappled sun that penetrated the willow branches. She felt so free, it seemed ridiculous that she had never done this before. She thought back to all those years in Oxford, bumping into Jay on the street or in the pub, and never trying to rekindle their awkward youthful passion. She must have been stupid.

The splash of his entrance into the water reminded her that she was supposed to be trying to elude him, and she darted off, letting waves ripple in her wake. But there was no

way she was going to allow herself to escape, and it was with a delighted shriek of laughter that she felt his arm grab her around the waist and pull her back against his chest.

"Mmm, look at you, all wet and naked," he murmured into her dripping ear. "What shall I do with you, hmm?"

"You're the rocket scientist, you tell me," said Elyssa, which made him laugh and swallow her smart mouth in an all-conquering kiss.

"I think showing beats telling," he told her, coming up for air, his hands all over her beneath the surface of the water, snaking down her back to her bottom, then up her belly to her breasts, like water creepers. "God, you're gorgeous. Why did I leave it this long?"

"I've been wondering the same thing." She lifted a leg to wrap it around his hip, pressing her exposed centre against his crotch. The invitation was honest and unmistakable, and he kissed her again, squeezing those mounds of flesh he'd found, holding her in a tight octopus grip.

The water streamed around their bodies and through the gaps between their flesh, warming in the sun. Jay pulled Elyssa down so that they both knelt on the lakebed, the surface lapping around Jay's chest and Elyssa's collarbone. Beneath the sunlit blue-green ripples and the floating fronds of lakeweed, the lovers were free to do as they pleased with each other, and they did, causing waves to roil around them until the water was choppy.

"Perhaps we should get back on the bank," whispered Jay. "I've heard of drowning in passion, but I don't really want to know if it can happen literally."

Elyssa kissed his neck, lingering over the soft flesh, wanting to consume every inch of it. "You're sure nobody can see?"

"I've been around this lake from every angle, and I'm sure this is the blindest spot on the shore."

"Oh, so you've done your research then."

"Of course. Come here." He gathered her against him and strode with her out of the lake, emerging onto the shore like a triumphant naked Trident with his captive mermaid.

She was tipped unceremoniously but gently onto the picnic rug, spread in the dappled shade of a clump of weeping willows, and there she lay, looking up at her rocket scientist. She could see how he was very much like the supercilious, glamorous eighteen-year-old Jay he used to be, and yet, how very different. Some of the youthful arrogance was gone, replaced by self-deprecation, almost humility – and yet the wit and charm remained, in a

more polished form. Now, as he dropped down beside her, blinking myopically in the sunlight yet still looking as intensely focused as any predator, she could see that he had real desire for her, way beyond the need to win a foolish contest. She hoped he saw that reflected in her.

His mouth hovered over hers for a moment, then it zoomed downwards, to the base of her throat, and began to kiss a trail between her breasts and beneath their mounds, careless of the rivulets of lake water that streamed from them down her body and onto the blanket. He buried his face in the soft curve of her belly, rubbing his nose gleefully until she had to push him away in ticklish protest.

"Lower then," he ordained, and his mouth was at the triangle of her pubis, his fingers untangling the short matt curls of hair, parting them to reveal the victor's spoils — Elyssa's offered sex, waiting for his attentions, ready and prepared for him. He tested its readiness with fingers and tongue, so that Elyssa squirmed and sighed deeply, pushing upwards to beg for more, which Jay happily bestowed.

Crouching over her from the side, one palm flat beside her hip while the fingers of his other hand plundered and explored, Jay feasted on her fattened clit like a man possessed. He licked and tongued her as if this was his ultimate end, as if it gave him as much pleasure as it gave her, which made the sensation even more piquant. Eventually, almost unbearably stimulated, she came once then twice on to his enthusiastic tongue until she felt exhausted and had to beg him to stop.

He raised his head, his face all lazy wicked smiles, and reached into the picnic basket, where a pack of condoms nestled amongst the strawberries.

"Stop, eh? I thought you were just getting into that," protested Jay.

"You certainly were," she panted, watching him sheathe himself, both excited and scared at the prospect of what would inevitably happen next.

This is it. Jay and I are going to fuck. Will it be as good as the fantasies? In the fantasies, for some reason, Jay had always been wearing a burgundy smoking jacket and drinking brandy prior to the Grand Seduction, so in that respect, it wouldn't be at all the same. But she had a presentiment that it would be just as good, if not better, this way.

"What do you expect? I've wanted to get a taste of you since I was a schoolboy. And you're even more delicious than I thought. Salt and sweet and creamy."

He rolled on top of her, elbows clamping her arms to her sides, knees together in the haven of her thighs, and he silenced her response with a long, distracting kiss until she felt the tip of him at her entrance, nudging, jostling, ready for the off.

He raised his face long enough to croon, "All mine now, Elyssa, all mine for the taking. God, I've waited long enough for this."

"So have I," she whispered, then he was inside her, his face screwed up and contorted with shocked ecstasy before it dropped back down to take her lips once more.

He felt so much a part of her, moving slowly and precisely within her tight, slippery channel, trying his utmost to keep the pace slow and sensual instead of racing for the finish as the teenage Jay might have done. She knew it must be difficult for him to hold back, and she put her arms around his neck and held him close, wanting his skin to join with hers just as they were joined at their roots. They could be one, a union so perfect that it could never be broken apart. He rocked back and forth in small, exact movements, grinding a little with his pelvis on each thrust, then he released her mouth, stretching his neck back so that the thin silver chain he wore around his neck dangled and brushed Elyssa's chin with each push farther into her.

"I've got you," he said, almost savagely, seemingly to himself. "I've got you now." He lifted her thighs, giving him a deeper angle of penetration, and she held them up, her feet pedalling the air, eager to feel him all the way to the hilt, to build the pace and the force, wanting to be his and to have him, for always.

"I want to make you come," he said, starting to pant, the words coming out in stertorous gasps, "harder than anyone has ever made you come before. I am going to do it. I am going to make you scream. I am going to be the best you've ever had, the best you'll ever have. You won't want anyone else, ever, once I've done with you."

He was moving faster now, faster and faster, and harder, plunging with abandon, and he had the angle, the exquisite friction of cock and G-spot, and Elyssa was too close to her edge to say anything in answer to his words of fierce challenge. Instead, she just let herself fly, let her brain disengage and her body take over until the pressure sent her up in the air, lid blown, sensations bursting out in a fountain, and she was saying his name, over and over, "Jaaaaay, Jaaaaay, Jaaaaay, ohhhhh, Jaaaaay."

"You said my name," he said later on in the rowing boat after the champagne picnic had taken the edge off their other appetites. They were drifting under a high afternoon sun, lying down on the blanket together, Jay's fingers in Elyssa's mussed hair.

"Yeah. Did I? You said mine, I think."

"I remember."

"Do you remember everything you said?"

Jay pushed his shades back over his eyes, his manner a little shifty.

"You wanted to be the best I've ever had? The best I'll ever have?" Elyssa persisted.

"Well, y'know, in the heat of the moment you say things..." Jay laughed, a small embarrassed laugh.

"You'll never shake off that competitive mania," predicted Elyssa. "You always have to be the best, don't you? I probably shouldn't tell you this..." She sighed.

Jay propped himself up, squinting down at her. "Tell me what?"

"You were," she admitted. "The best I've ever had. Not just because you were, you know, good at it. But because it was *you*. It was always you I had the huge crush on."

Jay was silent for a while, looking over to the shore of the lake while the boat drifted.

"So what are you going to do about Patrick?" he asked at length. "Will you still see him tomorrow?"

"Jay, I can't answer that. I don't know."

"I want to be with you. I want this to be the start of something – not just the end of decades of *wondering*..."

"Okay." Elyssa kissed him. "So you feel that way, too. I thought you did. I just didn't want to presume."

"I don't live so far from you. We can do the weekend lovers thing...see how it goes..."

Elyssa snuggled into the crook of his arm, feeling as if Christmas had come in the summertime. Jay, her brilliant beloved Jay, talking of commitment. Was it the first time? She suspected it might be.

"Poor Patrick, though," she murmured.

"He'll get over it," said Jay philosophically. "I was kind of hoping we could stay in touch but...if he doesn't want to..."

"I'm going to meet him tomorrow anyway," determined Elyssa. "I owe him that much. It won't be much fun, but I don't want to break it to him over the phone or by email. I respect him too much for that." *And still love him – even if that's out of the question now.*

Jay put a hand on her hip, his arm resting on her stomach proprietorially. "I'll come with you if you like."

"No, there's no need. I should do this alone. It'll be fine. It's not as if he's my boyfriend or anything."

So why do I feel as if I'm being unfaithful? She let the thought linger for a moment or two until Jay, his appetites restored by all the strawberries and champagne, kissed and canoodled it out of her head.

* * * *

Patrick had brought flowers, and that didn't make Elyssa's job easier by one iota. He had also dressed to the nines and driven up in a vintage car, having texted Elyssa earlier to advise her that her highest heels and best jewellery should be worn.

Sliding in her diamond studs, Elyssa had felt sure that she was going to be sick before they got anywhere near dinner. Her stomach was churning, her head ached and the bruised soreness between her legs meant that Jay was a constant presence in her mind, and her body, all day. She wanted Jay – no question.

But, oh, Patrick, when he walked up the path in his dinner jacket, looking like James Bond and smiling like a shy angel, bouquet clutched to his chest, tested that resolve more severely than could ever be fair.

"You look sensational," he said gallantly, handing over the flowers for her mother to put in water and offering his arm. "Wait 'til you see where I've booked! You're going to be the Queen for a night."

"Wow." Elyssa laughed nervously, tripping along the path beside him. "I feel I should have worn a flowery hat and brought a corgi or two with me, then."

"What? Oh, haha, yes. Well, maybe not literally *the* Queen. But *my* Queen. God, that sounded so cheesy, didn't it? Perhaps I should just shut up and drive."

Elyssa was helped into the passenger seat, then watched as he took the wheel, letting the car, which must be hired, glide off through the higgledy-piggledy streets of their small

market town and out onto the country roads, past field after field of golden corn and vivid green vegetables, towards the neighbouring town, the place where all the rich people lived, and to which they had travelled to school each day as teenagers.

"Remember this road?" asked Patrick, bowling along at a fair speed, into the setting sun.

"Every day on the school bus," smiled Elyssa. "Girls on the top deck, boys on the bottom."

"I never understood that segregation. If we'd had the civilising influence of girls down below, I'm sure there wouldn't have been so much spitting and swearing. I used to hate that. Until I got to the Sixth Form and was able to do something about it."

Elyssa remembered how much respect Patrick had commanded amongst even the most loutish boys in the school. As the best sportsman of his year, he had avoided the nerd tag that had been attached to Jay and Elyssa, and had been wildly popular. Not just with the boys either, thanks to his golden good looks and impeccable manners. He had been the Sir Lancelot of the Sixth Form, and damsels in distress with their coursework assignments had often thrown themselves on his mercy.

"The top deck wasn't that much better," Elyssa revealed. "Thick cigarette smoke and bawdy singing all the way."

"You? Bawdy? Never."

"Well, I didn't join in those songs," said Elyssa delicately. "I was usually too busy helping Juliet do her homework that she hadn't bothered with. The teachers must have wondered why the hell her handwriting was so jerky all the time."

"Well, no homework, spitting, swearing, smoking or bawdy singing for us tonight," said Patrick, navigating the picturesque streets of the historic town. "Or we shall certainly be thrown out of Jean Montel."

"Jean Montel!"

Patrick steered the car into the gravel drive of the exclusive restaurant and parked it against the low wall topped with shrubs and ferns, taking the key out of the ignition with a flourish.

"Patrick! Brad and Angelina had trouble getting reservations here! How did you...?"

"I pulled strings. Made a few calls. Mentioned my name...okay."

Elyssa pulled a face of disbelief and he laughed.

"I confess. My brother-in-law is the maître d'."

"Oh! That makes sense. I knew you couldn't have got a table at one or two day's notice. Jean Montel!" She stepped out of the car and looked up at the gracious grey stone manor house. The sun was just low enough in the sky for the fairy lights dotting the garden to glow like fireflies, and Elyssa turned to Patrick, excited despite herself.

"I said I'd take you here one day. Do you remember?"

Elyssa remembered, and she also remembered, with a painful lurch, that she was here to disappoint him. "Oh yes. At the Leavers' barbecue."

"Where we danced," he reminded her. "And I kissed you. And you ran away."

"I...know. I panicked. I had to find Jay."

Patrick put a hand on her arm, looking down at her until she had to return the gentle pressure of his blue eyes. "Don't run again," he said softly.

"Patrick, I—"

"Let's go in."

It wasn't until the chilled wine arrived in its silver cooler and the food had been ordered that Elyssa felt able to broach the subject of Jay.

"Patrick," she said huskily, breaking into his nervous chatter about surgery and city living. "You haven't asked me about how it went with Jay yesterday."

"Do we have to talk about him?" he asked, taking a sip of wine in affected nonchalance.

"He was your best friend." The mild reproach in Elyssa's voice made Patrick frown, then put down his glass heavily, a cloud of realisation passing over his brow.

"Oh, I see," he said dully. "The best man has already won, has he? Or rather, the first man to the winning post. Right?"

"Patrick, I should have told you from the start. I'm sorry. Perhaps I should go..."

"No." Patrick's rebuttal of the suggestion was so forceful that several diners looked over in curiosity. "You shouldn't go. Stay. You promised me a date, and you're going to deliver on that promise. And you're going to give me the same chance you gave Jay. That's the deal."

"But Jay and I—"

"Whatever is between you and Jay, you have to hear me out. You have to give me the opportunity to sway you. Let me try and sway you. I fully understand that I will probably fail, and if I do, I'll ask nothing more of you. But at least give me this night."

Elyssa, impressed by the anguished sincerity of his words, shrank back into her chair. "All right," she said. "We'll have our date. But I do love Jay—"

"You love me too," said Patrick, and the calm, confident way he said it made Elyssa realise that it was true. "You love us both. What if you could have us both?"

"Don't be...I can't have you both. That's greedy."

"Be greedy. Be greedy with life. Grab all the happiness you can. Just for today, imagine that you can have whatever you want. You *can* have whatever you want. Name it and it shall be yours."

Elyssa stared, and noticed the waiter from the corner of her eye, allowing her to release a breath and dissipate a little of the high tension. "Well, just now, what I want is that crayfish salad," she said. *And now he expects me to eat. After telling me that I can have him even though I've already slept with Jay. I can't, though...can I?*

Elyssa found herself unable to eat much of the superb meal. She eschewed pudding in favour of a stroll around the manor's substantial grounds with Patrick, the moon now out and illuminating them as if by her suitor's personal request.

"Did you order this moonlight?" asked Elyssa jokingly, thinking all the same that it was perfect—too perfect to resist.

"Yes, I did. Moonlight, roses, fine food and wine and...oh, you're going to hate me."

"Why?" Elyssa stopped abruptly, turning to study his face, which was alight with suppressed mischief.

"Elyssa, would you kill me if I told you I'd reserved a room in the manor?"

She let her mouth drop open. "Maybe not kill you. Maybe give you a hearty slap round your presumptuous chops though!"

"Go on then. I deserve it." Patrick stood dramatically straight and still, offering one flawless cheek to Elyssa. "Aren't you going to slap me?" he asked after a while.

"I should. I'm not a violent person, though."

"But you are a passionate one. I want to see your passion. Come on. Hit me."

"Are you doing this to get one over on Jay? Is it all about the competition?"

"Fuck Jay! Oh, excuse me. You've already done that."

Elyssa, torn and conflicted to the point of torment by her competing lovers, let her arm swing through the evening air and her palm connect, with a ringing slap, to Patrick's cheek.

"That's it!" he shouted jubilantly, grasping her wrist in a strong hand. "Fire! Passion! Everything you bottled up for years. Bring it out, Elyssa. Give it to me."

Then they were kissing, hard, up against the plinth of a statue, hands all over, bodies bumping and crashing, Patrick's solid chest blocking Elyssa's heaving bosom so that she had to fight him as part of the embrace. Their tongues battled until the lovers lost their breath and Patrick took advantage of Elyssa's capitulation to take her hand and run with her across the lawns to the reception area, where he claimed the key to his room and dragged her upstairs behind him.

"Let's take this to the bedroom," he muttered, fumbling with the lock and pushing her against the door as soon as it was shut, continuing the grimly purposeful work his kiss had started with the addition of hands and thrusting pelvis. Elyssa clung to his neck for dear life, drinking in all the torrents of his desire this evening had released, accepting them into her body and converting them into her own delirious lusts. Handsome Patrick, after whom all the girls had languished, wanting her, and only her, so badly that he had taken a string of gambles—so badly that he would forget everything that had passed just to hold her for that one shining moment.

Her fingers grappled with his bow tie, loosening it, unbuttoning the starched collar, exposing his reddening throat beneath. He felt so large, so substantial, so different to Jay, and yet so complementary. Patrick's hand, a big hand whose fingers nonetheless performed the most delicate surgery on a daily basis, slipped under her skirt, stroking Elyssa's sheeny thighs, clamping her hip. With his other hand, he lifted the fabric so that his knee could rise up and wedge itself against her sheer lace-covered sex.

"God," he panted, tearing his lips off hers. "I have to have you. But I think the bed will be better...this time..."

Elyssa allowed him to propel her to the bed in a savage waltz, then unzip her dress and let it fall while she performed the same frantic operation on his shirt and trousers. Half-naked, they fell in a sideways heap onto the four-poster bed, their arms and legs everywhere. She had seen Patrick in swimming trunks before, so she knew he had a magnificent body, but, oh, she'd forgotten the sheer majesty of it—the shoulders, the pectoral muscles, the tight hard abdomen and the powerful limbs. A man in peak physical condition, capable of overpowering her as easily as if she were a rag doll, and yet, she knew he would never do so, would never use that formidable force against her.

He rolled over on his back, pulling her on top, waiting for her to settle her legs on either side of his hips before bringing her down for more kissing, more touching, more exploring. His intrepid fingers had found her underwear now, and they delved inside, finding the soft hillocks of her breasts, contrasting so well with the full-blooded hardness of her nipples. His mouth sought them out, freeing them from the lace cups with his teeth and tasting them while his hands moved downward, straight to the ripe split that waited, impatiently, inside those lacy panties for him.

Elyssa was relieved he'd had the presence of mind to remove the condom packet from his jacket pocket while she was undressing him, and, after peeling her knickers down and off, he freed himself from his boxers and slipped the rubber onto his rigid cock.

Patrick held Elyssa above him at her hips, allowing her pussy to slide up and down and over the head of his cock, never quite going far enough back to swallow it inside her. Instead he worked on her clit, circling it, rubbing it until she moaned her frustrated desires into his mouth.

"What's that, Elyssa?" He broke the kiss, making her meet his searching blue eyes.

"You want me? Is that it?"

"Please. Let me. Please."

"It's for you," he said, relaxing his grip so that she was able to plunge down on that shaft in one triumphal move.

Patrick purred with pleasure at the guttural sound that was forced from her lips by the wonderful fullness his cock gave her. Elyssa supposed he didn't realise that she was still sore from Jay's attentions, so he was merciless from the start, but when she began to whimper and bite her lip, he relinquished control of the pace to her. She could have this any way she wanted, he seemed to imply. If that was his thinking, she had to admit it was smart—that way she would be more likely to want to come back for more.

Elyssa didn't want to think of Jay, but the inevitable burn that Patrick's cock was engendering made this difficult. It wasn't uncomfortable, exactly, but it was definitely there, and this gave her a feeling of wantonness that was half-exciting, half-guilt-inducing.

"Don't think about him!" said Patrick suddenly, sharply. "You don't owe him anything. Think of me. This. Us. I've got you now, and I don't want you thinking of anybody but me."

Elyssa tried. She tried to focus on Patrick and Patrick alone, to focus on the pure sensation of his cock, taking it all the way inside, leaning down to let the base of it touch her

clit, or leaning back to let it penetrate her all the more deeply. She was almost there, almost doing it, almost forgetting everything else, letting the tension build and build until it was close, so close to flying apart then...her phone bleeped.

"Ignore it," gasped Patrick, face contorted like that of a man in pain, grabbing her upper arm and yanking her down into what should be the climactic kiss. But as he roared and bucked her up and down on his pelvis, almost dislodging her with the force of it, all she could think was, *I bet that's Jay*.

"I'm sorry," said Patrick, lying beside her, stroking her forehead. "You didn't come, did you? Let me..." His fingers walked down to her pubis. His eyes were anxious, caring, loving.

She hated herself. "It's okay, Patrick. Let's just sleep..."

"We can try for round two later," he said hopefully, but his face was defeated, pained.

"Yeah," she said consolingly, kissing his lips. "Later."

She watched the ceiling, waiting for him to sleep, desperate to check her phone, but ultimately afraid to. She had blown it. By thinking she could have them both, she had ensured that she would end up with neither. Jay would be devastated, and Patrick disappointed. She would leave before he woke and go back to Coventry to prepare for the conference in San Francisco. It would break her heart, but it was the only way. She lay like that until dawn, when she drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter Three

A brisk knock at the door startled her awake.

"Room service."

Patrick was stirring, his eyes bleary, his head as scrambled as hers by the look of him.

"Don't think I ordered..." he mumbled but the door opened anyway.

"Smoked salmon, scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice, coffee."

"Jay!"

Elyssa wanted to bunch the sheet over her head and hide forever, but her limbs were frozen and all she could do with stare, mouth hanging open, as a Jay, who was far more suave than anybody had a right to be at six thirty a.m., glided around the side of the bed, pushing a wheeled trolley laden with food.

"What the fuck?" demanded Patrick, almost looking on the verge of laughter. Almost.

"So then," said Jay conversationally, perching himself on the side of the bed and beginning to pour coffee from a cafetière. "No need to ask how it went last night."

"Jay..." said Elyssa tentatively, wanting to fall at his feet and beg forgiveness, but settling instead for a hand on his arm.

"Elyssa." His smile, his eyes...they looked genuine. There was no discernable pain. There was something a bit like mischief...it didn't make sense. He took her stray hand and kissed her fingertips, tenderly. Then he stood and started taking off his clothes.

"Budge up," he said. "There's more than enough room for one more in that bed."

Elyssa looked wildly at Patrick, who was shaking his head, but smiling, too.

"This is, um, can someone tell me how I should feel about this?" she stammered.

"Flattered?" suggested Jay, now stripped down to his underwear and inserted between the sheets, passing a cup of coffee to Patrick, then to Elyssa before settling himself down for some three-in-a-bed caffeine ingestion. "The lengths we go to just for you." He peered at her over the rim of his cup and winked through the thick lenses of his spectacles.

"I knew Jay would get there first," said Patrick. "I knew you'd never resist him. So I rang him the day after the reunion and suggested an extra clause for the contest. If he

managed to get his dirty mitts on you, I'd still get my chance. And if you...if we...well, we're adults, aren't we? Broadminded, intelligent adults."

"What Patrick is trying to say, in that charmingly gauche way of his," Jay took up the conversational reins. "Is that we're big boys now, and we've learnt how to share."

Elyssa's hand shook so that the coffee threatened to spill over onto the pristine white duvet. "Share?" she said weakly.

"We both love you," clarified Patrick. "And you love us both. Shall I draw you a diagram? I'm awfully good at those."

"Not as good as me," mock-snarled Jay. "I draw the best diagrams in the western hemisphere. But yeah. I know it's all a bit Sixties, man, but I never understood why *free love* went out of fashion. I always thought it was a splendid idea. I had to sell it to Patrick a bit, but I think you're cool with it now, aren't you, Paddy, my old mucker?"

"If it means I get to see more of you, Lyss," he murmured, putting an arm around the academic.

"So...you're talking about...some kind of ménage?"

"Yes. Some kind of ménage. The best kind. The kind that has you and me and Pat in it," said Jay enthusiastically.

"I won't lie," said Patrick, sighing. "If I could have stolen you from Jay, I would have done it. But it was pretty clear last night that you weren't going to forget about him. And, well, y'know. If seeing more of Jay is the price I have to pay for seeing more of you..."

"You cheeky bugger!" exclaimed Jay, pretending outrage. "I know you were only using Elyssa to get to me, big boy. Don't pretend otherwise."

Patrick put up two fingers at his old friend and they laughed in embarrassment. All the same, Elyssa hoped they were prepared to forgive each other everything for the sake of this new era in their love lives.

"So. What do you think?" Patrick sounded anxious again.

Elyssa looked at him, then turned her head to look at Jay. This mattered to them. They cared what she thought. They were serious about this.

"It's the maddest thing I ever heard," she said slowly. "But...I think you can count me in."

The two men pressed their lips to her face, kissing her cheeks and throwing their arms around her.

"I don't know how it's going to work," confessed Patrick.

"You'll have to loosen up a bit for a start," Jay told him. "Since we're sealing the deal, I think you should give me a kiss."

"Give *you* a kiss?" Patrick winced.

"Oh, come on. You've never...? I don't believe you. You're in a rugby club. I know what goes on in the shower block."

"Fuck off, Jay! Just because I'm not some poncey metrosexual like you."

"You're serious, aren't you? You've never kissed another man. Aww, Patrick, that's so *sweet*. Come on, pucker up. Just a peck. Just for starters."

Elyssa didn't dare laugh. "If Patrick doesn't want to..." she demurred.

"Of course he does," said Jay. "Because I *dare* him to."

Patrick's eyes flashed with purpose, he sat straight, pushed back his shoulders and put down his coffee. "Right then. You asked for it," he said, and his hand darted out to grab Jay by the scruff of the neck and haul him across to his strong, firm lips, taking the taller man's mouth as if he had been kissing men all his life.

Elyssa watched their embrace, thrilled by its adversarial feel, enjoying the sight of Jay's pale, slight torso against Patrick's rugby-player build, Jay's long spidery fingers lodged in Patrick's short dirty-blond crop, Patrick's strong jaw working into Jay's freckled cheek. His glasses had steamed up. Elyssa reached out and removed them, her unintended interruption breaking the men's kiss and recalling their attention to her.

"Wow," she breathed.

"Not bad for a beginner," said Jay, a little hoarsely. "Bit lacking in finesse, but that'll come."

"Less of your cheek, Marriott, or I'll have you on your knees before you can say 'elegantly wasted.'"

"Wow," repeated Elyssa. "There is definitely a *spark* there."

"Don't think you're getting away with anything," growled Patrick, turning to her. "Two men and one girl—you're going to be a busy, busy bee, aren't you?"

"I hope so," she said with a grin. "God, I'm starving. Sort us some food out, Jay, will you?"

"My pleasure, madam. And after that, you're coming into the shower with me and Patrick. Is the shower big, Mr. Robertson?"

"Massive," confirmed Patrick with a wicked smile. "More like a wet room."

"Well, that's good. Somebody is going to get very wet in the wet room."

He handed her a plate of breakfast. "So get those proteins and carbohydrates down you. Slow release energy, Elyssa. It will be your friend."

Jay drained the last of his coffee, banged the cup down on the trolley and loped off towards the bathroom.

"What about your slow release energy?" Elyssa wanted to know, but he shrugged.

"Need other appetites satisfied before I can eat," he said. "Don't let Robertson there eat it all. He always was a gannet."

"Growing boy, mate," muffled Patrick, mouth stuffed.

"I hope so," muttered Elyssa, blushing at her own wickedness. This couldn't be true, could it? It was like some kind of luxurious, decadent dream. She turned to Patrick.

"You really are okay with this?"

He put a hand on her knee, rubbing it underneath the duvet.

"Never more so," he reassured, chewing off a final crust of toast and brushing the crumbs from his chest. "Look at the state of me! I need a shower. And so, I think, do you."

He took Elyssa's glass of fruit juice from her hand, put it down and assisted her, gentlemanly as ever, from the bed.

"Is it cheating if I kiss you on your own, without Jay being here?" he murmured.

"I don't think so," she whispered back and, connected at the lips, they made a slow and smoochy journey across the deep-pile carpet to the bathroom, from which the sound of water splashing on tiles was already audible.

"Come on in," Jay invited, his lean, nude body outlined behind the streaming, steamed-up glass door. "The water's lovely."

Elyssa stepped in first, finding herself instantly grabbed and pulled into Jay's body, the wetness causing their skin to slap, and water to drip and pool around their mouths as they engaged in a deep kiss. She sighed into his throat, shutting her eyes and remembering again just why and how much she adored this man. He had the technique and the finesse, of course, conferred by years of practice, but he also had such a sensual nature, a genuine love of the amorous arts. Patrick, by contrast, was more boisterous, perhaps a little rough at times, but in his case, the passion that caused it was also so appealing that she wouldn't have had him any other way.

She opened one eye, wondering where Patrick was, and noticed him standing rather awkwardly outside the vast shower cubicle, fiddling with the towels on the heated rail.

"How do we do this?" she asked Jay under her breath, emerging from the kiss and blinking drips out of her eyes. "One at a time? Taking turns?"

"Oh, no, I think there's room for all of us," he decreed, extending a hand to the door and shouting at Patrick to get his pert arse into the shower before he poked his eye out with his erection.

Patrick, who was always observant of correct etiquette, and might be forgiven for struggling with the concept of what might pass for it in this situation, grinned with relief and joined his friends.

Elyssa was standing with her back against Jay, leaning into his chest while he massaged exotically scented shampoo into her scalp. His fingers had magical properties, unlocking every knot of tension in her neck and shoulders while the suds flowed down her back, and she thought she would always insist that he washed her hair for her from now on.

"Grab the shower gel and give her a wash," Jay suggested, though his suggestions were almost always orders. Perhaps he sensed that Patrick, always so proper and traditional in his outlook, would have more difficulty getting into the flow than either he or Elyssa. Even if he didn't, a gentle shove along the way might not go amiss.

Patrick seemed unruffled by his friend's dictatorial tone, and he took the tube of pearlescent gel in his hands, squeezing some into his palm, then applying it to Elyssa's belly and breasts, smiling at the lather as it bubbled up and frothed her skin, slathering it over her curves. Elyssa pushed her head, which Jay was rinsing now, back like a cat demanding more stroking, thrusting out her ribcage and breasts for more of Patrick's careful washing. Jay's hands were on her hips, his fingers drumming on the top of her thigh, while Patrick leant into her, giving her the solid support of these two male bodies. Now that they were so close, she could feel Jay's hard cock prodding her buttocks, while Patrick's dented her stomach. Four hands soaped her, sometimes vigorously, sometimes whisper-lightly, until she felt that every inch of her had been claimed. The sensory overload was intense, but addictive, and she angled her pelvis towards Patrick, looking for the one touch she had not yet been granted – that most intimate location.

Both men slid hands between her legs at the same time, and they managed not to struggle with each other, one finding her clit, the other circling her entrance with wet-tipped

fingers. Patrick's other hand caressed a breast, his tongue dipping low over her nipple, while Jay held his free arm braced across her stomach, preventing any thought of escape. His mouth attached to the base of her neck, nipping and sucking at the tender flesh, voracious with unsated lust.

Elyssa rocked and twisted between the walls of their chests, feeling herself double-ravished, twice-kissed, twice-fingered, twice-importuned by their impatient cocks, which threatened to bruise her pale skin with their unyielding stiffness. Jay's fingers slipped up inside her, spreading and stretching her walls, while she ground her clit down against Patrick's hand, wild for more, for all of it, her legs thrashing and sometimes kicking the air while the two men sustained their attentions to her crotch, urging her onward with all the assistant force of their teeth and tongues and mouths and rolling hips.

When she came, it was with utter abandonment, her senses taking her beyond the knowledge that she had two men watching and making her orgasm, into a place of pure animal need. She poured her cries into the tumbling water and swirling steam, into Patrick's wet hair, into Jay's iron-taut arm, anywhere that would take them, until her body was limp and she could see again.

"Nice, Elyssa, good girl," crooned Jay into her ear. "See, it's good, isn't it? Lots more of that to come, sweetness." The two men fell on her with their lips, kissing her face and hair and neck all over until she came down and the strength returned to her legs.

"Can I help you wash, Jay?" she offered, once her breath was back.

"Oh, yes, I think I'm going to need a hand. I'm filthy," he said, handing her the shower gel. Elyssa got to work, rubbing the foaming cleanser into the smooth skin, finding its secret hollows, its curves and bumps. His back arched perfectly beneath her touch and when her caressing hands slid lower, to his hips and belly, he seized them and pushed them down where his cock stood, proud and unsheltered from the insistent shower-rain. She ran her wet, lathered palms up and down, up and down, then she knelt, so that her face nestled against his thigh, and used her tongue to bathe his balls, licking an upward trail to the soapy-tasting cock.

In the end, it was just too soapy – she had gone a little overboard with the gel, she realised – so she stood back up, using her fingers to flutter to the tip of the shaft and back again while he held her against him. Behind her, between her bottom cheeks, she felt the sudden touch of Patrick's cock, rubbing itself forward between her thighs, prodding her flesh

so insistently she feared bruising. With her free arm she reached behind her and took its base in her hand, circling it tightly between finger and thumb, squeezing it while he slicked up and down inside her opening pussy lips.

They both seemed appreciative of her attentions, but Elyssa knew that much more of this would give her the most monumental crick in her neck.

"Back to bed?" she suggested.

Jay grinned, reached up and turned the spray off. "Best offer I've had all day," he growled. "Towels! Now!"

Patrick was first to the pile of warmed, fluffy bath sheets, and he wrapped himself and Elyssa into a clean, dry embrace, leaving Jay to sort himself out. Only two bathrobes hung on pegs by the door, and somehow the two men managed to appropriate these, so that Elyssa was forced to re-enter the bedroom in an abbreviated towel-toga, with a towel-turban on her wet hair.

"You look good like that," Patrick remarked, first to the bed, lying with legs sprawled, finishing off a piece of cold toast as if he'd been starved for a week. "You don't show your legs off enough."

"How the hell would you know?" retorted Elyssa. "It's been fifteen years since you were qualified to comment on my dress sense."

"Fair enough," he shrugged. "So you don't dress like you used to then? All long skirts and plaited belts and ethnic jewellery?"

"Hey, it was boho chic," Jay reminded him, one eyebrow raised. "She was doing it long before Sienna Miller stole her style."

"I bow to the fashion guru," said Patrick sardonically, frowning a little as Jay put his slender hands on Elyssa's shoulders, massaging them firmly as they stood by the mirror, gazing at themselves and the picture they made.

Elyssa caught a glimpse of his expression and realised that this was going to take some hard work to make sure Jay didn't ride roughshod over Patrick and his hopes and desires, in that maddeningly charming and charismatic way Jay had.

"Come to bed," he said, holding out a hand.

"I would, darling, but I need to do my hair," said Jay.

"Not you. Elyssa."

"Who gave you first dibs?"

"Sorry, didn't realise we had to draw up a rota."

"Look!" said Elyssa, holding up a hand. "Stop this. Stop locking antlers. There aren't winners or losers in this relationship. We're all getting what we want. And, quite honestly, I'm not a piece of meat that you get to divide up. All three of us are going to have to learn to listen and to understand what each other wants. I know that's going to be hard for both of you—"

"Going to be hard?" said Patrick ruefully, staring his erect cock in the eye.

"We need to communicate. Be open and honest. No verbal sparring or jealousy or resentment or feeling left out, or it's doomed. I don't want to be a bone of contention."

"I've got the boner of contention," said Patrick.

"Jeez, Patrick, you really do have a one-track mind today!" Elyssa exclaimed.

"It's not me! It's my cock! It won't leave me alone!"

Elyssa took pity, joining him on the bed and drawing him into a loving kiss. "Why can't we try to work together?"

Jay, putting the comb back on the dresser, threw off his bathrobe and stalked, splendidly naked, over to the bed.

"Working together," he said, clapping his hands. "It takes practice. How about a team-building exercise?"

"A...team-building exercise?" Patrick and Elyssa chorused. Blinking, Elyssa envisaged tedious training courses she had attended at work.

"Yes. We work together, as a team, to achieve a satisfying outcome. This is what I suggest." He sat down, pulling the turban off Elyssa's head so that her damp, coppery curls snaked down over her shoulders. "Patrick Robertson and Jay Marriott," he said, nuzzling into her neck, kissing it, touching Elyssa's hand on his friend's cock, "both want to make Elyssa Bradshaw come. Lots and lots of times. Let us consider how best to arrive at this result. Any thoughts, Elyssa?"

"Well, yes, I do have the thought that I also want to make you two come lots and lots of times. Is there any way to write that into the equation?"

"What about a contest?" said Patrick. "Whoever gives the most orgasms wins?"

"You and your bloody contests!" cried Elyssa, but she was laughing. "Okay, I think I can get on board with this one though. Don't forget – teamwork is the key."

"You have a natural advantage, though," objected Jay. "You're bound to win."

"Well, you can halve my score, if that makes it fairer."

"That sounds reasonable," nodded Jay. "Good. Right then. On your mark. Get set..."

Jay made a dive for Elyssa's legs, grabbing the knees in both hands and pushing his face up against her pussy before she could even squeal with surprise.

"Oh, you bastard!" Patrick, less quick off the mark than his friend, pouted. "That's bound to be a first score to you. Cunnilingus never fails. Bah."

"It's early days," Elyssa reminded him, wagging a finger prior to gathering his hard cock back into her steady grip and working him into a comfortable rhythm. "Ohhh, God," she added, as Jay's talented tongue found its target with ease.

She had to sink back against the pillows, opening herself to the hot, wet sensation of his breath and his mouth against her most sensitive parts, feeling her clit fatten and bloom against his tongue. The stroke of her hand on Patrick's cock grew lazy and she almost forgot she held it until he placed his fist firmly over hers and began to pump along with her.

"Maybe...a different way..." she gasped, trying to wriggle away from Jay's tormenting tongue, but he whipped a hand onto her thigh, holding her still, so that she had to tell him what she wanted to do.

"Ooh, Jay, can I shift a little, just so I can get my mouth on Patrick's cock?"

Jay surfaced, his eyes manic with lustful purpose, his chin wet with her juices. "What, like a more complicated sixty-nine? A one hundred and eleven? Or something?"

"Something like that." Elyssa snorted.

Jay scooted back, obliging her in her effort to place herself between Patrick's legs, crouched down on her knees while he rested against the headboard. She dipped her head, sealing Patrick's long-suffering cock between her lips, feathering around its circumference with the tip of her tongue until she had felt her way and could glide farther down, tuned in to his rapturous moans, and begin the job in earnest.

She was lost in her task, sucking and lapping greedily, when she felt hands part her inner thighs and silky hair brush that softest skin. Oh yes! Jay! He'd been licking her pussy so gorgeously that she'd been close to the edge, and now he meant to take her there. She let him ease his face underneath her — *he must be lying on his back*, she thought — and resume his fulsome feasting on her innermost pearl in its intricate folds. If she looked down, past the shaft of Patrick's cock in her mouth, past her breasts swaying along with her bobbing chin,

she could make out the crown of Jay's head, brown hair mussed across his forehead, lodged between her thighs.

Oh God, this is depraved, she thought, closely followed by, *Oh, God, this is incredible*. She shimmied on Jay's face, as wildly as she could given his firm grip on her outer thighs, and the way his thumbs pressed into the skin so that her pussy lips couldn't close against him. She felt every nerve ending rushing, flaring, bursting into flames. She shook her head, bringing Patrick's cock left and right with her, sucking harder and harder, grabbing his balls and squeezing, until he was pouring into her mouth, yelling and bucking under her. She held his cock in her mouth, even as she swallowed the salty liquid, and concentrated on her own climax, melting on to Jay's tongue in a swirl of sugary rush before her bones collapsed and she had to release Patrick and flop forward on to his powerful legs.

"First score to me," crowed Jay, shuffling out from his thigh-clamped prison and sitting up to swig from a glass of water before kissing Elyssa all over her neck.

"To me, you mean," Elyssa mumbled from her prone position. "I made Patrick come first."

Patrick chuckled tiredly, ruffling Elyssa's hair. "You're getting into the spirit of things now. You'll be just as fiercely competitive as we are in no time."

"I always was," she yawned, rolling over to look him upside-down in the eye. "You just never saw it. You thought girls didn't have that instinct. Newsflash – we do."

Jay, slumped on his front diagonally across the bed, raised a shaggy head. "Seriously? You need to be the best just as much as this freak and I do?"

"Every bit as much. God! I can't believe you never noticed! I was *so* not going to be outgunned, academically, by either of you. When you both declared you were going to put your names down for Oxford tuition, I decided then and there that I would do the same thing. With a scholarship."

"You got one, too," Patrick recalled. "I'd totally forgotten about that! And my nose was so out of joint when you told me."

"So was mine." Jay laughed delightedly. "You were so fucking *modest* about it, too. You wouldn't even mention it. Just stared at the floor and blushed when old Vickers announced it in the assembly. You dark little mare, you!"

"All the time I was mentally sticking two fingers up and saying, '*in your face, boys!*'"

"You are a bad girl." Patrick was shaking his head, but his eyes gleamed with merriment.

"Well, yes, I'd say my situation right now makes that a given, wouldn't you? Lying in bed with two men, looking like something out of a porn film."

"When it comes to the most deliciously naughty, gorgeous, clever, sexy woman, you beat the competition out of the water," said Jay.

"Whilst you are the Emperor Napoleon of smarmy compliments," she parried.

"I meant it most sincerely, ma'am," he protested, and she relented, kissing the tip of his nose.

"I know," she said fondly. "And I don't blame you for wanting everyone to know how clever you are. It's what I loved about you...both of you...right from the start. That and how funny and kind you both were to me on the first day, when none of my girl friends were in the same class with me."

"I suppose you got a First, then, did you?" asked Patrick.

"You mean, *you* want to casually drop into the conversation that *you* did," said Jay ascerbically.

"Yeah! I do! Don't you?"

"Well, all right. Yeah. I got one. You got one." They looked at Elyssa.

"Starred First," she said quietly.

"Fuck me!" both men blurted, impressed. "A *Starred* First!" Patrick repeated. "That's, like, better than a First. Nobody gets those."

"I did."

"You're a genius, Miss Bradshaw," proclaimed Jay, tickling her neck.

"That's Professor Bradshaw to you."

"Jesus Christ on a bike! Am I seriously in bed with a Professor?" Patrick chortled.

"Of course, it's not my first time," said Jay laconically. "There was that sweaty Friday night after the Astrophysics conference..."

"Tell you what, Jay," said Patrick, looking defeated in this particular competition. "Let's agree to hand you the Shaggers' Prize. I'm sure you've earned it. But there's still the small matter of the Top Orgasm Benefactor to settle. And I, for one, am ready for the next round."

"Well, you're on the back foot, lad, aren't you?" Jay patted his wrist. "One-nil so far. And I'm on form today. Match fit."

"That's about to change," vowed Patrick, and he rolled over, shadowing Elyssa, propped on his elbows while his hardening cock nudged a cheeky path between her folds. "What do you think, Professor? In your learned opinion?"

"I think I can't have given the best blow job if you're hard again, already!" She giggled and squealed a little, shifting position to make it clear that he was more than welcome inside her.

"I think you simply underestimated my stamina," replied Patrick, inching ahead. "A simple mistake to make. You'll need to extend your studies if you want to get a more accurate forecast of what I'm capable of. I suggest long-term research." He surged forward, sheathing himself fully in Elyssa's willing channel.

"I'll take note of that," she gasped, then Patrick went to work, rocking the mattress so that Jay complained of seasickness and had to hop off the bed. Elyssa was halfway to a vigorously earned paradise when Jay suggested Patrick roll over and let her go on top.

"You're flattening her," he complained. "I don't want her turned into a pancake."

Patrick, with a grunt that might have been annoyance or laughter, grabbed Elyssa's hips and swung her round until she perched on top of him, still connected at the centre, her breasts with their strawberry nipples now hanging free.

"Now that's a good view," Jay approved, rejoining them on the bed. Elyssa began a slow grind over Patrick's pelvis, teasing him, making sure that her clitoris bore down on the root of his cock with each measured motion. She felt like an erotic goddess, with her hair coiling down over her breasts and this strapping young man beneath her, while another man admired her from behind. She felt even more goddess-like when Jay pressed his chest to her back and took her breasts in his hands, rolling her nipples between slender fingers, finding and kissing and sucking the back and side of her neck while Patrick took charge of her mouth. She could feel Jay's cock, hard and purposeful, edging in and out of her bottom cheeks as if it wanted to oust Patrick and take his place and was just waiting for an opportunity. But Patrick was not to be ousted, and he stayed firmly seated within her, letting her dictate the pace, but never allowing her to get away from him. The stimulation of two men, one at her front and one at her rear, was proving too powerful for her diminishing self-control, and she felt the orgasm uncoil from somewhere in the pit of her stomach, then fire through her, sending sparks to the furthest points of her, while Jay murmured endearments into her ear and Patrick yelled an answering climax of victory.

"That's one-all," he told Jay, holding two fingers in the air while Elyssa's head rested on his chest.

"One all, eh?" said Jay, and even as Elyssa lay on Patrick's chest, Jay put a hand between her legs and began to assess her readiness for more. "What do you think, Elyssa? You have a chance to get ahead here."

Elyssa, delightfully sleepy, yet still more turned on than she had ever been in her life, lifted her bottom and spread her legs, inviting Jay in from behind.

"I can keep this up all day, you know," said Jay, plunging in to the hilt.

"We get thrown out at eleven," said Patrick laconically. "It's early yet, though."

* * * *

The bizarre duel continued through the morning. Elyssa came nine times in various positions and permutations, once in the hot tub, seven times on the bed, once on the rug. She was licked by two tongues and fingered by four hands. She let each storm her barricades until they fell, and she was too sore to admit any more surging cocks through her gates. The men tried to resist coming too often, for fear of being the first to concede their potency she guessed, but eventually, Elyssa sensed that they knew the match was coming to its conclusion.

It ended with a disputed orgasm — Elyssa came with Jay's cock inside her from behind, and Patrick's tongue lapping her clit, his head between her thighs.

"That point is mine," Patrick insisted. "Everyone knows most female orgasms are clitoral. It's a medical fact."

"Most doesn't equal all," argued Jay. "Expressed as a syllogism, you will find that your proposition is logically inconsistent."

"Fuck logically inconsistent! The empirical evidence points towards victory being mine!"

"You have no way of proving it, therefore I take the point. I am the winner."

"I'm the winner!" argued Patrick.

Elyssa coughed, with one of the last remaining breaths of her body. "Excuse me," she said weakly. "I've had nine orgasms this morning. I think you'll find that *I'm* the winner." She fell asleep, exhausted by the exertion of her assertion.

* * * *

They spent the rest of the week together, an unbreakable triad. Now that they had worked through their competitive urges and emerged on the other side, they were free to simply be, and to enjoy themselves and each other. There were picnics by the lake that ended with naked moonlight swimming, there were tables for three in smart restaurants, grinning at the subversive thrill of taking dinner together *en ménage*. There were walks along the river, hand in hand in hand, there were trips to the cinema with a different man's palm on each of Elyssa's thighs as they sat through the film.

And, every night, in the small holiday cottage Jay was renting rather than staying with his estranged mother, they found themselves in bed together, falling deeper and further into their unusual dynamic, trying different combinations, keeping the fever burning in anticipation of the day when all this would have to end.

"If only it didn't have to end," said Elyssa sadly on the morning of their returns to their respective hometowns. She toyed with her cereal, her appetite — so greedy and lusty until now — quite gone.

"Does it have to?" Jay looked over from the coffee percolator, frowning and pushing his glasses back up his nose. "Didn't we say...?"

Patrick was in the next room, zipping up backpacks.

"That was before Patrick..." Elyssa dropped her voice. "I thought...I don't know...we didn't say anything, but I thought the *understanding* was that we were having a few days out of reality. This kind of thing isn't sustainable, is it? Unless you mean we should see each other without letting Patrick in on it?"

She frowned at Jay, making it clear what she thought of such subterfuge.

"That isn't what Jay means," said Patrick, appearing in the doorway. "I think he means we should all see each other. Whenever we can. Sometimes in pairs and, when possible, in our threesome. Is that so impossible? Or unthinkable?"

Elyssa shook her head in surprise. "I just...it seems...so greedy! Of me! To take two gorgeous men off the market. I assumed you would want to look for a more exclusive partner."

"Elyssa!" Jay wagged his finger sternly. "You disappoint me. You made an assumption! About me! I thought you were cleverer than that, Professor."

"So you...?"

"I've not been good at commitment thus far," he said. "I just don't think I'm cut out for all the traditional monogamy stuff. I've never loved anyone else, and I'm pretty sure I never will. A threesome is fine with me. Believe me. More than fine."

Elyssa looked over at Patrick, who shrugged.

"I can't lie," Patrick said. "I *am* cut out for the traditional monogamy stuff...at least, I thought I was. But it didn't work for me last time. She said I chose my career over her—I couldn't give her enough of myself. With you...if I'm working long hours, you have Jay on hand. I don't ever have to be *not enough* for anyone again."

"Patrick, that's rather sad!" said Elyssa.

"No, it isn't! Elyssa!" He came to hold her hands, staring earnestly into her eyes. "You are all I want. I have you. I couldn't be happier."

Elyssa looked from her blond Adonis to her suave sophisticate. She had to echo Patrick's sentiment. She had all she wanted—all any woman could want. She got to have her cake *and* eat it—and what a cake it was. Dark and light chocolate, fruit and spice together.

She smiled. "Sounds like a plan," she said. "We all win."

"Yes, we do," smiled Jay. "We all win."

Chapter Four

"It's almost exactly the way I imagined your place would look." Elyssa lifted her eyes from the horn of the old-fashioned gramophone and grinned at Jay, who was sitting back in a velvet wing chair, long legs crossed, fingers playing negligently with the lapel of his silk jacket.

"The students expect it of me," he explained. "Especially the first years. They long to be drawn into my Bohemian web of decadence and cloudy sherry."

"Especially the girls, I imagine."

"Girls? I lecture in Astrophysics." Jay stood and went over to the window of his college lodgings, which looked out over a neatly mown quadrangle, dotted here and there with lounging youths. "Spotty boys who live for World of Warcraft are my constituency. I went into the wrong subject. Should have gone for a Humanity, like you."

"Well, you've got a human like me instead. And I'll have you know that I frown upon student seduction."

She took her place at Jay's shoulder, touching his elbow lightly, just to convey that she wasn't scolding him with any serious intent.

He put a hand at the back of her neck, ruffling the stray hairs at its nape. Down on the lawn, a pair of young men spotted them, waved madly and shouted, "Dr. Marriott!"

He took Elyssa's wrist and yanked her away from public view.

"Popularity is such a bore," he drawled, pulling her onto his lap on the faded wing chair. "As you'll find out when you take up your post next term. I haven't congratulated you yet, have I? Very clever of you to get a gig at the college next door. I almost suspect you of stalking me!"

"It's a coincidence, you arrogant swine!" Elyssa laughed, letting him pull her in closer for a long, sweet kiss.

"I deliver a series of lectures on the subject of coincidence," Jay said, his lower lip still rubbing against Elyssa's, his eyes huge pools of dilated pupil. "As a Physicist, I prefer persistence. I think that's what got you that job."

"You are very persistent," Elyssa agreed, running her fingers beneath Jay's shirt, onto the warm skin that covered his collarbone. "Patrick's late. I wish he'd call or something. I wonder what this news of his is?"

"Shall we start without him?"

"I feel bad..."

"You are bad."

Jay nipped her earlobe, flicking the point of his tongue beneath it.

"Very bad," he muttered darkly. "A very, very bad girl."

His hand grazed her thigh, then slid up beneath the short skirt she'd worn for the occasion. "That's why you aren't wearing knickers!" he exclaimed, finding the nude lips wet and ready for him.

She shrugged and nuzzled his shoulder. "Seemed a bit pointless to put them on."

"That's the kind of reasoning I like to hear." Jay's fingertips pushed their way between the twin portals, finding the swollen nub of Elyssa's clit and stroking it lightly while his mouth continued to ravish her ear. "Open those legs wider, Professor."

The sibilance of his whisper sent tremors through her. She arched her back in delight and spread her thighs as wide as she could, hooking her right ankle over the chair arm and clinging to Jay's neck.

His thumb worked her remorselessly, setting every nerve ending into motion, causing her to squirm helplessly on his hardening lap.

"Jay...oh...Jay..."

"Is that like SOS?" he asked conversationally, manipulating her ruthlessly to an unstoppable orgasm.

When her wailing died down and the tingling flush had spread across her body, weakening her bones and rousing her blood, she rolled her neck towards the door. It was open.

"I can't believe you started without me." The affronted Patrick threw his holdall into the centre of the room and folded his arms, mock-frowning.

"Tell me you'd have done any different," challenged Jay, setting Elyssa gently on the floor and standing up, leaning forward to take the bag and stow it in the bedroom.

Patrick kicked the door shut behind him. "No, you're right," he said as Elyssa flopped back down into the wing chair, fighting to regain her sense of normality. "Sorry I'm late."

Bloody Friday traffic. Still, I'll have to get used to it, I suppose, when I start working at the John Radcliffe."

"What?" Jay and Elyssa exclaimed in chorus, their necks swivelling, mouths dropping, eyes popping.

Patrick took the armchair opposite and steepled his hands, beaming at their stunned reaction. "Well, once Elyssa got the job here, I knew I had to follow her, or risk becoming the third wheel. Do you really think I was going to stew in London while you two spent every non-working moment in bed together? We're a threesome, aren't we, not a couple with a bolt-on?"

"Or a strap-on," snorted Jay.

Elyssa, rolling her eyes, assured him, "Of course we are."

She crossed the floor, dropping down to a crouch beside Patrick, placing her hand in his. "Oh, Patrick," she said. "I got the job here because I wanted the job! Not because I wanted to phase you out of this amazing thing we've got going. I would never want to do that! It's been the most wonderful six months of my life, and I hope it lasts forever. It would break my heart to lose either of you."

Patrick squeezed her hand, apparently reassured by her sincerity. "That's good," he said. "Because now we have the chance to take things to another level. I've got the consultant neurosurgeon post at the hospital and I need to find a place here."

"That's excellent news," said Jay soberly. "Let me shake your hand, Robertson."

The two men shook hands warmly, then Jay pulled Patrick unexpectedly into his chest, hugging him close. "Well played," he spoke into his ear. "I knew you'd do this. And I know you won't believe me, but I'm glad you did."

"Thanks," said Patrick. "Actually, I do believe you."

Elyssa broke the emotional silence, clapping her hands together.

"So here we all are, the three of us, with our jobs and our places in the same city. No more long drives or late nights on MSN. We can just pop in on each other whenever the mood strikes, even start looking for a place together. I think that calls for a celebration, don't you?"

"The bedroom is that way," said Jay, gesturing grandly towards the half open door. "Please do be my guests."

A squealing Elyssa was chased by her two lovers into the small room, taking off clothes as she ran. Patrick caught her first, trapping her against him with a well-placed rugby-player's leg while he unsnapped her bra, then he pushed her over to Jay, who made short work of the flirty little skirt.

It had taken six months, but now all the sharp corners and rough edges of their threefold interaction had been smoothed out and they were able to read each other's intentions perfectly. No more elbows in the face or two sets of hands reaching for the same thing at the same time – now they worked together as three parts of a perfect whole, all focused on the pleasure of the other two at all times.

"My turn," asserted Patrick, undressing at warp speed and presenting his splendidly naked form, with its majestic cock at the centre, on the wrought-iron-framed bed.

Elyssa shinned up his long legs to straddle him, hovering over his straining tip, licking her lips lasciviously.

"I've been hard as a rock for about twenty minutes," complained Jay.

"Why don't we do that thing we did last week?" suggested Elyssa, winking at him over her shoulder.

Jay began to fling off his clothes, even faster than Patrick had done.

"You sure?" he asked, sounding like the cat that got the cream.

"Sure I'm sure. I've been dreaming about doing it again all week." She impaled herself on Patrick's thick length with a happy sigh, which he echoed.

With her pussy filled and her pert backside wriggling at Jay, she tilted herself forward, bringing her face down to meet Patrick's for ravenous kisses, waiting for what she knew was going to come next.

The rough slide of Jay's bedside drawer, the uncapping of a bottle, the unmistakable glug as its contents dripped into their owner's palm. Then there were fingers gliding up the crack of her bottom – warm, slippery, probing fingers, taking their time, working with the rhythm of Patrick's thrusts, making sure that the tiny aperture they sought was well and truly coated in the light, fragrant lubricant.

Elyssa cried out when Jay's long fingers found their secret target, and she cried out again when his strong arms wrapped around her from behind and the rounded head of his cock pushed her rear cheeks apart.

Patrick, face contorted with lust by this scenario, began to pound all the more furiously, so that Jay had to hold her tight and take extra care with the slow drive forward, edging in, fraction by fraction.

"Easy, Patrick, easy," whispered Elyssa, her senses all over the place, flying from front to back passage, over and over again like confused fireflies. Patrick calmed down enough for Elyssa to feel the dual friction, the complementary play of cocks at fore and aft, and to sink deep down into the knowledge that she was taken in the most absolute way possible. The incredible privilege she was gifted with struck her anew, as it always did when she shared her body with these two exceptional men, and by the time Jay had seated himself to the hilt, she was gasping and almost in tears, close to a release that was as emotionally powerful as it was physically intense.

"I'm yours," she moaned, signalling that they could begin to match their rhythms and seek their separate, yet inseparable, climaxes.

The two men reached a co-operative arrangement, one thrusting ahead while the other drew back, plunging in and out, holding Elyssa still between them, covering her face and neck with their kisses. She knew that the best she could do was hold still, giving her pelvis an encouraging roll now then when they came particularly close to sending her up in explosive flames.

"You're mine," crooned Jay, and Patrick echoed the words.

"Mine too, mine too," gasped Elyssa.

This had become their signal, the green light to go ahead and race for the finish. Whenever Elyssa said those words, "Mine too," it meant that she was close to the edge, ready to erupt in the molten flood of orgasm.

With Jay buried in her rear and Patrick powering past her G-spot, she melted into trembles and whimpers, her body twisting against her two lovers while fronds of russet hair whipped their skin.

"Yes, yes," hissed the men, acting upon their cue and letting their own pleasure take its forceful course, emptying their bodies and their hearts into Elyssa's safe keeping.

A single organism made of three parts, they collapsed together upon the bed, limbs strewn everywhere, mussed hair in three different shades contrasting with the white bed linen.

"You know," said Elyssa solemnly, trying to speak over the pounding of her heart, "I'm the luckiest woman alive."

The men kissed each of her cheeks, lying still and silent for a while, watching the ceiling spin and feeling the enormity of their bond. For the first time, the future seemed assured and certain. This was no longer an experiment or a contest but a way of life.

"You certainly are," yawned Jay. "So lucky that I've decided I never want to play you at Scrabble ever again."

"Luck!" Elyssa sat up, hair flying, eyes vivid with outrage. "It was skill!"

"Quartz on a triple word score," Patrick snorted. "Pure fluke."

"Right, that does it," fumed Elyssa. "Get the board! I'm going to thrash your arses once and for all."

"Is that a promise?" drawled Jay, but Patrick was already rooting through the cupboard.

"Naked Scrabble," he ordained. "Winner gets everything they ask for the rest of the night. Losers have to make dinner."

The box landed on the bed with a clink of tiles. Elyssa laid out the board and began to fumble in the bag for her first seven letters.

"Oh look," she said, laying down four of them across the central star. "*Love*. I think I've won already. Love should always win."

The men could only agree with her.

About the Author

Justine Elyot is a UK based writer of erotic romance and erotica. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies from Black Lace, Cleis Press, Xcite and Constable & Robinson. Her first full-length book, On Demand, was published by Black Lace in 2009.

Email: justineelyot@gmail.com

Justine loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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