
HOME SWEET HOME

by

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The voice was high and sharp, and it wasn't just the quality of the cheap cell phone that was to blame. "Chaz? Can you hear me? God, it's like an electrical storm on this line. Your home number's been cut off. Did you forget to pay like last time?"

I lifted the cell a couple of inches away from my ear and sighed.

"Chaz? Chaz. *Dammit*. Say something, will you? I don't even know if this thing has connected..."

A slight smile teased the corners of my mouth. I wasn't going to pretend I'd forgotten what a pleasure it was to hear that voice, whatever the tone, whatever the words. But I didn't have to say so; not yet, anyway.

"Look, you want me to call them? Sort it out for you."

"No!" I spoke more sharply than I intended. I brought the cell back into proper earshot and sighed again, though under my breath this time. No point in being that wiseass I'd so often been accused of. "It's fine, Ryan. I just canceled the account a few days early."

There was a moment's silence on the other end of the line. I realized I could still read those silences as clearly as some huge ass hoarding. "You're moving again, then."

"Yeah." I smiled ruefully, looking at the boxes around my feet. "Guess so. The lease ran out, and the guy's asking a renewal amount that'd buy me a whole street in some states. That's if I had the money in the first place. And the job at the deli finished last week, so...time to move on."

"Sure, fine," Ryan said, in a voice that suggested it was anything but. "And you were going to tell me...when?"

"Hey." I kept my protest gentle. "I would have called you. Haven't I always informed you of major changes to my modest life?"

"Yes. You have. I admit that."

I could imagine Ryan nodding at the other end of the line, always determined to be fair. That was how he managed his life. But I was pretty sure he'd also be a little resentful, because I wasn't always prompt in sharing things with him. Not to be intentionally cruel--that was just how my life managed *him*.

"Why didn't you call earlier? I'm happy to help out. We both know you're not the world's greatest organizer on the domestic front."

"Yeah, right." I made a growling sound in the back of my throat that probably startled both of us. "So you'll come and help out like last time, because of your significantly better *organizational* skills. Of course. And so--"

"Ah... Chaz, no, wait. I didn't mean--"

--and so I'll end up with the rest of my admittedly cheap plates smashed, also four new, potentially restrictive clauses in the lease, three utility companies fighting to the ceremonial death for my business, one or more of the removal guys with a hernia, and everyone else with a migraine. *Just* like last time, right?"

I imagined Ryan running a hand back through his blond, well-groomed hair in frustration, half opening his mouth to protest. Worrying his lower lip, in that way he had. He had very firm lips that could also be very soft lips. It was a good description of Ryan himself, two rather contradictory sides. One very forceful man in public; in private, quite another. I sighed yet again, but I knew this time it was a fond gesture.

"Chaz?" Ryan spoke more quietly. "Tell me where, and when. I really would like to come and help you." He made a tutting sound, but he seemed chastened. "Okay, I know what you're saying. Last time you moved, I was a little too officious. I'm...I know I have a rather aggressive approach to projects. But I'll watch myself this time. I promise." He paused, waiting for a response, but obviously didn't hear what he wanted. "What is it, you want blood as well?" There was a slightly petulant, slightly amused grunt at his end of the line. "So shall I say *please*, then?"

I grinned to myself. I'm a sucker, I thought. *A sucker for cute manners.*

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It had been a hell of a day.

I hauled the last box through my front door into the apartment, bracing myself to drag it along the hallway linoleum to my new kitchen. Suddenly, Ryan was there in front of me, broad shoulders framed in the open doorway, backlit by the gray, late afternoon light seeping through from the main corridor. The half silhouette effect gave him a strangely ghoulish look.

"Sonofabitch!" I was shocked. I was also sweaty, my lower back was aching and I was so desperate for a beer I'd have strangled anyone who stood between me and the bottle, with my bare, albeit callused, hands.

Ryan stepped into the hallway, becoming more solid, shifting sideways to avoid several large, cardboard sheets of packaging that were stacked loosely against the wall. A couple of them wobbled and scraped down his leg. He pushed them impatiently back into place. "Great welcome, Chaz."

I frowned. I wasn't in the mood for company, was I? The day had been...well, stressful didn't begin to describe it. To start with, it seemed I'd not given the proper instructions to the removal firm, so they'd turned up way too early. And they'd only sent the one skinny, aged employee. I'd stared at him. The guy had stared back, with the implied challenge that he was all I was going to get. We'd forged an uneasy truce

and gotten down to work. I had to pack most of my stuff myself, but I forgot to start with the heavy, unbreakable goods, and by the time I realized the trick of leaving the fragile stuff until last, it was too late to repack. As the boxes were dropped awkwardly into the van, I winced at each muffled crash.

And things had just gone from bad to worse. Rummaging around my limited collection of clothing, I found most of my favorite sweaters dusty and moth-eaten, because I'd apparently just bundled them into the back of the closet as soon as the better weather came, and forgotten about them. I also couldn't find the number for the management company to complain about the full month's bills they'd charged me, despite leaving early. My final departure was further delayed while I crawled on my knees in the kitchen, probing under the decrepit old stove with a wooden spoon, trying to ease out a filthy computer disk that I thought might hold my missing address book. And where the hell was the fifty dollars I'd hidden away for emergencies in a safe place, so safe I'd damned well forgotten it?

Then, to add that special sugar frosting to life that fate so often gifted me with, I had to sit beside the skinny, aged, and now sweaty removal guy, as we set off in the van toward my new home, clutching my toaster in my lap and trying to avoid a poorly-stacked box of assorted cutlery digging into my neck. He made no concessions either to my comfort or to his client's precious cargo; we lurched across town at something just below warp speed.

It hadn't been a rewarding experience.

"Ryan." I grunted, pushing stray hair back off my damp forehead. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I know you didn't," he replied coolly.

I leaned over the box, my arms suddenly very weary. Ryan looked tall and confident and, well...cool. He was dressed in what he'd call a casual outfit. His designer jeans were about as casual as a tux; his boots looked like they'd just crawled out of the box. His shirt clung perfectly to his torso, the thin fabric probably something very exclusive and even more expensive. I drew a long, deep breath and tore my eyes away from that *clinging* effect.

Ryan Crawford looked fit, healthy and poster-boy handsome. He always turned heads, though to be fair, he never expected it and was largely unaware of his impact. And me? Never much to look at, or so I maintained. Slim and wiry, despite all the crap I often ate, messily-cut brown hair that wouldn't stay back behind my ears, features that were striking rather than movie star. And I was a very different guy. I didn't have Ryan's money or his tolerant relatives, didn't concern myself with clothes or possessions. With a family background that delivered more absence than approbation, I never felt the need to make much of myself beyond getting by. The complete opposite of him, in many ways.

But yet again, he'd never been the one to make anything of that.

I sniffed surreptitiously under the torn armpit of my T-shirt. I was conscious of my own ripe body smell and the new rip in the knee of my jeans from the packing case nails. I cursed the God of Disadvantage for picking on me, at the same time as knowing it wouldn't do a blind bit of good.

Ryan leaned down and took the other end of the box. I felt relief as more than half the weight was taken from me. The guy looked like Adonis, but had the strength of a young Hercules. Deceptive bastard. That was another of Ryan's characteristics. The deceptive bit, not the bastard. We lifted the box together and started to shuffle back toward the kitchen.

My ass bumped off the wall and I yanked the box awkwardly. "Uh. Sorry."

Ryan huffed. "You didn't expect me, because you told me the wrong day. Didn't you?"

I grimaced and wondered whether I could get away with feigning innocence.

"Don't turn on that innocent puppy look," Ryan snapped. "Good thing I happened to swing around the street a day early just to see what your new building looked like."

"*Good thing?*" I frowned at him. "Are you stalking me?"

He frowned back. "You just didn't want me around, wanted to do the whole damned thing on your own."

"Only partly right," I grunted back. We maneuvered our way through the kitchen door. The handle was loose and caught at my sleeve, ripping it another inch.

"What do you mean?"

I dropped my end of the box on to the floor with an even greater relief, and straightened. My joints crunched and a muscle spasm stabbed my thigh. There was a quiet, tinkling settlement of items in the box as background accompaniment. "You're partly right. This *is* my show, right? I'd like to try to handle it my own way. I think I can move Chaz Edmonds and his paltry possessions without needing your wealth and influence."

Ryan flushed, and I wanted to bite back the words borne of stress and exhaustion. I'd been needlessly cruel.

"I never said you couldn't, Chaz. You deliberately misunderstand me. Dammit, I shouldn't be surprised at that, I guess. But you've moved so often, and I've helped before, haven't I? I just don't see you making any kind of a plan, or advance preparation, and yet it's not an easy exercise, moving homes. Whereas I've had plenty of practice, Dad's diplomatic service taking us all over the world, uprooting the family all those times during my school years. Major projects, complex, too. Moving is the second most stressful thing in life, they say, and I've always considered the best approach--" He stopped abruptly, eyes widening.

"Man, I'm sorry." I couldn't hold back the grin.

"The *lecture* voice, huh? That's what you used to call it." Ryan was still flushed, his eyes darkening. "Well, if that's the way you feel..."

"God, I've missed you," I blurted out.

"What the hell?"

"Yeah, I have." My breath caught in my chest. *And don't I realize it now.* "You don't have to believe me. In fact, it'd serve me right if you didn't."

I gazed at him, assessing things properly for the first time that day. It was both cute and disturbing, the way Ryan blinked hard, as if trying to change thought mid-freeway, just to keep up with me. As if I were some alien species just discovered speaking English, which he was totally pleased about in theory, but startled to find the first words were probably obscene. His emotions were always so obvious, his expression so hungry for response. Personally, I'd had too many years of keeping things hidden to feel comfortable with such openness.

But it was honesty, too. Something to be admired. Ryan stared back at me, and I knew he wouldn't see the sweat and the dust and my ripped clothes. He'd see--as always--just me. There hadn't been many people in my life who'd looked as far as that.

"I don't know what the hell to believe." His current expression was wary. "Whatever your intentions, you rarely call, and we don't hang out together anymore. I suppose I didn't realize how things would change..." He shook his head as if to clear a disturbing thought.

"That's what we said, though, wasn't it? I'm just abiding by the rules you set."

"Not *rules*!" Ryan was doing that teeth-grinding thing where he tried not to get angry. I'd pushed that to its limit more than a few times. "I just thought...it was better we had some time apart. While we thought over what needed to change, what we needed to do."

"So you said. So you arranged. So you implemented."

"Okay." He sighed. "I can see where this is leading. I prefer to say they were suggestions, but I don't expect you to see it that way. You're not a fan of either."

He wasn't whining, just stating a fact, but it was sobering to hear, nonetheless. I ran a hand back through my hair, my fingers sticking fast in a couple of tangled curls. Yeah, I knew where this discussion was leading, too--where it usually did. Today...well, maybe I was thinking of breaking the pattern. If *I* were as honest, it was way overdue. "I did agree with you," I reminded him.

Eyebrows raised above glinting eyes. "Yes, that's right, you did. One of the few things we *did* still agree on. The rest of it was getting..."

"Old." I nodded. *Miserable*. Something familiar but unwelcome was tightening in my gut.

"Yes. That's a fair assessment."

There was a moment's silence as we stared at each other. Obviously, a lot of dust had gathered in my throat so I cleared it. "I'm not good at...you know. Talking about..." Though I wasn't usually *so* inarticulate. "The sappy stuff."

Ryan rolled his eyes though he didn't smile as he might have done in times past. "No, you're not. Neither of us is. Not our thing. That sappy stuff, as you call it. I remember."

I nodded but I didn't feel reassured. The room's emptiness seemed a physical ache around me. Probably I needed more furniture--that was why our voices sounded like hollow echoes. I wondered what else Ryan remembered of our time together, before it all started to get resentful and confused. Whether it was the noise and the nagging conflict of our personalities, the tension and anger of constant argument and failed expectation. Or whether it was the soft salty taste of skin; the whisper of shared amusement; the gasping cry of surrender in the middle of a night.

Not sappy stuff, at all--none of it. It was poignant, deeply emotional stuff for two guys who'd never really experienced things like that before. I didn't know about him--though sometimes I hoped--but I'd fallen hard and deep, from the day I met him. I'd just wanted more of him, all the time, and I'd been happy when I got it. Didn't look any farther than that. Hadn't examined what it should all mean in return. Had no idea how to keep things going beyond that exciting, lustful, exploratory, anguished time. How to pull things back when they started to slide through our fingers.

It had been stuff not easily shaken off. Especially in the middle of the night.

His gaze fell away only a fraction before mine did. I blinked hard. The dust had gotten into my eyes, too.

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Perched on one of my luridly covered, rickety stools, Ryan glanced around at the selection of boxes. "Let's get started, then." I imagined him clapping his hands together, pulling the pencil from behind his ear. "Where's your inventory?"

I sat gingerly on the other stool and coughed.

Ryan let out a breath, in a familiar, deliberately controlled way. "So...no inventory. How do you know if everything got here in one piece?"

"How do I know?" My voice rose, warm with warning, if anyone chose to listen. "I know it *didn't*, because I heard the crack when one the boxes got dropped, which was inevitably the end of my last two china mugs. But I know that what I packed got here--because, *one*, there were only a dozen boxes' worth; *two*, I had to pack the whole damned lot by myself into the van; *three*, I traveled all the way here with it either in my lap, stabbing my ears, or sliding dangerously close to my kidneys every time we took a corner too sharply; *four*..."

"Okay." Ryan held up a hand. "I get the message. I promised to watch myself, didn't I?"

"You can't help wanting to take charge," I said. "It's what you do." When Ryan looked up sharply to protest, I made a really big effort to put a smile into my eyes. Ryan looked bemused. Maybe he'd been angling for another fight. After all, we had enough practice.

"So, what about furniture? There's only the table, these two stools, and the kitchen unit in here."

Yeah, like I'd thought, I probably needed some more. One day. "There are a couple more chairs in the lounge. A small card table. Portable TV. A clothes rail for the bedroom."

"And...?"

I shrugged. Ryan groaned.

"Ryan, it's only furniture. Most of what I had before was begged or borrowed, so it was time it went back. I can buy more when I need it. There's only me, right?"

"Phone? You'll need to get connected again."

"Later. I've got my cell for the moment."

"Services? You need to get the gas up, and a meter reading."

"Sure." I tried to muster up a sense of urgency for these things, I really did. "I'll call them when I need to. Weather's warm enough not to need heating. I've got electricity and hot water. Enough for a shower, anyway." My muscles were starting to ache and I stretched my arms high above my head. One of the joints popped. Ryan watched me, his gaze on my hands as I tugged my wrist each side, straightening out the kinks.

"Bed," he said, and then flushed, not thinking the observation through. Or perhaps he *was*.

I grinned. "I've got my bedroll in a box somewhere. That's all I need. And you know that's comfortable enough, eh?"

He frowned at me but his color was still high. How damned cute he looked, a tall, blond god fallen to earth as a jock, with the comic book humor of pink shading on his cheeks. I tried not to remember other cheeks, other pink blushes on skin, behavior that was lusty rather than cute. Tall, blond gods could be impressively dirty young men in the sack, of course.

"Maybe I was right after all," he murmured. His eyes were still on me. There was a reluctant twinkle in them.

"Huh?" I felt slightly dazed.

"It was better for us to take a break. I can't...it's not so easy to think straight when we're..."

"Face to face?"

He grimaced, not answering directly. "What about supper tonight? Are you having a proper stove installed?"

"I'm no gourmet at the best of times." I was aiming for insouciance and falling a tad short. "I can eat out for a while. There are takeouts..."

I saw the realization arrive in his mind and lodge there. "Okay, so no stove. But what about money? When does your job start?"

"Don't know," I said.

Ryan looked at me like a school principal catching some kid with his hand down another one's pants--half shock, half fascination. "Do you have a new job at all, Chaz?"

I mustered up a rueful grin. "Ahh...no, not yet."

He couldn't control his look of horror, even if it only skittered across his face as it raced for cover. I sighed. "Let's not go there again, Ryan, okay? I've never failed yet to support myself. I have plenty of useful skills to offer."

"Too precious to share with a commercial, nine-to-five employer?"

I tsked. "Cut the sarcasm. I'll get a job, when I need to. And I'll do my best at it."

"Of course you will!" He meant it, too. Now he looked worried he'd offended me. "Dammit, I never meant anything else."

I nodded.

He stood up suddenly, his back straight, his jaw set. Flushed and tense. Fists clenched, yet I knew the anger was directed partly at himself, not just me. His voice was hoarse. "You've got an answer for everything, haven't you, Chaz? For everything I can suggest, anyway. For everything that matters to me."

"But not necessarily to *me*." I leaned over, the edge of the stool biting uncomfortably into my ass, and gently touched Ryan's arm. He shivered, though he tried to hide it. "Don't take this on yourself." *Please*.

"I promised to watch that as well, as I remember," he said, tersely. "Judging you and your life by my standards. Expecting you to be different..."

"Do you want me to be different?"

"Of course I don't." He sighed, but he hadn't hesitated for a nanosecond with his reply. "You confuse me, Chaz. I just don't understand you."

I grimaced, same as he had. "Ditto. But that's nothing new, right?"

He nodded, slowly. He didn't seem to get the joke. It choked me up far worse than the damned dust.

I stood up as well. "You know? I've just remembered where the coffee machine is. We should have a cup, to toast my arrival." I kept my tone light. "And if we can't save the mugs, there are plastic cups I liberated from the deli."

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For a couple of minutes, I scrabbled in a box, looking for the kitchen supplies, praying I'd had the sense to pack the coffee packet in with the machine. The God of Disadvantage was obviously on lunch, because I found everything and dumped it up onto the bare counter. Setting up the coffee kept me busy, kept my back turned to Ryan.

He didn't move, just stood there behind me. "Some of these boxes look unopened from the last apartment."

I smiled to myself. "I think you're right." I had to wonder what was so unimportant I'd never needed to look inside.

"You're always on the move. Getting ready to go. Never settling."

His voice was shockingly hoarse. I nearly spilled a spoonful of coffee, trying to concentrate on what I was meant to be doing. "Sometimes I have to be."

"But you like it." He was struggling to get himself back under control. "That's you. Never content in one place."

I didn't answer. It wasn't entirely true.

"Chaz, I...did I really fuck up somewhere?"

Was it my fault? he was asking, but he couldn't articulate it any more clearly. Besides, I didn't want to hear. There was such a slow response from the coffee machine I wondered if the electricity hadn't been turned on as promised, or the mechanism had got broken in the move. I stabbed at the switch with no little venom.

"Don't worry about that," Ryan said. "I'm on my way out."

I spun around, feeling a bit dizzy. "No need to go."

He laughed then, rather bitterly. "You don't need my help, or my hindrance, whatever you want to call it. And I have plenty of other things to do. It was rude just to invite myself over. I'm sorry I interrupted you."

"You didn't," I said, wondering how he'd hear my quiet voice over the noisy hammering of my heart. "And you don't need to apologize. We're always going to be friends, remember?"

"I remember," he replied. His gaze ran slowly over my face. "And that's why I'm going. So we'll stay that way."

I stepped forward, abruptly. We stood there in the kitchen, staring at each other. Behind me, the coffee machine gave a lackluster gurgle.

He hitched a breath. "You sure that's safe?" He tried to examine it over my shoulder.

"I wanted this time to be different," someone said, someone who sounded strained and a little pathetic. Hell, it was *me*. "This moving thing. I wanted you to see me settling in, to see everything managed okay. To see you don't need to worry about me. That I'm fine on my own." *That you can move on, if you want.*

It wasn't what *I* wanted. I stared at the equally disturbed young man in my kitchen and I'd never been more sure of anything in my life.

"How can you stand it?" Ryan's voice was strained, too. A fine couple we were. "No job, no goods. No support network, no advance planning."

"Minimum hassle. That's what I've always looked for in the past, all I can cope with. I just concentrate on *me*, and where I need to be, and what I need to do. I know it's not for everyone..."

"It's a nightmare." The implication was there--*you're* a nightmare.

I felt the pangs of guilt and regret. "And it's damned selfish, isn't it? Disappointing and frustrating."

"I never said..."

But of course, he *had*, albeit in the heat of argument when we both always found ourselves extraordinarily articulate. "It's childish, too, trying to avoid responsibility, to avoid commitment. You were right. So how can *you* stand it?" *Stand being with me?*

His eyes narrowed. "I said some shit I didn't mean, but you know that. I never really thought of you that way." He shifted awkwardly, as if he wanted to take hold of me but didn't know how well it'd be received. "You know how it was all getting...confused."

Something started to move inside my gut again. It wasn't heartburn, although I hadn't eaten properly for a couple of days. It seemed to be inextricably linked to the tightness in Ryan's body, his fight to keep his movements under control and his expression sympathetic. Toward *me*.

I took a deep breath. "Yeah, I do know. And I think I was meant to be changing my own behavior as well. I think I made promises, too. About growing up, about remembering I might have someone else's interests to consider. Right?"

There was wary gratitude in his eyes. "Yes, you did. You were going to watch yourself, as well."

We did some more of the staring thing. "Haven't been too good at it so far, have we?"

"No." He shook his head, eyes rueful. "Control freak...you said that, plenty of times. I was sweating the small stuff. Chill out, you said. *Back off.*"

I winced. "Yeah, I can talk shit, too."

He smiled, genuinely amused I think. "Look, I said before, I don't want you to be different--"

"No," I interrupted. "I know that, too. Wouldn't work anyway, eh? But it wouldn't work with you, either. You are as you are."

"Yes--"

"And that's just how I like you, Ryan Crawford."

He went very quiet. I couldn't hear a breath, couldn't see his chest moving. He worried his lower lip again and I couldn't take my eyes off the gesture. My gut was still disturbed, but it wasn't an entirely unpleasant feeling. I suspected I knew where *this* discussion was leading, too.

"You like..."

"Yeah," I said, more firmly. "You. As you are. Liked you the first day I met you." *Fell for you shortly after.* "Whatever crap I say to the contrary, it's good to know I can rely on you. Good to know you look out for me. Yeah, you drive me mad. But..." What should I say? How should I say it? He could take a joke like the next guy, but this was something else. "You're a challenge to me. It's exciting."

"You mean the differences?" He was looking at me from under half-lidded eyes.

I held his gaze, trying not to blush like some idiot. "More than that. You...yourself."

He nodded. Didn't answer.

It was still my spot on stage. "So, I can see that this lifestyle of mine is a problem for you."

"You can?"

"Yeah. And I'm sorry about that, I genuinely am. I guess it wouldn't hurt me to be a little more responsible. It wouldn't hurt me to admit that just concentrating on *me* doesn't always get me where I want to be. That sometimes I have to backpedal for a bit, and mop up a few mistakes. That sometimes I wish..."

Ryan's mouth opened slightly and he moistened his lips. "Chaz..."

"I wish sometimes I'd thought things out a little more carefully."

He looked startled. "You mean, like the moving?"

"Uh-huh."

But that wasn't actually what I was thinking about. I was suddenly more concerned that I'd let some pushy blond with cute manners talk me into a separation that--if I'd ever had the sense to realize it--I'd never wanted. I *did* like the way he looked out for me, provided the anchor for my occasional turbulence. I complained about it but, yeah, I'd missed it. And if I'd put some kind of careful thought into the whole separation suggestion, rather than the arrogance I wore like a badge of honor, I might have been able to bring some compromise to the table, rather than a shrug and a surrender. It was a two-way street. Or so someone had once told me.

Ryan's face was a picture--a picture of strange, shocked hope. At least, I hoped that's what it was, and not permanent hemorrhoids from sitting on the damp, crappy stools that I was sure I'd thrown out after the last move.

"I can see things a little more clearly, too," he said. His voice wasn't hoarse anymore. It was soft and low, issuing from those soft yet firm lips of his. Ryan spoke a lot of sense, of course. He could be a fool, same as I could, but I knew it was plain cussedness that often prevented me from distinguishing between the two. "I guess I can see that it's not the end of the world, not having a plan."

My turn to be startled. "No?"

His face twisted in a wry smile. "Guess that's something from a control freak like me, eh? Sometimes I like the carefree, the sudden. The spontaneous."

"You do?"

"I'm working on it. You're worth it."

Dammit. That sly grin of his infiltrated my defenses like a rat under a fence. I took another of those deep breaths. "Ryan, I want to do something fairly spontaneous right now, but I'm just not sure how close you are to that coffee machine, which will either explode in your face or you'll want to beat me off with it--"

He beat me to it instead. He took two more steps forward, slid his hand around the back of my neck, pulled me forward and kissed me. *Hard.* His lips were at the firm stage, his palm was slightly sweaty--just how I liked it on my skin--and he smelled like the most delicious thing I could think of, if I'd been able to think clearly at that moment, if his tongue hadn't been sliding into my mouth, if he hadn't been whispering against my cheek such incoherent sounds of need, such gasps of *please...*

It wasn't only the cute manners I was a sucker for.

Carefree and sudden? *Dammit*, the man was one hell of a surprise to me. His mouth was insistent, his hands kneading my ass, his knee pushing between my thighs. When I pulled back briefly to grab another breath, I saw his eyes were glitter-bright.

"I missed you too, Chaz." His expression said it far more vividly, but words were good. Words were probably *needed*. "Is this...? I mean, it's been a while." He ran his hands down my arms, gripping me, feeling me. My palms opened, reaching for him in return. "We haven't..." He laughed, a short, pained sound. "This was never a problem, right? But we said we weren't going to use each other just for the sex, for pity fucks..."

God, we'd *both* talked some shit.

My answer was wordless. I cupped his face with my hands and returned the kissing with just as much enthusiasm. Guess that was enough to reassure him.

Laughing, he pushed me ahead of him, out of the kitchen. We bumped off the walls along the corridor, legs unsteady, mouths meeting and then missing, hands grabbing and holding as tight as we could, as if the moment would somehow escape without our full attention. He twisted us around and we stumbled into the bedroom. Empty, no blinds, a couple of boxes stacked in the corner, and nothing else. Our boots made noisy footsteps on the bare boards. It looked no different from the empty living room, of course, but he'd made a lucky guess. I broke long enough from him to make clumsy gestures about finding something for us to lie on.

He grinned. "Is this your new way of considering my interests?"

"Don't push it, you--"

He laughed, his lips ghosting back out toward mine, his breath warm on my jaw. "How much longer will I have to wait?"

My heart did that leapfrog thing, like I was feeling nauseous but for a much better reason than sickness. "Just a minute, that's all. For waiting...you know. The bedroll's in one of these boxes." *I think*. I rolled my eyes. "Ryan, the floor's not swept. Previous guy took the carpet with him. It's cold..."

Ryan chuckled, his shining gaze following the movement of my mouth as I blustered. "I really like it when you think of me. But today I don't care. We can do whatever you want."

I don't care? Good God. The tension in my chest twisted one last time then burst apart, flooding me with virtual warmth inside. He helped me find the bedroll and we spread it out between us, laughing breathlessly, hands fumbling awkwardly on the fleece fabric because we were far more interested in stroking each other's body. When his hip nudged against mine, I shivered, the touch as intimate as if we were already naked, my cock thickening swiftly like it was our first date all over again.

"What about the other things?"

I stared at him. "Things?" Then I did blush. "Toilet bag. Under the rest of the bedding."

He groped around inside the box and dragged out my bag of bathroom supplies. I prayed to that same old god that I still had condoms, because I'd stopped carrying them as essential supplies when we first stopped...well, seeing each other. He pulled out a crumpled box, half full. Another swipe into the bag found a small bottle of lube. Holding them in his hands like trophies, he looked at me and grinned

The joints of my knees seemed to have been replaced by molten rubber. "Ryan..."

He hesitated. "God. Am I assuming too much?"

I shook my head slowly, my lips still mouthing his name.

"Okay, then I'll put them over by the wall, they need to be within reach but you don't want them rolling around in the dust--"

"*Ryan!*"

Shock flickered in his eyes. "*God*. Sorry. I mean, I don't *mind* the dust, I just wanted to make sure things were good..."

"Come here," I said, hoarsely. "Now." Like I cared about the dust or how far I'd have to reach out. Like I cared about anything, apart from touching him again. Later on I'd worry about getting some fair use out of those supplies. He looked at me and the shock eased away. He understood. *Felt the same*. The inner flood of warmth seeped down my veins, heating up all body parts south.

And spontaneous was definitely his new game. Before I had a chance to initiate anything else, he peeled my tattered shirt off over my head, then pulled us both down to our knees on the cover. Don't get me wrong; he'd never been a reluctant lover. He'd matched me in passion, from the very beginning. But he'd let me lead most of the time--deferred to my moods, to my preferences. He loved it all, he always said, with

what he would have called a wicked smile. *Cute*. He had no idea what real wicked meant. But that was such a huge part of his charm. One of the many reasons I liked him.

And yeah, maybe much more than that.

He flipped open the button of my jeans and tugged them down my thighs, none too gently. My cock was already straining at the waist of my briefs, the swollen head pinched in the elastic. I pushed the cotton down my legs as well, freeing myself, and then leaned on my hands to brace myself. But Ryan caught me unawares, taking the opportunity to push me over. I was unbalanced and my knees buckled underneath my weight. I fell sideways and then on to my ass, gasping, hobbled by my jeans and with my cock bobbing out against my thigh. He leaned over me, smirking. Maybe he was better at that wicked smiling than I'd ever given him credit for. And then he bent his head over my lap and went down on me.

Dear God. Those lips had all kinds of extra sensation now, tightening around me, tugging and sucking. I groaned and flattened myself out on the cover, kicking my jeans down and off at one ankle so that I could spread my legs wide around his shoulders. He put a hand on my chest and held me down, though not with any aggression. Just...holding. I wriggled underneath him, my hips juddering, my gut coiling in a delicious way. His tongue flickered around me, sliding up my cock, then down again, licking back and forth.

"Oh God. Wait." I shuddered, pushing at his shoulders, knowing I was going to come if he kept that up. Half of me was desperate for it, half of me wanted the anticipation to last much, much longer. The whole of me wanted way more time for us both to enjoy.

He drew back, panting. His shirt hung crookedly where I'd tugged some buttons open. I watched his fevered eyes, the haphazard way a blond tendril stuck to his forehead with fresh sweat. He started to unzip, wriggling his hips to pull down his jeans. I squirmed about again, wondering whether to bother untangling the other leg of my jeans right at this moment. We were both clumsy, both frantic. *Just* like the first date.

"Chaz? What do you want?"

That was one of those questions we could spend all night and a crate of beer discussing. But at that moment, things were clearly single-minded. "You. On top."

Ryan raised his eyebrows and his breathing got shallower. Kneeling back, he pulled his jeans and boxers to his ankles, toed off his boots, and tugged the clothes off after them. The shirt followed, yanked off over his head. Naked, he was even more gorgeous. His chest rose and fell with quick breaths. The muscles of his thighs bunched as he crouched back over me, straddling my hips. His legs were covered with a fine coat of hair, and his cock was thick, jutting from his groin, crimson-dark at the tip. Sweat glistened in the hollow of his throat. I licked my lips and hoisted myself back up on my elbows.

"It's going to get cold in here," I said. What the hell was I going on about? Was I *nervous*? "There are blankets in that box, too. Might even be some cushions..."

"Like I care about that," he whispered. "Shut up and lie back." And, startled, I did. Kneeling over me, he stretched out his arm and snagged the condoms and lube from off the floor. He dropped a condom onto my chest, nodding at me to do the necessary, while he flipped open the lid of the bottle. The glint was back in his eyes. I fumbled to get the packet open, sliding the latex onto my cock in record time. I barely glanced down at my crotch, I didn't want to miss a second of staring up at *him*. Ryan looked like he was concentrating on the logistics of getting enough lube on his fingers without the bottle spitting the stuff all over my bare chest, but I could see his eyes darting around under the half-closed lids, sneaking a look down to my face. The pink color rose on his cheeks again.

"I like to watch," I said, quietly.

He smiled. "Idiot." But he straightened his shoulders under my gaze, lifted his hips, and reached down between his thighs. I sucked in a breath. His wrist nudged aside his balls, hanging darker-skinned and heavy behind his arousal, and he stretched even farther back. I watched the way his eyes narrowed as he played with his ass. I saw the flicker of shocked delight in his eyes, showing me he'd pushed a lubed finger inside. I smiled when his mouth opened and no sound came out.

My voice was shaky. "That's a damned good look on you."

His pupils were dilated and his arms shook but he kept up the smile. He shifted his knees forward to get a better position, then brought both hands back in front. One of them curled around his cock, pumping himself slowly and lustily. Then, still stroking, he started to lower himself, brushing the crease of his buttocks along my swollen cock.

"God, *yeah*, take it slow." I gasped, half due to my need, half from worry for him. My dick felt thick and extra heavy, leaking pre-come. I slid my hand around the base of it, holding it erect. It was very hot against my palm.

"It'll be okay," he whispered back. And then he pressed on down.

I saw him wince as I breached him, but he never hesitated. He sank on to my thighs, his ass settling on my groin, and he gave a long, heartfelt sigh. I guess some of it was due to the effort, but I wanted to believe the rest of it came from rediscovered pleasure. Just at that moment, I was reveling in it myself. I couldn't remember why the hell we'd ever thought giving this up would be a good idea, when it was one of the many things that bound us, not separated us.

"Oh yes," he moaned.

But it wasn't just the sex, fabulous though this was. I clenched my muscles and thrust up into him at the same time as he bore down.

"*Fuck!*"

I grinned and gasped. "Doing my best here." My heart was aching, full of something much more than physical lust. I watched Ryan lift up and down, still caressing his own dick, his other fist gripping my hip and the muscles tightening across his belly. I savored his wide-eyed pleasure, the grunts and half-breaths that came from his mouth. The smile that had no pretension or shame or resentment.

"Shit." I moaned. "So good."

He nodded and pressed his ass against me again.

"Not this." I grunted. Not *just* this. "I mean...you."

His free hand darted out and grasped my jaw, pulling my chin up so that even if I'd been avoiding it, I had no choice but to stare at him. He fixed his gaze on mine as he moved his body slowly up then down again, riding me with fierce, deliberate, greedy enjoyment.

"This is no pity fuck, you know?" It was almost a growl.

I swallowed heavily. "Sure. I know."

"So lie back and take it." He hissed through his teeth and started to speed up. Didn't I say he could be impressively dirty in the sack? He clenched the muscles of his ass and squeezed me. He damn well *squeezed* me. All those hours he spent in the gym were paying off, in my opinion, all that wondrous determination to concentrate his efforts--and those damned muscles--just *exactly* where he wanted them.

"Oh, dear *God*. Ryan! I can't hold it..."

The thrill ran through me without check, its seductive breath prickling down my back, its irresistible fingers tugging the promise of orgasm from the coiled desire, deep in my groin. I had no control over it whatsoever, not anymore. I grabbed at Ryan's arms, suddenly breathless, my vision blurring. Dammit, was he grinning at me?

"Give it up, Chaz," he whispered.

I didn't have time to wonder if he meant anything other than my climax. It shuddered through me, making my cock jump and swell, making me thrust harder and deeper. My back arched and I groaned aloud, once, twice, maybe many times, my stomach muscles tightening painfully as I came. Lodged deep and warm inside Ryan, my mouth reaching for him, my hands clutching him close. I could hear his laughter over the rushing in my ears as I fell back, letting the rush of sensation flow right through me. I was panting, gasping. I may even have been sobbing. *Like I cared*.

As my vision gradually settled again, I looked back up at him. There was a faint sheen of sweat down between his nipples and his neck was flushed. He was still stroking himself, still moving on top of me, though just a gentle rocking by now. As I watched, his eyes narrowed and his tongue darted out to moisten his lips.

"You, now." I whispered, too. "*Please*."

He gave a kind of strangled cry and his body went rigid above me. The come spat out of his cock, over the top of his tightening fist, splattering against his belly and dripping down on to mine, warming me outside as well, filling the air around us with the rich tang of sex.

He leaned forward, shaking, but he didn't collapse on to me. Instead, he just held himself there for a moment as his tension eased. Then he touched his free hand to my face again, this time to brush a tangle of hair off my forehead. His breathing was gradually slowing; his touch was astonishingly gentle.

"So good," I repeated, softly. "So very, very good."

Ryan just smiled and nodded.

That worked for me.

* * * *

I thought I might invest in a bed. After I got a job, of course, and paid off a couple of the more insistent debts. And took Ryan out for some food. *Good* food, not just my usual pasta or multi-layered sub. He deserved good stuff. *Whatever*. I knew I was grinning like a loon, the muscles at the side of my mouth feeling unusually stretched. But it was a damned good feeling.

A cool draft sneaked across the room from a chink in the window frame. I sighed quietly. After we'd finished the reunion sex, snickered with awe and embarrassment at our teenage-style frenzy, and then made out some more for a half hour or so, we'd found a blanket to pull over ourselves, agreeing we should rest.

But maybe I'd dropped off to sleep for a moment, because it had slipped down from around my torso, and now my nipples pebbled up with the fresh air.

I stretched out my legs. My briefs were still awkwardly snarled around my left ankle but I wriggled out of them slowly and easily. Not a problem. *Nothing was*. I sighed again and rolled over on the bedroll, raising some dust and a nervous money spider from the nearest corner of my virtually empty bedroom.

Empty--except of course, Ryan was there with me, also naked as a baby but built like all man. He was lying on the same bedroll, his head turned my way, staring at me with a look in his eyes that probably mirrored mine. I imagined I could still hear the delicious echo of his cry of satisfaction bouncing off the bare walls. I ran my hand down his chest, tracing the line of thin, curled hairs and resting my palm against the heat from his skin. Yeah, what a fine couple we were.

"Yes, please," he murmured, and grinned at me. I knew exactly what question he was answering, because it had been on my mind, too. He just had the manners to ask nicely.

"Hey, I'm out of practice. Recovery may take me a moment more."

He chuckled.

I smiled, too, because it really didn't matter. "Some things are always the same aren't they, Ryan?"

"Guess so." He looked very settled, lying beside me. All the tension in him had gone.

"And maybe some things are better new." I breathed gently into his ear because I knew it tickled the hairs on his neck and he always liked that. His hand slid back between my thighs and nudged under my balls, making the skin crinkle with goose bumps of pleasure.

"Uh-huh." His murmur was relaxed. "There'll be advantages, I'm sure." He rolled right over to face me, and his nose bumped against mine. "I missed you a lot, Chaz."

"You said that before."

The skin around his nose wrinkled. "Let me say it again."

Our lips brushed together, just a gentle touch, an acknowledgement. At times like these, I could forego the smart-ass comments. I'd almost forgotten what happy felt like. It was the warmth of the blanket and the smell on it of our bodies and sex. It was flakes of cheap paint falling from the ceiling, and a faucet dripping in the nearby bathroom. It was the comforting aroma of coffee, seeping through the apartment. *Damn*. Guess that'd be well stewed by now.

"So...you want to go again?" When Ryan's only reply was to squeeze my balls more firmly in his palm, I laughed. "Soon. But not that. I meant us. Have we had enough time apart?"

"You mean a fresh start?" He sounded cautious.

"No, just in a new place," I said. I kept my voice soft in the hope it hid my nervousness. It had been soft when I groaned Ryan's name into his kisses; raw, when I'd let my trademark insouciance and carelessness fade into stark, vulnerable need. "We don't need to start again, because we're already there. Always have been. We just have trouble with the domestic front, don't we? Liking different things, sharing different attitudes to real life."

"Differences." He sighed. "Chaz, I don't know."

"Yes, you do. We're working on it. You said it--it's worth it."

"Yes?"

"Yeah." My voice was firmer now. "Believe me. Look at what's the same. Make the most of it. What's good." I licked slowly along the line of his jaw, tightened my arm across his chest. "What I love about you."

His body suddenly tensed under my hands. "Chaz."

"No point falling for one thing, then complaining it's not something else." I sighed. "Is there? You are as you are and that's what I want. If it works, it works."

"Is it that easy?" His cheeks were pink again, but he was relaxing against me. Suddenly, he grinned. "Yes, maybe so. That works for me, too. But what you said..." He dropped his gaze, but not before I'd seen the wide, bright spark in his eyes. "Kind of sappy, you know."

I laughed lightly, following his lead. "Sure. Probably the dust got to me." Maybe not a discussion for today, then. *But still true.* "I'm getting hungry. You want the shower first?"

"In a minute." Ryan sighed, relaxing on to his back again. "So. A new place." He hesitated for a moment. "Will you stay?"

I breathed deeply. In amongst the sweat, I could smell his shampoo, the light tang of mint toothpaste. "Don't see why not. Maybe that's what I need now, to put down some roots. Not just a place for my boxes." *A home.*

"Home sweet home." Ryan's contentment was like a purr. Maybe he read my mind or maybe we were just on the same page for now.

I leaned over and kissed him. Extremely thoroughly.

"Very sweet," he murmured, his expression dazed.

I nodded. "Yeah. Very sweet indeed. Let's forget the food and the shower for a while longer. Now it's my turn to say shut up, and let me taste some more." And I rolled him gently over onto his belly.

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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