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PRICKS and
PRAGMATISM

J. L. MERROW

Easy come, easy go...until the heart gets involved.

English student and aspiring journalist Luke Corbin should be studying. Instead he's facing homelessness, thanks to the lover who's just kicking him out of their posh digs. It's not his first rejection—his father tossed him out at age sixteen—but Luke has no problem trading his favors for a home and security. Especially with rich, powerful, handsome men.

Except now, with finals bearing down, there's no time to be choosy. He needs a roof over his head and he needs it now. Even if it means settling temporarily for a geeky, less-than-well-off chemical engineer called Russell.

Luke's fully prepared to put out for the guy—because after all, in this world no one gets something for nothing. But Russell isn't just a nerd; he's an honourable nerd who wants to save himself for someone special.

At first Luke is annoyed, but the more time he spends with Russell, the closer he comes to a devastating realization. He wants to be that someone special. Except he's fallen for the one man he can't seem to charm...

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Pricks and Pragmatism

JL Merrow

Dedication

With thanks to Pen, Flic, and everyone from
VWC—not just for this one but for all the rest too.

Chapter One

I looked up from my Uni notes on Rakes and Libertines as Sebastian walked into the flat. He was a vision in Armani, as always, his sleek black hair allowed to grey artfully just at the temples and no further. He'd said once he thought it gave him gravitas; I'd told him I'd grab his arse any time he wanted.

I was lying on the rug in front of the mock fireplace wearing nothing but the Calvin Kleins he'd bought me. On the rug, because Sebastian would have thrown a hissy fit if I'd taken pens on the sofa; in my underwear, because there's nothing wrong with giving a bloke something nice to look at after a hard day at the office.

I flashed him my best smile over my bare shoulder. "Hey, handsome."

He didn't smile back. There was a strange tension around his eyes that made me think that, if it hadn't been for the Botox, he'd have been frowning. His gaze travelled down my body and stopped at my arse, and for a moment there was something almost like regret in his eyes. That was when I realised what was coming, before he even opened his mouth. "Luke, I need you to move out by the weekend."

They always said it like that. Never "I *want* you to move out," because if it was only something they wanted, maybe I'd try and talk them out of it. Safer to say they needed me to go, like it was out of their hands. Sometimes they added a bit, dressed it up with "It's been fun", or "Sorry", but the bottom line was always the same. I never made a scene. After all, chances were whoever they were chucking me out for wasn't going to last, and I might want to come back one day.

So I didn't say what bloody awful timing this was. I didn't remind Sebastian I'd got Finals in three weeks, and I certainly didn't ask him where the hell I was supposed to go. I just smiled and said, "No problem. So you've met someone, then?" and I pretended to listen to Sebastian gushing on about this merchant banker who he swore was The One.

Not like me. I was never The One. I was just a friend with benefits and a cash flow problem. Maybe I couldn't pay my share of the rent, but hey, I made up for it in other ways, didn't I?

So while Sebastian was rabbiting on, I smiled and nodded and went through my mental list of places to stay. Trouble was, this end of term no one at Uni was looking for an extra lodger. Not that most students have got enough money to carry a passenger anyway. I needed a bloke with a job. Patrick (tall, built, had his own import/export business, but a tiny little willy) was back with Mark again—it wouldn't last, but a break-up in the next week was probably too much to hope for. Calum (lawyer, gorgeous, mean streak a mile wide) was still single, but last time I was with him I got a bit tired of pretending I was into the rough

stuff. Put him down as a last resort. Tom... God, when was the last time I saw Tom? Maybe I should look him up. Tonight, perhaps.

“So, anyway, you’ll be all right, won’t you?” Sebastian asked finally. I was almost touched he’d asked. Most of them don’t bother—probably worried I might say no.

“I’ll be fine, you know me.” I was smiling so widely my jaw was starting to ache. “Got a bloke in every port, I have.”

Sebastian laughed. “Well, it’s been fun, hasn’t it?”

Yeah, Sebastian. It’s been fun.

I got on the phone straight away. Tom sounded pleased to hear from me, and we arranged to meet up at the Frog and Frigate down by Ocean Village. I got there early—it wasn’t like there was anything to hang around for at Sebastian’s.

It’s not Tom’s sort of place at all, the Frog and Frigate, but it was where I met him, so I was hoping for a bit of nostalgia to kick in. It’s a bit of a student hangout, friendly and, more to the point, gay-friendly. I’d been there with a crowd from Uni when Tom had been dragged in by this idiot who’d totally misjudged him. All it had taken was a smile and a comment about how he looked like he was used to a better class of establishment, and we were on our way out of there and between Tom’s 1,500-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

Don’t get me wrong, the Frog and Frigate’s a great place—if you like that sort of thing. Outside, it looks a bit surreal, like it elbowed its way in between the buildings either side and they didn’t quite move over far enough, so now it stands head and shoulders over its neighbours and looks like it’s sucking its gut in out of sheer necessity. Inside, the décor’s a bit cartoonish. And froggy.

And they have local bands there on a Friday night. Like I said, not Tom’s sort of place at all. I smiled as he breezed in, all good looks and airy confidence, the sort only money can buy. I quite liked Tom. He was pretentious and selfish, they all were, but he wasn’t mean. Generous, even, when he thought about it. He’d buy me stuff I actually wanted, not just stuff he wanted to show me off in. “Tom!” I called. “You’re looking great!”

“You too, Luke. *Très jolie*. The shorter hair really suits you. Makes you look all American frat boy.” He nodded at my glass. “Want another one of those?”

“Yeah, please.” I watched him as he made his way to the bar and came back with a couple of glasses of Chablis. Still the same trim figure, showcased to perfection. He didn’t go in for fashion much, just classic stuff that really suited him. Yeah, I wouldn’t have minded getting back with Tom even if I hadn’t been desperate.

“Cheers, Tom,” I said as he put my glass down.

“*Saluté*,” he replied. Just like old times.

“So, what have you been up to, Tom? Seems like it’s been ages since we had a drink together,” I added, letting a wistful note creep into my voice.

Tom beamed at me. “You are *never* going to guess, but...I’m getting married!” He waggled his ring finger at me. “You won’t be seeing *this* baby naked for much longer.”

I smiled. Bastard. Was it all a bloody joke to him, wasting my time? “Congratulations, Tom. Who’s the lucky bloke?”

Tom leaned forward on the scratched wooden table. “Well, his name’s Nigel, he’s six foot one-and-a-half, he plays squash, and he works at the oil refinery at Fawley.”

“Big, beefy, hard-hatted oil worker?” I asked. At least I was getting a drink out of this, and Tom was looking so bloody happy I couldn’t stay annoyed at him for long.

“Hardly. He’s their management accountant.” Tom pulled out his phone and showed me a picture of an average-looking bloke in a suit. “Isn’t he gorgeous?”

I nodded. “It’s just like women always say, Tom—all the good-looking ones are married or gay.”

“And in three months’ time we’ll be both. But anyway,” he carried on, “about your ‘problem’.” I tried not to cringe as he did the air quotes. “I *think* I may be able to help. Or, rather, Nigel’s got a friend who might be able to help you out. Russell’s his name. He’s not really your usual type, I’m afraid, but needs must, *n’est-ce pas?*”

I nodded again, suddenly feeling a lot friendlier towards Nigel the unknown accountant. “So what’s he like, then, this Russell?”

“He’s an engineer, a few years out of Uni. Works at the refinery, that’s how Nigel knows him. He’s doing all right, career-wise, got his own place, but, well...” Tom broke off and gave a laugh. “You’d be doing him a favour, believe me. He can’t seem to get a date for love nor money, poor sweetie. Still, *c’est la ville*.”

I managed to cover up my laugh by taking another swallow of Chablis. Good old Tom and his unique grasp of French vocabulary. Never failed to cheer me up. “People with money can *always* get a date. Trust me on that.” I raised my glass to Tom. “So when do I get to meet him? Tomorrow? After all, if he’s that desperate...”

“I’ll get Nigel to sort it out.”

Tom spoke to Nigel, who talked to Russell, and the upshot was Russell and I had a date in a café in town after he’d got back from work.

It took me a good quarter of an hour to decide what to wear. See, it’s not just a matter of putting on whatever you look best in. You’ve got to tailor it to the bloke. And to be honest, I’d never had a lot to do with socially retarded saddo types. For my date with Tom, I’d gone for fresh-faced, sporty-but-casual—

hence the frat boy comment. If it had been Calum, I'd have worn tight jeans, a studded leather belt and something faintly sleazy on top. For a moment I toyed with the idea of dressing like that to meet Russell; after all, you know what they say about the quiet ones... But I didn't want to risk him taking one look and running off screaming for his mother, so I played it safe in casual jeans and a soft blue shirt. There's only one thing I don't like about my looks: my eyes. When I was a little kid they were bright blue, just like my mum's, but these days they've faded to grey, and where I'm blond now they can look a bit cold. But the blue shirt makes them look warmer, somehow. I left it undone at the neck, one button lower than you'd expect. Just to help Russell concentrate on the benefits of doing me a favour.

Then I brushed my teeth and headed over there. With an overnight bag, because you've got to be optimistic, right?

I clocked Russell the minute I walked in the door of the café. He was sitting on his own at a table in the corner playing with his mug, short stubby fingers moving nervously over the china. I was almost worried to say hello in case I made him spill his drink. Tom had been right. Russell *really* wasn't my usual type. He was... Well, he was a bit of a geek. Actually, he was a lot of a geek. Round face and too-long mousy brown hair, although at least he'd washed it. An actual beard to match; and we're not talking a neatly trimmed goatee, either. He wore a shapeless sweater over a shirt his mum must have bought him, and glasses from Nerds'R'Us. No spots, thank God. He looked around thirty, although from what Tom had said he ought to be a lot nearer my age. Still, it wouldn't be the first time Tom had given the truth the odd nip and tuck.

Three weeks to Finals, I reminded myself. And beggars can't be choosers. So I plastered on my best cheeky smile, pulled out the chair opposite him with a scrape and sat down. He looked up, startled, and just managed not to drench me in coffee. "Hi, I'm Luke. You're Russell?"

"Er, yes," he said, like he wasn't really sure. "Nice to meet you." He didn't say anything else, just stared into his coffee cup as if helpful suggestions were going to spell themselves out on the foam on top. His fingers linked around the sides of the mug like he was giving it a cuddle. I wondered who'd taken away his security blanket. Maybe it was in the wash.

"Coffee any good here?" I asked. Actually I'd been here a few times before and I knew it was shite. But they were really good about letting you hang around all day when it was cold outside, and one waitress in particular was always good for a free refill if you flashed her a smile.

Russell looked worried, like he thought it was some kind of test.

"Not that I'm fussy, mind," I added to put him at his ease. Never a truer word, and all that.

"It's—it's all right, I suppose." His eyes darted up to me briefly, and then returned to the safety of the coffee cup. "Their tea's better," he ventured.

I shrugged. “Like I said, I’m not fussy. As long as it’s hot and wet, it’ll do me.” I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the table, and made my tone low and suggestive. Habit, really, more than an urgent desire to get into Russell’s C&A slacks.

Russell blushed. Ye gods. Well, at least his innuendo detectors were working just fine. “Tom said...he said you needed somewhere to stay for a bit,” he said, looking up briefly from under his hair and then ducking back down for cover again.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know it’s a pain, but I need somewhere by the weekend. Tom reckoned you might be able to help me.” He still wasn’t looking at me, which wasn’t helping at all, so I made my voice as warm and seductive as possible and reached across the table to place a hand on one of his.

He jumped a bloody mile and this time he did spill the coffee. “Shit! Oh, God, sorry!”

“Hey, don’t sweat it,” I told him easily, seeing as about one drop had gone on my sleeve and the rest was soaking into his sweater. Shame it hadn’t gone in his lap, but I made the best of it. I must have used half the paper napkins in the place to mop him up, even the bits that didn’t strictly need it. He appreciated it. Believe me, I could tell. “Come on, we’d better get you home and into some dry clothes,” I said, taking his arm.

Russell lived in a development near the docks. Not the posh end, by Ocean Village where Sebastian lived so he could go and wank over his yacht any time he wanted, but it wasn’t totally downmarket. His flat was on the second floor, up four flights of stairs. It was all right, I suppose. Nothing like Sebastian’s, of course, but I’d known I wouldn’t get that lucky again. There was a tiny hall that led into a smallish lounge/diner, with other doors off that must be to bed and other rooms. “Great place you’ve got here,” I said, slinging my rucksack on the floor.

Russell looked pleased. “You like it? I know it’s a bit bare—I haven’t had time to do it up much yet.”

“No, it’s great,” I told him, walking past the squashy, lived-in sofa to the window. “That view is amazing,” I added, with a lot more sincerity this time. The flat looked out over Southampton Water, and you could see the lights of ships passing by underneath in the twilight. Farther up to one side was a bridge over the river with tiny little cars driving over it, visible only by their headlamps. Somehow it made me feel like we were right in the heart of things, but in our own little world; part of the city, but above it too.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Russell said, coming up behind me. “It’s why I bought the place. Just fell in love with that view. You look at that and you feel you can go anywhere, do anything.” It was more words than he’d strung together the whole time in the café.

“Yeah? You always lived here alone?”

Russell nodded once, clamming up again. “I’ll just get changed.”

He disappeared into what must be his bedroom, and I looked around a bit, checking out the bookshelves and the DVD collection like you always do, although hopefully I'd have plenty of time to do that later. There were the engineering books like you'd expect, and the complete works of Terry Pratchett snuggled up to *Gormenghast* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but there was also a whole shelf full of books in French, mostly crime stories, which made sense. You don't need half as big a vocabulary to read thrillers in a foreign language as you do for science fiction. There were a couple of Arsène Lupin paperbacks that looked familiar from my teenage years, and a solitary Maigret. It made me nostalgic for childhood holidays in Brittany. Back when my dad had still been speaking to me.

"Do you speak French?"

Russell's voice had startled me, and I spun 'round. He'd changed into jeans and a baggy red T-shirt that made him look like his own kid brother. "Haven't done in years," I said, shrugging.

He gave a shy smile. "You'd probably pick it up again all right if you tried. Um. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet, no," I told him with a smile, sitting on the well-stuffed sofa and putting my arm along the back. I casually rested my right ankle on my left knee, giving him a good look at my package. Laying my cards out on the table, so to speak. "What do you fancy?"

I watched him perch awkwardly on the edge of an armchair and tried not to sigh. He was like a tortoise, I decided. Retreating into his shell every time I tried to get close.

Was he even actually gay?

Still, as long as he let me stay here until the end of Finals, what did I care? I sat forward again. "If you've got some food in, I'm not bad at cooking. Or we could get a takeaway? If you've got the money, that is," I added, as it was probably time we got the business details out of the way. "Tom told you I'm skint, right? So I can't afford any rent, but I'm happy to pay my way in other ways. You know—you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Or, you know, any other bits you want scratching..." I left it hanging, but I didn't lick my lips. I've got some class. And he'd probably have run off screaming.

I could see Russell's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed. "Tom said...he said you didn't have any money." He frowned. "But you don't need to...you know." He stopped, looking like he'd rather be at the salon getting a back, sack and crack.

Shit. He wasn't gay. I was going to *kill* Tom.

Russell was still talking. "You're welcome to stay here until after your exams. Or, you know, whenever." He looked at me earnestly, his face clashing horribly with his T-shirt. "It's, um, kind of you to offer, but I don't want you to feel you have to, well, pay me back."

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Did he have the first fucking *idea* how he was making me feel? What was I, some kind of charity case? I supposed it made him feel *noble* or something. Or maybe he was just worried where I'd been. I felt like screaming at him, with his stupid nerdy glasses and his bony elbows and his beardy weirdy face even his mother only pretended to love.

But I had my Finals in three weeks' time, so instead I just smiled sweetly and said, "Thanks, Russell. Now, how about that takeaway?"

I'd calmed down a bit by the time the food came. Well, the lagers probably helped. We had Chinese, and it was pretty good. I hadn't had a takeaway in a while; Sebastian was so bloody anal about what he ate. It used to drive me wild. Russell ordered shredded chilli beef and special fried rice and I chose chicken chow mein and monks' vegetables, but we shared it all anyway, sitting down to eat it off the low coffee table in front of the telly, which had been another big no-no in Sebastian's flat. Sometimes I'd been surprised he ever let me sit on his bloody sofa.

"You always watch the football?" I asked Russell once I'd got to the full-but-still-picking-at-it stage. Because really, he didn't seem like the sporty type.

He looked down at his plate, where all the bits of tofu he'd picked out of the vegetable dish were wobbling in a sad little pile. "Er, yes. But we don't have to if you don't want to watch it," he added politely.

"Russell, you're doing me the favour here. You're letting me stay here. You don't have to pretend you don't mind missing stuff just because of me. Besides, I like the football. I just thought you might not, that's all."

He shrugged. "Most people assume I keep it permanently switched to National Geographic. You know," he added, with a perfectly straight face, "sometimes, when I'm feeling particularly daring, I turn over to a comedy show."

I laughed, genuinely. Maybe he was all right after all. And I kind of liked the way his eyes crinkled up at the corners when he joined me in the laughter.

"Tom told me you were studying English," he said after a while. "Do you know what you want to do when you've got your degree?"

I nodded. "Journalism."

Russell cocked his head on one side. "You sound very certain about that."

I was. "I've known it was what I wanted to do since I was twelve."

He smiled. "Lucky you. I just sort of fell into engineering—was good at science, didn't want to stay at university the rest of my life. Have you had anything published already?"

"Yeah, a couple of freelance pieces. You have to make a name for yourself in this business."

Russell nodded. "Where did they appear? Anywhere I might have read?" He actually looked interested.

"I had an article published in *Attitude*," I said, trying not to sound like I was boasting.

"Really?" he asked, leaning forward. "Which issue?"

“The one with Gareth Thomas on the cover.” I told him. And yeah, okay, I was totally boasting. Russell had that smile on his face, the one that was mostly in his eyes. He’d seen that issue, all right. A lot of people had. It’d been big news, the first professional rugby player to come out while still playing. And a bloody good picture of him too.

“I think his thighs must be about the same measurement as his waist,” Russell said dreamily. Yeah, he was gay, all right. Then he blinked and finished his beer. “Another?”

“Yeah, please.”

I watched Russell as he headed into the kitchen. All right, so he was no Gareth Thomas, but then who the hell was? I work out, but it’s cosmetic with me. I wouldn’t last five minutes in a rugby scrum. ‘Course, Russell wouldn’t last five seconds, but he wasn’t badly put together for a possibly-thirty-year-old geek who didn’t get enough exercise. He had nice broad shoulders, which I always like, and in his case helped to counteract a suspicion of a few too many Mars Bars. He was taller than me, which again I like, but then most men are. It doesn’t bother me. Muscles look more impressive on a shorter frame. Small but perfectly formed, that’s me.

Russell came back with another couple of cans and plonked them on the coffee table. “So how come you didn’t do a degree in journalism?”

“A lot of places—the *best* places—still don’t respect you if you’ve done a vocational degree. There’s a lot of intellectual snobbery.” I shrugged. “It’s all bollocks, but you can’t change the system from outside.”

Russell laughed softly, and I looked at him, surprised. “You know, I can just imagine you getting into the system and turning it upside down,” he said. “Like some kind of nanobot, fixing it from the inside.” He flushed and hung his head down so his hair brushed up against his beard. “Sorry. I sound like a total geek, don’t I?”

It was sort of cute. “Hey, geek is the new black, haven’t you heard?”

“No, and I don’t think anyone else has, either,” he said, his eyes still all crinkled up from the laughter. “Look, I need to get to bed.” He stood. “I’ll, um, show you your room first? It’s the one that’s not mine.” He gave a nervous laugh, like he was worried I might get mixed up and jump him in the night.

I gave up. I stripped down to my boxer briefs, cleaned my teeth and crawled under the flowery duvet in Russell’s spare room, wondering what the hell he thought was going on here.

Chapter Two

I slept late next day, really late. It'd been so long since I'd slept alone, I hadn't realised how much I relied on the sounds and the movement of someone else getting up to drag my lazy carcass out of bed. Russell had gone to work, of course. He'd left a key on the kitchen counter, together with a note saying I should help myself to toast and Frosties and he'd see me around six.

So I did some push-ups in front of the telly and had a couple of slices of toast (Frosties? For real?) and then I headed back to Sebastian's to pack up my stuff. There wasn't a lot of it; just clothes, books and my laptop, so it didn't take long. I thought about calling Sebastian up at work and asking if he'd drive me over to Russell's with my bags, but it wasn't worth the hassle. It wasn't like he owed me anything, after all. And I was bloody certain I didn't want to owe him. So I dug into the emergency fund and got a taxi.

I'd hung my clothes in the fitted wardrobe, unboxed my textbooks and was deep in Critical Analysis when the front door opened. "Hi, Russell," I called out, trying not to lose my place in the book.

"Hi." He kept going to the kitchen, and I realised he'd been shopping. Russell was rustling.

I leapt up. "Let me help you with those bags. So, we're cooking tonight?"

"Er, yes." The closer I got, the more he seemed to shy away. It was like we were right back in that café.

"Great! You want me to do it? I mean, you've been at work all day. What do you fancy?" I rummaged through the bags. "Pasta okay? I can do a half-decent carbonara, or spag bol, whatever you prefer."

"Well, er..."

"Great! You go and sit down, and I'll get it started."

I hummed as I cooked. I'd missed this—cooking what I wanted, when I wanted. And I had a feeling Russell would appreciate whatever I turned out, even if it was a total disaster, which it wouldn't be, because I'm not a bad cook. Mum taught me, despite my dad moaning on that I should be outside kicking a football, not hanging on her apron-strings all the time, as he put it.

Russell popped his head into the kitchen a couple of times to ask if I needed help, so I got him to wash the salad and get the drinks ready. I think it helped; he didn't seem half so nervous by the time we sat down to eat. "This is really good," he said 'round a mouthful of pasta.

"Thanks." I'm a sucker for compliments on my cooking. "Do you cook much?"

He made a sort of self-deprecating gesture. "Well, I do, but nothing like this."

“This? This is simple. Look, I’ll show you next time, all right? I mean, you’re a chemical engineer. How hard can cooking be for someone like you?”

Russell smiled down at his plate. “You’d be amazed.” He looked up again. “I, er, looked up your article, by the way. I had seen it. I just didn’t recognise the by-line at the time. Obviously. It was really good. Insightful. Not something that gets written about a lot, domestic violence in gay relationships.”

I shrugged, trying not to show how pleased I was that he’d made the effort. “Well, that’s the key, isn’t it? You find something no one’s written about before—or that they haven’t looked at in depth. I mean, a lot of stories you see are hot topics—everyone jumping on whatever bandwagon’s in fashion that day. But the real secret is to be ahead of the trend, find something fresh and exciting.”

“So it wasn’t just a case of writing what you know?” I froze, and Russell back-pedalled furiously. “Sorry. That’s none of my business. I shouldn’t have—sorry.”

I unclenched my fingers from around my fork and laid it down carefully on my plate. I don’t know why I’d got so uptight about it. It wasn’t like he was the first person who’d ever asked that. I suppose I just felt like I could take it easy with Russell. Like I didn’t have to be on my guard, so when he asked the question, it threw me all the more. I took a deep breath. “I’ve been there. A long time ago. When I was sixteen. Not since then, though.”

Not since I made a rule never to move in with anyone I couldn’t walk away from in a heartbeat.

“Sixteen?” Russell frowned. “Wasn’t that a bit young to be living with someone? I mean, I assume you were living with him?”

“Yeah. See, my dad...well, we never really got on that well, and once I told him I had a boyfriend, it just sort of fell apart. We had a blazing row over this bloke whose name I am *not* going to tell you, because I promised myself nothing of his would ever pass my lips again, and Dad basically told me to either split up with him or get out and not come back.” So I’d moved ’round to Nameless Bastard’s, and found out too late my dad hadn’t been totally wrong about him, even though he’d been going at it from the wrong direction.

I’d never seen Russell look so unhappy. “I can’t...I can’t imagine that. My parents just accepted it. Well, I think they’d already given up on me ever having a girlfriend by the time I told them, anyway. I know it’s a lot more difficult for some people—but to get thrown out by your own parents at sixteen...” He paused and pushed his plate away, like his appetite had disappeared all of a sudden. “And then to have the bloke who’d caused it all knock you around...”

“Yeah, well. Like I said, it was a long time ago.” I smiled at him and put a hand on his sleeve. “I’m over it now, trust me.” I gave a gentle squeeze to his arm. “Don’t worry. It hasn’t put me off men.”

Russell leapt up like a startled rabbit, and muttered something about washing up as he disappeared into the kitchen. I laughed to myself, and got my books out again. Exams in nineteen days, after all.

We settled into a routine pretty quickly. Well, I'd had plenty of practice fitting in with new blokes, although it still felt bloody weird that we weren't sleeping together. Russell would go off to work, and I'd head up to Uni, and when he got home I'd cook him dinner. I was ready for a break by then, so it worked out well. He liked most things I cooked, but he was a total pushover for pasta. Carbonara, arrabiata, Bolognese—you name it, he loved it.

Weekends were a bit different, but I made sure I went out to the library, or the gym, or just out for a run so I wouldn't be in his face too much. I could tell he was the sort of bloke who felt weird getting on with life as normal with a stranger in the house. Made me wonder why he'd agreed to have me, seeing as he wasn't actually *having* me, but I was hardly going to call him on it, was I?

It was one Sunday night, about a week and a half after I'd moved in, when we realised that as neither of us had gone shopping, it was going to have to be either be a takeaway or cobble up something awful with the last few cans in the cupboard. "What do you fancy?" I called out to Russell, my head still deep in the kitchen cupboard as if some fresh food was going to magically appear there any moment.

"Um."

I backed out of the cupboard and noticed he was looking a bit red in the face. "Were you looking at my arse?" I teased him.

The face got redder. He swallowed. "Fish and chips?"

So we walked down to the marina and went to the chippy there. It's pricey, but then they cater to the yachting crowd, so what do you expect? After Russell had paid for the food, we wandered down to the waterfront and sat on a bench to unwrap our greasy parcels.

The chips were thick-cut, hot and smothered in salt and vinegar, just like I'd asked for. I munched appreciatively. Funny how food like this always tastes better eaten out of doors. Russell nodded out to sea, where a few raucous seagulls were swooping lazily over the waves. "I used to live there."

"What, on top of a buoy or something?"

He laughed. "On the Isle of Wight. Ever been there?"

"Well, a couple of day trips, but apart from that, no. We used to holiday in France when I was a kid. Brittany." I remembered the French novels on his bookshelf. "Where did you learn French? Did you live there for a while or something?"

Russell suddenly got very busy with squeezing out a sachet of ketchup onto his chips. "No. Evening classes." He looked up and grinned at me sheepishly. "I heard they were a good way to meet people."

I laughed. "Well, if you enjoy meeting middle-aged housewives suffering from Empty Nest syndrome..."

“Actually, half of them were men.” He grimaced. “*Straight* men, and not one of them a day under sixty-five. I think pensioners must get special rates or something.” He took a big bite of battered cod and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “So what were they like, those holidays in Brittany?”

I shrugged. “Okay, I suppose. Brittany’s a lot like Cornwall, really.” I grinned. “Except the accents are easier to understand. And you don’t tend to get clotted cream teas. We used to rent a gite out in the country and drive to the beach and stuff. I used to go shopping with Mum in the local market, and then we’d cook while Dad read the paper and moaned about the country going to the dogs. Britain, I think, not France, although to be honest I never really listened when he went off on one of his rants.” I stuffed down a couple of chips. “I used to wish we’d go to a hotel, or a campsite or something. You know, where there would be more people around. But Dad didn’t like that kind of thing. He used to say he went on holiday to get some peace and quiet, and he didn’t want hordes of other people’s kids spoiling it for him.”

Russell nodded, like he’d heard the same sort of thing from his dad. “We never went anywhere very much. I think my parents’ view was that if you lived somewhere like the Isle of Wight, you didn’t need summer holidays.” A chip cooled in his fingers as he reminisced. “I used to dream of going abroad for a proper holiday like all the other kids at school did.” He laughed. “The closest I ever got was a long weekend in the New Forest.”

“Yeah? Where did you stay?”

“Er, the New Forest? I was a bit young to take notice of place names. I remember a pub that did some really nice ham sandwiches, though.”

I laughed. “You were living the high life, all right.” I picked at the remains of my haddock, trying to decide if I was really still hungry. “I used to live ’round there. Lyndhurst.”

“Your family,” Russell said hesitantly. “Do they know where you are now?”

“Nope, and they don’t care.” I stood, crumpling the paper with the remains of my supper and chucking it in the bin.

Russell’s moustache drooped. “They must care. They’re your parents.”

I leaned on the railings and stared out to sea. “Well, for starters it’s just my dad, now. Mum died just before my sixteenth birthday.”

I felt Russell come to stand beside me, his body shielding me from the chill of the breeze that had picked up while we were eating. “Luke, I’m sorry.” He was silent for a moment. “How did she die? Or would you rather not talk about it?”

“It was a long time ago. Brain tumour.” I looked out to sea again. “She just keeled over one day. At least it wasn’t a long, drawn-out illness. I don’t think she even knew it was happening.”

“It must have been really hard for you. Especially with everything else going on...”

I turned and gave him a smile. “Are your parents okay?”

“Oh, yes, they’re fine. Still living on the Island, in the house I grew up in. Every so often they talk about moving to the mainland, but I don’t think they ever will.”

“And do they still insist on staying at home all summer?” I asked with a grin.

Russell made a face. “Now they go to Spain or the Canaries. Every bloody year.”

I laughed. “Still, you’re a big boy now. You can go anywhere you want. Have you got anything planned this year?”

“Um.” He blushed. “I did promise Mum I’d spend a week on the Island.”

“Russell, Russell, Russell. I am ashamed of you.” I shook my head in mock disbelief. “Tell you what, we should take a trip to France.” I didn’t really think we *would*. It was just talk, just like Sebastian always telling me about all the exotic places he’d take me to on his yacht when he got around to it. “I could see if I remember any of my French, and you can pick up some more paperbacks. It hardly takes five minutes on Eurostar.”

“I, er, I sort of have this thing about tunnels,” he admitted. “But we could get a ferry.”

“Leaving out all the Freudian implications of your *thing* about tunnels, yes, we could get a ferry,” I told him. “Hey, we should take Tom along. He could learn some proper French to pose with.”

Russell laughed, his beard twitching. “He’s, um, got an interesting way of putting things sometimes, hasn’t he? I was with him and Nigel once, and we were talking about Sex and the City, and he kept insisting that Sarah Jessica Parker was *jolie-lait*.”

“Hmm. Pretty milk?” I raised an eyebrow. “Now, I might be making assumptions here, but looking at her figure I’d say dairy products really aren’t her thing.”

The following week, which was the one before my exams, I started to go a bit stir-crazy. I’d hardly been out in two weeks—all right, I’d been running, and to the gym, but that was just exercise. I’d revised Romanticism that day until my brain felt like it’d turned to cheese and if I hadn’t taken a break it would have started dribbling out of my ears. Which is why I was doing push-ups in the nude when Russell came home that night.

Look, there is a reason for this. You work out, you get sweaty. So if you’re wearing clothes, you’ve got to shower and bung your clothes in the wash. But if you don’t wear any clothes, all you have to do is shower. See? It’s not just lazy, it’s eco-friendly as well.

And all right, I’d looked at the time and I’d known there was a good chance Russell would walk in and catch me at it. I admit it. I was horny. It’d been two weeks since I’d had any action. *Two weeks*. And it was just daft, me and Russell living together and not messing around. I was going crazy. I was even starting to dream about him. Weird, hot dreams about hairy chests and whiskery kisses. And let me tell you, Hugh Jackman was not going to be happy about that when he found out. I’d tried wandering ’round in my

underwear, or with a low-slung towel, but Russell had just seemed to develop this strange sort of squint that meant his eyes looked anywhere but at me.

So anyway, there I was, pumping up and down like I was shagging the invisible man. I heard the door go, and I heard footsteps, and then I heard a sort of gulping sound. I finished up the set I was doing and I hopped to my feet. Russell was just standing there, looking a bit red in the face. “Hi, Russell. Good day at work?” I asked cheerily.

He was blinking rapidly, but even so I noticed the moment his eyes slid down to my groin before darting up again like they’d been burned. Somehow I didn’t think he was just shocked to see that the carpet didn’t, in fact, match the curtains. “That’s...yes. Good. Good day. I’ll go and put the kettle on.”

I watched sadly as he scampered to the kitchen like a virginal Hobbit being chased by a sex-mad Ring-wraith.

“Well, that went well,” I muttered to my cock, which had optimistically jumped up when I did. All pumped up with nowhere to go. I took it for a shower and gave it a few strokes to make it feel better, but it wasn’t fooled. It knew it was just my hand tugging on it.

I turned the water to cold for a quick blast, then got out and towelled myself off briskly. It was probably just as well, I reflected, that I’d stopped being so fastidious with the personal grooming since moving in here. After all, Russell didn’t seem to know razors even existed. He’d probably have had a stroke if he’d seen where I generally used them.

Next day Russell came home from work with a Marks and Spencers carrier bag. “I bought you something,” he told me.

I frowned, looking up from my revision notes on Farce. “Russell, you don’t need to buy me stuff.”

“No, please. Take it.” He looked so miserable I didn’t have the heart to argue anymore, so I took it.

Inside the bag was a thick, long, fluffy and utterly concealing dressing gown.

Chapter Three

“Oh, er, Luke?” Russell hesitated, halfway out on his way to work the next morning.

I looked up from my book on Enlightenment. “Yeah?”

“I’m, um, going out for a meal tonight. Probably stay for a few drinks afterwards.”

He’d got a date? Fuck, why did everybody always bloody do this to me?

“So, um, I wondered if you’d like to come?” He said it all in a rush. “If you’re not busy. Nigel and Tom will be there,” he added encouragingly. “There’ll be about half a dozen of us.”

I relaxed. “I’ll let you know tonight, all right? See how my revision’s going? I mean, it’s less than a week to go now.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” He grabbed his jacket and keys and headed for the door, turning back just as he reached it. “It’d be really great if you could come.”

I smiled at him. “I’ll let you know tonight.”

I wasn’t planning to go, of course. It’d just be awkward, with Tom and Nigel assuming me and Russell were shagging and wondering why we were acting like we were just flatmates. I didn’t fancy having to explain it all, especially seeing as I wasn’t really sure myself. And they’d be bound to think I was just taking advantage of him, getting free board and lodging for no consideration. Which I was, but what the hell was I supposed to do? Hold him down and forcibly administer a blowjob?

Anyway, it’d be safer to stay in tonight. I got out my files and started making some notes.

Even when the parcel came, I didn’t twig. I just signed for it and wondered why his mum was sending him sweaters in May. It took the arrival of half a dozen brightly coloured envelopes before I realised. I didn’t need to look at the name on the front to know they weren’t here to wish me luck in my exams. “Why the bloody hell didn’t you tell me?” I asked out loud. Followed straight after by “So how old are you, then?”

It didn’t take long to find his passport. God bless engineers and their anally retentive filing systems. He even filed his comic books under M for Marvel. I flicked to the section of the passport with the personal details. Russell Winchester; sex: male. Place of birth: Newport, Isle of Wight. Date of birth: thirty years ago today. “You tosser,” I told his photo. “How could you just *not mention* it’s your thirtieth birthday today?”

Thank God I hadn't been spending much lately. I reckoned I could run to a card and a bottle of something, at least. I grabbed my wallet and headed out to the shops.

Halfway down the street, I stopped and jogged back. I'd had an idea. I checked out Russell's DVD collection. Yes. I'd been right. *X-Men I, II* and *III*, but no *Origins: Wolverine*. Which was criminal, really. After all, if you were into this stuff, wouldn't you want to have the one with Hugh Jackman fighting in the nude?

I got a bus down to Totton. It's just a small town perched on the edge of Southampton. There's not much there, really, but it's got a few good shops, the sort you don't get in the city centre. There's a great mountain bike shop—the bloke who runs it really knows his stuff—and, more to the point, an indie DVD store. I hate all these soulless places that only have the chart stuff. You might as well pick up your DVDs with your weekly shop in Tesco. Which, of course, most people do.

I picked up *Wolverine*, then went straight over to have a dig through the international section. I struck gold. A remastered copy of *À Bout de Souffle*. That's the one that was remade as *Breathless*, with Richard Gere, but trust me, you need to see the original 1960 one with Jean-Paul Belmondo. I was fifteen the first time I saw it. We were on holiday in France, as usual miles from anywhere and with nothing to do in the evenings, and my dad had been moaning on about how my French would never get better if I didn't work at it. So he dragged me in to watch this old black-and-white film on TV.

He'd have been horrified if he'd known the effect it had on me. I was mesmerised by Jean-Paul Belmondo's face, with its full lips and sensual features that shouldn't have been good-looking, but were. Kind of like Gerard Depardieu, although not to the extent that he actually looked anything like him, if you know what I mean. I wanted to *be* Jean Seberg, or more precisely Patricia in the film, with her pretty face and her gamine cropped hair—it didn't hurt either that she was a wannabe journalist. I even started smoking Gauloises for a bit, but gave it up when I finally admitted to myself the taste made me retch. I'd dreamed for months afterwards of arrogant immoral bastards sweeping me away to go on the lam with them, and calling me a bitch with their dying breath.

Anyway, it was the sort of film Russell ought to see, and quite possibly wouldn't have. Even if he didn't like it, it'd look good on the shelf next to his Arsène Lupin novels. I paid for it, bunged it in the bag and got the next bus home.

I'd thought Russell might skip off work early, seeing as it was his birthday, but he got back at the normal time, just after six. I gave him a hard stare. "You are in so much trouble."

I had to laugh as he went all startled rabbit. "How could you not tell me it was your birthday today?" I held out the bag with the DVDs. "Sorry I forgot to buy wrapping paper. Happy birthday." He was still looking like he was blinking in the headlights. "Go on, see what's inside," I urged.

Russell looked uncomfortable. “You didn’t have to buy me a present.”

“Yes, I did. Now are you going to take this bloody bag before my arm drops off?”

He took it and pulled out the DVDs. He was looking down, so I couldn’t see his mouth under the face-fungus, but I could tell from the twitching of his moustache he was smiling. “That’s fantastic! I’ve been wanting this one,” he said, holding *Wolverine*. “Thanks!”

Then he put it down on the table, and looked at *À Bout de Souffle*. He looked up at me with a weird smile on his face. “Have you seen this? Or did you just buy it for me because you know I like French stuff?”

“Saw it when I was fifteen.” I gave a lopsided smile, not my usual at all. I hadn’t realised giving him the film would make me feel so naked. “It’s what made me realise I was gay. I just thought you might like it, that’s all.”

“It’s... Thank you,” Russell said, his eyes as big and blue as Southampton Water as they looked at me probably longer than they ever had done before. “Thank you, Luke.”

I felt a bit uncomfortable, I don’t know why, so I was the one who broke eye contact first. “So where are we going tonight, anyway?”

Russell seemed to relax a bit too. “Chinese. Kachina, in Shirley—have you been there?”

“Yeah, once or twice. They do a great crispy duck, don’t they? So what are you wearing, then?”

Russell looked a bit worried. “Do I need to dress up? I’ve never been there before, but Nigel said you’d—that it was a good place to go.”

I pursed my lips. “Do you want to wear a suit? Because a suit would be fine, but you could go more casual if you’d rather. I’ll dress to suit what you’re wearing, so you won’t be the only one, whatever.”

“Um...”

“Look, why don’t we have a look at what you’ve got and then decide what’s best?” I suggested, leading the way into his bedroom and only realising when I’d got there that this was the first time I’d actually seen it. I think Russell would have rather I’d given him five minutes to tidy up. I pretended not to notice him kicking a discarded pair of underpants under the bed as I flung open the wardrobe. “Right, what have we got here...”

I soon realised trying to go for smart casual would be a disaster. Had Russell not actually bought any clothes at all since his mum had stopped doing his shopping? *Had* his mum stopped doing his shopping? I picked through sad-looking checked shirts hanging limply on wire hangers, trying their best to distance themselves from the poly-cotton slacks.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?” Russell said in my ear.

I gave him a sympathetic look. “Do you want an honest answer, or a tactful one? You know what, we should go shopping sometime, after I’ve finished my exams. I’ve got quite a good eye for clothes. But for now, let’s go formal, all right? Everyone looks good in a suit.”

Even if it was cheap one from Marks and Spencers. Still, it was a dark navy, and from what I remembered, the lighting in Kachina was fairly dim. And so what if he would be wearing a tie with a retro video game printed on it? It was his bloody birthday.

I dug out the Alexander McQueen suit Sebastian bought me a few months ago. It was a dark grey that made my blond hair look even more striking, and I had a Dior Homme shirt in a soft cream that looked great with it. I slipped on my Kurt Geiger loafers and looked at myself in the full-length mirror in the hall. Funny how a couple of weeks of lying around the place in sweatpants made you forget what you looked like dressed up. Even I hardly recognised me.

I turned 'round to go and see if Russell was changed yet and found him already there, just standing looking at me. "Hey, you look great!" I meant it. The smartest I'd seen him in so far was his work stuff, which was nerdy trousers and an open-necked check shirt. The suit might be M&S but it was still well-cut enough that it emphasized his shoulders and trimmed his waist. Even his beard looked smarter with a decent shirt and tie underneath it. I was glad he'd gone for the Space Invaders tie. The Tetris one really didn't suit him.

He didn't say anything; just stood there, staring at me. "What?" I asked. "Did I cut myself shaving?" I started feeling 'round my chin.

"No!" Russell's voice sounded funny, like he was having trouble speaking. "You look—you look amazing."

I felt a warmth course through me. It meant more, somehow, coming from him. Because I knew he wasn't just saying it to keep me sweet. "Thanks. Hey, isn't it time we got going?"

Russell checked his watch. "God, yes! We'll be late if we don't hurry." He started searching around for his keys, looking a bit flustered.

"Russell, they're not going to cancel a table for six if you're five minutes late, okay?" I put a hand on his arm, hoping to calm him down, and tried not to feel hurt when he shook it off like it was contaminated.

It was a short drive to the restaurant in Russell's VW Beetle. Shirley's not that far from the centre of Southampton, and it's close to the University so I knew it pretty well, especially since Sebastian had taken me to restaurants there a couple of times. We were a few minutes late for the table, but we were still the first ones there. It didn't surprise me.

"Do you think we should give them a ring?" Russell asked, looking at his watch again as we waited in the bar area. I'd ordered us a couple of drinks—wine for me, and a Diet Coke for Russell. It was just like

him to insist on being designated driver on his own birthday do. I was already making plans to get him to ditch the car later.

“No, just give them a couple of minutes. Timekeeping never was Tom’s strong suit.”

He looked around for a moment. It was just him, me and a life-size golden Buddha with a hefty pair of man-boobs. Russell hesitated, then asked me: “You were with Tom for a while, weren’t you?”

I don’t know why, but I had to force myself to answer. I really didn’t want to talk about it. “Yeah. Does that bother you?”

He gave a curious kind of laugh. “There’s no reason it should, is there? After all, it’s not like we’re...” He shrugged awkwardly.

“No!” I agreed, a bit too loud. “No, of course not.”

I think we were both glad when Tom, Nigel and the other two turned up, all piling out of the same taxi.

“Happy birthday,” Nigel said, handing Russell a gift bag. “Er, probably best not to open that until you get home.” The others laughed, nudging each other. The alcohol fumes wafting from their direction only confirmed they’d stopped off for a drink or three on the way.

Russell still looked pleased, though. “Luke, this is Peter, he works in my department, and this is Darren. He’s in accounts with Nigel.” He seemed not to realise I’d never met Nigel, and Tom didn’t bother introducing us either.

Peter in particular seemed a bit startled to meet me, but he did his best to cover it up. “What do you do, Luke?” he asked as we were shown to our table.

“I’m a student,” I told him with a smile. “Got my Finals next week, actually.”

“Oh, really? What subject?”

“English.”

That seemed to be the extent of Peter’s conversation, but I don’t think it was for want of interest in me. I noticed he kept staring at me all through the meal. Which was interesting in itself, as Tom took an early opportunity to whisper in my ear that Peter and Darren were straight. “So don’t go overboard on *the gay*,” he hissed, doing the air quotes again and generally managing to look and sound like he’d just wandered in from a Pride march. I covered my grin. I reckoned if Peter and Darren could cope with Tom, they’d be just fine with me.

“What did Luke get you for your birthday?” Tom asked Russell with a wink as we sat down at the table. Thank God the other three were there, or Tom might have gone into detail about what I’d given *him* one birthday.

Russell blushed anyway. Maybe he’d guessed the sort of thing Tom was thinking about.

“I got him a couple of DVDs,” I said with a smile that said keep your bloody nose out of it if you know what’s good for you.

“Porn?” Tom asked, clearly *not* knowing what was good for him.

“What would he need that for?” Nigel said archly. The words “when he’s got the real thing” were clearly implied.

At least it was clear to me and Tom. I was hoping Russell hadn’t got the message. Peter and Darren looked like they were trying not to.

“An X-Men one and a French film, actually.” I told them.

“Ah, *la cinéma française*,” Tom gushed. “*C’est belle*.”

“Actually, *cinéma* is masculine,” Nigel put in carelessly. “So that would be *le cinéma, c’est beau*,” and Russell and I just looked at each other and tried not to laugh.

“Whatever,” Tom muttered sulkily. “Are we ready to order yet?”

I’d expected Tom to make a big fuss about ordering something posey just for him, but when Russell suggested we go for the banquet menu, Tom just said, “Oh, it’s your birthday, Russell, you order what you like.” So we ended up sharing the old favourites of Dim Sum and crispy duck, and it was a lot more fun than I’d thought it’d be. Russell looked like he was having a great time, and Tom was a different bloke with someone he loved and a bunch of friends.

Well, not that different, maybe. He still rolled his eyes when the fortune cookies arrived and muttered something about them being “hardly *authentic*”.

I needed to visit the Gents after we’d eaten, and as it happened, Peter came along too. I could feel him watching me all the time, and while we were washing our hands, he came out with it. “What on earth are *you* doing with Russell?”

Well. There were several ways I could have handled it. I could have said we were just mates. I could have said he was just helping me out with a place to stay. But I’d had a few glasses of wine by then, so I gave him a cheeky grin, said, “Wouldn’t you like to know?” and blew him a kiss on the way out.

When we left the restaurant, I persuaded Russell to drop his car off home and we walked to the Frog and Frigate from there, Tom grumbling half-heartedly at the prospect, but cheering up soon enough once we’d got some drinks in. Nigel cornered me while Russell was buying a round. “You’re all right, you know,” he told me graciously, his voice only slightly slurred. I resisted the urge to tug my forelock and say “thank ’ee kindly, sir.”

“You’ve been good for him,” he carried on. “He’s a lot happier these days.” He sniggered into his beer. “And let’s face it, a thirty-year-old virgin would have been just *tragic*.”

Thank God he was too drunk to notice my reaction. Russell was a virgin? He'd never...? *Never?* At *thirty?* I mean, come on, I'd thought I'd been a late starter, at sixteen, but I'd certainly made up for it since. How could anyone live for thirty years without having sex? I'd been finding it hard enough going the last few weeks.

Suddenly it all dropped into place. If you'd waited that long, well, you weren't just going to throw it away on the first bit of scum that floated to the top of the gutter. You'd save it for someone special. You wouldn't waste it on someone like me. "Got to go," I mumbled, lurching to my feet and nearly knocking over my chair. "Got to revise tomorrow. Tell Russell I'll see him later."

Nigel gave me a bleary-eyed wave, and I headed out into the darkness.

I'd only got halfway down the street when Russell caught up with me. "Luke!" He was panting a bit. "Are you all right?"

I smiled. I'm good at that. "I'm fine, Russell. Look, you should get back to your mates. This is your birthday party. I'm just a bit tired, that's all." It was God's honest truth. I wanted to sleep for a week.

"Oh, well...to be honest, I've had enough, really. I've still got to work tomorrow. And you shouldn't really be walking home on your own."

I stared at him. Because although he was a couple of inches taller than me and maybe had the weight advantage, I'm pretty much all muscle, and Russell, well, isn't. The thought of *him* wanting to protect *me* was utterly ridiculous. And really sweet. But painful too. I wasn't sure why. "Russell, I'm a big boy. I can look after myself." I laughed despite myself. "But I'm touched, honestly." And then I took his arm. Because why should those tossers have him back, anyway? They didn't really appreciate him. Not like I did. "Come on. Let's go home."

The wind was blowing in off the Solent again, carrying the scents of salt, seaweed and oil in from the water. It had been a chilly day, for late May, and I was hugging myself for warmth by the time we got back to the flat. Russell had his hands jammed deep in the pockets of his suit jacket and the collar turned up. We were like two small boats battening down the hatches against an icy sea.

"Do you want a coffee?" Russell asked when we got in.

I stood for a moment looking out the window, across the water. It was never still, even at this time of night. Always people there, going about their lives. Going out to work; setting off on holiday. Going home. "No, thanks. I'll just get to bed. Goodnight, birthday boy."

I smiled and went past him into my room. I'd been planning to offer him a birthday kiss, and maybe something more, until Nigel's little revelation. It was just as well I'd found out. Having Russell turn me down again would only have been embarrassing.

"Goodnight," Russell called, sounding almost uncertain, and just for a moment I wondered... But then I heard his bedroom door shut behind him, so I pulled off my clothes, hung up my suit and kicked the rest into a corner before crawling into bed.

It took me a while to get to sleep. For some reason, Patricia's line from *À Bout de Souffle* kept running through my head.

"It's sad to fall asleep. It separates people. Even when you're sleeping together, you're all alone."

Chapter Four

Russell was great while I was doing my exams. He insisted on taking over the cooking, so we ended up eating a lot of beans on toast and Russell's version of risotto, which basically consisted of a bit of everything in the fridge mixed with rice and soy sauce. Still, it went down all right. I was starting to get a bit nervy, anyway, so half the time I hardly noticed what the stuff tasted like. It was daft, because I knew I'd done well on my dissertation—but these exams could make the difference between an Upper Second and a First, and I'd worked bloody hard all year. I didn't want to let myself down now.

Russell seemed to understand. He was good like that. Plus, he'd been through it all himself, of course. We hadn't talked yet about what would happen after I'd finished my exams, but I didn't think he'd be in a hurry to kick me out. Too nice for his own good, he was. In fact, it occurred to me, if I left it up to him I'd probably still be living there when we were in our eighties driving matching Zimmer frames.

Although, come to think of it, I'd probably have died of sexual frustration long before that.

My exams finished on the Thursday and okay, I'll admit it, I was completely rat-arsed when I got back to the flat that night. Not so much three sheets to the wind as a whole bloody duvet set and pillowcase. To give you an idea how drunk I was, I doubled over laughing and nearly pissed myself at the thought of Sebastian's face if he'd heard me mangling sailing metaphors like that.

Russell looked up anxiously when I staggered in. He was sitting in front of the telly, eating a pasta salad out of the packaging. "How did it go?"

"Bloody marvellous," I slurred at him. I frowned. Slurring was not good. Wouldn't want him to think I'd been drinking. "How was your day, darling?" I pronounced carefully.

Russell's whole face creased up in a laugh. "Do you have any idea at all how much you've had to drink?"

I had to laugh with him. You couldn't look at that face and not laugh. Then I took a minute calming myself down. Because I had something important to tell him, that he needed to know. "Your face is, is a laugh," I said. Slowly, so the words wouldn't blur together. "Like, like, if you couldn't hear. You could look at you, and you'd know. What a laugh is. You know?"

"I know you're going to have a hell of a hangover tomorrow," he said.

I frowned again. "Thass not very nice. Thass. Lat's. Oh, buggrit." I collapsed on the sofa. "Water?"

“Oh, yes. And quite a lot of it, unless you want to spend tomorrow wishing you’d never been born.”

I laughed. “Firs—first time I’ve agreed with my dad in a long time, that’d be.” Russell didn’t seem to react. I frowned again. “‘S a joke. You’re s’posed to laugh.”

He didn’t. “Did he really say that to you?”

“Say what?”

“That he wished you’d never been born.”

It wasn’t fair, him saying it. It was okay for me to say it, but Russell shouldn’t say it. It wasn’t fair.

“Oh, Luke, it’s all right. Shush. Don’t cry. I’m here.” There were arms around me, and something was tickling my ear. It felt sort of nice. I didn’t want it to stop, so I twisted ’round and kissed the lips hidden in that tickly beard. They were still for a moment, and then they kissed me back.

Russell. I was kissing Russell.

All at once I didn’t just *want* it not to stop; I needed it not to stop. I clambered up on his lap and slung my arms around his neck. He was soft and warm, smelling of fabric softener and cheap shampoo. His lips tasted of mayonnaise, and I was so hungry for him I couldn’t think straight. I pushed his shirt up with one hand and bent to kiss his chest. Why the hell hadn’t we done this before?

Suddenly I couldn’t reach. I frowned. He was holding me at arms’ length. “Luke?” he said, his face flushed and his lips redder than I’d ever seen them. I bent my head to try and taste them again, but his hands were too strong. When did his hands get so strong? “Luke,” he said again. “I’m going to get you some water, okay?”

“Don’t need it.”

“Yes, you do. Come on. Dehydration’s bad for the skin. Don’t want to lose your lovely looks, now, do you?”

I slumped off his lap sulkily and watched him go into the kitchen. My cock was aching, so I gave it a couple of rough strokes through my jeans. God, he was taking his time. I leaned my head back against the cushions, hoping it would make the room stop slipping off to one side, the sneaky little bugger.

And then I passed out on the sofa.

The first thing I saw next morning was Russell’s face, peering down at me with a look of concern.

“Oh, God,” I groaned, my voice unfortunately totally failing to drown out the pounding in my head.

His beard twitched as he smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Indescribable. Literally. There is no profanity vile enough to let you know just how bad I feel right now.” I sat up and had to take a couple of deep breaths, trying to stave off the nausea. I was still on the sofa, but the duvet from my bed seemed to have migrated here during the night. “And sorry, by the way.”

“You’re allowed to get drunk when you finish your Finals, you know,” Russell said with a grin. “In fact, I think it’s in the University statutes.” He passed me a glass of water. “See if you can keep any of this down.”

“I meant...” I took a cautious sip of water. My mouth liked it, but my stomach was still reserving judgement. “Last night’s a bit fuzzy, but I’ve got a feeling I sexually assaulted you.”

“It’s all right. I’ve decided not to press charges.”

Something occurred to me. I frowned at him and then stopped as it made the pain behind my eyes even worse. “Shouldn’t you be at work today?”

“Oh, I, er, I decided to take the day off. Seeing as it’s almost the weekend.” He gave me a whiskery grin. “I wasn’t sure what state you were going to be in this morning, anyway.”

He yawned, and another cog turned slowly in my aching brain. “What time did I get in last night?”

“It was around three, I think. But it’s all right,” he assured me quickly. “I was up anyway.”

Russell, you silly sod, I thought affectionately, touched that he’d waited up. “I’m sorry, Russell. I’ll cook you something really nice to make up for it, promise.” My stomach roiled. “In about a decade, probably, when I might be able to face food again.”

Later that day, when I was starting to feel a bit better, to the extent that sudden death wasn’t looking quite as overwhelmingly attractive as it had when I’d woken up, Russell came and sat down on the sofa next to me. He fiddled with the TV remote for a minute, then put it down again.

“Luke, can we talk? Now your exams are over—”

Stupid, the way it shocked me. I should’ve expected it. Especially after I’d made such an idiot of myself last night. It was just that he was so bloody *nice*. It made me let my guard down. “Course, Russell.” I smiled. “I’ll pack my stuff up and get out of your hair. Is the next day or two all right? You’ve been great, putting up with me for so long.”

“Luke?” He sounded hurt. “Have you got somewhere to go?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve got a mate called Calum, he’ll put me up.” It’d only have to be until I got a job. I could stick it out that long.

“A mate?”

My smile was making my face ache. I don’t think I’d had that since moving in with Russell. “You know. Friend with benefits.”

“Oh.” He turned away and looked out of the window for a minute. The wind must be mild to nonexistent. Southampton Water was as flat as a pancake below us, looking cold and grey under a cloudy sky. “It’s been really nice having you here,” Russell said. “I just...”

“It’s all right, Russell,” I told him before he could say anymore, because the thought of him trying to tell me tactfully that I was a worthless piece of shit was more than I could bear. It wasn’t like I didn’t know it already. “I know. You want to meet someone special. I get it. I hope you find him, you deserve it.”

“You too,” he said, still staring out of the window. I looked at his rounded shoulders, and the way his hair curled all over the place when it hit his collar, and for the first time ever I wanted to make a fuss about leaving. I wanted to tell him Calum was a vicious little sod, and I was sick to death of selfish bastards who thought they owned me just because they hadn’t kicked me out on the streets yet. I wanted to beg him to let me stay.

But I couldn’t do that to him. Not to Russell. So I went back to my room and I started packing up my books, and wondered if it was too early to call Calum.

I don’t think I heard Russell come in. Maybe I just felt his gaze on me. I looked up at him, at those kind blue eyes behind those bloody awful glasses, and for the first time in my adult life I couldn’t dredge up a smile from anywhere. “Um,” he said. “I thought, well. Interest rates.”

I stared at him blankly. “Interest rates?”

“Um. I read in the paper they’ll be going up soon. Probably around the time you get a job? So it’d be—if you’re not that keen on this friend of yours, that is, which obviously is entirely up to you, none of my business at all, but anyway—”

Somewhere along the way of Russell’s complex ramble, my spirits went from lying hungover in the gutter to spaced out on E’s. “You could do with some help with the mortgage?”

Russell burst into a relieved smile. “Yes, that’s it. Only when you’re earning, of course.”

“Right. Well, I wouldn’t want to leave you in the lurch,” I told him, a big grin on my face to match his. “Not after, you know, everything. So, what do you fancy for dinner?” I grimaced, as my stomach reminded me how I’d mistreated it last night. “I was thinking something plain.”

Russell laughed. “That’d be fine.”

I got out my laptop and started looking for a job the following Monday. Even with Russell’s super-fast connection some of the sites took a minute to load, so I found myself staring out of the window at the harbour below. I wondered if Russell had made anymore holiday plans since the last time we’d spoken about it. He hadn’t mentioned anything, and I hadn’t been tripping over holiday brochures in the flat, but it was easy enough to book stuff online in your lunch hour. But he’d have said, right, if he was going away? So maybe we could do that trip to France like we’d joked about? Not with Tom, obviously. But it’d be nice, just me and Russell.

Anyway. Sitting there daydreaming wasn't getting me anywhere. I updated my CV and made sure I had a cute photo attached. I've got the sort of looks that appeal to women as well as men, so I reckoned they'd get me an interview at least. That's all you need, if you're any good; a foot in the door.

That reminded me to give Amit a ring. Amit was a...well, I wasn't really sure what he did, precisely, but he'd got a finger in a lot of pies, business-wise, and he knew *everyone*. I'd met him a few times when I was with Sebastian and, put it this way, he'd been all over me like Kate Moss on coke. Allegedly. I didn't think he'd turn me down if I asked him out for a drink.

I didn't reckon he'd turn me down for anything.

"Russell?" I said over supper that night. "I've got a date this evening—so if I don't come home tonight, no need to call the police." Because he would. Russell was just that kind of bloke. Last week had proved that. "Russell?" I asked again. He seemed a bit distracted. Maybe he'd had a bad day at work.

"Oh. Sorry. So, er, you've met someone? That's. Um. Nice."

I laughed. "Nah, it's not that kind of date. This is just some bloke who might be able to give me a hand finding a job. Get your mortgage paid off quicker."

He didn't look exactly grateful. "So why would you need to stay out all night with him?"

For a thirty-year-old, he was bloody naïve. "Russell, it's the way of the world. I want something from him. He's going to want something from me."

Russell pushed his plate away roughly, his food only half-eaten. First time I'd ever seen him leave pasta. I was a bit hurt, to tell the truth. I'd made that sauce 'specially because he'd said how much he liked it last time. "People do help other people without expecting them to jump into bed with them!" he snapped.

"Jesus, Russell, it's just sex!" Sod it. Now I'd lost my appetite. "It's not like I'm a bloody virgin—although I might as well be, with the amount of action I've been getting lately!"

I stormed to my bedroom and slammed the door. What the *fuck* was it to him if I let some bloke he'd never met do me? If you're not hungry, get out of the fucking kitchen.

I met Amit in a wine bar in the centre of town. Amit was even less of a Frog and Frigate type than Tom was. He was wearing a grey suit with a soft mauve shirt and deep-toned tie that set off his dark skin to perfection. He was as smooth and charming as I remembered, holding out my chair for me as I sat and ordering a bottle of Pinot Noir.

"It was good to hear from you again, Luke," he said, smiling. "I heard from Sebastian that you two were no longer together."

I smiled. "No, well, I don't think that was ever going to last. So how have you been, Amit?"

We chatted on about this and that for a while, because one thing I've learned is that you can't rush this kind of negotiation, and we were getting near the end of the bottle when Amit reached across the table and stroked my hand briefly. "You seem a little out of sorts tonight. Is something amiss?"

Bloody Russell. He even had me off my game. I smiled. "Just had a bit of an argument with the bloke I'm living with before I came out tonight, that's all."

Amit raised an eyebrow, and his hand on mine stilled for a moment, then retreated decisively. "Oh? Is that why you wanted to see me?" His lips tightened, although he looked concerned rather than angry. "Luke, how can I put this? You're very beautiful, and extremely pleasant company, but I prefer to live alone, I'm afraid."

I had to laugh. "It's okay. Thanks for being so tactful about it, but I'm not looking for a place to stay. Russell just got the hump about me coming out tonight for some reason. He's not going to chuck me out on the streets."

Amit tapped a finger on his glass. "Russell? I don't think I know him."

"No, I can't imagine you do. He's a bit of a—well he's not rich, or a player, or anything. Just your average bloke, really. He works up at the Oil Refinery in Fawley."

"You surprise me." Amit sat back in his chair, a smile playing around his lips. Something seemed to have changed in his attitude, and I wasn't sure what or why. "So tell me, why did you want to meet me tonight?"

I leaned forward on the table, fixing him in the eye. "I need a job. A proper job. I want to be a journalist, and I know I can do it well. I've had a couple of articles published already, and there'd have been more if I hadn't been busy studying. I just need introductions to the right people, that's all."

Amit nodded. "I do have one or two contacts at the *Daily Echo*—if a local paper is what you're after. Is that what you're after? I should have thought a young man as ambitious as you seem to be would want to try his luck with the nationals in London."

I shrugged. I *had* originally planned to go up to London after Finals, but it hadn't seemed so important lately. "The way I see it, a smaller paper's going to be more hands-on. Give me a greater breadth of experience. If I got taken on by a national with no experience, I'd probably be stuck making tea and doing photocopying for the first couple of years." And whatever happened, it wouldn't hurt to stick around Southampton for the summer, see what was available here. I could still head up to London in September when everyone got back from their holidays and was feeling a bit more focussed on the job.

"I'd agree you'd be wasted doing that," Amit said with a knowing smile. Then he stood. "I'll see what I can do for you. It was a pleasure to see you again. Now, why don't you go home and make your peace with Russell?" We shook hands and he tossed a couple of notes on the table for the bill before leaving.

I sat again and picked up my glass. This wasn't how I'd expected the evening to end. It was like I didn't know the rules of the game any longer, and I hated it. He'd thought I was *with* Russell. He'd thought

that made me off limits, so instead of getting laid I was sitting here on my own getting drunk on red wine. “Fuck you, Russell,” I muttered to myself. I mean, Christ, what the hell gave him the right to change the bloody rules? I wanted to run after Amit and tell him Russell was fucking *nothing* to me. He was just the loser I lived with.

I wanted to be back in control.

So when this bloke walked up to my table, looked at the two glasses and me sitting on my own, and said, “Lonely?” I just gave him a slow look up and down and smiled. “Not anymore.”

He slipped into the seat opposite me, making a show of moving Amit’s glass to one side and substituting his own. “I’m Suq.” He was tall and skinny, his features slightly too large for his angular face but not bad-looking, on the whole. Not, to be honest, up to the usual class of bloke you met here, but he was trying to be. His hair was thick and slightly curly, and he’d used just a little too much gel on it. As he played with the stem of his glass the candlelight glittered off the gold rings he wore. If Russell had done that, it’d have looked shy, nervous. Suq made it look like foreplay. “So, you like Asian men, do you?”

I smiled. “I like all sorts of men, Suq. White, Black, British, Polish. And Asian,” I added after a significant pause.

“What happened to the bloke you were with?”

“Blunt, aren’t you? He had to go. He’s just a friend, anyhow.”

Suq raised his glass. “Here’s to friendship.” He smiled, showing a gold tooth. His eyes didn’t crinkle up at the corners. Not even a little bit.

I shrugged. “I’ve got plenty of friends. I’m not looking for any more.” Not ones in knock-off designer gear who enjoyed playing to men with a dark skin fetish. I smiled back at him as I spoke, so he’d know it wasn’t a brush-off.

“Are you going to finish that?” Suq nodded at the bottle.

“No, I’m done,” I told him. Shame to leave it, it was decent stuff, but the taste had gone sour after Amit had left. I stood. “Coming?”

“Have you got a place near here?”

“Nah, I live in Totton. And we can’t go there anyway. My flatmate’s on early shift this week.” I wasn’t letting him any closer to Russell’s flat than we were already. “You?”

He met my lie and raised it. “Actually, I’m just visiting my sister here. Don’t think I’d be too popular if I brought anyone back. Sorry.”

Or maybe in his case it was the truth. Whatever.

I let him have me in the toilets. The place we were at was too nice for the loos to smell bad, but it was cramped, and every five seconds the outer door swung open to let in a blast of sound and a bloke needing a piss. Suq didn’t seem to be one for wasting time on the preliminaries, so at least I didn’t have to suffer it for long. He wasn’t that big, but then I was out of practice, and it hurt like fuck when he pushed into me. Eased

off eventually. Suq left me to bring myself off with my hand while he slammed into me, his breath hot on my neck and reeking of cheap lager mingled in with the sickly aftershave he wore. I don't think I felt any pleasure when I came. It was a release, nothing more.

Afterwards, he dropped the condom in the toilet. I watched it floating there as I straightened myself up. Some things never flush away.

Behind me, Suq zipped up his flies. "Cheers, mate. I'll see you around, all right?"

God, I hoped not.

When I finally got home, Russell was watching *À Bout de Souffle* and eating peanuts in the dark. Jean-Paul Belmondo was just telling Jean Seberg that if she didn't smile by the time he'd counted to eight, he'd strangle her. I wondered what would have happened if he had. It would've been a whole different film, that's for sure. Maybe she'd have been happier, in the end. Or maybe that was just the three vodkas I'd downed post-Suq talking.

I slumped down on the sofa next to Russell, probably reeking of alcohol and God knows what else. "He didn't fuck me, okay? Amit. Happy now? Because he's too fucking noble and principled. Is there some club you all go to?" I belched. "So I let Suq fuck me instead. Whoever the hell he was. He wanted to take me home, but his flatmate had an early shift." I don't know why I said all that. I really don't.

"How can you do it?" Russell asked, still staring at the TV.

"What, shag people?" I laughed. "It's not that hard, Russell. People do it all the time. Some people even enjoy it."

"I just don't know why you sell yourself so cheaply—"

I swung my head 'round to glare at him so sharply I got a crick in my neck. "I do *not* sell myself, you self-righteous bastard. What the fuck do you think I am? Some bloody rent boy wiggling his arse on a street corner? Think Suq paid me, do you? Want some yourself? I could do you a special rate, seeing as we're mates and all—"

"I'm going to bed." Russell stood, knocking his bowl of peanuts off the arm of the sofa. It caught the edge of the coffee table on the way down and the cheap china bowl shattered, sending peanuts and pale blue fragments flying. They scattered in all directions, across the carpet and under the furniture.

"We're never going to be able to fix that," I told Russell moodily. He didn't answer. "Night, then," I muttered, giving his back the finger as it disappeared into his room.

I woke up late next morning with a crashing headache, knowing I'd been a bastard, although I wasn't sure I really understood why. I'd upset Russell, that was clear, but it seemed to me he'd been mad at me

even before I'd laid into him verbally. I tried to replay the conversation mentally, but last night was shrouded in a haze of alcohol and bad sex. The sooner I forgot that last one, the better, so I dragged myself out of bed and made some strong coffee, then stared at the TV until I felt vaguely human.

It wasn't until the post came that I remembered my degree result was due out. I held the envelope with its official Uni stamp and just looked at it for a moment. A couple of months ago I'd have said this was the most important thing in my life. Now...well, yes, I cared, obviously. But a lot of the marks are on your dissertation and the professor had told me privately I'd sailed a First on that, so what I was really waiting to find out was whether I'd bagged a First, or only made a 2:1. Putting it that way, was it really going to make that much difference to my life? I considered leaving it until Russell got home, but I decided that would be just daft, so I ripped the envelope open. And then I nodded to myself and put the letter carefully in the letter-rack in the kitchen.

I spent most of the afternoon clearing up peanuts and shards of china from the living room floor. Of all the things I could have been doing for Russell while on my knees... Still, at least he might actually appreciate this. I went shopping too, and got some steak in, because it's not good for you to eat pasta every night. And I'd been wanting to try out a peppercorn sauce. After all that I was a bit sweaty, so I had a quick shower and changed into my blue shirt before Russell got home.

He was back dead on time, thank God. I know some blokes who'd have spent the evening in a bar just to piss me off after last night. Of course, I'd been sleeping with them, so it was different, wasn't it?

"Hey, Russell," I said cautiously as he walked in. He looked at me warily, so I carried on quickly. "Sorry about last night. You know, the coming home drunk and abusive." I paused. "I was out of order. It won't happen again."

Russell's moustache seemed to be perking up a bit. He gave an awkward sort of laugh. "No, don't worry about it. You were right. It's none of my business what you do with, with people. I shouldn't have said—"

"No, it was my fault. I'd had too much to drink and I was in a bad mood, and I took it out on you. You don't deserve that." I was relieved to see he was smiling properly now, even if it did look a bit hesitant still. "Anyway, I'll go and get dinner on. We're having steak, so it shouldn't be long."

Russell seemed to thaw completely over dinner. Way to a man's heart, and all that. "Thanks for clearing up, by the way," he said as he mopped up the last of the sauce with a bit of French bread.

I shrugged, pleased he'd noticed. "Well, I had plenty of time, didn't I? Shame about the bowl, though."

Russell laughed. "Probably cost less than the peanuts." He stood and carried the plates into the kitchen. I heard them clatter into the sink, probably a bit more carelessly than was really good for them, and the tap was turned on, run for a while, then was turned off again. There was a bit of tuneless humming, and then a silence.

Russell burst back into the living room brandishing my results letter, his face split with a huge grin. “You did it! You got your First! That’s fantastic! Well done, Luke!” I think Russell was actually happier about it than I was. I mean, I was pleased, but as I said, it didn’t seem quite as important as it once had. But Russell’s grin was infectious.

“Thanks!” I told him.

“That’s amazing. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me right away!”

I shrugged.

“Hold on there, I’m getting a bottle of wine. We’ve got to celebrate this.” He disappeared back into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of Merlot. “Sorry it’s not fizzy, but it’s definitely alcoholic,” he said, eyes crinkling as he pulled out the cork and poured us each a glass. “Congratulations,” he toasted me.

I took a cautious sip, mindful that my liver probably wasn’t going to be too pleased with a fresh onslaught. I didn’t need the alcohol, anyway. I felt fantastic already.

“You don’t get a lot of Firsts in English,” I mentioned, feeling I could get away with blowing my own trumpet a bit now. “What’s it like in Engineering?”

Russell folded my letter carefully back into its creases. “Oh, you know.”

“So what did you get? Back in the Dark Ages, when you took your degree?”

“Um. Well, a First,” he admitted, like he was owning up to having herpes. “Although in my case, it was more a comment on my social life than any reflection of academic ability.”

“Your social life?”

“Yes. I, er...” He sighed. “I didn’t have one.”

Chapter Five

“Do you fancy seeing me in a gown and a dodgy hat?” I asked over breakfast one Saturday. I was eating wholemeal toast and marmalade, but I still hadn’t managed to wean Russell off the Frosties.

He looked up, a tiny droplet of milk clinging to his lower lip. I didn’t want to lick it off. Not at all. “Starting a drag act, are you?”

“Close. I’m graduating. Nineteenth of July. They’ve sent me a couple of guest tickets.” I waved the envelope at him and laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m not actually expecting you to take me up on this.” These things were boring as hell unless you were a doting parent, and probably even then. It wasn’t the sort of thing you expected your mates to endure cheerfully. I took a swig of coffee and frowned, realising it was going cold. “Still,” I found myself saying, “it’s not like I’ve got anyone else to ask, so if you fancy taking a day off work to be bored out of your mind...”

Russell grinned. “Well, to be honest I’d rather see the drag act, but I’ll put it in my diary.”

“Great! Um, thanks.” Suddenly I wasn’t sure what to say. I didn’t want him to think it was a huge deal for me, him coming along, because it wasn’t, obviously, but I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t grateful, either.

He hesitated. “You could send the other one to your dad, you know.”

Suddenly, I’d had enough to eat. “Waste of a stamp, Russell. I’m making some more coffee—you want some?” I headed off into the kitchen without waiting for his reply.

I got a call from the Daily Echo that afternoon. Good old Amit. Or maybe they’d just been impressed by my CV, although I doubted it. Academically, I’m pretty solid, but then so are an awful lot of other people. I’d taken it ’round to their offices a couple of days after I’d seen Amit, so they’d have it to hand if he did get around to mentioning me to his contacts.

I’d flirted enough with the receptionist that day that I thought she’d remember me, and she did, a smile splitting her face as I walked in the glass doors. “Well, someone’s impressed with you,” she said archly. “Not many people get an interview with the editor himself straight after finishing Uni.”

I leaned on her desk to return the smile. “Oh, I can be impressive, all right.”

“Now, why do I get the feeling I’m never going to find out for sure?” She gave me a look that seemed to see right through me and picked up the phone. “Richard? Luke Corbin is here.” She listened a moment,

then put down the phone. “He’s ready to see you. Down there, second door on the left. Go straight in.” She paused, and her smile softened. She reminded me a bit of my mum, just then. “Good luck.”

When I walked into the office, its owner was standing by the window looking out, in typical Big-Man-of-Business pose. He was about my height, sandy hair thinning on top and the middle-aged spread just starting to show. His suit was a decent quality, but it could have been a better fit. Still buying the size he used to wear, I guessed.

He turned and nodded at me. “Richard Matlock.”

“Luke Corbin,” I said in turn. His handshake was cool, dry, and very definitely straight.

“Well, sit down, sit down.” He perched on the edge of his desk where he could look down on me, but I don’t intimidate easily. All blokes are the same when you’ve got your mouth ’round their cock, at least in my experience.

Not that I was expecting a blowjob to be part of the interview, but it’s the principle of the thing.

“I expect you know you’re here because Amit Anand asked me to give you a chance. Do you want to know what he said about you?”

I nodded. “If you don’t mind telling me, Mr. Matlock.”

“He said, if I looked beneath the surface with you, I might be pleasantly surprised.” He paused, to see if I’d react to that. “So go on, Luke, surprise me. Convince me you’re not just another pretty-boy who’s only interested in designer suits and sleeping his way to the top.”

“I got the job!” I couldn’t wait until Russell came home to tell him. I’d got on the phone and rung him at work the minute I was out of the Daily Echo building. “They’ve offered me a training contract!”

“That’s fantastic!”

“We’ve got to celebrate tonight,” I told him. “I’m taking you out for a meal. Where d’you want to go?”

“Wherever you want—it’s your celebration.”

“Okay, I’ll surprise you. See you at six.”

I took him to Ennio’s. It’s a smart Italian restaurant down on the waterfront, attached to a small hotel. The food’s superb, but the atmosphere’s relaxed, not at all stuffy. And okay, at this rate I’d be spending my first pay cheque before I even started earning it, and yes, I was totally fishing for Russell to say their pasta wasn’t as good as mine. I wasn’t disappointed, although I think he might have been bending the truth a little, bless him.

As we walked back home, the best part of a couple of bottles of Montepulciano keeping us warm as the wind blew in off the sea, I couldn’t remember a time I’d felt more content. It’d been the perfect

evening. I almost slipped an arm around Russell's waist—and then I remembered just how he'd probably react to that, and suddenly I didn't feel so warm any more.

Russell was still laughing at some daft joke I'd made, and I tried to smile back, but it just felt all wrong, with him.

"Luke?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I shrugged. "Just tired, I think."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" We'd stopped under a lamppost, and his eyes looked into mine.

It hit me like a punch to the gut that one day he was going to be doing this sort of thing—going out for the night, having fun, walking home together—with someone he really cared about. They'd maybe hold hands as they walked—or maybe not; even in this day and age that sort of thing was asking for trouble. But when they got home, they wouldn't have to pretend they were just friends. He'd kiss Russell, this bloke I'd never met and already hated. He'd tease Russell about his fashion sense as he undid the checked shirt and slipped it off those broad shoulders. He'd make a note to take Russell shopping, and then he'd forget it like he always did, because what was important was what was inside. He'd have that, all of it, and he'd take Russell to bed and show him what he'd been missing all these years. I only hoped that bloke would realise how lucky he was.

And it wasn't going to be me. I'd never felt so empty in my life, not even after I'd finally got up the nerve to leave Nameless Bastard and was walking 'round town with my rucksack wondering where I was going to sleep that night. I felt the weight of Russell's hand on my arm, its touch warming my skin but not reaching my heart, and I had to look away. "Bit of a stressful day, that's all," I told him. "Come on, let's go home."

Once we'd got back to the flat, Russell put on the kettle. "You know, you should give your dad a ring," he said, looking intently at the coffee he was spooning into the mugs. "You can tell him about the First, and your job, and..."

"No." I stood. "Russell, just leave it, will you? I'm not getting back in touch with him." I went into the living room and switched on the TV, hoping I could find something that'd distract him from taking this any further.

It was daft—I'd got my degree, I'd got a job and I could stick two fingers up at all the bastards who'd treated me like some pretty little toy they could play with for a bit then chuck out with the rubbish when they got bored. I had everything I'd ever wanted.

Everything.

But I still wasn't happy.

The morning of my graduation, Russell was fidgeting around like mad. “Sit down, will you?” I told him, exasperated. “Anyone would think it was you who was going to have to go up on stage dressed up like you’re headed for Hogwarts.”

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Have you got your ticket?” I asked, doing up my formal shirt. I’d be picking up the gown and mortarboard at Uni. “They won’t let you in without one.” Russell dug in his back pocket and waved the ticket at me. “Good. Actually, tell you what, we’ll take the spare as well—you never know, someone might turn up on the off chance, hoping for returns.” I darted into the kitchen and grabbed the envelope the tickets had come in from the letter rack, then frowned when I saw that only the cover letter was there. “Russell? What’s happened to the spare ticket?”

I think it was the fact that he didn’t answer immediately that put me on my guard. “Russell?”

“I, er...it got lost?”

“Russell!”

He squeezed his eyes shut as he spoke. “I’m sorry! I sent it to your dad! I know it was none of my business, but I thought, well, there can’t be that many Corbins living in the New Forest, and I looked in the phone book, and he was the only one, so I sent him the ticket.”

“You what?” I felt hot and cold at the same time. “What the hell gives you the right to arse around with my private life? What the *fuck* did you think you were doing?” I realised I was pacing up and down the room and stopped abruptly. “Think it’s going to be all hugs and tearful reunions, do you? You can fucking well forget about that! You’ve never met my dad. The best we can hope for is that he chucked your letter straight in the bin! Even if he does turn up, it’ll just be so he can have another go at telling me what a disgrace I am to Mum’s memory!”

Russell looked like he was about to cry, and for a moment I bloody well hoped he would. “Luke, I’m sorry, I just thought—”

“No. No, you didn’t think. You didn’t fucking think at *all*.” I checked my watch and unclenched my jaw with an effort. “We’ve got to go now or I’ll be late. Come on.”

We drove there in silence. I felt like I was about to throw up. The last memory I had of my dad was him telling me how disgusted he felt to be my father. I wasn’t sure I could handle going through that again. This was supposed to be my day—the day I showed the world what I was worth. And now, thanks to bloody Russell, it was going to be like a bad episode of *Eastenders*. If Dad even bothered turning up, that was.

I didn’t even say goodbye to Russell as I slammed the car door and headed over to the Student Union building, where I had to pick up my gown. I smiled at the guys from Uni as they congratulated me on

getting a First, but I was hard pushed to remember to return the favour. It was almost a relief when we all had to line up to go into the hall.

All the guests were already there. Some of them looked 'round as we trooped in, but it was hard to see individual faces in the crowd. Graduands had to sit at the front, so I couldn't even look 'round to see if Dad was there. As I walked up on stage, I wondered if I'd see him—but I was up there for only a minute. Shake Vice Chancellor's hand with right hand, take diploma with left hand, move along now, next please. My gaze barely had time to fall on Russell, sitting looking miserable in the sea of proud parents on uncomfortable chairs.

After the ceremony, there was a drinks reception in the sports hall. I wouldn't have bothered, but we all got shepherded along there en masse. I half-expected the faculty staff to start whistling and calling "Come by!"

Russell caught up with me inside. "Have you seen him?" he asked as we headed over towards the table where the drinks were laid out. "Look, we don't have to stay—"

I stopped walking, and he trailed off. I'd just realised who was making his way through the crowd towards me.

It was my dad.

He looked a lot older than I remembered him. And smaller—though he was still taller than me by a good few inches. I got my mum's genes. He wasn't smiling. *Plus ce change*, as Tom would say. "Lucas," he said, and his voice sounded different too. Rougher, but not so harsh, if that makes sense, which it probably doesn't. "Well done on getting your First." He thrust out a hand. "You should be proud of yourself."

"Shake his hand," Russell hissed in my ear, and it broke through my momentary paralysis.

"I—thanks, Dad," I managed, and gripped his hand briefly. It felt cold and dry. He nodded, and an awkward silence fell.

"I'll, um, get some drinks?" Russell suggested nervously and escaped over to the bar area.

My dad and I looked at each other. I wondered how different I looked to him. I'd bulked up a lot since I was sixteen, but did he still see the effeminate little runt he'd tried so hard to toughen up?

"You look well."

"Thanks." Pause. "You too."

It did get better. By the time Russell got back with the drinks, Dad had managed to enquire about, and comment on, both my job ("I suppose you have to start at the bottom") and where Russell and I were living ("You'll need to be careful after dark"). He'd even invited me out for Sunday lunch sometime ("You can bring your...Russell").

He obviously thought Russell was my boyfriend, and I didn't bother correcting him. With Dad making all that effort to accept me as a gay man, it didn't seem the time to explain that Russell and I were just living together, not *living together*.

There were four separate graduation ceremonies that day, so the drinks reception didn't last long, thank God. After we'd walked out, and Russell had gone to fetch the car, I was left alone with my dad for a few minutes. We spent them scuffing our feet and trying to think of anything we could possibly talk about.

It was Dad who broke the silence. "This...Russell. What does he do?"

"Oh, he's a chemical engineer. Works up at Fawley."

Dad nodded. "And you're...happy with him?"

"He's great," I told Dad truthfully.

Dad sniffed. "I would have thought you could do better," he muttered.

I gritted my teeth and managed not to say something we'd both regret. In his own, cockeyed way, Dad probably meant it as a compliment.

"Your dad's, um, nice," Russell offered as we were driving back.

"No, he's not." I sighed. "But he's my dad, and at least he was trying."

Russell was silent for a moment as we went 'round a busy roundabout. "I'm sorry I went behind your back like that," he said hesitantly. "I just thought, if he didn't turn up, at least if you didn't know, you wouldn't know."

He pulled into the parking spaces behind the flats and switched off the ignition, then turned to me, a worried expression hiding somewhere in the foliage of his face. "Are you still mad at me?"

"Russell..." I had to look away for a moment. "You'll never know just how tempted I was to slap you today." As his face dropped, I leaned over and kissed him on one hairy cheek. "I'll get over it. Come on, I could murder a beer."

Chapter Six

I started work a couple of weeks after graduation. It took a bit of getting used to, but I loved the job. Seeing words I'd written come out in print—well, I'd never get tired of that.

Towards the end of my first month, I'd just finished up for the day and was walking down Northam Road when I heard Tom's ringtone. I've got it set to Bill Wyman's "Je Suis un Rock Star" for reasons which should be obvious. I flipped open my phone. "Hi, Tom. You okay?"

"Marvellous, Luke. Marvellous." He paused. "Can I meet you for a drink?"

I assumed he wanted to talk about the wedding. Russell was going to be Nigel's best man, and I wondered if Tom wanted to ask me. I'm not even close to being his best mate, let alone the awkwardness of him being my ex, but there's very little Tom would let stand in the way of an aesthetically pleasing wedding photo. "Well, Russell's expecting me home for dinner, but it's early yet. I could make it for a quick drink."

We arranged to meet up at El Nino. Curiously enough, it was the wine bar I'd first met Sebastian at. I'd been living with Calum, but I was fed up dealing with his shit, was on the lookout for somewhere new to live. So I'd been dancing at this place, and I think I had my shirt off for some reason that escaped me, and, well, you get the picture. I'd packed my bags the following day. Calum hadn't tried to stop me.

Tom flashed me a smile when he walked in, but he looked out of sorts, somehow. God, I hoped he and Nigel hadn't had a bust-up. Just as I was wondering why the hell Tom would have called me if that had been the case, a nasty thought crossed my mind. Maybe it wasn't just a drink Tom was after? If that was it, I was turning him down flat. Nigel was a good mate of Russell's.

"Luke, come and sit down." Tom pushed a glass towards me. "I ordered you the usual."

"Thanks." I picked it up and took a sip. "So what's this all about?"

Tom fiddled with his coaster for a minute, which wasn't like him. Then he sighed. "Nigel asked me to have a quiet word with you. He's a bit concerned about Russell."

"Russell? Why? What's wrong? He hasn't said anything to me about anything being wrong—"

"Calm down. Nothing's wrong. But, well, nothing's right, either, if you get my drift." He placed his hand briefly on mine. "Luke, you know I love you. But isn't it about time you moved on? Russell's never going to find Mr. Right with you hogging the bed. And now you're earning, there's no need for you to keep taking advantage of him like this. It's time you moved out. *Pour encourager les autruches*, so to speak."

My whole body felt numb, my fingers suddenly clumsy, so I put my glass down quickly in case I spilled it. “Right,” I managed to say. “Of course. Actually, I’ve started looking for a place already. Didn’t think there’d be too much of a hurry, but if you’re concerned—”

“No! God, Luke, no. We don’t want to kick you out on the streets. Just as long as things are moving along. That’s fine.” He leaned back and beamed at me. “Now, I’m afraid I’ve got to dash. Nigel wants to talk cakes. Soooo tedious, but one has to suffer for love.”

I sat there for a long while after he’d gone, staring into my glass. Tom was right. I knew he was right. And if anyone deserved to find love, it was Russell. So why did I feel like someone had just opened up my chest with a steak knife and ripped out my heart?

The numbness had gone, but God, I wanted it back. Why the hell was I feeling like this?

Oh, God. Realisation washed over me, soothing as battery acid. I was in love with Russell. The one man I knew who had the sense not to have anything to do with me. Not in that way. It was so fucking ironic it was almost funny, but I didn’t feel much like laughing. I wanted another drink, but I couldn’t face getting up and going to the bar. I’d have to talk to people, smile at them, and I wasn’t sure I was ever going to be ready to do that again. God, why did it have to hurt *so much*?

And then I heard a familiar voice calling my name. I looked up. “Sebastian?”

He was standing by the table, his Armani suit slightly rumpled, Dior tie just a little bit askew. “Luke!” he said, beaming at me like I was the love of his life. “I’ve missed you so much! Come and have a drink with me.”

I don’t know why I went with him. Maybe it was because he’d said he’d missed me, and I was sick and tired of not being wanted. Maybe it was just the promise of another drink. Sebastian led me over to a booth and ordered champagne. Proper stuff; none of that Moet crap. As the first bubbles tingled across my tongue, I realised how much I’d missed this. Sebastian was smiling at me with all the force of his porcelain veneers, and I knew that all I had to do was go home with him and I’d be back here every week if I wanted. I could be back drinking this stuff in his Jacuzzi; could be back to shopping at Harrods and dressing in Armani.

Not to mention, Sebastian... Well, he was gorgeous, of course. Tall, broad-shouldered, not an inch of him that wasn’t toned, buffed and polished to perfection, with discreet help from his plastic surgeon where necessary. He was solid establishment; could easily give me a leg up in my career, at least with a certain class of periodical. I’d be mad to turn him down for anyone, let alone a shy engineer with no muscle tone, mediocre career prospects and a secret comic-book stash.

Especially seeing as Russell didn’t even want me.

“I got my First,” I told Sebastian.

Sebastian looked at me like he didn’t have a clue what I was talking about for a moment. “Oh! Your degree, of course. Congratulations.” He topped up our glasses.

“Got a job too. I’ve got a training contract with the *Daily Echo*. Okay, it’s just the local rag, and the pay’s rubbish, but you’ve got to start somewhere, right?”

“That’s nice. Listen, Luke, I’ve been thinking. Xander was a dreadful mistake. Why don’t you come back home? Same arrangement, obviously.”

I hesitated, not sure what to say. “I’m sort of with someone,” I told him at last.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “I know *exactly* who you’re with, so don’t start this game with me.” He sighed. “What do you want? More pocket money? A new laptop? Clothes?” His hand reached across the table to cover mine, and I felt heat spread through me from the point of contact. “We both know you’re not seriously planning to stay with the hairy social misfit.”

The hairy social misfit who didn’t want me. Not that way, anyway. And I was desperately missing feeling wanted.

Sebastian’s hand tightened on mine. “Come home,” he said.

I stood. “All right,” I said.

“Place hasn’t changed,” I commented as we walked into Sebastian’s flat. It was almost as if I’d never left.

“Well, it’s only been a few weeks.” Sebastian sounded impatient. “What did you expect—*Sixty Minute Makeover*?” He fussed about for a minute, taking off his shoes and washing his hands afterwards like he always did. “Now, do you want more wine? Coffee?”

I grabbed him. I pulled him to me and mashed our mouths together in a kiss. He joined in for a moment, then backed off, laughing. “Oh, you have missed me, haven’t you?”

I didn’t want to answer that, so I kissed him again. I felt both his hands grab hold of my arse as he rammed his hard-on against mine. “Get in the bedroom,” Sebastian panted into my neck, his breath sour from the wine we’d drunk earlier. Still, mine was probably just as bad. I could smell his cologne, the scent of money and power, and it turned me on just like it always had. I started to unbutton his shirt, and we stripped hurriedly. I remembered to fold my clothes neatly so Sebastian wouldn’t get in a snit. “God, I’ve missed this,” he breathed, his hands firmly back on my arse. “Get on your knees.”

I clambered onto the bed and got on all fours. At least with Sebastian I could be one hundred per cent certain he’d changed the sheets since Xander. I heard him get a condom out, and the tiny sounds as he rolled it on, then another foil packet was ripped open and oil drizzled down my crack. I tensed involuntarily. What the fuck was I doing here? I should be home with Russell.

Who didn’t want me. Who I had to leave for his own good. “Come on, fuck me,” I snarled at Sebastian.

He chuckled. “You’ve missed this, haven’t you? Missed my cock. Missed me taking you. God, I’m going to take you so hard.” He thrust into me clumsily, and I gritted my teeth and waited for the burn to ease.

“Go for it, Seb. Make me feel you all bloody week,” I told him when I felt I could stand it, and he started to slam in and out of me like a pile-driver. His hands were all over my body, pinching and grabbing. I just wished he’d hurry up and finish.

After what seemed like hours he finally grunted, gave one last, painful thrust and stilled, breathing hard. “So good,” he gasped, collapsing on my back like a damp sack of potatoes. He didn’t ask if I’d come. Just as well, really. I shifted a bit under him, and he finally took the hint and rolled to one side. The weight lifting off me felt more spiritual than physical.

“You’re even tighter than I remembered,” he muttered smugly. “I don’t think your current owner has been treating you properly.”

I looked at him and I wanted to throw up. The worst of it was, he hadn’t changed a bit. It made me want to puke my guts up that I’d spent months with this bastard, letting him treat me like pond-scum.

I sat up. Maybe there was still a chance. I could go back home to Russell’s and...and what? Make him love me? We’d been living together for weeks. If he’d ever been going to love me, he’d have done it by now. If I went back to him, all I could hope for was a gentle rejection.

But it was better than staying here. I got off the bed and picked up my clothes. I’d thought Sebastian had passed out, but he roused briefly as I walked out the bedroom door. “Put the kettle on, I’ll have a coffee,” he called out drowsily.

“Sebastian,” I said softly, “you can take your kettle, and your coffee, and you can shove them up your scrawny, entitled arse.”

I didn’t wait for him to regain the power of speech, just left, closing the door quietly behind me.

I was very late for dinner by the time I got back to Russell’s. I looked around at the living room with its squashy, comfortable sofa and large-screen TV, and wondered how I’d ever thought the place dingy and uninspiring. Russell had already eaten and was sitting on the sofa with the TV off. “It’s in the microwave,” he said without quite looking at me. “A couple of minutes should do it.”

“Thanks, Russell.” I hesitated, then went into the kitchen and came back two minutes later, steaming plate of lucky dip risotto in hand. “Sorry I’m late. I met up for a drink with a friend and sort of lost track of time.” I dug in, wishing I’d thought to bring the soy sauce in too.

“Luke?”

Something in Russell’s voice made me put my fork down. “Yeah?”

He still wasn’t looking at me. “I’m—I’m sorry, but I need you to move out.”

Those words. Those *fucking* words. From Russell. And tonight, of all fucking nights. The rice in my stomach seemed to turn to lead. If I'd had more than a couple of mouthfuls, I'd have thrown up.

Russell turned to me then. "You understand, don't you?" he said with a horrible attempt at a smile.

I looked at him, all ready to show him how a proper fake smile was done, and then I couldn't. I just couldn't. Not with him. "No. I don't understand. I don't fucking understand *anything*. You don't want to sleep with me. I get that. You're waiting for that someone special. I can respect that. I'm not sure I can *understand* it, but I can respect it. But you and me... Fuck, Russell, I thought we were mates! I thought—I thought you actually liked having me here." I stood so fast I nearly knocked the table over. "Fuck it. I'm going to pack."

I couldn't believe how close I was to tears. I felt like I'd wrapped bandages around my heart, and he'd just come along and ripped them off to reveal it raw and bleeding underneath. I started grabbing clothes and books and shoving them into bags, not caring what went where or if it got crumpled or ripped or what the fuck ever.

"Luke?" He was standing in the doorway.

"I'm going, all right?" I snarled at him. "You don't have to stand over me while I pack." My voice cracked on the last bit.

He fiddled with his sleeve for a moment, where his shirt cuff had frayed. I never had got around to taking him shopping. Or the trip to France. We hadn't done that either. So many things I hadn't done with him. I wanted to stay angry, but it all drained away while I was looking at him, leaving only sorrow. The one bloke I'd—but it didn't matter. He didn't want me.

"I had a call from Tom," Russell said, not looking at me. "He said he'd seen you in El Nino, drinking champagne and holding hands with Sebastian."

I froze. I'd just assumed, when Tom had left me, that he'd *left*. It hadn't even occurred to me that he might have stayed there.

"And then, Tom said, you left together." Russell looked at his watch. "About an hour and a half ago." He looked down at his feet. "I know I'm not being fair—"

"Too bloody right you're not being fair!" I exploded. "Yes, I had a drink with Sebastian. Yes, I went home with him afterwards. And yes, I let him fuck me because it's been so bloody long I've almost forgotten what my prick's *for*. And what the bloody *fuck* has it got to do with you?" I realised I was still holding a crumpled handful of underwear, and I threw it on the floor and tried to stop my hands from shaking.

Russell was hunched over, tense with what looked like misery. I didn't get it. This was all fucking wrong. He didn't *want* me. "I wanted to be just friends with you," Russell said in a low voice. "I tried, I really tried. I just can't seem to—" Behind the lenses of his glasses, his eyes closed. He gave a twisted smile. "It wasn't like they didn't warn me."

“Warn you? Warn you about what?”

“They said...” Russell sighed, his eyes squeezed shut. He rubbed them, and when he opened them again it was to look down at his feet, not at me. “You told me once you hoped I met someone special,” he said to the carpet. His voice sank until it was barely audible. “I did.”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak.

He turned away, muttering something I didn’t catch. It broke the spell, thank God. I lunged after him, stumbling over a box of books on the way. He turned at the noise, his eyes wary. “Me too,” I told him. “I met someone special too. That’s why I just had the worst sex of my life, right before I told Sebastian where to go and came home to you. Where I belong.”

And then I grabbed him, and I kissed him, and this time he didn’t try to push me away. This time he kissed me back and didn’t stop. I felt his arms slip around my waist, and he crushed me to him so hard I thought I’d get a bruise from where his cock was digging into my stomach. I wanted that bruise. I was terrified he’d stop; terrified he’d come to his senses and realise who he’d just called special. I didn’t think I could bear it if he let me go, so I wrapped my arms around his neck like I was drowning and he was a bearded, speccy lifeguard. I kissed him so hard my lips would be swollen for days, and I wanted it all. I wanted him to take me, mark me. I used to joke about Sebastian, saying he wanted his name tattooed on my arse, but with Russell I’d have lain down for it gladly, and got them to ink it on my forehead as well.

“Oh, God,” Russell breathed, and it brought me back to my senses. This wasn’t about me. This had to be for him; it was his first time, and I wanted him to remember it forever.

I wanted him to remember *me* forever.

“What do you want to do?” I asked, as I shoved a hand up his shirt.

I was kissing his neck, and I felt him swallow. “Anything,” he said hoarsely. “Whatever you want.”

So I pushed his shirt up with my left hand and started kissing my way up his stomach and chest, while with my right hand I fumbled with the fastenings of his jeans. I’d latched onto a nipple by the time I got them open and freed his thick, heavy cock from his underwear. It was gorgeous and hot and it felt just right in my hand. Just like the rest of him. He was moaning, and I knew he wouldn’t last long, not after waiting all this time. I was damned if I was going to let it end as a bloody hand job, so I slid to my knees and took him in my mouth.

Russell cried out loud as I slid my lips over his cock. He was burning hot in my mouth, salty and sweet. It was a rush, knowing no one had ever tasted him before me. I let my throat muscles relax and buried my nose in his pubes, taking him down to the root. He smelled delicious, all clean and musky. I rolled his balls in my hand, and he whimpered, and in the next breath he shot down my throat, thrusting and crying. I didn’t care that I could hardly breathe; all I could think about was that this was Russell and he was finally mine.

“Luke,” he said weakly, pulling out of my mouth. “Are you all right?”

I looked up into eyes that were wide with concern. “Are you serious?” I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Then I clambered up off my knees and kissed him.

When I felt his hand on my cock, it sent an electric jolt down my spine, and I gasped without meaning to. “Oh, God.”

Then I felt Russell lowering himself until he was on his knees, just like I’d been a few minutes ago. “Russell, you don’t have to...”

He didn’t answer, just wrapped his lips around my cock.

It felt like lightning striking me in the gut. It threw me, totally, because I’d never felt like this with anyone before. All the practised moves in the world just didn’t compare to the feeling of Russell’s mouth on my cock while his beard tickled my thighs.

I was glad he’d only lasted a minute. I was only going to last bloody nanoseconds.

I felt his hand come up to cradle my bollocks, like he’d been taking notes earlier—and then his finger crept further back to my arse, proving he’d been reading ahead. He circled my hole a couple of times, and then he pressed his finger inside me, and I lost it totally, coming in his mouth without even warning him.

I wouldn’t have blamed him if he’d spat it out, but he swallowed my come like a seasoned pro. He didn’t stop sucking my prick until I slumped down on the carpet in front of him, utterly drained. All I had the strength to do was kiss him, grabbing him ’round the neck and hanging on like I was drowning again.

We stumbled into bed afterwards and just lay there, my head pillowed on his furry chest and his arms wrapped ’round me like he was never going to let go. There was a pink nipple just in front of my mouth, and I was wondering if I had the energy to give it a nibble and maybe start the whole thing going again, when he spoke. “I, um, probably should have mentioned this before, but that...” He stopped, his arms tightening a little bit as if he was worried the next thing he said was going to send me running for the hills. “That was my first time. With anyone.”

I almost said, “What, seriously? I’d never have known!” But then I remembered who this was. This was Russell, and I didn’t have to pretend with him. “I know,” I said, craning my neck up to kiss him on the beard. “Nigel told me.”

There was an ominous stillness. “Oh.”

“He was a bit pissed,” I said quickly, feeling bad that I’d dropped Nigel in it. “It was at your birthday do. And he thought we were sleeping together, so I think he thought I must have realised already.”

“Oh.” And then again, “Oh.” Russell sighed. “You must have thought I was the saddest man on the planet. Is that why you walked out of the pub that night?”

I pushed myself up on my hands and looked him in the eye. He looked really cute with his glasses off. Maybe we should get him some contact lenses? On the other hand, it wasn't like anyone else needed to see it. Just me.

"It's all right," he said before I could say anything. "Don't answer that." He gave a weak sort of smile. "Things are different now, I know."

"No, they're not," I said, frowning. Then I looked at us, lying naked in bed together, well shagged. "All right, so they are. But I don't feel any differently about you."

"Um. Is that good, or bad?"

"Good. Definitely," I reassured him, snuggling back against his chest. "What did Tom tell you about me?" I asked after a moment.

Russell gave a little laugh. It made me want to kiss him, so I did. "He said you smile a lot."

I was startled into laughter. "What? That's it?" I mean, it's a fair comment but it's hardly a complete description.

"Um. Well. He said you were really good looking, which obviously you are, and that you needed a place to stay for a few weeks."

I don't know why I was pushing it. But I had to know, somehow. "But he told you I'd put out, right? He must have told you that. What else?" I remembered something. "You said they warned you. What did they say, him and Nigel?"

"Does it matter? It's not like I listened to it."

"What?"

Russell sighed, and I felt his hand come up and stroke my hair. "They said, don't get attached. They said you'd be off like a shot the minute you got a better offer." He was silent for a moment while I wondered what the hell Nigel had thought he was doing, fixing up a friend—someone like *Russell*, for God's sake—with someone like me.

"That's why I tried to be just friends," Russell whispered, clutching me tighter. "That's why I couldn't just sleep with you. I thought, if I wasn't sleeping with you, it wouldn't bother me when you—but I was wrong."

"I thought you didn't fancy me," I told his chest. I couldn't bring myself to tell it the real reason, that I'd thought he didn't think I was worth it, but it was close enough.

The chest rumbled as Russell laughed. "I don't think there's a gay man on the planet who wouldn't fancy you, Luke."

I found myself laughing back. "There's been a few straight ones too. At least, that's what they told everyone they were." I was quiet for a moment, drifting into that warm, relaxed stage where you're still awake, but you know you could drop off any minute. "You know what?" I mumbled into the chest hairs

that were gently tickling my nose. “When I was little I had a teddy bear just like you. My dad chucked him out when I was twelve. Said cuddly toys were for girls and sissies. Are you going to let me stay?”

“Luke...” He paused, and I tensed. “I love you,” he said finally. “I couldn’t kick you out even if I wanted to.”

I snuggled in closer. “Good. Because I’m not planning on going anywhere until you do.”

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When at first you don't succeed, turn up the heat!

Just Desserts

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French chef Luc Tessier is five-star successful. His cookery program on TV is rated as high as his restaurant, and casual flings are his specialty. The only stain on his toque is Daniel Sheridan, an English food critic who has made it his business to ruin Luc's reputation.

The only way to clarify this particular pat of butter is to invite the critic to dine and bury the hatchet—preferably in Daniel's back. The moment he lays eyes on Daniel, however, Luc's thoughts turn from sauces to seduction.

Daniel definitely finds Luc appetizing, but he plays it cool. He never wants to be anyone's toy, ever again. Yet in the face of Luc's relentless pursuit, he's finding it harder to keep the flamboyant chef at arm's length.

A cooking competition on a remote Scottish island seems the perfect way to put some distance between them. Until Luc shows up to compete, determined to win not only the trophy, but Daniel's heart...

Warning: Ingredients include two extremely hot men determined to come up with a whole new definition for "sizzling". Explicit use of food items could incite spontaneous nekkid food fights.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Just Desserts:

It was seven-thirty. The restaurant was filled with women in jewels and men in tuxedos. Luc had a very strict dress code, mainly because a man in a tux made him hard. It was only fair these guys should give something back to him after he had given them a gastronomic orgasm.

He peeked through the serving hatch from the kitchen and watched people arriving, his heart beating far faster than it should. Soon he zeroed in on a man in a tuxedo being led across the room. Luc's glance turned to a stare. If he had ever seen a more attractive man in his life, he could not remember. All his past conquests paled into insignificance beside this heavenly apparition.

The man was about five-feet eleven-inches tall and perhaps thirty-five years old. He had a nicely proportioned body, not too lean, not too fat, a hint of muscle under his perfectly tailored tux, the shoulders and chest broad, the backside undeniably pert. He had jet black, expensively cut hair, which was teased into luscious, shiny spikes by some no doubt outrageously expensive gum or paste. His skin was creamy white, his jaw strong and chiselled, shaved smooth as glass, his nose small and upturned, his mouth like a pink, pouting rosebud.

Luc was quite possibly stricken with sudden love. If at least not love, it was definitely pants-splitting lust. He was so hard he could barely think for all the blood deserting his brain. He couldn't see the colour of the man's eyes. He thought that if he didn't see them right then, he was going to die.

He got a grip on himself firmly. *Concentrate. This is how you will sabotage this evening, with your dick consumed with this patron instead of with the matter in hand.* There would be time for getting to know this man later. It would be his reward for pleasing Daniel Sheridan. Once the critic was going back to his hotel satiated, Luc would have all the time in the world to see what colour eyes the man with the black hair had when he was on his back beneath Luc staring up in adoration.

He let his glance trail the man lingeringly for a few seconds more as he crossed the room, following Guillaume, weaving through the tables nimbly. There was another person with the black-haired man, a shorter blond man who was attractive, too, but in a less arresting way, and Luc wondered briefly if the two men were gay and idly toyed with the idea of having them both.

Then Guillaume stopped at the table and pulled out a chair for the man with the black hair, and Luc's heart about stopped on the spot. It was Daniel Sheridan's table, and it was Daniel Sheridan's neatly place-marked seat into which the man lowered himself.

Luc ducked back into the kitchen and pressed himself against the wall with the blood roaring furiously in his ears and his dick throbbing. *No*, he told himself, *no*. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. Why hadn't someone warned him? All his staff must be in cahoots, that they hadn't warned such a fearsome man-eater as Luc that Daniel Sheridan was the most exquisite specimen of masculinity on the planet. Even his manager and his agent had never remarked on Daniel's obvious physical attributes, and surely they must have seen a picture of him before.

It was some cruel trick, designed to sabotage the evening, Luc was convinced of it. Someone somewhere wanted him to fail tonight. How exactly could he cook when all he could think of was his cock in the tight arse of his bitter nemesis?

He groaned aloud. He rushed through the kitchen and out the door, where he climbed the spiral staircase at the back to his office. There he threw himself into his executive leather chair behind his desk and rapidly pulled his cock free from his black-and-white-checked pants. He leaned back, eyes closed, fist gripping his swollen flesh, pulling hard while he saw the man in the tuxedo behind his eyes.

He adjusted his fantasies accordingly. This was Daniel Sheridan. Luc would have to dominate and possibly humiliate him. He imagined the other man down on his knees between his legs. Between sucks of Luc's cock, Daniel would moan about how perfect the meal was and how it had made him so hard that he had been touching himself beneath the table all evening. Luc would grip that perfect hair hard and force his head down over his cock. Daniel would take it without complaint. When Luc pushed him over the desk and ordered him to take his pants down, Daniel would beg him for it, telling him he was sorry for all the wicked words he had printed about him and pleading with Luc to punish him like the bad boy he was.

Luc would find the nearest thing in his office—a ruler in his desk drawer—and strike Daniel on the bare arse several times until the food critic screamed in masochistic ecstasy. Then he would thrust into his

depths, and Daniel would arch off the desk in delight, shouting that oh God, he was going to come right now and Luc was the best fuck he'd ever had in his life.

Luc growled and spurted over his hand and his starched white tunic. He settled back, panting, in his chair and then his eyes flicked open in panic. What in the name of God was he doing? His restaurant was full at seven-thirty on a Friday night and he was up here in his office spanking the monkey like a teenager?

"*Mon Dieu...*" He moaned aloud in horror at his lack of self-control and jumped up, tucking himself away and looking for tissues. The time for this was later, when he intended to make his fantasies come true. When he intended to take true revenge on the Englishman once and for all.

The head waiter was in the kitchen screaming for him. Antoine Anelka, a middle-aged overwrought Parisian native, had a temper to rival Luc's and was the only one who dared to answer him back.

"*Zut alors*, what are you *doing*?" Antoine cried when Luc rushed back and threw his apron on over the stains on his uniform. "Monsieur Sheridan is seated awaiting his *hors d'oeuvres* and you haven't even started cooking them!"

"Shut up and give him some *canapés*," Luc muttered sullenly, opening the fridge and flinging out ingredients.

"He's already *got* them!" yelled Antoine. "He shows no interest in them whatsoever. He merely sits there with a face like a slapped arse and glares at me. *Merde!* What am I supposed to do?" He wrung his hands, pacing, his face scarlet.

"Someone get Monsieur Anelka a Valium please," Luc said, surprisingly calm. "The time for breakdowns is later, Antoine. Pull yourself together or so help me..." And he brandished his favourite and sharpest knife at the head waiter to make his point.

Antoine sank into an offered chair and mopped his perspiring brow with a spotted handkerchief. "*Mon Dieu*, you will ruin us all," he muttered.

Luc put some butter in a saucepan and ignored him. Much to his chagrin, he was thinking of Daniel Sheridan's bare arse over his desk again and silently agreeing with Antoine's assessment of himself.

A little push and pull makes the heart grow stronger.

The Distance Between Us

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After ten years together, Ethan Mallory and Rhett Solomon are calling it quits. They're more than ready to dump their heavy emotional baggage. The only thing they can't seem to unload is the house. They're stuck living as roommates with a hefty mortgage hanging over their heads...at least until they can bring in some extra money to pay it down. Solution: rent out a room.

Enter Kieran Frost. Suddenly, the only thing Ethan and Rhett both want more than getting away from each other is getting close to their single, young, *hot* roommate. Complicating things is the fact that Kieran doesn't mind the attention from both, and he certainly doesn't mind sharing.

Their combined chemistry ignites something else that Ethan and Rhett had thought was long dead—the mutual attraction that drew them together in the first place. Except bitter jealousy over Kieran could only push them even farther apart...

Warning: Includes multiple threesomes, angry sex, makeup sex, and a little peeking.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Distance Between Us:

I was somewhere in that hazy state between asleep and awake when something brought me back to full awareness. Blinking in the dark, I tried to locate the sound that had pulled me into consciousness.

Down the hall, the sliding glass door hissed, then clicked shut. Shuffling footsteps moved across the hardwood floor of the living room, toward the hallway. No voices, just footsteps. Uneven, almost stumbling. Bumping into furniture, struggling for balance. I wondered just how many bottles of wine Ethan had gone through. He wasn't usually the type to get fall down drunk, particularly not while he was trying to lay the charm on someone. Or maybe it was Kieran. He wasn't as familiar with the layout of the house, and since there was no strip of light under my door, he was probably trying to work his way through the darkness.

Fabric brushed against plaster. Again, with a little more force this time. Definitely Kieran. Between the dark and the wine, he must—

A low murmur, something I couldn't understand, ending in enough of a lilt to indicate a question.

Then a response. The reply was deeper, quieter, so low I almost felt it rather than heard it. And it was a voice I knew all too well: The hoarse growl of a very aroused Ethan.

Fabric rustled again and they continued down the hall, past Kieran's bedroom, toward the stairs.

You two didn't waste any time, did you?

For the first time, I was aware of every creak of the stairs and wished we'd put down carpet. At least then I wouldn't hear their shoes tapping and shuffling, occasionally even squeaking, as they worked their way up to the third floor.

The house was absolutely silent except for the nearly—but not completely—in audible sounds they made on their way into Ethan's bedroom.

Ethan's bedroom, which was directly over mine.

I closed my eyes and let out a frustrated breath. One of the selling points of this house was that it was in an exceptionally quiet part of Capitol Hill. Just this once, I wished we'd bought a place right beside the freeway. At least then the roar of traffic would have been enough to drown out the muffled sounds of my ex getting it on with our new roommate.

My eyes tracked across the ceiling, following the sound of their footsteps as if I could see them. Pulling off clothes, stumbling over each other's feet, kissing like only Ethan knew how to kiss.

I shivered. It didn't matter how or why we'd split or how we felt about each other, the fact remained that no one kissed like Ethan Mallory. *Oh, Kieran, you lucky son of a bitch.*

The lips were only the beginning. Right about now, Kieran was probably discovering just how many erogenous zones Ethan could find on someone's neck, or what his perpetually stubbled jaw felt like when skin brushed skin, or what Ethan's voice felt like when he moaned into a deep kiss. I ran my tongue stud along my teeth, remembering the way Ethan would tease it with the tip of his tongue.

Just wait until you find out what else his mouth can do, lad.

They stopped moving. I could hear nothing except for the beating of my own heart, but my mind's eye filled in everything that was probably going on. If I knew Ethan, he was anything but silent right then, kissing his way up and down Kieran's neck while whispering in great detail all the ways he'd make him beg for more.

And if I knew Ethan, he wasn't exaggerating. Whatever he said he would do, he did. Promises of a rough, hard fuck, or a long, spine-melting blowjob, even a gentle, oiled massage that would no doubt lead to much more. I could almost feel Ethan's lips and voice against my neck as he breathed all his promises.

The distant, muffled sound of a belt buckle made me shiver. Clothes hit the floor; jeans, I guessed, if I could hear it that clearly. Footsteps moved above me, then bedsprings creaked softly.

I closed my eyes again. I wanted to be angry, I wanted to be jealous, but just the thought of either of those men, naked and horny, made me want to be *there*. And whether I liked it or not, my body wanted to be there too.

Reaching under the covers, I closed my hand around my cock and stroked slowly, barely even breathing so as not to drown out the faint sounds from upstairs.

They were mostly silent now, save for the occasional gentle creak of the bed accommodating movement. Knowing Ethan, he probably had his hand and mouth around Kieran's cock. He'd be stroking

and sucking, his occasional enthusiastic, aroused moan sending Kieran into the stratosphere. The man gave head like he could feel everything he did on his own cock.

Biting my lip, I stroked my cock the way I remembered Ethan doing it: Slower, faster, slower, faster, pausing now and again just to keep me on the edge. I tried to imagine Kieran's face, his eyes screwed shut and his lips parted with breathless, soundless cries, until he reached that point of no return and his eyes—those incredible, hypnotic green eyes—flew open just as he came in Ethan's mouth.

I could barely breathe, taking uneven gasps whenever I could think to do so. Above me, more motion, more urgency and speed. Kieran was probably right there, getting close just as I was. What I wouldn't have given to have been the one about to make him come like that.

Closing my eyes, I held my breath as the faint, distant vibration of Kieran's voice slowly crescendoed into a moan, then a deeper sound and, just before I couldn't hold back anymore, I realized it wasn't Kieran's voice at all. Ethan came with a whimper that I could barely hear, but it was enough, and in that same instant, I came too.

When I could finally draw a breath, my body relaxed and my spine sank back down to the bed. I hadn't even realized I'd arched my back like that, but the force of my orgasm had nearly levitated my entire body. With a trembling hand, I reached for the tissues on my bedside table.

Above me, there were more sounds of movement. Then, the all-too-familiar sound of the nightstand drawer opening, then closing. I couldn't help but shudder, imagining Kieran fucking Ethan. Not only that, but by the time Kieran was done, Ethan would probably have recovered. He may have been a few months away from forty-two, but he had the kind of stamina that rivaled men half his age.

If Kieran could keep up with him like I could, the sun would be coming up around the time they finally collapsed.

Ethan's bedframe groaned in protest of more movement, then fell into a rhythmic creak, filling my mind with all manner of sexy, frustrating images.

If Kieran could keep up with him like I could, they were going to kill me before this night was over.

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