

Loveyoudivine



BLINDED

SARAH MASTERS

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Blinded

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Blinded

By

Sarah Masters

Dedication

For Sidney Octavian

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Chapter One

Clouds covered a yellow moon's belly, and stars of the same hue were out in force. Ryan had been walking for a couple of hours since an old woman dropped him before her turnoff. It sucked she wasn't going all the way to Biddingford, but then again, who did apart from those living there? Well, he supposed relatives of the villagers visited, but no one in their right mind would *choose* to go to such an out-of-the-way place, surely?

And I'm not in my right bloody mind, and neither was Lee when he moved here, so there you go. I must be nuts to have agreed to this.

With about a mile left to walk, his legs ached something fierce. Upon arrival at the village, he still had to climb a steep hill to reach Lee's cabin. The pad of one foot throbbed from his socks rubbing against his ruined inner sole. *If I stop to take it out, I might not start walking again.* Ryan shoved his hands into his pockets, cursing himself for not thinking to wear gloves in this weather. His beanie hat kept his head warm, though. Good job, really; he reckoned his shaved head would have frozen if he hadn't worn one.

The village lights shone far into the distance, and he pushed on, each step making those creamy twinkles grow bigger. He *had* to be crazy doing this. None of Lee's other friends had offered to take the wad of cash to him, and Ryan felt obliged. Scrub that — he'd *wanted* to. Lee's old dear had died yesterday, and although Lee stopped contact with her years ago, it was only right the woman's money was delivered to her son as she'd requested. Whether Lee would want it was another matter. The old dear

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had left instructions with her neighbour to take the money before the authorities arrived.

Ryan rounded his shoulders, resettling his backpack, the straps digging in so badly he wondered if they'd broken the skin from chafing. His thoughts strayed to the reception he might receive. If he knew Lee, the guy would tell him to fuck right off with the money and not come back. Still, he had to try, and if he was honest, it would be good to see his old friend again. How long had it been now? Four years? Christ, four years living on the top of a hill with no one for company.

Unless he's found someone to share his life with.

That thought sobered Ryan, and he frowned. His offer to take the money had been with an ulterior motive: to see Lee again, see if something could come of it—them. He gave a light chuckle, remembering their fumbled exploration of one another when they were, what, eighteen? They'd hung around with each another for years as kids, and the one time they cut loose and gave in to their feelings, Lee's mother had caught them. Hence the rift. Shit, she hadn't been pleased, standing there in the doorway, hands on hips and her mouth wide open. Her flushed cheeks screamed of her embarrassment and anger, and she'd started ranting, finger pointing and accusations flying. She'd wanted grandchildren, hadn't she, and her only son being 'like that' hadn't sat well at all. And Ryan, the little bastard, was to blame, getting her son all confused. Ryan had made a hasty exit after scrabbling into his clothes, meeting Lee later that night under the streetlight at the end of Ryan's road.

"I've left," Lee said, hands in pockets, his head down. "Gonna go and live in the middle of nowhere so no one can bother me. I can't stay here. Not with her telling everyone what a disappointment I am. And she will, despite being appalled. She'll do anything for a bit of attention. Always has."

Ryan's stomach had plummeted, and he grasped Lee's arm. "Come and stay at my place. I don't give a fuck what people say. We can, you know, be together...if you want."

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Lee lifted his blond-haired head, those deep brown eyes of his filled to the brim, and sighed. "If I tell you something, will you promise not to laugh?"

Ryan nodded, hoping his friend would tell him...tell him he thought a lot of him. Felt the same as he did. "Yup. Tell me whatever you like."

"I feel like...uh, like I've got to find myself, know what I mean?"

He did know. Shit, Ryan had done all his soul-searching a couple of years back, telling himself he shouldn't feel the way he did about his best pal, but Lee? He'd only just admitted to himself and Ryan how he felt, how he *was*, and still had a long way to go in coming to terms with it. And what with his old dear's reaction, the poor bastard must have been as confused as hell.

Ryan nodded. "I know what you mean. You go. Do it, but you'll stay in contact, yeah? Let me know where you wind up?"

Stooping, Lee picked up his large holdall, one they'd used when camping the previous summer. "I will. And hey, maybe you'll come and see me one day."

"I will. When you're ready."

And here Ryan was, four years later, going to visit Lee without knowing if he *was* ready. *Or whether he has someone else.* He shook off the persistent thought, one that had bugged him since Lee left, and winced as his calves protested at the slight incline of the road. He moved off the asphalt and onto the grass verge, thankful the softer ground proved easier on his feet. He stared ahead at brighter, larger lights and picked up his pace. Wouldn't be long now and he'd be with his buddy again. Shit, they had so much to catch up on. Okay, they spoke over the phone and instant messenger, but it wasn't the same, was it? Not like sitting side by side, a beer in hand, with facial expressions and body language to drink in. Christ, he'd missed Lee's body language. The way he used his hands to explain things, all waves and arm jerks, fascinated Ryan, and his eyebrows—how he got only one to shoot up, Ryan didn't know.

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Excited now, he pushed himself to walk faster. The first house on the outskirts stood up ahead, and he almost ran to it, pleased the lights blazed, indicating someone was still up and awake. He needed directions to the hill—Lee’s explanation on how to get there had confused the hell out of him years ago when he’d told Ryan all about Biddingsford.

Nervous, he approached the small cottage, walking up the garden path. He’d heard village folk didn’t take kindly to strangers, and Lee had said it had taken them a while to get used to him. Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door, silently berating himself for allowing something so simple to affect him. The light flicked on behind the two glass panels, and a black figure moved toward the door. A chain rattled, and the door swung wide, revealing a stooped old lady wrapped in a pink fleece dressing gown. She squinted up at him, one rheumy eye releasing a tear, the wrinkles around her lips telling Ryan she’d either smoked for most of her life or perpetually went around with pursed lips.

“What d’you want?” she said, voice terse, the curlers in her hair bobbing. “Ain’t seen you before.”

“Um, sorry to bother you, but could you give me directions to the cabin on the hill?”

“Ah!” She raised a gnarled hand, finger pointing toward him. “One of *them*, are you? Tsk.” She stepped back and began closing the door.

“Please, wait. If you could just tell me—”

“Piss off!”

The door closed, the chain tinkled back into place, and the light went off. Huffing out a breath, Ryan blinked, trying to take in what had just happened. Shit, he knew people like her existed, but to encounter one so damn rude—besides Lee’s mother—was a first for him. He walked back down the garden path and headed toward the next house on the opposite side of the road a few meters away.

Let’s hope I get a better reception at this place. Jesus.

Once there, he knocked on the door, readying himself for more of what he’d just received. This time, after the light went

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on, the door opened with the chain still in place. A face peeped out of the gap—a black-haired woman of about forty, eyes wide, brows raised.

“Yes?” She gripped the door, knuckles pronounced.

“Uh, sorry to trouble you, but I wondered if you’d mind telling me how to get to the cabin on the hill. My, uh, friend lives there.”

“Lee? That who you want?”

Ryan smiled. “Yes. Yes please.”

“Hang on.” She closed the door and walked away, her shape vanishing at the end of the hallway. It appeared again a moment later, and once again she opened the door, chain secure. “Here.” The woman shoved a piece of paper at him.

He took it, looking down at what she’d written—a series of lefts, rights, and straight aheads. Glancing back up, he said, “Thanks.”

The door closed, and Ryan walked back to the road and followed the directions. Clusters of houses came into view now, and roads branched off the main one, more homes evident by the yellow glows shining through the windows. At the end of the road, he took a left and walked a twig-strewn path that led upward. Trees bordered it, their leafy canopies joining high above his head to obscure the moon. A night critter scuttled in the undergrowth, shitting the life out of him, and he strode faster, unused to the countryside and what lived in it. Feeling claustrophobic in the tunnel-like foliage, Ryan let out a sigh of relief at seeing the trees thinned out, giving way to the hill and the open pathway that led to the top.

He stared up. Only one light shone in the cabin—possibly a living room or kitchen—and he imagined Lee inside, watching TV or reading one of those Sci-Fi books he loved so much. The trek almost finished him off, but he reached the top, exultant that he’d managed it only a little out of breath. Speeding up, he approached the cabin, feeling foolish that his knees had decided to mess him about and go rubbery.

It’s only Lee. It’ll be just like old times, like I’ve never been away.

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But what if it wasn't? What if their easy camaraderie on the phone drained away once they came face to face? What if Lee was busy and Ryan couldn't stay there? Shit, he should have asked to come. Springing it on Lee wasn't the best plan he'd had. Indecision warred inside him, and he pulled out his phone.

I'll ring him. Yeah, that's what I'll do. Ring him and see if he fancies a visit.

He pressed the speed dial button for Lee's number and listened to the ringing in his ear and the dull peal filtering through the cabin window.

"Hello, mate," Lee said, sounding chipper and pleased to hear from him. "How're you doing?"

"All right. You?"

"Fine, fine. Watching a bit of TV. You?"

"Um, just been for a long walk."

"What? Tell me you're taking the piss."

"Nope. Hill walking."

"You? Fucking *hill walking*?"

"Yeah. Listen, I was wondering, d'you feel ready for a visit yet?"

"What, from you?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck yeah. When were you thinking of coming?"

"Now."

"Now?"

"Yeah. Open your front door."

"What?"

"Just do it."

The shuffle of Lee moving came down the line, and a light flicked on, glowing through the glass in the front door. Lee's figure stood behind a netted curtain, the same broad shoulders—broader, even—than Ryan remembered. Ryan jogged toward the cabin, stopping a few meters away as the front door opened, showcasing the man he'd missed and thought about for such a long time. The white T-shirt, tight on his biceps, showcased muscles he'd grown since coming here. Blue jeans moulded to

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the tops of his legs, and bare feet poked out from under the hems.

Lee squinted, phone pressed to his ear, and Ryan grinned.

Lowering the phone, Lee said, "That you?"

Ryan laughed and stepped closer, cutting the call and slipping his phone in a pocket. "Yep."

"Fuck me! How...? What...?"

"A beer would be nice." Ryan walked up to the door. "But a hug'll do."

Lee's smile tamed Ryan's nerves but sped up his heart, had his stomach rolling over. Lee's arms enveloped him, and the pat on his back cemented their friendship once more. *It's going to be all right. Shit, everything's okay.*

Ryan pulled back, the urge to kiss Lee's lips like a tangible thing, as though it had hands that pushed their heads together. A brief brush and then Lee stepped away, ushering him inside.

"What a fucking shock! But shit, it's good to see you," Lee said, closing the door and walking down a short hallway with stairs to the left.

Ryan followed and entered a kitchen, the wooden worktops looking like they hadn't been changed for years. Happiness bubbled up inside him. To finally be here with Lee after all this time! Christ, it was like they'd never been apart.

"Want a beer, mate?" Lee asked, putting the phone on the side and opening the fridge. He nodded at Ryan's bag. "Dump that on the floor. I'll sort out the spare room later. I don't have many guests. Sheets need changing." He handed Ryan a can of lager, grin filling his face. "Can't believe you just *did* that to me! Nice surprise, though. Shit. Come here!"

Ryan stepped into Lee's arms, the coldness from the fridge seeping through his coat, and he felt absurd for having tears in his eyes. He blinked them away and rested his cheek on Lee's chest, where he needed to be, wanted to be since the day his first love had left town. Lee's scent, a woodsy aftershave and the unique smell that belonged only to his friend, wafted up. Ryan took it in, unable to quite believe he was here. He smoothed his hands up and down Lee's back, the breadth wider, the muscles

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more defined than before, and wondered if his thighs and calves had grown too. Their close proximity and the sheer excitement of being here got to Ryan, and he wanted to laugh it out—really laugh until his ribs hurt.

He raised his head and looked at Lee. “Shit, I’ve missed you.”

Lee’s eyebrow rose, and he smiled, a lopsided grin that had Ryan’s stomach flipping.

“Didn’t realise how much until I saw you, but I’ve missed you too.” Lee gripped the tops of Ryan’s arms and squeezed. “Come on into the living room.” He let Ryan go, handed him a beer, and closed the fridge, leading the way back down the hall and opening a door on the left. “Got a lot to catch up on.”

Ryan stepped into the room, taking in Lee flopping onto a black leather recliner in his peripheral vision—and a man sprawled out on the sofa straight ahead.

Chapter Two

The bottom fell out of Ryan's world. Hadn't he known this would happen? Hadn't he *told* himself Lee would have found someone by now? God, he wished he hadn't come. Wished Lee had told him before now he'd got himself settled. And why hadn't he? Did he think Ryan wouldn't be able to handle it?

"Take a pew," Lee said, clearly oblivious to the turmoil raging inside Ryan. "Budge up, Josh."

Ryan, feeling awkward and young again, stepped toward the sofa. Josh swung his feet off and sat at the end nearest Lee. He nodded and watched Ryan sit at the other end. Anxiety spiralled inside him, and he had the urge to run, get the hell out of there and not look back. After all, he still had his coat and hat on, and he was bugged if he was going to take them off. He'd feel exposed—more so than he did already. He affected nonchalance and stared at Lee, who picked up a can of beer from a small table beside his chair and sipped.

"Shit," Lee said. "Should be introducing you, shouldn't I? Ryan, this is Josh. Josh, this is Ryan."

"All right?" Josh said, his bright smile and twinkling eyes a punch to Ryan's gut.

Ryan nodded and opened his beer, taking a mouthful. It tasted sour—or was that the bile at the back of his throat? His stomach clenched, and he gazed around the room for something to do. Tongue-and-groove covered the walls, glazed with a pine-coloured varnish. A large canvas, a reproduction of something by Monet if Ryan guessed right, hung over the TV in the corner beside the window. Wooden floors matched the walls, and a

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black shaggy rug covered the floor in front of the sofa and chair. Ryan wondered if they'd chosen the décor together, and a stab of jealousy took his breath away.

I need to go. Shouldn't have come.

"So, you're Lee's friend from years back, yeah?" Josh asked, lifting one ankle up to rest it on his knee. "Heard a lot about you."

Ryan swallowed. "All good, I hope." *What the fuck did I say that for?*

Josh laughed. "Yep, all good. So, what prompted this surprise visit, then?"

Like I'm going to be telling you. "Uh, I just came on a whim. You know, to do something different for a change." Jealousy gripped Ryan harder, squeezing his guts, and he couldn't stop himself asking, "Known Lee long?"

"Long enough." Josh laughed again, the sound irritating as hell, tinny and smug.

Ryan looked to Lee for support. *Come on. Out with it. Tell me he's your bloke and I'll fuck off. Get out of your way.*

Lee drained his can and put it back on the table. "Josh, didn't you say you had stuff to do?" He gave him a look as if to tell him to go into another room. "Me and Ryan have got a lot to catch up on. Old times to talk about."

Josh lowered his foot, a lazy motion that pissed Ryan off, proving Lee's bloke didn't relish leaving them alone and being out of the picture.

"Ah. I *see*, you want to be *alone*." Josh winked and stood. "Anyway, I've got to be getting back. Sue'll be wondering where I've got to."

Sue?

Josh turned to face Ryan. "Nice to meet you. You staying long?"

Ryan blushed, realisation dawning as Josh reached down the side of the sofa, brought out a coat, and slipped into it.

"Um, I'm not sure. Depends on Lee."

God, do I feel like a bastard.

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"Stay as long as you like, mate," Lee said. "And Josh? Hurry up and piss off out of here. I'll see you at work on Monday."

"All right, all right! Jesus!" Josh winked at Ryan. "You just hope he doesn't treat you like this. Nice meeting you. Safe journey home if I don't see you before you leave."

He held out a hand, and Ryan reached out to shake it, guilt and shame flooding his cheeks. Seemed like Josh was just a friend, and straight if the name Sue was anything to go by.

Shit.

Josh left the room, hand raised, and his footsteps receded, disappearing as the front door closed. Ryan looked at Lee, who flung a throw cushion at him, a great big smile on his face.

"You thought he was my bloke, didn't you?"

Ryan's face heated further. "No, not at all. Don't know what you're on about."

"You did, didn't you? Aww, shit!" Lee got up and plunked himself down beside Ryan, face serious. "I haven't been with anyone other than you, you know."

What? "Um, really? How come?"

"Because...well, I needed to find myself, didn't I? Told you that when I left. Couldn't do that with a man in my life, but now? Yeah, I think I'm ready to start again."

Bet he's got someone in mind. Someone he's met at work or someplace. "Good for you. Someone nice?"

"Yup."

Ryan stared at the Monet, emotions swirling through him: guilt at thinking Josh a jerk, shame at realising he wasn't, and envy toward the man who Lee had chosen as a partner. *I'm too late. I waited, thinking we had something back then, and now it's all gone to shit.*

"You," Lee said, nudging him in the ribs. "If you'll still have me."

Ryan turned his head, staring at Lee wide eyed and open mouthed. He hadn't heard right. Couldn't have, because Lee had said —

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Lee leaned across, his nose bumping against Ryan's, and smoothed his hand up Ryan's coat-covered chest. Their lips met, and a burning fire took over them. Lee undid the coat, and Ryan shirked out of it, his movements awkward while they still kissed. Lee broke away and straddled him, sitting on his thighs. He slid his hands beneath Ryan's T-shirt, fingers and palms gliding up his belly and back down again. Ryan's cock hardened, strained against his jeans, and Lee must have sensed it. He popped open the button and lowered the zip, freeing Ryan's cock with long fingers. They curled around it, the touch sending Ryan dizzy. He stared at Lee, willing him to move that hand and make him come hard and fast. This wasn't how he'd expected it to be, but it didn't matter. Urgency gripped him, and he wanted to touch and taste every part of Lee all at once.

Lee released Ryan's cock and stood, pulling Ryan upright with him. They stared at each other, the silent message saying they needed to get undressed. Now. Helping one another out, they shed their clothing, tossing it to the floor then moving together into an embrace where cocks and chests met. Hands roved asses, hips circled, and bollocks brushed together.

God. God, this is so fucking intense.

Ryan crushed his lips to Lee's, and their kiss grew frantic, a coupling of tongues that set Ryan's cock to throbbing. Lee guided his hands up Ryan's back, settling his palms on his shoulders and pushing Ryan down. Ryan kneeled, and without hesitation took Lee's cock into his mouth. Lee's hands on Ryan's head set the pace, and Ryan gripped the other's ass, kneading the soft yet taut flesh. Lee's girth stretched his mouth wide, the tip of his cock skating against the roof of his mouth before butting the back of his throat. Lee moaned then muttered curses, and Ryan sucked harder, wanting to taste his cum for the first time.

"Ah! Wait!" Lee hissed, easing his cock out and kneeling before Ryan. "This way. Please."

He lay on the floor, and Ryan sunk that cock into his mouth again, hand slipping between Lee's legs to finger the soft strip between ass hole and bollocks.

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Lee whispered, hips bucking, "I want you to do something. Something I've wanted to do for a long time. Thought about it at night. Wondered...ah...if you'd be up for it."

Ryan pulled up on his cock and took it from his mouth, turning to face Lee. "What is it?"

"My belt. On my jeans." Lee blushed. "Would you tie my wrists?"

Ryan stared at him, unable to believe he'd heard right. It wasn't that he didn't want to do it or that the request shocked him—more along the lines that tying Lee's wrists would have him shooting his load right now. He scooted over to the jeans and yanked the belt from the loops, returning to kneel beside Lee, his cock throbbing to a painful degree. Lee held his wrists up together, and Ryan wrapped the belt around them, securing the buckle.

"Come here." Lee raised his arms and patted Ryan's leg. "Give me your cock."

Ryan moved over Lee, knees either side of his head, cock pointing toward Lee's mouth. His guts lurched with excitement, and he knew he wouldn't last much longer. He lowered as much as he could without lying completely flat, and Lee took him into his mouth. God, that felt so fucking good, and he sucked Lee's cock the way he wanted Lee to suck his, with hard, unforgiving pulls.

Pressure built, and the combination of Ryan sucking and being sucked proved too much. The base of his cock throbbed along with the vein in Lee's, and Ryan came, his groans and murmurs muffled around Lee's hardness. On Ryan's second shot, Lee's cum filled his mouth, and he swallowed to make room for more. Ryan spilled into Lee again, two gushes in rapid succession, and he juddered above him, the rhythm he'd acquired going out of beat. He pulled up on Lee's cock, milking the rest of his cum, tongue flat against the shaft, lips tight. He raised his ass, easing himself out of Lee's mouth, that soft wetness too much now on his sensitive tip. He lifted his head, and Lee's cock left his lips with a soft pop.

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Heart beating wildly and bubbles of exhilaration in his gut, Ryan manoeuvred so he rested beside Lee, the rug soft on his skin. They lay on their backs, panting, sweating, legs knotted together. Ryan put the back of his hand to his brow, waiting for his breathing to settle. He laughed, then said, "Fuck, that was good."

"It was." Lee turned his head to look at him. "Better than our first attempt."

"Yeah." Ryan laughed again, thoughts of Lee's mother coming to the fore. "Yeah."

Long moments passed, and Ryan contemplated what would happen next. Things just couldn't change. Not now. Not when they'd shared something like this and worked together so well. He replayed the past few minutes in his mind, needing to brand it there in case this was one of the only memories he'd have once he told Lee his reason for being here.

Despite his mind being crowded with images, sleep crept upon him, and his eyelids drooped.

"Reckon it's bedtime," Lee said. "I didn't get a chance to ask. How did you get here? You passed your driving test without telling me?"

Ryan yawned and sat up, undoing the belt. "No. I got lifts then walked the last couple of miles."

"Shit, no wonder you're half asleep. Come on."

He trailed Lee upstairs, still naked, and climbed into bed beside him, the sheets smelling of Lee, the mattress a balm on his aching muscles. As though he'd always done it, he nestled against his lover, head on his chest, leg draped over the other's. He shut his eyes, and Lee whispered, "Need you here."

Ryan opened his mouth to speak, but sleep closed around him at the same time as Lee's arms.

Chapter Three

Ryan woke, disconcerted for a moment at opening his eyes to a strange room. Faint sunlight tried to infiltrate the blackout blind, only succeeding in seeping around the edges, bleeding onto the wall like a square, dull aura. He rolled onto his side and studied Lee while he slept, his lover facing him. How had he ever spent so long away from him? He smiled wryly. *By knowing if you let someone go they come back to you, that's how. Or so the saying goes, anyway.*

He wanted to stroke Lee's face but feared waking him, so stuffed his hands between his legs. Taking in Lee's stubbled jaw line, he imagined how it would feel against his skin and squirmed with the twitching of his cock. His love for Lee blinded him with its intensity, always had, and nothing could change that. If things went wrong, well, he'd just have to deal with it, but no matter what, your first love always held a special place in your heart, didn't they? He thought about that for a moment and realised how naive he was. Didn't his mum marry her first love and hate him now?

I can't see Lee making me hate him, though what I've come to tell him might have him hating me for not telling him sooner. I'll do it today. Get it over with.

His stomach churned at the prospect, and he shoved the thoughts way, filling his mind with memories of last night. Their frantic coupling had surprised him. He'd dreamed of it since they'd been parted, imagined it would be slow and tender, romantic, even. It wasn't, but it didn't matter. Hopefully there

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was plenty of time for ease and gentleness – if he didn't mess up what he'd come to do.

He sighed, his stomach knotting again, and tried to go back to sleep. Mind alive and in no mood to cooperate, he opened his eyes, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. How many times had he done this over the past four years, tormenting himself as to who shared Lee's life? He shook his head. Many wasted hours in the middle of the night spent worrying, only for his suspicions to be dashed by Lee's admittance that there had been no one since Ryan. *Wow*. That they'd both abstained from sex, from getting involved with someone else – that had to mean something, right?

Unable to lie still any longer, he got out of bed and padded downstairs, picking his clothes up from the living room floor and dressing quickly. He'd shower later and wash away the fatigue that lingered in his bones from all that walking yesterday. Besides, he didn't like to make too much noise and wake Lee.

In the kitchen, he familiarised himself with the layout and put the kettle on to boil, then stared out the window at miles of countryside. The view, all patchwork fields in greens and browns, was a comfort to look at and calmed him a little. The sun hung just above the horizon, and its bright light gave the illusion of a summer's day. The frost on the grass just outside told a different story, and he had the urge to go out there in the bracing cold to shock the tiredness from him.

Kettle boiled, he made a coffee and found some keys in a box on the wall. It took a few tries to find the right one, but he unlocked the door and stepped outside, the chilly patio numbing his bare feet. The air worked its magic, and he woke fully, body as alert as his mind. He sipped his coffee, steam from the mug thick due to the outside temperature, and his breaths puffed out in white clouds. Goose bumps popped up on his skin, and he went back inside to get his coat.

Lee stood in the kitchen doorway, tousle headed and sleepy eyed, a pair of grey jersey tracksuit bottoms on. "Thought I'd dreamed it when I woke up to find you gone."

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"Couldn't sleep. Always the same when I sleep somewhere other than my own bed. You all right?"

"Yeah. Shut the door, will you? Bloody cold!" He winked and clicked on the kettle. "You all right?"

Ryan closed the door. "Yeah, thanks. Got anything planned for today?"

Lee yawned. "I was going into the next town over to do the weekly shop—nothing exciting—but I think I've got enough to last the weekend if you'd rather not go."

"I don't mind either way. Whatever you want."

Lee poured kettle water into a cup. "We could go to the pub for lunch. Give the villagers something to talk about." He smiled and put the kettle down, then mimicked gossiping mouths with his hands.

Ryan smiled, leaned his elbows on the worktop beside Lee, and looked out the window again. "Could do." He paused, then, "How long did it take you to get used to living up here?"

Stirring in coffee and sugar, Lee said, "About six months. Was too quiet at first, but then again, that's what I needed. Peace to think. Now, I don't think I could go back to a town to live. Too much going on. Too many people wanting to know your business. All right, there are a few here who are the same, but for the most part they avoid me. Phobic, see. That has its uses." He smiled again then sipped his drink. "Come on. Living room. Bloody nippy in here."

Ryan followed him down the hall. In the living room, Lee flicked on a three-bar fire, put his coffee on the table, and moved to sit in his recliner then changed his mind. Flopping onto the sofa, he looked up at Ryan and frowned.

"You sure you're all right?"

Ryan nodded and sat at the other end. "Yeah, course I am."

"Any regrets?"

"No. Fuck no! It's just..." *I can't do it. Can't tell him.*

"Just what?" Lee sat upright, worry tightening his features. "Look, if you've got something to say, say it. Whatever's worrying you, we'll sort it out. You forget I *know* you. Know when something's bugging your arse. So come on. Out with it."

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Shit. Ryan's heart sped up, and his pulse throbbed, the sound so loud he couldn't hear anything else for a moment. He swallowed. *Just tell him. Get it over with.* "Your mum—"

Lee frowned. "What about her?"

Ryan stared at him. Deep gouges in Lee's brow indicated his annoyance at the mention of his mother. Hadn't he said he didn't want anything more to do with her? Didn't want to know anything about her? But this was different, wasn't it? No way could Ryan withhold that kind of information. Lee's downturned mouth spurred him on to get it over and done with.

"I don't know how to say this or how you'll take it, and I'm only bringing a message because I think you have a right to know. She's, uh, she's dead." *Blunt and to the point, Ryan. Well done.*

Lee's mouth opened and closed, and he reached for his coffee, taking a large gulp and staring at the doorway. "Right. And why did I need to know this? You know how I feel about her." He glanced at Ryan then looked back at the hallway. "It wasn't just her reaction when we were younger. She's always tried to manipulate me, treated me like I had to do what she wanted or suffer the consequences. It was never simple, my life. She was slap happy; you saw the bruises enough times to know that. Best thing I ever did coming here."

"I'm sorry." Ryan felt sick. He sensed Lee's barely suppressed anger and wished he'd got someone else to come here and do what the old lady asked, but wasn't it better that Ryan had come? "Look, I know how you feel, but it isn't like you think. She left two notes. One for whoever found her, and one for you."

Lee's wry, bitter-sounding laughter cut the air. "Ah, she was still on form right until the end, then. Manipulating people to do what she wanted. Come on then, what did the note say? And who found her? And how the fuck did you get to hear about it? May as well hear the whole sordid tale."

"Uh, she asked that the police not come and inform you that she'd gone—that one of your friends had to do it. Me, actually, though no one else offered anyway. Her next door

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neighbour heard the...noise and went to check on her. They apparently had each other's house keys. And she knew someone who knew me—knew me and you had been friends as kids. And, uh, she left you some money. It's in my bag."

"Don't want it." Lee stood and walked over to the window, staring out at a village that had never accepted him. Much like his mother.

Christ, poor bastard. "Didn't think you would, but I brought it anyway."

Lee sighed and sipped his coffee. "Suppose you're going to tell me she died in her sleep, all peaceful, no suffering. Not what I wished for her, I can tell you. And yeah, I sound a bastard, but you weren't brought up by her. You—"

"Hey!" Ryan got up and stood beside him, placing his hand on his arm. "I know all this, don't I? No need to explain it to me. I understand, all right? I only came because if I didn't tell you, you've got to admit you'd wonder why. It's one of those situations where I can't do right for doing wrong, but that's okay. I expected that."

Nodding, Lee said, "Sorry. Not your fault. It's just...when I think of her, all the bad comes back, know what I mean? Like it was all happening again, except I see it in my head. But I feel it inside. Still fucking feel it, as if it was fresh. God!" He sniffed and sipped again. "So how was it? How did she go?"

Ryan hiked in a deep breath. *Tell him. Just say it how it was.* "She shot herself."

Lee's head whipped round to face him, his widened eyes wild and bright. "What? My old dear *killed* herself?" He huffed out a laugh. "How the hell did she get hold of a gun? You've got to be kidding me, right?"

Lightly squeezing Lee's arm, Ryan shook his head, words failing him for a moment. He swallowed then said, "D'you want the money and the note?"

"No. Reckon she'll have written a load of bollocks about what a disappointment I was. I already know that, so what's the point in reminding myself? And as for the money... Give it to charity or something."

Blinded

"But it's twenty grand, Lee. I shit myself bringing it all this way. It's in cash. Her neighbour got it and the notes out of the house before the police arrived."

"Doesn't matter how much it is. Don't you see? Anything from her is tainted. Even me. I can't even bring myself to forgive, can I?" He sighed and left the window, pacing up and down the room. "Look, I hate to do this to you, but uh, could you give me some space?"

Ryan's stomach plummeted, and his immediate thought was that if he left, Lee wouldn't want to see him again. *Christ, I'm a selfish bastard. Let him have his time alone. Last thing he'll be thinking of is me. Go. Leave him be.* "Sure. I'll, uh... Well, I'll go back home, all right? Give you a ring tomorrow or something."

Lee stopped pacing and turned to face him. "No. I don't mean... Not that far away. Don't go back yet."

"Oh. Right. Uh, okay. I'll go into the village for a bit then, yeah?"

Lee nodded, his knuckles white as he gripped his cup. "Yeah. Only for a bit, though. I'll ring you. Come and meet you after I've had a think."

"All right. I'll, um, go and freshen up, then."

Ryan left the room, guts churning, sick to his stomach that he'd hurt Lee with this news, dredged up the past, making Lee go right back to childhood all over again. But what else could he have done? In the kitchen, he rooted in his bag for clean clothes, fingers brushing the large envelope full of money and the smaller one containing the note. He took out some jeans and a black T-shirt, followed by boxers and socks. Heart heavy, he went upstairs to the bathroom, annoyed with himself for forgetting to bring up his wash bag. Making do, he put his clothes on the floor and brushed his teeth using his finger. Finished, he switched the shower on, as hot as he could stand it, and stepped into the cubicle. The image of Lee downstairs all alone hurt his heart, and he resisted the urge to get out and go down to give him comfort. He knew Lee too well, though. If he said he needed space, he needed it. It would only cause friction if Ryan ignored his request.

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Once clean, he dried himself off and dressed, jeans sticking to his semi-damp skin as he pulled them up. He hung the towel on a door hook and collected his dirty clothes. Returning downstairs, he grimaced as anxiety rushed through him. Back in the living room, he expected Lee to be there and raised his eyebrows, fretting over where he'd gone.

For God's sake! He's a grown man. Stop worrying.

Boots and coat on, he pulled his beanie over his head and walked to the kitchen. Lee stood staring out the window in the back door, dry eyed, jaw clenched. Ryan reached into his bag and took out the envelopes.

"I'll, uh, leave these here." He placed them on the worktop. "Just in case you —"

"All right. Thanks." Lee continued to stare.

"Um, I'll be off then. You, uh, you take care okay?"

Lee nodded. "Will do."

Ryan had the urge to go to him, to offer a hug, anything, but instead walked out and down the hall, checking his phone and wallet were in his coat pocket. Outside, he closed the front door and stood on the path, looking out over the village. He'd probably get a frosty reception if the old lady was anything to go by, and he inhaled a lungful of air before heading for the path that led downhill.

With time to think himself, he considered what Lee had said last night. *Need you here*. Did he dare entertain what that could mean? It could have just been something said as the pull of sleep tugged him, but what if it wasn't? What if it was more than that? Lee's admission that he couldn't return to a town meant that to make this work, Ryan would have to move into the cabin. He could do that all right, but after each of them had lived alone for so long, wouldn't they annoy one another after a while?

He exhaled and tromped down the path, fatigue making a reappearance. At the bottom of the hill, he headed toward the main road, spotting a sign that read Market Street. Taking that turning, he ended up at what could only be described as a row of buildings that catered for the villager's bare essentials. A small

Blinded

convenience store boasted posters in the window of so-called special offers that were big fat lies. Paying over the odds for a loaf of bread wasn't Ryan's idea of special, and he turned his attention to a newsagents that doubled as a post office. A pub stood on the corner, its swinging sign proclaiming it The Boar's Head, and he walked up to it and peered through the window, gratified to see they kept town hours. He glanced at his watch: ten-thirty. Too early for a beer, but he spied an old man in the corner drinking from a large cup and reading a newspaper. He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Talk about walking into the past. Everything appeared as it might have done more than a couple of decades ago. Brasses hung either side of a grey brick fireplace, and old-fashioned mirrors graced the walls, their gaudy advertisements like something from the '80s. Cream paint covered anaglypta wallpaper, thick from many layers added over the years, the corners warped and coming away from the walls. It stunk of cigarette smoke, despite the modern ban of lighting up in public places, and the source of the smell came from a middle-aged man sitting at the bar. Ryan assumed it was business as usual here. After all, the police were hardly going to bother coming to this village unless they were called out.

Ryan approached the bar and leaned his arms on it. The black-haired woman who had given him directions breezed through a door at the back and approached him, a smile of recognition brightening her face.

"Hello! What can I get you?" She grasped an ale pump, head tilted as she regarded him.

"Uh, a coffee would be good, thanks."

"Too early for a beer, eh?" She smiled and turned to the rear bar, lifting a carafe from the coffee machine and pouring the dark liquid into a cup. "Sugar and creamer?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Please. Thanks."

She placed two sugar sachets and a tiny tub of cream beside the cup on a saucer and handed him the brew. "Ninety pence. Free biscuit, though, if you want one."

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Ryan took out his wallet and handed her the money. "No thanks. D'you get busy?" he asked, more for something to say than really wanting to know.

"Not really. Quiz night brings a few in, and today we'll have a straggle, it being Saturday and what not, but most of the time it's pretty dead." She smiled again, shifting her weight onto one leg, her wide hips telling of possible childbirth. "So, you got to Lee's all right then?"

"Yeah. Directions were spot on. Thanks."

"Good. Did he not come into the village with you?"

"Uh, no."

"Everything all right?"

He feigned brightness. "Yeah, he's just a bit busy. Meeting me later."

"Ah, right. Just that you look a bit troubled."

Though she was pleasant enough, her enquires pissed him off. He supposed a newcomer to the village brought a break from the norm and it was only natural that she asked questions, but shit!

"I'm all right," he said. "Bit tired from walking last night, that's all." He lifted his cup and saucer. "I'm going to, uh, going to sit over by the window for a bit." Nodding, he moved to walk away.

"Did you want a free biscuit?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Um, no thanks." Getting away while he could, Ryan went over to a table in front of the large window that afforded him a view of the whole street. He could see Lee coming when he was ready to come meet him.

But what if he isn't? What if he needs all day? I can't sit here until tonight. I'll give it until two then ring him. If he still wants to be alone, I'll nip back to his place and collect my bag. Go home. Come back when he's ready. If he's ready.

That last thought scared him.

Chapter Four

Ryan's phone chirped, indicating he'd received a text message. He jumped. Having waited so long, he'd convinced himself Lee wasn't going to call. *It might not even be him.* He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen.

HER FUNERAL BEEN ARRANGED YET?

He replied: NO. THERE'S AN ENQUIRY BECAUSE OF THE GUN. He waited for a response. Too many coffees sitting in his belly griped his stomach, and he stared at the menu behind the bar. Today's special was pea soup with a crusty roll and the main was cottage pie and beans. The soup didn't appeal, but the pie did. He'd order one in a minute once Lee texted back.

His phone chirped again.

NEED YOU. COME BACK.

He stood, replying as he walked to the door, sending back the message that he was on his way. Outside, the cold air slapped him after the warmth of the pub, and he hunched his shoulders, standing his collar up to keep his neck warm. The walk seemed to take forever, despite him almost jogging, the climb up the hill longer still. At the top, he panted and walked toward the cabin, wanting nothing more than to run. So why didn't he? If he was honest, he was wary of what he'd find inside. Could he handle a tearful Lee? An angry Lee? He'd have to.

He knocked on the door, only for it to swing open, no Lee on the other side. Heart thrumming, Ryan stepped inside and closed the door, going straight to the living room. No Lee. He checked the kitchen, and on finding it empty, he looked out the

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window just in case Lee had needed some air. He hadn't. The garden remained deserted. He took the stairs two at a time and entered Lee's bedroom, the drawn curtains giving it the air of being later than it was. Lee rested on his side, curled up in a ball. The envelopes lay next to him, the smaller one open, the corner of the paper inside poking out.

"Uh, you all right?" Ryan asked, cursing himself for saying something so stupid. Clearly Lee wasn't all right. He'd been crying by the looks of it.

"Yeah. I am now. You?" Lee stared at the wall.

Ryan moved to the bed and sat on the edge. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Silence encompassed the room, and Ryan searched for something to say. But what could he say in this situation without either upsetting him or making him angry? He waited for Lee to supply something, anything to give him some idea of how the next few minutes would go.

"Haven't been crying for her," Lee said, hands fisted beneath his chin. "Cried for the kid I was. For how different things could have been if she wasn't the way she was. Her letter... She killed herself out of guilt. For pushing me away. Took to going to church after I left, so she said. Made her see a few things. S'pose the guilt got to her in the end. Funny, because I heard the Bible didn't tolerate the likes of us." He laughed, a dry, empty sound. "Maybe it was the Christian shit in there that got to her. Who knows? Who fucking cares. It doesn't rub out all the things she did while I grew up. Doesn't make anything *better*." He blinked, and a tear trickled across the bridge of his nose. "Wants me to have the money to make up for all the crap she put me through. Said I should spend it to bring me some happiness. That she hadn't given me much of that." He paused for long moments. "What would you do?"

Ryan held out his hand, praying Lee would take it. He did.

"I don't know. I really don't. It's something you've got to decide. If you think you deserve it, then take it, but if you'd feel sick spending it, don't. You've got enough to live on. You don't need it. So what does it matter what you do with it?"

Blinded

"Thought the same." Lee squeezed Ryan's hand. "Sorry about shutting you out."

"It's all right. Nothing to worry about." He braced himself to ask the next question, worried he'd get a shouted answer and Lee's disapproval. "Uh, you going back to sort out the funeral?"

Lee sighed. "S'pose I should. Make sure she's really dead." He chuckled, though it didn't sound mean. Not really.

"Want me to go with you?"

Nodding, Lee said, "If you wouldn't mind." He took his gaze from the wall and looked at Ryan. "She mentioned you. In the letter."

Ryan frowned. "Did she?"

"Yeah, said she'd always liked you, and if I couldn't bring myself to like girls, she'd have preferred us two to get together rather than me pick someone else and be unhappy. She always did have to spoil her rare nice times with a barbed comment. Still, after all these years, I finally got her approval on something. I hate to admit it, but it means a lot, you know? I mean, growing up like I did, I just wanted her to love me like your mum loves you. Just wanted to do something that she'd be proud of. And I s'pose her approving of you, despite you being a bloke, is as close as I'm going to get."

A lump formed in Ryan's throat, and he forced himself to speak around it. "So, uh, d'you think you're going to be all right?"

"Yeah. Once I get a hug from you."

Relief surged through Ryan, and he settled down beside Lee, stroking his face, fingers jolting over the wet skin. Lee hugged Ryan to him, their legs tangled together, arms holding one another tightly. His ear against Lee's chest, Ryan listened to the steady thud of the other's heart, the beats out of sync with his own. His cock hardened, and he chastised himself for feeling this way when Lee was upset and had more important things on his mind.

Lee lifted his arm and took off Ryan's hat, smoothing his hand over the shaved hair. "It's okay, you know."

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Taking Lee's words to mean his situation, Ryan smiled and nodded. Lee looked down between them, and Ryan understood.

"Sorry, it's just...when I'm near you..."

"Like I said, it's okay. Life for the living doesn't stop when someone dies. We carry on, don't we? And I'll get over this in time. Shit, I've coped with it all so far, haven't I? Just got a few extras to sort out in my head, that's all." He leaned forward and rubbed Ryan's nose with his.

"I, uh, I really care about you. You know that, don't you?" The lump in Ryan's throat expanded.

"Yeah. Always have, always will."

Lee put his groin to Ryan's, showing his own desire. Relieved, Ryan waited for the next move to come from his lover. It did with the sweeping of one hand up and down his back, the shedding of their clothes, then a finger dipping into the top of his ass cleft. Ryan's hips bucked involuntarily, and his cock pressed closer, their rigidity clean and hot and pure, their primal urges overtaking sorrow and distress. Lee's finger trailed down the crease to rub over Ryan's pucker, the slow up and down tightening his bollocks and stirring a drip of pre-cum to dribble.

God, he gets me so fucking hot so quickly.

A flash of the times he'd had to fist himself to completion came to mind. Never, during those nights, had he come so close so fast. Nothing beat intimate contact, the touches that sent his desires rocketing, pushing like a hard shove. He returned the caress, finger in the same place, moving at the same speed. They stared at one another, Ryan waiting for those lips to brush his, complementing the sensations on his ass hole. Lee's head remained where it was on the pillow, but his other hand came up between them and grasped both their cocks, setting a rhythm at odds with the strokes on their puckers. Ryan brought his hand up to grip Lee's wrist, guiding him to a slower, more sensual tempo that pushed his bliss up several notches. He wanted it languid, meaningful, a complete exploration of one another. He needed to see if the reality matched his imaginings. Lee leaned forward and kissed him—and the reality surpassed anything he had ever envisaged. The soft beauty of that kiss robbed Ryan's

Blinded

breath and prompted tears. It was okay to cry, wasn't it? Cry at the brilliance of being together? A tear trickled from one closed eye and dripped onto the pillow.

Don't let him have seen it.

He kissed Lee harder, wanting to convey how much he'd missed him, needed him. Lee responded, their tongues searching out the other's, the strokes on their cocks gaining a little more speed. Lee's finger slipped inside Ryan's ass, and Ryan lifted his knee up over Lee's hip to give him better access. His sheath tightened around the finger as it moved up and down, twisting in search of the nub that would send Ryan over the edge. Lee located it, rubbing circles over it, and the familiar tingle at the root of Ryan's cock turned into a throbbing insistence that heralded him coming very soon. He eased his finger into Lee's ass and mimicked him. His cock pulsed in time with Lee's, and Ryan kissed harder, faster, moving his hand to quicken the pace on their cocks.

They pushed against one another at the same time, chests meeting, hands squashed between them, fingers working ass holes and nubs with faster strokes. Ryan's sheath clenched Lee's finger a second before his cock gave its final warning. He hardened further, stiffer than he'd ever been, and he moaned into Lee's mouth. The first shot of cum left him hard and swift, the pleasure-pain of it almost too much to handle. The second brought a wave of bliss, and he wrenched his mouth away from those tempting lips and threw his head back, his neck cords straining against the skin. Lee nestled his head beneath Ryan's chin, and his expulsion joined Ryan's, hot and sticky on their stomachs. Lee's finger slipped out, and he gripped Ryan's ass globe, fingers massaging the flesh. A softer jet left Ryan, spreading a rush of tingles over his cock tip and bringing his orgasm to a close, aftershocks all he had left of that sharp and all-consuming ejaculation.

He let go of Lee's wrist, allowing him to set the pace as the last of his cum shot out. Cock sensitive, he gritted his teeth with the last few strokes and held his breath. Lee stilled his hand, and Ryan eased his finger out. They lay panting, Lee's hair tickling

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Ryan's chin, his breath hot on the dip below Ryan's Adam's apple.

We were born for this – the way our bodies fit together and react confirms it.

Ryan was where he needed to be, where he'd always wanted to be.

* * * *

Sunday dawned bright but cold, the sun once again deceiving Ryan into thinking it would be warm outside. They'd eaten a cooked breakfast, packed up their bags, and now headed down the tree-lined path toward the village.

"We'll stop at Josh and Sue's to pick up my car," Lee said, hands in pockets, large backpack bumping his spine. "They let me store it in their garage."

They didn't say much else, Ryan figuring Lee's mind was full of what was to come and the demons he had to face before he could put them to rest. Would he ever do that fully, or would some remain, taunting him at those times when he couldn't sleep, or in the idle moments when thoughts tended to run rampant? He didn't envy him the coming days, weeks, and months, but vowed to be there every step of the way. All it needed was for Lee to ask him to move to Biddingford.

Will he? God, I hope so, but if a long-distance relationship is all we can have, I'll take it.

Lee led him up the garden path of the house where Ryan had been given directions. Ryan marvelled at the way things worked out—how people came into your life for fleeting moments only to reappear later as more solid participants. Going by the greeting he received from Josh and Sue, he felt sure they'd become firm friends. He remembered his feelings toward Josh when he'd thought of him as Lee's lover, and once again shame burned inside him.

I shouldn't have been so quick to judge.

Lee explained where they were going and why.

Blinded

"You want me to tell the boss you're taking time off? Doubt he'll mind. Work's slow at the moment, isn't it?" Josh said.

"Yeah. I'll ring him myself tomorrow." Lee scrubbed his chin. "But I need to get away today, and if he ends up giving me the sack, I've got a bit stashed away for emergencies to tide us over. I expect I'll be bringing Ryan back with me to live, eh Ryan?" He glanced at Ryan and winked.

Ryan nodded, his heart full and his mind going over what he needed to do before he could move in with Lee. *Shit, it's really happening!*

In the car, with the road stretching ahead of them and the sun high in the sky, Ryan sighed with happiness. That road led to the end of some of Lee's suffering and the beginning of their new life, and he embraced the feeling of finally being where he should be.

"You all right?" Ryan asked, glancing at Lee.

Lee turned to him and smiled. "Yeah. I'm blinding."

About the Author

www.sarahmastersauthor.wordpress.com Sarah writes in many genres. Her love of fantasy and historicals often features in her work, and she leans toward the highly erotic. She lives in England with her adorable husband and children.

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