



A Good Neighbor

Clare London

A GOOD NEIGHBOR

...The front door slammed behind me as if cutting me off from the life outside...

And I was plunged into another one.

I never had a chance to speak. The bouquet was snatched from my hands and flung onto the low table by the door. I was pushed back against the wall and a hard, flat chest pressed against mine, hot breath panting in my ear, broad hands reaching to push my jacket off my shoulders. Strong hands. Impatient.

“*Fuck.*” The voice was harsh and masculine. A man’s face brushed against mine, the jawline rough with a half-day’s stubble, the eyes gazing hungrily at me. “You’re early! I thought we said tomorrow.”

I laughed aloud, partly from protest, partly from the sheer joy of the touch. He was a few inches taller than I was, his body stocky, his shoulders broad. As he opened his arms to wrap them around me, the faded fabric of his shirt stretched tight across his chest, accentuating the sinewy planes of his torso.

“The Aunts insisted I come over today. I didn’t know when you were planning to arrive. *If* you were. Look, I can go...”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” he snapped, but his eyes danced with pleasure, not anger. The hallway smelled of furniture polish and the lingering aroma of warm toast. Up close, I could also smell strong coffee on his breath, but then he always drank too much of it, a symptom of his commitment to ridiculously long hours of writing and traveling. His face nuzzled into my neck, his skin warm, his thick curls uncombed and brushing his shoulders, just the way I liked it. I ran my fingers into it, tangling tightly, tugging back his head. Hard, just the way *he* liked it...

ALSO BY CLARE LONDON

Muse

A GOOD NEIGHBOR

BY

CLARE LONDON

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A GOOD NEIGHBOR
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For Chrissy, my very best online neighbor

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The Aunts had been on at me for years to settle down. To find my true love—to marry, and all that sweet jazz. Problem was, in their slightly rheumy eyes, all of that involved a girl.

“There’s that sweet girl Josie at the end of the street. Wouldn’t that make a very neat arrangement, Dylan?” Aunt Bess crowed, her shortsighted eyes screwed even smaller with the effort of focusing on me. Small, plump and solidly built, her shawl kept slipping from her ample shoulders. She smiled slyly, the expression of girlish mischief at war with her obviously grand-maternal looks. “You spend so much time around there already.”

“She’s a fine lookin’ girl,” Aunt Mitzi said in her high little voice, her body slim and fluttery like an exotic bird, her silk-gloved hands shaking continuously with the onset of palsy, and her

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sparse hair dyed a rather indigestible auburn. “I said so, when they moved in last summer, didn’t I, Bess? Josie and her brother, both of them with those dark, strong features.” She peered at me. “She’d look a real treat standin’ beside you, Dylan. Somethin’ to offset that sickly pale look of yours. Someone to share all this leisure time you have when the children go home every day.”

I rolled my eyes, but just out of her sight. “I’m fine, thank you. Not sickly at all. And it’s not leisure time, as you well know. My students are young adults, it’s a college not a school, and I have plenty of work to do outside of class time. And when I *am* free, I have plenty of friends.”

“Friends are all very well, Dylan. But that’s never the same as a soulmate.”

Did they really think I’d never thought the same—that I didn’t seek it on my own behalf? Nearly thirty years young and relentlessly single in a small town. People were beginning to talk. Or at least, the Aunts were.

Bess sniffed. “I’m not so sure about that sometime brother of hers.”

“His name is Neal. And *sometime* brother? What does that mean?”

Mitzi grimaced. She didn’t always agree with Bess, but when she chose to, they became an immutable force. “Dylan, you’ve been a restrained, responsible boy all your life. I don’t expect you t’understand the ways of these *artistic* types.”

I smiled ruefully to myself. She made him sound like he walked naked through the streets at whim. Probably ate babies’ heads on toast for breakfast, too. “Mitzi, he’s a journalist. A writer. It’s his job.”

Mitzi sniffed in concert with Bess and shook her head. An

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auburn curl worked loose and fell over her forehead. "Comin' and goin' with the weather," she pronounced. "Some kind of gypsy, I'd call him. Hardly ever seen in the town, never has time for neighborly business, like Josie does. She's always been very hospitable, sendin' donations to the school fair, offerin' recipes to the minister's kitchen. She must have her sweet hands full, keepin' a good-for-nothing like him in check."

"He travels a lot," I said, rather shortly. "Else I'm sure he'd do his share." Since when was keeping unusual hours a sign of dissolution?

"Maybe that's why you go around there," Bess murmured.

"Sorry?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

Bess looked straight at me. "To help Josie. I'm sure she appreciates your help and support, running that house, cooking and cleaning for them both."

"Poor orphans..." Mitzi sighed.

"I know how that is," I said, wryly.

Bess huffed. "But you're more mature about it, Dylan. You're such a *steady* young man."

I bit back a sigh of my own. I'd found there wasn't much else to do when Bess cranked up her rather careworn bossiness. "I'm just being neighborly. I helped them get settled when they moved in and we became friends. That's why I go around there. Occasionally."

"She keeps a real good house." Mitzi admired her gloves, her attention drifting already. "She's always been most hospitable. Did I say that before?"

"You did." I smiled with fondness at her.

Mitzi fluttered her eyelashes like she was fifty years younger all over again and I was one of the many, many beaux who'd

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apparently called at her house when she was my mama's age and twice as flighty. "She invited me in for tea only the other day." I knew that'd mean at least six months ago, because Josie hadn't been around much this season. "Showed me all the pictures of her poor, dead parents. Her school photos. Some of that brother of hers." She straightened a miniscule crease in the fabric at her wrist. "Y'all know he's a real handsome man."

I stared at her, startled. Bess looked studiously at her lap.

A slight blush appeared on Mitzi's cheeks but her eyes were innocently wide. "Her papa, I'm talkin' about. In the family portraits. It's easy to see where Josie got those pretty, dark looks. What did you think I meant, Dylan? It's really not polite to sit slack-jawed like that."

"I suppose the son has the looks, too." Bess's eyes were on me and I wasn't entirely sure why.

Mitzi's nose crinkled. "But he's a *boy*, Bess. Who in heaven's worryin' about that?"

"Of course," Bess agreed. They glanced quickly at each other.

I opened my mouth to offer my opinion, then closed it again. The room felt unseasonably warm.

With one of the amazing non sequiturs Mitzi was infamous for, she swiveled around to stare at me again. "Did you taste that cinnamon apple pie of Josie's, Dylan? Never too much spice; pastry light as a young girl's dance. I had just the tiniest of slices that day, but it was real delightful. You could do well for yourself usin' some of her recipes, boy." She often called me "boy," conveniently forgetting I was old enough to have boys of my own if I'd chosen. I think it helped to maintain the illusion that she was still a young woman herself.

I got up from the couch to collect their cups for a refill of

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strong, English tea. The Aunts came to visit me once a week, every week, in all weathers. I fetched them from Laurel Home on the other side of the park and guided them into my house like the precious cargo they were. I listened to their lively, often argumentative chat and fed them tea and plenty of cakes. They'd loved me as a child, and Mama, too, when we'd shared this big, old-fashioned house after my father's death. When Mama died a few years after that, the Aunts stayed on and were my guardians for my last few years of childhood. And now, when I was an adult and it was my inherited home, it seemed natural for me—and a pleasure—to look after them in return. No one ever told me how or why they'd come to live in the same house as us, nor was my knowledge of our true relationship as clear as it should have been. They were definitely not sisters, and I sometimes doubted they were even Mama's blood relatives. But like I said, it was a small town, and if you loved it like I did, you took whatever package you were dealt—which, for me, included Aunts Bess and Mitzi. Like any good double act, they made me smile with their wicked wit and dubious reminiscences. Even with their shameless attempts at matchmaking.

It was a good bargain, in my eyes.

"I'll have just the tiniest slice of the chocolate." Mitzi's eyes flickered over the cake stand. It would be her third helping.

"Maybe not as good as Josie's," I murmured. "But I'm glad you like it."

Bess snorted quietly and Mitzi just shook her head. They both shifted on their seats, getting settled for the replenished refreshments. I smiled, appreciating the fact that, despite their casual chatter, they always changed into their best clothes to visit. The fiercely waved and colored hair sat dustily on their bowed

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heads, the soft misted perfumes of lavender and rose wafted up my nose. Both of them were well past the socially acceptable age for wearing low tops and cinched waists, but neither one of them cared a jot.

“Anyway, Josie doesn’t really stay there anymore,” I said, cutting and serving the cake for them both. “You remember, don’t you?” I dropped four sugars into Mitzi’s cup and stirred it carefully for her. “She’s moved on. She has a successful career in the city, where she keeps an apartment during the week. Maybe I didn’t tell you.”

Of course I had, and many times at that. Josie Whitman had moved into the house down our street with only half an idea of home—the other half was fixed firmly on property investment. She was a friendly woman with plenty of personal charm, but her career in financial services meant far more to her than a reputation for fine cake-making. She came back and forth to the house in the early months, dressed in suits as sharp as her wit and intelligence, and full of plans for remodeling. But as the house became more presentable, her visits had become rare. I knew that, nowadays, she had someone to do her housekeeping for her, and I’d heard she went by the more professionally sober name of Joan. I didn’t think any of it was a secret in the town, for anyone who wanted to ask. They were by no means senile, the Aunts, but they most definitely had selective hearing.

Aunt Bess rattled her teacup. When I looked over, one of her beady eyes winked at me. She’d never needed spectacles, and I’d never seen her miss a step or find it difficult to read her book. She tilted her head and I noticed absentmindedly that she had earrings on that didn’t match. Both of them were pearl drops, set in an elegant, bygone style—one ivory white, one pink—and both hung

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loosely from her crinkled lobes.

I smiled, knowing her cup code from years of practice. I reached discreetly for the small half bottle of whiskey on the side table and measured some into her tea. She tapped a fingernail on the side of the cup—I raised an eyebrow and measured out more.

“And Josie has a nice young man already,” I added. “She brought him back over Thanksgiving.” I resisted the urge to repeat, “You remember?” He was smart and sharp, too, something in real estate. Their corporate city image oozed money and success, but there’d been genuine affection between them as well. “She visits now and then to keep an eye on the house for her and Neal, and sometimes her fiancé comes with her. That’s all. She’s not looking to settle back here with a small-town teacher like me.” There was no regret in my voice—there’d never been anything but friendship between us. I wished her all the best with her professional life and partner.

Mitzi shrugged. She took no notice of my protest. “She’s just spreadin’ her wings for a while. Pretty, cute girl like her.”

“The fiancé’s pretty cute, too,” I murmured. Should have resisted that urge, of course, but Mitzi didn’t notice. Maybe Bess did, glancing quickly over at me with narrowed eyes.

“So, Dylan.” Bess moved awkwardly on her chair, her ankle-length skirt rustling in that way that well-worn satin fabric has, making me feel I was in some kind of remake of *Gone with the Wind*. She always settled herself like this, prior to making one of her announcements. “So I assume you’ll be calling on Josie this afternoon?”

Mitzi nodded at me, her eyes suddenly sparkling. “We don’t mind you takin’ the time out, we all know what young boys are like. You need a life of your own. Leave us here by all means

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while you make a social call. Y'all know your manners, I hope. Anyway," she continued, her mouth settling into a pout. "Bess needs her nap this time of day."

Bess snorted again.

"I won't be calling on anyone," I said, laughing. "I'm spending the rest of the afternoon with you two ladies."

With an affected wave of the wrist, Mitzi pointed her gloved hand at me and coughed. "You went around there last month."

"And the month before," Bess added.

I busied myself with the cake plates, stacking and re-stacking all three of them on the tea tray until my heartbeat settled again. "Like I said, just to be neighborly. And that was after I took you two home, surely?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mitzi shrug. She and Bess exchanged a quick look. "We still think you should go, Dylan."

"Look, Josie's not there today." I felt I'd strayed into an alternate universe, but then, tea with the Aunts was so often like this. "She doesn't come over every month. I have told you before." Last week, a case in point. And the week before. Damned if I knew why I kept trying, sometimes.

"Nonsense. The curtains at the door are drawn back," Mitzi said, her tone a little sly. "Someone's taken in the mail already today."

I stared at her, my breath suddenly tight in my throat. "How the hell do you know that?"

Her eyes widened, though mischief flickered in the pupils. "Dear Lord, Dylan, I'm very concerned at your language. Did y'all learn *that* with your teacher's exams?"

I bit back a sigh. "I'm sorry, Mitzi, you startled me. But what do you think that high wall around their house is for, except for

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privacy?”

“Pshaw. Y’all bring yourself to this town, you bring your business with you. That’s been the way since your mama’s time and long before then, too. Am I right, Bess?”

Bess nodded. She crossed her arms and rested them on her ample breasts. “The house looks very welcoming, too. There’s a new coat of paint still drying on the downstairs window frames and the lawn’s been cut this month. That’s the loving touch for you. I brought you some flowers to take, Dylan; you can pick them up from the table in the lobby.”

“Flowers?” I stared at her, astonished. It was a family joke that Aunt Bess always carried a ludicrously large case with her wherever she went. But I’d never had the nerve or appetite to look inside to see what it hid.

“You’re a young man, like Mitzi says, you should always take them when you’re courting. You shouldn’t need the advice of old women like us.”

“I told you, I’m not courting Jos—”

“But seems like you still do,” Mitzi interrupted. “Need advice, that is.” She gave an exaggerated sigh and shook her head. A miniscule—but real—diamond pendant around her throat glinted as it caught the light. “Change that shirt of yours for somethin’ better pressed, boy, and then run along. Such bad form to keep a lover waitin’.”

I rolled my eyes in surrender. It was impossible to be angry with them for long, however interfering they were. “I’ll just go and double check everything’s okay up there. You’ll be all right without me? I’ll hurry back.”

Mitzi’s gaze was unusually difficult to read. “No rush, Dylan. Take your time.”

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Bess frowned. "Good Lord, Dylan, we're not babes in arms. I can ask Mr. Gerald from the Home to come fetch us back."

"Such a hospitable man," Mitzi murmured happily in the background.

"Bess, there's no need for that—"

"It's already arranged," she said, firmly. "He'll be here in half an hour."

While I gaped at her, astonished, Mitzi gave a very unladylike giggle. "Enough time for you to have a nap, Bess."

Bess raised an eyebrow. "Enough time for us to clear away these cups and make everything straight again." Mitzi coughed rather loudly and Bess turned her back on her companion, smiling determinedly at me. "You just take your time, Dylan."

* * *

I walked up the drive to the Whitman house, the gravel crunching under my boots. There was no sign of life anywhere, either in the gardens or from inside the house. My heavy footsteps broke the silence, my presence a gauche human intervention in the cool calm of nature. Because the house was at the far end of the street, it had no neighbor on the other side and this allowed it far more grounds than any of the other properties. The front garden was bordered with flourishing, dark-green ornamental hedges. Between them and the high gate and wall, the house was sheltered from both the street and prying eyes. Or at least, I'd always thought it was.

I stopped a few feet away from the front steps and took a deep breath. The contrast between this and my own family home was very marked. I suspected the Whitmans were considerably stronger

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financially than I was, but I was also sure Josie was better at keeping on top of the repairs and maintenance. It was the same size house, but in far better condition. The brickwork was neat, the paint wasn't peeling, and the lawn was neatly trimmed at the edges of the path. My house aimed for faded charm. Theirs aimed obviously for elegance, and met it, too.

I knocked loudly at the front door, making my gestures very obvious. After all, I didn't want the Aunts to miss a second of my visiting routine, did I? Now I knew of their secret voyeurism, I could imagine Mitzi at the window of my top floor guestroom, from which she'd obviously found a view of the Whitman's home over the wall. I was pretty sure she had to stand on a chair and peer over the curtain rail, but that wouldn't have discouraged her. I worried she'd hurt herself, at the same time wondering how the hell she got up and down the stairs so easily and swiftly at her age. And I also knew that if I turned back now to look up at my house and caught her at that very window, she'd drop back into an innocent, languid pose as if yearning for a faraway suitor, rather than spying on her former ward.

I smiled to myself and clutched the overblown bunch of blooms Bess had insisted I take with me. I felt hot and awkward in my jacket and smart shirt. Hoping that Mitzi might have tired of staring at me, I ran a hand through my hastily combed hair, ruffling it back up.

Damned if I couldn't hear in my mind Bess's snort of disapproval at my slovenly behavior.

The door opened abruptly. For a few seconds, I just stared. My heart was hammering, fierce as anything. But the smile that greeted me was broad and mischievous and full of a welcoming love for life. It was also very familiar. *Dark, strong features.* With a mental

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nod to the Aunts, I stepped inside. My sight began to adjust to the change, the hallway furniture throwing elongated shadows across the pale, waning sunlight, and then the front door slammed behind me as if cutting me off from the life outside...

And I was plunged into another one.

I never had a chance to speak. The bouquet was snatched from my hands and flung onto the low table by the door. I was pushed back against the wall and a hard, flat chest pressed against mine, hot breath panting in my ear, hands reaching to push my jacket off my shoulders. Strong hands. Impatient.

“*Fuck.*” The voice was harsh and masculine. A man’s face brushed against mine, the jawline rough with a half-day’s stubble, the eyes gazing hungrily at me. “You’re early! I thought we said tomorrow.”

I laughed aloud, partly from protest, partly from the sheer joy of the touch. He was a few inches taller than I was, his body stocky, his shoulders broad. As he opened his arms to wrap them around me, the faded fabric of his shirt stretched tight across his chest, accentuating the sinewy planes of his torso.

“The Aunts insisted I come over today. I didn’t know when you were planning to arrive. *If* you were. Look, I can go...”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” he snapped, but his eyes danced with pleasure, not anger. The hallway smelled of furniture polish and the lingering aroma of warm toast. Up close, I could also smell strong coffee on his breath, but then he always drank too much of it, a symptom of his commitment to ridiculously long hours of writing and traveling. His face nuzzled into my neck, his skin warm, his thick curls uncombed and brushing his shoulders, just the way I liked it. I ran my fingers into it, tangling tightly, tugging back his head. Hard, just the way *he* liked it.

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“Neal.” I groaned. His neck was taut, the Adam’s apple flexing as he swallowed. My lips tingled with the need to kiss it—to kiss *him*. “Thank God you’re here.”

He shook himself free of my grip, though I’d never intended it to hold him back. “Idiot. Of course I’m here.” He laughed raggedly, perhaps still impatient with me. He was panting slightly and couldn’t seem to keep his hands off me, grabbing, stroking, tugging at the soft fabric of my single decent shirt. A button slipped open and his fingers slid in against my bare skin, catching one of the swollen nubs of my nipples underneath and twisting it. It was painful—it was impossibly exciting. “Every damned month, right?” His voice was low and hoarse, even though we couldn’t be overheard. “If it’s humanly possible—wherever the hell I am—I’ll get here. I don’t want to miss it. Miss *this*. You know I don’t.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I hoped and I prayed—but I never really knew. And, God help me, I certainly never *expected*. But did I want to discuss that now? My fingers clumsy with excitement, I helped him open the remaining buttons of my shirt and I shrugged out of it. He took a shaky step back, one of his hands still gripping my wrist. His wild gaze sent goose bumps across my flesh. When he licked his lips, my whole skin shivered with anticipation.

“Dylan.” His eyes widened with eagerness. “Look at you. *Christ*.”

I started to laugh from nervousness and I swallowed it quickly. “You’re the idiot. I’m not... Well, I haven’t been to the gym much this month, you know...”

He laughed and let go of me. I watched him peel his shirt up over his head, my gaze fixed on the tensing muscles of his stomach. He was well toned for a man whose job was usually associated with long hours at a computer screen. The broad

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shoulders ran into a slender, wiry body. Plenty of strength there, I knew, the result of his energetic lifestyle and his personal enthusiasm in following a story physically as well as literally, taking him to all parts of the world. Dammit, he didn't need a budget gym membership like some of us.

"Dylan," he whispered. He was smiling, watching me watching him. He lifted a hand to his chest, teasing at one of his nipples, and I heard him suck in a short, fierce breath. I shuddered, instinct taking control of me. Dark hairs dusted across the skin of his pecs, then ran in a trail all the way down the center of his torso to his navel. And below. The skin was slightly tanned but there was a stretch of pale skin just showing under the waistband of his sweats. Long legs and strong feet, bare feet. I knew there'd be nothing else on under the sweats, and I was suddenly breathless. Neal Whitman was a walking wet dream. My own cock betrayed my reaction, swelling thickly inside my pants. And his reputation was well-known elsewhere, I'd read more than once that the success of his exclusives was partly due to his personal charm. Against him, I was truly the "sickly-pale" of Mitzi's description, a shadow compared to his vivacity, and so far from that wet-dreamlike status it was laughable...

"Dylan. Dylan?" Neal grinned and gently tapped my forehead. "Hey, come back to me, man. What are you thinking in there?"

"Nothing," I said. "Everything."

Neal laughed again and held his arms out from his sides. "So. You want some?"

I laughed as well this time; it was a joke between us. "Maybe. You did say I was too early."

He raised an eyebrow. "Well, if you're not sure..."

This time, I took the step and it brought me right up against his

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body. I wasn't very graceful and I think I stood on his toes, but he didn't complain. Instead, his eyes darkened and his hands clenched into gentle fists against my chest. I didn't wait for *him* to kiss *me*, but curled my hand around the back of his neck and pulled his head forward. The taste of his surprised pleasure was worth it. It was rich and yielding and after the first seconds, just as eagerly returned.

"Can't wait, eh?" he murmured into my open mouth. "Know how that feels." The words hummed against my tongue as I thrust it back against his. A bead of saliva trickled from the corner of his mouth and I licked at it, quickly, afraid of losing a single drop of his flavor. His hands opened and reached for my waist, starting to loosen the awkward fastenings of my pants. "Dylan? You okay?"

"Yes." I couldn't say any more but I didn't need to.

"Thank God," he said, and even though I knew he was joking, his voice shook with genuine relief. "Thought I'd lost my appeal. Thought you'd forgotten..."

"No," I said. My voice was more like a croak. *Never*. "Neal. Now. *Please*."

Chuckling, he sank to his knees in front of me and pulled my pants down to my thighs. Crooking his fingers into the waistband of my briefs, he tugged them down as well. No time wasted on foreplay, but that suited us both right now. My cock ached like it had a mind of its own, and it sprang free, the flesh hot and blood red, a telltale shine at its tip where I was already leaking with desire.

"Yeah," he whispered, his gaze on my groin. "*Please*."

He gripped the back of my thighs as an anchor and leaned forward. His breath was warm on the head of my dick and I nearly came right then. I staggered to one side so that I could lean against

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the wall beside the front door. Then I just stood there while he sucked me off, his dark head bobbing at my groin, his fingers pressing deeply into my flesh until they seemed to meld to me. My whole body ached now, but the core of my excitement concentrated itself in a tight, fierce coil in my groin and I knew I couldn't control that for long. Neal panted and hummed around me, his own breath hitching from arousal. I wanted to touch him, to hold more of him—to return this ecstasy—but I was pressed back against the wall as if I were paralyzed, my knees shaking. I managed to lift a hand onto his head, and I threaded my fingers through his hair. But I wasn't guiding him, just following his movements with amazement and raw pleasure.

He moaned, and his lips tightened on me, catching the ridge around the head. I came, fiercely and fast, with a cry of total surrender. As I jerked in his mouth, his teeth grazed me, and I could feel my cock throbbing and spitting seed against his tongue. For a few, glorious moments, I was nothing but sensation. I stood there, shaking, savoring it.

Then he moved, and my shrinking cock slid out of his mouth. The sudden tug of gravity was sharp against the oversensitive flesh. I realized my eyes were shut so I opened them, trying to focus properly again. Neal stood, grunting with the effort and grasping my arm for support. And there was me, hoping to use him for the same. He leaned into me and I could hear how harsh his breathing was.

“Too long,” he growled. “Jesus, Dylan. Too fucking long.”

I nodded, and put my arms around him, resting my forehead against his. I was smiling, stupidly I suspected. Neal was shaking and I realized he'd pushed his sweats down his thighs and was jerking himself off.

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“Yes,” I hissed into his ear. “Do it.” I peered down between our bodies, watching his hand pumping himself. The tip of his dick thrust out from his fist, then slid back in, shining, looking both angry and needy. I wanted my hand to be there instead, but for the moment, I reckoned the ends justified the means. From the look of pained ecstasy on his face, Neal did, too.

“Dylan?” He grunted, still shuddering, his eyes fixed on mine. His pupils were seriously dilated and a thread of his dark hair was stuck to the side of his nose with sweat. He was gorgeous.

I smiled straight at him, licked my lips, and whispered. “Come on me.”

He groaned, very loudly, and shot. I held him tightly as it spat out, the come spattering my lower belly, the fingers of his free hand digging into the flesh of my upper arm. I could smell his sweat and the hot tang of seed. I pressed my lips to his temple and felt his pulse thudding underneath the skin, then starting to slow as his body gradually stilled again.

“Fuck.” He sighed, deeply.

“Yes. *Please*,” I repeated, grinning.

* * *

Neal stumbled against me as we turned, cursing when he caught his shin on the table and bumping me against the wall again. I laughed aloud, amused at us both. Amused at everything! We were even more desperate and clumsy than usual, though we often never made it to the bedroom. The couch had seen more than its fair share of making out, and he’d taken me plenty of times on the floor, my face pressed against the thick carpet, my hands grabbing out behind my back to pull him close as he slid into me.

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I'd fucked him once on the stairs—a hot, impossibly delicious time, with his hand gripping the guardrail to keep himself still, his knees spread wide across one step and his head bowed down onto the upper one. He'd thrust his ass up toward me, the shadows between his buttocks and thighs glinting with eager sweat. I'd dropped to my knees behind him and died that small death very, very happily.

“Dylan. *Shit.*” He twisted around in the bedroom doorway, pushing me ahead of him.

My back scraped against the doorframe. “Ouch.”

“Good,” he growled. He frowned at me. “You’re drifting again. I can see it in your eyes. Need you with me here.”

“Oh, I’m with you.” I showed him, too, pushing him in return until we were both backed up to the bed. I took his head in my hands and kissed him fiercely, until I didn’t know where my lips ended and his tongue began. Then I shoved him, my hand in the center of his chest, and he tumbled onto the mattress.

He grinned up at me, his eyes fevered and his hand hovering around the waist of his sweats. I could see his cock swelling gently again, under the soft fabric.

I peeled down my pants and briefs with indecent haste, hopping around a bit when they got caught at my ankle, in the top of my boot. Neal just watched me, not speaking, his face growing more flushed by the second. When I finished, I stood there in front of him, naked. The room was warm—he must have turned the heat on when he arrived—but goose bumps rose up all over me. I felt self-conscious at the same time as I reveled in exposing myself to him like that. He had that effect on me, and I wasn’t complaining.

“Good,” he said softly. His gaze ran over me, its path sliding down each of my limbs in turn, lingering at last on my groin. “So

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good.”

“I’ve never done this for anyone before,” I whispered.

“Stripped?”

“You know what I mean. *Been* like this.”

His eyes softened. “I know. This is special, Dylan. We both know it.”

“Just...” I shook my head slowly, not sure what I wanted to say. “Just needs saying sometimes.”

“Consider it said.” He wriggled on the bed, yanking off his sweats. His thighs tensed; the muscles of his belly tightened. The patch of skin between his thigh and groin was paler than on his lower legs, the hairs thinner. Above that, I saw the dark curls on his groin and his cock jutting out from his body. It hadn’t been a bad guess of mine...he wore no underwear. He glanced back at me and grinned. “You want to do something more for me?”

I looked down at my own, reawakening cock and grinned, too. “Looks like it.”

We laughed together and I scrambled onto the bed beside him. Every time it was new and exciting; every first touch was impossibly needy. I was some way from being a virgin when Neal and I first got together, but I’d definitely never had sex like we had now. In the early months, we’d been full of hunger and awkwardness as we got used to each other, and so desperate I felt I spent all my time apologizing for being too rough, too clumsy, too inexperienced—too damned fast! But he’d never taken any offense, never shown any less enthusiasm for me in return.

Neal groaned in my ear. I lay facing him, with my leg lifted across his, so that our groins rubbed together. His cock was hot and hard again, and he started to thrust against me, seeking friction.

“Fuck.” I gasped.

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He started to laugh but his voice caught on a similar gasp. For a few moments we just held each other, kissing, licking, our chests pressed so tight together that my nipples were tugged painfully every time he moved. My cock slid against his, the flesh snagging, the pre-come slicking.

I knew when it stopped being just playful—I'd learned to recognize the tension in Neal's body and the agonized hitch in his voice. I leaned into him more closely, kissing him deeply, and I slid my hand down the center of his back to the dip at the base of his spine. His muscles clenched.

"I want you," I whispered, throatily. He didn't answer, but he tightened his arm around my waist. I stretched my hand farther, rubbing a finger down between his buttocks, seeking the ring of crinkled skin.

"*Shit.*" He pulled away, his ass slipped out of my grasp, and he twisted facedown underneath me. He arched his back, pressing up to my belly. "Fuck me," he muttered.

The tension clenched like a small, sharp fist in my throat. "Everything in the usual place?"

He nodded and I wriggled awkwardly on top of him, leaning over to the side table. He kept supplies in the drawer, though he didn't always remember to restock when he'd been away. He protested that Josie knew all about him, but I think he still worried about her visiting one time and finding a drawer in the family home full of condoms and lube. I grabbed a packet, feeling it slip against my sweaty palm. I fumbled a lot, opening it, though I rolled on the condom firmly enough. I slicked my cock quickly with some lube and dribbled more on Neal's ass. He jerked and yelped.

"Fuck, it's cold!"

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I laughed, but my breath was too shallow to hold it for long. I smoothed the lube over his hole, my fingertip sliding in and out of the opening. I watched the movement, fascinated, as if it were someone else's hand. The dark hairs in the crease of his buttocks were glistening with stray lube.

"God," he said. He groaned. "*God.*"

I set my dick at his hole and pushed in as carefully as I could. My hand was shaking by now and my head ached with tension. Everything I had was concentrated on my cock, on its slow and tight passage into him, on my fingers gripping the flesh of his ass, leaving red marks the size of pennies.

"Hey." I was fully sheathed inside him and I paused, breathing heavily, my heart thumping hard. I slid one of my hands over the curve of his ass, savoring the warmth of his skin.

"Hey yourself," he muttered back. He lifted his upper body on his arms and turned his head so that he could look back up at me. It sharpened the angle for my cock and the sudden squeeze made me moan aloud. "Dylan, it's so good." His eyes were wide, but his mouth was creased in a generous smile. "You here. You *there*."

"Damned good." I grimaced. "But not for much longer. I can't...*Neal*." I was so close, I could feel the ecstasy tingling at the base of my cock, the control slipping away from me like liquid escaping through my fingers.

Neal wriggled his ass and laughed raggedly. "Who cares? Plenty of time for more. But for now..."

I slid out a couple of inches, then back in. He grunted with satisfaction and his head fell forward again. I made a few more strokes and then I gave up any pretense of restraint. I thrust hard and came fiercely, my body shuddering and a strange, strangled cry hiccuping out of my mouth. I clung to Neal's body, pressed

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down over him, waiting for the shocks of pure pleasure to subside, at the same time wishing they never would. Underneath me, he moaned something, but I never heard the words through the rushing in my ears. I just hung on and held him as if I'd never let go. His hips jerked, his whole body went rigid against me, and for a second or two we really were that two-backed beast.

Then he relaxed and I peeled my skin away from his, sliding out my softened cock. We collapsed on the bed, a mixture of sweaty hot and cold, still close together. Lying on my back, I turned my head toward him. I pressed my lips against his throat and I could feel his pulse still racing. He stroked at my shoulder, his hand limp and barely touching me, but he seemed reluctant to lose touch.

"Need to clean up," I mumbled. The condom had shriveled around me and tugged at some stray pubic hairs. I groped around on the table until I managed to snag a tissue to scoop it up.

Neal didn't release me but rolled closer, his front resting against my side. His cock rubbed against my leg, damp with the residue of his spilled come. A trail of it clung to my skin, warm and slowly trickling down my thigh onto the bed covers.

"Later," he whispered. "Can we just...?"

"Take our time?" I finished for him, in uncanny echo of Bess's words. "Of course."

His arms tightened on me, and I held him in return, waiting for his breathing to steady and for him to nap, as he often did. By now, I knew what he needed. He didn't need to ask the question in the first place.

* * *

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I rolled over in the bed to reach the glass of water on the side table. The digital clock winked four A.M. at me. The room was darker than it should have been at that time of the morning, with only a sliver of early dawn showing under the heavy blinds. I peered around, getting accustomed to the dim light. There were a couple of empty plates on the table as well, smeared with sauce from our earlier supper, a fork lying beside them. The remote for the bedroom TV had fallen on the floor many hours before and stayed there.

Beside me, Neal grunted sleepily.

I pulled myself up to sitting, the sheet creasing around my hips. My skin was very warm and my legs felt pleasurably tired. Neal turned his head on the pillow to face me and his breath skimmed over my belly, warm and uninhibited. I'd have used the same words to describe *him*. Goose bumps of anticipation ran down my back.

"Can't sleep?" His voice was muffled.

I clicked on the side light and watched him scrunch up his eyes. "Sorry," I said, but I knew he probably didn't mind.

"Look like shit at this godforsaken hour," he grumbled. He ran a hand through his hair and only succeeded in tangling it even more.

"Oh, I don't know about that." I smiled and trailed my fingers down the side of his face. The stubble was heavier now but it felt good under my fingertips.

"You're not leaving?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. I have school later today, but I'll come back afterward. If you want me to."

He grunted again, but this time it was more like a laugh. "You bet." He shifted another couple of inches and reached across to kiss

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me, his lips brushing the skin under my arm.

“When do *you* have to go back?”

He shrugged. “Couple of days. There’s a briefing at the office on Thursday.”

I tried not to tense up. “Another assignment?”

He yawned. Maybe playing for time, thinking how best to phrase his answer. But when he answered, I couldn’t mistake the excitement underlying his tone. “Yes. Asia, this time. It’s a fabulous opportunity, Dylan, the company’s been pitching for it for months and now they’re looking for a team to present. The kind of retrospective I love doing. A series of commentaries on the changes in the last ten years from the point of view of ordinary family life...” The room fell quiet again.

“TV franchise?”

He nodded. “Hopefully.”

“You won’t be back for a while, then.”

“Dylan.” He ran his palm over the top of my thigh. “Maybe I will. I don’t know yet. Honestly.”

I sighed. “Some kind of gypsy.”

“Huh?”

I laughed softly. “That’s what Aunt Mitzi calls you. Even though she knows damned well you’re a writer.”

“She’s a wily old bird.” Neal yawned. “Maybe she’s right. They’ve both had their eyes on me since I moved here, you know, as if I might be up to no good. I’m sure Mitzi made a pass at me one time.”

“She didn’t!”

He laughed aloud at my shock. “No, I don’t think it was that deliberate. But she loves to flirt, doesn’t she? She came for tea with Josie a few months back when I was still here, and I think she

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was piqued I didn't take any notice of her."

"She liked your cake," I said.

He flushed and laughed again. "Good God, is that true? I think Josie passed it off as her own, she always uses my recipes. But she can never get the balance of cinnamon right, always drowns the apple..." He caught some expression on my face because his mouth twisted ruefully. "Your Aunts always liked Josie."

"I know," I said, wryly.

He slid an arm across my waist. "Come and tell me about it."

"In a minute."

"I've worn you out." He smiled. "Dammit, and you usually have plenty of juice left in you for another round in the morning."

"Not just yet, Neal."

He rolled on to his back and looked up at me. The silence started to drag while he caught his lower lip under his teeth. "What's up?"

I gazed down at my hands and saw I'd interlocked my fingers very tightly. I hadn't realized how tense I was. "I'll miss you."

"I haven't got the job yet, dummy."

"But you want it. You know what I mean."

Neal was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. I do want it. Bad. It'd make my name, being involved in a project like that."

"Which is what you always wanted. I know." I shook my head, sort of agreeing, sort of trying to cut short the well-worn discussion.

He glanced at me then away again. "It is. Everything—and the *only* thing—I planned for, all through college and beyond." He cleared his throat. "At least, until I met you."

I made a noise of disbelief.

He frowned. "You're an asshole about this. And you don't give

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me any credit for missing you, too. I'll come back when I can, you should know that by now. Maybe the trip won't be as long as we think, with air travel as fast and easy as it is. You know."

"Sure. I know." I'd never been on a plane in my life, but that wasn't really relevant at the moment.

"Dylan?" He poked my side with his finger. "*Shit*. You knew what job I did, when you first met me. I only came here to help Josie move in because I was between assignments. Don't get me wrong, I love this house, I was happy to share the cost with her. To share having a home, even if I wasn't around much to benefit. And of course, it was worth every cent, for the sake of meeting you."

I glanced at him, suspicious.

He pulled a face back at me, obviously still trying to lighten my mood. "Fuck you, you still have no idea how good you look, do you? Those fabulous brown eyes in your pale face. Damned smile..." His voice gentled. "You were so polite when you came to welcome us that first day, so friendly. I wasn't used to that, coming from the big, bad, cynical city."

The memory teased at me. "You were standing in the middle of the floor, cursing at that poor guy. One of the removal men had mixed up the boxes with your books in it, or something. You couldn't find your diary and you were beside yourself with fury."

Neal grimaced. "Damned morons." He caught sight of my look. "Okay, so did I really complain that much? But wouldn't you? A simple task, meant to be their job, get things safely into the place they're packed for..." He glanced at me again and started to laugh. "But you wouldn't, would you? You have the tolerance and patience I lack in spades."

"You were great." I could remember it vividly—my first sight of this dark, vibrant young man I'd never met before but who was

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completely uninhibited about yelling at an employee in the middle of his lobby in front of an unfamiliar visitor. Neal's barely repressed anger, the fascination of his fierce movements, his tousled hair and his slowly growing smile as he noticed I was there and probably realized what an idiot he must look himself, and all over a couple of books being mislaid.

Eventually, he apologized to the guy and the diary turned up in another box. I helped him find it, which was fun in itself, searching through the haphazard collection of stuff he'd brought to his new base. Josie had been delayed at work and so we were alone for a few hours. He found the coffee and made me many cups, only some of which I drank. He offered me cake and confessed with a slightly self-conscious grin that he'd made it himself. It was very good. I stayed until very late, just listening to him. *Talking* to him.

Neal sighed. He wriggled restlessly under the sheet. "So. This isn't enough, is it? Us. *This*."

I turned abruptly to stare at him.

"Don't get me wrong." He frowned back at me. "I'm not saying I don't like it. Look forward to it. I just mean..." His voice trailed off and he shrugged again.

It isn't enough.

"You have a great job. It takes up so much of your life." I tried to keep my voice steady because I really didn't want to sound churlish. "It's everything to you."

"Sometimes." He wrinkled his nose, stared up at the ceiling. "I mean, it's all I've ever done. I don't always enjoy it, you know." He wasn't very convincing.

"It's okay, you're right, I've known from the start what you did, what you need. What *this* is..."

He gripped my arm suddenly, far fiercer than he needed to be,

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because I wasn't going anywhere. I tried to tug away, but he just tightened his hold. "Don't you dare dismiss me like that, dismiss what we have. Why do you do that?"

"What?" Nausea nagged at the back of my throat. "Neal, I'm a lot less naïve than *you* give *me* credit for. You're traveling all the time, meeting new people. It's a hell of an adventure." I'd seen him getting ready for a trip, his whole body alight with the anticipation, his mind focused totally on driving his plans forward. And I'd seen him when he came back, too—the weariness and anticlimax of leaving that exciting life behind and returning to...

What?

"That's your world and you're successful there." I knew his agent had been pushing for a television deal for a long time; there was talk of him writing some travel books, not just articles. His talent coupled with his personal charisma made him more than just a writer. He could be a celebrity, too. "There's nothing to compare with that here."

He huffed. "You telling me you haven't had plenty of adventure?"

I laughed. I wasn't offended. "Adventure for this town is a new set of costumes for the summer procession, Italian bread stocked for the first time in Bess's local store, the church using desktop publishing for its weekly newsletter."

"And for you?"

"Something much more domestic, I'm afraid." I didn't often put it into words, not even for him. I always just assumed he knew how different we were. "It's watching some people slow down when they move in from the city, and some people increase in confidence as their families put down roots here. Watching a community build and settle and absorb change, but at its own pace."

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And over the last couple of years, seeing an increased proportion of my college students coming from local homes, pushing themselves forward on their way to success in the city. Or wherever they choose to go.”

He was watching me closely. “That’s *your* world. Watching others. Working for others.”

I frowned. “You make me sound like a mix of voyeur and saint.”

“But it’s what you like, isn’t it?”

“Being here?” I smiled. He knew the answer to that already.

“And what about romance?”

I laughed again. “The options are rather more limited. We’re not big on alternative lifestyles, at least not in public. I suppose there’s that guy at the store no one’s really sure about. Lizzie’s hairdresser cousin from up north. Some of the softball team at the leisure center who spend way too long in the showers.”

“Dylan, you really *can* be an asshole. There are men, here and out of town. There always are. There’d be plenty of interest in you, if you wanted.”

“I don’t want.”

“Yeah. But you could. You’re damned smart. And a good-looking guy.”

“What I am,” I said, slowly, and rather fearfully, “is spoiled. Spoiled for *you*.”

Neal just stared at me. Slowly, the skin across his cheekbones turned pink. “Are you worried I’m screwing around during all these *adventures* of mine?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “You know what? I’m not. I don’t want that interest in me, either, because I’m dating *you*.”

My heart beat faster. “It’s not like that, though, is it? Like

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proper dating.” What the hell was I really trying to say?

“And is that only *my* fault?”

I stared at him, bemused, but he looked away.

We were silent again for what seemed like a long while. Then Neal shifted to sitting, his shoulder against mine. We sat still for another few seconds. I was listening to his breathing and I expect he was listening to mine. All the time I’d known him, and maybe I still didn’t know much.

“So...Aunt Mitzi...is she watching the house?”

I was startled, but glad of the distraction. “Yes, she is. How did you know?”

Neal shrugged and grinned. “Don’t panic, I just guessed. If Josie’s not here, I still come in the side gate every time, and I keep the blinds drawn at the front of the house. I doubt anyone ever sees much of me.” He nudged my shoulder. “And especially when you’re here, too.”

I bit back the protest, because we both knew how it was. “She and Bess know I come here regularly. They think I’m courting Josie. Bess told me to bring the flowers.”

Neal chuckled. “That figures.” He glanced at the foot of the bed. At some time during the evening, he’d put the bunch into water and left the vase on the dresser. “They’re nice. I’ll accept them on Josie’s behalf, quite happily. Guess that gives you the perfect cover, anyway.” Now there was a strange, uneven tone to his voice.

“I’ll come and clear them away, when you’ve gone. Keep the place tidy.”

“Dylan, I don’t want a fucking housekeeper.”

I jumped.

“Sorry.” He grunted the apology and his hand caught mine on

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top of the covers. “Sorry. But Josie and I can keep an eye on the place well enough. Fuck it, she can afford an agent if she wants. She sometimes talks about selling up.”

My whole body was suddenly awash with chill. “Don’t sell.”

“I don’t want to, of course I don’t.” Neal turned to me. “This place grounds me. Funny how I only took interest for the sake of Josie’s project, but now...it draws me. Stupid stuff like painting, cleaning the place. I enjoy it. Cooking, too.” He sighed. “I wish I had more time for it all.”

I smiled. “You’re damned good at it.” Supper for me would have been cold meat, but Neal had cooked us a spicy Mexican pasta dish, from what I guessed were very basic ingredients. The house still had that warm, lingering smell of herbs. And he’d been the one to give me the recipes for the cakes I made for the Aunts on their weekly visits.

“Dylan. Always encouraging me. But it’s not just the house that draws me, you know? From the first day you came, I knew I was in trouble.”

“Trouble?” I laughed nervously. I’d never been accused of starting any of that. But I’d known how I felt about him, too, that very first day. The feelings I’d kept well buried, ever since I was young and knew my tastes were different from the town norm. Before I was old enough to start visiting the city now and then on my own, reading books, watching movies. Seeing other guys. I learned quickly. But I never said anything at home.

And then I’d met Neal, a man like me. A man I’d made my friend, whose witty company I enjoyed, whose lust for life stimulated me even after a slow, weary week at work. A man who was way more to me than a fumble, who shared with me more than a brief, embarrassed, physical release. Who showed me what a

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relationship might really be like.

"I was courting that day, Dylan. Took a while for you to notice me."

"No." He deserved honesty. "I always noticed you. Just didn't make a move until I was sure." It had been three months before we kissed; four before we fucked. Then I couldn't get enough of him. Just to be *near* him, that strange mixture of pleasure and pain. It was still the case, even after many more months of growing familiarity.

His eyes glinted. I think he was remembering the same things. "I was always sure. You're the best thing I ever found in this hick town." He leaned over and kissed me. His lips were dry and soft from his sleep. "*You* ground me." His hand had slipped under the cover and down between my thighs. The palm was hot.

I smiled, but I didn't turn to him in return.

He sighed and slid his hand back out, slowly. "Yeah, I get it. Like I said, this isn't enough. Monthly fucks, sometimes even longer apart. Using Josie and maintenance of the house as an excuse to come back here. But then never being seen out with you, never telling anyone. Side doors and drawn blinds and leaving the bed only mussed on one side for the housekeeper's calls. Remind me again, why do we carry on this way?"

I tensed. I wanted to pull away from him—from his simmering resentment—but I couldn't without being cruel. Whether to him or to myself, I wasn't sure any more. "This isn't the city, Neal, it's not easy. Dammit, remember how people were when Kyle Martin got a pierced nose? When Suzie Newman got pregnant by that supply teacher?"

"Doesn't mean it doesn't go on. Why's it all have to be behind closed doors?"

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“Not in this town.”

He was the one to pull away now. “Then maybe I shouldn’t be here at all anymore.”

Oh no. “Neal, don’t. Don’t go.” My voice sounded tight, pained.

He didn’t answer immediately. He swung his legs out from under the cover and over the side of the bed. Reaching for his sweats, he sat with them on his lap, making no further move to get dressed. “Dylan, I don’t mean that. I want to make it more. But not here, not like this.”

“I...” I couldn’t answer, though I wanted to agree. But to what?

“Come with me.” The words spilled out quickly, as if they’d been waiting to come out but he’d had to pluck up courage to say them. “Come on the trip with me. Be with me.” He turned his head to look at me again, and his eyes were bright with fierce excitement. “All the time, as my partner. Whatever you want. No one really gives a fuck who you sleep with, so long as you get the job done, believe me. God, Dylan, just imagine what we could do together, *see* together...”

“I can’t just leave.”

He stared at me. The excitement was fading. “Scared?”

“No.” I didn’t think so, but the nausea had returned, making me dizzy. “I have a job, a house. Students who rely on me. Family.”

He nodded but his pained expression didn’t agree with me. “But that’s only part of you, isn’t it?” He turned away again, staring across the room. The light under the blinds was brighter now, the day approaching. “What about the part of you that needs more? That needs *this*?”

I had no idea how to reply to that. He had the courage to say aloud what was only dread in the depths of my heart. “We...I have

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to make compromises. This is my home.”

“Fuck that!” He got up, abruptly. A sliver of light glanced across his hip, and lit up the muscled curves of his ass. Then he tugged up his sweats and covered himself. His back was still turned to me. “*You’re* my home, Dylan. That’s the truth.”

“I don’t want to upset anyone.”

“Jesus, they must know!” He turned suddenly, his hands clenched at his sides. “We’ve been fucking like this for months now. You think no one ever sees the bus drop me off, never sees me bring in groceries for a couple of days’ stay, for more than one man’s appetite? Dammit, Mitzi and Bess already know someone’s here in the house, even if they think it’s Josie. Do they think you come around just to dust the fucking ornaments? Stay the night just to check the washer’s working in the laundry room?”

I couldn’t answer. It all sounded ludicrous, laid out like that.

His voice was suddenly, chillingly calm again. “Anyway, that’s not it, is it? It’s not really to do with *us*. You haven’t told anyone about yourself. No one knows about *you*.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“About being gay.”

I felt things tighten up inside me, as if a drawstring were slowly being pulled. “It’s none of their business.”

“But it’s *yours*,” he growled. “If you’re ashamed of it—ashamed of *me*...”

“Of course I’m not fucking ashamed!” It wasn’t often I raised my voice, but now I knelt up on the bed, clutching the covers around my waist. My throat was gorged with fear and anger. “You have to understand what it’s like, living here every day. There’s a vice principal’s job going at the college, Dylan. I can’t fuck that up.”

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“So you fuck me up instead?”

“That’s not fair and you know it! Stay here long enough and we’ll sort something out.”

“Sort something out for yourself, and maybe I’d *want* to!”

We both stopped yelling at the same time. I was panting heavily. There was shock in his eyes and I knew mine would look the same. He took an unsteady step back toward me.

“Dylan...”

“I have to go,” I said. I couldn’t put words to all the other questions and pleas in my head.

“Yeah.” He sounded very tired. He ran a hand back through his hair again, tugging at some of the tangles. “You know what, Dylan? I think you underestimate them. I think they’d cope with it, even the Aunts. If you had the guts to be honest.”

“I don’t know.” I could see my pants lying in a heap at the foot of the bed and I tried to reach them without dropping the sheet, as if it were somehow protecting me from any more hurt. “It’s different for you, Neal. You chose a different world.”

“And maybe you don’t want to,” he said, so quietly I hardly caught it. “Not even for me.”

* * *

The Aunts were very fractious the following week. When I went to collect them from the Home, Mitzi was talking on the phone in a hushed voice and Bess looked quite flushed. She kept chattering to me, rather too loudly, and made a lot of fuss about us both looking for Mitzi’s gloves, until Mitzi finished her call, opened her bag and found them there as always. I had to escort them both from the building and into the car, or we’d never have

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got the afternoon started at all. But back at my house, the tea and refreshments didn't go much better.

"It's not your best," Bess said, peering at her slice of lemon cake. Her upper lip curled.

I resisted rolling my eyes. "I ran a little short of lemon peel. I'll return to the chocolate recipe next week, if you like."

"It's not a matter of what *I* like." Bess sounded very peevish.

Mitzi rattled her cup in its saucer. "Did you use four sugars, boy? It's a little sharp..."

"Good God!" I snapped. "That's not the only thing today!"

There was a sudden, startled silence.

"What's wrong, Dylan?" Bess said, her voice quavering.

Mitzi peered at me. Her lipstick was applied a little crookedly today. "The boy looks pale again."

Bess pursed her lips. "Too much time in the classroom. Too much childish company."

"He needs some proper lovin'," Mitzi murmured, and giggled.

"Dear God," I protested. I ran a hand back through my hair, disturbing the careful combing. My couch seemed less comfortable than usual. "I'm sorry, ladies. Forgive me. I'm...tired. That's all. Shall I get some more tea?"

"He looked well enough last week." Bess sounded very thoughtful.

"He always does, when he's been visitin'," Mitzi said. "He looks splendid when he comes back from the Whitman house."

Bess nodded at her companion. "He positively *glows*."

I snorted. "I am here, you know."

Mitzi sighed and nudged her plate hopefully toward the cake. I cut another slice for her. Bess was right, it wasn't one of my best attempts. I'd tried to make it without the recipe. On my own.

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“How were the children this week, Dylan?”

“They’re students,” I complained, knowing Bess wouldn’t take any notice, as usual. “They were fine, thank you. The preparation for summer exams is coming along well. They’re just a little...restless.”

“Their families all have such high hopes,” Mitzi said, who hadn’t touched a nonfiction book since she was twelve, as I remembered Mama telling me.

But I agreed with the sentiment. I’d had personal experience. Mama’s expectation of me had always been to study well and find a good job in town. Then the Aunts had taken over and added their matchmaking hopes. Expectations had been my companions for as long as I could remember, and conventional ones at that.

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Bess’s voice broke into my thoughts, catching me unprepared. *It’s not enough, is it?*

“I’m sorry?”

“You said they were restless.” She was looking closely at me.

“All work and no play,” Mitzi murmured beside her. Their combined perfume suddenly seemed stronger, as if they’d replenished it when I wasn’t looking. It was rather cloying.

“The sun’s out, Dylan.” Bess folded her arms in that way she had, hoping I think to intimidate me. “They want fun, too.”

“Adventure,” Mitzi said, with a little simper.

My head snapped toward her.

“You can have too much work, Dylan. Too much routine.”

“Be too *safe*,” Mitzi whispered, her eyes glinting. The pair of them were chiming back and forth like a pair of speaking clocks.

“What are we talking about here?” I demanded.

“You’re a sensible, loyal man, Dylan. We love you so dearly.”

“We want the best for you, y’know, y’all remember that.”

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“*But*,” Bess said, straightening in her seat and frowning as if she were addressing a recalcitrant child. “It’s only natural you get restless, too.”

I scowled at them, my head starting to ache. “Are you saying I’m like a child?” I bit my tongue. “I mean, like a student?”

Mitzi smiled in a rather sinister way. “Y’all are so *literal* sometimes, boy. But yes, I’d say you need some teachin’ in the ways of the world.”

“From you?” I didn’t mean to offend them but they were surely overstepping the mark today. I was in no mood for criticism.

“That’s not what we mean.” Bess leaned over and placed a surprisingly firm hand on my arm. “Just that it’s not only sense you need. You need spirit, too.”

“Bess, for God’s sake...”

“You have great spirit, Dylan,” Mitzi chirped in my ear. “So *much* of it, you’re like your Mama. You just don’t let it out too often.”

My fingernails dug into my palms. This was all too much to cope with. In fact, this week, most things had been too much to cope with. My days had been full of painful tension as I forged through the dull paperwork and the tribulation of keeping my fretful students to the timetable. My nights had been silent and stark and lonely, full of an entirely different—but just as miserable—tension.

I could do this, I told myself. I’d lived this way for many months, and if this was the price for those few hours of pleasure and...

What? For Neal, of course.

It’s not enough.

“Stop this right now!” I barked. The Aunts both gasped. I had

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tried not to turn on my teaching voice, but—already on the edge of a bad mood I so rarely entertained—they’d provoked me. “I don’t know what you’re playing at today, but that’s it!”

Mitzi wrinkled her nose with disapproval. “Well, Dylan, what on earth has brought *this* on?”

I ignored that. “Aunts,” I began. They both stared back at me, eyes wide, the air pregnant with curiosity. *God*. I’d rather have faced the worst of my classes. “I must...I need to talk to you about something. Something I should have told you about before now, something important. About *me*.”

Bess’s hand was still on my arm. She tightened her grip. “What you *need*, Dylan, is to get the door.”

There was a loud, firm knock at the door.

I stared at Bess. “How did you do that?” I glanced out the window, but the angle wasn’t sharp enough for me to see someone coming up the path. Though maybe Bess could, from her position in the armchair. I peered back at her, suspicions raised. “What’s going on?”

The knock came again.

“You want me to go for y’all?” Mitzi fluffed up her hair and made as if to get up from her chair.

“No, thanks.” I moved quickly to forestall her. The last time she answered the door for me, I ended up with a lifetime supply of kitchen cloths, a retractable mop, and a year’s subscription to a religious cult. As I went out into the hallway, I heard the pair of them whispering, their skirts rustling as they leaned into each other. No, another batch of kitchen cloths would really be the final straw.

It wasn’t a salesman of any kind. Neal was outside. He’d just raised his hand to knock a third time when I opened the door.

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He flushed. His eyes widened and I saw a sudden spark of excitement reflected in them. "Ah...sorry. Impatient, I'm afraid. Well, you know that already, I think. Hello, Dylan."

"Neal." My throat felt very tight.

His gaze flickered between my face and the hallway behind me. "Do you know, I don't think I've ever been in your house."

I gaped at him. I thought I could hear footsteps in the room behind me. "Probably not. I mean, Josie has visited a few times..."

"Ah yes," he said, his tone very steady. "Josie would, of course."

We stared at each other for a few more seconds. "I thought you were away." I tried to drop my voice but it seemed ridiculous to whisper.

"No." He didn't say any more, and I didn't know exactly what to ask. He shifted on the step as if uncomfortable. I couldn't remember ever seeing Neal Whitman nonplussed.

"Dylan, who is it?" came Bess's throaty voice. Like she didn't already know, because she'd been peering out of the doorway of the living room as if her eyes were on stalks.

"Is that Miss Bess?" Neal called through to her, tilting his head to see past my shoulder. "What a pleasure to find you here as well, keeping an eye on things."

I frowned at him but he deliberately didn't catch my eye. I heard Bess shuffling to the side and I could imagine Mitzi wriggling into the doorway beside her, also peering into the hallway.

"And Miss Mitzi, too," Neal said, his voice gentling. "How come you look younger every time we meet?"

Mitzi's giggle was a delight to hear, but I was still confused about why he was here, what he wanted.

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"Invite the Whitman boy in, now, Dylan." Bess's voice was a startling mixture of girlish excitement and reprobation for my lapsed manners.

I sighed and took a step back. Neal nodded at me and moved into the lobby, closing the door behind him. As we both turned to follow the Aunts, he pressed briefly against me. A shiver ran through me like an electric shock. My gaze locked on his face, meeting his in return. We stumbled the last few steps back to the door of the living room. I saw Bess watching us with what looked like a half-smile on her face.

"Here, let me help." Neal gallantly guided Mitzi back to her chair. Then he turned to Bess, who was darting glances between us.

"I'll manage myself, thank you," she said, but there was none of the irritated pride in her voice I usually suffered. Guess his charisma worked even better on a live audience than a newspaper one. I should know, of course. She wriggled herself back down in her armchair, next to the table that held the tea and cakes.

I searched around for a spare chair for Neal but he walked straight over and plumped down on the couch. It was where I'd been sitting. After a moment's pause, I went over and sat beside him.

The room was unnaturally quiet.

Bess cleared her throat. "Gentlemen."

"How long do you think they'll be starin' at each other like that?" Mitzi sounded genuinely intrigued. "Who's goin' to pour the tea?"

"Hush, woman. I'll do it," Bess said.

"Try some cake, Mr. Whitman." Mitzi waved a plate in Neal's general direction. "No? Well, we have to say it's not one of

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Dylan's best attempts."

Neal raised an eyebrow.

"Not enough lemon peel, he told us," Bess explained helpfully.

I just wanted to close my eyes and believe this wasn't happening.

Neal nodded back to Bess. His voice sounded perfectly calm and conversational. "It happens. You can use other citrus peel in the recipe, of course. In fact, a mixture adds something to the final cake, something out of the ordinary. Mischief and a hint of mystery. To the taste buds, that is." His gaze flickered back to me.

I stared at him. "Why are you here?"

"Manners, boy," Mitzi murmured.

"Do you know, I think I've had enough of manners today," I said. My voice sounded rather high and clipped. "I'll thank you to let me carry on a conversation in my own house with my own guest."

Mitzi raised her penciled eyebrows and Bess sighed. Some darker expression flickered in her pupils.

Neal looked over at the Aunts, then back to me. He sighed, as if accepting the fact he had an entrenched audience. "I needed to see you, and right away. To...tell you."

"Tell me what?" I knew I sounded rude, but the disorientation continued. That, and the heady excitement of his thigh just a few inches from mine. I could see the gentle pulse at his throat, feel the warmth of his body. When he moistened his lips to speak again, I had to bite my lip to keep in the gasp of desire.

"Dylan, give me a break. For a man who uses words as his occupation, I'm sorely tried today."

"Last time I saw you, you were going back for your briefing. Your career's taking off. You're planning the Far East travel." I

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sounded accusatory though, God knows, I thought I'd come to terms with it.

"Yes, I know. I did. It is. And I'm not." He winced. "I'm not going away this time. Well, not much at all. Not anymore."

I tried to take it in. "You haven't lost your job? Oh, God, Neal..."

He grasped my hand and I let him, I was so startled. "Dammit, you're still worrying about *me*! No, I haven't lost my job. I've still got it, and it's still great. Will you just shut up and listen?" When I nodded, dumbly, he continued, though he didn't let go of my hand. "I talked it through with them and although I'm going to be significantly involved, I won't be presenting. So I won't be traveling for all those months. Hardly at all, actually. I'll be back here more often than not." I started to reply, but he talked on over me. "And that's how it's going to be from now on. It suits me really well, Dylan. After all, it's the material that I love, creating the copy, writing the stories. I decided I wasn't looking for a career change where it's more about *me*."

"But you want..."

He gripped my hand more tightly. "I'm *getting* what I want. A home. It's just another route to it, don't you understand?"

I ignored the rustle I heard from the armchairs. I'd never known the Aunts be so silent. "You said..." I swallowed and started again. "You once called this a hick town. So I can't understand it, why *here*?"

In the background, I heard Bess click her tongue at me.

Neal mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "asshole" but I couldn't be sure and, besides, his tone was fond. "You misquote me, and you damned well know it. I said *you* were my home. And so that's really what you're asking, isn't it? *Why*

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me?”

I think I heard Mitzi sigh.

“Dylan, you won’t let me tell you, but I’m going to.” He glanced over at the Aunts, then back to me. Mischief sparkled in his eyes. “While I have you captive here. You know I want you, how you excite me.”

“Neal...”

“Hush, boy,” Mitzi whispered. When I also glanced their way, both Aunts’ gazes were fixed with fascination on Neal. I was waiting for their horror and shock, but maybe that was a reflection of my own.

“I want more of you, and if that means moving here permanently, that suits me fine.” His voice shook slightly. “I want more of your wit, your kindness, your perceptiveness. I want that familiarity and comfort and strength you find here.” He was starting to look very flushed. “I want more of the way you make me feel, Dylan.”

“How...?”

“Good,” he interrupted, quite fiercely. “You make me feel...just...good.”

Yes, that was definitely another sigh from Mitzi. I was hot with embarrassment by now but neither Aunt had spoken a word.

“I can’t...” I swallowed. I was still struggling to be properly articulate. “We can talk about this later, right? But this town is way too dull for you.”

He laughed. He never took his eyes off me, as if knowing he had me trapped. “No, not dull, just different. And that’s good, too. I mean, I’ll still have to travel, but not as much. And you can come with me, according to your schedule, let me share that with you. If you’d like that?”

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I looked back into those dark, shining, fearful, excited eyes. “Yes,” I said, quietly.

He grinned. “Good. That world was draining me, you know. I got sucked in, forgot what I was really good at. Got caught up with the marketing and hype and the false glamour. I needed to stop and take stock, to have a good reason to. I’ve been surrounded by guys who live in their own heads, run their own agenda, are constantly looking over my shoulder for the next opportunity.”

“Not a lot of those here,” I murmured, though his words warmed me.

“I only need one.” I was sure he was leaning closer to me, a move I welcomed and yet—in my living room—I was terrified by. “One opportunity, one guy. Now I can be with you, like I am now, but...properly. When I’m bone tired and disillusioned with hotels and transport and sharp, disinterested faces, I can come back to *you*. It’s a gift to me.”

By now, I didn’t know who was gripping whose hand more tightly.

Neal’s face twisted suddenly. “That’s assuming...God, Dylan. I never thought you...” He looked over at the Aunts, though I don’t think he was focusing properly. “I should have brought flowers or...something. Should I?” His gaze came back to me, raw and needy. “God dammit, say something!”

I smiled. “Don’t worry. You had me at the cake recipe.”
And Bess snickered.

* * *

I didn’t give anyone else time to react. I stood, because I felt more confident that way. Must have been the teacher in me. “I’ve

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not been honest,” I said. “Not to you, Mitzi and Bess, not to Neal, not to myself.”

“What’s he saying?” Mitzi asked Bess.

“You don’t need to do this, Dylan.”

I stared at them both, my heart racing, my mind set to continue. Bess looked fondly at me. Mitzi was blushing.

“I should have stood up long before now. Not like this, in my living room. But properly, in my world. Instead of hiding.”

“We love you,” Bess said quietly, but I ignored her.

“I’m never going to marry a cute girl like Josie—or any other woman, for that matter. I’m probably never going to provide you with a tribe of great-great nieces and nephews, though I suppose everything is possible nowadays. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you in any way, or failed your expectations, or if I cause you any shock or embarrassment or disgust.”

Mitzi’s snort sounded a lot like how “asshole” would have sounded from anyone less refined. Beside me, Neal reached up and took my hand again.

“I’m gay,” I said and waited for the sky to fall. It didn’t, but I suspected that was only a temporary hiatus. I continued, regardless. “We can discuss it later if you want to know what that means, if you have any questions. But you need to know I want Neal. I’ve wanted him since the day I saw him. More than that. It’s got more every time.” His fingers squeezed mine. “More want, more need. But I’ve been keeping it secret, making *him* keep it secret, too. I’ve been keeping him away from me.”

Neal cleared his throat. “Well, my job hasn’t helped...”

“No, it’s me.” I looked down and took heart from his encouraging, slightly stunned smile. “I’ve prevented us having anything more rewarding, anything more lasting. Denying you.”

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“Dammit,” he said. He looked over at the Aunts. “You see why I called him my home?”

“And you,” I said, refusing to look away, my voice starting to waver. “And you are my adventure.”

That’s what it was—what I craved and what I feared. The joy, the passion, the desperate need. The touch of his hands, the smell of his skin. His laugh, his quick temper, his impatience, my shocking, sweet desire. The need to discover more, the challenge of days together, the anticipation of sharing my life with him. It was all about coming alive.

The room fell almost silent again. All I could hear was my harsh breathing. My shaky legs wanted me to sit down again but my stupid pride thought I ought to stay upright.

“Dear Lord,” Bess said, very quietly.

“About time.” Mitzi sniffed. “May I have another cup of tea now?”

Neal smothered a chuckle.

I glared at Mitzi. “You knew? About being gay? About *me*?”

Bess put a restraining hand on Mitzi’s arm and replied to me herself. “Dylan, I’ll thank you to watch your tone. Don’t you realize how small this town really is? Maybe we don’t talk about these things in that blunt and largely ugly way you young people talk about *everything*—but that doesn’t mean we’re...”

“Babes in arms,” Mitzi finished. A lock of her hair had worked loose again and she flicked it away with an aimless finger. “We love you, boy, but you’re too tense. I said you needed some teachin’.” I saw her turn her accusing gaze on Neal. He had the good grace to blush.

I let myself sink back onto the couch while Bess busied herself with a fresh cup for Mitzi. Then she turned her serious gaze on me.

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"It will soon be the end of the school year, Dylan. You two should take a trip together. Get away from here and treat yourselves." Her eyes softened. "You deserve it, boy."

"Excellent idea," Neal said, too brightly.

I caught the glint in his eye. "Did you all plan this afternoon somehow?"

Neal shook his head, his surprise genuine. "No way, I only arrived in town this morning. Though it wasn't my usual bus. I got dropped off on the other side of the park and I briefly had to check my bearings with some helpful old gent who was washing his limo." Mitzi made a small whimper of noise but I ignored her. Neal flushed. "I've spent the whole damned time since then plucking up courage to come around."

I frowned at Bess. "I can't just *take a trip*. I can't leave you and Mitzi just like that."

"Nonsense." Bess snapped back with the spirit she'd demanded I should show more of. "Mr. Gerald will get us out and about for a few weeks. He's not family, of course, but he's perfectly adequate."

"We chat all the time," Mitzi murmured. Her eyes were on the remains of the lemon cake. "He always lets me know what's going on. And such a careful driver, too. A very hospitable man. Did I already say that?"

"Did we also tell you his son is the principal at the college, Dylan? He apparently often tells Mr. Gerald what a high regard he has for you. What plans he has for your promotion."

"*Most* hospitable." Mitzi echoed herself.

I was smiling but I wasn't quite sure why, as she added, wistfully, "But flowers from Mr. Whitman would have been *very* good."

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* * *

Neal helped me escort the Aunts out into the lobby and to my open front door. Outside, Mr. Gerald was waiting beside his freshly washed and polished limo to take them back to the Home. He didn't look at all surprised to see us all together, Neal at my side. Bess beamed at him, like something had been concluded to her complete satisfaction. I watched the way Mitzi waggled her gloved fingers at him and refreshed her perfume before leaving the house. I wondered, not for the first time, just how devious the Aunts could really be.

"You make a fine couple," Bess said, pausing in my doorway.

Mitzi nodded, her gaze appraising Neal particularly carefully. "Those strong dark looks are apparently very fashionable. They certainly balance that pale face of Dylan's."

Bess smiled fondly at me. "Thank you for another lovely afternoon."

Mitzi sighed, the excess scent wafting across the hallway. "It's as good here as the afternoon soaps."

"Better," Bess said. Outside, Mr. Gerald leaned on the horn, though very discreetly.

Mitzi peered up at me. "Will you be getting a piercing like Kyle Martin, boy?"

"At least he won't get pregnant like Suzie Newman," Bess muttered. "Come along now, Mitzi. Your beau awaits."

"Dylan?" Mitzi lifted her sweet, garishly painted lips up against my ear. "Just one word before we go?" Her whisper was the lightest breath, her kiss a caress of comfort and love.

Then Neal and I watched the Aunts amble to the end of the path, hand in hand, where Mr. Gerald bowed gallantly to hold the

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door open for them both. I waved as the car slowly pulled away from the curb.

“What did she say?” Neal’s impatience was getting the worst of him. He brushed my cheek with his thumb, presumably wiping away the print of Mitzi’s lipstick. “Dylan? Are you mad with me? Tell me about Mitzi. What did she whisper to you?”

I closed the front door carefully. “She said...” Then I turned sharply, pressed him against the wall and began kissing him. Hard and hungrily, and ignoring any protest there might have been. This was going to be a steady, cumulative project and I needed to make that clear from the start.

“She said she wants your recipe for cinnamon apple pie.”

CLARE LONDON

Clare took the pen name London from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant. She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic and sexy characters. Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter 3 stage and plenty of other projects in mind...she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home. All the details and free fiction are available at her website.

Visit her today at <http://www.clarelondon.co.uk> and say hello!

* * *

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