



**How The
Other Half Lives
Clare London**

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

...My friend Ethan looks both annoyed and bemused—I suspect he's struggling to remember the meaning of the word *detritus*. "You've lived in this building for six months, but you have no idea who your neighbors are. You're not involved in neighborhood committees, you don't play any sports, you have weekly grocery deliveries so you never mooch around the supermarket. You work long and erratic hours, and I've never known you to entertain anyone here except for me and Harry. Look at the pair of us here, tonight! Just sitting in, drinking a couple of beers, talking about *work*. Our regular Thursday night get-together has been like this for *months*. You're an island, Martin, and some would say, a damned unadventurous one at that. Do you even know where your local pub is?"

I frown, because he knows I'm not comfortable with the effect of drinking at the best of times. "I have a place of my own, surrounded by my own things, arranged just as I like them."

"Arranged? But that's what I mean." Ethan stands up, his whole body vibrating with dramatic tension. "You can't always *arrange* everything in life. You've got to loosen up a bit, be receptive to new experiences, to new relationships. Things can be...irrational, sometimes, you know? People, too. Martin, you are so anal retentive that being around you makes my teeth clench up."

"Thanks."

He shakes his head—another impatient gesture. "So that didn't sound quite right. I just want you to be happy. To *engage* with life, to enjoy the fun, the benefits. Will you please listen to me, for once? *Properly?*"

He really does look distressed now, and I have no intention of challenging him on the "benefits" issue...

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Muse

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HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

BY

CLARE LONDON

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HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES
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To Chrissy for her invaluable support.

CHAPTER 1

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
M. Harrison (no unsolicited mail accepted)*

“No, of course I’m not trying to harass you.” My best friend Ethan’s voice is very calm, deliberately soft. From the moment he arrived, he insisted he wasn’t here to annoy me, nor to interfere with my life. He doesn’t appear to realize that he’s causing the very effect he’s trying to avoid. I often wonder about the empathetic skill he’s meant to possess, as a creative artist. Or so he often tells me.

“It’s just a friendly word, Martin. Don’t be defensive.” He pushes back his long blond hair with an impatient yet studied gesture. As an apparently successful painter, he often refers to his

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“media image.” I’ve suggested in the past he get his hair cut in a more practical style and wear clothing more suited to his age, but even from Ethan—whom I’ve known for years and am very fond of—continued eye-rolling can become very wearing. “It’s just that your friends can see you...objectively, as it were. And we worry about the impression you give to others.”

“Impression?” I bite my lip. He’s perched carelessly on the side of my sofa, swinging his foot. I’m worried that his boot buckle will snag on the fabric. It’s Victorian Chesterfield, and the upholstery is newly refurbished.

“Martin, are you listening to me?”

“Do I have any choice?” I place my drink back down on the walnut card table, on a carefully placed coaster. I straighten the top right edge of it so that it lines up with the base of the nearby lamp. Then nudge it a fraction the other way, which is much better. “Look, I’m fine about the impression I give people. People can like it, or get over it. If they don’t have the wit to cope with an alternative point of view, then that’s their problem.”

Ethan gives one of those long-suffering sighs that I seem to provoke so frequently in him. His eyes soften toward me, his mouth purses. I often wonder whether he’d have been better suited to a career in theater. His whole demeanor is one of compassionate disappointment, to the extent I think he must practice it in his leisure time. I suggested that once to his partner, but Harry snorted and spat his drink out all over the table. Thank goodness it wasn’t actually in my flat. Red wine stains can be a nightmare to get out. Harry had growled a protest at me, though there was no doubt his eyes had been laughing. Of course, I’d only been trying to help Ethan gain a *deeper empathy*.

Ethan’s face is rather flushed and he seems even more

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frustrated than usual. “God, Martin, but that’s exactly what we’re getting at! Your total lack of tolerance for—or interest in—the rest of the human race. How the hell are you ever going to meet anyone new, or, God forbid, someone romantically, if you show them no more respect than you do a piece of furniture?”

I stare at him pityingly. “Actually, Ethan, I consider a fine piece of antique furniture far more worthy of respect than most of the pieces of human detritus that you persist in thrusting my way in the name of romance. Please leave me to organize my own social life and choose my own companions.”

“But when was the last time anyone passed that interview?” He looks both annoyed and bemused—I suspect he’s struggling to remember the meaning of the word detritus. “You’ve lived in this building for six months, but you have no idea who your neighbors are. You’re not involved in neighborhood committees, you don’t play any sports, you have weekly grocery deliveries so you never mooch around the supermarket. You work long and erratic hours, and I’ve never known you to entertain anyone here except for me and Harry. Look at the pair of us here, tonight! Just sitting in, drinking a couple of beers, talking about *work*. Our regular Thursday night get-together has been like this for *months*. You’re an island, Martin, and some would say, a damned unadventurous one at that. Do you even know where your local pub is?”

I frown, because he knows I’m not comfortable with the effect of drinking at the best of times. “I have a place of my own, surrounded by my own things, arranged just as I like them.”

“Arranged? But that’s what I mean.” Ethan stands up, his whole body vibrating with dramatic tension. “You can’t always *arrange* everything in life. You’ve got to loosen up a bit, be receptive to new experiences, to new relationships. Things can

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be...irrational, sometimes, you know? People, too. Martin, you are so anal retentive that being around you makes my teeth clench up.”

“Thanks.”

He shakes his head—another impatient gesture. “So that didn’t sound quite right. I just want you to be happy. To *engage* with life, to enjoy the fun, the benefits. Will you please listen to me, for once? *Properly*?”

He really does look distressed now, and I have no intention of challenging him on the “benefits” issue. I know exactly what he means, and the fact it inevitably includes sexual relationships. He knows I’ve never been really comfortable with them, either. Such interactions can so often lead to mistakes, confusion and embarrassment. Better avoided in case of failure, is my opinion, though that’s one I keep to myself when faced with the obvious romantic affection that Ethan and Harry share, and don’t think twice about demonstrating in public. Just a touch or a kiss, of course, not full-on intercourse. Though I wonder sometimes, when I see the look of devilment on Ethan’s face. Thank God for Harry’s more sensible attitude.

But this is how most of my conversations with Ethan go, nowadays. It’s another observation I’ve pointed out to Harry when the three of us meet up. Ethan has a low emotional threshold—a tendency to overreact. Or maybe that’s just around me. Harry smiles gently whenever I mention it and his eyes sparkle, which leads me to assume that, despite Harry’s *more sensible attitude*, Ethan’s excitable reactions are no problem to him.

“I’m listening,” I say to Ethan now, seeking to keep his exclamations down below an offensive decibel level. “If it makes you less outraged, I’ll try to...loosen up a bit.” His eyes are rolling again now. But because I *am* fond of him, and because he’s been a

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constant, decent friend since we were at college together, I cast around in my mind for some consolation prize for him. “There’s a notice on the communal board downstairs, suggesting a flat-sitting scheme, for when tenants go away at weekends. That would be useful for me, I admit, for when I go to auctions, to have someone located in the building to pick up my mail and check the heating thermostat settings. And there’ll apparently be adequate police checks for all the contributors, which is reassuring.”

“Reassuring, indeed,” Ethan murmurs, his brows still suspiciously arched.

“I’ll sign up for that, okay? To show my”—my throat feels a little dry—“public spiritedness. But nothing more. I don’t want to join book clubs or learn conversational Spanish. And as for taking part in the local choral society concerts...” I’m trying to explain my feelings to Ethan, but maybe my small shudder does that just as well.

He nods, some kind of surrender. “That’s a good start, Martin. Well done. We just...I’d just like to see you enjoying life a little more. You’re good-looking, you’re witty and clever, and you’re good company.” He catches my glare. “What? You *can* be, if you try.” He grins, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Yeah, okay, if you try really *hard*. I just think you have a lot to offer someone, if you’d just—”

“Ethan,” I say, quite firmly. He’s such a good friend that I generously ignore the fact he disturbs the feng shui in my flat every time he comes around, but enough’s enough. “You don’t need to make me your mission in life. You have your own idea of happiness and I’m pleased for you. But I have sufficient enjoyment of my own already.”

He knows enough to let the subject drop, and we chat more

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generally before he leaves to meet Harry after his music class. And I wait until the door closes before I rush to tidy up his glass and smooth the arm of the sofa where he sat. Then, to be fair to him, I look around the flat, trying to see my life with his objective eye. All I see is...me. The room is delightfully tidy and soothingly quiet. The pale cream color on the walls really does blend pleasantly with the old wood and classically understated fabrics of the furniture. I feel most comfortable here, with no desire to face the vibrant colors of Ethan's modern art, or the loud volume of Harry's latest music.

Of course, when Ethan talks about my enjoyment of life, he's not really talking about furniture and fittings. Just occasionally, I do wonder about the difference between us—and more specifically, the fact he's happily dating Harry and I'm...not dating at all. Or how long it's been since my last unsatisfactory attempt.

But as I continue to maintain, relationships are confusing, irrational and messy. In fact, everything I abhor. After all, there's nothing wrong with wanting people on my own terms. Nothing wrong with enjoying one's own company.

Nothing wrong at all.

* * *

*Flat 3c, Abercrombie Buildings,
Russ's Place (abandon hope all ye who enter here)*

“Dammit to hell and back on the bus, Russ!”

Don has a damned colorful portfolio of curses. That's the second time he's fallen over my packing case of assorted books and magazines and stubbed his toe. Over the many years we've

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been friends and fellow workers, I've learned all kinds of new words. Of course, I've re-cycled them rather less discreetly than he has, which accounts for why he's now junior management in insurance and I'm working freelance. But that's life, I guess.

"Dammit," he mutters again. "Can't you clear this away? You've been in this flat for months now, but it's like you only moved in yesterday."

He's looking around the living room with a wild and angry expression in his eyes, rubbing furiously at his injured foot with the other. His collision with the box tipped over a pile of clean washing, not yet folded, now wedged behind my sports bag and rackets. As he glares over toward the window, a roll of spare bedding falls off its perch on top of the sofa. It's never been very secure there, I must admit.

"Look at all this mess. Your stuff's still in boxes, most of it not even in the right rooms. No order to anything. How the hell do you live here?"

I bite my lip, because this is, indeed, where I live. *Me*, not anyone else. And it's just as I like it. I never see the need to unpack my stuff into cupboards and on to shelves because it just doubles the work. Stepping over boxes doesn't bother me. There's always something going on that's more interesting than cleaning—beyond a basic spit and polish, anyway.

Don's a good friend, you know? We met when we both started at the bank, straight out of school. Office juniors together, he soon trod the corporate path more confidently than I ever would, and he was the one to pull me back from the brink of my most outrageous practical jokes. Something about my sense of humor and the company's job security policy being largely incompatible, he said. And when I left—shortly before I was pushed, apparently—we

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kept in touch. He was very generous to ask me to be his best man when he married Emma. They were both very understanding when her mother found me swapping eyeliner tips with the bridesmaids—and yes, I eventually agreed, it was probably a good thing my speech was cut short at the fifth page.

Don insists he feels totally relaxed at my place, but he's been known to wander around after me, picking up stuff. That makes me laugh, of course. And, let's face it, I like to laugh. Today he's finally settled down on the sofa and is looking around for a clean glass for his beer. I'm sitting across the room from him, perched on the edge of an old suitcase that's full of never-used gardening tools. Or I think it is.

"I suppose you can find your way around this place okay." He's making that big effort again, the one where he tries not to lose his temper and call me a slob. That happens on a regular basis. Still, it keeps him occupied, and as for me, it's water off a duck's back. "But what do guests think?"

"Guests?" I raise my eyebrows. "You're here, aren't you?"

"No, Russ. I meant other people, people who aren't..." Here comes that look again. "...who aren't used to your pathological hatred of housekeeping." He gives up looking for a glass and settles for drinking from the bottle like I am. When he leans back on the sofa, one of the springs creaks like a metallic fart. "Where do you entertain? You have hardly any furniture and you never finished decorating this room." He shifts forward to the edge of the cushion again. "And you still don't have a decent sofa."

I glance around at the entertainment on the walls and shrug. "I couldn't decide in the end between the crimson flock wallpaper and the purple paint. If I keep the two of them up on the wall together, it may inspire me one day. And I don't see why I need a

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new sofa, it'd just be a waste. I'm hardly here to take advantage of it, working all those late restaurant shifts. Plus the fact I spend plenty of weekends away. What are you, the flat makeover police?"

He smiles, but it's a little forced. "If you don't see why you might need a comfortable sofa, I'm the last one to tell you. But what sort of impression do you think you're giving to people? How will you ever make new friends? Sometimes it exhausts me, nagging you about your flat and your dress sense and your—dammit—lack of healthy male pursuits."

I look quickly down at my clothes, my jaw jutting out defensively. I never see the need to iron T-shirts when they get creased again so quickly. At least they're always clean. And why wear shoes and socks at home when you have carpet? Or patches of carpet, in my case. And last time I caught a fashion program on TV, wasn't it hip to have rips in your jeans?

I sigh. Don isn't really interested in my soft furnishings or my looks, as well I know. "You really mean I should be chasing other guys. You mean I should be dressed like a gigolo, smelling like a brothel, lighting scented candles in the bathroom..."

This is way too familiar an argument, but it's an entertainment for us both, and I don't hold it against Don personally. He's a good-looking guy and has never had trouble attracting plenty of company. Of course it's a pity he likes girls rather than boys, or things could've been different between us—if only to put a stop to all these "elder brother" type talks. Though I'm not sure Emma would agree with me. I mean it's not that I don't like the thought of having some fun like that. I'm just disorganized, not dead from the waist down. But it seems to me that dating's a hell of a lot of bother for a fairly unreliable outcome. I don't have the time or

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energy for it at the moment.

“Look, Don,” I say, firmly. “Chill. I’m fine about the impression I give people. People can like it or receive it diagonally up the most appropriate orifice. I’m not bothered.”

“That’s just what I mean.” He’s frowning hard, ignoring his beer. “You don’t seem to be bothered about anything. If you could just demonstrate some self-control, you’d show yourself to a much better advantage. I mean, you’re good-looking, you’re always enthusiastic, and you’ve got a fine, creative brain.” His eyes narrow. “Albeit your education seems to have bypassed interior design. But I’m sure you’ve got a lot to offer.”

“Thanks for such a glowing vote of confidence,” I say wryly. “You want supper before you go?”

His nose wrinkles with his expression of regret. “No thanks.” He’s the main test subject for all my inventive recipes, and it’s the one area in which he never criticizes me. But I know he’s on his way to meet Emma’s family for someone’s birthday celebration, and can’t stay. He stands quickly, cheating me of the fun of nudging that worn sofa cushion out from under him and dumping his arse on to the floor. “Just try a little harder, Russ, okay? I only want you to enjoy life to the full.”

“I’ll give it some thought,” I promise him, showing him out of the flat. “You’ve been a man on a mission for a long time, though I reckon I’m plenty old enough to look after myself.”

“I just—”

“Look.” I sigh, prepared to make allowances for my best friend. “I saw a notice downstairs about flat-sitting at weekends, maybe I’ll sign up for that, make some new friends.”

“Yeah?” He sounds encouraging though there’s a glimmer of skepticism in his eyes. I shut the door firmly behind him so he

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can't bounce any more advice off me.

Admittedly, flat-sitting would be useful for me when I'm on long shifts. And I often have to stay away if the restaurant I'm visiting is too far for a day's journey. The return favor would be *sort of* like helping out, but without too much extra responsibility. I wouldn't have to dress up or anything; wouldn't be beholden to anyone beyond a weekend or two.

But I feel a little unsettled, even after Don's long gone. The way I live is a lifestyle choice, and that's what I try to tell my friends, though none of them really gets it. I can't bear feeling trapped or bored or...*obliged*. My flat is just that—mine, to do with what I wish, when I wish. Or not, as the case may be. I guess spontaneity's not everyone's idea of fun. There's probably a grain of truth in Don's lecturing. It'd certainly account for why my recent social life has been as dormant as a tortoise in winter.

In the kitchen, I drag a couple of boxes to the side so that I can get to the cupboard under the sink. That was the last place I saw my home brew equipment, and I've remembered I was going to start on that this week. Wrenching open the door, a box of detergent tips out and sprays the floor with white powder, and a pile of assorted magazine clippings falls off the counter, showering my head and shoulders. The door sags alarmingly on a single hinge and the sharp edge skewers my foot. I'd been planning to mend that last week, but I suppose I got distracted.

When I straighten up, detergent in my hair and my arms full of grubby glass bottles, I examine the room with fresh eyes. It's like every other room in my flat, full of stuff—jumbled together, piled up, a glorious jetsam of my life. All I see is...me.

There's nothing wrong with being a free spirit, is there?

Nothing wrong at all.

CHAPTER 2

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
M. Harrison (visitors by appointment only)*

There's no way I think Ethan's amusement is justified, no way at all. I suppose I imagined that he would share my horror at the experience I've just been through. No...*suffered*, is the appropriate word.

"Martin, look at your face! Was it really that bad?" He laughs, rather too loudly and too long for my liking. "Come on, we're in the business end of town, not some kind of ghetto. These are smart flats, and the tenants have to clear some kind of credit check before moving in. It can't have been a *hell-hole*, as you so graphically describe."

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“It was.” I’m still shuddering at the mere memory. “Initially, I thought the place had been burgled. I’ve never seen such a mess in my life. Everything jumbled together. Nothing labeled or cleared away.” Ethan’s still laughing at me, and I don’t approve of his levity. “There were several dirty plates, Ethan. And not just in the sink! I found an umbrella in the bathroom, a car maintenance kit in the kitchen, and there was some correspondence pinned to the wall in the lobby with a fork. Like a...spear.” It remained the most aggressive vision. “There was dust on the top of every door frame, and a very disturbing color scheme on the walls of the living room. I had a headache after my first evening visit.”

“So what do you have to do? Do you have to live there while the owner’s away? All the time?”

I catch that glint of mischief back in his eye. “Very amusing, I’m sure. No, I only have to check in on a daily basis. Collect up the mail, check the alarm’s set, things like that.”

“Mail?” I suspect Ethan’s still provoking me. “I believe you can tell a lot by a person’s mail.”

“I believe so,” I reply dryly. “But if that’s the case, I’m not much the wiser, having waded through a mass of free flyers and invitations to various gourmet events. There were also some gaming magazines with lurid covers of impossibly-cantilevered, scantily-clad animated women.”

“How the other half lives,” murmurs my so-called friend. “You sorted it through for the tenant, then?”

I can feel a slight flush on my cheeks. “Of course I did, among other things. The owner obviously needs help, and I...had a spare hour. I put the car kit and the umbrella back in the hall, and took a large pile of bedding from the living room to the spare bedroom. I also sorted a total mess of CDs in the living room into alphabetical

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order.” I sound like the domestic help, but I’m also secretly impressed with how efficient I was, in the time allotted. “Oh, and there was a hideous smell in the bathroom. I was going to alert the caretaker of the building, but on investigation, I found a filthy bottle of stagnant liquid in the linen cupboard by the boiler. I disposed of that, of course.”

“Of course,” Ethan murmurs.

“I did find washing up the crockery particularly challenging. The tenant appears to cook several times a day and uses some very eccentric, exotically-flavored ingredients...” I finally notice Ethan’s grin. “You’re the one who told me to show some neighborliness.”

“So you found out who owns this flat?”

One would think he assumed some ulterior motive in me, like common curiosity. Or something. “McNeely, initial R. Apart from that, I have no other information. The owner never turned up for the introductory meeting. The management committee provided the key and the details, including a signed agreement.” I shift, inexplicably uncomfortable for a moment. “I’m not sure all of this meets your criteria of making new friends and influencing people, so perhaps I should just let it drop.”

Ethan raises an eyebrow. I think we’ve either been friends for too long, or else his empathy is improving.

“Okay.” I sigh. “I’ll persist with it. Actually, I had some ideas for a shoe rack in the hallway and some more modern storage units in the kitchen. He might be interested in that, as I’ve never seen so many ill-assorted utensils scattered all over the counter. And I did think a formal message board would also be an excellent idea...”

“He?” Ethan’s eyelids flicker half-closed, as if he’s trying to hide his reactions. But maybe my empathy is improving, too.

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"I saw his flat, remember? I saw the mail. And..." I'm racked with another shudder. "I saw the piles of unfolded laundry. It's a male tenant. Please don't ask me to elaborate."

"Underwear?" Ethan is relentless. "I believe you can tell a lot by a person's—"

I glare at him and he bites back the rest of the sentence. "I can assure you, I didn't stay any longer than necessary. I was going to play some of the CDs that had been left out of their cases, just to check whether they were still serviceable, but I couldn't get the equipment to work."

Ethan frowns. "It was broken?"

"No, no." I'm impatient with him now, and although I like his company, I'm hoping he'll go soon. There's something disturbing my thoughts and I need to wipe the whole flat-sitting episode from my mind. I need to settle back in my own place, on my own, with my things around me. I need...

"The place was the most appalling jumble, Ethan. I just couldn't find the remote control. Then when I was about to lock up and leave, I found it under the—" Now it's my turn to bite off my unfortunate words, but it's too late. Ethan's all but pouncing on me.

"Where, Martin? Where did you find it?"

"Under the laundry," I admit. The flush is all over my neck now. "If you must know, it was under a pile of boxer shorts illustrated with a character called Super Mario."

* * *

*Flat 3c, Abercrombie Buildings,
Russ Lives Here (or "the chef is IN")*

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Don is laughing at me across my kitchen and I'm pissed off with him. "For God's sake, what's the joke? This is your fault, for bullying me into doing something I should have known wasn't my thing. I do my Good Samaritan act and all I get in return is being creeped out!"

"Russ." He's shaking his head. "This is a good neighborhood, a totally normal block of flats. You don't get ghouls here. You sound like a kid at Halloween."

"Dammit, I felt like one!" I'm nearly hysterical, I know, but I'm obviously suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. "It was like no one lived there at all, you know? Place was cold...and it was too frigging quiet." I let the shudder run through me, exorcising it all from my system. "The tenant's got hardly anything in the cupboards, you know. Hardly any food, only enough crockery for a couple of place sittings, no extra pots and pans. Must eat out all the time, though there wasn't a single pizza box in sight. No herbs or spices. *No herbs or spices!*" I repeat, because Don's attention seems to be wandering. "Can you imagine that? And it's not just empty in the kitchen. There are no magazines open at a favorite page, no pile of shoes in the hallway for quick and easy use, no souvenir wineglasses, or pictures or school medals or...any ornaments at all. And no notes pinned up anywhere. Hell's bells, I don't know how anyone manages life without plenty of reminders."

"So you had a good look around," Don says. He's grinning at me again, though I don't know why he's getting such entertainment from my distress. "Aren't you just meant to drop in occasionally over the weekend, check it's safe, collect up the mail?"

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“No mail.” I shrug. “Well, nothing interesting. All I found were unopened offers for new credit cards and a magazine featuring old furniture. Boring cover, and that’s before you even look inside. No animation or glitter or Tomb Raider types bouncing off huge oak cupboards or anything...”

“Antiques,” Don murmurs, obviously approving of the subject if not my attitude.

I scowl. “Like I know what antiques are, thanks. The place is full of old stuff like that. In fact, the living room felt like some kind of mausoleum—pale walls and dark furniture, nothing to look at except books. I got a tension headache just listening for something to crackle or spit or fart, just to break the tedium.”

“There were plants to water?”

I shrug. “Not so as you’d notice. There were some fat little things in pots, looked plastic, all twisted up. I left them well alone. Well, apart from having to shift them to one side to look for some tolerable music to play. Which was a futile quest, I can tell you, unless you like opera.” Goose bumps run up and down my spine. “Look, I feel sorry for the owner, in all truth. They obviously haven’t had time to make the place personal enough.”

“So you...?” Don’s voice is a murmur, trailing off.

“Well, yes, I did think I should help out a bit, just in passing, you know? The pale walls were a great backdrop for some prints I found behind the sofa. Not sure why they hadn’t been put up immediately, I love modern art like that. And I came back here for a few bits and pieces from my kitchen and rustled up a batch of goulash for the week ahead. Nothing like home-cooked food. Bit tricky, working in an unfamiliar kitchen, but most of the mess cleared up okay.”

Don’s eyebrows are raised in that supercilious way he has,

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where he pretends he knows me better than I know myself. “So did you meet this mystery tenant?”

“No,” I grumble. “No one was at the introductory meeting.”

“More likely you didn’t bother to go yourself.” Don knows me far too well. “You’re not giving this a proper trial.”

I sigh. I’m pretty tired after a couple of weekends away with work, and now I have to cope with my weekend duty as Mausoleum Curator. I’m just really glad to be back amongst all my own stuff, cooking some new recipes I cut out of the magazines, music playing loudly in the living room. Though I was alarmed to find my CDs were all out of order. I can’t imagine Don would try such a scam on me, but you never know. It’ll take a hell of a long time to sort them back into my special chronological system.

“Russ?”

“Okay, I’ll give it another try.” I know Don only wants the best for me, albeit that’s by his standards. And it had been rather cool to see someone else’s place, even if it was like stepping into a show home. I probably should have taken my boots off when I arrived, but by the time I saw the mud I’d trudged into the living room, it didn’t seem worth it. Anyway, I made a good enough job of brushing it off. “Actually, I wouldn’t mind finding out some more about that art work. And I’ve got ideas I could share about easy weekday meals if he’s got a problem with lack of time. Though I can’t see what I’ll have in common with a guy who stacks his underwear in color coordinated piles.” I catch sight of Don’s startled look. “I was looking for a towel, okay? I spilled some water on the kitchen table. Well, quite a lot, actually, the water pressure’s different in the flats on that floor.”

Don’s frowning at me. Maybe it’s because he fell over that packing case again when he came in. “He, Russ?”

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I shrug again. "Yeah, it's a man."

"And you knew that, how?"

"The mail," I protest. "Obviously. Mr. Harrison, it said. What, you think I'm going to go nosing through someone's washday piles solely to find out if they wear a bra or boxers?"

"Yes," Don says, way too quickly.

"Be sure not to slam the door on your way out," I snap back. "And turn the music up for me, will you? The remote control's on the table, it magically reappeared the other day." I turn around in the kitchen, unaccountably restless. "Hey, you haven't seen a vat of my home brewed sloe gin, have you? I thought I left it in the bathroom." I frown. "It was just reaching the critical fermentation stage as well."

CHAPTER 3

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
M. Harrison (please knock quietly)*

Ethan has been standing in the doorway to my living room for two minutes forty-three seconds. He appears to be rooted to the spot. If he extended both his arms to the side, I would suggest utilizing him as some kind of new age coat stand. He makes a gargling noise in the back of his throat as he stares at the wall ahead of him.

“It’s one of my pictures,” he says. He sounds breathless. I nod in reply. I need to get past him to go to the kitchen and I don’t see that his statement requires any further response.

“You’ve got one of my pictures on display. On your wall.”

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Ethan is making a new conversational style out of stating the obvious.

"I know," I say, rather curtly. "The sitter put it up the other weekend. I haven't had time to take it down."

"You said my art made you nauseous," Ethan says. He looks a little disorientated. No...stunned is perhaps the word. "You said the mix of colors and shape was like a particularly messy and aggressive migraine. You said that if I were looking for your professional opinion, you'd rather cut off your left arm and let the blood spatter across your clean ironing than have to face any of my work on a daily basis—"

"All right, I think you've made your rather torturous point." I push past him, deliberately brusque. "I was obviously in a bad mood then. I'm sure you'd be the first to agree that any man can occasionally change his mind." He's muttering something behind me about how only a lunatic would consider Martin Harrison to be any man, but I may be mistaken. "Do you want tea, water, or just to stand there gawping until the end of the week?"

He follows me into the kitchen, still clutching his jacket. He looks around, puzzled, waving it aimlessly from one hand.

"Just drop it on the chair," I say. "You can hang it up in the hall when we've had our supper." When I look back at him, he's got that startled rabbit look again. I suspect that it's another expression he practices regularly. "What's the matter now?"

"I should have hung my jacket up already," he says. He stares at me. "On the third hook from the left. Over the umbrella. You always insist on that exact placement. Now you say just drop it on the chair." He glances around the kitchen and his eyes widen farther. "There's all kind of food in here, Martin, that I've never seen grace your counter before. Since when have you bought fresh

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ingredients? Since when have you owned a food processor?" He peers at me now, and there's a smile creeping across his face. "Who are you, and what have you done with my borderline obsessive friend Martin?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I snap. "I just thought I'd invite you around for supper and cook it myself. He left a particularly interesting recipe last weekend—"

Too late to bite back the careless words. Ethan pounces, as he's so fond of doing. "He? *He*? Do you mean the mysterious flat sitter?"

"Not mysterious, for God's sake. Don't be so melodramatic."

"Have you met him, then?"

I purse my lips. "No. Not exactly. We keep missing each other. We both seem to be away a lot. He...leaves me notes." I recall the bold, scrawling script, the signature of smiley faces, all on creased, crookedly-torn scraps of paper that I might have previously thrown out as rubbish. The first note had astonished me, a careless, cheerful message on the back of a mango chutney label. Since then, I'd come to look out for them, albeit rather warily.

The gleam in Ethan's eyes is beyond mischief and venturing into the realm of sinister. I'm disturbed to feel a blush on my cheeks, so I get busy with the mixed salad to try to distract us both. "Do you know, when he first visited, he had the effrontery to bring some personal items into my kitchen. I never managed to contact him to demand they be removed. Dammit, Ethan, he cooked while he was here! How outrageous is that?"

"Appalling." My friend murmurs agreement, but I can tell his heart's not in it. He sits at the kitchen table in front of a pasta bowl that he probably knows has never been used before, his head resting on his hand, giving the impression of hanging on my every

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word. His throat wobbles like he's struggling not to laugh.

"So," I continue, measuring the exact proportions of oil and vinegar as appropriate for the dressing, "I decided to use them as they were obviously intended. Since then, he's left a couple of other recipes, and the necessary ingredients each time."

"But you don't cook," Ethan stated, softly. "It makes mess. You never have the time for it. It's a waste of energy, apparently. Food is nothing but a mandatory refueling."

The pasta is almost at the correct consistency and I silently count the remaining seconds to completion, balancing the fork and colander comfortably between my hands, assessing the distance to carry the pan to the sink for draining. My nose wrinkles with instinctive pleasure as I smell the tang of pesto in the bubbling sauce.

"I'm quoting you, Martin Harrison," Ethan says. His tone is surprisingly gentle. "Or at least, the Martin Harrison of yesteryear. Personally, I'm very pleased to see some color brightening up the place, and the smell of home-cooked food is very welcoming. And a new...friendship...is also very exciting."

"Exciting?" I look at a small drop of spilled sauce on the floor and bend down quickly to mop it up before it stains. Of course, before I started cooking for myself, the issue rarely arose. "As I remember, you considered it your mission to socialize me, to bring me out of my shell. To have me mix with the rest of the human race." I smile, wryly. "I'm quoting you now, Ethan."

He laughs, and holds his plate up to be filled. "Those are two of your virtues, Martin—your wit and your honesty. They're very attractive. I suspect that other people will also admire them, when you give them the chance."

"Don't labor the point." I can hear myself growling. I pour

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some good red wine into Ethan's glass, and he looks down at it.

He gives a strange snort. Then he holds up the glass, pointing to it, shaking with laughter and perilously close to spilling his drink. 'Souvenir of Buckingham Palace, it says. Let me guess. Your sitter left this behind on one of his visits, as well!'

* * *

Flat 3c, Abercrombie Buildings,

R. McNeely (no food deliveries without proper invoice)

"I'm in the living room!" I call out when I hear Don's key in the lock, dropping in on his way home from work as he often does. I'm engrossed in reading a rather interesting magazine review of a fashionable city restaurant. Considering I spent three weeks there last season in my best trouble-shooting role, it's rather disappointing to find that they still can't manage to serve up a good menu without overcooking the shellfish or getting caught with beetle droppings in the side salad.

There's a muffled curse from the hallway, and the thump of a well-built body hitting the wall. Don has to be one of the clumsiest guys I know. He lurches into the living room, waving his jacket at me. "Where the flaming fuck's the case in the hallway?"

"And a good evening to you, too, friend," I say, dryly. "It's gone. I unpacked the stuff inside and now it's cleared away. I decided you'd fallen over it once too often."

"I expected it to be there," he says, his expression bemused. "I make allowances for it when I come into the flat. But today there was nothing there—"

"—and so you fell, regardless." I smirk. "I'll get you a drink."

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I get up to go to the kitchen, but he's blocking the doorway. He's staring, his pupils dilated. I wonder for a minute if a person can suffer concussion from tripping over a nonexistent obstacle.

"Russ, what's that?"

"No, sorry," I say, slowly. "I'm going to need more of a clue than that."

"You've got a new sofa!" He glares at it like it's an alien object just been beamed down from the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. I mean, I like the style, obviously, but I didn't think it was that striking. "You've bought a sofa."

I nod. Didn't find it under a gooseberry bush, did I?

"And the walls." He turns his head slowly from side to side, like one of those nodding dog toys. "I mean, the color is great. It's very tasteful."

"Autumn umber, it's called." I'm trying to sound careless, but it comes out more like defensive. "Of course, I may still keep the crimson flock wallpaper in the hall."

Don nods sagely, oblivious to my teasing. He peers back at me, as if looking for evidence of spots from some fatal disease, then his face grimaces with compassion. I suppose that means, in his mind, I've already been diagnosed. "It's an astonishing change, Russ. But excellent progress. I never thought you'd get yourself together like this."

I shrug. I feel a bit flushed, to be honest. "No big deal. I just thought it was time to settle in a bit. Some painting and decorating, a spate of clearing up. You may also have been right about needing more furniture. On his last visit, he left a recent copy of *Antique Design Monthly*, and it gave me a few ideas..."

"He?" Don spins around as I pass him on the way out of the living room. "You mean the flat sitter? You've met him?" He

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seems to have sprung back into life. He's on my heels as I walk through the flat, trying to catch my eye. He keeps dodging to avoid cases, boxes and shoe heaps, then realizes they're just not there anymore. It's bloody funny to see him confused like this.

"No," I say, with exaggerated patience. "We're way too busy, both of us. He...leaves me notes." We've both reached the kitchen and when I go to boil the water, I can't help glancing toward some papers piled on the counter beside the cooker. Thick, expensive paper with careful script, full of excessive politeness, but also evidence of firm opinions. Made me laugh out loud the first time...then made me think again.

"So, Russ, are you exchanging housekeeping hints with him now?"

I'm slow to turn around because I just don't need Don's smirk right now. "Don't be ridiculous. The man's got some weird ideas about tidiness, and I draw the line at alphabetizing my herb pot storage. But he's actually suggested a few very sensible things, like the new storage arrangements in the linen cupboard and the recycling of my different types of household waste."

A muted snigger from behind me alerts me to Don's lack of enthusiasm for such significant milestones.

"As far as I remember," I say, slowly, and with a chilly tone that gives out a clear warning should he choose to listen, "you've given me plenty of grief in the past about my slovenly flat, and my *lack of healthy male pursuits*. You've made it your mission to hound me, demanding I expand my horizons beyond work and sleep. So now when I venture into something new—"

"Someone new," he murmurs, but I ignore him.

"So now I'm doing that," I continue, "and you're still not satisfied, scorning my attempts to bring some order into my life,

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debasement every innocent comment of mine with your lewd and cynical attitude—”

“Oh for God’s sake.” Don sighs. “I surrender, okay? I didn’t mean to offend you.” He peers at me again, trying to see just how serious I am. Our friendship thrives on this banter, but that’s no reason not to catch him off-balance now and then. “I’m really pleased for you, Russ, if you’re happy with it. I guess I’ve just got used to teasing and nagging you, and you taking not a blind bit of notice of me, treating it all like a joke yourself. But I never think of *you* as a joke. And I’m pretty sure that anyone worth a second look from you is going to think the same as well.”

I’m afraid that I’m blushing at this unexpectedly flattering reference, so I scowl instead and hand him his drink.

He stares down at the mug. “What’s this?”

I roll my eyes. “Herbal tea. I think you should try it for your nerves.” He’s looking around aimlessly for a spoon to stir it, so I reach immediately to the appropriate drawer and pass him one. Such unusual efficiency makes his eyes widen again, but he’s still looking apologetic. And then I grin at him.

He breathes more easily, and smiles back at me over the rim of his mug. “Is that a new shirt?”

I sit down opposite him. “Nah. Just one I found in the back of the wardrobe I never wore before. It happens.”

“It used to,” he says, quietly. “Maybe now you’ll be color coordinating your clothes, too.”

“Color coordinating my ass,” I say, cheerfully.

“He may have color swatches for you to examine for that.” Don smirks.

“You may like to feel the print of my knuckles on your sarcastic jaw,” I snap back.

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“Just being supportive,” he protests.

I wonder how long it'd take me to restore all the boxes and cases along Don's path back out of the flat.

With any luck he might break a supportive ankle.

CHAPTER 4

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
M. Harrison (at home)*

I open the door to pick up a magazine that fell out of my morning's pile of post and someone's there. For a second, the shock ambushes me. A tall, slender young man with big blue eyes, messy hair and a surprised look. His hand is raised, and there's a key held tightly in his fist.

"Hey." His voice is quite loud, but at a pleasant pitch. He grins very broadly. "Scared the bejabbers out of me," he says, cheerfully. "You looking after the place this weekend?"

I wonder what he's talking about. "This is my flat," I say. He'd been looking me up and down, which is disconcerting in the first

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place, but at this, his eyes snap back up to my face. A band of color appears across his cheeks.

“Shit,” he says, sounding flustered. “I mean, I never imagined you’d be...” He stops talking, takes a deep breath, and before I can even begin to assimilate and reply to the last comment, he’s starting again. “Look, I’m really sorry, I thought you were another Good Samaritan-type guy like me, sitting this flat, because maybe I’d got fired or something and nobody bothered to tell me, or I didn’t get the call, or more likely I missed it—I’m away a lot—and when I’m not away, I’m always doing something else, you see. Anyway, I thought the schedule said you were away this weekend and I was on duty, but obviously the management got it mixed up, or maybe I did, which isn’t such a ridiculous premise, because as I may have said, I’m—”

“Please,” I say, quite loudly. That seems necessary to get his attention. “Please tell me who you are and what you’re doing here.”

He’s looking at me again, really closely. I realize that hardly anyone’s done that for a long time. It’s not necessary for my job, where the product is always of more interest than me, and outside of work... Well, whatever the reason, it feels rather odd. Then he sticks out his hand so assertively that I almost flinch back. “Your flat sitter, Russ McNeely. Well, you know my name already, don’t you? But we’ve never been formally introduced. Pleased to meet you.”

I shake the hand, automatically. His palm is warm, the grip confident. *My flat sitter*. “I’m Martin Harrison. You know that, too, of course, having...collected my mail for me over the last few months.”

“Ah,” he says. “Of course. Sorry about that problem with the

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telephone bill and the squashed fly. I hope the company sent you a fresh one. Document, that is, not bug.” The skin at the side of his eyes crinkles when he smiles.

“It’s fine,” I say. It hadn’t been at the time, but over a period of weeks, my indignation has faded. Though the memory of the black stain on my mail—a couple of legs still attached—will remain deeply ingrained forever.

“And you.” He pauses, his voice tentative. “Of course, you’ve been returning the favor for me all this time.”

“With the fly-squashing?” I startle myself, because I’m not usually so ready to offer jokes to people I haven’t met before.

He laughs, loudly and freely, and I’m fascinated by the unfamiliar sound. “Hey, no way. You don’t strike me as the kind of man who’s spooked by a bug and lashes out without thinking...” His words dry up suddenly and the flush on his cheeks deepens.

For a moment, we just stand there, and then I remember Ethan’s compassionately disappointed expressions and my promise to be more sociable. I’m pretty sure that extends to real life, not just through correspondence. “You’re right.”

“I am?” His eyebrows rise up under his floppy hair, as if the sentiment is a shock to him.

“About this weekend. I was due to be away, but the antiques auction was cancelled at the last minute, so I’m still here. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” he repeats, grinning again at me.

This flat-sitting arrangement has been in place for a few months now, and both of us have taken full advantage of it. But it’s surprising that we’ve never met before. I suppose that realization accounts for my current disorientation. I think anyone watching us

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as we stand there at the door, both looking rather bemused, would wonder just what kind of connection we had.

“Would you like to come in anyway?” I ask, and when he nods, I’m surprised to feel an instinctive smile on my own face. He saunters past into the flat and I notice his hair is long and his hips are narrow and his arms swing loosely at his sides. My fascination is...yes, also odd. He’s wearing a T-shirt with a provocative slogan that I assume is in some kind of street language, and jeans that seem to have been badly damaged around the knee area. The ensemble suits him in some outlandishly stylish way. He certainly doesn’t look like it bothers him. His feet are bare. *Bare*. Though I suppose he’s only had to come along the corridor and down a flight of stairs. His legs are quite long and his stride is very...assertive. That word keeps cropping up in my mind.

I can’t remember when I last invited a stranger into my flat, though I daresay Ethan has been keeping a diary, just to torment me with it.

But then, Russ McNeely isn’t exactly a stranger, is he?

* * *

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
R. McNeely (visitor)*

I mean, I thought he’d be much older, didn’t I? A man who likes old furniture, one who couldn’t manage to cook for himself, who didn’t seem to have much of a life. But he’s not. I was *way* wrong. He’s young. And nice. You know, nice, as in good-looking. Bit of a shock, really, to find myself face to face, just like that.

I make my way to the kitchen by habit, and he follows me in.

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“You’ve got some new pans!” I can’t help the exclamation, though I doubt Don would recommend that on his list of Opening Conversational Gambits for a new acquaintance.

Or perhaps...not so new.

Martin Harrison nods slowly. He looks like a man who takes his time over things, who’s careful, and...well, probably always right.

“Having tried out a couple of your recipes, I needed some more equipment. I appreciate you leaving the details on the notepad in the kitchen now, rather than pinning them to my door, using those unusual toothpicks. The ones with the characters from a series I believe is called Pokemon.”

Don’t I feel an idiot right now? And I know I’m blushing. “Ah, yes. My own special recipes. I don’t know if I ever explained, but that’s what I do, you see. I’m a freelance chef. I travel around a lot, do some lecturing, do some contract work at restaurants. Cooking is what I love, to be honest.” One of the few things I give my full attention to, according to Don. “But that was pretty rude of me when I first came around, cooking for you when I didn’t know you, didn’t know if you wanted me to. Made a bit of a mess, too, I’m afraid.”

He moves his foot very slightly. Underneath it I can still see the tomato stain from my first batch of goulash, a clumsy red splash on the pale wood of his kitchen floor. But he’s trying to cover it up, which surprises me. People don’t usually care about embarrassing me. “It’s fine,” he says, like he did at the front door. Nice voice, too—quite deep and restrained, but every word carries well. “I’ve practiced it a few times and I complete it quite successfully now. Also the risotto recipe, and the Spanish omelet.”

Now I’m flushed all over. “Shit on a shovel,” I say, and then

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wish I hadn't. "Sounds like I'm taking over your whole menu."

When I catch his eye, he's not smiling anymore. "I thought that, too, at first," he says. "There's no doubt that you've been an intrusion in my flat, Russ McNeely. First, there was all that activity in my kitchen, then there were my friend Ethan's art prints that you put up on my walls without permission. You obviously tried to clean a portion of my living room carpet once. And of course there's my bonsai collection that has been left to dehydrate on a regular basis."

"Those little trees? You're meant to water them?" I groan out loud. My gut lurches with embarrassment. Just let me sink into the floor and vanish.

"Several of them are now in dormancy, but I've been able to save a couple." His eyes are mocha-brown and bright, and he's watching my every movement. Seems like he's got a catalog of complaints to bring to the party. I wish I'd kept out of the way; I wish we were back to the polite, interesting little notes; I wish I weren't a blob of abject self-pity right now. I know the time has come to make myself scarce, which is a real shame. I'd got sort of used to this place and its cool, clean, peaceful atmosphere. And I would've liked the chance to get to know Martin Harrison better. Really liked it.

"Look..." I start to apologize at having caused such trouble in what is, after all, his place, but his expression has changed and now he's smiling again. It's a cautious smile, but he looks much less stern, and so I bite back my inevitable babble. He's still watching me, but it's a curious look, not confrontational. He's tall and athletic, and I must say he's even more attractive when he relaxes, though he doesn't seem to trade on it. Maybe he doesn't do it often enough to realize how sexy he looks. There's a

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sensuous movement throughout the whole of his body, like he's letting out a deep breath.

"Russ McNeely," he says, as if trying out my name again for size and shape on his tongue. "It's about time I met you in person."

* * *

*Flat 2a, Abercrombie Buildings,
Martin (entertaining)*

He's been here for an hour or so now, sitting on the other end of my sofa. *Russ McNeely*. It's a bold name and it suits the man in person. He's drinking his second cup of coffee while I'm sipping my tea. I've never kept coffee in the flat for myself, though he brought some with him on his second visit and it stayed in my cupboard from then on. I often find granules scattered over my kitchen counter.

Actually, I find a lot of things scattered.

Russ is an example in himself. He's sprawling on the sofa, one leg tucked under him, the other stretched out and nudging the leg of the card table. He exudes energy, even when he's presumably relaxed. When he puts his cup down, he knocks the lamp off its base, and I instinctively reach out to stop it falling. He catches it himself, though, his face creased with an apologetic smile. He stands it back up, a few centimeters too far to the left, but the misalignment doesn't seem to worry me as much as usual.

Perhaps his attitude is contagious. I'm not sure how I feel about that. The confusion makes me feel a little dizzy.

"So tell me what you do," he asks. "We've been in touch all this time but never really found out these kind of things."

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I'm usually reluctant to talk about myself, and I can feel the muscles tensing across the back of my neck. Perhaps he sees my hesitation, because he leans forward and touches my arm. "Sorry. Sometimes I'm too blunt. Not really polite enough for other people. That's why I'm working for myself nowadays, you know? Not very good with formal authority." He smiles, a little nervously. "I mean, you don't have to tell me a thing."

"I source antiques for clients," I say, in a bit of a rush. My voice sounds uneven. I can't stop staring at his hand on my arm. "You've seen my catalogs and my own collection, but I work in the field as well. I'm hired by a corporation or a particular individual, and asked to find something special for them at a price they specify. I travel a lot to regional antique auctions and shows. Well, you know I'm often away, that's why you're here..." My throat is a little dry, so I swallow, and continue. "I've always been good at determining the value of a piece, and I can evaluate the bidding accordingly. I get great satisfaction out of knowing a client can display the right item in the right place for them."

He draws back his hand, biting his lip, and suddenly I'm worried for no apparent reason. Did I say something wrong? Wasn't that what he wanted to know?

"The right thing in the right place," he says, slowly. His face is a bit flushed, and I don't think it can be from the coffee, despite the stimulating properties of caffeine. "So is that what you've been doing at my place, Martin Harrison?"

I stare. My stomach feels nauseous. I don't understand what kind of person he can be, who can create this disorder inside me. "You mean...I think you've found me an intrusion as well."

"Damned right, I have." His voice is very soft, but there's wariness in his eyes. I often see that look when I meet people, but I

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thought that was because of business, not...whatever this is. “At first, I couldn’t find the things I wanted, and some of the things I didn’t want to find kept appearing in front of me at every bloody turn. Then I started to look at things differently, all over. And see where that’s got me!”

I keep silent, a little shocked, but assuming the question is rhetorical.

Russ looks stern. “Perhaps, Martin Harrison, you’ll have noticed the changes I’ve made—the reorganization that’s gone on in my flat. Since I’ve always done my own thing and I don’t have a whole lot else of through traffic, I can only conclude that all this upheaval in my life is due to you.”

For some strange reason, I find myself staring at one of Ethan’s pictures, one of the selections that Russ McNeely put up on my wall on his first visit here. It’s marked the pale paintwork quite badly. It’s very bright and very obtrusive, and it’s constantly in my line of sight when I come into the living room to rest. Ethan still comments on it, teasing me about my initial intention to remove it. I wonder to myself why it’s still there...and why I’m rather used to it now.

“You threw out my gin,” Russ McNeely’s voice says, quietly but firmly. “You cleared up things that I didn’t need nor want cleared up. We don’t all live the same way as you, you know.”

“I’m sorry.” That’s my voice speaking and it sounds miserable. It’s the first time for a long while that I’ve felt so wrong about something.

When he jumps up in a burst of long limbs and noise and movement, I know he’s going back to his own place. I feel very disappointed. But of course I understand that I have overstepped a mark, even if I wasn’t entirely sure where it was. For maybe the

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first time ever, I curse my preference for my own company.

“Hey, forget it,” he says. “It’s fine, okay?”

I just stare at him, wondering if he’s mocking me, though it doesn’t sound malicious.

“It’s fine,” he repeats. And I’m rather pleased when I recognize the softening of his expression—when I realize that he’s genuine. “So do you want to come back to my flat now?”

“Pardon?”

Russ has to repeat the invitation, and that makes him smile. He seems to smile all the time. I’m aware that I’m staring quite rudely, but he doesn’t seem to mind, and he’s definitely not angry anymore. “My turn to welcome you, Martin Harrison, now that we’ve met properly. Damn my damson jam, any guy who can find my remote control when it’s been missing for weeks can’t be all bad!”

And when I keep staring, totally confused, he laughs aloud again. The noise fills my flat, louder than an auctioneer’s call, and more warmly, too. I think I can recognize some good-natured teasing when it’s shining in Russ McNeely’s wide, vivid blue eyes.

* * *

*Flat 3c, Abercrombie Buildings,
Russ (at home and entertaining)*

Martin is really an astonishing man. I mean, I’ve learned some things about him just from his notes and being around his flat, but there’s no substitute for meeting someone face to face, is there? We’ve had a browse through some of the albums of my demonstration shows and my lecture appearances. He’s put me

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straight on a few things about design around the flat. Oh, and he helped me fix that cupboard door in the kitchen at last.

He wasn't too sure about my sofa at first. Well, he was civil about it, which I think is pretty much the way he is, but I could see it didn't meet his professional expectations. But when he sat in it, his eyes did that dark widening thing that shows his emotions. He was pleasantly surprised with its comfort, and after all, that's what I want it for. Right?

We're sitting here now, and have been for an hour or so. Time flies and all that. He's really easy to talk to, but every now and then I catch him staring at me with that puzzled look. When I know him better, we can talk about it. Or maybe not. Doesn't matter to me, so long as we're cool with each other.

"You want some supper?" I ask, ready to dash about for us both. "There's a combination of chicken and tarragon that I'm working on."

"No," he says, sharply, and then grimaces. I suppose we're both a bit blunt sometimes. "I meant, not yet. I'm comfortable here, Russ."

I'm happy with that. I sort of like staring back at him, to tell you the truth. We must look like a couple of idiots, grinning at each other and sinking gradually down into the sofa. I can see what Don meant about its use as an investment. It's damned good value for money if you want somewhere to sit comfortably with...a friend. At one point, I worry that Martin might be getting a backache, and I grab a cushion and offer him a hand to settle himself more comfortably. He makes some protest and assures me he's fine, but he doesn't let go of my arm afterward for quite a while.

I realize I'd quite like to develop that particular kind of cool

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with each other. The feeling catches me by surprise.

"You have to get back? I mean, you've probably got stuff to prepare for work next week, or calls to make."

"No."

"Me neither," I say. "I've got a couple of days leave, actually. I'm between contracts."

"I...might be off work, too." His face looks flushed. "I don't have any appointments confirmed for the next eight days." His knee is brushing against mine, touching the skin where the fabric is split.

I want to ask if he's dating, or going steady, or whatever. What the hell's the matter with me? Tongue-tied isn't my usual look. But it's a long time since I felt that interested. It's rare that I'd actually welcome Don's advice, but I'm not as confident in this area as people assume. I mean, I want to know if Martin likes men, rather than women, and I don't know how to ask. Actually, it's more of a *need* to know. I want him to be on my team, you see. Romantically, that is. If you know what I mean, and I know *Don* would. The look in Martin's eyes encourages me, but I don't think we're quite ready yet to exchange past sexual resumes. Still... nothing ventured, right?

"We could get together again, then," I say, slowly. "Soon. We could take a look at that local Ideal Home exhibition."

"We could visit the new Spanish food market by the station," he replies, just as slowly.

"Or just...flat sit," I say, even more cautiously. "But together." I grin, so that he can take it as one of my jokes if he wants to.

We stare at each other. The air feels suddenly warmer and my breathing sounds shallow. He isn't smiling back at me, and I'm not entirely sure what the expression on his face means. He's not the

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easiest person to read. I think of his cool, tidy flat, and then I think of my place that's still pretty chaotic, despite all my attempts. I can only see the differences, not the similarities between us. "Look, Martin, sorry about that. Obviously it's not—"

He interrupts me, words all in a rush. "Are you scared of stepping on my toes, Russ?"

I draw in a sharp breath. "Are you scared of falling over mine, Martin?"

We do that staring thing again, and then we both smile. And laugh.

He stands up to leave, but he's still gazing at me. "Come around tomorrow," he says, rather shyly. "When I'm in, I mean. I can arrange things for us."

"Good," I reply, scrambling to my feet as well. "As arranging's not my particular strength."

I see him to the door, where he pauses. He picks up a pad of sticky notes abandoned on the hall table and the purple marker beside it, and he prints a number on the top sheet. "My private mobile number," he says. "For...future reference." Then, as I watch with surprise, he peels the sheet off and attaches it very deliberately to the wall at the side of the door. It's now a bright fluorescent square framed by a random strip of crimson wallpaper that I keep meaning to remove. He grimaces at the shocking contrast, and he spends a long time carefully lining up the paper with the doorframe, but it's almost the same way I'd leave a message, and so I appreciate the gesture from him.

I stand at the door and watch Martin Harrison walk down the stairs to his own floor. I'm in no rush to go back into my flat, and things feel very, *very* good. If this is what it means to enjoy life to the full, I'm not going to bitch to Don about his brotherly advice

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ever again.

CHAPTER 5

*The Write Stuff Bookstore, London,
Kingstown Publishing and guests*

Don struggled past several groups of chatting guests, clutching his collection of champagne-filled glasses. The hotel function room was full of people from all parts of the media world, gushing over piles of the new, glossily-printed bestseller. He passed one particularly tall pile and stared at the vivid picture of his friend on the cover. *McNeely's Menu: From Minestrone to Mousse*. He groaned to himself, shaking his head with wry amusement. He finally reached his own table with a sigh of relief and sat down.

"Have you seen Russ yet?" Ethan asked.

Don smiled as he handed around the glasses. He'd only met

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Ethan and his partner Harry recently, but they were already friends. He nodded at Emma, and she grinned back at him. They both knew what it was like trying to track Russ down at the best of times. "I think he went off to autograph some books but I haven't seen him since."

"Nor Martin," Harry added. He sat beside Ethan, his arm casually around the back of Ethan's chair. "They'll be together somewhere. The pair of them are like bookends nowadays."

"They've just developed a good friendship," Ethan protested. His back arched gently as Harry teased at the hair in the nape of his neck, nuzzling into the protective caress. "Though God knows, they seemed to have little enough in common at first."

Harry nodded. "On the one hand, Martin's obsession with order and control..."

"Versus Russ's desire to be free of anything remotely resembling discipline," Don countered.

The group grimaced at each other. And then grinned.

"Things have definitely changed since then. Did you see that designer shirt Russ was wearing tonight?" Emma sounded impressed. "Smart dressing is no longer a nauseating concept to him."

Harry laughed. "And Martin nearly arrived wearing mismatched socks! He was scandalized when I spotted it and made a pile of excuses from not having the full laundry facilities around at Russ's flat, to losing the matching items down the back of that sagging sofa of Russ's..."

"You know Russ's thinking of getting rid of that sofa?" Don said. "Says the springs have collapsed. He can't have had it longer than six months. He wants to replace it with one just the same. Something about sentimental value."

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“And apparently,” Ethan added, excitedly, “Martin’s antique Chesterfield is uncomfortable and just no good for sha”—he caught Harry’s widening eyes and bit off the rest of the sentence in time—“for sharing experiences.”

They watched the rest of the party milling around them for a while, sitting companionably and watching for their mutual friends to reappear.

“The book’s doing well in America,” Ethan commented. “I had no idea Russ was such a talented cook. They love...well, *eccentric* chefs over there. Apparently the publishers want him to do a series of books now, on creative cooking through the ages.”

Don nodded. “It’s to be illustrated with antique kitchen novelties, discovered and collected by Martin. An attractive combination.”

They could see two young men peeling themselves out from among a cluster of reporters and publisher’s assistants, laughing their good-natured protests and insisting on a break to draw breath and have a drink themselves. They were both waving hands vaguely in the direction of their friends.

“Yes,” Ethan sighed, gazing at the couple on their way over. His expression could best be described as compassionate approval. “A very attractive combination.”

* * *

*Martin Harrison,
Kingstown Publishing—VIP Guest*

I’m so proud of Russ, and of his creative success. It was a client of mine who happens to work in the publishing industry who

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gave him the chance to put his proposal forward, but it's Russ's own imaginative work that's in that rather garishly illustrated book of recipes. I haven't been able to look at anyone but him all night. He's flushed and laughing and he's never looked more vibrant.

It's a struggle to remember what my life was like before I met him. Ridiculous, maybe, but it's true. Didn't Ethan once make some comment about my honesty? Whenever Russ is with me, it's like a fresh burst of energy. He's light and color and noise, and maybe sometimes uncontrollable. But I can learn to live with that. I *am* learning to live with that. And enjoying the experience more than I could have believed possible.

We've been surrounded by the publisher's guests since we arrived, and we'd already decided not to show too much public affection except around our friends, but Russ still has that way of looking straight at me and smiling that's almost better than an arm around me. Or a kiss.

By the way, it's been three hours and eighteen minutes since he last kissed me, and that was merely a snatched moment behind the publisher's free-standing display shelves. I pretended not to notice that we dislodged the whole top shelf of Mediterranean Cookery: M to Z. But I'm only prepared to last another hour or so before asking for another. From the look in his eye, I think he's already guessed at my dishonorable intentions. As he turns to sign some more autographs, he grins, rather too knowingly.

There's a drop of sweat in the hollow of his throat. It glimmers from the reflection of the photographer's lights. Once upon a time I would have wanted to reach over and mop it for him. Now I want to lick it up. And keep my lips moving down his body.

He refused to wear anything smarter today than his jeans, despite the fact that the knees have worn completely through by

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now. It never ceases to confuse me that he doesn't care about his clothing the same way that I do. But he says the jeans are his favorites. When pressed about that, he reminds me he was wearing them the very first time I touched him, finally plucking up the courage to push him back down on to the sofa underneath me, horribly clumsy with my need, kissing him hard, then keeping going even when I missed his mouth because he was laughing so much. When I tried to wriggle my hand under his fly, the button popped of its own accord and allowed my fingers down between his thighs. I can't remember ever being so excited. The sigh he gave that day was deep and hoarse and desperate. And then he went quiet, the happy laughter stilled in favor of breath-catching thrill. We didn't even make it to the bedroom before I had those jeans down to his ankles and his cock in my mouth. He tasted of shock, fun and pure, delicious spontaneity.

Yes, I can understand why he keeps the jeans. He has a strange and robust capacity for sentimentality that I'm learning to treasure. At least he looks good in the new shirt I got him. It's a beautiful, sensual fabric. I want to touch it where it clings to his torso.

Dammit, I just want to touch *him*.

I feel transparent when he turns around again to catch me watching him. His grin is even broader. He has a whole portfolio of smiles, in fact, and I can recognize almost all of them by now. The knowledge amazes me.

And it thrills me to realize how much I enjoy smiling back.

* * *

Russ McNeely,
Kingstown Publishing—Celebrity Chef

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Let's make this very clear. The only reason I'm at this damned embarrassing book launch is because it's a chance to see Martin in a smart suit and then grope him shamelessly and messily behind the refreshment table. Otherwise I'd be out of here faster than either of us could spit. Well, not that Martin would spit, of course. He's far too well behaved for that.

I don't know if success is going to go to my head. The champagne's doing that already. Thank God Martin's here to keep an eye on me. And my arse. Hell in a handbasket, that's the champagne talking.

It's good to have our friends here for support, but it's Martin I need most of all. I like to turn around and see him there. I like to hear his calm voice, listen to his dry jokes, tease him when he slips back into his most rigid ways. I like his weird antique stuff and his miniature trees and his cool sanctuary of a flat. I've always liked all of it, and always will. It's been fun, getting to know each other. Well, I think it is! Martin occasionally looks a little left behind, but he doesn't seem upset about it. I suspect he likes being swept along sometimes.

I feel a bit sentimental. Well, *very*, actually. I blame the champagne. Good to have something to blame.

Those first days were astonishing. We had a load of fun, just going out and about, cooking and shopping and movies and walking and talking. Stuff like that. But the time had to come when one of us made a move. The way he used to look at me—dammit, the way I used to ogle him back!—it was only a matter of time. And then, when he was the one to jump me, it startled us both. Let me tell you, I soon returned the favor.

It had been dark in his bedroom that first night. God knows

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why we whispered when we were the only ones there, and we were both very much consenting adults. “It’s been so long.” Martin’s voice had been very shaky. “I’m not an exciting man, Russ.”

I was speechless. Yeah, who would have believed it? But I’d taken things very slowly, tracing him, loving him with my tongue and hands. Whereas he’d been the one to leap into action at first, it was now my turn to be calm and careful. His skin tasted of desire and need, even while his hands were still tentative on my body. I made him gasp and shudder, and when he finally arched underneath me, his eyes wet and glistening in the half-light of night and his mouth open in a very weird but sexy O, I knew we were going to be okay.

He was a *very* exciting man that night.

“Russ?” He moves beside me at last, and his hand brushes very gently against my back. “Are you thinking about future royalty checks?”

A strange, snorting noise comes out of my mouth. Damned embarrassing, but I suppose I can blame that on the champagne, too, nothing to do with my threatening hard-on. “You’d better believe it. I’ve just ordered a new catalog of bedroom toys for us to try out.”

He flushes. “Just don’t leave any of them out on the top of the TV again, like...”

“... last time Ethan and Harry came around?” I nod vigorously. “Sure.” I’ll get it all together, one day. I’m sure.

Someone calls from over by the camera; they’re ready to take some publicity shots.

Martin holds me back for one more moment, though I’m not exactly trying to break free. “I just spoke to your agent,” he murmurs in my ear. “She said something about an American tour.

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For both of us.”

I start to grin with the anticipation of a trip full of adventures and discoveries and Transatlantic accents and—of course—luxury hotel rooms with baths big enough for two slim men and a mess of bubbles. I might even toss in some scented candles. But Martin’s eyes are dark and still, the way they sometimes go, and I pause for a moment.

“So...how do you feel about that?”

He slips his hand under my belt at the back of my jeans and tugs me very slightly toward him. “Only one problem, Russ McNeely.”

Oh good grief and my gonads. “What’s that, Martin Harrison?”

He smiles that smile that makes my flesh melt against my bones and the champagne bubbles pop under my very skin. “Who the hell are we going to ask to flat sit for us while we’re gone?”

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!

* * *

**Don't miss *Upwardly Mobile*
by Clare London,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Since the day they met, Owen's restraint has been an exciting foil to Caleb's unruly lack of discipline. Now established lovers, they

can't deny how welcome that balance is in their lives. Two very different men, both strong-willed—it shouldn't work between them, but it does! Owen's steady world is rocked by Caleb's boldness, and Caleb finds a haven in return. Now they share their lives, a strong need for each other and a highly developed love of play.

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