



COMING OUT
AT CROFTON HALL

REBECCA COHEN

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For Tom and Foo

CONTENTS

Author's Note

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Also by Rebecca Cohen](#)

[About Rebecca Cohen](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to another instalment of the Modern Crofton series, and I have to admit this one almost got away from me. This is Dorian and Alex's story, but there is a fair amount about Robin and Simon from *Starting Again at Crofton Hall*. In fact, they were so insistent to tell me more of their story there is an extra spin off called *Unfinished Business at Crofton Hall: Robin & Simon* as I couldn't have them stealing Dorian's thunder.

At one point this foreword was meant to announce the end of the series, but that's not the case, and there will be at least a couple more to come plus some more of those Unfinished Business spin offs...

Please note that I am British, as is Lord Crofton, and so are the spellings and grammar used in this book.

Unending thanks to Louise Auty, and of course Sue (my long-suffering editor) and Garrett (whose covers always blow me away).

CHAPTER 1



Dorian had lost track of which press junket this was; the host was the usual false jerk who wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire if he didn't happen to be a movie star. It was one of the bigger entertainment shows, the third of six he had scheduled today—not *Good Morning America*, as that had been yesterday. There were only so many times he could roll out the same spiel and still sound sincere.

He hadn't been sleeping well, the plan he'd been forming was now invading his dreams and he needed to act on it before he went mad. Every passing day began to feel wasted and he couldn't do it any longer. It seemed so long since Robin had walked out of his life and he knew he owed it to himself to stop hiding. Dorian knew he was ready, he just needed to take the first step.

Gail Andrews, his glamorous co-star, batted her eyelashes as she tried to play-up any sexual chemistry between them. As beautiful as she was, Gail was never going to float his boat.

He couldn't do this anymore. Couldn't continue to pretend he was something he wasn't.

“So, Dorian,” began the obnoxiously perky TV host, “a little bird told me there maybe love in the air between you and Gail.”

Dorian knew he was going to get in so much shit for this but it had been coming for months. He'd told Zak he wouldn't hold off for much longer while his manager had given him every excuse to stay hidden, and Dorian wasn't buying it. How

he'd got through the last lot of filming he'd never know. All he could think about was that he wanted someone to come home to, someone he could take out for dinner, and fuck what the rest of the world thought. A proper boyfriend, not a quick anonymous shag, or someone behind closed doors, he wanted a decent bloke who would be as happy with a fish finger sandwich as a Michelin-starred meal. The whole being out and proud thing had been a bit of a sticking point. Or it had been for him... but not any longer.

"Afraid not, Phil." He winked at Gail. "Maybe if she were a Gary there'd be more chance for real-life romance."

Phil's eyes widened. "Sorry? I must have misheard you. Dorian, are you saying that you prefer men?"

"Yeah, I've never really been one for the ladies."

"But... but... you've been linked to some of the biggest names in Hollywood, you were engaged to Skye Jerry."

Dorian could see the realisation on Phil's face that he had the scoop of the century. "She was a good friend doing me a favour."

"This interview is over." Zak stormed forwards, his expression like thunder. "Dorian, time to go."

He'd warned his manager multiple times over the last year that he wanted to come out. Before then they'd had several heated exchanges back when Robin was still in the picture and getting restless. Dorian had told Zak he wasn't going to wait much longer, and when he'd woken this morning, he'd been filled with a growing determination that today was the day. Robin had told him enough times he only had himself to blame for living a lie. His ex had dealt him some serious tough love, to the point of being a prick in some of the conversations they'd shared since they'd split, but the fucking bastard was right.

"Yeah, it is." Dorian stood. "But I'm going nowhere with you."

Dorian smiled apologetically at Gail, who didn't deserve to get caught in the crossfire, and pulled at his microphone, not

caring if he damaged it. He stormed off the sound stage in the opposite direction to where his security were waiting, disappearing into a corridor, spotting a fire escape and hurtling through it. He'd been in plenty of action movies to know how to avoid anyone trying to follow him, he ignored the calls for him to come back and sprinted away.

Dorian squinted as he emerged into the bright daylight and dropped his pace to a brisk walk, not wanting to be seen running. The back streets were a warren of alleys and he kept going until he couldn't hear anyone calling his name. Heading for the main road, he ignored the buzzing phone in his pocket. Dorian had no intention of answering. He fished it out and turned it off, suspecting that one of his handlers would figure out how to use its find-my-phone function to locate him sooner or later.

He ducked into the first coffee shop he came to, and into the bathroom to remove the makeup he'd had on for the interview. LA was full of stars, he needed to pass as a normal bloke, which was easy enough once he'd removed the slap and messed up his hair. The barista gave him a strange look when he reappeared, not uncommon when people thought they knew him but couldn't place him. He bought a coffee and muffin, leaving a ten-dollar tip.

Once outside, he gave the coffee and muffin to a homeless guy and then spotted a Target. First up was a pre-paid sim card, and then a hotel where he could lie low. Chateau Marmont was his first thought, but then it would probably be every fucker in his entourage's thought too, although they were discreet when money was no object. Money had never been the issue, he could disappear and never be seen again and he wouldn't run out of cash.

An hour later, he was shown into a suite in one of LA's most exclusive hotels and he stared around wondering what to do next. He couldn't stay here for too long, maybe a few days, perhaps a week, but he'd need a better long-term option. He turned on his phone, and was subjected to dozens of notifications. He ignored them all and disabled the tracking function and put in the new sim card. First, he'd need to speak

to Jenny, his PA, and get her to send a few things while he holed up here. Then he'd call a few people he trusted and decide what to do. He thought he had a plan of sorts, but he'd not fleshed anything out beyond announcing he was gay. Zak and Marisa would be having kittens.

He called Jenny.

"Hello?"

He was half surprised she'd answered as she wouldn't have recognised the number. "It's me. Don't say it. Are you on your own?"

"Hey, Steve, how's Mom doing? Hang on, let me move somewhere away from the gang. I'm sure they don't want to hear about oozing abscesses."

He'd hired her because she was smart and ruthlessly organised, and was nothing like Robin in appearance. He waited, assuming she was moving to somewhere she could talk.

"Hey. Are you all right?"

"I need you to get me a few things together, clothes, toiletries... usual stuff for a couple of weeks. My travel documents, and the emergency grab folder."

"Right. Give me a few hours, I need to ditch the gruesome twosome."

"Talk to Mic, set up a decoy or something." His main driver had got him out of all sorts of tight spots, Mic would know what to do. "Get him to deliver a load of random stuff to somewhere else but you come here to Chateau Marmont. I'm under the name Redbourn."

"Got it." She made a humming noise. "Anything else?"

"No. Thanks, I owe you."

"No, you don't."

He ended the call and scrolled through his contacts, transferring a few onto the new sim—just in case—then

making the call he probably should have done first since he'd registered under his name.

No answer. He tried again. On the fourth attempt, the call was answered. "Yes?"

"Ben, it's me. Dorian."

"Dorian? It's nearly bloody midnight."

He'd forgotten about the time difference. "Shit, sorry, I didn't think. I'll call back."

"No, don't be silly. A certain littlest viscount has me up on daddy duty, so no harm no foul." Ben sounded knackered.

"Midnight's not exactly late for you... it used to be the time the party started."

Ben chuckled. "That was before I became a devoted family man. Still, it's not like you to mess up time zones. What's wrong?"

"I've come out. And not exactly in the controlled and careful manner we discussed." Ben had always been a good friend, told him what he needed to hear, and didn't make him think he was a complete twat.

"Oh God. Did you get caught sucking someone's cock?"

Dorian snorted. "Give me some credit, you giant arse. I sort of blurted it out during an interview. It wasn't live, and despite Zak being there, I can't see it staying quiet."

Ben muttered something under his breath which Dorian didn't catch but probably wasn't complimentary. "Hang on a sec."

He waited and a few moments later Ben was back. "I take it you've not checked social media?"

"No, I avoid it like the plague most of the time."

"Put it this way Instagram is one giant rainbow flag draped over your face. You can safely say it's not been contained."

"To be honest, I'm glad. It's been a long time coming." He puffed out his cheeks. "I haven't the first fucking clue what to

do now, though.”

“Where are you?”

“In our favourite Hollywood hotel. I’ve used your name for the room. Obviously, it’s my credit card but I sort of said Redbourn without thinking.”

“It’s okay.”

Ben sighed and he thought he heard another voice but then he realised Ben must be holding Davy and his son was making the strange gurgling noises only babies made. He shouldn’t be doing this to Ben, he had other responsibilities now, and Dorian was being selfish.

“Look, I just needed to tell someone. You head off to bed, I’ll call tomorrow.”

“It’s fine, it really is. We came up with some ideas before, try and follow those. I know you were thinking of doing something more controlled but now that ship has sailed it doesn’t mean this has to be a complete car crash.”

He wasn’t convinced, but that wasn’t Ben’s problem. “I’m gonna order room service and chill. I’m sure it’ll look better in the morning. Or at least I’ll have a clearer head to think about it.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

The acceptance was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t ask that of Ben. “Nah, you’re good.”

“How about you text Robin? You could see if you could use one of the Flint properties in the city. Or you could even join him in New York. You’re less likely to be tracked to one of them than an exclusive Hollywood hotel.”

Actually, that was a pretty good idea. “Robin did offer before—on both counts. I’ll see if I can get hold of him tomorrow. I think he’s back in London this weekend, so I don’t want to eat into his time with Simon.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a different issue.” Ben tutted. “You and Robin are as bad as each other sometimes. Simon must have the patience of a saint.”

He'd not met Simon, but everything he'd heard told Dorian he was a decent bloke, one of the good guys, who Robin ought to have marched down the aisle by now if only half the things he'd been told about him were true. "I can't be a judge of that since I've never met him in person, but Robin seems to like him well enough."

"He's never going to be your favourite."

"I've no problem with Simon. It's not his fault he's dating my ex." Robin was happy and that was what mattered. "He might not mind if I moved to New York to keep an eye on Robin, at least he should know we're no longer interested in each other."

"Might help keep the gold diggers away as well. Although I'm not convinced that's a healthy or long-term option."

"*Gold diggers?* Robin hasn't said anything."

Ben yawned and Davy let out a wail. "I'll catch you up another time. I have to go. Call me tomorrow, right?"

"Will do. Night, Ben."

Dorian disconnected the call and sat on the edge of the bed. The suite was like many of the luxury places he'd stayed, it cast an illusion of home comforts but he wasn't sure what that even meant anymore. He thought about returning to his house in LA, but he didn't want to, it hadn't felt like home since Robin left. He itched to be somewhere, but he didn't know where. For the first time in what seemed forever, he didn't have a schedule to keep. He'd sack off the rest of the interviews for this run. His agent Marisa could deal with those if she hadn't had the foresight to do so already, and he'd already been planning some downtime as work on his next film wasn't starting for another six months. Plus, given his little announcement, they might not think him suitable anymore as the leading man in a romcom about a single dad and a kindergarten teacher.

He fell backwards onto the mattress waiting for the dread to hit. Several minutes later he realised he felt good, really good. He laughed. Maybe everything would be okay after all.

CHAPTER 2



Ashley blinked away the tiredness. The post-lunch lull was even worse than the after-breakfast slump. He'd never appreciated what being tired was before Davy was born. He cradled his son as he fed, the two of them in a cocoon of sleep-deprivation, lost time, and unconditional love.

"There are my two favourite people in the whole world." Ashley looked up to see Ben, obnoxiously gorgeous despite having had as little sleep as him.

"How can you be so awake?"

Ben sat next to them and stroked the downy hair covering Davy's head. "You took the second shift last night so I got the better sleep. Amazing what five hours uninterrupted shut-eye can do for a man."

"You're only saying that to make me feel jealous." Davy fussed and Ashley removed the bottle. "You want to burp him?"

Ben scrunched up his nose. "I wouldn't want to deprive you of the pleasure."

Ashley realised he was dressed in one of his better shirts. "You need to start wearing more baby-appropriate clothing, or accept that this season's must-have accessory for your designer shirts is baby spew."

"Give him here."

Ashley smirked and handed Davy over. He took the opportunity to scroll through his phone, not having the mental

capacity to do much else. Three months into the journey of fatherhood, he spent half his awake time babbling mindless jibber-jabber at his son and the other half as a zombie who drooled only slightly less than Davy.

His Instagram appeared to have blown up overnight with post after post about Dorian. “Fucking hell! Dorian’s come out!”

Ben tutted. “I know, I told you that this morning.”

Ashley frowned. “No, you didn’t.”

“Admittedly your reply was a series of grunts, but I most definitely did.”

“I don’t remember.” The nighttime feeds were playing havoc with his short-term memory.

“He called at midnight, which was a giveaway something was up. The plan to come out in a controlled way went up the Swanee and he blurted it out as part of the interview he was doing for his current release.”

“Bloody hell. He must be a wreck.”

“Seemed all right, but it’s been less than twenty-four hours and he’s holed up in a hotel. I’ve suggested he gets in touch with Robin as I know he offered to put him up in one of the Flint properties if he came out, as a bolthole, or even stay with him in New York.”

Ashley wasn’t sure that would be for the best. “I’m not convinced Simon’s going to think that’s a good idea.”

“Yes, there’s been a couple of bumps, but nothing they haven’t overcome, and Robin’s trying his best.”

Ashley grunted. Ben was always a bit too quick to defend Robin, and Simon had confided with him that he was more worried about their future than he was letting on to Robin. “I still think adding Dorian into the mix is something they don’t need—Robin being in New York for six months is a big enough challenge. Perhaps Dorian should leave the US.”

“It’s part of the big plan, or it was. He did talk about a career in the theatre, leaving behind the silver screen for a

while and I think that'd do him good. Refocus.”

“I suppose so. But for now, I imagine his main thoughts will be to lie low and not get swamped by the press.”

“Dorian’s not exactly the shy and retiring type. I think now he’s out, he’s not likely to be anything but out and proud.”

Ashley groaned. “He’s going to get eaten alive. Is New York a good idea? He could end up on a bender and every gold digger on the East Coast will be after a piece.”

“Robin—”

“Robin nearly fucked up his own relationship thanks to an Italian model who thought him fair game, he can’t be babysitting Dorian who’ll be free and single.”

“Ashley, you’re being too harsh. Robin’s bound to be seen as a target to many as a potential partner—it was a deliberate attempt to make it look like he was up to something he wasn’t.”

“This time. Simon’s still a bit insecure about it all—and I don’t blame him. His boyfriend’s living halfway around the world, and as a rich, attractive man with an amazing future both as a businessman and the next Viscount Whetford, half the city wants a piece of him.”

“Robin isn’t interested in anyone else. He’s been beside himself with worry over the whole thing.”

Ashley huffed. “I still don’t think it’s fair to put this additional strain on them as a couple by having Dorian there as well.”

Davy somehow managed to do a whole body yawn and Ben popped him into his bouncer. “You’re so cute.”

“Grumpy, cute. And clingy.”

Ben leant over and stroked Davy’s cheek. “I can’t blame your tastes. I get clingy over your other daddy too.”

Ashley chewed the inside of his cheek. “Look, about Dorian. If he does end up staying with Robin, why don’t you

fly over to New York, and settle him a bit? I'm only talking a couple of days—to make sure there's nothing to worry about.”

He had a routine with Davy and could survive Ben being away for a few days if that meant a cataclysmic clusterfuck might occur if he wasn't. Simon had become a close friend, someone who could understand what it was like being a partner to a man like Ben.

“Are you really that worried?”

Ashley nodded. “Not just for Simon, I know Robin loves him, but Dorian, with all his past history with Robin, could end up raking up a lot of old hurt on both sides.”

Ben seemed torn. “But you and Davy need me.”

“We can cope for a couple of days. I've a whole army of members of the Davy fan club to help me here—we'll miss you but if you can help prevent things from going south I can deal with it.”

“But we've barely had any time for ourselves since the little fella arrived. I was hoping to try and get at least a night alone with you.” Ben laced their fingers together. “If we both weren't so tired I'd have worried there was something wrong.”

Ashley brushed his lips to Ben's, and as if by magic Davy jolted awake with a squawk. “It's as if he knows. But it'll get better.”

“I hope so, last time I went this long without sex was before I went to Cambridge.”

Ashley could understand Ben's frustration, he had his own, but with his fatigue and short temper it sounded like it was just Ben who was suffering. He lifted Davy and stood with him cradled close, jiggling from one foot to the other. “You're not the only one,” he snapped.

Davy wailed. Ashley screwed up his eyes murmuring to Davy to hush. He felt Ben's hands on his shoulder. “I'm sorry. Here let me take him. Why don't you go have a lie-down.”

He should argue, but a nap sounded like a wonderful idea. “Thanks. But only an hour, and I'll be right as rain.”

Handing Davy over made him feel like a failure. He couldn't look after his own son, he was missing proper intimacy between him and Ben, and he was terrible company. No one had warned him it would be this difficult, he'd expected it to be hard work, but he'd never felt so clueless in his life.

* * *

One change of nappy and several verses of *Fly Me to the Moon* later and Davy had dropped back to sleep. Ben placed him in his bouncer with the same care he imagined was used when defusing landmines. He worried about Ashley, he was one of life's perfectionists and he could see he was having trouble adjusting to fatherhood. Not that he wasn't a wonderful father, but that he was being far too hard on himself.

His phone buzzed, it was always on silent these days, and he saw it was from the new number Dorian was using. He'd half expected Dorian not to call and he'd be the one chasing him.

"Dorian, how's life out of the closet treating you?"

"Seeing as I've not left my hotel room, pretty good." He laughed. "Seriously though. I feel all right. Although that's probably because I'm only talking to you, Robin and Jenny, the rest I've done by email."

"What about Zak and Marisa?" His manager and agent were, in Ben's opinion, the reason Dorian had kept his sexuality hidden for so long.

"Only by email—I'm not ready to deal with them yet. That's not to say they haven't been trying to reach me by other means. I've all sorts of obligations but contractually, but as long as I'm at the London premiere in a month for *Shadow Prince*, I'm golden."

"You mean you actually read the small print on those contracts you sign?"

“Cheeky shit. And yes, every word.”

He was only teasing, Dorian was far from stupid. “Anyway, you’re up early.”

“I’m usually up at six to hit the gym, and I wasn’t sleeping that well anyway so I thought I’d call you instead and let you know my immediate plans.”

“Go on.”

“I’m gonna get out of LA. Head up to Robin’s place in New York the day after tomorrow and lie low for a while.”

Ben had offered the night before, but Ashley had also suggested he went to New York, and he couldn’t shake the thought that it was probably a good idea. “As I mentioned, I could fly out and meet you in New York. We can have a proper chat, help you make some decisions.”

Dorian huffed. “You don’t need to babysit me. Davy and Ashley need you at home.”

The way Dorian said it sounded as if he wanted to accept but didn’t think he could. “Ashley suggested it too. I’d not be coming to babysit but to offer a bit of support. You’ve made a huge leap and it doesn’t hurt to have a few people holding a safety net.”

“I wouldn’t have thought Ashley would’ve cared if I landed head first.”

Ashley hadn’t hidden his opinions on how he’d never thought Dorian was as good a friend to Ben as Ben was to Dorian, and his actions after Robin had left hadn’t helped. “To be honest, while he is concerned about you, there are other aspects.”

“Oh, so it’s more about Robin. We’re friends now, worked through a lot of things, Ashley needs to accept that.”

Ben sighed. Robin obviously hadn’t said anything to Dorian about the Marco situation—it wasn’t Ben’s story to tell—but at the same time Dorian would need to know to tread with caution if he were to stay with Robin. “It’s Simon he’s

worried about. Robin's on his extended assignment in the US, and let's say the distance has caused a few hiccoughs."

"Robin didn't say there'd be any problems."

He didn't want Dorian to get the wrong idea because Robin had said things were back in a better place. "Fundamentally, they're perfect for each other, but Ashley's a natural worrier, and Simon and Robin are dealing with a long-distance relationship—not always the easiest to negotiate."

"Fair enough."

Dorian could read between the lines and could speak to Robin if he needed more information, but his ex-boyfriend's problems weren't Dorian's to solve.

"So I'll book flights and see you in New York in three days? I'd come earlier but I need to finish off the interviews for my new secretary. I've high hopes for the last chap."

"Sounds good. It'll be great to see you, Ben. Seems too long."

"You too, Dorian. Now don't do anything stupid."

Dorian chuckled. "No promises but I'll try my best."

Ben ended the call. He didn't intend to be away long, and Ashley had people around who could help. He'd known Dorian since school, and if he could stop him going off the rails, and taking anyone with him, then a few days away would be worth the sacrifice.

CHAPTER 3



Alex tugged at the cuffs of his shirt to ensure his cufflinks were perfectly aligned. He'd been shown into a lovely well-appointed office and sat waiting for Lord Crofton to arrive. The desk was walnut and, he suspected from its design and colouring, was as old as the house. It was quite a contrast to the ultra-modern glass construction his old boss had favoured. As Crofton Hall was a five-hundred-year-old house in leafy Hertfordshire, and the CEO of Lif Ltd had chosen a skyscraper in the City of London, it was hardly a fair comparison.

He'd already had a telephone screening with Mr Vinter and he'd got the distinct impression that, while he carried the under butler title, Karl was the one running below stairs, albeit with a nod of deference to the butler, Mr Billins, who had been the one to escort him to his lordship's office.

The door opened and Alex stood. Lord Benjamin Redbourn, 16th Earl of Crofton was every bit as attractive in person as in his photos, although there was a tiredness around his eyes that accompanied most new fathers he'd encountered. "Alexander Reynolds?" he said holding out his hand.

"Yes, my lord," Alex said shaking Lord Crofton's hand. As expected, he had the perfect grip. "It's my pleasure to meet you."

"And me you. Please take a seat." Ben sat opposite and opened a document wallet. From where Alex was sitting, he could see it was a copy of his CV with parts commented on and underlined. "I hope you had no trouble finding us."

“None at all. I’ve been before, my cousin got married here last autumn.” One of the more normal members of the extended family, although not many would believe it.

“Oh, lovely. I’m afraid I’m unlikely to know the name if you told me, my husband would know. Ashley takes care of the weddings.”

“I doubt he’d forget this one. The bride got married in purple fake fur and her husband, gold leopard skin print.”

Ben’s smirk told Alex that the wedding had made an impression. “I see you’ve not chosen to follow in the family’s choice of attire.”

“No, I much prefer a more refined option.” He did wonder how he’d escaped some of the eccentricities of his family but thankfully he didn’t think wellies and pyjamas were the best thing to wear to a supermarket and had yet to take up a hobby which involved needing fire extinguishers on hand. “I find it important to have a professional image, after all, I’m not just representing myself, but my employer.”

Ben tugged at the lapel of his own jacket, a bespoke piece of tailoring, if Alex was not mistaken. “As you can see I completely agree. Not that I’m never dressed down but you’ll be unlikely to ever see me in sportswear outside of the gym or off a tennis court.”

“I should think not, my lord. I imagine your schedule wouldn’t allow too much downtime. Especially now with the new addition to the family.” He’d gleaned from Karl that it was the arrival of the Viscount of Crofton that had driven the earl to take on a secretary.

“Pretty much the crux of the matter. I’m sure Karl filled you in with the gist of the position and looking at your CV, I don’t think you’d have any issue with what I’d need.”

“Not at all. There’s not many things that make me baulk.” He’d hired escorts, organised balls and replanned travel schedules on a whim, the Earl of Crofton would have a reasonably full agenda but nowhere near the extent of his previous employer.

“I’m relieved to hear it.” Ben leant across the desk. “I’ll be honest, Alex. I need to find a secretary as soon as possible. Ever since the birth of my son, David, my world has spiralled into a maelstrom of sleepless nights, exhaustion and a perpetual state of confusion. As much as I adore him, I need to do something to get the rest of my life back in order before I drop the ball and miss another meeting or somehow endanger the earldom.”

Most of the people he’d worked for would have never dreamt of being so upfront in an interview. He’d already decided he wanted the job after speaking to Karl and hearing about the rest of the household, but this human side to Lord Crofton would be revolutionary in terms of his daily life.

“I doubt it would come to that, my lord, and Mr Vinter said you would prefer someone who could start immediately.”

“Karl thought you would be perfect after speaking to you, but I do have a few things I need to ask, including why someone of your calibre is currently looking for a job?”

A question he was expecting, and not a difficult one. “My last employer had a very aggressive travel schedule and he began requiring me to travel with him, which wasn’t originally part of my contract. Since we couldn’t come to an agreement, I’m now looking for something less... demanding.”

“That was the CEO of Lif Ltd. Venture capitalists, if I’m not mistaken. You do realise the position here at Crofton Hall is going to be rather different. Live-in and no extensive travel. In fact, no travel that I would expect you to accompany me on in the current plan.”

“And in the future?”

“None that I’m aware of. I’ve a quick dash to see a friend in New York but I wouldn’t be expecting you to travel on those sorts of things. I honestly can’t see you needing to be away from the hall for any extended period beyond maybe the odd meeting you attend with me. I hope that’s not a disappointment.”

“Far from it.” The idea of not having to live out of a suitcase sounded brilliant. “It will be nice to settle down. From what I’ve seen, this is a lovely part of the world to do so.”

“I should probably warn you that we have several others in the house. There’s Dara, Dr Callaghan, who is cataloguing the family archive. There may be a few bits you could help him with from time to time. Chris, who is our writer-in-residence, and part-time PhD student, so I don’t expect them to be too much of a burden.”

“What sort of things will be required?” he asked. He was aware of the two archive dragons—Karl’s descriptor not his—but not that they would be part of his workload.

“Occasional grant applications, help with potential soirées around book launches, and a potential opening night for a play Chris has been working on—but that won’t be for a while.”

Nothing he couldn’t manage, nor that he’d mind. He’d helped an author friend in a similar situation and he reckoned Lord Crofton would have a better advertising budget than twenty quid and as many free eBooks he could give away. “Should add some colour.”

Ben smiled, charming and sexy without any effort. “Alex, I’m not one to beat around the bush. You seem perfect, we can do a three-month probation period in case we get on each other’s wick, but when can you start?”

The salary was generous, especially since he’d be living in, and it would mean he could get away from his family, which was the main reason for trying to get a new job as soon as possible. As much as he loved them, they were driving him to distraction. “When do you need me?”

“Tomorrow.” Ben laughed. “Or as soon as.”

“I’m at my parents’ place in Norfolk so I suppose I could grab a few things and then move in properly over the weekend.”

“Oh, that would be marvellous!” From the document wallet, Ben picked out a few sheets of paper stapled together.

“Here’s the contract my solicitors drew up, I think you’ve received a draft by email when you applied.”

“Yes, it all seemed in order. I’ll give it another read overnight and if there’s anything we can discuss before I sign. But provisionally, I’d be delighted to join Crofton Hall. I could be back here tomorrow after lunch. Say two p.m.?”

“Wonderful. Now I must insist you call me Ben, I’m not one for too much informality, and you can help me sort out my New York trip.”

The door to the office flung open and a man about his own age charged in with a crying baby. His glasses were askew and he looked like he really needed sleep. “Ben, you have to take Davy. Oh, fuck! Sorry, I thought you were done.”

Ben was on his feet. “Never mind. Ashley, this is Alex, my new secretary.”

Ashley was close to tears, reminding Alex of his older brother when he’d first become a father. Davy had a powerful set of lungs on him but once he was in his other daddy’s arms, he seemed to quieten.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. Don’t let this put you off. It’s not normally this bad.”

Alex had a sneaking suspicion this might not be the worst of it, but compared to being at home, it was a paradigm of calm and serenity.

CHAPTER 4



Dorian couldn't remember the last time he'd flown coach, but it was great camouflage as he barely garnered a second glance, and he suspected it was because no one would think Dorian Marsten would fly anything but first. They would have a point, but he was Dorian Forbes now, and some of the thoughts he'd had of late made him think that he might be Forbes from here on in.

He'd spent most of the five hours reading with his headphones in but he'd needn't have worried, because the guy in the next seat played on his phone, with no interest in him. Ben's flight should have landed thirty minutes before his, but he would have to clear US immigration whereas domestic arrivals was a relative breeze, even with a couple of checked bags, so all being well they'd be ready about the same time. Robin had offered to send separate cars but Dorian had liked the idea of being able to spend a little time just with Ben.

He waited at arrivals for Ben to appear, having clocked a driver waiting with a sign for *Redbourn* and he knew he was grinning like a loon as he spotted Ben, ever graceful and didn't look like he'd just got off a transatlantic flight.

"Hey, Ben!"

Ben's smile of recognition made him light up and they exchanged a hug. It was so good to see him. Dorian had missed Ben, they used to get together more often before he'd settled down, and Ashley was great for him, even if he wasn't what he'd call Dorian's biggest fan. "Look at you, all grown up and out of the closet."

“Ha, fucking, ha,” he said, letting go and giving Ben a friendly punch on the arm. “Let’s get our ride.”

They were shown to a Daimler and their bags stowed. Once in the back with the privacy screen up, Dorian relaxed. He’d been carrying a lot of nervous energy for days, and now it was just him and Ben, he felt able to let some of it go.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Dorian, but I’m surprised how well you look. I was half expecting you to be a hot mess.”

“I’m not sure that isn’t to come. I’ve deliberately stayed off the booze and been curating every message that wasn’t from you, Robin or Jenny.”

“Reality is going to bite sooner or later. You’re going to need to decide what you’re going to do.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had months to think about that. I might not have gone through with the glacial coming out plan Zak wanted, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t been considering my future. Including a change of management.” He’d not said that part out loud, but after several conversations over the last few months it was the only logical outcome. “I need someone who’ll support the real me.”

Ben squeezed his thigh. “I’ve said it before—Zak and Marisa were brilliant for your career but not for you. You can build a team that’ll support your future dreams, without a load of history.”

“In theory, I’ve six months until my next project starts. But I’m not convinced it’ll go ahead, there’s a few emails on the subject in my inbox I’m refusing to read at the moment but I wouldn’t be surprised if the studio wanted to recast.”

“Can they do that?”

“Bad press clause, they can claim me coming out could be detrimental to the future box office sales—I don’t particularly want a fight over it.”

“Dorian...?”

No doubt he’d be asked to issue a statement with some insipid reasoning that would boil down to a mutual agreement

not to go ahead. “I’m kinda sick of Hollywood, and you know I was thinking of coming home to the UK. Maybe doing some theatre work.”

“Are you asking for my advice?”

“There’s no one I trust more.”

“I think you’re right. A change of pace, a different type of role, is a great idea. You’re a great actor, I don’t think you’ve used your skills to your full ability.”

Ben had always had a gift for saying the right things. Sometimes Dorian hadn’t wanted to hear it, but Ben had never steered him wrong. “I’ll probably look for a house somewhere in London, then move over once I’ve a base.”

“You know you’re welcome at Crofton Hall.”

He hadn’t wanted to impose. Ben already had Robin as a houseguest, and he wasn’t sure them both being under his roof was the best idea. “What about Robin?”

“What about him? He’s got a few months still out in the US, and if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll finally get his finger out and buy somewhere in the UK. He’s been making noises about setting up home with Simon and if he doesn’t make good on it sooner than later I don’t think Simon’s going to be too impressed.”

Robin hadn’t alluded to there being trouble in paradise when Dorian had contacted him to arrange his visit, and even though Ben had mentioned a past issue, Dorian hadn’t wanted to ask in case it sounded like he was prying, or his ex thought he was interested in rekindling something if Robin were to find himself single.

“I don’t want to put my foot in it later, so what’s gone on?”

Ben wrinkled his nose. “Ultimately nothing. But there’s a lot of pretty people in the circles Robin moves in, he attracts men all the time. He’s a prime catch.”

Dorian didn’t want to think the worst, and Robin had never been the sort to cheat, but long-distance relationships, even for

a short time, were not easy. “Did he... y’know... do something he shouldn’t?”

“No, well, not really. He was targeted by a persistent individual who orchestrated a situation so Robin, who admits he was flattered by the attention, was put in a compromising position.”

“Oh shit.”

“There were a couple of photos that managed to find their way onto social media that needed a lot of explanation. Simon wasn’t happy when he saw them.”

There were trophy hunters and gold diggers everywhere, and Robin must look to many like the prize of the century. “Fuck! I thought he was head over tit for Simon.”

“He is. Hindsight is an amazing teacher. Simon went over and they had a big talk, and Simon asked if he wanted to split up.”

He couldn’t imagine Robin had coped well with that. “And?”

“Robin told me he almost had a panic attack when Simon said it.”

“Did Robin consider it at all? I mean they could get back together once he’d done his time in New York.”

Ben stared at him incredulously. “Really, Dorian? I know you don’t know Simon, but you can’t think he would be happy to let Robin fuck about for a few months then come back as if nothing had happened?”

It had been what he’d suggested to Robin when they’d split. He’d been deep in denial, not wanting to admit they were over, hoping that Robin would get his hissy fit out of his system and they’d try again. Looking back, he’d been a proper twat, and Robin and him had no future as partners.

“I guess that’s a no.”

“It gave Robin the scare he needed. He’s still going out, and he’s put in more boundaries with the guy in question, but there’s always someone trying to bag a man like Robin.

Simon's like Ashley, he puts up with it knowing he can trust Robin, like Ashley can trust me, but that trust has to be earned and maintained."

"You and Ashley are married, have Davy, it's hardly the same."

"Robin's life goals aren't so different, and he's realised that Simon isn't going to sit around and be treated like he's not important. He had enough of that with his ex-husband."

Robin had said Simon's ex was an asshole and Robin had a protective streak in him worse than a mother bear. "No doubt Robin's got a plan. Can't see him letting Simon slip through his fingers if he's really serious about him."

"You're not upset about that?" Ben asked carefully.

"No, I've got over my wanker phase."

He'd missed having a long-term partner, waking up with someone, having a boyfriend he could confide in. For years he'd thought he'd found his happy ever after with Robin, but he'd been kidding himself, not reading the signs as Robin became less and less satisfied with their relationship and his life playing PA to a movie star in public. The man he was today was very different to the one Dorian had started dating, and he didn't think him and the new Robin would have lasted more than a few months, let alone the six years they were together. But they were now shaping up to be good friends.

"So what about my offer?" Ben said.

"Eh?"

"Crofton Hall. And you moving in for a while."

As much as he liked the idea, he wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. "I'll think about it. You've enough going on without adding me into the mix."

"Don't be all fucking noble, it doesn't suit you."

The car glided to a halt and he saw through the tinted glass that they had arrived on Fifth Avenue. He should have known the Flint family would have property in the most exclusive part of the city. Dorian was a rich man, but it wasn't until after

he'd split from Robin that he'd really considered how wealthy Robin's family, and Robin himself, were. The driver opened the car door and Dorian stepped out, staring upwards at the towering skyscraper. "Not a bad place for a pied-à-terre," he joked as he walked toward the tower's doorman, Ben next to him.

"Have to slum it from time to time, I suppose."

They were shown to the elevator and escorted to the penthouse. Dorian was used to a certain level of security and having been without his minders for the last few days had been freeing, but this was different and it smacked of wealth well beyond him and Ben.

He'd expected a member of staff to open the door of Robin's apartment so was surprised when it was Robin who greeted them, waving them into a lobby. "They let you into the country then, Crofton? I should have a word with immigration, they seem to let anybody in these days."

"Watch it, Flint, it's more surprising they give you leave to remain."

Robin gave Ben a hug before turning to face Dorian. "Congratulations. Believe it or not, I'm very proud of you."

Dorian was surprised to find himself pulled into a hug. There'd been no physical interaction between them since his failed attempt to get Robin to agree to try again. That had been a botched kiss which, in hindsight, he'd known was never going to be anything more.

"Only ten years too late, eh?"

"Could have been worse, could have been another ten?" Robin clapped him on the shoulder and let them both into a lounge with a magnificent panoramic view of the city.

"My God this place is amazing!" Ben said. "Why didn't I get invited here before?"

"My father only bought it last year. He offered it to sweeten the deal to encourage me to come here for six months. We have several other apartments in the city that are not quite so well-appointed."

Dorian stared around. "I was expecting an army of staff."

"Someone comes in to clean and stock the cupboards, but I like my privacy."

"Not even a cook?" Ben seemed surprised.

"I'm more than capable of cooking for myself. I find it kind of relaxing."

Robin hadn't been the best of cooks, but it had added an element of normality to their relationship, so he'd never complained about the less than stellar offerings or that they were something from a meal prep kit. "I don't remember you having the most expansive of repertoires, though."

Robin laughed. "True. And I won't pretend that I don't eat out or order in more than I cook, but Simon's taught me a few simple dishes and he even filled the freezer with some of my favourites last time he was here."

"He's too good for you," Ben said with a snort.

"You're not wrong there." There was something about Robin's smile that didn't quite meet his eyes and Dorian could tell there was a lot of concern behind Robin's words. "Let me show you your rooms, you can freshen up and we can go grab something to eat at a little exclusive place I'm a member of if you're willing."

"Not sure I'm up for public engagement," Dorian admitted. He'd spent the last few days avoiding people and to be seen, even in an exclusive club, might be a step he wasn't yet ready to take.

"I promise you won't be bothered at this place. Somewhere safe to blow off a bit of steam."

"I..."

"What's the point of coming out if you intend to stay in?" Robin smiled. "We'll have a drink and we can leave if you're really uncomfortable, but I think it's important. And you've both myself and Ben there to support you."

He didn't think Robin would drop it, and he did have a point. "All right. How flash are we talking?"

“Do you have one of your Scabal suits with you?”

He snorted. “Of course I do. There are some things I do not travel without.”

“Then you’re good to go.”

“I don’t think I’ll have anything suitable,” Ben said, which Dorian was surprised at since both Robin and Ben were much more into their labels than he was.

“You’ll fit into something of mine. I have a new Armani if you want.”

“Oh, yes. Haven’t had the chance to shop the collection yet.”

Dorian let Robin usher him into his room. Or, as he discovered, his suite. His bags had been delivered and he unpacked. The shower was brilliant, and he emerged feeling positively perky. Tonight would be his first time out as a gay man, not that he had any intention of hooking up with someone, as he wanted to spend time with Ben and Robin, but it felt as if it needed marking somehow.

Robin was changed when he returned to the lounge, looking amazing in a charcoal-grey suit, his shirt open at the collar. He’d always liked his labels, but Robin had usually dressed far more casually. “I’m still not used to seeing you in a suit. I guess times *have* changed.”

“Different image. I’m no longer a PA, and I need to dress the part of the new me. Or rather the real me.”

Ben arrived in a grey-blue suit and Robin swore. “Fucker. You are not supposed to look better than me in my own clothes. It’s bloody out of order.”

“Come on, Robin. Ben’s always been the perfect clothes horse.”

“Cry more, Flint,” Ben said with a wink.

Neither him or Robin were unattractive men, but he’d always thought of Ben as being in a league of his own. The effortless charm and the title had meant he’d never been short of offers from men and women, and he was sure there had

been much distress when he announced he was settling down with Ashley.

“Let’s get going before I change my mind and demand Ben takes my clothes off.” Robin laughed. “That came out wrong. Or five years too late.”

Dorian had fond memories of the times the three of them had spent together, nothing more than fun and friends blowing off steam. Ben had never said much about it, but Dorian had always got the feeling that now and again Ben had wanted the familiarity that came from knowing someone for more than just a few hours at a time. These days their relationship was closer to brothers than lovers, and since Ben was with Ashley there was no danger of it reverting back.

By the time they reached the lobby, a car was waiting and Robin was on the phone making arrangements ahead of their arrival. He’d always been insanely organised and had not just pretended to be his PA; the way he spoke held no room for argument and he expected to get what he wanted. They were heading further into Manhattan although not far and it might have been quicker to walk, but he guessed this wasn’t the sort of place people walked up to.

“Where are we going?” Ben asked.

“North Down.”

“Nice. I’ve been a few times when I was younger. I almost took Ashley when we had a weekend away because a friend of mine offered to sign us in—for old times’ sake. But I decided against rattling Ashley’s cage over that. He’s not a fan of those sort of places.”

“I share Ashley’s sentiment of most of them,” Robin said. “Although I’ve found a couple in New York that I like.”

Dorian had never thought Robin had been too bothered where they went. “You never used to mind.”

“It’s different when you’re not in the spotlight. When I used to go places with you, I was invisible, these days I’m not. I’m not famous like you, and frankly, I don’t know how you cope.”

“The obvious answer to that is I don’t. You put up a front, constantly acting. It gets exhausting.”

“You’ll be glad to know, North Down is one of the members’ clubs that, once you’re through the door, everyone is treated with discretion. I know we never went together, so I don’t think you’ve been before.”

“No. Heard of it, but tonight’s one of many firsts. Might as well be somewhere new for me.”

“That’s the spirit,” Robin said with a smile.

The car halted in front of an inconspicuous door around the side from the main entrance, where those who were members, but not in Robin’s league entered. Dorian followed Robin and Ben out of the car, he wasn’t used to hiding, being on display was his normal but he didn’t want to be gawped at.

They were greeted by a perfectly put-together young woman. “Good evening, Mr Flint, Lord Crofton, and Mr Forbes. We’ve set aside an area for your use and I want to assure you that your host will ensure you’re not bothered by any of our other patrons.”

She’d recognised him, but hadn’t made a big deal out of it and even called him Mr Forbes. He felt himself relax. They were escorted into a VIP section, the club an epitome of taste and decadence where nothing was spared to reflect the calibre of the guests they entertained. They were shown to a half-circle couch with a table, tucked away from the main thoroughfare and sheltered from all but a few tables.

“A bottle of my favourite burgundy and three glasses, and whatever the chef recommends for a light meal would be much appreciated,” Robin said with a smile. Dorian knew a lot of people with money, and many of them thought their riches meant they could forget their manners, but not Robin.

Dorian glanced around, the place was busy although not over-full, but then the members would not want it rammed to the gills. New York’s beautiful people were out in their designer clothes, dripping with jewellery or expensive watches. He shouldn’t have felt out of place, but usually he

would be one of the types who'd be strutting about, happy to be seen.

Ben leant in. "Everything all right?"

"Just getting my bearings."

The wine arrived and once they each had a glass in hand Robin proposed a toast. "To Dorian Forbes, for being the man he wishes to be."

It meant a lot coming from Robin. He was with two of his favourite people, the world would right itself sooner than later and he would go on. Tonight he would try to relax, enjoy a couple of good glasses of wine and forget everything else.

CHAPTER 5



Ashley didn't dare move. Davy had finally dropped off to sleep, and it didn't matter that it was across his chest and it was not a position his back would thank him for later. He was hungry and hadn't had breakfast, but he hoped Karl would stop by and check on his plans for lunch before too long. The door opened and Simon entered. "Oh, don't you look uncomfortable."

"Shush, the little sod's asleep." He hadn't been expecting Simon, but he was glad to see him.

Simon tutted, and scooped up Davy. "You're creating a rod for your own back. You're going to need boundaries if you don't want him running rings around you day and night."

Ashley waited for the scream but instead there was a sleepy grumble and Davy went back to sleep in Simon's arms.

"I forgot he loves you. You can never leave me."

Simon laughed. "Your son's got great taste."

Ashley sat forwards and worked the kinks out of his back. "Did I forget you were coming?"

"No. I thought you might like some company since both our other halves have fucked off to babysit a movie star. I hope I'm not imposing."

Simon was a decent bloke, and there had been moments over the last couple of months when he didn't think Robin deserved him. "You're never an imposition. How are you feeling about Robin not coming back this weekend?"

“It’s fine. Proper fine, not pissed off fine. He’s still coming but a couple of days later. He mentioned something about flying back with Ben as his dad is using the company jet.”

“Slumming it, is he?” Ashley drawled.

“Apparently I’m worth travelling with the plebs in first class. He was quick to tell me he wouldn’t be on his own with Dorian.”

There was a lot to unpack behind those words.

“I don’t think Robin’s going to do anything stupid,” Ashley said. He picked up his coffee and realised it was cold.

“I didn’t think he would, so I have to ask why did you send Ben out to be there when Dorian arrived? It had to be you, Robin wouldn’t have thought of it and Ben wouldn’t wanted to leave you home alone with Davy.”

Simon was a perceptive man, he wouldn’t be good at his job as a police detective if he wasn’t. “It wasn’t just because I didn’t want you to worry about Robin and Dorian—yes they have history but Robin’s not going to do anything that’ll make you carry out the ultimatum you gave him.”

“Dorian’s not the problem—their history is why I know I’ve nothing to worry about there and, while there is the odd thing that gives me pause, it’s not deal-breaking.”

Ashley wasn’t sure what he meant by that. “Such as?”

“Stupid things like he used to cook—after a fashion—for Dorian. Just meal prep kits that didn’t take much, but he’s never done that for me. It niggles a bit, although we’ve not got to the living together stage yet.”

“Not sure I’d want to eat anything Ben would cook on his own, to be honest. But Robin and Dorian weren’t like you and Robin even if they did live together.”

He sighed. “I know and it’s not Dorian who’s the worry but all the others in New York.”

“I get it, I do. Ben attracts anything with a pulse in some places. I thought it’d calm down after we got married, but half

of them think he's a challenge to be won or desperate for a change."

"It's nice to have someone to talk to who understands. At least yours is in the same country though."

"Yeah, but you're probably still getting laid more often than me. The Viscount of Crofton has an uncanny ability to know when his daddies are trying to get some alone time."

Simon laughed but then looked apologetic. "Sorry, I guess it's all part of being a new dad. I looked after my sister's kids when they were little to give her a chance to have some time with Nick. I'd be happy to do that for you and Ben."

"That would be amazing, but it's too much to ask."

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to. And it's not like I've got a busy social life you'd be impinging on. My boyfriend is three thousand miles away, I work weird shifts, and my idea of a good time is a 10K run."

Simon had never been the type to sing his own praises and Ashley knew Robin's willingness to relocate to the US without proper pre-discussion had left him rawer than he'd care to admit. At least to Robin.

"Robin won't be out in the US forever. A few more months and he'll be home."

"Then where will he go? Flint Industries has offices all over the world, and his father travelled extensively as he built the business and will probably want the same for Robin. A bit like some modern-day Grand Tour." He sighed. "I don't mind him being away but I thought we'd be a bit more settled by now."

Ashley had thought the same, Simon had made several comments about them not living together and he guessed this, on top of everything, was beginning to take its toll. "Haven't there been any new properties that Robin might consider?"

"I've sent him a couple, but he's not exactly biting my hand off to discuss it. Feels like it's not high on his agenda right now."

“Maybe when he’s home. Or during his visits.”

Simon sagged in his seat. “I don’t want to keep pushing. After the place we found fell through he’s been a bit reluctant, then he started spending more time in the London apartment that he bought so he can get into the office easier.”

“I noticed that.” Robin hadn’t moved out of the hall, but had been spending less time here. Ashley had mentioned it to Ben, but like most things when he came to his friend’s defence, Ben couldn’t see an issue. “Look, Simon, you do need to talk to him about this. If you’re going to live together, it’s your job that’s not flexible, so you need to be local to the police station.”

“I know. Robin said he understands that, but...” He sighed. “I guess the reality of dating someone who needs a job because they’re not a trust fund babe is beginning to bite. He’s mentioned a couple of times about me leaving the police.”

Simon hadn’t said anything about that before. “He wants you to change jobs?”

“He’s not said it that bluntly, but that’s the inference, or even give up work completely like his mum did.”

“Is that something you’d consider?” Ashley hadn’t wanted to give up his job when he’d started dating Ben, and while he now considered running the wedding side of the estate business as part of his contribution to the family, Simon might have different thoughts.

“His mum travelled with his dad until they had children, but they also met and married in eight weeks so it’s not the same.” Simon’s wistful gaze settled on Davy. “Maybe in the future I would, but not now. Not after... well, it’s not the right time.”

“I thought you were in a better place and had sorted things between you.”

Simon stroked Davy’s head. “We are. And I love Robin and want a future with him, but I’ve been divorced once and I don’t want to be in a position if we break up, that I’ve got to start over from scratch again.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to protect yourself.” Ashley hadn’t really thought about what would happen if him and Ben split, it seemed so unlikely, especially now they had Davy. Crofton Hall had been his home for a few years and he couldn’t imagine living anywhere else, perhaps his parents’ house if he had to.

“It’s more about having some stability. I thought I had it, Robin was close to buying a place, and I could see myself moving in. But now we’re not even in the same country, and he’s months away from being permanently back in the UK. I’ve come to the conclusion if I want an anchor I’m going to have to be that for myself.”

“Oh, Simon.”

He shook his head. “It’s not a bad thing. Honestly, Ashley. If me and Robin are going to make it work then I can’t be looking for him to be my rescuer. I’ll never be his financial equal but we have to be in other ways.”

Ashley’s phone pinged. He grabbed it off the table and saw a number of WhatsApp messages from Ben. Several photos of Ben, Robin and Dorian loaded. They appeared to be having a good time. Bastards.

“Looks like the night is still young in the Big Apple.” He turned his phone to show Simon.

“Bloody hell.” Simon checked his watch. “It’s nearly four in the morning. Robin is going to be a right moody twat when he wakes up later.”

“Least he’s not your problem.”

Simon chuckled. “Yeah. Hope they all have mammoth hangovers.”

Karl arrived. “Ah, Ashley, I wondered where you’d got to. You’ve missed breakfast. Would you like me to bring you something?”

Ashley groaned at the thought. Maybe he could divorce Ben and marry Karl. “A sausage sandwich and a hot coffee would be awesome.”

“Same for you, Simon?”

“If there’s one going.”

Karl disappeared and several more photos hit his inbox.

“I think I’m too old for that bollocks,” Ashley said.

“Those clubs aren’t really my scene. Even when I’ve got my posh gear on, I never feel fully accepted. Not sure I’d want to be.” Davy wriggled and Simon placed him in his bouncer. “I reckon I’ve got the better deal.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you best.” Ashley grinned. “I forgot to mention, we’ve Alex moving in today. I think Dara and Chris are going to take him to the pub if you’re interested.”

“Sounds good. I’ll drop Dara a text later. Or I could keep you and Davy company.”

“I wouldn’t say no to that. But don’t feel you have to.”

“Don’t be daft, Ashley.”

Whatever happened with Robin, he didn’t want Simon to think he wasn’t welcome. Crofton Hall seemed to have attracted a little band of like-minded individuals and Ashley would do his damndest to keep them together.

CHAPTER 6



Ben felt a little bad about leaving for New York. It wasn't just about Ashley, Alex had started as promised and within three hours, it was as if his life had elements of structure and order again. He would be moving in over the weekend, and Ben probably should have been there.

He swirled his wine as he settled into the seat he'd laid claim to. North Down was the sort of place he'd have come to years ago, when he was at his wildest, where money outweighed sense by a country mile and Ashley would have hated it on principle. He was old enough to know better these days, although age wasn't necessarily a deterrent to some of the other patrons who were calculating everyone who walked through the door in dollar signs. This was not the sort of place you met real friends, but rubbed shoulders with people who wanted to be seen with the right sort. Several women and at least a couple of men had given him appraising looks, an ego boost that didn't need acting on, and as many had a similar reaction to Dorian and he was sure a few had realised who he was. Dorian's demeanour transmitted he didn't want to be bothered, which suited Ben to no end.

"I bet the membership for here's not insubstantial," Dorian said, sipping his wine.

"I thought you might have been a member," Ben said.

"Not in New York. When I went out here it was when it was needed, usually to be seen around a release or with my so-called girlfriend at the time so it was believable, but usually a high society nightclub rather than this sort of member's place

where you sit around drinking. I never had an issue of getting on a guest list.”

Ben had not been too dissimilar, he'd known enough people that, when he was in New York, he could get into the best places. Tonight they were hanging from Robin's coattails and considering how long it was taking for him to get back from the bathroom, being stopped every few minutes, Robin was clearly as popular here as he was in London. Ben was surprised to see Robin enjoying the attention a lot more than when they'd been out back in England because he needed to be careful and Ben had hoped he'd learnt his lesson.

He saw Dorian scowl and Ben turned in the direction he was staring. Robin was talking to a man so attractive Ben forgot to breathe for a moment, then he realised who it was. Italian male models with a penchant for rich Brits were not common, and this one had been blatant about wanting Robin.

“Who's the bloke a bit too up close and personal with Robin?”

“Marco Fontana. You know I said Robin got himself into an incriminating position? It was with him.” Ben hadn't met him, but he'd seen a photo of Marco sitting across Robin's lap, wearing low-slung jeans and a shirt so sheer it wouldn't have survived a stiff breeze.

“Perhaps one of us should remind Robin he has company this evening?”

Marco had rested a hand on Robin's chest, and leant in to whisper something. Robin shook his head, removed the hand and took a step back.

Ben reckoned Simon would go ballistic if he saw Marco still buzzing around Robin.

“I'll go.”

Ben stood and made his way over, stopping to stand a few feet behind Marco. The music was low enough that a polite cough would do the job, but he didn't have to wait long for Robin to realise he was there. He looked grateful and put even more distance between himself and Marco.

“Hey, Ben, this is Marco. Marco this is Ben Redbourn, the Earl of Crofton.”

Marco saluted him with his glass of champagne, his stare lingering and appreciative. “Another pretty British noble. I am a lucky boy this evening.”

“Hardly, I’ve come to steal Robin away. We’re supposed to be discussing his upcoming visit home to see his partner, who is one of my husband’s best friends.”

Robin nodded. “Sorry, got distracted.”

Marco pouted, and Ben suspected he thought it made him more alluring than it actually did. “Looks like I’ll have to find my fun elsewhere.”

He hip-checked Robin and glided away, his model poise evident in every step.

“I thought you’d learnt your lesson,” he said to Robin.

“I have and it is completely one-sided. I’ve made it clear I’m not interested.”

Ben was glad to hear it. He’d been worried, Robin was a good man, but because of who he was, he could have anything or anyone he wanted and a lot of folks thought he’d be willing to gorge on everything that was offered. Although if people stopped to consider they’d realise that wasn’t the Flint way.

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you my opinion.”

“No, and we share it. I’m not stupid, Ben. I’m not going to give Simon more reason to worry, I’ve stretched his trust enough and I won’t do it again.”

They returned to Dorian who was topping up his wine from the bottle. “Dealt with the pretty little problem then.”

Robin tutted as he sat down, the three of them on a curved sofa tucked away to the side that Robin had reserved at the cost of God knew what for the evening. “There was nothing to deal with. I don’t appreciate the assumption—from either of you—that I am the sort of man who would cheat on his partner.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Dorian said, his trademark lop-sided grin in place. “You’re a lot of things but a cheating scumbag isn’t one of them. And he’s a bit young for your tastes. Don’t you prefer older men?”

Ben was surprised at the ease of conversation. There had been a point when he didn’t think Robin and Dorian would be anything but civil to each other but this interaction was friendly, putting aside the hurt and leaning on the years they’d known each other.

“You do have a point. But if you want an introduction, I’m sure Marco would be happy to meet you.” Robin waggled his eyebrows. “He would love to claim he’d had the now out and proud Dorian Marsten.”

Dorian snorted. “No thanks. I’d rather not be stalked as prey, and also I’ve moved past the one-night stand phase. If I wanted no-strings sex I’d have stayed in the closet.”

For a while Dorian had bounced from one pretty blond man to another. Anonymous hook-ups had been the order of the day and it hadn’t been the healthiest way for Dorian to get over Robin. It had seemed to have run out of steam the last couple of months or so.

“Tonight is just full of good news,” Ben said raising his glass. “Dorian is finally out and has stopped banging all and sundry—which, take it from me, I know is fun at the time but ultimately soul-destroying—and Robin’s confirmed what we already knew, that he’s not a skanky bastard.”

Robin and Dorian both spluttered and started to argue, but Ben raised his hand to stop them. “I mean it in the nicest way. You’ve always been two of my favourite people, but you’ve given me a fair few sleepless nights over the years, and not in a good way.”

“From memory, we’ve given you a few sleepless nights in the good way too,” Dorian said, grinning.

Robin laughed and slapped his thigh.

“My point being, gentlemen, that we’re all older and wiser. That’s not to say there won’t be fuck ups in the future, but I do

hope there'll be a lot less of them.”

Dorian clinked glasses with him. “It’s easy for you to say, you’ve got Ashley, Robin’s got Simon, and I’m still on my own. I can’t help but think I might have been better having a boyfriend when I came out.”

Robin tutted. “You had that option with me, you great arse. Although I’m pretty relieved you didn’t, as Simon’s much better for me than you were.”

“Cheers for that.”

These were the sort of barbs Ben had been concerned about, and was why he’d agreed with Ashley that it was best for all involved he’d be here to play referee. Their friendship was still in a non-sexual infancy and could be easily destroyed with a wrong word or misstep.

“I’m not trying to be an arsehole,” Robin said with a huff. “It would have been hard to do what I want with Flint Industries with a movie star as a partner. This assignment is bad enough, and I don’t think I’d want any extended time away from Simon again. But if we’d stayed together, Dorian, you’d have constantly been off shooting somewhere and I couldn’t have followed. We’d have ended up splitting up—you must see that?”

Dorian shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right. And I’ve decided to change direction a bit in terms of the sort of projects I want to do. I’m not rushing into anything, but I fancy doing a bit of theatre.”

“That makes more sense as to why you’re in New York then,” Robin said.

“I’m thinking London, to be honest. Not sure I’m up for Broadway.” He grinned. “At the moment at least.”

Robin threw his arm around Dorian’s shoulders. “That would be brilliant. You could branch out, ditch the rom-com leading man image and really do whatever you wanted.”

“I was even dabbling with the idea of retiring the Marsten stage name. Use Forbes—feels right. More authentic—especially now.”

Ben hugged the great lump. “Oh, Dorian, I’m so proud of you.”

The three of them ended up in a tangle of arms and legs, falling off the sofa into a heap. Ben managed to extract himself first, laughing, and Dorian swatted his arse as he did so. “As handsy as ever I see.”

Robin clambered over Dorian and back onto the sofa. “This calls for shots. Tequila and champagne.”

Dorian groaned and sat up. “You and your fucking Slammer Royales.”

He knew he would regret it in the morning, although his hangover was going to be a killer, it would be worth it. When Dorian and Robin had split, Ben had worried how he would be able to share his time with two of his best friends, thankfully he could now see a future where he wouldn’t have to step on eggshells or divide events they could be invited to. He relaxed, and let himself enjoy the night.

CHAPTER 7



Some of Alex's previous bosses had owned houses as big as Crofton Hall, not that they'd spent much time in them. No, they were too busy flying all over the world working, and neglecting their families. One of the reasons Alex had been so keen to accept the job with Ben, who had insisted he call him by his first name, was his lack of reasons to be away from his home. While he might be away at the moment, it appeared to be a rarity, and there had been assurances that, even if he'd already been working at the hall for a while, Alex would have not been expected to travel.

Technically he'd already started his job, having come in to spend the afternoon with Ben and organise his flights, and being given a rundown of Ben's upcoming schedule. He'd got the feeling Ben might not have a full handle on everything he was supposed to be doing and Karl had offered to help sort through the stacks of unanswered letters, but Alex was certain the main issues would be lurking amidst the thousands of unread emails.

He parked up at the small staff carpark at the back of the property. Crofton Hall was a lovely red brick manor house, the sort of thing that turned up on BBC period dramas and, come to think of it, he was sure he read that a new production of *Mansfield Park* had been filmed here.

His little car was full and it was going to take several trips to shift his belongings once he'd found his rooms, so Alex thought he'd best go find Karl. He needn't have worried as Karl headed towards him dressed in an impeccable three-piece

suit. “Alex, let me show you your new rooms. I’ll have Val come and help you unload, I’d help myself but I’m on wedding duty. I’ve about twenty minutes until I need to get back.”

“Val?” He didn’t recognise the name from the lists he’d been given.

“One of the gardeners and my partner. I’ll text him so he can come over.”

“Oh, I don’t want to put anyone out.”

Karl grabbed a suitcase off the back seat of the car. “No trouble at all—he volunteered. It’s good for you to meet a few people and Val, Chris and Dara are going to the pub later, so Val can bring you along.”

His list of the hall’s current occupants included Chris and Dara, who had been labelled as the Archive Dragons. “I must admit, I’m rather intrigued by those two. Ben said they were cataloguing the archive, I bet they’ve uncovered all sorts.”

“Oh, yes. If you get him started, Dara will talk the night away. Ask him about his current theory he has on the Regency earls, he is almost too embarrassed to admit it.”

“The mind boggles.”

“I won’t spoil Dara’s thunder, it’s quite a cracker.”

He followed Karl towards the side of the house and inside through a door a little further down from the kitchen and then up a flight of stairs. “You’ve a set of rooms next to mine that make up a self-contained flat.”

Karl opened the door into a lovely space, with a sitting room and kitchenette. Beyond he could see a bed and bathroom. It was bigger than the one he’d rented in London and he didn’t have to pay rent or bills.

It dawned on him that he was being treated like one of the estate staff, similar to a senior servant, like Karl. On reflection, it was appropriate as he was Ben’s secretary. “I daresay a hundred years ago these would have been the earl’s valet’s rooms.”

“Yes, or the butler’s. If you prefer, Ben did mention there would be a cottage available in a couple of months.”

Alex stared around. “I don’t think so—this is charming. And a cottage for one person is a bit wasteful.”

“I was offered the same, but thought similar, and I preferred to be in the hall due to my duties.” Karl set down the suitcase he’d brought with him. “I need to get back. But as a warning, Mrs Weather is very particular about mealtimes, be prepared to be mothered into eating three times a day and topped up with cake.”

He was more than happy with that arrangement, cooking was a chore he didn’t relish and he’d been happy his last boyfriend had a decent recipe repertoire. Unfortunately, an amazing penne arrabbiata could not make up for being dull as ditch water under the covers and having a personality to match. “Duly noted.”

“You’ll be safe today as it’s her day off. But tomorrow you’ll be plied with a roast dinner so if you’ve any dietary issues best let her know asap.”

“I learnt not to be fussy. My previous bosses worked long hours and I ate what was going.”

Karl chuckled. “I don’t think you’ll have that worry here. Ben’s schedule is a little erratic, the arrival of the youngest member of the household has not helped, but he’s not the type to slave away at his desk all hours.”

“It’ll be very different from my last boss. I’m not sure he slept more than four hours at a time.”

“Ben might be similar but for different reasons. David Redbourn isn’t sleeping through the night yet.” Karl checked his watch. “Have to dash.”

His new place was great. He thought to dig out his bedding first, so he would have somewhere to sleep. Not a mistake to make again, he’d once failed to set up his bed straight away, he’d been so knackered from moving he’d not had a decent place to collapse and woke up crammed into an armchair. Alex made his way back to his car, and had just wrestled a wardrobe

box containing all his suits from the back seat when a gorgeous guy with a physique honed in a gym approached. “Hey, are you Alex?”

“Yes,” he managed, remembering how to speak.

“I’m Val.”

He hadn’t been laid in nearly a year and he had a good imagination about what a man with Val’s impressive biceps could do to him. But he reminded himself Val was Karl’s boyfriend. An odd match, although he could sort of see how they worked. “Oh, thanks for offering to help.”

“No sweat. I’ll go grab Dara and Chris and we’ll be done in no time and in the pub before you know it.”

He made to argue but Val wouldn’t hear any of it, and by the time Alex had returned to the car after his last trip there were two other men waiting. The older guy was nice-looking in a cuddly cousin sort of way but the blond was something special. He could hear his mother wolf-whistling in his head. Crofton Hall was going to be murder on his libido.

“This is Chris,” Val said pointing to the blond beauty. “The other Archive Dragon is Dara. They’re both used to shifting boxes around so they can earn themselves a beer by lugging in your shit.”

Val’s attitude was so refreshing. He’d spent most of the last couple of years around corporate execs whose word choices were coached down to every syllable and would have never been so crass.

“Val, that’s really rude,” Chris said, shaking his head, his long hair like something out of an expensive shampoo commercial. “You can’t call someone’s belongings shit.”

Val chuckled. “You might not feel quite so protective of them when you’ve carried them up the stairs.”

Dara’s eyes narrowed. “Stairs? Ah, Karl that fecker, I bet you’re up in the attic next to him.”

“Yes, sorry. Look, it’s all right, I don’t have that much and I could do it on my own. If you tell me where the pub is I can

meet you when I'm done."

Chris smacked Dara's arm. "Now look what you've done. He thinks we're horrible people who wouldn't help our soon-to-be new friend."

Dara rubbed his arm. "For such a scrawny arsehole, you don't half pack a punch."

He wasn't sure what was the relationship between Chris and Dara, they were close, possibly boyfriends, but he didn't have time to think more on it as Val herded them all to pick up one of the boxes or bags from the boot of Alex's car. "Stop your yacking. Sooner we're done the sooner we can get to the pub."

Dara made an *oouf* as he picked up a rucksack. "Bloody hell, what have you got in here? Your collection of antique iron horseshoes?"

"Nothing so exciting. Documents mainly, and a few personal things from home. Sentimental things."

Sex toys and such that could not remain at his parents' house, not after finding his mum using a new vibrator he'd bought on the highest setting to whip cream.

"Ah, well, I can understand that well enough. My mam visited from Ireland a few months back, she drove over taking the ferry, meaning I'm now the proud owner of a box of my toy cars, action figures and a whole load of shite she wanted out of her attic."

Alex laughed. "Mine's the other way. I'm not sure I'd be allowed my toys even if I wanted them. She used my old Action Man figures in a piece of installation art."

"So she's an artist?"

"After a fashion." He wasn't sure how to describe his family. He loved them, but they were a bit odd at times. "More of a non-conformist than an artist. She made it for a protest she was going on. Although she does do commissions."

"Sounds like a right character." Dara smirked. "Do you take after her?"

“Not really. Or my dad. I think they were surprised how I turned out. I’m not as much of a free-thinking, independent spirit as they are.”

“Sounds like my mum,” Val said fondly. “She called me Valerian after her favourite flower. Hippy type, bless her soul. But definitely a few seeds short of a packet.”

“I’m named after Alexander the Great. Pity I didn’t manage to conquer Persia by the time I was twenty-five.”

“Hard name to live up to,” Chris said. “Mind you, if you can get Ben back into some sort of order then you’re on your way. We’d even consider making you an honorary Archive Dragon.”

“Do I get a badge?”

“Yes!”

Dara groaned. “Stop encouraging him. We’re not a secret society—we’re historians.”

He didn’t have that much stuff, and he could unpack at his leisure the next day, so a couple of trips later and they were done. Chris and Dara were an interesting pair and he’d settled on thinking they were together. Val was a great bloke—Karl was a lucky man.

“Right. We’re done,” Alex said. “Where’s this pub? First round and dinner’s on me.”

“About fifteen minutes’ walk into the village,” Val said. “And I wouldn’t say no to the offer. It’s a couple of days the wrong side of payday so I was going to have leftover pasta again, which is getting a bit chewy.”

“Oh, Val, I’m sure Mrs Weather wouldn’t see you go hungry,” Chris said as they set off. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll save you my afternoon cake.”

Val shook his head. “I’m all right. Just this month’s come with a couple of extra bills and I usually have dinner a few evenings a week with Karl, but he’s been busy helping Ashley. It’ll get back to normal soon enough.”

“What’s Karl helping Ashley with?” Alex asked.

“Some of the wedding business, and baby stuff. Not sure Ashley was as ready for fatherhood as he thought,” Val said. “Mind you, I’d never be ready. I’m happy enough with my plants, having to deal with mini-humans would finish me off.”

Chris tutted. “Baby Davy is adorable. I hope to be a daddy soon.”

Alex was walking between Dara and Chris, they seemed an odd couple but fond of each other so maybe they’d make it work.

“No chance,” snorted Dara. “Sticky fingers on books and stinky nappies. I’m not the paternal type.”

Or maybe they wouldn’t be able to make it work. Children, and whether to have them, wasn’t a topic that should be discussed lightly. “I think you two should probably agree one way or another, it must be difficult not wanting the same family dynamic. Good to talk it out before you wake up years later and there’s regrets.”

Dara laughed and made a kissy face at Chris. “Hey, honey, you want to have my babies?”

Chris grimaced. “Dara’s not my boyfriend. He’s my PhD supervisor.”

“Oh, sorry,” Alex said, mortified. “I did wonder, since you had a bit of a weird dynamic, and it does take all sorts. Usually, I’m pretty good at reading these things.”

“Don’t sweat it, Alex. Me and Chris work closely together and I guess we might give off old married couple vibes, but if we were romantically involved we’d kill each other.”

“Dara’s not my type,” Chris added, gagging.

Chris was out of most people’s league, and Alex wondered if he were single. He wouldn’t be averse to a little office romance.

“No, your type is a super patient barrister who can put up with you disappearing inside your head for hours at a time,” Dara said.

“I can’t exactly argue, Jack is super patient.”

Jack, Alex assumed, was the lucky person who got Chris, so he parked the idea of a fabulous fling with a blond bombshell. Dara seemed nice enough, but he was more the big brother type and that wasn't his thing. Once he'd settled he thought he might sign up to a couple of dating apps but, for now, figuring out his new job would be his biggest priority.

The Red Lion was the sort of pub that had been standing for centuries, and would most likely be there for the same amount of time again. Val and Chris grabbed a table and gave their order without needing to see a menu, while Dara came up to the bar with him. "You didn't have to buy us all dinner."

"Least I can do."

"Just as long as you'll not be brassic after. I know things can get a bit tight when you change jobs."

Dara was such a nice bloke. "I'm good, but thank you. And not having to pay rent will be a major advantage."

"I moved from Cambridge, I might not have all the space I did in my old flat, but Crofton Hall is an amazing place to live. You'll be settled before you know it."

With drinks in hand, and food ordered, they joined Val and Chris at a table in the corner.

Chris was staring at his phone, wrinkling his nose. He was an exceptionally cute guy, albeit taken. He glowered at the screen, which gave him a brooding look that somehow made him even hotter. "I don't think Robin's going to be very happy."

Dara peered over to see what was on Chris's phone. "Oh, fecking hell. That's a whole stable full of horse shite."

"Care to share?" Alex asked.

Robin turned his phone to see a headline on a gossip website. *Dorian Marsten in night out with secret ex-boyfriend billionaire trust fund businessman, Robin Flint. Is love back on the cards?*

"I wouldn't have taken you as the type to care about that sort of thing."

“I used to be a screenwriter in LA, I got in the habit of checking the sites so I’d know who to avoid. But this is Robin, *our* Robin.”

There was a Robin Flint on the list of members of the household. “The future Viscount Whetford?”

Chris nodded. “He’s staying at the hall. because he split up with Dorian. They broke up because Dorian wouldn’t come out. It was all very secret—no one was supposed to know. They were together in secret for years and this is the first I’ve seen of that being made public.”

Alex hadn’t been briefed on the history of the guests, but he had thought it a bit odd that a member of the Flint family was choosing to crash at Crofton Hall, best friends with the owner or not. “So why wouldn’t he be happy? Now this Dorian chap is out they can date openly.”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Dara said, sipping his pint. “Robin got fed up with hiding and that’s not something you can forgive. Besides that, Robin has a new boyfriend, local copper, so he’s not interest in getting back together with Dorian.”

Chris was scowling. “Seems like the fans are buying big into shipping Dorian and Robin. There’s already social media groups dedicated to their love and a TikTok song.”

Dara snatched Chris’s phone. “Already? When did that photo get taken?”

“Ben was meeting Dorian at the airport yesterday,” Alex said, sipping his pint which was an excellent pale ale. “So only this morning our time.”

Dara shook his head as he scrolled. “I hope Simon’s not seeing this. He should probably be warned.”

Chris wrestled his phone back. Alex smiled into his pint, finding their antics amusing. “I know he’s been a bit miffed lately, but he knows there’s nothing between Robin and Dorian.”

Alex was definitely not in possession of all the facts. “Simon is Robin’s new boyfriend?”

“Yep,” Dara said. He now had his own phone out and Alex thought he might be tapping out a message.

“So you think the billionaire is really going to turn down the movie star for a policeman? Can this Simon bloke breathe through his ears, or something?”

Chris looked confused. “Why would that be a reason?”

Dara sighed. “Honestly, Chris, you can’t be that naïve. Alex is suggesting Simon’s ability to keep Robin is due to his oral skills.”

Chris dropped his phone. “Oh! No! Well, I wouldn’t know, but I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be the only reason.”

Alex laughed and wondered what planet Chris lived on. “He must be pretty special, though. In my experience, rich men want rich men or women. It’s all about prestige. Whether that’s for the camera or the board.”

“Sounds like you’ve not met enough decent humans,” Chris said. “I lived in LA for a few years, and while there were lots of wonderful people, there were lots who were awful.”

“I’m not saying there aren’t any, but once someone has a lot of money their level of humanity tends to be inversely proportional.”

“Robin’s not like that. And neither are Ben and Ashley,” Chris said, the colour rising in his cheeks.

“There’s always exceptions that prove the rule,” he said, not wanting to antagonise, although he was curious, especially about Ashley and his colourful family. “And I guess Ashley’s from a pretty well-off family, which is different to this Simon bloke, right? Is it true there’s gangland connections?”

“Yes, but Ashley is not his father. He gets quite upset if people make assumptions about him.” Chris paused for a moment. “Ashley does have a side of him I wouldn’t cross though.”

Dara scoffed. “Ashley’s a pussy cat.”

“Pussy cats have claws! If you might hurt someone precious to him then I reckon all bets are off. He gave me the

shovel talk over Jack.”

“Jack, your partner, the barrister?”

“Yes.” Chris beamed and seemed to gaze into the middle distance. Dara elbowed him. “Ow!”

“Jack’s Ashley’s best friend,” explained Dara. “I doubt he did more than any friend would do. Chris is prone to letting his fiction bleed into real life.”

Alex laughed at Chris’s indignant expression. “A challenge I imagine—as a historian.”

“I’m only a part-time historian. I’m also the hall’s writer-in-residence.”

Ben had mentioned something about a play based on the 1st Earl of Crofton and his actor lover, although he didn’t have much more detail, then a nugget of information clicked into place. “Oh, you wrote *Hidden for the Duke*.”

“That’s right.” Chris preened. “Well, sort of, I wrote the unfinished bits that Sebastian Hewel hadn’t got to. He was Anthony’s lover and an actor at the time.”

Alex got the distinct feeling he had an awful lot to learn about the history of the Earls of Crofton.

Dara, who had been staring at his phone let out a deep sigh. “Well, that answers the question about if Simon knows. He’s started getting messages on Instagram telling him to do the decent thing and leave Robin so he can go back to Dorian.”

Chris looked scandalised. “That’s awful!”

“Someone has to be leaking this shit to the press.” Dara scowled as he read something on this phone, and he turned the screen for others to see. “Oh Jesus wept.”

Alex’s eyes widened and he nearly knocked over his pint as he read the headline. *Three-way gay affair for Denial Dorian, Randy Lord Redhorn, and Rampant Robin?*

CHAPTER 8



Dorian rubbed Robin's back and he leant over hyperventilating, rocking to and fro. "No, no, no. This cannot be happening."

The photos of their night out had been innocuous, three friends who were having a few drinks, nothing that would have caused a stir if some bastard hadn't also told the press that Robin and Dorian had dated in secret for several years. There were only so many people who knew, and even fewer with an axe to grind to spread rumours.

"It'll blow over and no one will give a fuck in a few days," Dorian said, aiming to reassure Robin, not that he was having much luck.

They'd got home a lot later than he'd envisaged they would, close to five a.m. and after having drunk far too much red wine and tequila. He'd emerged after six hours of poor quality sleep and had attempted to drown himself in the shower. Ben had got up looking refreshed and as if he'd slept for a week, but Dorian had forgiven him for being so perky because he'd come bearing gifts of painkillers and water.

Once he could see without wincing, he'd chanced checking his phone and he wished he hadn't. Every one of his social media platforms had blown up, he had thousands of tags and he could just imagine the panic his communications team were in. It had been bad enough when he'd peeked a couple of days after he had gone off-grid, now it was chaos. He expected positive and negative comments when he'd come out, and he'd got both in spades, but now he'd been linked to Robin, it had

kicked it up another level. And the internet wanted them to get back together.

Robin made another keening noise. “Someone must have told them. There’s specific details, not guesses or extrapolations because I used to be your PA. Which bastard did this?”

Dorian didn’t know who it was but if he were a betting man he’d say Zak, aiming to get back at Dorian for not playing by his rules. Proving it would be a different matter.

Ben sat next to Robin. “The problem is it’s the truth. There’s not much you can do. Nor should you.”

Robin looked up accusingly. “It’s my private business.”

“But you’re a public figure and so is Dorian. If you think you have to do something, then, if I were you, I’d issue a statement. Keep to the minimum and then let it go.”

Ben had always been a voice of reason but he didn’t think Robin was buying any of it. “If I had been allowed control over the release of this information then it would be different,” Robin said. “But Dorian’s fans seem to be twisting things into some perverse fairy-tale.”

“People are just grabbing onto something to escape their boring lives,” Dorian said, hoping to calm Robin down.

It didn’t work. “Some of them have mocked up wedding and family photos. There’s even a campaign to get you to apologise and propose to me!”

From where Dorian was sitting it was annoying, but it looked far worse on him than Robin. He’d had girlfriends, or at least pretended he had, and a fake fiancé. Robin was the poor creature who’d been sworn to secrecy by a cad of a movie star. “Robin, it’s me who’s the asshole here. You’re not gonna be that affected.”

“You think this is about me? It’s Simon I’m worried about, we’ve not made a huge deal publicly about our relationship but we’re together and I’ve tagged him a couple of times. He’s getting hate messages about being a homewrecker and that he

should do the decent thing and leave me. He's had to delete his Instagram account."

Dorian hadn't considered the knock-on effect. He'd seen some odd behaviour in his time, and expected a bit of a backlash but not in this way or at Robin's new partner. "It's just losers on the internet."

"He's not going to leave you because of this," Ben said.

Robin was panicked, and Dorian realised that was Robin's real fear. Simon was a normal bloke, not used to the insanity that trailed after the likes of Dorian. Robin's new career was different and, while he would have a different type of exposure, he'd still be under scrutiny. Simon was a policeman, he didn't have an army of fans, or loyal legions who'd be on his side in an internet dirt-flinging match.

"I can appeal to my fans. Record a video and stick it on my accounts. That'll put a lot of them off." Dorian hated that he could be the cause of this. "The heat will die down and Simon won't have to worry."

"Why should he have to put up with this shit at all?" Robin demanded. "I don't want him to think even for a second that I would consider going back to you, Dorian. I won't risk losing him over this, I can't."

"Have you talked to him? Not over messages, but talked?" Dorian asked.

"Not yet. He's with Ashley, and he said he'd text when it was a good time to speak." Robin turned to Ben. "I don't think Ashley's happy either."

Robin's phone pinged and he snatched it up. "It's Simon. I'm going to talk to him in the other room."

Dorian sank back into the cushions. "He's not taking it well."

"I think he should remove the apps from his phone and just carry on. I've been pilloried by the press, there's no point fighting it as it'll drag it out. I steer clear of social media unless it is specific for estate business—it's the only way."

Ben had been in several gossip rags when he was younger, fucking about and not giving a fuck. More recently, Ashley's dad had hit the headlines and there'd even been a flurry of internet wailing when they'd got married, people bemoaning that the lovely lord was off the market.

"Half the battle will be stopping Robin from reacting," Dorian said, knowing how Robin could get hold of an idea and not let go.

"I'm sure his father will already be on it. Flint's media affairs group will deal with it. Robin should let the company experts take the lead. You know if he finds out who leaked them he'll want to destroy them?"

"He's not that vindictive."

Ben snorted. "Sometimes I wonder if you know him at all. He's a Flint, they got where they were by doing what was necessary, but also keeping those close to them safe. You must have met his sisters?"

The Valkyries, Robin's sisters, had never warmed to him and he could see Ben's point.

Ben's phone began to vibrate. He checked the call and answered, "Ashley? Is there something wrong?"

Dorian couldn't hear the other side of the conversation but Ben's expression spoke a thousand words. "Ashley, are you listening to yourself? Of course I'm not fucking Dorian and Robin. How could you even think that?"

Ben stared up at the ceiling, trying not to overreact. "No. That's someone seeing us out together and making stuff up. This is not new—you know all about when it did happen. I've not hidden anything. I love you. I'd never do anything to hurt you like that."

Dorian wondered what had caused Ashley to be so upset. Unfortunately, it became all too clear as revelations of the past fun Robin and Dorian had shared with Ben scrolled across his screen. Ancient history had been dredged to the surface and caused chaos in its wake.

“You don’t have to apologise, it’s okay. No, getting Niall involved would not help.” Ben was remaining calm, and Dorian had to admire him for it. “I know, I know. Look, I’ll come home. Change my flights and be back as soon as I can. Try and sleep while Davy sleeps.”

A string of love-yous and miss-yous later, Ben ended the call. “Right, I’m going to try to heed my own advice here and not let this get to me, but according to the gossips me, you and Robin, are now some sort of triad and my sleep-deprived husband isn’t seeing the funny side of it.”

“You need to get home.”

“Yes.”

Robin emerged, his face a picture of thunder. “Whoever leaked this about the three of us is going to regret it. I’ll ruin them and enjoy it.”

“You might need to get in the queue. Ashley is so exhausted he even threatened to ask his dad to take care of things.”

“Fucker would deserve it. I need to go back to the UK as soon as I can. I’ve also spoken to my father, he’s told me I can have the Flint corporate plane.”

“When are you leaving? I’ll come with you if you’re okay with that,” Ben said.

“I sort of expected you might. It’s scheduled for this evening.”

Dorian thought he might as well leave with them. “Room for one more?”

Robin frowned. “I didn’t think you’d be heading to the UK just yet. You’re welcome to stay here.”

“I know, but given the circumstances, it might now not be an option if the press find out I’m staying with you. Ben did offer that I could stay at Crofton Hall for a while.” Considering the gossip, he wouldn’t be surprised if Ben rescinded the invite. “I do have an apartment in London, if not,

but I might see my mum as I don't want to be on my own too much."

"Don't be daft, Dorian. You're more than welcome." Ben turned to Robin. "You're fine with that, aren't you? You've been unofficially at the hall for a while, but I assume you'll be back in the US sooner than later."

"I'm not going to dictate who you allow in your house. I've already decided it's way past time I got my thumb out my arse and buy somewhere with Simon."

"Sounds like a plan then. Spot of lunch then back to Blighty," he said rubbing his hands together, feeling optimistic.

"I'll order in. There's no way we're being seen out having lunch together—the next thing it'll be some sort of post-orgy recovery brunch," muttered Robin.

Dorian was looking forward to going home. It helped that he didn't have to return to an upset partner like Ben and Robin, but he couldn't wait to leave the US behind. He'd been out here longer than he cared to remember, feeling he always had to be in LA, in the spotlight to capitalise on the next opportunity. He didn't need to do that now. If he never acted again, he'd be able to live off his considerable savings and investments, although he didn't think he could be away from performing forever, there would always be a call-back in some way.

But now it was time for a new chapter in his life. The plot wasn't written, but he was a believable main character without having to hide his true self. Time to reinvent himself, or at least scrape away the false layers.

CHAPTER 9



*B*en loathed the British press. To be fair, he loathed the press in every country. Once the news had broken about Robin and Dorian and his own limited involvement with them, his first thought after needing to get home had been the carnage at the airport and how, when he'd disembark, the press would report their flitting around. Robin had solved the issue, or rather his father had, and they'd set down at the private terminal of London Luton Airport. If it wasn't usually too expensive for him to justify, it would be the only way to fly.

As an additional bonus, Luton was less than twenty minutes from home and, while he'd flown from there often to mainland Europe, there hadn't been a way to fly transatlantic. Robin had spent most of the flight working and, given the depth of his foul mood, Ben and Dorian had kept their distance. He'd managed a few hours of sleep, more than Davy allowed, and they were landing early morning UK time. He couldn't wait to see Ashley, he'd been away two days but it felt too long after listening to Ashley's exhausted apologies.

A car collected them, another thing to thank Flint Industries for, and Robin appeared to have calmed a little. "I'll drop you pair at the hall first, but I'm heading straight to Simon's after that."

"Come to dinner? If not tonight then tomorrow?" Ben asked. "Might be better to have people around you?"

"Probably. I'll see what Simon says. To be honest, I might just crawl into bed with him and stay there until he forces me

out. I can't remember his shift pattern." He shook his head, angry at himself. "I should know that. It's important."

"I'm sure he knows you're busy with work. He's not going to be upset you forgot." Simon and Robin worked because Simon wasn't the type to hold things over him. This was Robin's own guilt, nothing else.

"I'll have it somewhere." He was back searching through his phone.

Dorian raised his eyebrows, Ben thought it was a good job Robin hadn't seen him. Dorian didn't seem to know Robin well at all, despite having dated him for so long, Ben would have predicted this, still, Robin was a different man now, the last year had changed him so much and Simon's unconditional support was an important part of his metamorphosis.

Ben always loved coming home to Crofton Hall, but this morning seeing her was a balm. It was still early, the household on the brink of waking. He motioned for Dorian to follow him around to the side. He'd sent word they were coming but not how early, not wanting to put Karl out any more than necessary. He should have realised that Karl would have known as he opened the side door when they arrived.

"You didn't have to get up to meet us," he said as Karl took his bag.

"No trouble, my lord. Mr MacLove told me when he was expecting Mr Flint as he departed. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Is Ashley awake?"

"Not yet." Karl checked his watch. "But if last night was anything like yesterday, Davy has probably had him up several times."

Dorian clapped him on the shoulder. "Go see to your boys. I'm sure Karl will sort me out."

"Of course, Mr Marsten."

"I'd prefer Dorian, but if you have to give me a full name, then it's Mr Forbes from now on."

Ben hurried away. If Davy had given Ashley another restless night then he'd need to shoulder the weight for the day and let Ashley have some downtime. Neither of them had been prepared for how much upheaval a baby would bring. He'd expected some change, but not his life turning upside down, and he was embarrassed by his own naivety.

Their rooms were dark as he entered, and he was as quiet as possible when he tiptoed into their bedroom. Davy was still in with them, his cot against the far wall, the plan was to move him into his nursery in a few months once he was sleeping for longer. Ben peered into the crib, his heart melting as he saw his son asleep, amazing how angelic the little bugger appeared when he wasn't screaming his head off.

He stripped down to his boxers and slid into bed. Ashley mumbled in his sleep and snuggled backwards as Ben curled around him, happy to be home, there was no place better than in his own bed with his husband. Dorian might have many millions in the bank, and the world gazing at him with adoring eyes but Ben wouldn't swap what he had for even a minute.

* * *

The wail woke him up. Ben sat bolt up and Ashley groaned.

"I'll get him."

"Ben?" Ashley muttered. "You're home."

He checked his watch to discover he'd been asleep less than twenty minutes, no wonder he was groggy. Davy's cries buried deep into his subconscious and wouldn't be ignored. With difficulty, Ben got out of bed and padded over to Davy's cot. The smell told him the problem. "What has Daddy been feeding you, stinky?"

His initial attempts at changing nappies had been poor, no awful, and Mrs Weather had stepped in with a doll borrowed from the Woman's Institute to teach him what to do. He'd been extremely grateful, as had Ashley, who had been a lot better at the practical side of this parenting lark than Ben and had been picking up most of the rubbish jobs. Ben dealt with his least

pleasant duty of fatherhood and tried to put Davy back in his cot. He wasn't having any of it—at least his lungs were healthy.

“Probably hungry,” Ashley said as he sat up. Ben's heart skipped a beat at the sight of his husband, bleary eyed, hair all over the place, but unquestionably Ben's.

“Lie back down, I can make a bottle.”

They kept the magic machine in their bedroom and it had become one of the most important pieces of equipment in the hall since it could make and prep a bottle in moments. Armed with one of the few things that would soothe the savage beast, he scooped Davy up and returned to bed, Ashley snuggling closer as Ben settled down to feed his son.

The warm weight of Davy in his arms, and his quiet suckles, made this one of his favourite things. He'd never minded babies, but before meeting Ashley, he'd come to the conclusion that children wouldn't be on the cards for him and instead he'd be a doting, but not that involved, uncle. How life had changed.

“Glad you're home,” Ashley mumbled. “We missed you.”

“Sorry, it's turned into such a shitstorm. But up until the press broke the story it was good, and you were right that having me there in the middle stopped some issues.”

“You in middle being a metaphysical term. At least these days.”

Ben chuckled, Davy scowled for a moment, fussed then went back to his bottle. “Yes, of course. There's no interest between Robin and Dorian anymore, well at least from Robin's side and, I think, Dorian's but I haven't had the chance to probe that.”

“At least Simon won't need to worry. Although it's not Dorian he's hung up on. God, I'm glad I've got you and not one of your useless mates as a husband.”

“I'm taking that with a level of praise that I don't think you intended.”

Ashley sent him a withering look. “I love you enough to put up with the pratishness and poshness, don’t push it.”

“I am eternally grateful for your devotion.”

“So Dorian and Robin are all right?”

“Robin will be once he’s reconnected to Simon. He had a panic attack thinking Simon might leave him.”

Ashley snorted. “Simon won’t leave him over this, but Robin does need to start making the right noises about their future. But what about Dorian, did he stay in New York?”

It dawned on Ben that he hadn’t told Ashley about their new houseguest. “No, he’s back in the UK.”

Ashley groaned. “You’ve let him move in here, haven’t you?”

“I thought you liked him.”

“I don’t dislike him, but I don’t think he’s as good a friend to you as you are to him. And in theory Robin’s still here as well.” Ashley sat up. “I not sure it was the best choice.”

“I couldn’t not invite him here. He cut himself off from all his LA friends, wants to reinvent his career under his real name Forbes and start afresh.”

Davy had finished feeding and made his displeasure known. Ben grabbed a cloth off the side. Where once their bedside table had been a home to lube and silk scarves, these days linen squares were the order of the day and the toys were of a different design and intended use.

“But he’s not the innocent party here. He chose to hide for the sake of his career, and he’s hurt a lot of people along the way to get what he wanted. If he starts causing shit in my home, I’m going to ask you to send him packing.”

Ashley wasn’t wrong, but he didn’t have the full story. Dorian had let his manager and agent influence him far more than he should. “That’s fair, but can I ask you to give him a chance? Robin’s made peace with him, and he was arguably the most affected, so I think you could too.”

“My concerns are for you, Ben. Not Robin or Dorian. If he takes advantage, or causes drama between us, then I’ll yeet him from the grounds myself.” Ashley might not be his father, but there were times when some of Niall’s genes came out in full force. “You won’t see the issues, you’re too nice. I’m happy to be the bastard to protect you.”

Davy grizzled and Ashley took him off Ben. For a moment Ben had twin sets of the same eyes staring at him. He sensed this wasn’t going to be the last time either.

“Right.”

“I glad we’re in agreement.”

There were arguments he could win, this wasn’t one of them and he thought it best to change the topic. “I thought it would be nice to have Robin and Simon over for dinner. Emphasise them as a couple sort of thing.”

“Good idea. I assume you know when you’re free.” That was a loaded question.

“Roughly. But I’m sure Alex will sort me out.”

“I hope so. He moved in on Saturday, so given it’s now Monday morning, it might be the perfect opportunity to start the week as you mean to go on. Me and Davy have a Baby Jazz class.”

He was more than happy to leave those sorts of activities to Ashley who, listening to the stories, was a very popular member of the local parent and baby groups. “Then consider today my first step back on the path to organisation.”

“You used to be on top of estate business at least, and so did I. But this little fellow tends to cause a few distractions. Best not miss another meeting with the mayor though.”

The mayor hadn’t minded, and told him all about her own grandchildren, but there would be others who wouldn’t be so understanding.

A shower and shave later and he was up and raring to go. Ashley was dressing Davy. “Since you’re back, would you be all right to take him this afternoon? I was thinking about

getting a haircut, maybe have an hour to myself drinking coffee without having to mop up baby drool.”

“Absolutely. I could do with some time with my favourite guy.”

“I refuse to let you make me jealous of my own son.”

Ben smirked. “You know me so well. I was thinking we could get a babysitter, or pressgang several of our residents, and have a night away. Maybe next weekend?”

“Don’t tease me, Ben. It’s not fair to give me that sort of hope.”

He pulled Ashley into his arms, Davy safe for a moment on the bed trying to put his feet in his mouth. “I promise a night to remember.”

“A full eight hours sleep?” Ashley asked, wistful.

“Afterwards yes, I’ll make sure you’re exhausted.”

“I already am.”

They shared a kiss. Ben loved having Ashley in his arms, but they were soon reminded by a grumpy grizzle why it had no chance to develop into more.

“When do you want me to take him?”

“I’ll be back late morning from baby crooners, so then?”

Another kiss sealed the deal before Ashley returned his attention to Davy. Ben headed to his office, ringing for Karl who arrived moments after him. “Could you hunt down Alex and send him along?”

“He’s just having breakfast. Can I get you something?”

“Coffee, please. You’re a lifesaver. And if there’s any crumpets going, I’ll have a couple.”

He supposed he should at least turn on his laptop, he’d not been the best at keeping on top of his official estate emails of late. To be fair, his private emails weren’t in a much better state, but he had managed to purge several hundred during the

flight to the US before he'd given up and watched a movie so uninspiring he'd already forgotten the title.

Opening his email, he girded himself for the tsunami of unread messages, red exclamation marks and titles in angry capital letters, instead there were only twenty unread emails and a new little army of folders. He wondered if he was still asleep and was having a dream, not the sort of dream he usually had because he was still dressed and there wasn't a margarita in sight.

He clicked on his calendar and it was now colour-coded, what the colours meant he wasn't sure, but they appeared to be in order. Karl reappeared with his coffee and crumpets but was quick to excuse himself as Alex entered dressed in a very nice suit, made to measure, if Ben wasn't mistaken.

“Good morning, good flight back I hope. I've cancelled your original return leg.”

Ben hadn't even given that a second thought. “Oh, thanks. I hope you've settled in all right. Back a little earlier than I was expecting but it's probably for the best.”

“I have made a start on organising your estate emails and appointments calendar. The emails marked as unread are new and need your agreement or reply.”

The penny dropped. Alex had been the saviour of his inbox and calendar. “Did you go through all my emails?”

“Only the last twelve months. I've archived anything earlier, once we're up and running I'll go back a couple of years for anything pertinent. Nothing's been deleted,” he added quickly.

Alex must have done all this over the weekend and this morning, and Ben wasn't sure if Alex was an evil genius or someone who loved things to be organised. Either way, he'd accept it, but if he could manage that in such a short time Ben would have a future where no meeting was missed, no deadline skirted and arguments over scheduling—especially with Ashley—would be a thing of the past.

“Gosh.”

“I hope everything’s all right. I mean, when we spoke you said you’d like me to get you organised...”

“Oh, it’s perfectly wonderful. I’m just a bit gobsmacked by it all,” Ben admitted.

Alex smiled. He was an attractive man, near enough Ashley’s age if he remembered right, and had artfully tousled blond hair and piercing blue eyes. “I’m relieved to hear it. Now I couldn’t recall if you said you had your agenda on your phone or not.”

“I don’t use my phone calendar.” He felt as if he was admitting some terrible secret. “I’ve been known to write things on the back of my hand if it’s time-sensitive.

Alex winced. “Not an ideal option. I’m sure we can come up with a solution that won’t get smears on your shirt sleeves.”

“I’m not sure I’d like to be permanently plugged into the business side of things. Apps pinging all the time, emails demanding attention.”

“You do know you can put apps into sleep mode, right?” Alex asked, sounding bemused.

“I do now.”

Twenty minutes later, he’d learnt Alex had the patience of a saint, and he now had his phone set up with a number of apps that would help manage his time, but not drive him to distraction.

“You have several meetings later in the week that you tentatively accepted so I can confirm those with you, and I think we should start looking a little ahead so we don’t get caught out.”

He loved that Alex was saying *we* when it was clearly Ben. “Fair enough. Actually, I’m hoping to spirit Ashley away for a night. Dinner, nice hotel... I’m sure you get the idea.”

“I imagine it can be difficult getting time alone when there’s a new baby on the scene. Let me look at a couple of options, you’re thinking luxury and pampering I take it?”

“The works. A swanky bar, good food... Michelin star if possible. Although I think Ashley might just be happy to have a pint in a pub and a full night’s sleep.”

Alex laughed. “I think we can do a bit better than that.”

Ben suspected Alex would see it as a challenge and he was already looking forward to his suggestions. They spent the next hour or so getting Ben’s life back in order, it was amazing what an upheaval a small child could make. Alex was beyond competent, and Ben thought he’d have no trouble seeing to his needs as a secretary, Alex might get bored if he wasn’t careful.

Alex snapped shut his notebook. He had a proficiency for organising things and a love of stationery Ben thought Ashley would appreciate. “Right, I’m going to prepare the letters you wanted and have a look at some of the contracts you said might be up for negotiation and contact your solicitors.”

“I hope that’s not too much.”

“Not at all. It’s quite nice to have a more sedate pace of life. I was speaking to Dara and Chris over the weekend and thought I might be able to help with some of their administrative items—they don’t seem very efficient.”

“Dara is a historian and Chris has his head in the clouds half the time, I’d be more surprised if they were super organised.”

Alex shook his head. “Oh, they’re organised. More that there’s ways and means of doing some of their repetitive tasks that could be better planned and executed. I’m used to making sure very busy men and women get the most out of their day.”

Ben wouldn’t object to Alex helping wherever he saw fit and he had a thought of another way he could help. “If you do find yourself at a loose end, we’ve a guest who might need some help. He had a PA before and let’s just say he’s had a change of circumstances that means he’s going to be spending some time with us here until he sorts himself out.”

“If that’s what you want me to spend my spare time on, then of course. But it would be great if I could have some details—I don’t have any information on him.”

Ben paused. Alex was a professional, had worked with some prestigious bosses but none of them were a Hollywood A-lister. “It’s a friend of mine called Dorian.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. If Ben had been a single man he might not have been so controlled in his reactions.

“As in Dorian Marsten?”

“Technically, it’s Dorian Forbes, and he is considering whether to retire his stage name.”

“If he’s thinking of retiring and, as I think you said, no longer has a PA, what would he need with a secretary?”

Ben had presumed that Dorian would need someone to help deal with the mundanities of life. “Retiring from the Hollywood side of things. I don’t think he knows what he wants to do, but he’ll need help dealing with everyday items, I imagine. I haven’t actually asked, but I’ve known him for years and he’s had an entourage of people to take care of everything for him, so I assume he still will.”

Alex didn’t look convinced. “That’s understandable. But I’m not a PA in the sense of a movie star’s minion. I can have a word with him and see if I can help but he shouldn’t expect the sort of thing PAs do for movie stars.”

Ben smirked, thinking of Robin. “I’m sure he won’t.”

Alex wrinkled his nose. “I do not sleep with my employers. I thought I should make that clear given his previous PA.”

“I…” He was seldom lost for words and it took a moment to reply. “I think I can clear that up. Robin was Dorian’s boyfriend and he acted as his PA so they could be together as much as possible. There was nothing inappropriate.”

“I’m sorry, I was aware of the connection, I didn’t mean to infer anything, it’s just I’ve had some difficulties in previous employments and I find it better to be firm.”

“*Difficulties?*” Ben hadn’t picked up anything when he’d interviewed Alex and he hoped this wasn’t too terrible.

“One of my boss’s wives was rather handsy. Didn’t like to take no for an answer and when I refused her advances, she told her husband I’d tried it on.” Alex winced. “If it wasn’t for the fact he knew I was as gay as they come, it might have cost me my job. Although it ultimately did as it was an uncomfortable position to be in and I resigned.”

“Oh, Alex, I can assure you that you will not be subjected to anything like that at Crofton Hall. If you don’t feel comfortable with supporting Dorian, then please don’t think you have to.”

“It’s fine. I’m happy to talk to him. But I mean it that I won’t be running around picking up his dry cleaning or fixing him lattes and spinach smoothies.”

Alex was a good egg. The solid type who could probably organise a land war in Asia and then pop home in time to do the ironing. “I guarantee no spinach smoothies. I don’t think Mrs Weather would let them in the hall.”

Alex left to sort out his new office next door, the one Ben had never been able to persuade Ashley to take because Ben would bother him too much. The thought of the man seemed to trigger his appearance.

“Ready for daddy duty?” Ashley said.

Ashley didn’t wait for an answer and handed Davy over.

“Always ready!”

“Then I’ll be back in a few hours. Oh, Simon texted to say him and Robin would be okay for dinner.”

Ashley didn’t hang around, departing after a quick kiss. Davy made a rumbling noise and the smell was unmistakable. “Why is it you poo every time I pick you up?”

CHAPTER 10



Alex printed off the last of the letters Ben would need to sign. Despite the rest of the world having moved into the digital age, it didn't seem to apply to the peerage. Ben had more invitations to dinners, events and fundraisers than he could ever hope to attend, and he preferred to decline with a written response. Those were on top of the meetings for the estate or the local charities Ben supported, then there were the emails, which should have been in his personal inbox as they alluded, some quite bluntly, to arranging meetings to get back in touch in the most intimate of ways. From what he could tell, Ben had a standard reply that made it clear he was off the market, citing plans with his husband. Not that it seemed to put them off.

He'd drop the letters in to Ben and then start his search to find a perfect night away for Ben and Ashley; he already had several ideas and could use his contacts to make sure it would be truly memorable.

Alex let himself into Ben's office, he wasn't on his own but had Davy in his arms and was talking to a man with black hair, grey eyes and a jawline that would even make a nun swoon. He looked familiar.

"Apologies, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll leave you with these to sign and then I'll get them in the post."

"Oh you're not interrupting," Ben said with a grin. "You've given me the chance to introduce you to Dorian."

The pictures he'd seen that Dara and Chris had found had been grainy and didn't do Dorian justice. Dorian stood, he was tall and fit. Alex couldn't say he'd seen any movies with him in, although he was a rare creature who did watch for the plot, not the eye candy. But in the flesh, he was a stunning man. He buried all his impure thoughts about Dorian under a weighted blanket of his professionalism.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr Forbes."

"Call me, Dorian. Ben was saying you might be willing to help me out with a few things."

The phone on Ben's desk rang. "Why don't you two go off and get acquainted?"

Dorian followed Alex out. "We could have a chat in one of the reception rooms downstairs, if that suits?" suggested Alex. "My office is still a work in progress."

"Sounds a bit like me."

Not something he'd expect from an international movie star, even one who'd come out recently and was having a crisis of identity. Dorian might need more TLC than a little bit of admin, but that wasn't his job, but it might mean he would have to adapt his style to support Dorian to his best without being dragged too far in. Or let Dorian's absurdly good looks infiltrate his subconscious to star in some of his more racy dreams. "I'll just grab something to take notes with."

His office wasn't as bad as he'd made out, but the piles of boxes that had to be unpacked, and the clutter in mid-tidy, didn't project the professional image he liked. Dorian was examining a portrait. "I've been here so many times over the years and I've never stopped to look at the paintings. Ben looks a lot like this chap."

Alex stared at the painting and the plaque. "Percival, 6th Earl of Crofton. Looks early Georgian by the clothing. I wonder why there's a ship in the background—I didn't think the Redbourns had nautical links."

"Ben's always been very proud of his delightfully nefarious ancestors so I bet there's a story in it somewhere."

“Most families have their eccentrics.” His seemed to have more than their fair share. “Shall we head downstairs?”

“If we could get a coffee, that’d be great. I got some sleep on the plane and this morning but I’m beginning to flag.”

Dorian’s opening ask was for him to make coffee, not the best of starts but he couldn’t say he was surprised. “Let’s go via the kitchen. I know Karl’s out this afternoon running errands and I don’t want to bother Mr Billins.”

The coffee machine in the kitchen was a thing of beauty and it was treated with the utmost respect. Mrs Weather had given him exacting instructions on Sunday morning and Karl had supervised his first few uses before deeming him trained enough to be trusted with it on his own.

He made two cappuccinos and hoped he wasn’t making a rod for his own back. Since the weather was reasonable, Dorian suggested they sat outside and he was more than happy to agree.

During his career he’d met all sorts of people and, without fail, it was always better to set expectations from the get-go. For both parties. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to support you in the ways you’re used to. Ben will keep me busy and I have agreed to help the Archive Dragons when needed, so that won’t leave you with the level of commitment your previous PAs have had.”

Dorian chuckled. “No fear. I’m not looking for that. Reality is, I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I presume you know why I’m hiding out at Crofton Hall?”

Alex had done an internet search once he knew the name and he’d been surprised at the results. He’d got some of the story in the pub on Saturday but there were a lot of column inches in the gossip blogs given over to Dorian. “One of Hollywood’s leading men who has always had an eye for the ladies admits that he’s actually more interested in men. Some of the coverage is rather intrusive so I don’t blame you for hunkering down for a while.” He bit his lip wondering if he should say more, but Dorian had asked. “I might have thought

you'd have chosen somewhere other than Crofton Hall, given some of the gossip though."

"You mean me, Ben and Robin?" He shrugged. "It happened a few times when I was still together with Robin, so it's not like it's a complete fabrication."

"I see." Dorian didn't seem at all bothered by the press knowing his business but it smacked of him not understanding the wider connotations. "It could see be a touchy topic."

"Anything that suggested it is still happening or has happened recently is complete BS. If Ashley tells me he's got a problem with me being here, I'll sod off, but Ben's my best friend and he invited me to stay, so I accepted as I needed a few friendly faces around me."

Or maybe Dorian did understand, and Alex thought he should give him a bit more credit. Maybe he wasn't just a pretty face and lovely biceps. "Seems reasonable enough, and obviously you don't owe me an explanation."

"I'm fed up with having secrets. Hiding the truth about myself may have given me my career but it's made me a poorer human. I need to focus, make some decisions, and if you could help shuffle some of the inevitable paperwork, meetings and admin, then I'd be grateful. I've had people to do this stuff for me for years, but I'm in a tricky place now and I don't know who to trust. Ben hired you so he obviously trusts you, and that's good enough for me."

Dorian gave off none of the swagger he'd expected. He was lost, and in a place he'd never thought to find himself. It was a rarity, in Alex's experience, to meet a man of Dorian's stature, in terms of career and looks, who were so obvious about their insecurities. "I'll do what I can. And I know you don't know me from Adam, but if you want to talk, then I'm a pretty good listener. My family were always supportive, I never hid my sexuality but my first boyfriend had to and so I've seen the pain that can cause."

Yves had been a mess, but he'd survived and Alex had been at his wedding last summer. If he could be a friendly ear,

and that was all that was on offer for the sake of his own sanity, then he'd be more than willing to help Dorian.

“It might be nice to talk to someone who doesn't know all the shit I've pulled. Ben and Robin have been great, but they're a bit too close to the action.”

He almost snorted his coffee up his nose. “I suppose that is one way of putting it.”

“Yeah, well, it's causing some ripples and I don't like that it might hurt someone who I already did enough damage to.” He smiled sadly. “Robin doesn't deserve the fallout. As you said there's all sorts of shit already on the internet, and I don't even know the half of it as I usually avoid social media like the plague. I took some of the apps off my phone on the flight back.”

“That's completely understandable. I assume you have a team looking after various accounts for you.”

“I did. For now, I've just ignored them.”

Alex didn't think that was a good idea. “You might want to do something about that. Silence on the matter could be seen as support.”

Dorian huffed. “Yeah, I get that. The thing is I don't want to be that person any longer, and I have some nebulous thoughts on what to do next, but I need to deal with the normal stuff that anyone would have to do.”

“Such as?”

“Making appointments with my lawyers, tax advisors, and other people who can help. I do need a car, and to change my driving license back to a UK one... see, boring stuff and I don't know where to start.”

“I can definitely help there. I had one boss relocate so I put together various checklists, I still have my templates and I reckon we can adapt for your needs.” Alex felt far more comfortable now he could see how Dorian wanted to find his feet to start with and how he could support. “I'll set up a spreadsheet you can review and we can start working through

the tasks. We can also work up a list for things that normal people wouldn't have to think about."

"I'll need a new manager and agent—that I have decided, but I don't need someone just yet. Then all the social media stuff as well." He smiled. "Thank you. I know you're busy, so I'll try not to be the usual demanding A-list asshole."

"Try that on me and I won't help. Respect is a two-way street and needs to be earned. I know you're a movie star, but I should warn you I've never seen a thing you've been in, nor wish to."

Dorian grinned. "That's great."

Alex didn't know how to answer that and was saved by his phone ringing. He checked the caller ID. It was his mum, it had been the third time she'd tried to call, he turned it off knowing from the text messages she'd also sent that it wasn't important. "Sorry about that. So give me a day or so and we can grab some time and work out a schedule. I can also help manage your inbox if you want?"

"Oh, I might take you up on that. I'm kinda ignoring as much as I can, but it's probably secondary at the moment."

"Let's get you set up and feeling more stable then we can see what I can do."

A soft cough behind them alerted them to Karl standing in the doorway. "Apologies for intruding, gentleman. Mr Reynolds, your mother called. She was worried you weren't answering your phone."

Alex groaned. "Thank you, Mr Vinter. I'll call her later."

He saw the smirk Karl was trying to hide, he could only imagine what she'd said. "She was quite insistent, and colourful in her description of what she might do if you were to wait too much longer."

While mortifyingly embarrassing, it did give him the chance to retreat. "I'd best go and see what she wants."

Dorian waved him away with a chuckle and Alex followed Karl back inside. "Sounds like your mum is a bit of a

character.”

He sighed. Karl had no idea. His dad was one too. There were days he thought, or maybe he wished, he was adopted.

CHAPTER 11



Dorian hadn't met Simon, although he'd heard so much about him, and he'd seen pictures. Simon had never struck him as anything special in terms of his appearance— attractive in an understated way, but not in Robin's league. He had to remind himself before he entered the dining room where Robin and Simon were already waiting, that Robin hadn't left him for Simon. Robin had left him because Dorian was a closeted twat who hadn't respected Robin's wishes or needs.

Dorian took a deep breath and opened the door. He was fucking Dorian Forbes, the darling of the silver screen, with countless adoring fans, he should not feel nervous or threatened by his ex-partner's boyfriend.

Robin gave him a look as he entered, a look he'd had directed at him repeatedly over the six years they were together. The message was clear, behave or tonight would not end well for him.

Ben and Ashley were seated at one end and Ben's mother at the other, he'd always had a soft spot for Elena, probably because she loved to embarrass Ben as often as possible. Chris and Dara were seated opposite Robin and Simon, and Catlin, Ben's little sister was also in the mix, leaving an open seat for him opposite Robin.

"Hi, I'm Simon." He stood and held out his hand to Dorian. "Pleasure to meet you."

They shook hands. "Likewise."

Simon had pale blue eyes, a rare colour, yet they were warm and devoid of malice. It suddenly struck him why Robin was so smitten. Simon had no reason to be petty or discontent, he held himself with self-assurance and it was an attractive image. Or he was a bloody good actor.

“Oh, it’s the ex and the current beau,” cried Chris, as if he’d just realised.

“Thanks for the reminder, Chris,” Robin snapped. “Someone might have forgotten.”

Dorian hadn’t known Chris as well as Robin did, and Ben had sung his praises as a writer over his new script, but he did know Chris wasn’t always on the same planet as the rest of them.

Chris bit his lip. “Sorry. I didn’t think.”

He sat down and Karl arrived with a soup tureen. It was hard not to keep glancing in Simon’s direction. Robin was an attentive partner, always had been, and Dorian wondered if he was even more so due to the current situation. He didn’t blame Simon for being insecure over Robin, but at least it didn’t appear that he thought Dorian was a threat.

“I suppose it’s more of a surprise we’ve not met before,” Simon said.

“That’s my fault. My filming schedule often got in the way of things.”

Robin huffed. “Yes, well, it had to happen eventually. I’m sure we are capable of being civil.”

Simon chuckled. “We could even try for friendly.”

Ben, who had been receiving silent instructions from Ashley via pointed looks, was always a consummate host, and he launched into a story Dara had uncovered in the archive about one of his Regency relatives and an Egyptian-themed party held at the hall.

Dorian loved these stories, and Ben seemed to have so many of them. “I dunno, Ben, the Redbourns are more

theatrical than most actors I know. Maybe you missed your calling.”

Ben scoffed. “Hardly. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Someone needs to fill the vacuum since I’ll be taking a break. I’ve bits of promo I need to do, including a red carpet event, but after that, I’m lying low.”

“I thought you were done with those for your latest,” Ben said.

“The London one was delayed as the UK release is later.”

Dara grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “Are you going to take a plus one—a pretty bloke this time rather than a lassie?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. I don’t need to make a statement.”

Robin sat back in his chair. “They’re great publicity though. If we hadn’t split up it would have been great exposure for the Flint charitable venture with the two of us on the red carpet.”

Simon’s gaze fell to his soup, Ashley glared at Robin, and he winced as he must’ve realised how what he said must’ve sounded.

But it was Chris’s reaction that surprised Dorian. “What a dickish thing to say. I thought you knew better than that!”

Simon recovered, but his smile was tight. “It’s just an observation—I’m sure Robin didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, shit. I’m not suggesting it either.” He grabbed Simon’s hand. “I seem to be spending all of my time of late making up for being a thoughtless ass.”

Dorian had seen mocked-up pictures of himself and Robin on a red carpet, some of his fans were ardent supporters of him and Robin getting back together and trying to show how it would be for him to have a beautiful man by his side and not a beautiful woman. From what he’d seen they were harmless, a bit creepy, but he’d tried not to think too much about the obsessive nature of some people and Robin had mentioned

Simon had received a few dodgy messages so had closed his Instagram.

“We could all go,” he said. “Robin with Simon together as partners, and I’d be there as a friend and supporter of the happy couple. I know there’s a few mutterings about me and Robin getting back together, but maybe this’ll help nip those in the bud.”

“I’m not sure,” Robin snapped.

Simon seemed to consider it for a moment. “I could at least see if the dates would work.”

Robin frowned. Red carpet events had always been a sore point between them. He’d taken woman after woman, and Robin—if he went—was part of his wider entourage. “If Simon wants to attend, then I suppose I’m fine with it too. I’m heading back to the States in a couple of days so you’ll need to let me know when and I’ll check if it’s doable.”

He knew if Simon had objected then it would have been a flat refusal from Robin, Simon seemed to want to build bridges and Dorian thought the more decent people he could have in life, the better. He’d been surrounded by vipers and hangers-on for years, everyone wanting something from him.

“I imagine your line of work is always busy,” Dorian said, keen to look as if he was trying.

“Unfortunately so. There’s always something nasty on the go, but it’s better here than Essex.”

Ashley snorted. “Stop picking on Essex.”

“Truth hurts, Ashley.” Simon smirked. “But don’t worry you’re safe and sound here in leafy Hertfordshire.”

Ben had said Ashley was close to Simon, and he’d thought it an unlikely connection seeing how Simon was a police detective and Ashley’s dad was a bona fide gangster.

“Oh, have you anything juicy on at the moment?” Elena asked. She waved her spoon in Simon’s direction. “My book group is reading the new Richard Osman.”

“Mother,” Ben said, his tone exasperated. “You’ve been warned before about asking those sorts of questions.”

“It’s fine. I can’t discuss active cases, and trust me, you wouldn’t want to know the details. Humans can be pretty horrible to each other.” Simon turned to Dara. “Talking of horrible, Robin said you’d found a reference to the sixth earl being sent a severed hand as a warning.”

Dorian was impressed by how Simon had moved the conversation along and away from himself, there was real skill in being able to do that and Simon must have had practise. Dara’s story was entertaining, and he was a born speaker. Dorian found himself relaxing, the conversation jovial and light-hearted despite the gory subject matter. Robin had shifted as close as he could to Simon over the meal without sitting in his lap and Dorian watched them together. He’d seen a change in Robin, they’d talked a lot over the last few months, and now he was with Simon there was a radiance about him he didn’t remember from when they’d dated. They weren’t hiding anything. Robin’s panic at the press headlines, and his horror at his earlier misstep about the red carpet, showed a deepness of his feelings for Simon Dorian hadn’t truly appreciated before now. He wondered if he’d get an invite to the wedding, as he was sure it would only be a matter of time.

Mrs Weather had excelled herself with an amazing beef wellington and a St Clement’s pudding, which he relished every mouthful of, knowing he didn’t need to be in the gym at the crack of dawn to burn it off.

Robin yawned and declined the offer of drinks after dinner, citing having not slept much on the plane. He noticed Simon holding back and they all began to file out. “I’ll be up in a minute. I just want a word with Dorian if he has a mo.”

Robin’s gaze flicked between him and Dorian, pursed his lips but didn’t argue. “Don’t be long.”

Left alone in the dining room, Simon shut the door. He shoved his hands into his pockets and Dorian thought he was trying to be as non-threatening as possible. He wondered if this was what he was like when he was interviewing a witness.

“Did you mean it, about the red carpet?”

Dorian wasn't sure what he'd expected. A warning not to upset Robin or try anything on, or even a bit of posturing although none of those fitted with the type of man he'd heard Simon was. “Yeah, of course. I'll need to contact a couple of people but I reckon the film's publicity team would be stoked.”

“Y'know it's something Robin had always hoped you'd do as a couple?”

“Yeah, look I wasn't the partner he deserved back then. I listened too much to my management team and lost a huge part of me and, ultimately, the man I loved.” It was freeing to be honest. “I'm making changes, and they can only be for the better.”

“I have to admit, I'm having trouble rationalising this version of you with what I've heard.”

That was fair. “Robin leaving triggered me into thinking about what I should do. Nothing changed quickly, and it took several months for me to admit the real problem and even longer to act on it. Dorian Marsten never really existed, and he kept Dorian Forbes from being able to live. I honestly don't know what will happen—my future's not set.”

Simon smiled. “It's not like you can't pay your mortgage or would have to take the first job offered to put food on the table.”

“True that. I've also got good friends, some of which I need to call back when I'm ready, and then people like Ben who, despite me not deserving them, are always there for me.”

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” His stance changed, less self-secure. “You don't have to answer.”

“Go on.”

“Are you looking for a future with Robin?”

Dorian could see how much of Simon that took to ask and he was waiting for the worst. “No. That ship's sailed. I admit after we split I wanted him back—thought he would come

back—but we aren't each other's future. Probably never were.”

“He still has a lot of affection for you. And if he were to really want you, and it was returned, then I'll step aside. There's too much bad stuff in this world to be unhappy.”

Ben had alluded to Simon having a shitty ex-husband, and his job meant he must see the worst of humanity. He could see how much he loved Robin, was willing to put aside his own happiness if it meant Robin could be happy. He didn't think it had anything to do with their recent rough path. Simon was probably too good for Robin, certainly too good for Dorian.

“Nah, Simon, he doesn't want me. He's a different man now from when we got together, and even more so since we split. You've brought out the real Robin, I got a glimpse of it, but the Robin Flint I dated was a shadow of who he is today. We'd kill each other, and there's too much history to be more than friends.”

Simon appeared satisfied and relieved by the answer. “I wanted to ask, to clear that aspect between us, because you and Robin are friends—could be good friends eventually. I didn't want to be waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Robin loves you. I heard you'd had a bit of a bumpy patch recently, but when I see him look at you, it's obvious. He's scared shitless you're going to leave him.”

“I think you may be over-egging that part.”

He shook his head. “No. I was there when all this shit dropped about me and him, and then throw in the Ben angle, and Robin was almost on his knees hyperventilating over how you'd react.”

“I was with Ashley when we saw it. He called me in a complete state, I thought he was worried about his reputation more than I was upset over it.” He chewed his lip. “We need a proper talk. I thought we had but obviously not. He's such a knob.”

“I was never very good at that side of things either. At least Robin has you to put him right, we were as bad as each other.

But you've nothing to feel unsure over. Be that me, or anyone else."

He still didn't look convinced but there was no reason he should take Dorian's word for it. "Would be good if we can stop your crazy fans trying to get you back together. I've had to close my Instagram because I got some nasty messages."

"We do the red carpet. I could even post some photos of the two of us being friendly like."

Simon snorted. "I'm already a home-wrecking whore for being with Robin, I can't imagine the stink if they think I've tried to ensnare you too." He laughed. "I'd be a crab-infested floozy within seconds."

"We'll figure something out."

"Let's see if the red carpet trick will work. Otherwise it's likely the more rabid fans will only back off once you've got a partner. Until then, I'm staying off social media. At least under my real name."

Dorian hated how Simon had been swept up in the fallout of his life. It wasn't Dorian's fault, he knew he wasn't responsible for the actions of his fans, but it would have never come to this if he hadn't been hiding. Whoever had let the cat out of the bag was partly responsible and while he had a gut feeling about the culprit, he had no proof.

Simon excused himself, wanting to get to Robin and Dorian thought there might be a serious talk in the offing later. He was knackered but Ben had suggested a couple of brandies and he thought that would be just what he needed to wind down for the night.

CHAPTER 12



After spending the last hour chasing down an appointment for Ben that turned out to have been for two months prior, Alex succumbed to the slice of chocolate cake Mrs Weather had sent up along with his afternoon tea. Ben was a lovely man, but he was a whirlwind of disorganisation wrapped up in a designer suit. There was evidence that he could be capable of keeping things under check, and the business side of the hall ran well, but the rest of it appeared to happen by good luck or people being persistent if they wanted Ben to attend something.

The cake made up for the frustration and he made a deal with himself he would take a long walk after dinner, even if the intent would be to finish in the pub and have a beer with Dara.

His office door opened without anyone knocking and Dorian caught him in mid-moan as he ate a large bit of cake. “Should I leave you two alone?”

Alex chewed carefully and swallowed. “No, but what you could do is learn how to knock.”

He suspected Dorian wasn’t used to being spoken to in such a way, especially not by someone who could be considered as working *for* him. He’d learn, one way or another.

“It seems I left my manners in LA. Sorry.” He smiled, and Alex could see why he was such a popular leading man. “Do you have some time for me?”

He pointed his fork at the chair opposite. “Take a seat. You can tell me what you want while I finish my cake.”

“I’ve a red carpet event coming up. So I need a fancy car service, hotel and a stylist.”

“Don’t you already have those? Or at least work with certain people?”

“My management team would’ve arranged it. I haven’t a clue how to sort it out.” He rubbed the palm of one hand with the thumb of another, making Alex think it was an unconscious act of comfort. “I’d like a new suit as well.”

None of it was a particularly challenging ask. “I can probably get you an appointment with Ben’s tailor unless you want designer and then we could get you a private viewing with the boutique of your choice. The rest I have contacts for but will need a date.”

“Oh, I expected it to be more complicated.”

Alex took another bite of his cake before answering. “It’s my job. I’m a professional. Things that might look complicated to you, aren’t to me.”

“Is there a way to restart this conversation without me sounding like an arsehole?”

Alex laughed. “You’re not being an arsehole. But I do appreciate the sentiment.”

He pulled out the notebook he’d started for working with Dorian and made a few notes. “Leicester Square I take it, and so a suitably decent hotel nearby? Alternatively, if you would prefer more privacy, a stylist could come to the hall and the car would pick up and drop you back here afterwards.”

“I hadn’t thought of that option. I think I would prefer it.”

“Not surprising really.” He checked his notes. “There’ll be an after-show party, I presume?”

“Yeah, but I’m not obliged to attend.”

It wasn’t surprising Dorian didn’t want to go, and it sounded as if he would have given the whole thing a miss if it

had been up to him. “Life is too short to do things that’ll make you miserable. On a different note, will you have a plus one?”

“Not exactly, but Robin and Simon are thinking of attending as my guests if the dates work.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t that be a bit awkward... given the history?”

“Robin’s my ex, and I want to show I’m supportive of him and his new partner.”

He’d been poking around on some of the Instagram posts shipping Robin and Dorian. People were engrossed in the lives of the rich and famous, obsessively so in some cases, with reel after reel discussing perfect destination weddings or houses they’d love. There were even a couple discussing how to persuade Robin to ditch his boyfriend.

“Some of your fans are rather excited by the option that you and Robin could get back together.”

“Yeah, I know. So having Simon and Robin there as a couple will signify I’m backing them. And that was something else I’d like you to help with. If I give you the details, could you contact the event organiser and get them added?”

Dorian was more thoughtful than he’d given him credit for. “I can call on your behalf, but they might want you to verify that it’s you asking.”

“I doubt they’ll mind them coming.”

“I’m sure they won’t. You and your ex on the red carpet will be great publicity. Especially as he’s a Flint.” He chuckled. “It’s more they might not believe me.”

“Oh, I see.”

He wondered if there was an easy fix for this. “We could have me listed as one of your contacts on your official website with a dedicated email address, no doubt it’ll get flooded with all sorts of weird stuff but I can do a search for things we might be expecting and set up some rules to funnel things to the bin.”

“Yes, I suppose. I don’t manage that either, but I have the details of the guys who do.”

“I know you want to keep a low profile, but we’re going to need to put a few things in place and that’ll mean people need to know an official way to contact you in the interim.”

Dorian didn’t look comfortable with the idea but he was going to have to accept the way the world worked. “I’ll email Jarrett, the IT guy and get the site updated.”

“If you have an email you use for business then you could give me access and the log-in details and I could organise things that way.”

“Yeah, I do. I’ll send you them.

“Did you have a think about the list of non-normal people concerns we talked about?”

“Yeah. Hang on.” He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and handed it over.

Alex had dealt with documents in a worse state and he smoothed out the wrinkles to read Dorian’s ideas. Some of them were not inconsiderable, such as selling three US-based properties and hiring pretty much an entire team of people. “These will take a while.”

“I know. But on the top of the list is changing my manager and agent. I want to make sure things are coming to me not them so I’ll need to get the word out somehow and quickly.”

Alex knew Dorian wasn’t a businessman, but he needed to protect himself. “I really think you should consult a lawyer first, I’m sure you’ve all sorts of contracts in place and you don’t want to be liable or sued for something. Do you already have a legal team?”

Again Dorian appeared pained. “Yeah, they’ve got offices in London and LA. I’ve been in touch with the LA team about the next film I was supposed to do and the promo things for the last one that I might be able to get out of.”

“Then give me the details—the price you’ll be paying they can send someone from their London branch here.” He scribbled down a note. “Do you have them with you?”

Dorian extracted his phone from his jeans pocket. “I should do, might take me a while.”

Alex grabbed a sticky note and wrote down his Crofton Hall email and mobile number. “Here, send them on by email or text. I’ll set up a spreadsheet to capture everything and share it with you so you can see how everything is being kept.”

“Thanks, Alex, it’s all a bit overwhelming. I just want to get the premiere over and have the space to think things through.”

He smiled encouragingly. “Just do the best you can. You’re trying to figure out what your life will look like for you in the future—be kind to yourself as you do it.”

“Being famous isn’t what I thought it would be like. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve had the best of everything, but it’s come at a price.”

“You don’t have to pay the piper anymore. You could just retire and enjoy being out of the limelight. The fuss will die down and if you want you could fade away.”

He shook his head. “That’ll feel like I’m hiding. And I do want to continue acting, just not what I was doing before. My fans are great—mostly—even if some are a bit obsessed about my love life.”

“Or lack of. Which is why they are filling the void. I have to say some of them have amazing Photoshop skills.”

“You’ve seen them?” Dorian asked, sounding uncomfortable.

“Yes, I thought it prudent to see what might be the current social media vibe if we are going to get a communication team in place. But I was in the pub with Dara, Val and Chris, when some of the nonsense first appeared and Chris saw them on a site he follows.”

“Jesus.”

There was a soft knock and Chris peered around the door. “Speak of the devil,” Alex said with a chuckle.

Chris's brow crumpled. "What?"

"Never mind. How can I help? Archive stuff?"

"Actually, it's Dorian I'm after. Ben thought he might be with you. I wondered if I could have a minute."

He didn't wait for an answer and instead dug a USB drive out of his jean's pocket. "This holds a copy of *Hidden for the Duke*."

"The play based on the 1st Earl of Crofton?" Dorian asked, taking the device.

"Well, since you've time on your hands, I thought you'd like to read it. And, y'know, you did say you were thinking of theatre in the future."

Dorian stared at the little red drive. "You'd like me to be in it?"

"We're a bit far from that yet, but you never know... anyway, gotta dash."

Alex watched Dorian continue to stare at the device, Chris shooting away before he could get a negative reply.

"It's not going to explode," Alex said, which seemed to bring Dorian back to reality.

"Do you know the plot?"

"Only vaguely."

"A duke marries an actor masquerading as his twin sister. It's what they think the 1st Earl of Crofton did."

"Ah, there was a documentary about the hall. I meant to watch it before my interview but I never got to. I'll see if I can find it online somewhere." Alex smiled. "Maybe you could play the duke?"

Dorian bit his lip. "Maybe I could."

CHAPTER 13



Ashley couldn't remember the last time he'd made a real effort for a date. He'd dressed up for Davy's christening but in general, he'd been living in jeans, T-shirts and sweats. Ben had somehow managed to navigate parenthood without dropping his standards, but then Davy had less of a propensity to spew, piss and shit over his other father. His mum had warned him that romance would take a backseat once the baby arrived, but he hadn't realised it would fall so far down the pecking order. Him and Ben had become creative with quickies here and there when Davy napped but he was so tired he wasn't often in the mood and he was missing the intimacy of being able to spend real quality time with Ben.

They'd decided to make the most of tonight, complete with a bit of role-play that this was a chance meeting of strangers. Wedding rings were off, and they would flirt shamelessly in the bar, go on for dinner and back to the hotel. There should have been no reason for him to be nervous, he was meeting Ben and was on to a sure thing, but as he entered the bar he felt like a clueless teenager.

The bar was the swanky kind Ben liked, the sort of place where there was no draught lager and a bottle of wine started at fifty pounds for something closer to vinegar than merlot.

With the joint credit card and the wealth of the Crofton estate behind him, Ashley took a seat at the bar. Ben had a table reserved for when he got here, but for now Ashley would enjoy his drink in peace, or that was the plan. He'd ordered a bottle of what he thought was Japanese lager and checked his

phone to make sure there'd been no messages. Catlin had sent a picture of Davy asleep, and he smiled knowing he was with his doting aunty. He was halfway through the bottle when someone sat next to him. His first thoughts were it had to be Ben, since he'd sat down without invitation, but the guy dressed in what looked like an expensive suit was not his husband. He was attractive, rocking a scruffy beard that was all the fashion at the moment, and had smouldering dark eyes and a physique that would take time in the gym to maintain.

“I saw you on your own so I wondered if you'd mind the company? I hate to see a good-looking bloke drinking on their own.”

It had been a long time since someone had tried to chat him up in a bar. Especially when it wasn't a gay bar, as most men wouldn't risk their chances even if it was a more liberal-leaning establishment, maybe this guy's gaydar was particularly well-tuned. He had to admit it was doing his ego the world of good. “You can, but to manage your expectations, I'm not interested.”

“The night is young, we're both here on our own, so why ever not? I'm Quinn.”

The cocky manner might work on some but it wasn't the way to impress Ashley. “Because I said no, and you should respect that.”

“No? Oh come on, can't you give me a chance? I'm house-trained.”

“I just want a quiet beer. You'd be better off finding another mark.”

Quinn didn't seem to want to take no for an answer and leant over and placed his hand on Ashley's thigh. “I—”

Ashley knocked his hand away. “Bugger off.”

Ashley turned to see Ben had arrived. He was fucking stunning, as ever, in a navy three-piece suit and lavender shirt open at the collar. Ashley needed to get rid of this arse or he was going to ruin his fun.

Quinn let out a low whistle as he clocked Ben as well. “My word. Perhaps I’ll try my luck with him instead.”

Ashley had got used to Ben turning heads, and Ben had grown adept at getting rid of people with ease.

“He’s probably out of your league.”

Quinn slid off his chair. “I’m a big proponent of if you don’t ask you don’t get.”

As Ben reached the bar Quinn sidled up to him and Ben sent him away with a wry smile. Then he looked straight at Ashley across the bar and grinned. Ashley swallowed and raised his bottle in salute.

Moments later a glass of champagne was placed in front of Ashley and Ben took the seat next to him. “I hope I’m not being too presumptuous.”

“I suppose that depends on what you’re presuming.”

“That you wouldn’t mind my company.”

Ashley toyed with the stem of his glass. “Let me think, a beautiful man wanting to buy me champagne... it’s a tough one.”

“My name’s Ben.” He held up his glass.

“Ashley.” They clinked glasses. “To what do I have to toast that brought you to this place tonight? I really should offer up some silent thanks.”

“I have friends nearby, and I fancied a drink before I headed home.”

“Where’s home?”

Ben licked his lips and took a sip of his drink. “A little place in Hertfordshire. You?”

“I’m an Essex boy, although I like to think I’ve had some of the rough edges knocked off.”

It was strange talking to Ben as if they didn’t know each other, yet thrilling. They hadn’t met like this, he’d been working for Ben and they’d eventually succumbed to their

mutual attraction. Ben did have a long history of fly-by bar encounters, he wasn't sure if he was ready to see that side of him but then again...

"From where I'm sitting your edges look perfectly fine to me. But maybe I need a closer look."

Ben called the waiter over and said he'd reserved a table. Ashley followed Ben to a nook tucked away in a corner with a circular sofa. "Is this your regular spot?"

"Oh no, I think I've only been here a couple of times and that was years ago. But a friend told me the best tables to ask for were at the back, and I've always liked the best things in life, so I thought why not."

A simple sentence but it meant more than it said. This hadn't been one of Ben's old hunting grounds, he'd been here but it wasn't somewhere he'd been his old playboy self. Ashley was touched that he'd chosen somewhere with that foresight. Ben's past didn't bother him, but he didn't need reminding of it either.

"I ended up here by accident. Never been before, so perhaps we should celebrate the lucky coincidence."

"I'm celebrating that such an attractive man as you was willing to have a drink with me." He picked up his glass and clinked it against Ashley's.

Ashley stared over the top of his glass and bit his lip, something he knew Ben adored. "How do think you might want to celebrate?"

Ben shifted closer and placed his hand on Ashley's thigh. "There are countless possibilities. The night is ours to explore."

Ashley sipped his champagne. "Why do I get the sense you may have something in mind?"

Ben moved so his lips were at Ashley's ear. He smelt so good, Ashley loved Chanel Bleu, which seemed to be so perfect for Ben.

“If I’m being honest, I’d love to get my hands all over you. Peel you out of your suit, have you lying out across a bed. Begging to me to fuck you.”

The plan had been drinks, dinner at the ridiculously expensive hotel where they would only have to stagger a couple of floors upstairs to bed, but Ashley ached to have Ben touch him. He leant in and kissed him, pressing in closer and not caring who might be watching as he poured all his desire into his actions. Ben was an excellent kisser, and they separated breathless and Ashley’s cock hard.

“How about we get out of here?”

Ben smirked. “Shall I push our dinner reservation back?”

“Or cancel it. Unless they can deliver via room service because I doubt I’m going to want to leave our bed afterwards.”

“Have I told you how much I love you recently?”

“You know I can never hear it enough.”

Ben closed the tab at the bar, and they headed outside. The early evening bar-hoppers were out in force and Ashley grabbed Ben’s hand, determined not to be separated. This was not a pleasant stroll but a brisk trot down Kensington High Street.

They arrived at the hotel, and Ben handed him the room key. “We’re all checked in. Let me sort out dinner and I’ll meet you there.”

“Hurry up!” Ashley said taking the card and stealing a kiss.

“Don’t get naked I’ve been dreaming for months about peeling you out of a suit. As much as I love your arse in jeans, nothing compares to you in your finest.”

Ashley was in no mood to dawdle and even waiting for the lift was an exercise in restraint. The room was on the seventh floor and the hotel’s numbering system sent him the wrong way, when he finally found the room, it turned out to be a suite. He should have known Ben would use any opportunity

to show off. There was a bottle of champagne waiting but he decided to hold off on opening it as he didn't intend to give Ben any time to drink it before he had him on his back.

He threw open the bedroom door and was greeted by a massive bed, he found his overnight bag and dug out the lube. Hearing Ben arrive, he raced to the bedroom door and leant on the frame. "Success, or do we have to go downstairs eat dinner and try not to shag each other over a table?"

"All sorted."

Ben stalked towards him, there was no other way to describe it and they met with a deep, lusty kiss. He'd always loved the way Ben kissed, he somehow managed to make Ashley's head spin, conveying all his desire and passion as their lips met.

He tugged Ben towards the bed, he wanted to be part of a tangle of limbs, feel Ben's naked body pressed against him. They may spend every night cuddled up together, but he'd missed this side of their relationship.

Ben pushed him backwards and he landed on the bed. He watched as Ben began to peel away his suit and Ashley got with the programme and set about removing his own clothes. He had grand plans, and to start with he wanted Ben to fuck him into this mattress.

Ashley threw him the lube which Ben caught with one hand. "Time for you to remind me why I agreed to marry you."

"No fear, darling."

Ben knew how to make his body sing and, now, when Ashley needed him most, Ben played him beautifully. He begged for Ben to fuck him as he worked him open, desperate for the connection, to have Ben consume him.

Ashley groaned with pleasure when Ben pushed his cock inside. It had been far too long since they had taken their time over this. There was no need for a quick fuck, they wouldn't be interrupted and Ashley lay back and let Ben worship him. He cried in delight as Ben found the perfect rhythm, held on

tight as Ben fucked him through his orgasm before succumbing to his own.

They collapsed together. Ashley's heart racing, and his cheeks hurt from grinning.

Ben nuzzled into his neck. "You are so wonderful," he said, pressing a kiss to Ashley's collarbone.

"I've missed you, missed this." His happy chemicals were dancing. "We need to make more time for us."

"It'll get easier."

"It has to, because I'm not sure I can cope, and Davy already has to suffer through my cack-handed attempts of being a father."

Ben levered himself up so he was propped on an elbow. "Ashley, you're doing a great job. Honestly, you're being far too hard on yourself."

"I'm just so tired all the time. The mums at our playgroup all seem so much more with it. It's bad enough being the only bloke, but to be surrounded by all these amazingly competent women makes me feel like shit." He'd been bottling this up for a while and it felt good to admit it, even though he didn't have an answer.

"Some people are just good at putting up a front. You've never compared yourself to anyone else in other parts of your life, why do it for this?"

He huffed, feeling stupid but still couldn't shake he should be doing better. "Because Davy is important. I don't want to screw this up."

"You won't. We won't. We're partners in this, Ashley. I know our son is going to be perfectly fine because we're there for him and each other." Ben leant in and kissed him. "We're also able to tell each other when things aren't working, and I'm telling you it's okay."

"Like when I wouldn't let you put his name down for Harrow?"

“That discussion is not over.” Ben smirked. “But let’s not forget when I refused to let you name him Raphael. Or Ezio.”

“Your anti-Italian sentiment is showing,” he teased.

“You know I am very sentimental about certain Italian-descended Essex men, but the next Earl of Crofton was not going to be named after a ninja turtle or a character from one of the computer games you play.”

“Philistine.”

“I’ve been called worse. And you’re the one who vetoed Edmund.”

“For good reasons: Blackadder and the git from the Narnia books. I also scuppered Arthur, Theobald and Terence.”

Ben chuckled. “Perhaps it was for the best.”

He’d not been serious with some of his baby name suggestions but it had been fun to rile Ben, who he knew would insist on a traditional name. “At least we could both agree on David.”

Ben nuzzled into his neck and Ashley felt so happy. Tonight was about reconnecting, being more than Davy’s daddy, and finding time for themselves. At some point, he’d demand a glass of champagne and some room service but for now, he was content to cling tighter to Ben and lie listening to the steady beating of his heart.

CHAPTER 14



Alex scrolled in horror through the emails in the inbox Dorian had sent him the access and login details to. He'd thought Ben's was bad but it was nothing compared to the shitstorm of Dorian's unread emails. To be fair to Dorian before he'd come out, he'd been well-organised and had replied to all relevant messages in an acceptable timeframe. All that had stopped three weeks ago, and now there were people screaming at him from every possible source.

At least the first task of getting him added as primary contact to Dorian's various platforms had been completed, and after a lovely chat with Jarret the IT guy, he was now confident he had a handle on what Dorian's communication team used to do. That he'd stood them down by email had caused over a hundred emails on its own, with all sorts of meaningless threats as Dorian didn't appear to have stopped paying them and would see out the contract though they weren't required to work on his behalf any longer. They'd need a new team, there was no way he would have the capacity to pick up what they did, but at least he knew what he was up against.

He thought he'd done well by arranging Dorian an appointment with his solicitor, who had been difficult about coming to Crofton Hall until Alex had made it clear that there were plenty of other legal professionals around and Dorian was free to choose a new one if dissatisfied with their service. Now someone senior was coming and Alex had prepared a long list for Dorian to discuss with them—Dorian needed to

get his head out of the sand before something happened Alex couldn't fix.

Just like he had done for Ben, Alex reorganised the emails into new folders and colour-coded them by topic. Two hours later, he had a list of immediate actions, and a plan for Dorian to work through, along with a brewing headache.

He fished out a couple of paracetamols from his stash of emergency medicine he kept in his desk drawer and used the remains of his cold coffee to wash them down. Today was meant to be easy. He'd blasted through Ben's needs by lunch, checked in with the Archive Dragons, who were bickering about the outcome of a civil war battle, which he'd decided not to intervene in, so thought he could apply a light touch to a few things for Dorian. Boy, had he been wrong. Worse was, in theory, it wasn't his problem, but he couldn't sit back and do nothing now he knew what needed to be done.

First things first, he would reclaim a little bit of mental calm and so he ran through a ten-minute guided meditation practise using an app on his phone. Much restored and with the headache kept at bay, he sent Dorian a text saying he needed to speak to him.

He got on with a few other tasks, not expecting an immediate response, and was halfway through redesigning an expense form for the weddings coordinator when Dorian arrived, backing into his office, again without knocking.

The chastisement died on his lips as Dorian turned and Alex saw he was carrying a tray with coffee and cake for two. "I thought you might like a little pick-me-up. Mrs Weather said you were particularly fond of her lemon drizzle."

"Thank you. That's very thoughtful of you."

Dorian grinned and Alex felt a spark in his breastbone that had little to do with his love of cake.

"I am capable of it, on the rare occasion." Dorian set the tray down and handed Alex a coffee. "I'm sort of hoping it's not apology cake since you texted about wanting to see me."

Alex slid the list he'd prepared across the desk. "You don't need to apologise to me for anything. I've spent the last couple of hours delving through your unopened emails and there's a few things you need to sort out as soon as possible."

Dorian picked up the list. He looked resigned as he read. "Nothing I wasn't expecting."

"The ones marked with an asterisk are legal, I suggest forwarding all relevant communications to your lawyers before you meet as they are in the main about contractual obligations."

"Yeah, I've stood down a number of teams but not stopped paying anyone. Most are in the US and I'd want people in the UK since I'm here now."

"I daresay you'll have to pay out the contracts either in advance or continue until the term ends." He sipped his coffee, it was good and he wondered if Dorian had made it or had asked Karl to. If it was Dorian he might put him on regular coffee duty.

"You've already got my list of folks I want to put in place, but some of them I need to put out some feelers and probably interview."

"Which ones in particular?"

"The obvious is a new agent and manager but I have no idea where to start, I first want to sever ties properly with Zak and Marisa."

Alex had seen many emails from two individuals called Zak and Marisa, and he didn't think they'd be easily appeased, although Dorian was a smart man and he couldn't imagine he hadn't had some sort of break clause written into their contracts. "Let your lawyers deal with them. I would say don't engage directly unless they tell you. Who else is on your priority list?"

"I had a publicist who worked along with a communication and social media team, a stylist, PA..."

He'd only realised how involved being a movie star was when Dorian had given him his long list of people he used to

employ. In the business world, there were whole hierarchies in place but Dorian was just one man.

“We can sort it all out. You’ll have people coming to you, I bet, you just need to be careful that you pick the right people.”

Dorian stared at his cake, playing with the cream with his fork. “Not sure I trust myself to do that right now.”

“Doesn’t need to be now. And when you’re ready, I’ll be happy to help where I can. I can screen candidates for the less important roles. Once you’re more your old self you can start reaching out to your friends for recommendations.”

“I don’t want to be the old me. To be honest I don’t know what I want.”

Alex felt for Dorian, he really did. He was lost, looking for answers and things that were familiar but nothing would be the same again. He had a few ideas he thought could be simple but effective. “You might want to think about recording a few super short videos for your fans—nothing arduous—just that you’re doing okay and taking some time to think.”

Dorian was lost, he needed time and not to be overwhelmed. “I’ll think about it.”

“I tell you what, we’ll get your lawyers to deal with all the old stuff and I know a couple of people in communications from my previous job, so we can put someone in temporary to hold the line and keep things ticking over so you don’t need to worry about it.”

“That would be amazing.”

He prided himself on performing minor miracles. “I’ll get on it tomorrow. Just so you know I’ve got everything in place for the premiere—car and stylist booked, and your suit is being delivered the day before.”

Dorian smiled. “Wonderful. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Nonsense it’s my job.”

Dorian smiled and Alex had to hold back a whimper. The man was gorgeous and wasn’t the overbearing knob he’d been expecting. He was going to put a lid on this before he let his

libido take the wheel and he got himself in too deep and fell for a man who was so out of his league it was ridiculous.

* * *

Ashley chewed the inside of his cheek. He'd met Simon for breakfast before he'd started work, and Simon had moaned about how he'd spent an hour the day before going over the report he'd made to the cyber-crimes unit over the messages he'd received on Instagram. A little probing had led Ashley to learn that Robin had received messages telling him to dump Simon and offers to remove him if he so desired. Simon had dismissed them outright. He'd seen plenty of these sort of things in his police career and didn't think there was anything real behind the threats. But whether it was his lack of sleep or the overprotectiveness he'd developed since becoming a father, Ashley couldn't leave it but didn't know what to do.

He spotted Dorian reading in the library, and his immediate thought was to ask if he'd received anything similar to Robin.

"Hey, Ashley. Are you all right? You look a little peaky."

He still had Davy with him, asleep in his car seat. He sat down and placed Davy by his feet. "Can I ask you something? I might be overthinking."

"Sure."

"Have you been getting direct messages about you and Robin getting back together?"

"I've been keeping a wide berth of social media. I uninstalled most of the apps after New York."

He should have expected that, Ben was similar. "It's just that Robin's had a few, and from what Simon said there's a dodgy element to them."

Dorian got out his phone. "Let me get on Instagram and check. Alex did mention that there were a lot of comments still going around, and I'm sort of hoping it'll all peter out after our trot across the red carpet."

“I’m probably being daft. Simon isn’t worried, but since you’re here I thought I’d ask.”

“No worries.”

It took a few minutes, and Dorian had made several attempts to remember his password. Ashley gnawed at his bottom lip as he waited.

Dorian wrinkled his nose. “There’s a lot of shit in my messages. Honestly, I don’t know why people think I’d read them.”

“Anything about you and Robin?”

“Fucking tons. Mostly that I’m an asshole for being such a shit to him. There’s a few suggesting we try again, but there’s thousands in here, Ashley, I could be here for days.”

He sighed. “It doesn’t matter. I suppose if Simon isn’t bothered then I shouldn’t be either.”

“No, you’re right to want to protect your friend. I tell you what, I’ll keep close to both him and Robin at the event. If someone does come and challenge Simon I’ll step in, although security should be on the case too.”

The offer did make him feel better. “Thanks, I don’t know why I’m like this. It’s probably sleep deprivation.”

“Lack of sleep is one of my kryptonites as well. Although mine’s been for a few nights on a gruelling shooting schedule, yours is more long-term.” He smiled at Davy. “Hopefully when I get to the kids stage, I’ll be prepared.”

Ashley hadn’t thought Dorian would be the type to want children. “Somehow I’ve never pictured you as a father.”

“There’s lots of things I never thought I’d be. But I’ve always liked kids... never had the conversation with Robin though. He’d always been rather lukewarm on the topic.”

“Oh.” From what Simon had told him, Ashley hadn’t got that impression.

Dorian cocked his head. “I gather that’s not your take on it.”

“Simon wants kids. And according to him, Robin has made noises that he’d rather pass the title down directly than to his nephew or nieces.”

Dorian’s expression was difficult to decipher, and Ashley guessed it had been hard to hear that children were something else he’d lost a chance at with Robin.

“They’ll make amazing dads.” Dorian cleared his throat and stood. “Sorry, I’ve just remembered I was supposed to call my lawyer.”

Ashley watched Dorian retreat. He felt a little better with the Simon situation, but a bit of a shit over talking about kids with Dorian. He imagined Dorian had more demons than any of them gave him credit for, and Ashley could probably stand to be a bit more supportive. Davy gurgled and he scooped him up, his warmth a solid comfort that never failed to make him feel better.

CHAPTER 15



Dorian used to love the glamour of the red carpet. The thrill of screaming fans and the flashing lights of cameras used to make him feel like he was the most important man in the world. But that belonged to a different life, now he had a growing ball of anxiety in his stomach, he thought he might be sick and he hadn't even left Crofton Hall yet. A stylist had primed and cooed over him, and he looked as good as any other time he'd got dolled up to meet the public but he couldn't stop his hands shaking.

Alex popped his head around the door of Dorian's room. "Car's here, and Robin and Simon are waiting downstairs."

He let out a loud breath and tried to force down the panic. "Thanks."

Alex took a few steps closer. "Dorian, are you all right?"

He scrunched his eyes shut for ten seconds and balled his hands into fists, his perfectly manicured nails digging into his palms. "Just a sec."

When he opened his eyes Alex was crouching in front of him. "It's okay to be worried."

Alex had been great arranging everything for tonight, not letting him faff or change things. But that was nothing compared to when he'd gone through his email, prioritised the stuff that could cause the biggest messes and set him on an even keel—he couldn't have asked for more. On top of that, Alex was such a nice bloke. Cute too, but he got the sense he wasn't the type to mix business with pleasure and Dorian

knew to respect boundaries. “It’s all come sooner than I thought. And this is my first proper venture into public since I came out.”

“The statement we released onto your website has set the scene, you’ll be here to support the cast and crew, and thank everyone for the space—so don’t worry.” He squeezed Dorian’s hand before standing. “Remember, you’re not going to be out there on your own. I know you thought this would be supporting Robin and Simon, but the reality is they’ll be an important crutch for you. Lean on them.”

Alex seemed to know the right things to say, he was so self-assured and Dorian trusted his judgement even though they’d not known each other long. “I don’t want everything to be about me anymore.”

“It’s going to take a while before that stops happening and you are going to a premiere of a movie you’re starring in, so not an easy ask for today.” Alex reached out and straightened his tie. “That’s better, the knot was on the wonk.”

He wasn’t sure he’d heard that correctly. “Say what now?”

“Your tie wasn’t right. Really, Dorian, by your age you should be able to cope with a Windsor knot. Now come on.”

Alex was heading out and Dorian couldn’t remember the last time someone had left him lost for words. He realised his hands weren’t shaking anymore and he no longer felt like he’d throw up, so whatever healing balm Alex produced he wanted more of it. Maybe he could persuade him to spend some time with him that had nothing to do with his schedule, or getting him sorted. He’d really love to get to know Alex better. He hurried after him.

Robin and Simon were waiting in the entrance hall. He’d seen Robin dressed up to the nines, and he looked amazing in a dark wool suit, but it was Simon who surprised him. In his three-piece slate grey bespoke number, Simon would not be out of place on the red carpet, in fact, he’d be the talk of the town. As a couple they were glorious. “Gentlemen, don’t you scrub up well,” he said as he approached.

“You’re all simply perfect,” Alex said, herding them towards the door. “Your carriage awaits and will turn into a pumpkin at ten forty-five if you’re not ready to leave.”

Dorian hadn’t wanted to attend the after-show party but had offered the chance to Robin, who had declined. “If you want to stay later it can still be arranged.”

Simon grinned. “Thanks but we’ve other plans. Robin’s back off to the US the day after tomorrow so... well, y’know.”

“Then you’ll be flying solo on your way back, Dorian,” Alex said, and Dorian was grateful Alex had shut down the conversation. “Security at the venue are aware of the arrangements and I would suggest you all leave together and drop Simon and Robin off wherever they intend to go and you can come back here.”

“I can arrange a car to pick us up,” Robin said. “I have a driver on call if needs be.”

He’d had the same in LA. Always someone available to make sure he could get from A to B with the minimum fuss.

“We’re not taking the bus then?” Simon teased. “We could get a kebab on the way home.”

Robin tutted. “No bus, no kebab. Honestly, read the room. I want to do something nice for you.”

Simon hip-checked him. “What about a kebab with extra chilli sauce?”

Alex laughed. “Gentlemen, we really do have to have you on your way. Simon, let me text you the address of a place that does amazing gourmet kebabs that’ll help you convince Robin you’re not a pleb.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m descended from the Earl of MacLove,” Simon said, with a pretend haughty accent. “Pity he was a traitor who lost the family seat six hundred years ago. I could have been even posher than Robin.”

Robin gave him a little push. “*Could have* is the operative word here. Move it, MacLove, or we’ll make Dorian late for

his party and, trust me, you don't want to deal with a grumpy Dorian.”

Robin had seen him at his best and his worst, there weren't many who knew him as well as Robin did, he opened his mouth to make the point then decided Simon didn't need to hear that about an ex.

“I doubt he's as grumpy as you when you when you don't have enough sleep,” Simon countered before Dorian could.

The more he saw of them as a couple the more he realised how good they were together. Robin would need someone to keep him grounded, his life was so different to what it was when he lived with Dorian and without someone like Simon he could easily find himself lost in the corporate jungle and the target of every gold digger going.

“No one is as grumpy as Robin when he's tired.” He slapped Simon on the back. “And he's your problem now.”

Simon let loose a whole-body chuckle and Robin scowled. They piled into the limo, Dorian letting them go first and then taking the seat opposite.

Alex peered into the car through the open door, and Dorian had a strange pang that he'd wished he'd asked Alex to come too. “Enjoy your evening, gentlemen. There's champagne on ice if you want, plus water. That should keep you going to get to the cinema.”

Dorian wondered how much of this lifestyle Simon had been exposed to. He'd been dating Robin for over a year but from the various social media posts he'd seen Simon wasn't often with Robin when he attended the various glamorous events, or at least he wasn't pictured. He'd also not mentioned to either of them his conversation with Ashley, and wasn't going to bring it up now, but he would keep Simon in his line of sight.

“Shall I open the champagne?” Simon asked.

Robin glanced at the bottle's label. “Ah, not a bad offering. Yes, I'll have a glass.”

Simon yawned and covered his mouth. “Sorry, I was on lates until yesterday. I had to swap with a colleague to get tonight and tomorrow off.”

Robin took hold of Simon’s hand. “Did you manage to get the day after as well?”

“No, sorry. I tried, but a couple of the cases are full-on and I have to put my leave in insanely in advance to guarantee something. I only got this because my boss has a crush on Dorian and I’ve agreed to cover her anniversary in a few months.”

Dorian hadn’t thought it would be an issue, yet here was Simon calling in favours in order to come tonight. He’d not considered other people for so long, always got what he asked for and it was something else he would have to change.

“Then I think you should let me and Robin do the work,” Dorian said, retrieving the bottle from an ice bucket. “Robin, I think there’ll be glasses in the console to your left.”

There weren’t many of this type of high-end luxury car that he hadn’t been in and the Maybach was one of his favourites—he’d almost bought one for himself. Sure enough, Robin found the glasses and Dorian opened the champagne with a satisfying *pop* and managed not to spill any.

“Any advice on how to avoid looking like a muppet?” Simon asked.

“What about other events you’ve attended?” Dorian asked. “Robin moves in some rather well-heeled circles these days.”

He saw Robin’s pinched expression but Simon didn’t seem bothered by the question. “I’ve been to a few black-tie galas with Robin. I go when I can around my work as it can be a bit unpredictable. But I’m there as Robin’s plus one not because I’m anyone important, so I’m usually a blur in the background, which suits me fine.”

“You’re important to me. You know I want you there.” Robin kissed the knuckles of Simon’s hand. It was so endearing. They’d not been like that, his and Robin’s dynamic had been different. Here Robin was more in the lead and he

could see that Simon was happy for him to be. Not something he'd have expected from a copper.

"I know I am. I'm completely fine not being in the centre of attention, which is why getting the online hassle recently weirded me out a bit at first before I spoke to someone at work." Simon shrugged. "Unless you tell me any different, I'm just gonna stay close to Robin or you and smile."

"There'll be reporters there," Dorian warned. "I'm likely to be their main target but don't be surprised if they ask you questions. Don't wander too far from me and I'll protect you."

"I've had media training thanks to the police so I know how to talk to the press," Simon said. "I'll just treat it like a press conference for a murder enquiry but giving less away."

Robin smiled fondly. "We should probably get you some training for the non-murderly parts of your life. Ones you're meant to be enjoying."

"I'm not that good an actor, sweetheart." Simon winked at Robin and drank his champagne.

Dorian laughed at Robin's mock outrage and he topped up Simon's glass. "People should get to see more of Simon, there'd be no questions about you wanting to get back together with me."

"We agreed to keep Simon's media presence light because of his job," Robin said. "We tend not to share too many photos and I've been clear I wanted my private life to be private."

The recent shitstorm had put paid to that but the adventures in New York hadn't helped. "What's the plan for after tonight? Few additional photo opportunities as a couple then return to the status quo?"

"I've a couple more months in New York so it's not so easy to play a doting couple in public at a distance."

Dorian thought Robin should come home but it wasn't his place to say. "You'll be over or Simon could come to you in New York."

“We’ll figure something out,” Simon said. “It’s not like it’s for long.”

He wondered if they’d had another big talk after Simon had cornered Dorian after the dinner at Crofton Hall. There was something about the way Simon held himself that spoke to a new self-assuredness when discussing Robin being in New York that hadn’t been there before.

“Hopefully we’ll be house-hunting during my next visit. It’s been tricky finding properties in the right area.”

“It’s not the area but because Robin won’t live anywhere with less than six bedrooms and a stable block for his imaginary ponies.” Simon’s banter was playful, not accusatory. “At this rate, it’d be quicker to build something.”

“I’ve had people looking into the option,” Robin admitted. “But planning permission’s the issue. It could take forever and we’ve been waiting long enough.”

They fell into easy conversation about ideal properties, Dorian admitting he no longer knew what he wanted. “I had half a mind on buying one of those Georgian houses in Russell Square or Pimlico but I’m not sure I want to live in central London.”

“Ben won’t turf you out,” Robin reassured him. “Don’t rush into it. If you’re after something particular let me know, we might have something in the Flint portfolio that might suit. At least on a temporary basis.”

It was nice of Robin to offer but he hadn’t a clue at the moment and the idea of leaving Crofton Hall made him feel kind of queasy. A little voice reminded him, quite unnecessarily, that if he wasn’t at the hall he wouldn’t get to see as much of Alex.

The champagne bottle was soon empty and they debated opening a second but they weren’t far away now and Dorian would prefer to have his wits about him when he stepped out of the car. They should be guided into a staging area that would allow them to pull up to a pre-arranged point where he

would wave to his fans and the three of them would then head inside after stopping to talk to the paps.

The car slowed and came to a halt, the window slid down to reveal a woman wearing a headset. “Good evening, Mr Marsten. You’ll be arriving behind Miss Andrews in about three minutes. If you could exit the car first followed by your guests, I’d appreciate it.”

He’d not spoken or been in any contact with Gail, his co-star, since he’d come out to the world during their interview. Not the best way to have handled this, but then he’d not been thinking straight.

“Perfect. You’re aware I’m not staying for the after-show?”

“Yes, sir. We’ll see to it that your car will be waiting for you as requested.”

Dorian sat back and took a deep breath. This would be his first public appearance since he’d come out. There were always bigots and arseholes but he hoped most of them would have stayed away.

“Are you okay?” Simon asked. “Big moment, right? But it’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

“Thanks, Simon.” He appreciated the sentiment, they were both facing the unknown. This was Simon’s first time at such an event, and for Dorian it was not knowing what reaction he would receive.

The car moved forwards and Dorian pushed the residual worries deep inside, he was an actor, a bloody good one, and now was the time to use all his skills to show the world he was still the same sexy, suave Dorian, and the only difference was he now admitted he liked to suck cock.

It was time. The car came to a halt and the door opened. Dorian stepped out.

The crowd had already witnessed the arrival of several of the other actors from the movie, they were warmed up and screaming and cheering, and at the sight of Dorian exiting his car the noise rose exponentially. He stared around seeing huge

banners in the crowd, rainbow flags and placards proclaiming their devotion. His heart swelled at the acceptance, that his fans loved him no matter who he might end up loving. As he made his way down the red carpet, he was aware that Robin and Simon were following.

He waved and winked just as if he would have if nothing had happened and he saw Gail waiting for him, smiling with her arms wide open. He broke into a run, gathered her up in his arms and spun her around, much to the delight of the audience. Reporters were closing in but they knew the boundaries and he could spot the unobtrusive security circulating a mile off.

From out of the corner of his eye he saw Robin had also been approached but he'd lost sight of Simon.

“Dorian, have you anything you'd like to say to your fans, especially given this amazing turnout?” He wasn't sure which of the reporters had asked, but he'd take these sort of easy questions all night long.

“I'm just so humbled by the response. It wasn't an easy decision to come out, and I feel I need to apologise for not being my true self for so long. I love these guys.”

He glanced behind to see Robin had been stopped by a reporter and Simon seemed to be staring towards the entrance. “I'll be right back, I need to make sure a friend of mine's not being left out.”

Dorian caught up with Simon and saw what had distracted him. A young lady, not even out of her teens, had jumped the barrier a few metres away.

She was picking up speed, unimpeded by the long dress she was wearing or her heels, her hand out in front brandishing a fan. It was then he realised she was heading straight in their direction. Her eyes were wide and staring, an unhinged quality about them that gave Dorian pause.

She lunged at Simon.

“Robin belongs to Dorian. If you won't leave then I'll remove you so they can be happy.”

Dorian shoved her to one side but Simon was already sinking to his knees. He pitched forwards and rolled onto his back. For a moment Dorian didn't know what to do, but he threw himself to Simon's side.

He was vaguely aware that the woman had been yanked away and was now buried under a pile of security officers. Simon was pressing his hand to his stomach. "Fuck," Simon growled. "You need to apply some pressure."

Dorian did as he was told, the wetness of Simon's blood making his hands sticky.

Someone was kneeling next to them. Paramedics took over but he could tell Simon was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

He heard Robin screaming Simon's name, and then strong hands were pulling him away. Security had stepped in, finally. "We need to get you clear, Mr Marsten."

He tried to struggle but they weren't having any of it. "But Simon?"

"He's got the best care with the ambulance crew... they need space to work."

Dorian tried to lunge forwards one last time, but he was ushered inside the cinema, Simon's blood drying on his hands.

CHAPTER 16



*R*obin sobbed uncontrollably in his arms. The last four hours had been a cycle of rage and despair. Simon's parents were in a similar state and Simon's dad, Jim, was dozing on a sofa in the waiting room they'd been escorted to, his mum, Hayley, curled up next to him. Despite washing his hands several times Dorian still had Simon's blood under his nails.

Now they were waiting at St Thomas' hospital for the outcome of an investigational surgery that he couldn't remember the proper name for and Robin had discovered the hard way that no matter how rich someone was, or what their name was, there wasn't any way around hospital bureaucracy and surgeons could not be rushed.

Robin pulled back and wiped his eyes. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

"No, no, no. You don't apologise for this." Dorian hadn't told Robin what the girl had said about removing Simon so they could be together. He didn't think Robin hearing that at the moment would help, there was already enough guilt in the room over them not treating the threats as real, and saying anything would cause a downward spiral he wasn't sure he could get Robin out of.

Simon had been rushed to A&E in an ambulance, Robin trapped inside the cinema alongside Dorian and had been unable to go with him, he'd wailed like a banshee until he'd been released. The countless guests and reporters inside had been wise to give them a wide berth, Robin was upset, and had enough influence to destroy a career in a moment of grief and

anger. Eventually, they'd heard Simon had been taken to St Thomas' and Dorian had insisted he'd go with Robin.

The door opened and a man in scrubs entered. "I'm Mr Fitzwilliam, the surgeon who's just operated on Mr MacLove."

Simon's dad jolted awake. Dorian had never seen three people look so terrified, each one waiting for the worst but desperate for it not to be the case.

"He was lucky, I couldn't see any damage to a major organ, but it was close."

"Where is he? Can we see him?" asked Robin. Dorian thought Robin should have known the answer to the second one.

"He's still in recovery at the moment and he'll be transferred to a ward for observation. Thankfully, we're not looking at a visit to ICU. You'll be able to see him later during visiting hours."

"How long will he need to be kept in?" asked Hailey.

"A few days, I can't be more specific at the moment."

"So he's out of immediate danger?" asked Robin.

"Yes, but as I said, he will need to be observed depending on the situation, additional tests and scans might be required."

"Then I think it highly likely we'll be requesting a transfer to a private room," Robin said. "I'm sure you can make use of the bed on the ward."

Mr Fitzwilliam scowled. "And you are who, exactly? Mr and Mrs MacLove are listed as next of kin."

"Simon is my partner. I'm not listed because I've been working in New York, but my family will meet all medical expenses to transfer Simon to private accommodation either within this hospital or to another."

"I can discuss that with Mr MacLove in the morning. His healthcare decisions are his own to make, he is not mentally impaired."

Dorian was sure Fitzwilliam had no idea who he was talking to and now Simon was out of danger Robin was going to want him wrapped in cotton wool and would use the full extent of his Flint muscles to do so.

“Fine. We’ll see him in the morning.”

“Visiting hours aren’t until the afternoon. You’ve all been through a traumatic event. Go get some sleep and come back. He’s in good hands.”

Dorian grabbed Robin before he could stand and do something obnoxious, they were all tired and adrenaline was running low. “You can sort it later, Robin. Let’s get Simon’s parents to your apartment and once you’ve had a few hours kip, you can do your thing without being an asshole.”

If looks could kill he’d be toast. “I don’t expect you to understand, Dorian, but someone I care about more than life itself could have died tonight.”

He wouldn’t rise to Robin, he was angry and lashing out and Dorian was in a convenient place to take the flak and it was the least he could do. “Fair enough. But you’re not going to help him if you’re a wreck.”

Robin didn’t answer but instead whipped out his phone and called someone to have a car pick them up. He glanced at Dorian. “Would you prefer to go back to Crofton Hall? I can have the driver take you after he drops us off.”

He recognised a conciliatory action when he saw one. “Yeah, you don’t need me under your feet and I can fill Ben and Ashley in on what’s gone on in the morning.”

Robin and the MacLoves needed to be in London, he didn’t. And Robin didn’t need an ex-boyfriend getting in the way. He was exhausted, he needed his bed and tomorrow he’d worry about the media shitstorm that was no doubt building. All that mattered was that Simon sounded like he was out of danger—the rest they could handle.

* * *

Dorian stared into the middle distance. He'd arrived home in the early hours of the morning with an update on Simon's condition, Ashley having had kittens when the news of the attack had broken across social media.

"Dorian, are you all right?"

Dorian started in his seat as he hadn't realised Ben was there. "Bloody hell, Ben, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

Ben dropped onto the sofa next to him. "I thought I'd let you know Ashley has had a couple of messages from Simon. He's playing down what happened but Ashley's not buying it."

"Being stabbed in the stomach isn't something to play down."

"Yes, well, Ashley's a natural worrier and Robin is on high alert—poor bloke is probably being smothered."

Ashley had been distraught at the news and had been awake when Dorian had returned, not letting him go to bed until he'd heard everything.

Dorian rubbed his face, he needed to speak to someone before he burst. "There's something I haven't told Robin. The woman who stabbed Simon said she was doing it to remove Simon so me and Robin could be together."

"Jesus, Dorian."

"I should have told him, but Robin was so distraught I didn't think it would help. Fuck, this is my fault."

"No, Dorian. It's not."

"I'm sure the police will be all over it. Simon is one of their own, so I imagine there'll be even more impetus... even on top of him being linked to the Flints through Robin."

The door to the Amelia room flew open and Robin stood there, beautiful in his anger, the rage rolling off him. "There you fucking are!"

Dorian had not expected Robin back anytime soon.

"Robin, why are you here?" Ben stood and approached him carefully, hands raised.

“Because I wanted Dorian to know I know what she said. And that I know what he’s done! The police have confirmed that the woman who stabbed Simon is one of his fucking fans. She’s confessed to wanting to get Simon out of the way so me and Dorian could be together. He even heard her say it!”

The words hurt to hear and he couldn’t blame Robin for his pain. Nothing he’d said was untrue and his guilt had him sick to his stomach.

Robin charged forwards and Ben grabbed him around the middle before he could get any further.

“Stop it. You can’t blame Dorian for this,” Ben said.

“Like hell I can’t. He should have managed his coming out better, not dropped us all in the shit because he decided the time was right. He should have never hidden in the first place! He’s a selfish arsehole and that makes him culpable.”

Ben wrestled Robin backwards. He was stronger than Ben and Karl and Alex arrived to help him hold Robin back and force him into a chair.

Dorian slid onto his knees in front of Robin. “I am so sorry. I never meant for this to happen, I didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

“This isn’t your fault, Dorian,” Ben said.

Robin scoffed. “It’s a bit late for that. The police will be combing through mine and Simon’s social media links and accounts to see if anyone else was involved, my father is talking about around-the-clock security and you can imagine how Simon will take those suggestions.”

Simon would not be happy, even after being stabbed Dorian couldn’t see him capitulating. “I’m sure there’s a way we can deal with Claude’s natural instinct to protect you without it being onerous on Simon.”

“You don’t get it? As far as my father is concerned, Simon is already a Flint. Why do you think he was so angry with me when the photo with Marco came out, and why he redirected the company jet when I needed to get home when the Dorian-

and-me bombshell landed? This isn't just about protecting me, but Simon as well, and Simon is being stubborn.”

“Then that'll make two of you,” Ben said. “He knows how these things work, and his police training will kick in and he won't put himself in danger to rail against Claude.”

“There wouldn't be any danger if Dorian reined in his fans.”

Ben sighed. “You know, deep down, that Dorian can't do that. He's not a puppet master. And the woman who stabbed Simon didn't do so under his direction.”

Robin was close to tears and Dorian wanted to hold him and make it better, but he was no longer allowed to offer that sort of comfort and it would never be accepted. “I nearly lost him. I can't go through that again.” He turned to Dorian, his eyes wet with tears and imploring. “Please, can't you do something? Issue a statement? You've got a group of fans thinking you want me back—that I left you for Simon because you wouldn't come out.”

“I could help craft something,” offered Alex. “I don't know how sincere it would look.”

Dorian was relieved to hear Alex was there to support him, he needed someone solid at the moment.

Karl made a soft humming noise. “I wonder if it might help if Mr Forbes were to allude to having a partner. Then the issue of him wanting to go back to his ex would be moot.”

Alex nodded. “I think you might be right. It would add credence, although we might need to be ready to address why that individual wasn't with Dorian on the red carpet.”

“Only if asked directly and I'm sure we could work up some talking points,” Karl said.

Dorian was still on his knees and he wasn't sure if he'd really heard what was being suggested or if he was going mad. “You have got to be joking. The minute I say that there'll be people hunting for clues for who the lucky guy is. The game will be up as soon as it starts.”

“I’m sure we can find someone who could play along. Would only be for a couple of months,” Ben said, and Dorian thought he’d gone mad too.

Robin seemed to be calming down but Dorian could tell by the way he held himself it wouldn’t take much to set him off again. “I think that will work.”

“All right,” Dorian said. He wasn’t convinced but wasn’t about to argue with Robin in his current state. “I’ll work with Alex to put something out.”

“Now I just need to deal with Simon,” Robin said. Dorian suspected that there was a huge amount of Robin’s own guilt wrapped up in this. “I need him safe. His mother is as worried as I am, and he can be quite obstinate.”

“When do you need to be back in New York? You could always move into his place,” suggested Ben.

“I’ll only be going back for brief stints from now on. I’m not willing to be away from him for an extended period. I don’t think he’d tolerate me being as clingy as I am, especially now, without a means of escape, which he doesn’t have in his cottage.”

Karl coughed. “Perhaps Mr MacLove could move in here for a short time. We could support him during his recovery when Mr Flint returns to New York.”

“If he’s willing, Simon is, of course, welcome,” Ben said. “He will have to contend with both Ashley and Mrs Weather clucking over him like a lost chick.”

“I reckon he’d tolerate that better than his parents and me being his sole company,” Robin said, sounding relieved. “It’ll be a matter of getting him to agree.”

“I’ve plenty of room so he can have his own space, and I think if you get Ashley to make the offer then he might be more open to it.”

Dorian thought that it was the best option. Plenty of people about if needed but also enough opportunity to hide away and find some peace when things became too much.

Dorian got to his feet. He needed to get out of here, the room felt too constricted and he could leave Ben to deal with Robin. “Alex, if you’ve time now, let’s go and write me a statement. Can we use your office?”

“Of course,” Alex said. They left together, Dorian only just managing to hold back his tears.

CHAPTER 17



Dorian slouched low in the chair in Alex's office as Alex typed frantically. He wanted to crawl into bed and forget the last twenty-four hours. He couldn't get the image of Simon's blood on his hands out of his head.

"Why don't you go have a walk or something? I can work on this and then we can go through it later," Alex offered. "I know it was Simon who was stabbed, but you were right there—you're bound to be upset over it too."

Dorian was glad of the support but he didn't want to be on his own. He wanted the distraction. "I'd rather stay here. With someone, if that's okay with you."

"Of course. Oh, Dorian, it'll be all right, you'll see." He smiled and turned back to his computer. "I'm not sure how much we can actually say in a statement. There's probably a whole host of legal issues that could crop up. I suggest wishing your good friend a speedy recovery, and that your thoughts are with him and his devoted partner."

"Sounds good. I just wish we'd taken the threats Simon received more seriously. Even if Robin wasn't with Simon, we wouldn't have got back together—that was not on the cards."

Alex bit his bottom lip and Dorian wondered if Alex was a good kisser. He blinked. Where had that come from? Just because Alex was gay and single didn't mean he was someone Dorian would want to kiss.

"Then instead we should allude to an amazing new man in your life, which would infer you're not in the market to get

back together with Robin. Whoever we create will have a hard time measuring up to Robin—millionaire in his own right, future billionaire and Viscount Whetford will be a hard act to follow.”

“I never really thought of him like that. To me he was just Robin. Looking back, that was probably part of the problem.”

Alex wrinkled his nose. “Who dumped who?”

He thought this was common knowledge at the hall but then why would Alex know? “He had enough of me not being out—or at least that’s his story. But there was more to it. Even if I’d have been out we wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

“No?”

“When I first met him he was in a difficult place. Recovering from the grief of losing his brother and with a coke habit that had landed him in rehab.”

“I was not expecting that. He’s certainly reinvented himself. I’m sure I’ve seen articles on him being one of these future business moguls to watch.”

Robin had been wasted as his PA. In hindsight it was obvious but he hadn’t wanted to see it. “He’s an amazing man. And I’ll always love him in some way, but he wasn’t ever going to stay hidden and the Robin you see today is the real Robin.”

“I would have thought a movie star, with all your connections, would have been a more suitable choice than a policeman.” Alex bit his lip again, and Dorian still wanted to know if he was a good kisser. “Simon must be rather special.”

“I wanted to think he was a rebound shag. That Robin would chuck him and I’d swoop in and we’d get back together, and I’d come out. But Robin fell arse over tit for him, and I was so mad.”

“I suppose Simon couldn’t believe someone like Robin would want to go out with him. I mean he’s like me. Just a normal bloke.”

“They met in the pub in the village. Robin didn’t let on who he was and they started dating without Simon knowing all the facts. For Robin it couldn’t have been better—Simon wanted him because of him. Not his name, or his money.”

“Sounds like the sort of movie you’d have starred in.” Alex smirked.

Dorian had to admit Alex was pretty cute. “Oi, I’ll have you know I’m not Hallmark material. Cheeky fucker.”

Alex turned the monitor in Dorian’s direction. “Have a read of this and tell me what you think. We might want to rejig a bit to sound more authentic to your voice.”

He scanned the document. Alex had a great turn of phrase and he could see why he’d been successful in his career. “Do you think the details about my fake boyfriend are too generic?”

“Since you haven’t identified someone who could pretend to be your partner, I don’t see how we could give more specifics. You had plenty of fake girlfriends in the past, including a fiancée, haven’t you any male friends who could fill in?”

Dorian huffed. “Fake girlfriends were easy because there was no chance it’d be more, with a bloke it’d be a different connotation.”

Alex sucked on the end of his pen and Dorian realised it had been too long since he’d been laid. “What about hiring someone?” Alex suggested. “A nice young lad out of RADA? Could be an excellent opportunity for them with exposure to the business through you.”

“Seems like a perfect set-up for blackmail. But maybe hiring an escort for a few dates could work.”

“Good lord, you’d be found out before you sat down for your first dinner. All it’d take is for one of his other clients to recognise him and you be rumbled. Or you’d be accused of acting out *Pretty Woman*.”

“Whatever way you look at it, I’m a bit of a sad sack to have come to this.” He’d brought it all on himself. “Let’s go

with generic, and we can figure out something. I really want to get a statement out as soon as possible.”

Alex pointed at the screen. “If you’re happy with this wording, and don’t want it run past a solicitor, I’ll upload it onto your website as I’ve now got full access. And you’re not sad, just going through some difficult time.”

Dorian stared at Alex, and he was struck that maybe the answer to his problem was sitting in front of him. “You’re gay and single.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “What of it?”

Dorian plastered what he hoped was his most charming smile. “You could be my fake boyfriend. It could be a paid position, like you suggest. Finite time, specific boundaries.”

“No.”

“No? Not even a let-me-think-about-it?” he asked more out of hope than expectation.

“Dorian, you’re a movie star and I’m the Earl of Crofton’s secretary, it would be a ridiculous notion that you would want to date me. Now, I’m not for sale beyond my contractual obligations in my employment.”

“Maybe there’s a charity you’d like to support?” Alex would be perfect. He knew how to handle himself, wouldn’t get ruffled in the face of the press and would look lovely on his arm.

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Positive?”

“Irrefutably.”

Dorian grinned and stood. “I’ll take that as a maybe.”

“You should take it as a no. Now go away. I need to get this done.”

“How about a drink tonight? We could go to the Red Lion.”

Alex shook his head. “As soon as I’ve uploaded your statement I am heading to see my parents for the weekend.”

“Next week then?”

“No.”

Dorian sidled out laughing as Alex tutted. His spirits lifted from when he’d first entered the room and he had Alex to thank for that. He might not have convinced Alex to play along as his fake boyfriend, but he sure was fun to rile up.

CHAPTER 18



Alex had long stopped trying to argue with his mother about an acceptable frequency for him to visit home. Anything less than once a month had been frowned upon for as long as he could remember. He parked up, seeing his brother's car in the drive, which meant he would be able to split the attention from his parents, which he was more than happy about.

He grabbed his bag off the back seat and fished out his keys. He slid his key into the lock but it didn't give. He tried another key thinking he'd got the wrong one but no joy.

The side gate opened, his dad beckoning him over. His long grey hair was tied up in bunches and he was wearing a bright purple puffer jacket. "You'll need to come round the back, Ali."

Maybe the lock had broken and they'd not got around to fixing it. There was always some minor repair needed, and his dad tried his best, often ending up making things worse or abandoning the job to tinker with something more interesting.

"What's wrong with the front door?" he asked as he followed his dad down the side passage into the back garden.

He stopped mid-stride, almost falling over as he noticed a large tent covering half of the lawn, plus two smaller ones. "What on Earth is going on?"

His mum appeared from out of the main tent. "Ali, darling, you're home. I wasn't expecting you this weekend."

“When I phoned last week you said I better turn up or you’d disown me.”

“Nonsense. Silly boy.” She kissed him on the cheek. “You can help your dad set up the barbeque. I don’t think he should be trusted with lighter fluid.”

As far as he could remember his parents had never owned a barbeque and his mum hated eating outside. The weather wasn’t too bad, but by the time they’d got the thing going and they’d cooked, it would be dark and on the chilly side.

“Why are we eating outside? You once said you’d rather starve than battle for domination with mosquitoes.”

She waved him away. “You’re always putting words in my mouth. Where’s your sense of adventure, Ali? We’ve fresh air, some lovely trout a friend of your dad caught and even some homemade sloe gin... what’s not to like? Then we’ll sleep under canvas like proper explorers.”

“You’re camping?” Something very strange was going on. “You hate camping more than barbequed food.”

“I am expanding my horizons.” She scurried away before Alex could grill her.

His brother Stephan emerged from one of the tents. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here. You can help me talk some sense into them. They’ll listen to you.”

This was not a good sign. Stephan was more often than not as flaky as their parents. “As much as I’d like to think they listen to me, we both know that’s a complete fallacy. What is going on?”

“I got here last night. Apparently, they’ve been camping out since the assessor from the builder came around.”

He’d only been gone a month, and he’d heard nothing about this. “I didn’t know they were having building work. Have they moved out to get it done?”

“Come with me.”

He followed Stephan to the side of the property where there were two outbuildings tagged on the end of the house.

Stephan pointed to the door of one of the outhouses. “Can you see it’s not straight in its frame?”

“Yeah, what of it?” The house was over a hundred years old, nothing big or fancy but it was sturdy enough.

“Apparently over the years tree roots have done some damage and, coupled with a weakness in the foundations, the house isn’t safe. Structurally speaking.”

Alex was always amazed that his parents never failed to tell him about the mundane things that didn’t matter but seemed to gloss over the big items. Like when his dad had an accident and ended up in the hospital or his mum had needed specialist tests. And now this.

“So where’s the underpinning, and whatever else a structural engineer would have suggested?”

“I haven’t got that out of them yet. But suffice to say, they’re been living out of tents for the last week at least.”

Surely his parents had insurance for this sort of thing, or savings they could dip into to at least make the house safe, if not completely fix it. His mum was collecting herbs from her vegetable patch and he decided this had to be tackled head-on.

“Mum,” he said as he approached, “Stephan said you’ve been camping out for a few days now. Want to tell me the real reason behind it?”

She stared at the bunch of greenery in her hands. “The thing is, sweetheart, we’ve hit a little bit of a snag, and until we rebalance a few things, me and your father have been exploring the world under canvas.”

“*A little bit of a snag?* Mum, Stephan said there’s an issue with the house, but you must have building insurance.”

“Well, therein lies the rub. When we paid off the mortgage we thought we wouldn’t need it anymore. And what with pensions these days, the extra money came in handy.”

His heart sank. He could understand their reasoning. The house had been sound and paying for insurance was a luxury they hadn’t thought they could afford. He wished they’d

spoken to him, he could have carried the expense of the premium but not the full amount for work stabilising and then rebuilding their house might now cost.

“Have you estimates for the work?”

“Nothing easily affordable. We were thinking about getting a motorhome instead.”

They’d lived in their home for thirty years, there must be something that could be done. He had some savings, and maybe they could borrow against the property. “How much are we talking? Don’t soft soap it.”

“Around twenty thousand, give or take.”

He had some savings but nowhere near that much. “Could you re-mortgage?”

“We don’t have the income to support the repayments. And it’s a bit of a catch-22 because until the work is done the house isn’t habitable so the bank won’t loan against it.”

“You can’t live in a tent. Can’t social services help?”

She shook her head. “We own the house and have our pensions. They don’t seem to grasp that the house isn’t worth anything in its current state. So for now we’re in the tents. It’s not so bad, we’ve camp beds and a little gas stove and an outside tap.”

“What about the bathroom?”

“Bucket in the shed.” She bristled, clearly uncomfortable about talking about her ablutions.

He couldn’t get his head around it all. “You’ve been made homeless through no fault of your own, there must be someone who can help.”

“We’re looking into it. A friend has a motorhome we can borrow once they’re back from their tour of Wales in a week or so.”

His parents were in their sixties, so should have plenty of years ahead of them, but his dad had retired early through ill health and his mum was prone to catching every respiratory

infection going. They couldn't live in tents or a motor home. "Why don't you move in with Stephan?"

"Stephan offered but he hasn't the room and I'm not going to impose as we don't know how long it'll be before we can raise the money. We'll burn through our savings far too quickly in a hotel, but I have registered us with some letting agencies so we'll see what comes up."

There *had* to be something. He could see if he could take a loan out and pay it back.

Then Dorian's offer of paying for a fake boyfriend came to mind, with the right guidelines and a limited timeline, it could be the answer. It would be horribly intrusive to be in the limelight but it wouldn't be forever and Dorian seemed like a decent bloke who wouldn't take the piss or renege on a deal.

"I might have a solution. Let me see if I can raise the money through a friend of mine."

She pursed her lips. "Ali, you don't have to do this. We'll be all right."

"I don't think you will."

"Alexander!"

"No, Mum. You and Dad scrimped and saved to help me through university, you've always been there for me and I think I can repay you. I can't promise but what I have in mind should work."

He didn't turn around as she called after him. He needed to get back to Crofton Hall, draw up a potential proposal and find Dorian.

* * *

Dorian turned the page of the novel he was reading. He couldn't remember the last time he'd read fiction for the mere pleasure of it, and he was enjoying the murder mystery although he was pretty sure he knew who the killer was.

A soft cough made him look up. “Alex? I thought you were visiting your parents this weekend.”

“Were you serious about a financial arrangement for pretending to be your boyfriend?”

He set his book down. “For the right person I’d be willing to consider it as a paid position. Do you have someone he mind?”

“How about thirty thousand for three months of service? Twenty payable up front.”

By his standards, it wasn’t a large amount of money but he knew to most it was a fortune. It struck him that whoever Alex was asking on behalf of might need to get hold of money with the minimum of fuss. “Possible.”

“There would have to be strict boundaries in place. Public interactions would be limited to giving enough evidence of a relationship but not inappropriate. Once or twice a week maximum, depending on scheduling.”

He thought it was reasonable but he wasn’t sure where Alex was going with this unless... “Are you offering your services?”

“Yes.”

Alex would be an amazing fake boyfriend but he didn’t understand his change of heart. “You weren’t interested yesterday.”

“New day, new thoughts.”

“But why?”

“My reasons are my own and you knowing what they are aren’t part of the deal.”

Alex sure was feisty. That wasn’t a bad thing.

“I think I should be told if there was any reputational risk if your reasons were to become public knowledge.”

Alex worried his bottom lip. “It’s a family matter. I promise there’s nothing illegal or nefarious. Can we leave it at

that? If you're trusting me to be your fake boyfriend I would think you could believe me over my reasons."

He puffed out his cheeks. Alex didn't strike him as someone up to their neck in debt to some mob boss or who had a terrible gambling habit. "All right. So say we were to embark on this business agreement what are you thinking of as rules?"

From his inside pocket, Alex withdrew a folded piece of paper. Dorian should have known he would have come prepared. "Here."

1. *No sexual activity, no nudity or lewd behaviour.*
2. *Kissing is limited to a single peck on the cheek or lips. No deep or lingering engagement. No tongues.*
3. *Separate rooms for the events where appearing to stay as a couple overnight. Adjoining rooms, if lockable, are acceptable.*
4. *Period of agreement is not to exceed three months. In the unlikely event an extension is required, double the original fee is to be paid in full.*
5. *One date per week unless there are mitigating circumstances.*

Dorian didn't think the rules were unreasonable and he'd have been willing to offer Alex a lot more than he'd asked, but he was concerned why he had accepted. He could get to the bottom of that later.

"I might want to add a couple of things. Holding hands, acting like you want to be there. No public arguments... and I would like to veto certain clothing choices."

Alex scowled. "You won't need to worry about how I'm dressed, I am fully capable of choosing my attire to fit the occasion."

"I've never seen you out of a suit, which I must say looks very nice, but do you have high-end casual clothes?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I'd say high street brands were more in my price bracket. I saved my clothing budget for work."

“Easily fixed. As part of the deal, your clothing for our dates will be covered by me.” He held up his hand to stop him arguing. “You will need to look the part. But I don’t expect you to pay for it, as I’m assuming if you had the spare cash we wouldn’t be doing this in the first place.”

Alex handed him a pen. “Write down your additional stipulations. I take it we have an agreement?”

Dorian smiled. “I would love for you to be my fake boyfriend. We could set up a first date, nothing too outlandish but we could let a couple of friendly journalists know. Dinner, maybe, in a fancy restaurant in London or Cambridge.”

“That would be acceptable. But I think I would have to clear this first with Lord Crofton. If he had no objections, once you’ve transferred the money, we can schedule our first date within a couple of days if I can meet the dress code in time.”

It also sounded so clinical but then it would be a business transaction. Dorian hoped they could enjoy each other’s company at least. “I can transfer the money now if you want but we can arrange our first date for next weekend.”

“If Lord Crofton agrees.”

“Ben won’t have a problem. Text me your bank details and we’ll go from there.” He’d talk to Ben, if only to assure him he wouldn’t act like a prick because given his previous actions, Dorian thought Ben would be within his rights to think it. Also, there was no need to rush into their first public outing and he thought Alex might need to deal with whatever had left him needing the money.

“Okay, I appreciate the additional time. Do you want me to sign the rules? They obviously can’t be legally binding.”

“Alex, I don’t need it. Look, it’s a bit of an odd situation, and I know it might be awkward at times but let’s just treat it as friends getting to know each other. All right?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “Sounds like a plan. I can pull together a list of potential dates, we can schedule them in and map out a month at a time so you can plan everything else around it.”

Alex was looking for a way to bring everything back under his control and Dorian would let him. “Brilliant. We can discuss on Monday. I’m hoping for some of your time if you’re free.”

“I can do late afternoon, if that works for you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to go and sort out some things.”

Alex didn’t run but he didn’t dawdle either. Dorian decided to find Ben and talk to him about the situation straight away rather than find out by other means. Ben might also have heard from Robin, as Dorian had thought better of contacting him just yet. It would be easier to find him if he sent Ben a text.

Dorian: Where are you? Do you have a minute?

Ben: Watching awful television with Ashley... would be glad of an escape. Meet me in the snug?

Dorian laughed at Ben’s response. He missed the mundane side of having a partner, being able to turn to someone and chat about nothing or everything. Loneliness was real, and it didn’t matter how many friends he had, it wasn’t the same as having a special someone who was just there.

The snug was a reception room not far from the earl’s room, which they’d spent many an evening in since school messing around, usually raiding the drinks decanters and playing games. Ben was already there when Dorian arrived, pouring two generous measures of whisky. He handed one to Dorian and they sat on the sofa.

“Until recently I wasn’t aware how awful Saturday night television could be,” Ben said and clinked glasses. “You’re my saviour.”

“Seems like becoming a father has put a dampener on your social life, but you don’t seem too unhappy about it.”

“Out of choice. I could have carried on doing what I did before, dinners, invites... y’know, and Ashley wouldn’t have had a problem with it, but I would. My father was a wonderful

man, but not what you'd call hands-on and I didn't want that for Davy."

"Yeah, mine was always working or away. I can't say I knew him that well, especially once I went to Harrow, and then my parents divorced."

His parents had remained friends even after his mum had remarried, but his dad had died a few years back having been too wedded to his job to have room for anyone new.

"I do wonder if I'd have been the same if it hadn't been for Ashley. I'd sort of resigned myself to being serially monogamous and not finding a permanent partner after Greg. And if I had found a fellow toff and we'd had children then the pattern would have repeated."

Dorian remembered the fallout after Greg the Cheating Bastard had broken Ben's heart, it wasn't pretty. He elbowed him playfully. "Then it's a bloody good job you got yourself a bit of rough from Essex."

"I count my blessings daily." He grinned, and looked positively smug. Bastard. "I doubt that was what you came to talk to me about though."

"It's about my fake boyfriend—I've made an arrangement, and I'm keen to get your blessing."

"As long as it's not Ashley I can't see how it would be any of my business."

"I didn't think about asking Ashley. Maybe I should."

Ben's eye twitched. "I think not."

Dorian snorted. "No fear, Benjamin. Your hubby's safe from me. What about Harry? Your little brother is single, right?"

"And straight," Ben said humourlessly. "Not to mention he's at an artist commune in Portugal."

He reckoned Harry would have found it funny to have played along but it didn't matter now. "Good job it's not him then. It's Alex."

“My secretary Alex?”

“Yes, which is why we felt it necessary to get your blessing.”

“But why would he?” Ben seemed as surprised as Dorian had been. “He doesn’t seem the type.”

“I’ll be honest I did ask him yesterday as he was helping me with the statement I put out, but I wasn’t expecting him to accept, and he didn’t.”

“But I thought you said...”

“He turned up about an hour ago asking if I was serious about it being a paid position and named his price and terms. He wouldn’t tell me why he’d changed his mind, just said it was a family matter.”

Ben took a sip of his whisky. “I don’t object to him helping you if he volunteered and wasn’t coerced into it, but I am concerned about his reasonings. It suggests he has some money worries.”

“I don’t think it’s anything dodgy per se, maybe he has a family member who he wants to help and it’s an easy way to do it.” There were ways to find out the information, and he didn’t want to invade Alex’s privacy but he did have to protect his own interests. “I could contact someone to look into what’s going on.”

“I’m not sure. A little intrusive, don’t you think?”

“He’s going to be playing my boyfriend, I’ve enough shit off the press as it is, if he’s up to his neck in something I’d need to know. Did you do a background check on him when you took him on?”

Ben shook his head. “Only in the sense I called up a couple of his previous bosses and they were glowing.”

“It might not have helped but whatever changed happened super recently.”

“I suppose I could have Ashley make some discreet enquiries.” Ben cleared his throat. “Through his father’s connections.”

“I daresay he’d be able to find out what was going on. As much as I need to know any potential impact to my rep, I am worried about Alex. He’s a lovely bloke—I’d hate to think he was in real trouble.”

“I supposed that would be our primary reason for asking. To make sure Alex was okay.” He could see Ben was trying to find a way to help and appease his conscience. “I’ll speak to Ashley, although he’s got enough to worry about with Davy and Simon, he’d kill me if I went straight to Niall without telling him.”

Dorian would let Ben handle that side of things. “Has he heard from Simon?”

“Yes, I think he’d been offering a friendly ear to let Simon rant. He’s going to see him tomorrow, and he’s planning to persuade him to move into the hall for a few weeks. Robin’s not been going about it in the right way so sending in Ashley will hopefully help.”

“Being stubborn is he?”

“Robin’s gone all caveman and Simon’s reacted exactly how you might expect him to act.”

Dorian couldn’t imagine Robin being so possessive, he’d never been that way when they’d been together. “I imagine Simon doesn’t like being treated like a kid. But Robin wasn’t the sort to be overly protective.”

“He wasn’t with you, but then you were never stabbed in the stomach and rushed into surgery.” Ben shifted so he sat facing him. “He’s worried, and feeling guilty that he hadn’t made Simon more of a priority in his life. He’ll back off in a bit, but only after Simon is settled.”

“They were already talking about buying somewhere. Robin’s going in the right direction.”

“Oh yeah, that plan will go into hyperdrive now. But he’s not my concern. He’s realised what he needs to do.”

Dorian slouched in his seat. “I’m your only problem child, then?”

“I was worried enough before the whole fake boyfriend thing.”

Ben didn't need to overthink this, it was a temporary situation and would give him some breathing space. “It's a perfect solution to the issue. This way I'm making it clear I'm not looking to try again with Robin.”

“But it's another pressure point. You'll have to accept that you'll be putting yourself—and Alex—under the spotlight.”

He shrugged. “But this is a much more positive thing—I can be in control of where I go, how it can be perceived. It'll be planned out, and with Alex on board you know it'll be managed properly. Unlike my coming out.”

Ben hummed. “Are you really sure you've thought this through?”

“Yes. I'm actually looking forward to dating Alex. He's kinda cute, and I reckon he'll be perfect as my other half for a few months.”

“*Kinda cute?* Oh, Dorian, you better not be thinking down those lines. I will not lose Alex as my secretary because you use him and spit him out.”

Ben could fuck right off. He wasn't that sort of man. Never had been. “Of the two of us, you were the one who couldn't commit to anyone. I might have had a bit of freedom after Robin but I'm not normally temporarily minded. And—I might add—just because I can recognise that someone is cute doesn't mean I'm going to try and shag them. Alex is doing me a huge favour; he will have my utmost respect.”

Ben did not look convinced. “Alex is just your type. Blond and bossy.”

“I don't have a type, and even if I did it doesn't mean I'm going to be an asshole. I'm approaching fake dating as getting used to having someone in my life again. Then in a few months, Alex and I will break up and I'll be in a decent place to find a real partner.”

Ben reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “I'm sorry for accusing you—I'm a bit short of sleep of late.”

“Nah, you’re all right. I’ve been a bit of a prick several times in my past, and it’s good someone’s looking out for Alex.”

“He’s been a godsend, and Ashley said Dara was singing his praises too. I think he’s settling in nicely, so I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable here.”

Dorian understood the sentiment. He was in a position to take advantage, but he wasn’t about to. He’d treat Alex right, and if he did get a little more romantic than the situation might warrant then he knew when to back off. Dorian couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so excited about something, and it felt wonderful.

CHAPTER 19



Alex made his way into the underground lair that was also known as Crofton Hall's archive, in search of the chief archive dragon who had asked for him to check over some documents. Dara was reading a leather-bound journal that had seen better days.

"What you got there?" he asked as he approached.

Dara looked up. "Alex, I didn't hear you come in. I was searching through a particular section looking for evidence to corroborate something Chris found when I came across this. It appears to celebrate a marriage."

Alex peered over to see what was so interesting. "When's it date from?"

"According to the notes, 1821, but look at the names of who was married in the hall's chapel."

"Charles and Timothy," Alex read where Dara was pointing. "Bloody hell—I know the Redbourns have always been a bit of daring side, but marrying two men here is something else."

"Says here that it was Samuel who officiated." Dara chewed the inside of his cheek. "I wonder why they didn't include the surnames."

"I imagine if that book got into the wrong hands it would be damning enough without further identifying the grooms."

Dara's expression suggested he thought it was more than that. "There's been a few things crop up around a Charles and

a Timothy from this period, I can't help but think there's more behind it."

"Such as?"

"Charles was the 8th Earl, and he was said to have fled overseas after shooting Captain Timothy Thorne in a duel. Then he was lost at sea on his way home."

"And here you have two men of the same first names getting married," Alex said, wondering where Dara was going with this. "I suppose it could be coincidence."

"I'm not a fan of coincidences, not when comes to the Redbourns. That goes doubly when it involves the eight and ninth earls as that pair were a special breed even when compared to the others."

"Trouble, were they?"

"Samuel's reputation was as a Hellcat, and he took it so far that the local church refused to intern him or any of his descendants in the church crypt."

Alex laughed. "Sounds like they were fun. Were they really so bad or was it just the society of the time frowned on their activities that wouldn't be seen as so bad today?"

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure if Ben started summoning demons today the average member of Joe Public might think it a bit much. And that's the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Samuel."

"Ben had his own reputation as a bit of a modern-day rake in his younger years, but if he was capable of spiriting up a demon, his agenda wouldn't be the hot mess it is."

Dara took back the journal. "Very true. But I think this Charles and the Timothy are the same ones who were duelling five years before on a foggy common."

Alex hadn't rubbed shoulders with many historians but as a group he wouldn't have thought they were the type to make such bold statements. "So you think Charles Redbourn faked his own death, handed the earldom to his Hellcat son and came back later to get married? It seems a bit... far-fetched."

“I stopped worrying about things being far-fetched once I started working here. Samuel didn’t strike out as a Hellcat until five years after he became the earl, in the interim there’s no evidence of him being anything but the usual member of the Ton. But in 1821 he starts with the wild parties, and I don’t think it is a coincidence that a Charles Bentley takes up residence at the hall alongside his good friend Timothy Hope.”

The evidence was circumstantial, but Alex could see why Dara might be thinking the way he was. “Would you stake your professional reputation on it?”

“I wouldn’t go that far just yet, but the last time I had a hunch like this we ended up with a *Secret Histories* special with the 1st Earl of Crofton having married a man pretending to be his sister.” He bounced on the balls of his feet. “I reckon with a bit more digging I could find more evidence.”

“It’s not as if Crofton Hall is a stranger to notoriety.”

“That’s still the case. Now we’ve a Hollywood A-lister hiding out here—it seems very in keeping with the rest of the history.”

Dorian had been plaguing his thoughts all morning, and while it wasn’t a surprise Alex would be preoccupied with the agreement he’d made, he was usually able to put up a block, but now he was beginning to wonder if he should doubt his sanity. He’d transferred the money and had moved his parents into a hotel and had a structural engineer and builder on site with a plan on how to put things right. He couldn’t back out now, but he could do with talking to someone who might help him survive the next three months without going crazy.

“Actually, Dara, I wondered if I could talk to you about the Dorian situation.”

Dara closed the journal and placed it on his desk. “Is there something bothering you? You’re helping him as well, aren’t you?”

“Not bothering me as such, more I think I might have got myself into a bit of a pickle, and I could do with a friendly ear.”

Dara motioned him to sit. “Take a load off and I’ll break out the emergency caramel brownies.”

“You have emergency brownies?”

Dara chuckled. “You’ve met Chris... lovely bloke but gets a bit dippy when low on blood sugar. Not that it’s easy to tell the difference.”

Alex sat and accepted a small plate onto which Dara placed one Mrs Weather’s finest creations. “Compared to what I’ve got myself into I think Chris is going to look a paragon of stability.”

“Good Lord, it can’t be that bad, man.”

“Well, you know Dorian issued a statement after the incident with Simon?”

“Chris mentioned it. Although I wasn’t paying much attention as I was trying to figure out how to unjam one of the roller shelves at the time.”

He’d hoped that Dara might have had a little more of an inkling and could’ve have guessed where this was going, but instead Alex was going to have to spell it out. “Part of the statement was to support Robin and Simon, the other part was to put off others thinking he might want to get back with Robin.”

“I hate to say it, but issuing a denial won’t help much.”

“He went further than a straight denial, he alluded to having a boyfriend.”

Dara’s brow crumpled. “But he doesn’t....” Alex thought he may have seen the penny drop. “Oh no, Alex, don’t tell me you’ve agreed to pretend to be Dorian’s new squeeze.”

“There will be absolutely no squeezing! I will be playing the role of his boyfriend for a few months, nothing more.”

“You great numpty. Have you any idea of what you might have let yourself in for? Why on earth have you agreed to do something so monumentally daft?”

He'd come this far, he might as well tell Dara the rest of it. "I needed the money so I agreed terms with Dorian. My parents have got themselves into some housing trouble and I needed to find a way to help as fast as possible."

"I'm sure they appreciated your help, but surely there must have been other options."

"Nothing that was so quick. They were camping out in a tent in their garden due to safety issues with their house. Dorian has already paid a good chunk of the money upfront, so I've been able to get the ball rolling."

Dara took a large bite of his cake and chewed slowly. "So what's the plan? Float about as his bit of stuff for a few months and hope his fans don't suddenly go after you like they did Simon?"

He didn't think he was putting himself in front of a firing range. "We're working out exactly what it will look like. Low-key dinners, maybe a few evenings in the sort of bars and clubs movie stars go to. We might engineer a weekend away where it looks like we go walking."

"You sound thrilled by the prospect," Dara drawled. "Ready to be stalked across the country by the press trying to find out everything about you?"

"There's not that much to say. It'll be a few months, and then Dorian will move on to someone new. I'm not to be blamed for the split. Once he finds a new partner I might propose that he cheated on me so I could be the victim."

Dara wrinkled his nose. "Why would you want people to think he cheated on you?"

"It's play-acting. I've been cheated on before, it's not like it doesn't happen in real life."

"I guess it would mean you wouldn't have his fans think you broke his heart. Although I'm not sure Dorian would want to tarnish his reputation further either. You will be careful, though, won't you?"

It was nice of Dara to worry but he didn't need to. "I think with what happened to Simon if there's any hint of trouble

there'll be extra security so I'm not worried."

"I'm not talking about you being physically harmed. Dorian's a lovely looking lad, and I bet he can be very charming. You might lose your head over him."

Alex spluttered. "No, that's not on the cards. What I'm getting out of this is my parents' house repaired." He decided to leave out the clothes Dorian had mentioned as he didn't need Dara jumping on the *Pretty Woman* bandwagon. "Nothing more."

"The other way to look at it is you're both single, and like men, so you could just enjoy it." Dara wagged his eyebrows. "See how much of Dorian is real and how much of the rest is CGI."

"Dara!"

"What?"

"I am not sleeping with Dorian. He's paying for my company, not my arse."

Dara smirked. "Up to you. Have you watched any of his films? I'm not sure you realise what you might be passing up."

He was not going to continue this conversation. "I need to get back."

Alex didn't wait for Dara's reply and started to head back upstairs.

"I recommend *The Escort*," Dara called. "You can't go wrong with that one."

Telling Dara might have been a mistake, and he hoped he wouldn't come to regret it. After a quick detour via his office to close down his work laptop for the day, he decided what he needed was a bath and dinner. Maybe a glass of wine. Yes, that sounded perfect.

One of the many things he liked about Crofton Hall were his rooms, and he'd felt at home right from the start. He'd set out his books and various knickknacks and the area with the TV had been transformed into a cosy nook with a throw his mum had made and a couple of cushions he couldn't

remember buying but somehow owned. The bed was another island of solace, but the situation with Dorian made him think that he'd never asked the rules on house guests, sort of assuming if he ever had the need he'd go to the other person's place.

Shaking the thought from his mind, he ran a bath, adding a generous scoop of bath salts which should help with some of the stiffness from sitting at a desk for too long. He poured himself a glass of red wine and placed it with his phone on the side of the bath before undressing and sorting his clothes into the correct laundry piles.

As much as he loved wearing a suit, there was something wonderfully freeing about taking one off and he sank into the warm water with a happy sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment and let himself relax. Working at Crofton Hall was nowhere near as stressful as his previous jobs and he did wonder if at some point he would miss the thrill of the chase, but that was hard to believe when it felt so perfect in his own private bathroom.

He sat up a little and realised he'd left his book on his bedside table, and he was far too comfortable to get out. Instead, he wiped his hands on a towel and grabbed his phone. Dara's words about watching Dorian's films crept into his mind. Maybe a seeing one wouldn't hurt if he could get it on a streaming app. He pulled up his favourite app and typed in Dorian's name. Bloody hell there were a lot of them, and most were in a similar vein of buff hero and pretty and smart heroine fighting the big baddie. Alex wasn't sure he could bring himself to watch those but he scrolled through and saw *The Escort*, which looked a little different. The cover was a shot of a man's back, he was stripped to the waist and Alex assumed it was Dorian. The tagline *Anything is available for a price...* didn't need much explanation.

Despite his better judgement, he started the film and within the first few minutes Dorian was already rolling atop a mattress while a beautiful blonde woman made enthusiastic noises that reminded him a little of a howler monkey—which he doubted was what the director was aiming for. There was

no denying that Dorian was fucking hot. Alex bit his lip as screen Dorian reduced his partner to a gasping mess and had Alex reaching for his cock. He was hard and it had been a while since he'd been laid. He'd never been one for porn, but this display was more than enough to have him tugging at his erection.

He balanced his phone on the side of the bath and set to work chasing his own release as screen Dorian thrust magnificently in a hypnotic rhythm. The mix of the warm water and visual stimulus was too much and he came with a whimper near enough at the same time as the blonde on his phone. While the bath water would wash away the evidence, he was going to have trouble looking Dorian in the eye the next time they met.

CHAPTER 20



“Alex?”

He pivoted on his heel. He was on his way out of the hall to visit the post office when Dorian called across the entrance. “Yes?”

“I thought we could grab a coffee and chat about our first date.”

He held up the stack of letters. “Sorry, I’m heading out to post these.”

“I’ve nothing planned, I’ll come with you.”

Dorian reminded him of an eager puppy who wanted taking for a walk. “I going into the nearest town. There will be people, people who might recognise you.”

He put on his sunglasses and pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. “No problem.”

“I’m sure that’ll fool everybody. Come on then.”

Dorian fell into step beside him as they walked to the carpark. “I could do with picking up a few things. I’ve got a hankering for cheese and onion crisps.”

“Surely you could have asked Karl for those.”

“I thought I’d also get Ben and Ashley something to say thanks for putting me up at the hall. Perhaps you can help.”

His short trip was rapidly expanding, but he didn’t have much more to do that afternoon and spending some time with

Dorian would probably help their first date this weekend. “I would think you know them better than I do.”

“True, but I don’t know the area. And as much as they’d like a Fabergé egg I doubt I can pick one up at the local Tesco.”

“Given Davy will soon get to the age where he’ll want to start putting everything into his mouth, I’m not convinced jewel-encrusted ornaments are the way to go.”

Alex got into his car and waited for Dorian to do the same and put on his seat belt, then found the handle to allow him to push the seat back to give himself more leg room. He looked ridiculous squeezed into the front seat of Alex’s Fiat Panda. “I’m not sure the last time I got in a car this small.”

“You invited yourself along, you can get out if you want.”

“No, I’m good. Sorry, I’m a lanky fucker.”

“We all have flaws in life.”

Dorian was a chatty passenger and Alex wondered if he just missed someone to talk to. “So you only moved here for your job, liking the area so far?”

“It’s not so different from where I grew up—apart from the sea. I enjoyed living in London but I am liking the quieter pace of life.”

“I love the sea. I might try and get a place on the coast in the UK, once I’m settled into somewhere. Need to figure the rest out before I do the extras.”

“Why? If you know what you want, you don’t have to wait.”

“I didn’t think of it like that. I’ve always had more of a plan, and moved sequentially.”

“Change the sequence. If you can’t, who can?” He glanced at Dorian who seemed thoughtful.

“I suppose you have a point.”

The carpark was full of arseholes who appeared to have abandoned their vehicles but, after a bit of circling, Alex

managed to find a space. “Seriously, lose the sunglasses. You look more conspicuous with them. Now come on, let me get the mail out of the way then we can see what you can buy.”

He needed to send a couple of letters by special delivery otherwise he’d have passed them on to the estate office, and he wouldn’t have had to contend with Dorian trying to act inconspicuous in a small market town.

“Go get a coffee or something,” he said, shooing him away outside the post office. “The place just down there is pretty decent. Mine’s a cappuccino with chocolate.”

The queue was not insubstantial, and he was trapped behind a woman who wanted to send letters to six different countries and buy a range of collectable stamps. He emerged back onto the high street to see Dorian leaning against the wall reading his phone, and two coffees in the other hand. The size of his ruddy great paws made Alex swallow, and he had to force away the image of Dorian from *The Escort* sliding his hands up a pair of shapely thighs.

Dorian suddenly looked in Alex’s direction, and grinned. It did not help calm Alex’s ardour one little bit. “Hey, I thought we’d drink and walk.”

He sipped at his coffee and wandered up the high street. The town wasn’t busy, but it struck Alex that humans were very good at not noticing things they weren’t expecting and Dorian strolled along without a second glance from anyone.

“Did you hear that Ashley managed to persuade Simon to move in?” Alex asked.

“No, I knew he was going to try. Least it’ll stop Robin clucking.”

“Do you mind? He is Robin’s boyfriend... might be awkward.”

Dorian shook his head. “Not at all. Decent bloke, and if it helps him recover and not kill Robin it’s all good by me. Anyway, it’s Ben’s house, he can have whoever he wants there.”

“Talking of Ben, any thoughts on what you might like to get Ben and Ashley?”

“This is possibly going to sound ridiculous, but when we were at school together our parents used to send us sweets since we were away from home so I thought I could find a load of his favourites.”

A gift more for Ben than Ashley, but it was a nice and somewhat surprising sentiment. “There’s an old-fashioned sweetshop on the market square if that’s the sort of thing you had in mind.”

“Oooh yes!”

Twenty minutes later they were still in the shop, Dorian almost exploding with excitement as they entered to see rows upon rows of sweets. That they were weighed and measured into little bags made him even happier. The pile on the counter had risen steadily, until Alex was sure Dorian had something from almost every jar.

“Are you finished? What about the liquorice?”

Dorian made a gagging. “Foul stuff... we both hated it.”

“An acquired taste.”

The bemused man behind the counter filled two carrier bags and Dorian paid. Before they left Alex got himself a small bag of jelly babies. “I could have got you them,” Dorian said as they left.

“It’s fine. Now, do you still want crisps or can we get your unreasonable amounts of confectionary back to Crofton Hall?”

“I would like some crisps.”

Alex handed Dorian his car keys. “You go back to the car and I’ll pop into a newsagents.”

He watched in amusement as Dorian hurried away, he really was the most ridiculous of men. Alex laughed and bought him six bags of cheese and onion crisps.

CHAPTER 21



Dorian fiddled with his cufflink and Ben laughed. “What’s so funny, Crofton?”

“You’re nervous. Bless you. I didn’t think you’d be nervous over this... first fake date.”

“It’s a milestone. I know it’s not real, but every other time I’ve been out in public with a date it’s been with a woman.”

Ben sucked on one of the pear drops Dorian had bought him and he hoped the fucker choked on it. “Enjoy it. Alex’s great company, and I’m sure you’ll find some middle ground so it won’t feel too awkward.”

He hadn’t felt awkward when they’d pottered around before his epic sweet-shopping extravaganza, but now they were going to a restaurant in Cambridge, the sort that had a nine-course tasting menu and a three-month waiting list that had mysteriously made way for them once the owners had been briefed that Dorian wanted dinner with his new boyfriend. “Do think we might have gone too low-key with this one?”

Ben shook his head. “No, this will come across as far more genuine if an eagle-eyed member of the public spots you, and if not there’s ways and means for things to get out.”

“Alex suggested doing an interview with a friendly magazine with the right review and approvals in place.” He’d liked that idea although he wasn’t sure it was quite the right timing. “Not us posing as a couple, but more an interview with

the real Dorian, a few nice photos and me alluding to enjoying being able to date a man openly.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Weren’t you in *Cosmo* once?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t quite their centrefold but there was probably a bit more skin on show than I should’ve done.”

“I seem to remember Robin being very complimentary.”

He grinned at the memory. “We re-enacted a few of the shots, with him playing photographer.”

“It’s great that you can look back on the good times now. You were good together for a lot of that part of your lives, don’t think you have to dismiss it all because it’s over.”

“I did struggle with a lot of what-ifs, but in the end, I can’t change the past and maybe I can find someone who’s right for me now.”

“I’ve no doubt you will,” Ben said. “Spend the next few months practising with Alex, and then you’ll be able to go out into the world with more confidence.”

“Talking of Alex, I’d better get going if I’m not to keep him waiting.”

“Oh, yes, he’s not the type to allow tardiness.”

Alex was waiting for him at the side entrance to the hall, dressed in another of his suits, although he didn’t think he’d seen the shirt before. It didn’t feel like a date, more that Alex was about to run him through his agenda for the week.

“Ready for the world to see Dorian Forbes on a date with a man?” Alex asked.

“Are you ready to be seen with me?”

“I already have been, although it wasn’t a date.” Alex smiled. “I’m going to be on the arm of the most attractive man in the restaurant. Everyone’s going to think I’m a right lucky bastard.”

The car Alex had arranged pulled up and they got in. “I’ve been looking at the menu for this place, it’s full of dishes that sound like they should be in an edition of poetry.”

“LA is full of places with pretention. Bit of froth masquerading as soup and single pieces of pasta as a course.”

Alex winced. “I’m sorry, would you have preferred for us to have gone somewhere else?”

Dorian hadn’t meant to belittle Alex’s effort. “Not at all. It’ll be nice to do the proper tasting menu thing without having to worry about putting on weight.”

“So how many of those bags of crisps you got left? Since you’re so worried about gaining a few pounds?”

He jostled him with an elbow. “Uncalled for.”

“Which reminds me, I’ve looked into the Grange Health Club for memberships.” Alex smirked. “You did say you’d be after a gym, and Ben and Ashley are members.”

“Okay, I suppose I can’t let myself go fully to seed.” He’d noticed a definite softening in the definition of his abs. “You could also join. We could be seen going together.”

“I can’t afford the Grange. And I’m not much of a gym bunny.”

Dorian tutted. “Don’t be daft. I’ll pay for it.”

“They only do membership for a year, so it’s well beyond what you’d need to cover.”

“Don’t be a plonker, Alex. I promise I can stretch to it.”

“We’ll see.”

Alex wasn’t someone who could be railroaded and while it was an admirable trait for a secretary, as he imagined he’d spent a lot of time trying to make sure his well-crafted plans didn’t go down the Swanee. “It’d be good to be seen doing normal things. Like shopping, going to the gym. We could have another trip out for coffee, but more coupley.”

“You do have a point, but let’s get tonight out of the way first. I think I might be too nervous to eat, though and I’m worried the wine will go to my head.”

“At least you’ve had a date in public with a bloke—this is my first time.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Alex chewed the inside of his cheek. “We probably should have discussed this already. I don’t suppose it’s too different, but having said that, I’ve never been out with a woman.”

Dorian wasn’t used to being nervous and he was starting to get unsettled. “Maybe I should call Ben and ask him.”

“Come off it, Dorian. It can’t be that hard. We do need our own guidelines rather than societal conventions, for example, if you try and push my chair in or order on my behalf, I will stab you with a fork.”

Dorian laughed and Alex smiled. “No rose bouquets either, I take it?”

“As you saw, I’d much rather have a bag of jelly babies.”

“I noticed your sweet tooth.”

“Some people might say all of me is sweet, but then the last person who said it cheated on me with a fishmonger from Clapham.”

Dorian might have had a weird dating history, and had hidden his relationship with Robin behind smoke and mirrors, but he hated cheaters. “Then that fucker didn’t deserve you.”

Alex seemed startled by his defence. “Oh, I didn’t mope and pine over him. And my dating history isn’t tragic just not very va va vroom.”

“No great love of your life? Or the one who got away?”

Alex shook his head. “No, I’ve never been in love. Not met the right person I suppose. I’m rather particular and a bit bossy. You?”

“I was with Robin for six years. First person I ever loved, and maybe always will a little.”

“Six years is a long time.”

“Yeah. I did think he was the one, or at least I told myself that. But the reality is, if he had been the one, I’d have come out when he asked me.”

Alex took hold of his hand, he hadn't been expecting it. "Must've been hard."

"I thought we'd get back together, and it took a while, including some pretty shitty behaviour on my part, to come to terms with it not going to happen."

"What's right in one moment, isn't necessarily right for the next. Then life can throw curveballs so really, you just have to adapt."

There must be a story behind Alex's philosophy. He was a few years younger than Dorian, and he was pretty certain he'd never have been so profound. "Sounds like you learnt a hard lesson along the way."

"Not directly. My dad is my mum's second husband. Her first was the great love of her life and he died in an accident. She decided never to fall in love again, and then she met my dad fifteen years later and he changed all that."

"Wow."

The look on Alex's face spoke to his devotion to his parents, and Dorian felt a pull towards him, not quite understanding it but wanting to be someone that Alex would be enamoured with too. "They are completely bonkers, and free-spirited and eccentric is a nice way to say they cause pandemonium wherever they go."

"I can't wait to meet them."

Alex shook his head. "Absolutely not. I would die from mortification. Anyway, what about your parents?"

"My dad died a few years back but we weren't close—he travelled a lot for work and that was his real passion in life. My parents divorced when I was about twelve and I was sent off to Harrow the year after. Still got my mum and my step-dad, lovely woman, adore her... but she's a bit of a reserved type."

"Good job we're only fake dating, you could imagine the chaos if they were to meet. My mum would want to make her something, she's an artist, and I doubt your mum would find it appropriate."

“Such as?” Dorian asked, intrigued.

“Put it this way, when my brother brought home his girlfriend, she created her a hair band made out of Barbie doll heads stuck together.”

“Fucking hell, that’s weird.”

“Yep. Apart from my first boyfriend, who they already knew, I’ve never had a relationship get to the point where I’d decided to introduce them to my parents.” He laughed. “My mind boggles what she’d do. But it’s all from the heart—there’s not an ounce of malice in her.”

Dorian had a sudden flash of meeting Alex’s parents. Them all sitting down for tea and Alex’s mum being as mad as a box of frogs and him trying to act as if it was all normal.

“Families are bonkers.”

“Oh yes, and mine more than most.”

The car was slowing and Alex peered through the window. “I think we’re here. Ready?”

Dorian realised they were still holding hands. He squeezed Alex’s, which seemed to startle him into letting go. He took hold of it again. “We need the practise. And I don’t bite.”

“I suppose hand-holding was part of the arrangement,” Alex said with a smile. “But it will be easier to get out of the car if we’re not linked arm in arm.”

Dorian was relieved there was no one waiting outside for them, meaning there’d been no leak in terms of him being out for dinner. His life was crazy and chaotic and he was relishing the idea of having a normal date—or as normal as it could be, given the circumstances.

For a moment he didn’t know what to do, his feet somehow welded to the spot. Alex tugged his hand and led him into the restaurant where the maître d’ greeted them. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“We have a table reserved in the name of Forbes,” Alex said. They’d had a debate under which name to book it, but

they'd settled on Dorian's as the whole point was he was meant to be out and proud, escorting a new boyfriend.

The staff would have been pre-warned of his arrival, but Dorian wasn't sure if the maître d' recognised him, although he found in most places the front of house was a consummate professional who wouldn't have reacted anyway. They were escorted to a table out of the way, and Dorian was glad they weren't somewhere prominent.

"Can I get you an aperitif while you peruse the menu?"

"A Kir Royale, please," Alex said.

"Same," Dorian said quickly, wanting to be left on their own and he was happy when the maître d' glided away.

Alex set the menu down. "We're having the tasting menu, right? Or have you changed your mind and would rather just have a main course and leave as soon as possible?"

He glanced around the restaurant, no one was interested in him. It was kind of nice but he still couldn't help feeling a little like a fish out of water. "I... we... I'm fine."

"Dorian, you're clearly nervous and apprehensive. If you want to leave at any time then we will."

Alex was lovely and he felt like he was in safe hands. "Let's enjoy it."

"Excellent, because I read the reviews online and they have this truffle risotto that is meant to be amazing."

"Fancy the wine pairing as well?"

Alex nodded. "Oh yes. I've arranged so many of these types of dinners but never got to go on one before so if that's all right I'd love to."

"Absolutely."

Dorian had the life where meals like this could be the norm, money was never a concern and he was seldom refused anything he asked for. But that wasn't what Alex was used to and he liked the idea of spoiling him, giving him more than the cash they'd agreed to because while Alex being Dorian's

boyfriend was purely transactional he could've played this down the line and not given a damn about Dorian's feelings or worries. Instead he'd checked over and over that Dorian was happy with the arrangements, asking him his preferences and offering words of comfort.

Their drinks arrived and they ordered their food, Dorian letting Alex do so for both of them, conscious of what he'd said in the car. He offered up his glass for a toast. "Thank you for this evening."

"I hope this will be the first of many good experiences as the real you." Alex clinked glasses. He took his phone out. "I thought we could take a few photos that suggest coupley stuff. Like the two glasses together."

"Or a selfie."

Alex rolled his eyes. "We don't have to go straight to the nuclear option. But we can do one later if you want."

"Be nice for Instagram and as a memory."

Alex spent a moment organising the champagne glasses and ordered him to put his hand at the bottom of the stem before doing the same, then taking a photo and showing it to Dorian. "Since you've given me access to your Insta account do you want me to post, or do want to do it?"

"Send it to me, I'll do it. Have you got an account?"

"I do," Alex said. "But it's set to private. If you want I can set up a new public one."

"Then I can tag you in the public one."

"All right. But for next time, I don't want us spending the whole meal on our phones. It's a bit rude. Right, you should have the photo, post and then phone away."

If Alex hadn't become a secretary then Dorian thought he'd have made a perfect teacher for his old school. However, if Mr Reynolds had been one of his old housemasters, he'd have probably wanked off even more, if that was possible for a teenage boy.

"What should I use for the caption?"

Alex thought for a minute. “Dinner for two. Keep it simple, it’s obvious that the hands belong to men.”

He did as he was told and within seconds the post started getting likes and comments.

Alex grabbed his phone out of his hand. “I meant it. Do I need to confiscate it or can you be trusted?”

“Are you always this bossy?”

Alex smirked. “Oh, I can be much worse.”

Dorian took his phone back and put it away just as their first course arrived, along with the sommelier who explained how the wine would complement the dish. Once alone Dorian prodded his food. “It looks a bit like frogspawn.”

“I’m sure the chef will love that. Come on, you must have eaten similar things.”

“Eating out and enjoying it aren’t the same thing. There was always someone watching or a reason not to have pudding or an extra glass of wine.” He scooped up a couple of the little jelly balls and a burst of apple and cinnamon crossed his tongue. “Fuck, that’s brilliant.”

Alex did the same and let out a happy humming noise. “I’ve never had anything like it.” He took a sip of wine. “Ooooh, you have to try it together!”

He’d had dinner with countless people, and he couldn’t remember anyone being so joyful at a mouthful of food. “You’re a bit of a foodie.”

“Never had the chance to be, so I will relish the opportunity while I can.”

“I tend to go the other way. I get this sort of thing all the time so I’ve been known to get teary-eyed over a boiled egg.”

Alex laughed. “Sometimes simple is best. And you’re in luck, as boiled eggs are part of my culinary repertoire.”

“Careful, the kitchen will hear and the chef will have you in there to take over.”

“I don’t mind cooking. But I won’t lie that I’m enjoying being at Crofton Hall and not having to. Beats living on your own and eating the same rotation of dishes.”

“I’ve never had to cook, and I tended to eat out or order in a meal service. Robin used to play chef, after a fashion, and I enjoyed that more than anything else.”

“One of my exes was an amazing cook, shit at everything else, but at least I’ve a few decent recipes.” He cocked his head to one side. “Somehow I don’t see Robin as being overly domestic.”

“He wasn’t, and when I say he cooked it was more those kit things. Looking back, we were playing at making house, it’s quite sad really. You fool yourself into believing things to justify carrying on and not changing.”

Alex reached out and stroked the back of his hand. “You can’t dwell on the past. It’s pointless. But you’ve chosen your future and you need to focus on that. I should also point out that it is very bad form to talk about your exes with the man you’re having dinner with.”

He laughed. “That works both ways.”

“Agreed. I won’t mention my lacklustre love life if you keep schtum about yours. There’s much better things to talk about.”

“Such as?”

Alex grinned. “Did you have a body double for *The Escort*?”

Dorian choked on his wine. “You cheeky fucker. I’ll have you know that it was my arse, bared to all.”

CHAPTER 22



Ashley cradled Davy close to him, trying to get the little sod to stop crying. He bounced from one foot to the other, hummed and sang. The teething ring had been discarded and even Mr Bunny, the most precious toy in the universe, had been sent flying by a flailing arm. Slowly, and by fuck did it seem to take forever, Davy began to quieten, probably more out of tiredness than feeling affable towards his father. He'd been up since four a.m. with no respite and Ashley was beginning to doubt his sanity.

The only solace was the multiple pairs of eyes staring at him with the same understanding look—each of the mums wearing a similar haggard expression born of sleepless nights and baby wails. Linda, who was mum to a little girl called Belle, put a fresh cup of coffee in front of him as he retook his seat. “You might even get to drink that while it’s still lukewarm.”

“I don’t think I’ve managed to drink a hot cup of coffee since he was born,” admitted Ashley, and by Davy’s grizzles today was not going to be any different.

“I developed a taste for iced lattes,” Lisa said with sympathy. “At least that way they were supposed to be cold.”

“Surely it’s not too much to have a hot drink once in a while?” he asked, knowing full well that time might be a few years in the future, even longer if they had another one.

“You didn’t consider getting a nanny?” asked another mum called Chelsea. “It’s an expensive way to get a hot drink, but

might be your only option.”

The subject of nannies had come up before, along with every other childcare option, and he'd been less upfront about his concerns, but over the months he'd come to trust the other parents and knew they wouldn't think less of him. “Ben did suggest it but I sort of feel I should be able to look after my own kid, although I didn't expect it to be this hard.”

The mums in this group always struck him as being super competent and organised. Everywhere he looked were nappy bags with nothing missing, extra snacks, and spare sets of clothing, whereas he thought he came across as barely managing to keep Davy alive.

“It's not easy, Ashley. Every time I think I have things sorted something else happens. The guilt of nappy rash or not being able to deal with teething.” Chelsea patted his arm. “You're doing really well.”

“I don't feel it. It's like some days I get my ducks in a row and then someone releases a squirrel.”

Chelsea laughed. “Oh, I understand that one. How much help do you get from Davy's other daddy?”

“Ben tries, and given he was brought up with other people doing everything for him I've been frankly amazed at how hands-on he's been.” Ben had been wonderful, and a doting father. He'd been much more involved than some of the other dads, according to the mums in the group. To be honest, they were both tired and strained by the arrival of Davy, neither of them comprehending beforehand how big a change a new baby would make.

“Didn't you say you were planning to go back to work?” asked Linda.

“Yeah, in a few months. I'm missing adult conversation—even if some of them are brides shouting at me and calling me a wanker.”

He was even relishing the idea of the confrontations. A bride was less likely to throw up down his back, and threats to

return a deposit for bad behaviour worked nine times out of ten.

“You might want to at least think about daycare,” Linda said. “My other two went to a childminder and I honestly think that saved my sanity and my career.”

Linda was something in the city, he wasn't sure what exactly, but her firm were so desperate for her to return that she worked three days a week from home and was able to schedule meetings around the parent and baby groups.

“I've been considering daycare. I'd like to go back to work in a couple of months but I'm already exhausted.” Both Ben and Davy's grandfather had made noises about sending Davy to a childminder, and each of them worried that something might happen to him due to the family connections on both sides. “But I'm not convinced a nanny is the way to go.”

“You know, if I could afford a nanny I would,” Chelsea said wistfully. “Someone I could trust implicitly, who lived in, could help you at any time—it would be amazing.”

Money hadn't been an issue, it was Ashley's stubbornness that had prevented it. “I guess it would be nice.”

Kendra, mum to Jamal, leant forwards untangling Jamal's pudgy hands from her hair. “Honestly, Ashley, think about it seriously. My sister has been training as a nursery nurse and her training has been really thorough, she's helped me so much so I think if you could get someone like her it would be revolutionary.”

“One of my cousins is doing something similar,” Ashley said. His mum had mentioned Theo a couple of weeks ago and he'd been surprised as he'd thought his cousin had been more into martial arts than baby games, and was sure he had a number of different coloured belts. “I'm still not convinced I want one though.”

The idea of a nanny was so tempting, but accepting he needed one would mean admitting to Ben he wasn't coping, that he'd have to swallow his pride, and that wasn't something he could do easily. They'd had several arguments over the

situation already and Ben had stopped pushing after the last time when Ashley had been a bit loud and shouty in his own defence, but if there was a way to bring it up without it coming across as he was capitulating then he would reconsider. Maybe he could speak to Simon and get his help to formulate a plan.

Thinking of Simon, he would be moving in later this afternoon and Ashley had promised to act as a conduit to prevent Robin from becoming overbearing. He might have his work cut out but at least Davy would have another doting adult about the hall.

He spent the rest of the session espousing his views on baby-led feeding for solids, which he'd been surprised that he had such a strong opinion, and then left the ladies, in a contemplative mood about a potential nanny. He would admit it was the best option, but now all he had to do was bring it up to Ben without coming across as a knob.

CHAPTER 23



Alex didn't particularly like shopping, but he preferred it when the store was closed to anyone else. Dorian had the kind of clout that meant the swanky boutique had reopened just for him in the evening.

Dorian held up a casual shirt in a pale green. "I think this would suit you."

Alex took it and held it flush against his body. "I can try it on."

"Jeans as well."

Dorian handed him a pair of black jeans. He'd accepted that he didn't have the wardrobe to play the part of a bit of totty to a movie star but hadn't expected Dorian to be so happy dressing him up like a doll. "You don't have to choose my clothes, I'm perfectly capable of picking them. It's paying for them that's the problem."

"Sorry, it's just kinda fun." Dorian stroked the front of a deep red T-shirt. "I've never got to do this with a boyfriend before, and you're a nice-looking bloke, so it's cool."

Alex didn't quite know how to react to the compliment and decided not to address it. "I suppose I can allow it. But you're not to go overboard."

He wasn't sure what Dorian's definition of going overboard would constitute and headed to the changing room. The jeans were more than a thousand pounds so he decided it was best not to read the price tags on the other items in case he swallowed his tongue. He might never get the opportunity to

splurge on clothes like this again. He tended to save for his suits for work and his casual wardrobe wasn't of the calibre to move in Dorian's circles.

The jeans were on the border of being too snug, the cut close but weren't too tight. It was a good style for him. He heard Dorian chatting to the boutique manager as he opened the door.

"Well?" he asked.

Dorian looked him up and down and smirked. "Very nice... turn around."

He did as he was told and was surprised to see Dorian had moved closer, placing a hand on his hip. It was within the bounds of their agreement but Alex realised how unprepared he was for the situation. Dorian smelt so good and he wasn't blind. "Glad you approve."

"There's a few more here I've picked out, but to be honest, you have to wear this tonight."

Dorian squeezed his hip and stepped away. The manager handed Alex several other pieces and Alex decided not to argue. "I could probably do with some shoes..."

"How about a pair of dress loafers and something more casual?" asked the manager who probably couldn't believe her luck, as he was pretty sure she'd be getting a hefty commission, or at least a bonus.

"Sure. Size tens, please."

She scurried off and Dorian pulled on the front of his shirt. "Honestly, I thought you were hot in a suit, but those jeans deserve an award."

"Thanks—I think."

"Hey, come on, take the compliment."

Dorian hadn't become a leading Hollywood man by looking as if he'd been hit by a bag of bricks, his natural sex appeal was off the charts and he was as charismatic as they came. Alex needed to retreat before he did something stupid.

The manager returned with two pairs of shoes.

“I’ll try the rest on,” he said.

“Want help with the buttons?” Dorian asked with a wink.

The manager made an excitable squeaking noise and he guessed she was stoked to be one of the first to see Dorian flirting with his boyfriend.

Two could play at that game. “You get to help with me taking them off later.”

He didn’t wait for Dorian to reply and hightailed it back to his dressing room, taking a deep breath as he locked the door behind him. The problem was Dorian pressed buttons Alex wanted to be pressed. He could imagine Dorian being strong and powerful in bed, would be able to follow directions and be determined to ensure his lover’s pleasure, and it had been a while since he’d had a competent lover. Thinking like this was not sensible. He didn’t do casual, he’d tried and failed when he was younger, and there was no way he could enjoy a nibble of the cherry like Dara had suggested without wanting to consume it whole. Dorian didn’t want him for a long-term partner, he wanted a distraction for Robin and Simon. Dorian must obviously still care for Robin if he was willing to do this, and Alex wondered if any man would live up to his ex. And as a future billionaire and viscount, Robin Flint was the mother of all exes.

Dorian’s cackle jolted him out of his thoughts and he tried on several more things. Unfortunately, Dorian had a great eye for clothes and he had to admit they all suited him, and several of them he’d have never picked for himself.

He poked his head around the door. “Sorry, did you want to head straight out? If we’re not heading back, I could change into your favourites.”

Dorian smiled. “I’ll come in to supervise. I’m sure Dee will bag up what you decide on taking and arrange for them to be delivered.”

As Dorian pushed his way into the changing room, all of a sudden the space seemed two sizes smaller. He leant in. “Can

we play up to this? Both of us look a little hot and bothered when we leave?”

“I guess if we are in the first throes of passion, then we shouldn’t be able to keep our hands off each other. Let me get changed and I can mess up the buttons.”

Dorian sat in the chair in the corner of the dressing room. Alex tutted. “Turn around.”

“Oh come on.”

Alex crossed his hands over his chest. “Now.”

Dorian’s nostrils flared. “Fuck me. Ben was right.”

“What’s that meant to mean?”

“Nothing.” Dorian snorted and moved the chair so he was now facing the wall.

Alex changed back into the first jeans and shirt Dorian had picked out. “You can look now. I’m done.”

Dorian grinned as he saw him. “I know you might have thought I was saying it for the benefit of the manager but you really do look great.”

“Thanks.” He glanced around at the collection of clothes. He’d liked them all but they would not be cheap. “Are you sure you want to get me all those?”

“Of course. As I said, you’re going to be taken to places where there’ll be an expected standard of dress. Not black tie, but the best labels. I know it’ll be awkward enough without some arse gawking at you because you’re not wearing the right things.”

“I suppose it’ll be like a uniform of sorts.” If he thought about it in that sense he could rationalise it a lot better. “Although there’s a lot less polyester in that pile.”

“You could make polyester look good.” Dorian winked at him and picked up the clothes. “Come on, Cinderella. Let’s get you to the ball.”

* * *

Dorian had joined about half a dozen of the various London-based members clubs on the basis of Ben and Robin's advice. Robin had a less than positive review of most in the city and was even vitriolic about a few of them. Ben had been more circumspect in his condemnation but had, in general, agreed with Robin's choices. He'd also said that Dorian might want to ask Simon or Ashley their opinions as their experience of such places would be more akin to what Alex would encounter. He hadn't done so, and was now wondering if he'd made a mistake and vowed to speak to Ashley before his next planned date to a similar place with Alex. Although now Simon had moved in, he might be a better option as Ashley hated these places and Dorian wasn't sure he'd get a balanced opinion with his sleep-deprived state.

Alex was not comfortable, he could see it in how he held himself, the way he glanced around and dropped his head whenever people looked in his direction. He'd scurried off to the bathroom and Dorian had been left sipping his wine, wondering if they should call it quits for the evening.

He'd booked a corner table out of the way, so they didn't have too many eyes on them. Still, the point was to be seen together. Something Alex hadn't been prepared for was this level of scrutiny. No one had come up to bother them and Dorian thought that next time it might be better for them to be joining other people and not being exposed as much.

The place was busy, unsurprising for prime time on a Saturday evening, and it hadn't taken long for the news to spread that Dorian Marsten was in the building with another man, on a date no less. In the main, people weren't staring outright, but he had no doubt that several surreptitious photos would have been taken and it wouldn't be long before the gossip sites were tipped off.

"Dorian? Is it you?"

He hadn't noticed the man approach and he recognised him as a director of an arthouse film he'd done a few years back as a favour. "Jez? I wouldn't have thought this was your sort of place?"

Jez Conor was an achingly hip Bostonian who had been far too cool for award ceremonies and showbiz parties. He sat down uninvited. "I've mellowed a bit over the last year. Divorce will do that for you."

"Oh, you and Alan have split. That's a shame." They'd been a lovely couple, out and proud and, if he'd remembered right, Alan was an architect.

"These things happen. But not a shock, unlike hearing Dorian Marsten is as big a cock slut as I am."

Dorian barked out a laugh. "You're just annoyed your gaydar failed you."

"Very embarrassing. That, and not catching on you were with Robin. Looking back it's fucking obvious. I saw you two weren't together any longer either..."

"He quite rightly decided that waiting for a self-obsessed prick to do the right thing wasn't for him. He's got himself a lovely fella."

"Nasty business with the stabbing though. Hope he's okay."

"He's on the mend."

"So you and Robin are done and dusted. I would've thought you two would have given it another crack."

Dorian saw Alex approach and hesitate, seeing Jez had taken his chair, so he beckoned Alex to hurry up. "That's not just because Robin has Simon but I've also started seeing Alex."

Jez turned and Dorian watched him give Alex the once-over, a considered, then approving, look. "I'll give you this, Dorian, you have a fantastic eye for the guys."

Dorian shifted up on the large loveseat so Alex could squeeze in. "Alex, this is Jez. He's a director."

Alex offered his hand to shake, which Jez took. “Nice to meet you, Alex. How are you surviving being the first public boyfriend of lover boy here?”

“It’s a little daunting. But neither of us wanted to hide away.”

“The limelight isn’t always the greatest place to be. I’m surprised Dorian didn’t go for someone more used to it.” There was a definite intensity in Jez’s gaze and Dorian hadn’t expected the interest. He filed the information away for later. Maybe if Jez was still single in a few months he could be someone he could ask out. They’d always got on well and with him being in the business, he would know more about dealing with the repercussions of dating someone like Dorian.

Alex placed his hand on Dorian’s thigh, a territorial act that Dorian cheered inwardly at. “Dorian needs a supporter, not someone wanting to bask in the glory or use his name. We’re *very* well-suited. In *every* way.”

Dorian turned and found himself staring into Alex’s eyes, he swallowed. He was lovely, and he hadn’t been lying when he’d said how well Alex filled his new jeans. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“I’ll leave you to your evening. I don’t want to be a gooseberry-flavoured third wheel.”

Dorian waved Jez off and Alex leant in. “He was interested in you.”

“Maybe a little. He’s not long divorced so probably on the rebound.”

“Would he be your type? I honestly didn’t think he would be since he’s a bit older and I guess the sort who would want to drive, prove he had more experience. Would that be something you’d want?”

Dorian considered himself to have a flexible approach to sex, although he probably had a preference to top over bottoming. “I’m not short on experience, it’s more I’ve not been open about it. I suppose I prefer to take the lead in bed, but equally I can follow orders if they’re good ones.”

“Do you want to start a potentials list? Whenever a bloke takes your fancy you could record the positives and negatives to help you decide.”

Dorian had never considered anything like that. “Doesn’t sound very romantic.”

Alex took a sip of his fruity cocktail. “Do you want romance? Can you afford something normal when it’d be better to be forewarned of issues that could be lurking given your position?”

That seemed so fatalistic. “You’re assuming there’ll be issues.”

“There are always issues but if you can ensure there’s never gonna be big ones then surely that’s got to be a benefit.”

“But just because I’m famous doesn’t mean I don’t want some of the normal things in life, like having a boyfriend I don’t have to vet.”

“There is always a price,” Alex said. “When the world knows who you are, and you have more money than God, you have to accept that it comes with a trade-off.”

Dorian didn’t want to think of things in such a black and white manner. “It’s not fair.”

“Not sure you can moan about things being fair. For those of us who can only dream of your lifestyle, it feels like a fair swap. Can you honestly say anyone in your Hollywood social circles had a whirlwind romance that stayed the distance with someone not an actor or in the business?”

Dorian racked his brains to come up with an answer to prove Alex wrong. He couldn’t. “I’m sure there are—just not ones I know well.”

“Trouble is there’s no fairy tale. People want to be famous but then don’t realise what that really means.”

Dorian had known he’d been lucky, he’d wanted to be an actor ever since he’d starred in his first play at school and had been guided in his early years by a mentor and then Zak and Marisa. “Fame means different things to different people. I

don't want what I used to have, Hollywood has lost its shine, so I don't see why I can't have a more spontaneous approach to dating."

Alex smacked his lips as he finished his cocktail and Dorian had the most inappropriate thought about whether he would make similar noises when sucking a cock.

"This probably isn't the best conversation to be having in public, even if no one can hear. We're meant to be a couple on a date so I don't think we're transmitting the right vibe."

Alex was right and Dorian called over a hostess to order one of the sharing cocktails, raising an eyebrow in defiance at Alex's withering look. "What?" he asked with mock innocence as she left.

"You've gone the other way now. What was wrong with just sitting close on a sofa looking like we fancied each other?"

Dorian chuckled at Alex's indignance. "You're so cute when you're grumpy."

"No I'm fucking not."

He reached out and stroked Alex's brow where his frown was crumpling his forehead. "Oh yes you are. You're like a rabid bunny rabbit. Have you got a fluffy tail?"

"Stop being a prick."

"I will if you will." Dorian waggled his eyebrows. "Come on, honey. Cuddle up."

He grabbed Alex and pulled him into his side as he sat back on the sofa. It felt good to hold someone close, it had been too long, his last encounters had been more about getting off than getting comfy.

"Dorian," Alex warned as he tried to move away.

But Dorian wouldn't let him. "Lighten up, Alex. If people see us like this they can envisage us watching TV curled up at home, it'll give a much better impression than me shoving my tongue down your throat."

“Your tongue is not going near me.”

Dorian couldn't resist, he stuck out his tongue and waggled it at Alex who bit his lip and swallowed. Perhaps he wasn't so impervious to his charms after all. “I've been told I have a very talented tongue.”

“Have you now?” Alex said, in almost a squeak.

He leant closer, knowing he shouldn't tease but he couldn't resist. “How do you think I get all those roles? It was my amazing oral talent. I've never fluffed a line.”

Alex shoved him away. “You're a sod.”

“But you love me anyway.”

He was sure Alex was going to say something derogatory but the hostess appeared with their drink, a goldfish bowl monstrosity with two straws.

“There you go, gentleman.” She set it down in front of them. “I know I shouldn't say anything, but you two make the cutest couple.”

Dorian slung his arm around Alex's shoulders. “I'm a very lucky man.”

* * *

Dorian's London crash pad was bigger than most of the places Alex had lived in even though Dorian had referred to it as bijou. Alex had slept in a massive bed that had been so comfortable he hadn't felt as well-rested in years. Even the shower in the ensuite was amazing, and with the sort of expensive toiletries his old boss would have given as Christmas presents to the spouses of his exec team.

He entered the kitchen, which was probably not used very often, but he'd had it stocked with some groceries by the concierge service that came with the place after they'd finalised the details of the date. Following a bit of hunt through the cupboards, he found what he needed for a breakfast of toast and coffee. With no sign of Dorian

emerging, Alex decided to take advantage of the sunny morning and sit on the balcony—if he could call it a balcony—it was more like a courtyard garden with views over Westminster.

This was not his life, he was just borrowing it for a while, and although he thought it would be easy enough to get used to, he was only pretending to be Dorian's boyfriend and shouldn't risk getting too attached to the lifestyle, or the man himself.

He scrolled through his phone wondering if anything about their date had hit the internet yet. Sure enough, there were headlines on the gossip sites, a blurry picture or two of them in the bar, and one of them walking to the car. He did look good in the photos and they made an attractive couple. With no one having identified him, Alex was being cast as Dorian's new mystery man and, depending on the site, Dorian was either a lucky dog to have ensnared a younger man, or the potential victim of a gold digger. People were awful. At least this wouldn't last for long and he'd be able to get back to his ordinary life keeping sleep-deprived earls from missing their appointments.

His phone vibrated showing his mum calling. It wasn't even ten a.m. yet and she wasn't the type to call before lunch.

"Mum?" he answered. "Is there anything wrong? Is everything moving along with the house?"

"Alex, why didn't you tell me you had a new boyfriend?"

He'd hoped his parents wouldn't find out, and if they did it would be much later. His mum didn't read gossip websites covering the dating habits of movie stars, or trashy magazines, and they didn't watch much telly. He doubted she'd even know who Dorian was.

His first thought was to deny it but she'd only get annoyed that he'd lied to her. He wouldn't tell her the whole truth though. "It's still early days—we've only had two dates, I didn't want to jinx it."

“I’m glad you’re dating again. It’s been a while and I was beginning to worry. Maybe this one you’ll let me meet.”

No chance was his immediate thought, but he managed not to verbalise it.

She had also tried to set him up with several guys, most of them artists, and the one he’d agreed to see had been an egotistical knob. However, the biggest question was how she had found out. “I’ve not told anyone yet so how did you know?”

“Mary just called me, said her daughter Judith was around first thing dropping off the grandkids for the day and she’d seen your picture on a website she followed and on various Instagram posts... apparently you’re dating a movie star.”

“Er... well...”

“I looked him up on the internet and there you were. Dorian Marsten and he’s only just come out as gay. You should have told me!”

“Sorry, Mum.” He hadn’t thought his mother’s network would have reacted so fast. “As I said it’s really new, and I’m the first guy he’s dated since coming out.

“How did you get to meet him? You don’t find movie stars in the local supermarket.”

“He’s a friend of my boss.” They had speaking points in case it came up, a clear backstory so they wouldn’t contradict each other. “Dorian is staying with him at the hall and we met over the coffee machine in the kitchen.”

She made a cooing noise like a strangulated pigeon. “Darling, that’s lovely.”

He thought he’d better stop her running away with the idea. “Look, I’ll be honest, I like him but I’m not going to hold his attention for long.”

“Nonsense, sweetheart. He’s very lucky to have such a caring young man as his first boyfriend.”

He thought it best not to overcomplicate matters by clarifying he wasn’t Dorian’s first boyfriend, just the first one

in public. If he'd been his proper new man then he'd also have to contend with living up to Robin Flint.

“Maybe, and yeah, I'm a safe pair of hands while he finds his way. But I'm not part of his razzle-dazzle world, and we're seeing where things go.”

“You're always so down on yourself.”

He sighed, he loved his mum, and she was right that he was one of his own worst critics. “Sometimes, but on this occasion I need to be realistic. Men like Dorian don't settle down with the likes of me, so I'll enjoy him while I can.”

The chair across from him was pulled out and Dorian sat down, a questioning look on his face.

“I have to go, Dorian's up and I wanted to surprise him with brunch. Bye.”

“Just be careful.”

“I will.”

Dorian waved at Alex's phone. “Who was that?”

“My mum. One of the neighbour's daughters is a gossip queen—she wanted to know what was going on.”

Dorian stole his coffee and one of his slices of toast. “You could tell her the truth.”

“What? That I'm fake-dating an asshole who steals my breakfast so I can help with a family matter?” He only just stopped himself from blurting out the actual reason he needed the money. He took back his mug. “No chance. She'd go ballistic.”

Dorian chuckled and ate the toast he'd stolen. “Mums can get a bit protective. Mine's a bit more reserved than what yours sounds like but she's been supportive in her own way. She liked Robin, so she wasn't happy when we split.”

“You were together a long time.”

“It took a while to tell her we were dating, although I think she had an idea. And I didn't exactly do myself any favours when Robin left me.”

Alex had wondered what the story was, he knew Robin hadn't wanted to hide but it sounded as if there was more to it. "What did you do?"

"I tried to fuck him out of my system, which didn't work. And I tried to get him to take me back, including storming into Crofton Hall acting like a jilted lover over Simon after he posted a picture of them together."

Alex winced. "I sense that didn't go down well."

"I was a mess. Robin leaving had been on the cards a long time but I didn't want to see it. I'd already come to the conclusion that I wanted to come out, but my management team weren't supportive, and I was drinking more than I should."

Alex reached over and squeezed his hand. "But you've come through it, things will only get better."

Dorian smiled and like the night before in the bar Alex felt his heart stutter. He was so screwed, he was going to end up falling for this prick and then he was going to be left broken-hearted and miserable as Dorian sailed off and had a wonderful life with a beautiful and famous guy.

"I can't thank you enough for doing this for me. Having someone I can trust while going through this has been really helpful."

Alex hadn't done this out of altruism. Dorian hadn't overstepped the boundaries they'd agreed upon and had been a proper gentleman, most of the time. The trouble was he found himself thinking he wouldn't have minded if Dorian had been a little less well-behaved. He would need to be more careful, protect himself because there was no way in hell that Dorian wouldn't break his heart.

CHAPTER 24



Several meetings with his lawyers later, he had agreements drawn up to sever his business relationships with everyone on the list they had compiled and, most importantly, with Zak and Marisa. It had felt like the end of an era as he'd signed the final page to cut ties and he'd insisted on doing it the old-fashioned way, with pen and ink. His professional priorities had begun to diverge a while back but they'd always managed to convince him to do one more lucrative rom-com or action movie. He was still convinced Zak had been behind various leaks about Robin, although he was in two minds about Marisa, and now they were legally separated he intended to look into a way to prove it without having to worry about financial repercussions.

For the first time in his career he had no outside steer, no one influencing his next move and, while he'd thought the freedom might be nice, the reality was he would need some form of management team. Getting a stylist and publicist didn't worry him, but replacing an agent and a business manager was different. People had approached him, most reaching out through the new email Alex had set up since he'd done his damndest to stop people from being able to have direct contact with him, but they had all been made from the same mould as Zak and Marisa—Hollywood-focused and chasing dollar signs. Not that he'd want an agent without drive but just that the direction would be important.

He trudged downstairs. Ben had mentioned that Dara's partner Nathan would be here for dinner and Dorian only had a vague recollection of meeting him at Ben and Ashley's

wedding, recalling he was a TV producer Dara had met during the *Secret Histories* programme he'd worked on based at Crofton Hall. Perhaps he might be able to help, being UK-based and with hopefully a decent network. Alex had suggested he reach out to his friends back in Hollywood, those with roots in England, but for now he was still trying not to get dragged into the drama that came with dealing with anything in LA.

Chris was there with Dara and Nathan already, and Dorian introduced himself and offered his hand. "Nice to see you again, Nathan. It's been a while."

"I tend to visit him in London," Dara explained. "As lovely as Crofton Hall is, she's still my workplace so it's good to get away."

Ben and Ashley arrived with Elena who was cackling over something that made Ben roll his eyes.

"What's so funny?" Chris asked.

"My suggestion I could give the dishy DI MacLove a bed bath fell on stony ground." Elena smirked. "Ben has no sense of humour. I despair, I really do."

"The poor man is recuperating from being stabbed. The last thing he needs is to add in mental anguish from being preyed on by someone older than his mother.

"Is he not joining us?" Dorian asked. Simon had been relishing the peace and quiet and Dorian hadn't seen much of him but he was sure he'd heard the plan was he'd start joining them for dinner.

Ashley shook his head. "He had a doctor's check-up earlier and it's taken more out of him than he expected. I said I'd sit with him if he wanted company for a late supper after he's had a nap."

Ashley placed the baby monitor on the table. "Is that for Davy or Simon?" Dorian asked.

"Don't even joke about it," said Ashley. "Robin made a suggestion in the same vein and Simon informed Robin where he could insert it if he were to buy one."

“Robin is clucking something fierce,” Ben said. “He’s shuttling between here and the US for a few more weeks and he’s gone all Mother Hen worrying over Simon. Add in the jet lag and it’s not been pretty.”

“The sooner he’s permanently back the better,” Ashley said. “He’ll see Simon is well on the way to a full recovery and he’ll calm down.”

Dorian thought that might be wishful thinking, and it would be a while before Robin was settled. He’d received several texts from Robin looking for additional insights, jumping on every scrap of information. “You know at one point I’m sure he was going to hire a nurse.”

Chris choked on his water. “Oh, I bet Simon didn’t like the idea.”

Ashley laughed humourlessly. “Understatement of the year. Simon is one of the most even-tempered men I know and he fucking lost it. He was angrier over that than he was about Marco.”

“No one wants to be treated like that by a lover,” Dorian said. “It’s one thing to care, another to smother.”

“Thankfully Robin dropped the idea.”

Dorian couldn’t imagine Simon going ballistic, he had such a level-headed manner he wouldn’t have thought it possible. “If he managed to out-stubborn Robin then he’s a keeper.”

There was general assent in the form of nods and muttering around the table. Dorian thought he needed to get to know Simon better if so many people were quick to praise him.

“If I didn’t have Nathan, I’d have tried to lure him away from his ridiculously well-off and good-looking boyfriend,” Dara said with a smirk. “Obviously, if I were available, he’d find my podgy historian vibe irresistible.”

Nathan laughed. “I’m so enraptured by that vibe that I turn down offers from celebs day in, day out.”

Dorian thought this might be his perfect opportunity to see if Nathan might be of help without asking directly. “You’re better off with a historian, most of us celebrity types are a bit knobbish. Either that or our agents are.”

“Well, to be honest, Dorian, it can be a bit of a mixed bag. Generally, big names tend to be better than reality TV show rejects. Same goes for their people, if you’re hawking deadwood then they tend to be more desperate and pushy.”

“Oh, god, remember that bloke with a comb-over who won an obscure daytime telly quiz, but had the most ridiculous request?” asked Dara. “Nathan came home fuming, as the bloke thought he was Gielgud.”

“I wouldn’t have minded, but on the same show I had two bona fide headliners from West End productions who were also TV stars in their own right.”

“Sounds like you have connections to all sorts,” Dorian said, aiming for casual. The knowing look from Ben made him think he was being obvious, although most of the others around the table had fallen into their own side conversations.

“Between myself and the executive producers or studio reps, we cast a wide net. I’ve produced all sorts of TV shows so I have been building the collection for a while.”

“Do you do theatre work as well?”

Nathan shook his head. “Not in the sense of actually producing plays. I deal with my fair share of actors who do both theatre and TV.”

“All UK-based?”

Nathan cocked his head to one side. “Quite a lot of them. None in your league, though.”

“I don’t have a league at the moment, that’s sort of the problem.” He fiddled with his napkin, wondering if he should ask in this setting. “I’m in the market for a new agent. Theatre-focused, I think, not sure about television.”

“Have you someone in mind? If you have a name I can let you know my opinion of them, might be biased as they

probably treat their clients better than us lowly crew.”

“If they treat the crew like shit I wouldn’t want them representing me, but to be honest, I haven’t got anyone in mind. I’d be open to suggestions.”

If Nathan was surprised by the ask, he hid it well. “I guess if you’re looking for theatre work, the average Hollywood agent isn’t going to be much help. But I can give you the names of a few of the better ones I’ve worked with—they wouldn’t necessarily have room on their books but I guess they’d make an exception for you.”

He’d be lying if he said he didn’t want special treatment, but also didn’t want to come across as a prima donna. “If you can give me any names you think are a good bet, I can do a bit of research.”

In reality, he’d ask Alex to do it.

“I’ll have a proper think and pass the names along, via Dara, if that’ll work? Nathan asked. “Or if you give me an email I can send them straight.”

“Could you send them to Alex?” He dug out a business card from his wallet that Alex had given him a stack of. “He’s acting as a bit of a barrier for me and he’ll set up the deep dive I’d need before I took on someone new.”

Nathan took the card. “He’s been doing quite a lot for you of late. You won’t know what to do when you part company.”

He wasn’t sure if Nathan had been told about Alex, he’d had seen they were dating, but didn’t know the mechanics behind it. On reflection, he should have expected Dara’s partner to know, as Alex had said he’d confided to Dara. “We might dissolve our public relationship, but unless Ben’s saying Alex can’t continue, I’d hate to lose the help he’s been giving me. At least while I’m still at the hall.”

“Oh, all right. I thought it might be a bit awkward afterwards.”

Chris nodded and Dorian realised he’d been listening to them and not the conversation Ben and Dara were having

about the 8th Earl. "I imagine it would be hard to transition back."

Dorian was bemused by the logic. "I don't see why. We've an agreement."

"He'll have gone from being one of the closest people in your life, being at your side, spending all the extra time with you, to being relegated back to a secretary. Even if there's no romantic attachment, then there'll be an emotional one."

Robin had told him once that people underestimated Chris, that they saw him as a dippy blond and wrote him off, but he was far more insightful than he was given credit for. "I didn't think of it like that."

"You should talk to him. I don't think it fair he be put in an uncomfortable position." Chris's blue eyes held a penetrative quality that he thought lesser men might kill for. "This is his job, he needs to be happy here."

Ben must've heard what Chris had said as he looked over sharply. "What's this about? Who's not happy at Crofton Hall?"

"Nobody at the moment," Chris said. "But once Alex is done with dating Dorian, I thought it would be a bit cruel to have him still working for Dorian."

"Cruel?"

Chris wrinkled his nose. "Uncomfortable, then. Imagine if Dorian wanted him to book a dinner with his new boyfriend, or go from being a confidant to a letter writer... well, I'd not like it much."

Ben's expression said they'd be discussing this later and Dorian thought he needed to step in. "I'm not going to do anything that would upset him. He's been great helping me and I won't repay that by being a dick."

"I didn't mean to start anything," Nathan said. "I'll send over a few names after dinner."

Dorian sensed a nervousness about Nathan that hadn't been there before. A lot of famous folk treated people as if

they were rubbish, he might have been shallow and a coward but he never treated people like they were beneath him. “You don’t have to rush. Enjoy your evening with Dara. And thanks for mentioning it... someone should be looking out for Alex.”

He’d caused all this trouble to start with. If he’d not hid in the closet, he wouldn’t have split from Robin, who wouldn’t then have left and found Simon, who wouldn’t have been stabbed, so then Dorian wouldn’t have needed a fake boyfriend.

A wail from the baby monitor had Ashley on his feet.

“Want me to go?” Ben asked.

“No. I’ll settle the young master and check in with Simon. If he’s awake I’ll ask Karl to bring us both something.”

Dorian allowed himself an extra-large helping of trifle, confident in the knowledge that Alex had created his membership of the Grange so he would not develop love handles or a belly wobble. Dara was quick to lead Nathan away after the meal had finished and he realised they didn’t see each other as often as most couples, Dara being here and Nathan on-set or in London, but they seemed happy enough.

Ben stopped him as he made to leave. “Quick drink?”

“Sure.”

Ben led him out onto the terrace, grabbing a bottle of port and two glasses as they passed the drinks cabinet, and one of the bags of sweets from Dorian’s gifted hoard, and once they were seated, Ben poured them both decent measures. “Only the one for me, though. I daren’t risk a hangover with Davy. My head might explode and I’ll get no sympathy from Ashley.”

There’d been countless evenings when they finished off a bottle of port between them. In his younger years, Ben was always on the lookout for a warm body for the night, and the parties they’d attended had been wild—from what his cloudy memory allowed him to recall.

“Do you remember the night in Santa Monica? We drank a bottle of port and gate-crashed a pool party. The one with the

Greek lad?”

Ben’s grin was sly. “Oh yeah... I still can’t drink ouzo without getting an erection. He was a very talented gentleman, I learnt a thing or two that night.”

“We were young and stupid. But it was fun.”

“I don’t miss it. The memories are good. Most of them. But I’d hate to still be that man.”

He understood Ben’s perspective, had shared it for years when he was with Robin. “It’s kind of hollow though, in the long run. I got tired of it pretty quickly.”

“Ashley saved me, I thought he was saving Crofton Hall, but her owner was in a far bigger need.” Ben smiled and took a drink of his port. “You’ll find someone, Dorian. Alex will help get you accustomed to being with a man in public and then you’ll take your training wheels off and Mr Right will be waiting.”

Dorian wasn’t an incurable romantic, but he liked the idea of someone being his and him being their important person. “I hope so. And I don’t intend to hurt Alex along the way.”

“I know. That wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about. But it is to do with Alex. Ashley heard back from his father about the question we had.”

He hadn’t expected the Essex connection to work so fast. “Go on then. Am I suddenly going to find myself sleeping with the fishes?”

Ben laughed. “No, there’s nothing untoward whatsoever.”

“Meaning?”

“I don’t know how he found out, I don’t ask my father-in-law those sorts of questions, but he investigated a few potential reasons and narrowed down the root cause with relative ease.” Ben swirled the port in its glass. “Alex’s parents’ house needs extensive work to make it habitable. They’d moved out and were living in tents but have since moved into a hotel while work has commenced.”

Dorian had expected something a little more juicy. An older brother with a gambling debt or a dubious decision that had led to blackmail, not this wholesome example of being a good son. “Are you sure that’s all it is? He could have gone to a bank for a loan.”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know his credit history, but I imagine it would be a considerable part of his salary and instead, he knew of an easy offer that would sort it all out and be done in a few months and not years.”

Alex was such a nice bloke it made perfect sense. “I can’t imagine him doing anything illegal. He’s been a dream date. But you’re right I do have a type—blond and bossy.”

“Just be careful, Dorian. He doesn’t deserve to be caught up in a shitshow. Make sure when it ends that no blame is attached to him, and if things go wrong it cannot be the case that he finds Crofton Hall an uncomfortable place to be.”

Dorian knew that. “I’ll move out if there’s a problem. I know the A in A-lister used to stand for asshole, but I’m a better man than that these days.”

“You weren’t a bad bloke.”

“I’m sure Robin would disagree.”

“He’s biased.”

But Ben had a point about Alex. Wherever this landed, he wouldn’t see Alex run out of Crofton Hall, he deserved the best and Dorian would ensure he got it.

CHAPTER 25



Davy took over an hour to settle, Ashley's usual tricks failed to work and even *London Bridge is Falling Down* had not secured the endgame and he'd had to wait it out, his son cradled against him until he fell asleep deep enough that putting him in his cot wouldn't restart the process.

Finally, he was able to creep out of his room, baby monitor in hand. He waited outside the door, breathing shallowly, listening for any sign Davy had woken and, hearing nothing, he left as fast as he could.

Ben was going to talk to Dorian about Alex. Not that long ago, Ashley wouldn't have passed on a request to his dad, but he'd found his views on a lot of things had changed since becoming a father, and the irrational fear Alex might be mixed up in something that could impact Davy had meant he'd agreed. That Alex needed the money for his parents had made Ashley feel a bit shit for agreeing to help but in the end he'd known his son was safe.

He decided to drop in on Simon. Robin had been bugging Ben for updates, but he hadn't been stupid enough to ask Ashley a second time. He supposed Ben might have acted in a similar way but he couldn't see his husband having such a level of fuckwittery.

Simon was sitting reading when Ashley arrived, and he looked a lot better than he'd done earlier. "Back from the brink of death, I see. Want some supper? I can text Karl to bring something up."

“That would be great.

Ashley dashed off a text to Karl requesting something for them both.

“I feel much better,” Simon said. “And the good thing is I’m recovering from the drops in energy quicker too.”

“If you could share your secret on that one I’d be grateful as I’m knackered.” He pointed to the baby monitor. “He’s a worse taskmaster than even the scariest bridezilla.”

Simon chuckled. “Hard job, babies, I’m often amazed the human race has continued given the upheaval kids cause.”

“What I’m amazed at is how some people manage to have a second one within a year of the first. Davy is a natural cockblock and often I’m too tired to be randy.”

“I bet that wasn’t something you ever thought would happen. Especially with a husband as attractive as yours.”

Ashley groaned. “The mind is willing, but the flesh is knackered.”

“I know that feeling. At the moment, taking my socks off is exhausting enough let alone the rest of my clothes for a bit of fun.”

Simon had to be mindful about his recovery but he was a stubborn man. “Perhaps you could not fight Robin on him finding someone to help. You need to swallow your pride on that.”

“I tell you what, I will if you will.” Simon stared at him straight on. “You’re not failing with Davy, but either Ben needs to do more or you get a nanny.”

Somehow the conversation had been shifted away from Simon, he was far too good at that, but Ashley couldn’t deny Simon was right. “It’s not a matter of Ben doing more, he’s a good dad, but I’m barely coping now, once I go back to work it’ll be ten times worse.”

“Most parents have childcare help when they work. Ben has duties to the earldom which aren’t something he can sidestep, and if you do want to work, then Davy will need

looking after. You can't balance him on a hip while the bride and groom debate the flavour of the cake."

Ashley had investigated local daycare and nurseries but the waiting lists were several months long and he didn't think he could survive until then. "I was talking to a couple of the mums, they were all for a nanny but most of them couldn't afford it. At least I wouldn't have that issue."

"Then what's stopping you from advertising for a live-in nanny?"

He was going to sound like a grade-A arse. "Because I've been adamant that I didn't need one."

Simon raised an eyebrow. "So is this you not liking being wrong? Or you just been a stubborn cock?"

"I... well... little from column A and a little from column B," Ashley said, Simon's penetrating look making him feel like a prick. "I thought to get around it, I could come up with some way to save face."

"Muppet. Ashley, I'm going to say this because you're my friend. You shouldn't need plans and strategies to save face in front of your husband. It shouldn't matter. If you'd married some twatwaffle then I'd understand, but you married a nice bloke. Do your relationship the courtesy it deserves, which is the truth."

"I hate being wrong. And I hate the idea I'm not coping and failing Davy."

"You can stop that. You're not failing your son. You're a loving and doting parent. There's nothing you wouldn't do for him."

"That's kinda the point—I shouldn't need help."

"Everyone needs help, but not everyone's in the position to get it." Simon tutted. "If you had a nanny you're still not the sort to suddenly stop caring for Davy and let the nanny do it all. They'd be there to help."

Perhaps this was the problem, his own preconceived idea about what a nanny might do. "I also thought of a nanny as

someone who charges in, deals with everything while the parents sit back and sip cocktails.”

“I’m sure that is the case for some, but it doesn’t have to be. You set the rules in your own home for your own kid.”

“I think Ben’s nanny was very hands-on... he’d no doubt expect the same.”

“Firstly, he’s one of three siblings, and his parents were of a different generation and social class to you. Davy is—at least so far—an only child, and you’re different to Elena in terms of a parent.”

Simon always spoke sense and made him rethink things.

“I guess so. I do need help especially when I go back to work.”

“Then tell Ben exactly that. Get someone in place ahead of time and you’ll be more comfortable about returning to work.”

Karl arrived with a tray of sandwiches and two bowls of trifle. They ate while discussing the gossip from the local running club, Simon missing both the interaction and his regular exercise.

“I think I need a walk.” Simon stretched in his seat. “There’s no way I’ll sleep now. And before you say anything, yes you can come with me, because I’m not that stubborn.”

“Not with me, but with Robin you are.”

“Busted.” Simon laughed. “I know I’m not up for hiking, and it would be daft in my current state to go unaccompanied.”

The tell-tale sound of Davy waking crackled across the baby monitor. “Oh shit!”

“Don’t worry about it, go see to your son. Maybe Karl is about, or someone else?”

Karl had a date with Val after he finished tonight, and Dara and Nathan were probably in do-not-disturb territory. “I could try Chris. Although he said he was working on his idea for a novel this evening, so there’s a high chance he won’t answer.”

Davy wailed again.

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter.”

Ashley scrolled his contacts. “What about Dorian?”

“I wouldn’t have a problem... he might have though.”

“Let me ask him. I know he was talking to Ben, but he didn’t say he had plans.”

Ashley: Hey, sorry to bother you... Simon would like a walk in the grounds but he can’t go on his own and I need to baby wrangle.

Davy’s cries were getting more insistent. “I better go. I’ll let you know when I hear back.”

He thought Simon might be right and Dorian be a bit reluctant but his phone buzzed before he reached the door.

Dorian: Sure. Can meet him on the terrace in ten minutes, if that works.

“He’s game.”

Ashley rattled off the instructions and Simon shooed him away. He had a lot to think about with admitting that a nanny was the way to go, and Simon’s advice he didn’t need to worry about a plan or any other silly scheme. Admitting he was wrong based on trying to do it all and he did need help wasn’t something to be upset over and Ben wasn’t the type of man to gloat over something like that. Ashley needed to remember they were partners in this and, either Ben had to take more of the strain, or they needed professional help. Put it like that, there was only one answer.

* * *

Ben had left to help with Davy since he’d assumed the reason Ashley had asked Dorian to keep Simon company was because he was needed elsewhere and that meant the boy was causing trouble. He’d departed with a proud grin, saying he imagined that trouble was likely to follow David Redbourn.

Simon appeared in the doorway to the terrace. He was moving a lot better than the last time Dorian had seen him, but

that had been a few days after he'd been discharged from hospital and looked as if he'd been hit by a bus, made worse by Robin's overbearing protectiveness.

"You all right?" Dorian called.

"Yeah, I needed some fresh air and I'm not stupid enough to go for a solo trot around on the grounds just yet, so thanks for being my keeper."

"I could do with walking off the extra pudding I had, so I'm well up for it."

Simon joined him on the terrace. "Can I ask a favour?"

"That depends on what it is." He was used to being asked all sorts of things, although he didn't expect anything nefarious from Simon, he wouldn't say yes to anyone outright.

"Unless I collapse and end up needing medical attention, please do not feed any negativity back to Robin."

"What makes you think he would ask me?"

"Because he's Robin." Simon smiled. "He's over-worrying and I get it—I really do—but it won't help either of us."

Dorian didn't want to lie to Robin, their relationship was rebuilding into one of a close friendship and if he withheld something serious, Robin would never forgive him.

"How about I put a positive spin on anything I feed back? He's smart enough to pick up on a hint and if he presses, I'll direct him to talk to you."

Simon began to walk down towards the lawn, his movements were slow and considered, as if testing out every step. "Deal. Although he'll be super suspicious you even agreed to do this."

"I was surprised Ashley asked. I'm assuming there wasn't anyone else available."

"You're probably not used to being a last resort," Simon said, flashing him a rueful grin.

"That's true, but this is because things could be a bit odd between us."

Simon snorted. “Why because we’ve both slept with the same man? It’s not like Robin left you for me, or cheated on you.”

“It’s a bit more than that though. We’ve both been in love with Robin—that’s different than fucking about together, otherwise things would be as equally odd with Ben.”

They ambled across the lawn, Dorian suspecting Simon wanted to get the awkward conversations out of the way as soon as possible. “If you think Ashley’s not funny about that then you’re delusional. But I do agree that between us it’s different.”

He’d known Ashley had been a bit concerned about how close Ben was to Dorian and Robin but thought that had passed. “What happened with Ben is ancient history. And Ben’s never going to risk losing Ashley, he’s never been happier.”

“None of it’s rational. Ashley over you and Ben. Robin over me... you over me and vice versa. The brain is basically a wobbly anxiety machine.”

“You did ask me if I still wanted Robin... you said you’d step away if I did.”

“Yes, see stupid brain. I know Robin loves me, but we were having a wobble over stuff that happened in the US, and I didn’t want to be someone’s second choice.” He shrugged. “He’s almost gone too far the other way now.”

Robin leaving him was still more of an open wound than Dorian allowed himself to dwell on and it wasn’t that he wanted him back any longer—more that he’d not seen it coming, or he’d been too bullish to think Robin could be constantly put off. “Once Robin had made up his mind to leave, there was no going back. It took me a while to accept it, but he wouldn’t have left you to return to me.”

“Maybe not you, but another. At the time, I was also worried he might find someone better in New York. I know what happened with Marco wasn’t instigated by Robin, but he won’t be the last.”

Until recent events, he wouldn't have been able to say that Robin wouldn't have left Simon for someone else, but now that was different. "You've got nothing to worry about. I'm actually quite jealous."

"I don't think you need to be jealous of me."

"I'm not, it's Robin I'm jealous of. He's found himself the perfect guy for him. You're with him because he's Robin. Not his name, or money. You were willing to put his needs first, even if it meant losing him, and you're a decent bloke. If I find someone like you, then I'll be a very lucky man."

"Thanks, I think." Simon gave him a calculated look. "Are you wanting to settle down? I know you've the thing with Alex going on, but afterwards will you be actively seeking a long-term partner?"

"Yeah. I miss having someone in my life. Alex has been great, and he's making me realise that I am missing that side of things." Dorian smiled to himself as he remembered Alex refusing to let him leave the office that afternoon until he knew the schedule for their date.

"Or given that look... why not just see if Alex will date you for real?"

Dorian stumbled over his own feet and only just gained his balance to prevent himself from hitting the grass. "What?"

Simon winked at him. "You and Alex. I know it might have started in an unconventional manner, but he almost literally made you fall arse over tit."

"No, I mean he is really nice guy. And kinda cute. But it's not on the cards."

"Younger, blond and bossy... do you consider yourself to have a type, Mr Forbes?"

"You're not the only one to have mentioned that." He shoved his hands into his pockets and let out a huff. "But I know that whatever I'm feeling at the moment is from gratitude for his help. I think we could be good friends, but nothing more."

“Okay.”

Dorian frowned. “Okay? You’re not going to keep pushing?”

“Why would I? It’s your life, Dorian. I get the sense you’ve always had someone telling you what they think is best. I’ve no right to do that, and I wouldn’t even if I did.”

They carried on walking, Dorian a little thunderstruck at Simon’s attitude. “I bet you don’t back down to Robin so easily.”

“Of course not. But I respect his boundaries still. I guess him not respecting mine has caused some of our problems of late.”

“I’m sure once you’re better...”

Simon paused and Dorian waited, not wanting to overstep. “It’s not just that. I want more permanence in my life, having your mortality questioned focuses you somewhat. And while we are house-hunting, it feels forced. Can I ask what he was like with you? Did it take long to move in together? What was your home life like?”

“We moved in together, him pretending to be my PA, within a matter of months. But you have to remember it was only when we were at home could we be a couple, so I guess we did throw ourselves into it.”

Simon made a humming noise. “Maybe that’s it. He didn’t want to rush things, but I did think...”

“What did you think?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Look, you don’t have to talk to me, but if you want to, then I’m all ears. Robin has changed a hell of a lot since we split but he’s not malicious or duplicitous—he wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

“I know, none of it is meant. It’s just, well, my ex-husband wasn’t good for me. He managed to convince me that I wasn’t worth very much, and in my darkest moments it’s easy to

believe he was right, especially when Robin's away and we're no closer to making a commitment."

"Robin will be back in the UK full-time soon."

Dorian had never met Simon's ex, Robin had alluded to him being someone he'd like to ruin if he thought Simon would never find out, and seeing Simon like this made Dorian want to help Robin run the bastard into the ground.

Simon puffed out his cheeks. "I'm knackered. But hey I managed most of the lawn—woo-hoo!"

He held out his arm. "Lean on me and we'll get you back inside. No arguing or I'll tell Robin."

"Bastard," Simon said, but took Dorian's arm.

Dorian wouldn't tell Robin about Simon running out of steam, but he would mention the other part of their conversation. Robin, the stupid fucker, needed to sort this out, because men of Simon's calibre did not grow on trees. The worst thing was Robin was probably angsty over Simon leaving him, when all Simon wanted was for Robin to prove once and for all that he was part of his forever plan. At least while he was concentrating on someone else's love life, he didn't have to think about his own, or that Simon seemed to have read him like an open book over Alex. His was just a little crush, it'd pass, there would be no great love affair, and in good time he'd move on and find his own Prince Charming.

CHAPTER 26



“So I’ve gone through the list of names Nathan sent and have done as much research as I can on the internet. I’ve tabulated all the information and created a scoring system based on what I’ve found and their suitability for what you said you’d want.”

Alex slid the list across the table, Dorian appeared to like paper copies of things as much as Ben did, and he wondered if it was because they were both public schoolboys and therefore a small part of their psyche was trapped in the 1950s.

Dorian picked it up and scanned it. “Wow, you’ve done a lot of research.”

He’d had the names for over a week, it really hadn’t been a challenge. “I’ve also emailed you the file so for ease of keeping everything together perhaps you could make comments in the electronic version and send it back.”

“I’m probably better scribbling over the paper copy. I’m bound to have questions, so we could just go through it together now.”

“I’m afraid I’m busy for the rest of the afternoon. Ben has got himself invited to a few things he needs to untangle himself from.”

Dorian looked as if someone had kicked his puppy. “Oh, I can’t monopolise all your time. Maybe later or tomorrow? I’d also want to talk about booking our weekend away. And about hiring a private detective.”

“What?” Good lord, what was Dorian thinking about now?

“I want to do some digging into Zak, and see if I can prove he’s been spreading rumours.”

“Right, I’ll add it to the list.” Alex checked his watch, he needed to get going. “If you want we can have a working dinner? Say seven o’clock?”

“Shall I come to you? Where will you be?”

He hesitated, having not thought this through, but he didn’t have time now to worry about it. “Yes, my flat is next to Karl’s. Take the stairs off the kitchen to the top. It’s the one at the end of the corridor.”

Alex grabbed a folder off his desk and herded Dorian out, before heading to Ben’s office. He found Ben staring at his computer screen in disbelief. “Ah, Alex, there you are. I seem to have got myself into a situation where I’m meant to be in three places at the same time, not to mention a bachelor auction.”

He pulled up Ben’s calendar that he had synced to his phone. This wasn’t the first time Ben appeared to have agreed to something only to be otherwise engaged. At least this was in a couple of weeks so he had time to sort it. “I see. Well, you could probably arrange a different date to visit the local scout group—somehow I don’t see you as a scout.”

“I was indeed.” He gave the scout’s three-fingered salute. “I was a well-behaved child. It wasn’t until I got to university that I went off the rails.”

“Right, I think the definition of well-behaved might be open to debate.”

Ben chuckled. “True, especially if you ask my mother. But I do want to meet with the scouts, so I dare say the timing can be rejigged.”

“But you are going to have to decide between the other two. One is a charitable dinner in aid of local youth homelessness and the other is…” He squinted at the scene. “The birthday of Kiki Bounce?”

“Ah, Kiki, an old friend of mine.”

He guessed what sort of friend, and a quick internet search confirmed she wasn't in the balloon industry, and he didn't think this would be a hard decision. "So you're going to respectfully decline Ms Bounce's invitation, I take it. Given recent gossip, the Earl of Crofton skipping out on a benefit for homeless kids to have a night out with a retired professional dominatrix wouldn't be the best idea."

"I didn't know she'd retired."

"Hardly the point."

Ben cleared his throat. "I daresay Ashley wouldn't have been too thrilled either. I was only planning to pop in and give the birthday girl my best wishes."

"I think you can do that with a nice bouquet of flowers. Would you like me to instruct the florist?"

"Yes, good plan."

Alex wrote himself an action on his phone. "I'll check your calendar for a date sooner than later for the scouts and let the troop leader know."

He opened the folder he'd brought with him. "I have a few letters for your attention, and a number of negotiations of contracts relating to suppliers for the wedding ventures."

Ben was back to staring at his monitor. "Ben?"

"Oh, sorry, it's just the other thing I have is this bachelor auction. It's in a couple of months but I thought it had disappeared."

Rather than try to search Ben's calendar he came around the side of the desk to see. Sure enough, there was an invite from the Countess of Malsberry entitled *HOTTIES FOR SALE – GET YOUR WALLETS OUT TO FIGHT CANCER!!!!*

"That's a rather excessive amount of exclamation marks and capital letters."

"Mel is quite the character. And extremely hard to say no to." Ben frowned. "There seems to be a rehearsal before as well."

“Had you agreed to do this?”

“I think so, sort of... but that was ages ago, before I got married. I’m no longer a bachelor, so I guess I could use that as an excuse.”

Ben looked hopeful but in Alex’s experience, people who used that many exclamation marks would not be swayed by logic. “Unlikely to be successful. I do hear these sorts of things are fun, with strict rules, are you sure you don’t want to take part?”

“I have been on sale before—I was very popular. But that was several years back and I was not attached.” He smirked and Alex did not want to know what had gone on. “I could speak to Ashley, obviously if he gives his blessing then, and it is for a good cause, I could do it.”

Alex did not think Ashley would bless any part of this and they would need a backup plan. “In the unlikely event that your husband won’t want to see you pimped out to half of the Home Counties, perhaps we could offer up an alternative sacrifice.”

“It would have to be top-notch. Mel’s not the type to accept a poor replacement.”

“Given your network, surely there’d be someone.”

Ben hummed. “Most of them know Mel and, if they have any sense, they’d politely refuse.”

“Talk to Ashley and, if it’s a no, we can put our heads together and find a replacement.”

He spent the next hour steering Ben into signing documents, and sending emails in the right tone to avoid a response or a reschedule. Sometimes Ben was too nice, or vague, or obscure and he’d learnt the hard way that not being direct enough caused more issues.

Another hour later, he’d got Ben sorted, had cleared out his to-do list and it was already after six. He would just have time to get back to his rooms, change and make sure everything was tidy for Dorian.

Alex scolded himself as he raced around repositioning things that didn't need it, he should never have agreed to let Dorian into his private space, not when there were plenty of other options in a house the size of Crofton Hall.

There was a sharp rat-a-tat-tat at the door and he stood frozen for a moment clutching a pair of fluffy slippers, coming to his senses he threw them into his bedroom and then hurried to answer the door.

Dorian held up a picnic basket as Alex greeted him. "I told Mrs Weather we were having a working dinner and she insisted on putting something together. And Mr Billins gave me this."

Dorian handed over a bottle of chilled white wine. "I'll get some glasses and plates. I only have a coffee table though."

"We'll cope."

Alex collected two glasses and opened the wine, watching Dorian lay out plates of sandwiches and cake. "I see Mrs Weather thought I was having six for dinner," he said, handing Dorian a glass of wine.

"I think she finds it a personal affront if someone in the household ever feels hungry. She'd be horrified to witness my diet when I'm shredding."

"I'd rather not have a washboard stomach and not have to live off grilled chicken and water," Alex said, picking up a sandwich. "I love cheese and pickle sandwiches too much to give them up."

"I can't say I miss the crazy diets, but those are Hollywood expectations and I am hoping my future projects won't involve me getting my kit off."

From the film he'd seen, he decided Dorian's crazy diets had paid off and, have been pressed against him a number of times of late, he wouldn't say he'd gone to seed. "Talking of which, we should work through the list. A good agent should make it happen then you can cover up your tummy rolls."

"Oi!" Dorian lifted his T-shirt revealing a stomach Alex had no hope in hell of emulating but wouldn't have minded

testing its pillow capabilities. “I haven’t got tummy rolls. Bloody cheek.”

“Yes, yes, put it away. I believe you.”

From the back pocket of his jeans, Dorian retrieved a folded piece of paper. “I had a look at the list.”

“Let me grab my laptop, we can transfer your comments into the spreadsheet.”

“I did try to do that but I was worried about overwriting things, and I’ve never had to use a spreadsheet so I was a bit out of my depth.”

Dorian wouldn’t have any need for dealing with the horrors of Microsoft programmes. “I suppose you’ve always had someone else to do it for you.”

“Yeah, pretty much. Robin loved something called a pivot table but half the time I hadn’t a clue what he was on about.”

“Something else me and your ex have in common, I do love a bit of structured data.”

Dorian unfolded his notes. “I have already ruled a couple out based on your notes. Also, I’d heard of one of them before and it wasn’t good so we’re down to three already.”

“Reputation is everything in your business, and I think you’re not going to want to risk being associated with someone who might cast a shadow.”

He saw Dorian had made extensive notes, it surprised him, firstly because he hadn’t expected him to take the time, but secondly because his handwriting was precise and neat. He’d perfected the art of reading scrawl and chicken scratches, and it had come in handy with Ben’s terrible handwriting, so Dorian’s was a treat for his eyes.

Alex grabbed another sandwich as Dorian talked him through his thinking and he appeared to have a favourite although Alex could tell he was trying not to show his bias.

“I’m assuming none of them would turn you away if you showed interest, so how do you want to go about contacting them and making an informed decision?” Alex asked, he had

his own ideas, but given the effort Dorian had already made, he suspected he wouldn't have to do all the heavy lifting.

“I was hoping you'd contact them on my behalf first, and then we can arrange a quick call, and if I think them okay, we could interview them together.”

“You'd want me to be in on the interviews?” Alex was surprised at the request.

“Yes, I'm second-guessing pretty much everything at the moment so having another opinion would be great. You've dealt with all sorts of people and you'd be a brilliant judge of character.”

His ability to see through bullshit was why he was successful at what he did. “All right.”

Dorian drained his glass and poured them both more wine. “I didn't realise you had a set-up like this.”

“You mean the flat?”

“Yeah, I thought you might just have a room or something.”

“I guess it's because I'm staff... I don't join the family for dinner, like Dara and Chris, who sort of feel more like extended guests. The past earls would have had a valet or a secretary so I'm taking rooms that are in line with that status.”

“I'd not thought of it like that. Did you say Karl's next door? What about Mr Billins?”

“Karl's under butler, so back in the day him and the valet of the earl would have pretty much run a house like this and we think these were the original quarters for those roles. As for Mr Billins, he's living in sin with Mrs Weather in one of the estate cottages.”

Dorian choked on his wine. “He's doing what now?”

“Didn't you know they were a couple?”

“No, I must have missed that. Fair play to him, I hope I've still got it in me when I'm his age.”

Alex tutted. “He’s not that old. Sex doesn’t end when you leave your forties. Or at least I hope not, or at this rate I’m going to never have sex again.”

“Come off it. You’re not even thirty, I bet you’re beating the men off.”

“I assure you the only thing I’m beating off at the moment involves a solo endeavour.” He cleared his throat. He did not intend to discuss his sex life with Dorian. “Now, back to finding you an agent. Have you thought about the sort of questions you want to ask? I’ve helped arrange interviews but they weren’t for that sort of position.”

“It’s more like a relationship, I can’t work with someone I don’t connect with. I can’t be asking questions like where do you see yourself in five years.”

“No, but you can tell them your goals and ask them how they are going to help you reach them in five years.” He selected another sandwich. Chicken this time. “The endpoint isn’t so different, you want a successful new career and lots of money—that’s the same as any corporate position.”

Dorian shrugged. “I suppose so. But I think it’ll need to be more organic, although if you’re there you can move it along in the right direction.”

Alex wasn’t sure anything shouldn’t be referred to as organic unless it came with the correct soil certification, but he thought this might be one of the many occasions he would lead someone in the right direction, rather than force it, as he sensed Dorian would dig his heels in.

“What about potential business managers? We haven’t touched on that side.”

“Agent first, I’ve a legal team to advise on various things and I’ll worry about the rest after. I’m going to need an accountant too.”

Alex thought that would be one of the easier of the appointments they had to make and he reckoned Nathan would again have names of someone who could be useful. He wrote

himself a note. "I'll start contacting the three shortlisted agents tomorrow. Hopefully, we can close that out quickly."

"What about the private detective?"

"I haven't had a chance to look. You're going to at least need a scope and some details. I know of corporate investigators but I'll have to put some feelers out about the sort of person you want. It could get expensive as it'll be international and persuading people to talk."

"I don't care how much it costs, and it doesn't have to stand up in court just enough to confirm my thoughts."

Alex didn't see the reasoning. "But what's the point?"

"Because then I'll ruin the fuckers. And I'll get Robin to help."

"I..."

"I never thought of myself as a vindictive person, but if it was Zak or Marisa they'll deserve it because Simon sure as hell didn't deserve to get stabbed in the stomach because I used to date his boyfriend."

Alex sighed. "I'm not going to persuade you differently am I?"

"Nope."

Dorian lay back on Alex's couch and Alex had the urge to join him, preferably with his knees either side of Dorian's hips. The image made him knock his wine over. "Fuck!"

He raced to get some kitchen towels and Dorian moved the plates. "You all right. You look like you've been spooked."

"Fine, fine," he muttered, trying to stop the wine from seeping into the rug. "Just tired."

"As long as it's not being surprised I'm an avenging angel." Dorian snatched the paper towels out of his hand. "Let me take care of this. You sit down. Between me and Ben, we'll have been running you ragged."

He started to argue but Dorian pulled him to his feet and moved him around, pushing him gently so he landed on his

couch. Without being prompted, he refilled Alex's glass and handed it over. Alex hadn't thought Dorian the domesticated type but he was a lovely sight on his knees and he'd done a decent job of cleaning up.

"Let's talk about something more fun. I've found a brilliant cottage we can escape to on the Norfolk coast for our weekend away."

"You have?" He had expected he'd have been organising that.

"Yes, Ben put me on to it. It belongs to a friend of his and it's secluded, beach-fronted and perfect for us to escape to. Since you're from the area I thought it might be nice. I had thought of flying us out to my place in Malibu, but I'm not keen to be back in the US just yet."

"You've a place in Malibu?" He knew movie stars were loaded but he hadn't dwelt on Dorian's finances beyond him paying his fee to be his fake boyfriend.

"Yeah, and one in Whistler. Shit. Would you have preferred to have gone to one of them? I should have asked you first."

"Oh no, I'm more than happy staying in the UK, I was just surprised you organised something."

Dorian smiled. "You've been doing everything, I thought it was the least I could do."

"I thought me planning our dates was part of the agreement so you didn't have to but it's nice you have."

"Want to see some pictures? Ben took Ashley for a break before Davy arrived." Dorian handed him his phone.

"Are they going to be all of the bedrooms?" The cottage, which wasn't a grand enough name for it, was a beautiful house with a path down to a private beach. The inside was just as wonderful and Alex thought it would be a romantic spot if they had been a real couple. "Oh, it's nice."

"I'm gonna hire a car, sporty convertible type, since I've not got around to buying something yet."

They had discussed basing a date around being seen going to a Ferrari showroom but in the end Dorian had vetoed the idea as every car he'd ordered he'd never gone to a public viewing. Alex had been a tiny bit peeved as it would be the closest thing he'd have ever got to buying a fancy car.

“Can I drive it too?”

“I don't see why not. I'll need your details for the insurance. Any preference on the car itself, I've not booked it yet.”

“A red one?” He laughed. “Anything would be great. It's not like I get the chance to drive anything sporty so I'd be happy whatever you choose.”

“I checked out the area and there's a lot of walks and pubs and stuff like that. Seems really nice—I can see why you liked it.”

“It's further down the coast from home, but it is a beautiful spot.”

Alex couldn't help but look forward to it, but he'd need to rein in some of his excitement. This was not real. Dorian was not his, and he needed to be careful.

“And I was thinking dinner again this weekend, although for afterwards I've found a place with a rooftop bar.”

“You *have* been busy.”

“I thought I should make an effort. I've always relied a lot on other people to do this for me, and you've enough on your plate so I should do my part as well.” He drained his glass and stood. “I'd better go. I've stolen enough of your evening.”

“Not at all.”

Dorian headed for the door. “Thanks again, Alex. You've been such a great help.”

He saw Dorian out, and for a brief moment he wanted to stop his leaving, invite him to stay—perhaps forever—but the moment of madness was fleeting and he waved Dorian away. Closing the door, he told himself he was being an idiot. And

he was going to use a large slice of cake to bury his feelings under it.

CHAPTER 27



Ben found Ashley sitting on a sofa in one of the reception rooms. “Ah, there you are. Where’s the young master?”

“He’s off with Elena. She’s taken him for a stroll about the grounds and to be cooed over by her coven.”

“Bit harsh calling my mother a witch, Ashley.”

“Elena’s a darling, but some of her friends are paid-up members of the broomstick club.” Ashley yawned, then grabbed his mug. He grimaced after taking a sip. “Urgh, just once I’d like to enjoy a hot cup of coffee.”

With Davy being with his grandmother it was not lost on Ben that they could get some alone time, once he cleared the bachelor auction with Ashley, as he’d received two more emails from Mel. If he didn’t respond soon, he suspected she’d turn up at the hall. “I’ll go get you a fresh cup in a minute. I just need to run something past you first.”

Ashley looked up at him with suspicion, he was tired, the dark circles under his eyes more prominent than ever, and Ben thought maybe offering to run a bath for him might be a better option than a quick fuck.

“What?”

“You probably don’t remember, but ages back I got asked to take part in a charity auction. I managed to sidestep it and thought Mel had given it all up as a bad bet, but it appears not, and she’s now got me on the list.”

Ashley frowned. “Auction? What to donate something? Surely you’ve enough old stuff to donate a bit of tat?”

“No, sweetheart, I’d be the *bit of tat* up for auction.”

“Meaning what? That you’ll spend an evening or night with whoever buys you?”

Ben was surprised by the anger in Ashley’s tone. “It’s for charity, not for anything nefarious.”

“But you’re asking me to let my husband fuck off and take someone else out for a date? You’re not a bachelor, why would you think that’d be even slightly acceptable?” Ashley was on his feet. “Why would you even want to do it?”

This was heading in a disastrous direction and Ben hadn’t seen it coming. “It’s a fundraiser, nothing more. I’m not going on a date in the romantic sense and I’m not sure what you’re trying to insinuate here.”

“That my husband wants to be put up for sale to the highest bidder so he can find someone else for an evening. Not sure what’s unclear about that. And he thinks I would be fine with it.”

“It’s dinner. I’m not going to do anything.”

“Oh of course not. You’ll be fawned over left, right and centre, men and women all panting around you, you’ll be in your element preening and lapping it up.”

Ben was not averse to getting attention and he was a bit of a flirt at times, but he had never been unfaithful. “How dare you accuse me of something like that. Yes, I flirt a little, but I’ve never overstepped the line. Ashley, I can’t believe you think I’d be interested in doing so.”

Ashley’s face crumpled. “But why wouldn’t you? I’m a useless father, and now you’ve realised you’d have better options for a partner too.”

Ben had no idea where this was coming from. His own anger was replaced with worry. He stepped closer and tried to take hold of Ashley but he wouldn’t let him. “Sweetheart, why

would you think such a thing? I love you, Davy loves you. You're a wonderful father."

Ashley shook his head. "No I'm not. And it's only going to get worse once I go back to work. I can't calm him when he needs it the most, it takes me ages to settle him, so he's exhausted by the time he's down and if I was better, he'd be sleeping through the night. I'd be able to sleep for more than a few hours at a time and I should be able to look after my own son."

Ben wouldn't let Ashley fight him off this time. "He's a fussy baby that's all. Marchent told me Toby was the same, and you're not doing anything wrong."

"I feel so guilty that I'm relieved when someone takes him for a couple of hours, I shouldn't want to be away from him."

He stroked Ashley's back. "At the moment he's a crying, eating, and pooing machine, you've taken on the lion's share of the work, and it's not wrong to be happy to have a little break."

"I feel such I failure. I should want to spend all my time with him, not be thinking how much I want to go back to work."

Ben held him tighter. "You are not alone in this, you didn't give up being who you are because you became a parent. There's nothing wrong with wanting to go back to doing a job you love."

Ashley sniffed and pulled back, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "I know I said I didn't want a nanny, and I'm still not happy that I've come to this, but I think it'd be best for when I go back to work."

Ben had suspected this would be the end result, but he was not stupid enough to say so. "I'm all for it if you think that's for the best. Whoever it is doesn't have to be full-time, and be more of a mother's... er... father's helper."

"I'm sorry for being so belligerent over it. Simon told me just to talk to you, that you wouldn't be an arse."

As much as he might have wanted Ashley to have come to that conclusion on his own, Ben accepted that Ashley's current state of mind was not as stable as usual. Simon seemed to be working his magic in many ways of late. He'd become a good friend to Ashley, and Dorian was singing his praises. Robin had picked a good man, although Ben wondered if he appreciated how good a man he was.

"I don't think I'm too much of an ogre."

"You're not." Ashley sniffed. "I wasn't thinking straight, and I didn't want to admit I was wrong about needing help."

"We'll find someone. There's specialist agencies for that sort of thing."

"Yeah, whoever it is will need to meet my standards."

Signs the old Ashley hadn't gone very far were wonderful to see. Stubborn, tenacious and brilliant—Ashley was everything he could hope for in a partner. "I'll have Alex look into who we can approach and then we can see who they have on their books."

"I've a cousin who is training, I'll ask my mum for their details because they might be able to give us some pointers on what to look for."

Ben was relieved that Ashley had decided to have a nanny. The estate kept him busy, and Ashley wanted to go back to work, but they would both still worry over Davy. They were in a lucky position to be able to afford personal childcare, but most parents wouldn't have the option.

"Good idea."

"I suppose I overreacted a bit at the auction as well. I'm really sorry. If you want to do it, then it's okay."

Ben knew that Ashley would prefer he didn't. "To be honest, I don't particularly have any burning desire to do it either. But Mel is a capricious creature—If I do manage to escape, I will have to find a replacement."

"Dorian owes you lots of favours..."

Ben wondered why he hadn't thought of him off the bat. "He might not be ready to do that though."

"If he's able to fake date your secretary in public, why not a bachelor auction to raise money for a good cause?"

"I can ask, but I'm not sure he'll be willing."

"If you can't find someone, I will cope and send you out for the evening in a chastity belt. Talking of enforced chastity." Ashley licked his lips and stepped closer again. "We've probably got an hour or so before Elena's back."

"I could run you a bath."

Ashley grabbed his hand and pulled him along, towards the door. "Only if you're getting in it with me."

CHAPTER 28



Alex watched the waves break across the beach. He loved the sea, it calmed him and brought with it a serenity nothing else could manage. Dorian was inside the house making a couple of calls and Alex had taken a blanket and a book, deciding an hour or so of reading would be a great way to kick off the weekend. He took a couple of photos and added them to the family WhatsApp group, knowing his dad had a similar love for the sea as he did. The last few weeks had been busy. Ben had asked him to investigate potential childcare providers and the number of options were baffling. Then there'd been dates with Dorian and a couple of trips back to Norfolk to ensure the repairs were going well at his parents' house. A few days by the sea were just what he needed.

Dorian dropped down next to him on the blanket. "This is a lovely spot. I could get used to somewhere like this."

"I thought you said you had a beachside property."

"I do. Both that and the LA properties are being put up for sale. I never spent enough time at the Malibu place to justify it."

He'd have loved to have lived by the sea. He'd spent his childhood visiting various parts of the Norfolk coast and some of his best memories came from those holidays. "I think I'd have never left if I had a place in Malibu."

"I know the weather's worse here, but there's something special about the British coastline. I might even take your advice and have a look into a second house by the sea."

“I didn’t think you have a main place yet,” Alex said. “Unless you count your London apartment.”

“That’s just a crash pad.”

He’d never been in a position to buy and now his current job meant he didn’t have the need to. “I know we touched on this before, but if you’re serious we could add property searches to your to-do list. Once you’ve narrowed it down a bit. I’m not randomly searching half the country for houses for you.”

“I’m in no hurry to leave Crofton Hall.” He stared out at the ocean. “I’m beginning to feel like the real me, but I’m still very much a work in progress.”

Alex thought Dorian was being too hard on himself. “Aren’t we all? Not all of us are ever fully baked.”

“I love that about you, you’re so unjudgmental.”

He wasn’t prepared to hear Dorian say the L-word in relation to him, even if it wasn’t meant in any deep romantic sense. A pang of want fizzled through him, beyond the sexual pull he’d already experienced towards Dorian. “Yes, well, I don’t have the right to judge anyone else.”

“That doesn’t stop a lot of people doing it.”

Dorian smiled and he couldn’t stop staring at his lips. The rules allowed a quick peck in public but so far they’d had no call for it, and Alex had to admit it didn’t seem enough and he’d like a deeper taste.

Dorian got to his feet and Alex wished he’d had the nerve to lean in and take what he wanted. Dorian offered his hand. “Come on. I’ve booked us dinner in a local gastropub and according to Google we can easily walk to it.”

Alex grabbed Dorian’s hand and let him pull him to his feet. He was surprised Dorian didn’t let go and he made no move to free his hand. “I didn’t realise we were going out tonight.”

“I was going to get something delivered, but I thought, after you said how much you loved the sea, you might

appreciate a stroll and when I was looking for a path, this place popped up. Is that all right?"

"It wasn't a complaint," he said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I didn't expect you would."

"Why would you? I've spent most of the last decade having people organise every aspect of my life, and to be honest, once I have my new team in place, I'll have the same again, but there are some things I should do myself."

Alex squeezed his hand. "You are the master of your own destiny."

"And tonight, my destiny includes several pints of IPA and fish and chips."

Alex laughed, Dorian was far more down-to-earth than most gave him credit for. "If they have mushy peas, I might have to join you."

Walking hand-in-hand with Dorian down the beach was a bit surreal. They chatted about everything and nothing. He'd learnt which football club was Dorian's favourite, and how he, Ben and the Duke of Marchent were intending to watch the cricket together in a few weeks. Dorian's fondness for his friends was evident in every story he told, but there was an underlying regret that he'd not been as close to them as he would have liked, due to his lifestyle.

"But you're still good friends and that's what matters," Alex said after Dorian had told him of all the things he'd missed by being away filming. "Ben doesn't hold grudges."

"I think he probably should. He asked me to be one of his best men and, in the end, I didn't because of an arsehole move I played trying to put Robin off the idea of me coming out and us getting married."

Dorian seemed to be in a retrospective mood. "What did you do?"

"When Ben got married, he seemed more excited about his stag do than the wedding itself. Looking back, it was more that he wasn't interested in all the organising and planning that goes into a wedding, not that he didn't want to marry Ashley,

but I sort of suggested to Robin that Ben might be getting cold feet, and if that was the case for a couple so obviously suited as Ben and Ashley, what hope had the rest of us.”

Alex could hear Dorian’s shame and remorse. “Does seem a bit of a dickish move.”

“I even asked Ben if it was the case, and he said no and I should have dropped it there and then. But I kept discussing it with Robin.”

“Oh, was it just to put Robin off or were you hoping Ben wouldn’t get married? You and Robin did have a bit of a thing with him.”

Dorian sighed. “The Ben thing was nothing. What I wanted was to keep Robin, get him to stay with me as we were, since I was already talking to Skye about us getting engaged and then a sham marriage, which is what my management team wanted.”

“Fucking hell. That’s... I...”

“Now I look back and realise that I was a complete arsehole. I am really sorry about it all. I was a selfish and inconsiderate prick.”

“I can’t disagree with you there. But the thing now is you’ve learnt from it and don’t do it again.” The Dorian he’d been getting to know didn’t sound like the same man.

“I’m insanely lucky that Ben is a good friend, and that Robin left me.”

“That Robin left you?” He didn’t think he’d heard that right.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking a lot about what would have happened if he’d continued to play along. We’d have got more and more unhappy, I’d have done more arseholeish things to keep him and, in the end, we’d have hated each other. I reckon all my real friends would have taken his side, leaving me in a fake marriage to Skye, miserable.”

Dorian needed to talk to someone and Alex was happy to be that person. “Accepting this sort of thing is an important

part of you being able to move forwards with your life.”

“I didn’t set out to hurt people, I’m not that much of a bastard, but I didn’t think about the consequences for others from my actions. I’d like to think I would now.”

“You have to actively do that... you can’t expect things just to happen. Or people are going to assume you’re the same old Dorian.”

Dorian was quiet for a moment, the sea filling the silence. Alex waited for Dorian to say something.

“Yeah, and I think that’s why Robin came at me over Simon getting stabbed. He saw the way I came out as unplanned and it caused trouble for other people. Worst thing was he was right.”

“I don’t think he should have blamed you for what happened.”

Dorian stopped and looked at him. “I wasn’t to blame for that girl’s actions, but if I had come out in a controlled way then things could’ve been managed better. That’s Robin’s point.”

“But he was worried sick, and angry, and lashed out at you.” He could understand Robin’s reaction, not that he agreed with it. “Simon doesn’t blame you, and he was the one who was injured.”

“They broke the mould when they made Simon. Robin’s only just realised how lucky he is.”

Dorian started walking again, he let go of Alex’s hand. Alex felt the loss but didn’t think he could be the one to reinitiate contact.

“I can’t say I know him well, he’s been to the pub a couple of times since I started.” Alex wondered if Dorian had a crush on Simon, he was a nice enough-looking bloke. “Are you jealous of Robin?”

“Not in the way I think you mean. I’m not interested in Simon as anything but a friend—fuck could you imagine the fallout if I went after my ex’s new boyfriend?” Dorian

laughed. “Robin would eviscerate me, no one would talk to me again. Not to mention Simon would be horrified I’d think he’d cheat with me on his partner.”

“It would be a momentous clusterfuck. I’m pretty sure somehow the press would find out and you’d be some gay homewrecking whore.” Alex snorted. “God, it would be awful yet hilarious... and to be frank you’d deserve what you got if it did happen.”

“Harsh.”

Dorian nudged him with his shoulder and Alex lost his balance and landed on his arse. “Oi. You big brute!”

Dorian lifted him to his feet and he found himself far too close and staring into Dorian’s eyes. “Sorry, I don’t seem to know my own strength.”

“I...” He wanted to kiss him. “There are people about.”

“Yeah, the perfect chance for a photo.”

That hadn’t been his thinking but had an excuse and he took it. He brushed his lips against Dorian’s, a whisper of a kiss that had his heart racing.

Then Dorian stepped away and Alex had to shake off how the barely-there kiss had made his head spin.

“We better hurry up. Or we’ll miss our reservation.”

Alex took a deep breath as he followed Dorian. He had to get through dinner yet. Pretending to be Dorian’s fake boyfriend was getting harder the more time they spent together. At this rate, at the end of the three months he’d be head over heels for him, and there was no way this could end well.

* * *

Dinner had been nice, and they caught a cab home. Dorian was still in an introspective mood and they’d spent the morning on a walk. Some of the people they passed had recognised

Dorian, and he was sure there were a few unobtrusive photos taken.

The doorbell rang. As far as Alex knew they weren't expecting anybody. "Did you order something to be delivered?"

Dorian shook his head. "No."

"I'll go see who it is. Maybe it's a neighbour or someone who's broken down." He was dubious as Dorian had posted a couple of pictures on Instagram, meaning there was an off chance an eagle-eyed fan could have identified the location.

He opened the front door, intending to be polite but firm. "Mum? Dad? What are you doing here?"

"We recognised where you were from the picture you uploaded in the family WhatsApp group and we thought we'd come up and see you." She peered around him. "And your new boyfriend."

She didn't give him time to react and marched past him into the entrance hall, his dad following in her wake.

Dorian appeared. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, you must be Dorian!"

Alex watched in horror as she hurried up to him.

Dorian looked to him for an explanation. "Dorian, these are my parents. Alice and George. They tracked me down from a photo I shared and decided to pop in."

"It was no trouble, we're only twenty miles up the road."

He hoped Dorian believed him and that he didn't think he'd invited them. "Then please come on through. I'll make us some coffee," Dorian said, smiling.

Alex herded them into the sitting room as Dorian went off to the kitchen. "What are you doing here? You can't just turn up uninvited."

George chuckled. "Well, you weren't going to invite us, and your mum wanted to meet your new chap."

“I’d have brought him home when I was ready. Not have you foist yourselves on him.”

Alice tutted. “Don’t be silly. You never bring home your boyfriends.”

“You wonder why when you do things like this.”

He’d spent his teenage years in mortified embarrassment, but had come to terms with his parents in his twenties, he wasn’t ashamed of them, more that they didn’t understand some people had different boundaries.

“Ali, we worry, and this seemed too good a chance not to check in on my baby boy. Would you have preferred if we came to Crofton Hall instead?”

“I work there, you wouldn’t have done that.”

The look his parents shared told him they would have. “This way we don’t have to test your theory.”

Dorian reappeared carrying a tray with a cafetiere, a milk jug and some cups, he’d even added a plate of biscuits. His parents were going to love him, and he would never hear the end of this.

“You must think we’re terrible parents turning up like a couple of bad pennies,” said Alice. “But Alex can be a bit close-lipped about his personal life, and since you’re already all over the internet, I thought it a good idea to come and meet you.”

“We’re not all over the internet. It’s one or two photos,” Alex said, counting to ten in his head. “No one knows who I am, and I doubt they’d care.”

It wasn’t technically true, there had been a few emails from journalists requesting a statement, and he’d been very glad he wasn’t on LinkedIn, otherwise they might have tracked him down already.

“But we care, sweetheart.”

He held his breath, not sure how Dorian would handle his mum’s direct approach.

“I think it’s wonderful that you want to make sure that Alex is okay. There are a lot of parents out there who don’t care, and so I’m happy Alex has you both.”

Dorian had been briefed by the best public relations professionals during his career, Alex shouldn’t have doubted him.

“I’m sure your parents are similarly minded. You’ll always be their baby.”

“My dad died a few years back but I still have my mum. And you’re right, I’ll never stop being her little boy.” Dorian poured four cups of coffee. “Alex talks about you all the time, you must be very proud of him. As proud of him as he is of you.”

If Dorian had been his real boyfriend, that would have earned him serious brownie points, several blow jobs and even a session where he could tie him up and do what he liked, because he saw his parents preen. No one he had dated had pushed to meet them, or talked about them even when he’d shared stories. Dorian could’ve excused himself, he had no long-term reason to be nice, no skin in the game that needed to be protected as if he were bothered about Alex’s feelings.

“I know when he was a teenager we were terribly embarrassing, but he’s comfortable with us now.”

“Who isn’t embarrassed by their parents at that age? My mum used to run me to auditions during the school holidays, giving me pep talks, and well, you don’t appreciate it at the time.”

“Yes, but I bet she didn’t threaten to come to your graduation wearing a hat shaped like a giant penis if you failed to call home regularly.” It had been one of several threats he knew would have been enacted.

“No, but then I went to RADA and it would have been encouraged.” Dorian grinned. “Alice, Alex told me you’re an artist. Are you exhibited somewhere?”

“I’ve a number of pieces in smaller galleries. Often my work is related to activism, so for a specific demonstration I’ll

create an installation piece, and therefore they don't always survive."

George chuckled. "An awful lot of them do seem to get set on fire."

"Yes, that is just part of my bigger aim. The obliteration of art is symbolic, and at its core, a demonstration of the animalistic proclivity of man."

Alex had no idea what she was talking about but Dorian was nodding along. "I dare say with the destruction of the idea, you exemplify the base nature of those who will not listen."

"Oh, absolutely." His mother was staring at Dorian as if he'd hung the moon, and his father was also enthralled.

Dorian had surprised him again.

"I didn't think you were into art in that way."

"You spend a lot of time sitting around on the sets of movies, so I read a lot. Art history and the history of political movements are two of my favourite subjects."

Alice was hunting through her huge handbag. "Alex, go sit next to Dorian. I'm going to sketch you as a couple."

"How lovely," Dorian said.

Alex wanted to argue, tell her not to bother but then he'd sound like an asshole. He imagined Dorian must have received thousands of fan sketches over the years and would be able to act impressed at whatever strange thing his mother created. She could draw, if she wanted to, but she preferred abstract expressionism and they'd probably turn out to be represented as a tomato and a fried egg.

He sat next to Dorian, who shuffled closer and put his arm around his back.

George munched on a biscuit, dunking it several times in his coffee. "Are you planning to make the UK your home now, Dorian? I thought you movie star types would be living the high life in LA."

“Been there, got the T-shirt, George. I lived in the US for over a decade, and now I’ve decided I want to come home, change my focus.”

“Least we won’t have to worry about you whisking Ali away,” Alice said, her pencil racing across her sketch. “I imagine it’s been difficult adjusting to coming out, having a boyfriend and lord knows what else.”

“I’m not Dorian’s first boyfriend, Mum.” She must’ve read the fallout over Robin.

“But you’re the first one he’s dating publicly. That’s a big step. Now I’m sure the Flint boy was a lovely lad, but you’re the one standing side by side with Dorian.”

She *did* know, and she was digging. God, she was crafty, trying to wheedle information out of Dorian about his ex.

“I’ll be honest, if Robin had got his way, I’d have come out years ago. But I wasn’t ready. I know that makes me sound like a bit of a coward—”

“No, no it doesn’t,” Alice said sharply. “You have the right to decide when to come out. No one else. Yves, Alex’s first boyfriend, was disowned by his parents when they found out about him. He stayed in our spare room for a while, even after they split, so you don’t have to explain yourself to us.”

“I remember, right up until the point Yves married Colm, you were still asking if we would ever get back together,” Alex said, hoping to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“He was such a nice boy, but then if you’d got back together you wouldn’t be with Dorian now.”

They’d only been seventeen, two walking bags of hormones and neuroses who were trying to find their way. The sex hadn’t been great, they were clueless, but he would always have a fondness for his first boyfriend.

“I’m sure Dorian is cursing his bad luck.”

“Oi, don’t be daft.” Dorian squeezed him. “It’s this Yves bloke who missed out.”

Alice flipped around her sketch pad and Alex braced himself. But instead of a random collection of shapes or lines, she'd drawn a proper portrait. Not a pair of bunny ears or vulvas for eyes in sight.

"Oh, wow, that's amazing!" Dorian said, reaching out to take the sketch.

"I know that most of my work is more avant-garde, but I thought you'd appreciate something you could frame and not have to explain to more closed-minded visitors."

"I'll have to find somewhere for it," Dorian said. "I'm currently staying at Crofton Hall but once I've a house of my own we'll find it a proper home."

Dorian was such a good actor, managing to sound sincere. Alex wished the sketch would be framed and displayed in pride of place where it would be cooed over. He could imagine it sitting on his desk or in a snug in a house they shared. Pointing it out, saying his mum had drawn it, capturing a moment in time. But he was just torturing himself. He'd take it back to Crofton Hall, put it somewhere safe and have it as a memento of the mad three months when he was a movie star's boyfriend.

"I think we've intruded enough, don't you, darling?" George said, slapping his thighs and standing.

Alice tore the page from her sketchbook. "Oh, yes. Next time I'll see what I can do about capturing your raw energies in oil paints. It'd be marvellous."

"You're more than welcome to stay for dinner," Dorian offered as they escorted them to the front door.

"We'd better get back, I said I'd water next door's petunias while they were away."

Left alone again, Alex let out a mighty huff of air. "I am so sorry about them. I didn't know they were coming I swear."

"Alex, they were great. Honestly, you've nothing to apologise for. Considering this was my first meet-the-parents in years, it could have been horrendous."

“They were definitely on their best behaviour.”

Dorian chuckled. “I can see why you wanted to protect them. I bet you’d wrap them up in cotton wool and pack them away if you could.”

Alex frowned. “What do you mean by that? Protecting them?”

“Don’t get mad, but I know why you agreed to our arrangement, and I think it’s amazing, you’re amazing.”

“What? You know? How?”

Dorian grabbed his hand, and Alex wanted him to stop stalling. “When I told Ben you’d agreed to go through with it, after being so adamant you wouldn’t, we were both a bit worried that you might have got yourself into trouble. I couldn’t afford another scandal and Ben wanted to make sure someone wouldn’t turn up at the hall—worried about Davy, you know.”

He could understand Ben, and Dorian, but that didn’t explain how they knew. “So you did what exactly?”

“Ashley asked his dad to do a check. He’s got contacts everywhere.”

“Bloody hell! Ashley’s dad is terrifying. If he thought I was a danger to his grandson I’d have never been seen again.”

“But you weren’t and if you were then...” Dorian shrugged. “You wouldn’t be you. I mean it was unlikely given Ben had employed you, but you must admit, you changing your mind so quickly could’ve been suss.”

“It was an infringement of my privacy.” He felt he should have been angrier than he was. “It was intrusive.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But we were also worried about you. If you’d been in trouble we’d have wanted to help.”

Alex was more confused than ever. Dorian was supposed to be a prick, an asshole A-lister but he wasn’t or at least not anymore. “I’m still a bit annoyed. Although I understand the reasoning.”

“How about we go for an ice cream? You can drive.”

“I’m not six, you can’t fix things with confectionary.”

“Is that a no?”

“I didn’t say that.” He grabbed the car keys off the side table. “I want a chocolate-dipped cone, double scoop and sprinkles.”

CHAPTER 29



Dorian smiled at the photo. He knew where and when it had been taken. They'd gone for a drive after Alex's parents had turned up and Dorian had admitted he knew the real reason behind Alex needing the money.

Alex was holding out his strawberry ice cream for Dorian to try, adamant he should have a taste since he'd got so excited to find his favourite flavour hadn't sold out for once. No one looking at the photo would suspect they weren't boyfriends.

His fans were going wild. Alex—who they had named DDB, short for Dorian's Darling Boy—was a huge hit. There were groups devoted to DDB and Dorian's secret smile, and references to gentlemen definitely preferring blonds.

“Don't you look happy!”

Dorian grinned as Ben sat next to him. “Seems that the plan with Alex is working.”

“Oh yeah?”

He showed him the photo. “See. My fans are totally smitten.”

“They're not the only ones.”

He swiped closed the browser. “I don't know what you mean.”

“Dorian, we've known each other since we were thirteen. You, my friend, are crushing.”

“*Crushing?* What are we? Still thirteen?”

“Deflecting.”

Dorian huffed. “Maybe a little crush. Look, I also know it’s not serious or real. Alex is a great guy but I’m not making more of it than it is.”

“If you say so. Don’t make me have to give you a talking to about my secretary. The man has the president of the Women’s Institute eating out of the palm of his hand—that is a skill that cannot be learnt, and I will not lose him.”

“It’s amazing how acting like a decent human being can do well for you. I should’ve learnt that myself years ago.”

Ben tutted. “You had your moments of being an utter twat, Dorian. But underneath you were never a monster.”

“What? A dickhead with a heart of gold?”

“Not sure I’d go that far.”

Karl glided up to them. “Mr Forbes, Mrs Weather said you’d requested these.”

Sitting on a silver salver was a bag of jelly babies. Ben reached over and picked them up. “Since when have you liked jelly babies? You used to melt them and throw them at rival houses back at school.”

Dorian snatched the bag back. “Alex likes them. I thought I could take a photo of a few and get my followers to comment which colour they thought was his favourite.”

“Was that your idea?”

Dorian knew his cheeks were flaming. “Yeah—I thought it would be nice.”

“Go on then.”

He hadn’t discussed this with Alex, but Ben wasn’t going to let it drop. He ripped open the bag and put an orange and green jelly baby next to each other on the tray.

“Aww, just the two? Oh, Dorian, I never took you to be such a romantic.”

“Fuck off, Crofton.”

He took out his phone and snapped a photo, uploading it straight to his Instagram account with the caption: *DDB loves jelly babies but which is his favourite?*

“DDB?” Ben asked laughing.

“That’s what my fans call Alex—Dorian’s Darling Boy.”

Within seconds his notifications exploded. Dorian grimaced. “I should probably go and warn Alex what I’ve done.”

He legged it from the room, Ben’s laughter ringing in his ears.

Alex should be in his office. Dorian knocked and peered around the door. Alex glared at him. “The answer is orange.”

Dorian held out the bag of jelly babies. “Peace offering?”

“How do you know I like them?”

“You bought them in the sweet shop, and you mentioned them on our first date.” He had a good memory, it was one of the things that helped him as an actor and meant he didn’t often fuck up his lines. “Said you’d prefer them to roses.”

Alex took the bag and selected a sweet. He held one aloft and then bit its head off. “Tell me, Dorian. At what point did we sanction the use of pet names on social media?”

“Erm... I couldn’t call you Alex, could I?”

“That much is true. But I’m also of the position you shouldn’t be calling me your darling boy either.”

“I thought it cute. There’s a lot worse you could be named. Just look at what they called Simon.”

Alex chewed the rest of the jelly baby viciously. “I’ll wait for those after you’ve dumped me.”

He couldn’t win this. “What would you prefer me to call you in the future? B and B?”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“Blond and bossy.” He didn’t duck quick enough and a jelly baby hit him on the forehead. “Ow!”

Alex tapped a piece of paper on his desk. “Your schedule to speak to the shortlisted agents. Take it and bugger off. Let me know after who you want to call for a face-to-face interview.”

He took the piece of paper. The interviews didn’t start for a few days. “Thanks. I’m going to head to the gym later, want to come?”

Another jelly baby lost its head. “No.”

“Oh, come on, we said it would be a great idea. And you have your membership.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m going to use it. I’m not what you’d call good in gyms... I’m not a gym person.”

Dorian wasn’t above begging or coercion. “Please.”

Alex huffed. “All right, I’ll consider it. But not this evening. Maybe once you’ve got an agent—as a reward.”

That might be the best he got. “I’ll hold you to it.”

“Of course you will. Now please sod off before I waste another jelly baby by bouncing it off your head.”

Dorian chuckled as he left. Riling up Alex was fun, but he would ask Mrs Weather to keep a stock of jelly babies in as he suspected chewy sweets might be the only way to soothe the savage beast. He’d just make sure Ben was none the wiser so he wouldn’t have to listen to him take the piss.

CHAPTER 30



“Thanks for coming, Rowan, I appreciate it’s a bit of a trek out to the provinces.” Rowan was the one person on the shortlist of agents who hadn’t rubbed him up the wrong way during the first round of phone screens. He had a decent client list and a reputation for not being a stain on humanity. Dorian liked him, which Alex had warned shouldn’t be his sole consideration.

“Hardly a chore. Nice bit of the world this, have you bought the hall?”

Dorian chuckled and took a seat. “No, Crofton Hall is still Ben Redbourn’s, I’m a house guest while I figure out some of my future plans.”

“There are worse places to use as a base to find yourself.”

Rowan sat opposite, making a huffing noise as he landed, his broad frame filling the chair. He had the physique of a man who unapologetically enjoyed gala dinners. That he was the polar opposite to Zak made him even more appealing.

Alex let himself into the reception room. “Ah, this is Alex. I know you’ve spoken. I’ve asked him to sit in to take notes and make sure I cover the points I have so I don’t forget something.”

Dorian waited for the kickback, he knew Zak would have hated an additional person in these types of discussions, and it had caused a number of arguments with Robin when he’d been sent out of a room. “Perfect,” Rowan said. “I bet Alex will do a better job of capturing everything than we would.”

“Anything we discuss in front of Alex will of course be kept confidential.”

Alex had his notebook at the ready. “You won’t know I’m here until I’ve issued the minutes.”

Rowan snorted. “I suppose we should start as we mean to go on. I’ve had a couple of instances where minutes would have helped, but with some production companies I insist on recording conversations on my phone.”

“Sounds like a story.”

“Nothing I can divulge, just rest assured I know how to deal with a slippery customer or two, and there’s a surprising number of them in the theatre and TV land.”

He’d met his fair share in La La Land too, and it was why he wasn’t willing to go out and negotiate roles without someone who knew the business. “We touched on it briefly when we spoke about where I saw my career going. I’m hoping you’ve had the chance to think about it.”

“Theatre is a different beast to the movies. The time commitment and rewards aren’t favourable in any way to what you’re used to.”

“I’m not going in with my eyes closed. I did theatre when I was younger and enjoyed it.”

“Fair enough, it’ll be knackered though, and long-winded. But there’s a lot of opportunities for a man like you. I’m thinking you don’t want to dive straight into *King Lear*, in fact, you might be better looking for something not so well-known or with a new spin. Then you’ll avoid a lot of the comparisons.”

He had similar thoughts. “Just a matter of finding a project. I actually have access to a previously unperformed play from a writer I happen to know quite well.”

“Please don’t tell me you wrote it.” Rowan smiled tightly. “It would be a step too far for a debut.”

“No, Chris is an ex-Hollywood screenwriter and he’s got some great credentials, although none in the theatre. The play

was half written by a contemporary of Shakespeare and Chris has filled in the missing parts. Around an actor playing his twin sister, fooling the court and falling in love with a duke.”

Rowan rubbed his chin. “I think it sounds like a potential future project, and I could probably help with getting him connected to a few folks who would be interested in the material, but if you were to take my advice you’d want to start with something that was a bit more solid.”

Dorian was impressed that Rowan hadn’t tried to dismiss the idea outright and was leaving it on the table for a future project, including using his network. He couldn’t imagine Zak having done that, especially during the first few years of them working together. But Dorian was a different prospect these days, a household name who, before his coming out, could have had his choice of anything.

He dug into a few questions on Rowan’s terms, and they were pretty much industry standard as far as he’d seen, nothing hidden and he seemed honest and upfront about what he could do. “I’ll be straight with you, Dorian. Theatre I know, TV is no issue, but my film contacts don’t run to the same extent. I do have some arthouse and independent connections, but we’re not talking like you’d have been used to in LA.”

“I’m not looking for film, in any guise, at least for a little while.”

“It’s not like you could never go back, dear boy.”

He liked Rowan, and while Alex would probably not approve of him going by a gut feeling he thought he’d found his new agent. “How about we give this a trial run, six months or a successful project? See if we can work with each other before heading into a long-term commitment?”

Alex spluttered. “Dorian, you should at least think things through a little.”

“I’ve got you for that, my sensible side will make sure I’m not taken advantage of.” He flashed Alex a smile and his cheeks pinked. “You’ll keep me safe.”

Rowan chuckled. "I'm game to suck it and see. Need some paperwork though, I'm a stickler for it and there's a lot of bastards out there."

"I would also insist that Mr Forbes engages his legal team," Alex said, although his voice was no longer so high-pitched, which Dorian took as a good sign.

"How about you send me over a contract, it'll give us both a few days to think over whether we'll kill each other or not, and we can talk early next week?" Rowan suggested.

It all sounded very reasonable to Dorian. "Perfect."

"Let me show you out," Alex said.

Rowan levered himself out of the chair and shook hands with Dorian. "Speak to you soon."

Alex led Rowan away and Dorian helped himself to a cup of tea from the pot he'd not touched. A few minutes later, Alex reappeared. "I do wish you'd taken a little more time to make your decision."

"It's my decision to make, Alex. At the end of the day, I'm the one searching for an agent."

"I'm trying to help."

"I do appreciate that, but the fact he didn't piss me off out the gate means he's better than any of the others."

Alex pursed his lips, his stare steely. Dorian had to stop himself from letting his imagination get the better of him, as he could envisage Alex being quite the firecracker in bed.

"Fine. I'll call your solicitors and get you an appointment for tomorrow."

He was almost out of the door when Dorian called after him. "I'll meet you at six in the entrance hall."

Alex frowned. "Why?"

"We're going to the gym, remember? You said it would be a good couples activity."

"I didn't agree to go tonight."

Dorian smirked. “Oh yes you did. You said once the agent interviews were done you’d come with me. So kit on, gorgeous.”

CHAPTER 31



Alex should have said no, and insisted on another day. But that would just be putting off the inevitable, and the Grange was a swanky health club with the kind of facilities he'd never get to experience otherwise. One summer he'd joined a gym after returning from an all-inclusive holiday having overdone it on pretty much everything, and it was a local authority leisure centre that wasn't bad but didn't boast the huge spaces of the Grange. Or the swimming pool. Or the spa. He'd lasted all of a week.

Dorian was ready in his shorts and tank top and, despite his moaning, he was getting out of shape, Alex saw no sign of it.

"Stop faffing, Alex," Dorian said, bouncing from one foot to another. "We'll start with some cardio and then a free weights circuit."

"I don't do weights." He grabbed his towel and water bottle. "I might do some of the machines, but I'm not into exercise."

"You just need to build the habit and you'll be amazed how quickly you'll come to love it." He swatted Alex's arse with his towel. "Move it."

It had been months since he'd worn his trainers and even longer since he'd done exercise for the sake of it. He trudged after Dorian, who was far too perky for the end of the day.

"We'll start with some stretches so you don't seize up."

Alex noticed a few of the other patrons watching Dorian as he led him over to a corner laid out with mats. He wasn't sure if they recognised him or were enjoying the view because Dorian in shorts and a tank top was a fine distraction.

Dorian did a number of stretches reminiscent of some of the positions from *The Escort*, and when he bent forwards Alex had to turn away and take a long drink of his water. His heart racing in a very different way from their barely-there kiss on the beach.

Regaining his composure, he mirrored Dorian's movements but had only a fraction of his flexibility, already feeling his muscles protesting. His general view on exercise was if other people were to succumb to the affliction then they were welcome to it, but he was of a firm opinion that, as long as he could run for the bus without keeling over, then that was sufficient. He should not have accepted Dorian's offer no matter how nice the gym was.

Alex groaned as he tried to do a seated hamstring stretch and collapsed backwards onto the mat. "You carry on. I will wait for you here."

"No. Get up." Dorian held out his hand. "Honestly, Alex it'll do you the world of good."

"It will kill me." But he accepted Dorian's hand and let him pull him to his feet.

"You don't have to do what I do—in fact, it's probably better that you don't because that might finish you off."

"Maybe I should start by watching. Make sure I have the right technique."

Dorian shook his head. "Go sit on a bike while I do my short cardio routine."

"How long?"

"Forty minutes."

"*Forty!* How's that a short routine?"

Dorian tutted. "Young sloth."

With a gentle push, Dorian encouraged him towards the equipment, half of which scared the living daylights out of him.

“Most of those should be outlawed under the Geneva Convention.”

“Nonsense—masochism doesn’t count.”

He claimed the nearest unoccupied recumbent bike, ignoring Dorian muttering about how he could have at least picked an upright, and selected a podcast to listen to. The bike was set to medium resistance and he soon changed it to the minimum. Dorian was on a treadmill and, thanks to the mirror placement, Alex had a great view of him, a bit too good really and he was relieved that twenty minutes later Dorian changed to a cross-trainer and most of his view was obscured, so much so he didn’t notice Dorian had finished until the bastard was behind him, yanking out one of his earphones.

“Did you even break a sweat?”

“Since when was that part of the deal?” He got off the bike and towelled it down, more for gym etiquette than removing the sweat, as there was none to remove. “Are we done?”

“No, free weights and cool down, not that you’ve warmed up.”

“I’m *not* lifting weights.”

“Just a few light ones, I’ll make sure you don’t hurt yourself and you can spot for me. We not going to go too heavy, I’m not in proper training.”

“Only a couple of tons.”

“Fifty kilos max. I reckon. Just enough to wake up a few big muscle groups, and I can start building back up over a few weeks.” He took a long drink of water. “I’ll look into seeing if they’ve a personal trainer. My old one’s in LA.”

“They’re not going to be able to teach you much.”

“Not about teaching, it’s about discipline.”

“If you wanted bossing about you only had to ask.” He motioned to the weights area. “Chop, chop, go lift heavy stuff.”

Dorian opened and closed his mouth and Alex shooed him away. “Go on, Dorian. Those bits of metal on poles won’t lift themselves.”

He yelped as Dorian grabbed him by the arm and dragged him with him. “You’re such a brat.”

Dorian assembled a bar with a ridiculous amount of weight and rolled it to the side. Then he selected dumbbells that were of a similar ludicrous amount before picking two others and holding them out for Alex to take. They were 10kg each. “I don’t want to.”

“Alex, take the weights.”

He huffed and groaned as he took the strain. “My arms will hurt.”

“With practise they won’t. A bit of core and upper body strength is good for you.”

In order to shut Dorian up, Alex did a couple of bicep curls. Muscles that were only used to carrying a laptop and notebooks protested their ill use.

“No, no, no—your stance is all wrong,” Dorian said, rolling his eyes. “You’re going to damage yourself.”

“I already told you that would happen.”

“A little use is not going to cause you long-term issues but the way you’re jerking those about could cause proper damage.”

“Then I should stop.”

Dorian grabbed him by the hips and kicked at his feet until Alex moved them into a Dorian-approved position. If he wasn’t so annoyed at the treatment he might have thought more about the way Dorian was groping him in public.

“Hands by your side. Shoulders down. Now with palms facing up slowly with controlled movements bring the

dumbbells up to chest height. Hold for three and slowly curl back down.”

Alex did as he was told. “I suppose this isn’t too bad.”

“Good. Do three reps of ten and then we’ll change to some others.”

By the third rep his arms were shaking and Dorian hadn’t taken his eyes off him, giving gentle encouragement and the odd steadying hand.

“Maybe next time we add another rep, but I don’t think we should push it too much.”

Alex wasn’t sure there was going to be a next time as he was bound to have some important filing to do whenever Dorian suggested a visit. “Can I stop then?”

Dorian smiled and took the weights. “Let’s hit the sauna. I can come back with a trainer another day.”

“Don’t you want to do some lofty things?” Alex asked, confused by Dorian’s change of heart.

“Probably better if I have someone who could lift the weight off me if I got into trouble. I’ll book a trainer.” He slung an arm around Alex’s shoulder. “Steam room then a beer?”

He wanted to argue that he wouldn’t be that useless but the reality he was. “Gin and tonic?”

“Whatever you want.”

* * *

Alex hummed to himself as he refiled a selection of documents Dara had given him to make copies of and get the handwriting appraised. He’d meant to do it the day before but helping Dorian with the details to engage Rowan meant Friday afternoon had got away from him and, since he’d no plans for the weekend, he might as well get this on his to-do list. At least his arms had stopped aching now.

“Well, somebody’s in a good mood.”

Alex peered around the cabinet in Dara’s office. “I wasn’t expecting you. Hadn’t you plans with Nathan?”

“A mate of his asked if he wanted a few days’ work on a project with the BBC and he can’t afford to turn down things that might lead to a bigger opportunity.”

Alex would be glad of the company as Dorian was off to see friends this weekend so he wasn’t required for a date night. “Fancy a pint? I was thinking about grabbing lunch.”

“You’re on. Best to get out of the way before the wedding starts. Don’t want to be gatecrashing the photos.”

The pub was already busy when they arrived twenty minutes later and Dara waved him off to grab a table as he went to get the drinks.

“How’s your week been? Not seen much of you,” Dara said as Alex handed him his drink.

“Between Ben and Dorian, it’s been a bit of a blur. I’m used to being busy but they are like herding cats. Honestly, I have no idea how Ashley, if he is as organised as he’s supposed to be, hasn’t killed Ben already.”

“That’s because he doesn’t run after Ben, just the weddings, and they tend to have firm deadlines and brides that don’t want things to go wrong.”

“Four times this week Ben has changed his mind on what events he was going to attend. I’ve told him if he does it again next week I’m refusing to do anything before he’s slept on it.”

Dara laughed. “Must be hard being so popular. I think the last event I got invited to was my own birthday, and I organised that myself.”

“I’m sure you prefer it that way. I can’t imagine you wanting to spend an evening making small talk with politicians.”

“Would be nice to be invited so I could turn them down. What about Dorian, how’s things going with him?”

Alex didn't think Dara was talking about his professional interactions. This morning he'd handed Dorian contact details for a private investigator and told him he wanted nothing more to do with it, he wasn't sure Dorian had heard that part. "He's got a lot of things to organise but at least once he makes a decision, he sticks to it."

"Does he now? Is that the same for when you're out on your dates?"

"They are part of an agreement that we have negotiated, there's no room for improvisation." Not completely true as their weekend away had involved a lot less going out to places to see than they'd planned and more coastal walks. Then there was the last date where their dinner had been meant to be followed by a club but Dorian had called it a night as Alex couldn't stop yawning. He smiled at the memory.

"Y'see those sort of little smiles that don't speak to negotiated agreements." Dara waggled his eyebrows. "Is he a good kisser?"

"How would I know?"

"You mean you've not sampled the goods?" Dara said, incredulous. "Surely that's the number-one perk."

"We have strict rules. We hold hands, put arms around each other and while there is a contingency for kissing it is limited to a chaste peck."

"What a waste of opportunity! You're both single, why not enjoy it?"

Alex stroked the condensation on the side of his pint glass. "Because if I do I might not want to give it up—we shared a brief kiss, it was kind of wonderful. And I keep getting the feeling that he might fancy me a bit, but he's a bloody film star who could have whoever he wants and he's collecting a list of names of blokes he'd like to try dating once we're done."

"A list of wannabe shags?"

Alex shook his head. "No, we're charting long-term potential. He's got a few on there that he wouldn't mind exploring."

“Hang on, are you helping him?”

“Yes, he wouldn’t know how to set up a spreadsheet. He can only just fill in the cells without deleting everything.”

“Why the fuck are you doing that?” Dara said. “If you like him, which you clearly do, it’s self-inflicted torture. And even if you didn’t, there’s no way a secretary should be doing that. Tell me you’ve at least put yourself on there?”

“No, don’t be daft. The sort of men on that list are actors or directors, there’s a couple of landed gentry, a lawyer and a CEO. I don’t fit the profile.”

“But you’re the one he’s dating. You said you thought he fancied you, so why don’t you do something about it before he picks Mr Column F?”

“Men like him don’t date men like me.”

“Ashley was an events planner when he met Ben. Robin’s world nearly ended when he thought he’d lost Simon—who’s a copper. So while I agree that most men like Dorian don’t date secretaries, most of them don’t come out and go into hiding at Crofton Hall.”

Dara sounded so logical. Alex liked to think of himself as an optimist, wanting Dara to be right. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to probe a little. To see if there could be something.”

“Don’t be subtle about this, Alex. Most of us men need to be told straight. And a big old lumbering ox like Dorian probably needs to be hit around the head with the obvious stick.”

“He’s not that bad. He’s a lot more self-aware than people give him credit for.” Alex didn’t want to make Dorian out to be some kind of saint but he’d come a long way. “I know he was an arsehole, and some of the things he’s told me don’t paint him in a great light, but he’s not the same guy he was before Robin left him.”

“It was probably the best thing that happened to the pair of them if you ask me. They’d have killed each other eventually. Although Dorian seems to be getting on great with Simon, I didn’t expect that.”

“He didn’t either. They’ve been spending quite a few evenings walking the grounds so Simon can get some exercise.”

“Dorian better be careful, I hear Robin has been overprotective. Don’t want him getting the wrong idea.”

Alex laughed. “I think Simon is one of the few who can keep the future Viscount Whetford in his place, even if that is only because Robin might think he’ll leave him.”

“Simon’s been sitting in the archive as well. We’ve put his detective skills to use while he’s signed off sick as he thought his brain might go mushy otherwise. He was saying Robin will be home on a permanent basis in a couple of weeks and he’s started to look for properties.”

“Dorian thinks Robin’s feeling a bit of a knob for having not done it already.”

Dara took a long drink of his pint. “I guess when you think you might lose the love of your life you start to look at things a bit differently. Twenty quid says they’ll be married by Christmas.”

“Twenty-five it’ll be before Halloween.”

Dara side-eyed him. “Do you have insider information?”

“Only what Dorian thinks, but he’s hardly going to be the most reliable source. No, men like Robin do not share well. I read his parents were married within eight weeks of meeting, so I reckon Robin’s planning something swift once he’s home.”

“You’ve worked for men like Robin, I daresay you’ve better insights than most. Now, back to your love life. I won’t let you steer me off topic again.”

“I’m going to talk to him. We’ve technically only a week left of our agreement and next weekend we going to go to dinner at a place I’ve always wanted to go to but could never have afforded. I’ll say something then.”

It gave him a week. A whole week to plan his actions, to make sure he was word-perfect. He might not get what he

wanted but if he didn't try he'd always have regrets, and this was in his hands now. Dorian was a great fake boyfriend and now Alex was ready to see if he could do it for real.

CHAPTER 32



Simon was waiting on the terrace, a mug of tea in hand. Dorian sat next to him. “I wasn’t sure you were coming.”

“Sorry, I got waylaid.”

“Nothing too terrible I hope.”

He’d been talking to Rowan about a few scripts he’d got his hands on and thought might be of interest. “My new agent wanted to run a few ideas past me. I can’t say any of them jumped at me.”

His mind wandered to the various offerings, thinking he might run them past Alex in the morning. The thought of Alex led him back to the circle of internal arguments.

Simon kicked him. “Are you all right?” Simon asked.

“I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Something you want to talk about or is it one of those you internalise and stomp it right down?”

“There speaks the voice of experience.”

“If you ever meet my ex-husband you’ll understand why.” He laughed. “But seriously, I can be a friendly ear if you need one.”

He could brush it away but he’d been burying things for years and it wasn’t a healthy way to deal with them. “It’s the stuff with Alex. We’re due to come to an end and I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“In what way?”

“I had been thinking we’d been getting on really well and working great, so I could broach the idea of extending it, but now I don’t think I could do that and not get too attached.”

Simon blew across the surface of his tea. “What’s wrong with getting attached? Unless you don’t believe it would be reciprocated.”

“Maybe it would be, I dunno to be honest.” He thought back to the kiss on the beach, how he’d stepped back before he did something stupid like snog Alex within an inch of his life. “I *do* like him, but not sure he’d be what I want in a partner. I met up with a few friends this weekend and I doubt he would have fitted in.”

“Oh, right, why would that be?”

“All the conversation was about the industry—it was nice to be surrounded by it and I had a great time being with people who understood. If I’d dragged Alex in it wouldn’t have been fair.”

“Not every evening will be like that, and you and your partner don’t have to be cast from the same mould.” Simon gave Dorian a look he couldn’t interpret. “You had that with your fake girlfriends and Robin, and look how those turned out.”

“Bit unfair. This isn’t about me, but Alex.”

“But is it though?”

“Yes.”

Simon’s lack of support shocked him, but only for a minute as he realised what an unthinking idiot he was saying something like that to Simon given his partner.

“You see, you’ve basically described me and Robin. I have no clue what he’s going on about sometimes when I go to his poncey business dinners, and when he meets my police mates he’s completely lost. But from what you’re saying that’d be enough for him to kick me to the kerb.”

“No, you guys are different.”

“How?”

Dorian didn't have an answer for that. “I'm being a twat again, aren't I?”

“Yup. Look, if you don't think there'd be a future with Alex just say it. As it stands, you're still in the middle of a contract, not a relationship.”

“So I should just let it end?”

Simon sighed. “What do you want to happen?”

If he knew that he wouldn't need to have this conversation. “I dunno. I've not even kissed him properly.”

“If you're like this without snogging him it's a good chance you'll like him a damn sight more afterwards.” Simon looked him straight in the eye. “Seriously, Dorian, life's too short whichever way you look at it. Either call it quits with Alex and find someone else, or give it a proper go.”

“What if someone else had already asked me out? And I might like them too but I don't know how much.” The text from Jez sat unanswered on his phone. “He's a director, not long divorced. In theory, he could be better suited.”

“What are you asking here?”

“Would it be cheating? On Alex I mean. I wouldn't do anything with the other guy until we were officially out of our contract.”

Simon scrunched up his nose. “You aren't a real couple so you can't be cheating on him. But ask yourself what are you hoping to achieve from dating this other guy?”

“I just want to see if it could go somewhere. Fake-dating Alex isn't like a real date.” The truth was he wasn't sure but that sounded about right.

“Then let me give you one piece of advice. If you do go on a date with this guy don't do it behind Alex's back. You need to be honest, or he'll think you're hiding something and that's worse. Trust is a fragile thing.”

“Is that what happened with Robin?”

“Not quite. He wasn’t interested in Marco, but Marco was hitting on him and Robin kept that to himself and continued to see him as a friend thinking he could handle it without the shit hitting the fan. Which it did.”

“I know it didn’t go down well.”

Simon crossed his arms over his chest. “My ex-husband, among other things, was a cheating bastard, and so I admit I have trust issues but I do trust Robin. He could have anyone, and I still find it odd that he chose me.”

Dorian didn’t think it odd. Simon might not be a twenty-three-year-old model but he was worth ten times more than any vapid barfly. He stabilised Robin, made Robin think outside his privilege and supported him in ways that were far beyond being a piece of arm candy. “You’re what he needs.”

“So my point is, what do you need from a partner? If they have to be in showbiz, then that rules out a lot of people. If Robin had to date someone with a title or high-flyer in the city then neither of us would have had the honour of being with him.”

The fact that Simon considered himself honoured to be with his partner spoke volumes, and he didn’t think it was something just because of Robin. “I need to think about this. But I will accept the date with Jez—and let Alex know.”

“It okay not to know things, Dorian. Being honest with yourself is just as important.”

He’d learnt that lesson the hard way, it had taken him years to come out publicly and he didn’t want to waste any more of his life. He’d test the waters with Jez and talk to Alex. Make sure he didn’t leave a trail of carnage this time.

Simon excused himself as his phone rang. “It’s Robin. He’ll be clucking over a house he’s spotted so I best not to let him work himself up too much.”

Dorian took out his own phone and selected Jez’s text.

Jez: I thought you might like to have dinner with me. Somewhere intimate, a chance to talk and get to know each other as more than friends.

Dorian: *Okay. What about Wed?*

The reply was almost instantaneous.

Jez: *Wonderful. Shall we say 7? I know this lovely little place in Chelsea.*

Dorian: *Send me the details. I'll be there.*

CHAPTER 33



Dorian knocked on the door to Alex's office and entered as he heard Alex call to him. Alex smiled as he entered and he felt his heart clench, even more of a reason for him to get this out of the way. He'd already left it a bit late as he would be seeing Jez tonight.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Of course." Alex tidied away the papers on his desk.

"I wanted to talk to you about next weekend, since that's going to be officially our last date."

"I hope to catch you about that too." Alex bit his lip. "The time's flown. I can't quite believe it. Everything's booked, is there a problem with the arrangements?"

He thought he could let Alex go first, but that was the coward's way out. He sat down. "No, look I wanted to tell you something. I didn't want you to somehow find out, but I've a date tonight."

Alex's expression faltered and then the smile was back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I see. Do you want me to help with something for it?"

"No, I just thought you deserved to know. He contacted me over the weekend so I thought it might be a good idea to get the ball rolling. If you'd rather I can move it to after we're officially not involved."

"Don't be silly. Do you mind me asking who it is?"

"Jez."

“Ah, yes, he’s on the list. The director—I think he was the guy you talked to on our second date, so kind of fitting it’s come full circle.”

A silence fell between them. Dorian hated it. “You said there was something you wanted to bring up too.”

Alex shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Alex.”

He cleared his throat. “I have quite a lot to do. I imagine you need to get ready for this evening as well.”

Dorian stood. “Can we talk tomorrow?”

“I have a few very busy days. If there’s something specific then let me know and I’ll make sure I’ll get to it, otherwise, I think it best we reconvene on Saturday. As originally planned.”

“Do you want to know how the date goes?”

Alex stared at him a hurt look flashing across his face. “Erm... no. I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Dorian left and he hated that Alex seemed upset. Maybe Simon was wrong and sometimes these things were better not said. He wondered what it was that Alex had wanted to ask him, especially now he didn’t think he could. He’d see if he could get to the bottom of it on Saturday, for now he needed not to overthink this. Enjoy his evening with Jez, which was a real honest-to-goodness date with someone who was interested in having dinner with him without having to have been paid thirty grand to do so.

* * *

The place Jez had selected was an interesting choice, tucked away in a corner of Chelsea and with an eclectic menu—he couldn’t say he’d seen anything quite like it before. He was on time, to the minute, but Jez had yet to arrive and he’d been shown to a secluded table and given a drinks list to peruse. All

the tables were secluded, either tucked away in alcoves or had privacy screens, giving it a strange vibe.

His phone pinged and he thought it better not be Jez cancelling so he was surprised to see a text from Alex.

Alex: Sorry if I seemed off with you earlier, I did have a very busy day and I was fighting a headache. I hope your date is everything you wish it to be.

He stared at the screen not knowing how to reply. Alex didn't need to apologise and Dorian wanted to check and see he was all right, but before he had the chance to formulate an answer, Jez arrived.

“Dorian, looking marvellous as ever.”

He stood, not knowing whether to shake his hand or something else. Jez solved the issue by leaning in for a quick hug that lingered a little too long. Instead of sitting opposite, Jez moved the chair so he was to Dorian's right.

“Sorry I'm late, I had a production meeting overrun and the traffic was a complete bitch and my taxi driver got us stuck by going a stupid way.”

“Not a problem. So you've a new project?”

“Oh yes, I'm very excited.” Jez had one of those faces that made him come across as smug, but get him talking about work and it tripled. “It's an existential rethink of a classic. The reimagining of Dante's *Inferno*.”

Jez was famous for being a pretentious wanker, and this seemed on-point. “Reimagined in what way, dare I ask?”

“It's based on a department store, each floor is one of the levels. With the parking area being Purgatory.”

“Certainly different.”

“That's the point.”

Dorian decided he was going to need a drink if he was going to be able to cope with this sort of conversation for a couple of hours. There was a nice-sounding bottle of Crozes Hermitage that should keep him going.

A waitress dropped off food menus and Dorian ordered the wine, hoping it would come quickly. He needed not to think like this, he was supposed to be here to enjoy Jez's company. Jez was an attractive bloke, older than him by around a decade, and Dorian wouldn't have said he was his usual type, Jez's colourings were closer to his own and he was a little on the broad side compared to Robin or Alex.

"If you trust me, I can order for us. The menu might look strange on first read, and I would have never thought mango and crab go together, but it's sublime."

Dorian thought the different flavour combinations would be described by someone like Jez as brave and experimental and Dorian thought it probably better to let Jez choose. "Go ahead. You know this place well, then?"

Jez smiled at him over the menu. "I've been a few times. A couple of dates, and some business lunches. The owners are lovely people and really know their stuff."

He was flirty, not overbearing and Dorian thought the evening had potential. "I'm also keen to find new places. I'm still not decided where I'm going to settle at the moment."

"You're at Crofton Hall, aren't you? Bedding down with the delicious Ben Redbourn." He smirked. "I read about your history... thinking of adding to it?"

It was a strange question for what was a first date, but he guessed a lot of people who had read the headlines might be thinking the same thing. "No. He's married and not the type to play away from home."

"More's the pity. I suppose there has to be a few men capable of maintaining their wedding vows."

Dorian wondered if that was a dig at Jez's husband. "So I'm staying with him until I decide what to do. I've no particular rush to move out or settle far away."

"I'm surprised you've not got a London base."

"I do, but it's not home. I'm not one for living in an apartment all the time. I think I might be too old to want to live in London full-time."

“Never! When you’re tired of London, you’re tired of life.”

“That might have been the case in the eighteenth century but I’m pretty sure Samuel Johnson might have had a different take on it nowadays.”

“You just need to find your people, Dorian. You’re not long back from LA, you’ve come home and you need to regroup. I’m sure that’s something I can help you with.”

Maybe that was what he was missing, a connection to people, but he wasn’t convinced those people were the same ones Jez might think he’d want to mix with. “Well, I’m open to exploring new things. But you’re right in the sense that I’ve been back in the UK for less than six months, and I’ve still got much to figure out.”

Jez waved over the waiter and ordered a selection of dishes that he didn’t think would belong on the same menu let alone chosen to be eaten together. It would either be a taste sensation or he’d be worshipping the porcelain god into the early hours.

A strange-looking amuse-bouche, bright green foam balanced on a strip of marinated tuna arranged on a dessert spoon, came first.

Jez moaned loudly as he popped it into his mouth. “Sweet Lord, that is heaven in a mouthful.”

He had to admit it was good, but he wasn’t quite ready to moan like a whore in public over a piece of fish.

“Reminds me of a pretty lad I met in Honolulu.”

Dorian brushed the comment to one side, he was used to throwaway innuendos. “Honolulu is full of pretty people. In fact, there are millions of them everywhere, I’m more interested in someone who can hold my attention.”

“Depends how long you want to hold them.”

The rest of the food arrived and he hadn’t realised it was served all at once, sort of tapas style, rather than in courses.

“I’m not looking for temporary. I’ve spent the last year bouncing around.” He thought it better to set some

expectations, he wasn't sure what message Jez was trying to transmit.

"I can understand. Divorce is a mix of freeing and paralysing. No one goes into a marriage thing you're going to split up and lose custody of the schnauzers."

"I imagine it's been tough. I wasn't married to Robin but we were together a good few years and it took a while to adjust."

Jez chewed thoughtfully on a coconut-infused prawn. "Not really. I'll be honest with you, Dorian, monogamy isn't my strong point, and seeing as you're here then I assume you're similar."

Wherever Jez was going with this he didn't like it. "I've never been unfaithful."

"But aren't you seeing some young chap? Yet you're having dinner with me." He reached over and placed his hand on Dorian's thigh. "You're fucking gorgeous, Dorian, how about we get out of here?"

To be fair to Jez, he had accepted the date, but Jez was a presumptuous knob. He knocked his hand away. "Alex knows I'm here. We're in a stage where we're getting to know each other and nothing's permanent—that's different to cheating on a spouse."

If they'd been together he'd have considered this as cheating but Jez didn't need to know that.

"Then where's the problem? I'd love to take you back to my place, I bet I can show you a thing or two more than your young pup. We can see where it goes from there."

Dorian wasn't going to put up with any more of this bollocks. Jez had proved himself to be an arrogant git, and now he wished he'd chosen to stay at the hall, play Scrabble with Simon or, even better, have spoken to Alex and admitted he had feelings for the bossy blond sod.

"I doubt you could show me anything. And Alex's youth and beauty, coupled with his creativity, would leave you a poor second."

Jez snorted. “If he was so amazing you wouldn’t be here. Life is too short to be tied to one person.”

“That might be your opinion but it’s not mine.”

“Are you looking for a fairy tale? I hate to tell you but life isn’t like that.”

“Actually, you’ve just helped me prove that it is possible to find a prince amongst a bunch of fucking toads. With Alex I’ve picked a good one. I was worried whether, with him not being in the business, we could work long-term, but there’s no problem if it means he doesn’t turn into a boring, sanctimonious wanker like you... he’s a keeper.”

“How dare you talk to me like that! I could make it difficult for you to get work, you should watch your mouth.”

“Oh, fuck off!” Dorian laughed. “You’re in a dream world if you think you could have any leverage over me. I’ve turned down more projects in the last week than you’ve worked on in your entire career.”

God, how could he have been so wrong about wanting someone in the industry? The egos, the insufferable belief that they were important made him angry. Alex was worth twenty of this fucker. And he had a bolt of realisation why. Alex was real.

“I’ll settle up on my way out.” He pushed back from the table. “If you try to threaten me again I’ll ensure you’ll have trouble working on toothpaste commercials let alone another Cannes winner.”

He left the restaurant in a cloud of foul temper and annoyance. He’d wasted an evening, but on reflection it wasn’t all bad. Jez had shown him in no uncertain terms he’d been wrong in thinking he needed a man who was part of the world he lived in for his profession, he didn’t want or need it, in fact he thought he would thrive better without. In the same way Simon was best for Robin by being a different kettle of fish from the rest of his life. Dorian thought he needed the same and Alex could be that man.

CHAPTER 34



Alex thought he might regret this in the morning but as he opened his second bottle of red wine he couldn't bring himself to care. Dorian was out with another man, a silver fox-type swanky director. They were probably exchanging kisses over caviar and whispering filthy words of what they would do to each other once they were back at Dorian's apartment. Dorian would end up falling in love with Jez, they'd move in together, adopt twenty children and go on to make a series of award-winning films and be the ultimate power couple.

He didn't even bother with his glass this time and took a long swig from the bottle. With the opposite of grace, he slid off the sofa and landed on his arse on the floor. He'd fucking had enough and burst into tears.

The front door to his flat pushed open and he saw Karl peer around the frame. "Alex? I heard—oh, whatever is wrong?"

Karl came and crouched next to him, placing his hand on his shoulder. Alex tried to wipe away his tears but he was drunk and feeling sorry for himself and he couldn't stop crying.

"Dorian is off on a date with a sexy superior older man, and I'm going to be left all alone and never be happy!"

Karl helped him off the floor and back onto the sofa, wrestling his bottle of wine off him. "I think you'd best not have any more of that."

"At least wine loves me!"

“It doesn’t, and it won’t respect you in the morning either.”

Alex was willing to take the risk but Karl had moved the bottle out of his reach. “Give it back.”

“No, I’ll make you some coffee. Then you can tell me why you’re in such a state over Dorian.”

Alex crossed his arms over his chest, suspecting he looked like a sulking toddler. Karl rattled around his kitchenette and a few minutes later presented him with a mug of coffee. “Come on, Alex. Drink this. I didn’t think you were the type to get yourself into a state over being left on the shelf. Or is this specifically about Dorian?”

He sighed. “I wasn’t meant to fall for the annoying bastard. Just a few months playing his boyfriend, after which I thought I’d be desperate to see the back of him.”

“He’s not the arrogant movie star I was expecting,” Karl admitted. “I had to try and restrain him a few months after Robin came to stay, but I guess people do change.”

“Dorian has been so lovely. We’ve talked about all sorts of things and he’s never made me feel uncomfortable or stepped over the line. I was thinking about asking if he might like to go on a real date but it’s obvious now that I won’t be who he’s after.”

“I don’t see why not. You’re a good man, and he needs someone who won’t let him get away with bullshit.”

“What he might need and what he wants aren’t the same. He’s gone out with a director tonight. The other people he’s mentioned who might be potentials are other actor types and entertainment lawyers. Not some secretary like me. I had thought, well it doesn’t matter what I thought now.”

Karl gave him a considered look. “Did you think he was interested in you? You both went into this thinking the same thing, that it was a contractual agreement, what’s to stop him from changing his mind too?”

“I thought I saw some signs. A few lingering looks, and I was all set to say something as it’s meant to be our last date

this weekend, but then he told me he was going to dinner with this Jez bloke.”

“Did he say why he was going out with him? It sounds like there might have been a reason behind it?”

Alex scoffed. “I imagine it’s the same reason most people go out for dinner, Karl. I doubt they’re playing Scrabble.”

“You know what I meant.”

“I don’t know why Jez in particular, but I think he wanted a proper date with someone who could understand his job and the struggles he’s going through.”

“You could ask... maybe hint you’re interested in more. Just because he’s had one date with this bloke doesn’t mean he’s Dorian’s forever after.”

“I don’t know, Karl. I think I might have to accept I’ve made an idiot of myself and move on. I’ve even sent him a good luck text.”

Karl picked up Alex’s phone that was on the coffee table. “You texted him?”

“Yes, because I wasn’t very supportive, and it’s not his fault I’m not what he wants in a partner. He didn’t text me back though so I guess he’s too busy fucking Jez.”

Karl hummed and stared at the screen. “Looks like he’s replied recently.”

Alex snatched his phone back.

Dorian: The date was a bust. Waste of time. Steering clear of these types!

“What do you think he means by these types?” he asked Karl. “Older men? Directors?”

“Could be both,” Karl said. “Not knowing the man he was with, it’s difficult to give a proper conclusion. But if you said you thought you’d seen signs he liked you, maybe these types are anyone who isn’t Alex.”

“I’m not that lucky, Karl.”

“Nothing important should be left to luck. Would you allow Ben to manage his agenda by luck?”

“Of course I bloody wouldn’t... I think that was what he was doing before I started. I’m not letting him do that again.” He shuddered. “It’s all about meticulous planning.”

“Then why not apply the same principle to Dorian.” Karl patted his leg. “Between us we keep the house and his lordship moving in the right direction, I’m sure we can come up with a plan to make Dorian realise what he could have.”

Alex stared at Karl, who looked deadly serious. Karl had what he called an elastic brain, he was able to deal with pretty much any situation without breaking a sweat. “What do you have in mind?”

“You said you were going to talk to Dorian, what were you going to say?”

The alcohol was making his brain slosh about. He took several sips of coffee. “That maybe we could try continuing what we were doing but without the contract. Seeing as we were getting on so well. But that was before he decided to date the director.”

Karl pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’re heading into circular reference territory as we’ve just ascertained that the date with Jez did not go well, so strike that as a variable. You need to approach this as you would keeping Ben in line.”

“What’s to stop him just working down his list for the next one?”

“*List?*”

“I helped create a spreadsheet for future dates with their pros and cons.”

“Are you on it?” Karl asked.

“Of course not, that would be terribly crass and desperate.”

“Well, as I see it, you have two options. The first is to add yourself to the list, if he is using it then he can see you there and you’ll know if he acts on it. Or unfortunately, as these things do tend to happen, that document got corrupted and will

no longer open and the backup copies have been lost in the cloud.”

“The first might be a bit too subtle for Dorian. But the second could work, he’ll remember the names though still.”

“We could combine the two. Can the original version and create a second but with only you in?”

Alex thought the idea had merit but Dorian wasn’t the biggest fan of spreadsheets so it would be leaving a lot to him deciding to open up a document he was already convinced he was going to delete by accident. “I think we’re expecting Dorian to be more technologically competent than he is.”

“There’s always the direct approach. What are the current plans for Saturday?”

“We’ll head to London, have dinner, then one of the places he likes for drinks after and either stay at his flat or come back here. I need to confirm that part—the rest is all arranged.”

“So you’re travelling in together?”

“Yes, there’s a car booked.”

“Then I think we need a little change. Is there any way to arrange things so you don’t see or speak to Dorian before Saturday?”

He didn’t have any time in his agenda with Dorian for the next couple of days but Dorian often just wandered in on the chance he was free. “If I can keep him out of my office when I’m not with Ben, I should be able to keep my distance. Or I could work downstairs with Chris and Dara, I’ve a new project with them.”

“Excellent. What I think you should do is meet him at the restaurant. And ask for it to be a real date. One final evening together and see where it goes. Hopefully, he’ll be a bit Alex-starved if he’s not seen you for a couple of days, which will help.”

That was a good plan. “Can someone run me to the train station on Saturday afternoon?”

“I’ll ask Val. I’ve a wedding.”

“I need to sober up. I don’t usually let myself get so emotional over this sort of thing.”

Karl handed him his handkerchief. “There’s nothing wrong with being emotional, and it shows that this is important to you. We spend so much of ourselves making sure other people have everything they require, we shouldn’t forget about our own needs.”

“Good advice. Thank you.”

Alex had spent years always putting someone else first. Now, he was going to take Karl’s advice to heart and make sure he got what he wanted. Dorian wouldn’t know what hit him.

CHAPTER 35



Ben had always considered himself to be a chap's chap, the sort of man who could be depended on in a crisis, but now he wished he was a cad of the highest order and he could run to the hills and not give a damn, because he was in the clutches of the Countess of Malsberry and there could be no escape.

"But, Mel, darling, I'm not even a bachelor any more. It all seems a bit on the dishonest side."

Mel snorted, her nostrils flaring and her piercing stare getting more pointed by the second. "Nonsense, Ben. It's not like you'd have been marrying any of them anyway. It's not 1824, which is a relief, as I'd look frightful in an empire line gown."

He thought he might try another tack. "I didn't want to bring it up, but I have had a few none too positive column inches in the press of late—all lies of course—about a little liaison from my youth reoccurring now, perhaps the association wouldn't be the greatest for the charity."

"I hate to tell you, but the idea of you having a threesome with two other beautiful men is hardly going to be a turnoff. I was even thinking of upping your minimum bid... I reckon you'll have them all fighting for you."

Maybe he should have asked Karl for help formulating an escape plan, because as it stood he was caught like a deer in headlights and there was no way out. "I do think you're overstating my appeal."

“You weren’t at the committee lunch. Half of them are thinking of taking a punt, and there’s some terrific comments on the website.”

“Wait, I’m on the website already?” Oh dear lord, he hadn’t realised that it had gone that far.

“Yes, you’re sandwiched between a fireman and a belly dancer. Not literally, of course, but then given your thing with Robin and Dorian, you might not have minded.” She guffawed at her own joke.

“Very droll.”

“Now come on, you big sourpuss, I know you can’t make the official rehearsal so let me show you the set-up. Where’s that lovely secretary of yours gone?”

Ben had hoped that by coming over to Malsberry Manor in person, under the pretence of being here to get the lay of the land before the event, he’d have been able to persuade Mel to release him from his commitment, bringing Alex along to take notes for verisimilitude. Now he was going to need him for real.

Alex was waiting for him in the great hall. He’d been talking to the head of staff. “My lord, Mr Hill was taking me through the arrangements for the event.”

“We’re in excellent hands with Hill,” Mel said fondly. “We’ve a few bits and pieces to iron out but it’ll be marvellous. And such a worthy cause. I’m so glad you’re participating, Ben. I knew I could count on you.”

Alex tapped his notebook. “I have detailed notes on the logistics, my lord. I don’t think you need to worry about anything about the evening. You’ll have someone behind the scenes to usher you on and off a raised stage and all the voting will be done by an app with only the organiser being able to see who the final winning bid is from.”

Mel clapped her hands together. “It’s all so clever. Everyone gets a code name and there’s a big screen to show the bidding in real-time.”

Ben plastered on what he hoped didn't come across as too fake a smile. "How are the ticket sales going? Might not be worth it if the audience is too small."

"Sold out. We could probably squeeze in an extra table or two at a push but we've hit our numbers. Does your Ashley have a ticket? Although I'm afraid it would be unsporting of him to bid for you."

Ashley hadn't because Ben had been hoping not to have been here either. "I..."

"Let me follow up, my lord," Alex said. "I can make arrangements with Mr Hill on where he should be seated."

"Thank you. I'm not sure if he's going with someone. Maybe Mr MacLove?"

"I'll double check."

He'd noticed earlier but Alex did seem a little off-kilter, not that he thought Mel or Mr Hill would have noticed, but the Alex he'd come to know over the last few months would have had a more definite answer, even if, as in this case, it was completely fabricated.

"Do you have everything you need, Ben? Just I need to head off for an appointment in the city and I'm already cutting it a bit close," Mel asked.

He was more than happy to have a reason to leave. "All good. And I do need to get back myself."

"Feel free to pop in again if you want to. I want to make sure you're comfortable with the set-up. Don't want to put bidders off!"

Mr Hill escorted Ben and Alex out. "Would you like to drive?" he offered Alex. "You're on the estate's insurance, which includes the Jag."

"Normally I would love to, but I'm not sure I'd be the safest behind the wheel."

"Is there something wrong?"

Alex cleared his throat. “I had a bit more to drink than normal last night, I’m still feeling a little delicate.”

“Oh.” Ben winked. “We’ve all been there, Alex. I’ve had some doozies of hangovers through the years. I thought there must have been something.”

Alex looked horrified. “Oh, dear lord, I didn’t think it was affecting my work. I am so sorry. I can take a day’s less holiday or something to make up for it.”

“Don’t be daft. Even on your ever so slightly off days you’re incredible.” He wondered if there was more behind Alex’s mid-week drinking, and remembered that Dorian had told him about a date he was planning with a director. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, I just needed a bit of downtime yesterday and I overindulged. It’s not my usual practise and I promise it won’t happen again.”

Ben wasn’t convinced and he thought he might have a chat with Karl and ask him to keep an eye on Alex. He’d not been too impressed at the idea of Alex fake-dating Dorian, but his reasons were noble enough even if Ben thought he hadn’t appreciated how it might affect him. Dorian was an attractive, charming man, Ben knew the fucker far too well for him to have been more than a friend and to fall for him, but Alex he imagined could have been swept up in the romance of it all.

“What you do in your own time is your own business. I will never dictate how you live your life unless it was to impact your work, and even then it would have to be a serious issue, not a slight difference only I would spot. If you are having trouble, please know you can come to me. Or if not me, then Karl.”

“I appreciate that, thank you. But honestly, I’m fine now. And actually, I did speak to Karl yesterday and he was a great help.”

Ben was still not convinced but if he remembered correctly, this weekend would be the end of the fake dating the movie star and Alex’s life could return to normal.

CHAPTER 36



Dorian scowled. Every time he'd tried to seek out Alex he either wasn't where Dorian thought he should be or he had left moments before. He'd been thinking long and hard about his date with Jez and he wanted to talk to Alex. Perhaps Alex was avoiding him. He hadn't replied to his text after his date and if Alex did want to be left alone, the last thing he'd want was Dorian harassing him by text to see where he was when he had no legitimate reason to meet.

He'd try Alex's office one last time for the day. The door was open and there was no sign of him. "Dorian, is everything all right?"

He turned to see Ben with Davy strapped to his chest in a harness. "I was looking for Alex. I see you've a new accessory."

Ben rubbed the top of Davy's head. "He's stopped grumping when he goes in it now so I thought I'd give Ashley a break and have the little fellow for the afternoon."

"It's a good look on you. I don't suppose you've seen Alex?"

Ben checked his watch. "It's after four on a Friday, Dorian. I'm not a slave driver."

"I've been trying to catch him all day today and yesterday."

"Yesterday he came with me to Malsberry Manor, I had to scope out the venue for this bloody bachelor auction."

Dorian had heard some mutterings but had thought Ben was trying to get out of it. “That still going ahead?”

“Unless there’s a miracle. Alex, the marvel that he is, will at least ensure I know what I’m doing and don’t make an arse of myself.”

“You know you’re in safe hands there... so where is he today?”

“Did you try the archive? He’s been helping the dragons with a new project they’ve got. But he’d probably not be there now.”

He checked earlier and Dara and Chris had said they’d not seen him although Dorian had spotted a third mug on the desk and three chocolate brownies, but if Alex had not wanted them to give him away, then he wasn’t going to push.

“He wasn’t there.”

Ben frowned. “That’s odd I could have sworn that he was planning to be there. Maybe check in with Ashley.”

Dorian thought anyone he asked would not have seen Alex. They were supposed to be going on their last date tomorrow and now he wasn’t even sure Alex would turn up. This was bollocks, he was going to get himself a drink and sulk in the library.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll text him later. I wanted final details for tomorrow, that’s all.”

“Oh, yes, it’s your last date. Whatever happens, it’s bound to be better than the one you had with Jez.”

“Yeah, low bar. Anyway, I’ll leave you to your baby-dangling.”

Dorian wandered into the library and saw Simon reading on the sofa, sipping a sherry. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there. Are you meant to be drinking?”

Simon raised an eyebrow. “I’m off the serious pain meds, and I’ve no infections, so I’m allowed. But for the love of God don’t tell Robin, because he’ll demand to see written permission from my doctors and then I’ll have to kill him.

You'll be saving a not-so-innocent life and me from prison. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you that ex-coppers don't do well inside."

Dorian laughed and collected the sherry decanter and a glass. "Top up?"

"I knew there was a reason why I liked you and it wasn't just your taste in ex boyfriends."

He topped up Simon's glass. "I hated you for ages. It was easier for me to believe Robin left me for someone else rather than just leaving."

"We've established on previous occasions you were an arsehole, and I'm glad you've changed." He sipped his sherry and stared at Dorian as if he was daring him to challenge him.

"I've gone through my arsehole phase and metamorphosed into a useless bastard."

"That's an interesting life cycle. Not one I'd have associated with a movie star. I take it this has to do with your date with the director. How did it go?"

"Shite, with a side order of rubbish." He knocked back his sherry and refilled his glass. "He was a complete knob. Honestly, I will never get that time back, and while the food was good I barely tasted a mouthful."

"Wow, that's damning. Even on my worst dates I was able to appreciate the food."

"I know. My tolerance for dipshits is getting less as I get older."

Simon tilted his head to one side. "I wonder if it's not more nuanced than that."

"What do you mean?" He didn't think he wanted to know the answer.

"You're arse over tit for Alex. You were mooning over him before you went on the date, so anyone who wasn't him was going to fall short."

Dorian hated the fact Simon was right, but also was pissed off that his ex-boyfriend's boyfriend knew him well enough to call him out and wasn't being enough of an arse that he could dismiss him outright.

"I admit I have a little crush on Alex, but I wasn't convinced he'd be right for me." That sounded lame to his own ears let alone Simon's. "I wanted to see if I could have something real."

"Right, so this one was so real that you've come back saying he was a load of shit. Sorry, Dorian, but I think you'd be better off admitting that you want Alex and stop fucking about." Simon gave him a penetrating look. "To be frank, you messed up with Robin by not coming out, don't miss out on a chance with Alex because you think you shouldn't be together."

He bristled at the mention of Robin but it was Simon's statement about Alex that made him pause. "But he doesn't want me."

"Honestly, you and Robin are as bad as each other. Alex doesn't think he's in your league, he can't believe you'd want him. Can't you see that?"

Alex had no reason to think that. "He'd been avoiding me for the last two days. He doesn't want me."

"Fucking hell, are you so dense? He's avoiding you because he thinks you don't want him because you went on a date with another man."

"I texted him to say the date was a bust!"

Simon snorted. "So now he thinks you'll be looking for another date, not that you're looking to do anything with him. I thought there was some sort of entrance test to get into your posh school, but the more time I spend around you, Ben and Robin, I wonder if they let any old chimp in a suit in."

"Oi. That was uncalled for. I think you've had too much sherry."

Simon wrestled the decanter off Dorian. "No, I'm not going to soft soap this. If you let Alex go without telling him

how you feel you're a bloody idiot. And I'm telling Robin."

"Don't you dare!"

* * *

Dorian towel-dried his hair, he was knackered but annoyed with himself. He had a few scripts to look over, which might help him fall asleep but his mind was too busy trying to replay all his fuck ups over the last ten years.

His phone began to ring, his initial thought was to ignore it but seeing it was Robin he didn't think he would give up easily.

"Hey, how's things?"

"I've only a few more days left in the US, so would you do me a favour and stop getting my boyfriend riled up because he is meant to be resting and I'm not there to make sure he does."

"I have not riled Simon up. He's more than capable of getting his own knickers in a twist. Especially when he's been on the sherry."

Seeing as Simon had grassed him up to Robin, he didn't feel guilty in dobbing the bastard in too. "He's been drinking?"

"Yep."

There was momentary silence. "Nice try to distract me, Forbes. I'll deal with Simon separately, but for now you're on my shit list."

"I've no reason to be. I'm not your responsibility anymore."

"You're my friend and despite, or maybe even because, of our history, I'm not going to let you make another great, cocking mistake."

He sighed and laid back on the bed thinking he might as well get comfortable if he was going to be talked at by Robin. "I'm not sure you're in any position to lecture me."

“I think I’m in the perfect position being the ex-boyfriend who left you for not taking action.”

“Simon’s already had a go at me over Alex. I don’t need to hear it again from you.”

“I nearly lost Simon, not over Marco because Simon is too good a man to leave me over something that wasn’t really my fault, but I was inattentive before then which, had it been left to fester, would have been a death knell for us.”

He thought Robin was being a tad melodramatic. “Come off it, you two were solid. It was just a wibble.”

“I’ve done a lot of thinking, Dorian. I was careless with someone very precious to me. Simon nearly dying brought everything into sharp focus and then I went too far almost suffocating him.”

He had no idea where Robin was going with this. “All right, but you’ve fixed it so what’s the issue?”

“There have been so many incidences when it could have gone wrong and I wanted to stop you from making a mistake over Alex. Simon cares enough to pull me into this intervention—that’s all you need to know. If Alex wasn’t worth it, or he didn’t care, Simon wouldn’t have bothered.”

“So you’re telling me to take a chance on Alex?”

“Yes, what’s the best that could happen?”

“Shouldn’t that be the worst?”

Robin huffed. “No, now’s not the time for fatalism. Go and bag yourself a bossy blond secretary. He’s just your type.”

CHAPTER 37



Alex had managed to avoid Dorian and had texted him Saturday morning to let him know he'd meet him at the restaurant. He'd needed the space and time to think. Karl had been right that he had to put his happiness first, and while he didn't know he had a future with Dorian, he'd never know if he didn't try.

He'd arrived early at the restaurant, it had been one of the ones he'd researched for Ben and Ashley's date but as it wasn't part of a hotel, it hadn't made the cut. It was owned by a celebrity chef who still did the cooking and was in a little mews in Fitzrovia. Alex had decided to take up the offer of a seat in the bar rather than head straight to the table. A little bit of Dutch courage in the form of a cocktail would take the edge off and he sipped at his drink, letting the mix of champagne and brown sugar do its magic. He was nervous, going over in his head what he was going to say to Dorian, not wanting to sound desperate, but not wanting to lose his chance.

His seat was tucked away in the corner, so he could see who was coming and going and every time the door opened his heart jumped into his throat only to crash again when it wasn't Dorian. At this rate, he'd give himself indigestion before he had the chance to eat.

There was a couple seated at the bar, she was beautiful and he was handsome, they were holding hands and Alex had never felt so jealous of someone he knew nothing about. Dorian wasn't due for another fifteen minutes, and he should have texted him to check his eta. Maybe he changed his mind

and had stayed at the hall, or was heading off somewhere else in London.

This time when the door opened it was him. Alex stared hopelessly at Dorian, who was amazing in his made-to-measure suit. He would never look that good, would never be attractive enough to be Dorian's plus one on a red carpet. Alex knew that he needed to make as many memories as he could tonight, as there wasn't going to be a them tomorrow.

Dorian's smile lit up his face as he spotted Alex, and for one night Alex would make believe Dorian was his.

"I'm glad to see you—I thought you might have changed your mind," Dorian said, sitting next to him.

"Me? Why would I stand you up?"

"Are you saying you haven't been hiding from me for the last couple of days?"

They were interrupted by a waiter. Dorian ordered a Kir Royale and Alex decided to join him. "For the record, I wasn't exactly hiding. I just had a lot to do, and I strategically did so in areas where you wouldn't have expected me to be."

"Sounds like hiding to me."

Their drinks came, which was a relief and he hoped Dorian wouldn't press him further. "I'm not the one who went out mid-week on a date."

Dorian reached out and took his hand, he wasn't expecting it. "I'm sorry about that. I should have at least put it off for a while. I did text you to say it was shit though. Jez is a bit of a wanker."

"Well, he is in show business, so what did you expect?"

Dorian nudged him with his shoulder. "I deserved that. But I didn't expect him to be such a cockwomble."

He didn't want to talk about Dorian's shit date, instead he wanted to bask in the happiness the bubbles of his champagne could give and get what he wanted to say out of the way. "Actually, Dorian, I was hoping to have a word before we start this evening in earnest."

Dorian was clearly pensive. “Is everything all right?”

He kept his voice low, but they weren't near anyone and he didn't think Dorian had been recognised yet. “Tonight's our last date, and I would like to just have one date with you where I can pretend it's real. Not an arrangement, not fake, just two people having dinner on a date...” He paused and took a breath. It was now or never. “Can I kiss you, properly?”

Dorian blinked. Alex thought he might get up and leave but then Dorian was leaning in and cupping his cheek. “I'd like nothing more.”

The kiss was soft, all gentle lips and perfect. Alex never wanted it to end. But Dorian pulled away, his thumb stroking his lower lip. “I knew you'd be a good kisser. And we'll have several more of those over the evening.”

“I'm game if you are.”

Dorian shuffled closer, and Alex sat right against him. They'd sat like this before but he'd never felt as if he had the permission to enjoy it. If he had his way he would not let the evening end after dinner—he wanted to have the full Forbes experience, even if it was for only one night. Still pressed against Dorian, he sipped his drink.

“I can't say I'm unhappy with how your date with Jez turned out,” Alex admitted. “You might have had to behave yourself.”

“Are you saying I don't?”

Alex stared into Dorian's eyes. “Not if you don't want to.”

Dorian kissed him again. He was nowhere near as gentle, his arm snaking around Alex's waist and holding him possessively. Alex loved it, loved the feeling of being held so close to show he was Dorian's and no one else need even glance in his direction.

They broke apart. Alex aware they were in public and no matter how hard his cock was, they were going to have to get through dinner. “We should claim our table.”

“I’m going to need a minute, otherwise it’s going to be fucking obvious that the only thing I want to claim is you.”

Alex reached under the table and pressed his hand to Dorian’s crotch, the bulge made his mind spin about how Dorian would feel inside him. “If you are a very good boy, I might let you.”

Dorian let out a low growl and Alex smirked. He slid out from where they’d been sitting, needing a discreet wriggle to make himself comfortable as he stood.

He held out his hand. “Come on, darling.”

Dorian stood, winced, and pulled down on the front of his jacket. He took Alex’s hand. “This meal better be worth the torture.”

A waiter intercepted them and they were guided up a narrow flight of stairs to the first floor which had been turned into a restaurant with tables down one side facing an open kitchen where a team of young men were conducting a culinary dance preparing food.

They were given a corner table, Alex having requested one if available. Dropping Dorian’s name when making the booking which seemed to work, because he’d been recognised. The waiter presented them with menus, although there wasn’t an option as it was a tasting menu and the choice was with or without matching wine. Alex saw Dorian’s eyebrows rise.

“Alex, sweetheart, there are eight courses.”

“But they’ll only be small.” He bit his lip. “You will indulge me, won’t you.”

“Why do I think there is only one answer to that?”

Alex smiled and refused to look at him. “Because you are brighter than you look.” Dorian pinched him. The fucker. “Oi. That is not you being a good boy.”

Dorian leant in and whispered in his ear. “You have no idea how good I can be, but I would love to show you.”

Alex cleared his throat and fixed Dorian with his best stare. “Later.”

He loved the attention. In their earlier dates, Dorian had been great company but not like this, not with a hand on his thigh and a seductive grin.

The first course was three tiny tarts which were to be eaten with their fingers and Alex didn't have to fake the moan, they tasted amazing. Maybe he didn't have to suck his fingers quite so slowly afterwards but it was fun to torment Dorian.

“Tell me, just how awful was Jez?”

“There was nothing right about him. He wasn't blond or beautiful.” Dorian stroked his cheek. “His eyes weren't the sort of blue you could drown in.”

“Too old for you, I reckon.”

“Younger men are far better.” Dorian was a wonderful flirt. “Not to mention he was self-obsessed with the personality of a dried cum stain.”

“What a catch.”

“I get the feeling I might have caught something from him. If I'd been stupid enough to sleep with him, but I dodged that bullet.”

It dawned on him that Dorian would have slept with a lot more people than him, he could count all his sexual partners on one hand. An edge of uncertainty began to creep in, he wasn't a bad fuck, he was sure of it, but no doubt he'd be mediocre compared to some of the guys Dorian had been with.

“Alex, is something wrong?”

He must have been quieter than he'd thought. “No, just lost in a moment.”

“I shouldn't have mentioned sleeping with someone else, I broke the mood. I'm sorry.” He picked Alex's hand and kissed his knuckles. “Forgive me?”

“There's nothing to forgive. I was being silly.”

“Please tell me what's bothering you.”

Annoyingly, there was no waiter arriving to rescue him from his embarrassment. He dropped his voice. “You've had a

lot more partners than me. From what you said you've probably slept with more men this year than I have in total."

"I've been tested if that's your worry. And I'm not going to pressure you into anything."

"It's not that." He now felt like he was being ridiculous. "If something were to happen later, I don't want to be someone you'd forget in a hurry. Or remember me for the wrong reasons."

"Given how hard you made me from a kiss, I can't imagine that you're anything but dynamite between the sheets."

"I might get a bit bossy," he admitted with a wince. One ex had found it a turn-off, but he couldn't help it. Repressing his nature only made him worse.

"Oh, I fucking hope so." Dorian glanced around and whispered. "Are you a bossy bottom? I'd be lying if I said I haven't wanked off thinking about you like that."

"Yes, pretty much," Alex said with a squeak, a noise that surprised even him.

"You really are perfect." Dorian pressed a kiss to the shell of his ear. "Only seven courses to go."

The next course was something fishy but Dorian's hand encroached up his thigh during the explanation of the dish and how the wine would pair with it, so he had no clue what was said. It tasted divine and the noises Dorian made were encouraging for post dinner activities.

He needed to rebalance and take back control, try to get through a few courses with less innuendo. "What's been your favourite date of ours?" he asked.

"Excluding this, then the weekend in Norfolk. You loved being by the sea so much it was a joy to share that with you."

"That strawberry ice cream we had was the best—I'll never forget it."

"Your favourite memory of the weekend is the ice cream?" Dorian laughed. "I've the picture your mum drew of us still. I

might get it framed, and it'll go in pride of place.”

Alex would love that, but it was a fantasy too far to believe, even with the date going so well he couldn't risk the notion this could lead to anything permanent. After tonight he'd be back to being Alex the secretary, not DDB or the Boi Toi—which was another fan favourite and he'd been assured it was a positive mantle even though Alex thought it made him sound like a whoreish Ken doll.

“My mum keeps asking after you. You made the right impression by giving them biscuits.”

“I can't imagine how badly behaved your other boyfriends were if that's the standard I had to reach.”

He sipped the incredible white wine that had been poured to go with the next dish. “Apart from Yves, you're the only one who's met them.”

“Then I'm highly honoured.”

The courses kept coming, and between dishes Dorian was attentive and generous with his kisses and Alex couldn't tell if it was the wine or his hormones that were making him giddy. All he knew was he didn't want it to stop. Dorian's hands on his thigh or waist felt as if they belonged and he wanted to know how they'd feel on his skin.

“Just pudding to go,” Alex said. “Is there somewhere you want to go afterwards? I'll need to text the driver.”

“As if we're going anywhere but the apartment. And when we get there I'm going to peel you out of your suit and feast in a whole other way.”

Alex was rarely speechless but Dorian had him so turned on that his words did not want to cooperate. It took several moments before he could answer. “You better live up to your own hype.”

“Oh, I will.”

Despite wanting to devour his strawberry creation in two large mouthfuls and get out of the restaurant as soon as possible, Alex took his time, taking small bites and licking the

remaining cream off his spoon. Dorian whimpered and Alex asked for the bill, which the eagle-eyed waiter knew would be needed straightaway.

“Car’s outside,” he said as Dorian finished paying. “Are you sure you don’t want a drink somewhere else?”

“Don’t push me, Alex, or I will throw you over my shoulder and carry you to the car fireman style.”

Alex laughed. “As tempting as that sounds, let’s not break the internet this evening.”

The car pulled away and Dorian grabbed him. “How long’s this ride.”

“Should be less than ten minutes at this time.”

Dorian kissed him, deep, messy and demanding. His hands found their way under Alex’s jacket and tugged at his shirt but Alex was not going to let Dorian have everything his own way. He pushed him back and waggled his finger. “No skin until we’re behind closed doors.”

“Are you trying to fucking kill me?”

He slid his hand up Dorian’s thigh. “No, but you must know that good things come to those that wait.”

Even at this time of night London was not free of traffic and Dorian was growing more impatient by the minute. Alex enjoyed watching him squirm. They reached the apartment in Westminster and Dorian dragged him into the communal lobby and into the lift, pressing him against the mirrored walls as they ascended to the penthouse. “Can you feel how hard I am?”

There was no mistaking Dorian’s erection. “I’m sure that will be magnificent rammed deep inside of me.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly.”

The doors to the lift opened and Dorian grabbed his hand and yanked him into the corridor. With the keys in his other

hand, he somehow managed to open the apartment door without letting go.

Once inside Dorian picked him up and flung him over his shoulder as if he weighed nothing. Alex yelped in surprise. “Put me down.”

“Once we’re inside the bedroom I will.”

He tried to struggle but his heart wasn’t in it and Dorian was racing through the apartment. He’d not been in Dorian’s bedroom before and just had a moment to realise it was a bigger version of the one he’d stayed in last time and he was thrown, with great care, onto an enormous bed.

“Get your kit off,” Dorian ordered, unfastening his jacket.

Alex propped himself on his elbows. “I think you’re labouring under the false impression that you’re in charge here.”

He’d always loved being fucked, but he also loved calling the shots and he hoped he hadn’t misread some of the signals he’d spotted from Dorian that he wasn’t averse to following orders. Dorian was the very essence of alpha male, and if he’d got this wrong, then Dorian might not be happy.

“Is that right?” Dorian licked his lips. “Does that mean I should do as I’m told?”

If he was only going to get one chance then he might as well have the full five-star fantasy. “I want you to fuck me but, as I said earlier, you need to be good and that means following orders.”

Dorian smirked—fuck he was a sexy bastard. “I take directions for a living, I’m pretty sure I will meet even your exacting standards.”

His cock throbbed at the words. “Strip off, don’t rush but no need to dawdle. I want to see just how much is real compared to the camera.”

Dorian shrugged off his jacket and laid it over the arm of a chair, his shoes were next, followed by his socks. Alex had

never had a thing for feet but it appeared everything about Dorian was first-rate.

“I must say you are doing well. Cufflinks and shirt next.”

He did have a thing for well-muscled arms and that had been a huge part of his distraction seeing Dorian in the gym, but him peeling away his white shirt to give Alex the perfect view of him stripped to the waist made his mouth go dry. “Trousers, but leave your boxers on.”

“I’m not wearing any.”

“What?”

“I didn’t want to ruin the line of these trousers.” He grinned and Alex thought he was no longer the cat in this game but a poor mouse than might be swallowed whole if he was lucky.

Dorian turned and Alex was about to protest that he had not given him permission to do so when Dorian dropped his trousers to reveal his most magnificent arse. Alex could write poetry about it, if he had any talent for it, which he didn’t. It was so toned and beautifully round he would love to sink his teeth into the fleshy mounds. Then the bastard kicked away his trousers and spun around. His cock stood proud from a thatch of curly dark hair.

“The camera is not doing you justice.” Alex couldn’t stop himself from staring. “But it does seem that if you are to excel at your duties, your next job will be to help me out of my clothes.”

Alex still had his shoes on, and he pointed a foot at Dorian. “You can work your way up.”

He suspected Dorian had only so much patience and Alex was proved right as his shoes and socks were yanked off without ceremony. Dorian crawled over so he was kneeling over him. “I am going to fuck you until you forget how to be bossy.”

“You can try.”

Dorian kissed him but it wasn't enough, he needed to be naked, to feel skin against skin. "Back up—we need to get my clothes off."

Dorian moved away enough that Alex could sit up. Dorian helped him with his suit jacket. The shirt followed and Alex wasn't sure where one of his cufflinks ended up but that was a problem for a later time.

"Undo my trousers."

"Yes, sir."

Dorian unfastened the button and unzipped his fly, pressing a kiss under his belly button. Alex didn't need to be told to lift his hips, and Dorian peeled away both his trousers and underwear together.

"Do you think you could put your mouth to better work?" Alex said.

"Absolutely, but you won't be coming until I'm buried inside you."

"Is that right?"

"Trust me, I'll look after you." Dorian leant over and kissed him, the press of his naked body made Alex want to beg for more.

He caught Dorian's lip between his teeth for a moment before he let him go. "Get your fingers covered in slick, get them in my arse and your mouth on my cock."

Dorian's heated expression made Alex feel bold and sexy. He was overjoyed he could press Dorian's buttons in all the right way. From the bedside table Dorian grabbed a tube and then sat back, making a great show of covering his fingers with lube. Alex kicked him as he wriggled into position to present his arse for the taking.

He had always loved having his cock sucked and Dorian was fucking glorious at it. There was something to be said for having a partner who knew what they were doing, and as Dorian began to work him open he almost forgot to issue more orders.

Alex slid his fingers into Dorian's hair and gave a firm tug, he needed to move this on before he came in Dorian's mouth. "Enough. You need to get your cock inside me."

Dorian pulled back with one final long lick of Alex's shaft. "You're glorious."

"Less chatter."

Dorian grabbed a condom and rolled it into place. For a moment Alex thought he might flip onto his belly, but if this was his only chance with Dorian then he wanted to fuck face-to-face. He let Dorian position him how he wanted, his leg splayed and wanton. He closed his eyes as Dorian sank inside, giving Alex the time he needed to adjust. Dorian was not a small man, and he had to take several deep breaths as he breathed through the stretch.

"All right?" Dorian asked as he bottomed out.

"Yes, just give me a second."

Dorian wrapped his hand around Alex's cock, his leisurely strokes a wonderful distraction. But he needed more, needed Dorian to take him, finish this and send him to the stars. "Time to prove you're as good as you say, Mr Forbes."

Alex let himself get lost in the rhythm, Dorian's thrusts perfect in every way. He knew how to bring Alex pleasure, seemed to find the best angle and depth to tease out Alex's orgasm. The tingle in his balls grew and grew, and Alex came with a cry, his mind ablaze and his body singing. Dorian sped up, claiming his own release, and his loud shout accompanied his climax, while he was still buried deep in Alex.

For a while the world just seemed to stop, and then Dorian withdrew. He pressed his lips to Alex's. "I'll be right back with a cloth."

"Uh-huh." Not his greatest comeback.

Dorian returned and cleaned him up before lobbing the cloth in the general direction of a laundry hamper, and then lay down.

Alex snuggled closer and decided to do his impression of a limpet while he could. Dorian's arms around him made him feel safe, and he could pretend to be loved and wanted. "Are you okay?" Dorian asked.

"Yeah, comfy." He nuzzled into Dorian's side, loving the smell of his cologne mingling with the aftermath of sex. "You're a great pillow."

"Life goals met."

He sniggered. "Yeah, mine too. Never thought I'd see the day I got to cuddle with a Hollywood heartthrob."

Dorian carded his fingers through his hair. "And I never realised quite how much I like being told what to do—if it's by the right person."

Alex hoped Dorian would find the right person for him, he was a decent guy, and a great lover. He wanted Dorian to be happy, to have someone who could be his everything, and one day Alex would love to have the same for himself. The fantasy would fade in the morning, Dorian would go off and find another beautiful man to stand by his side. He'd made no noises of repeating what they'd done, and Alex wasn't one to torture himself. First thing tomorrow, he'd find his cufflinks, get dressed and do the walk of shame.

CHAPTER 38



Dorian curled around the warm body in his bed. It had been a rare event in the last year or so to wake up next to somebody. He'd burnt through anonymous fucks for several months after Robin had left and even when he'd slowed down and become more selective, the liaison never lasting more than an hour or so.

He nuzzled Alex's soft hair. He felt so good in his arms. Holding someone he cared about, someone he wanted to make happy, was a pleasure he had forgotten was so wonderful.

Alex muttered something in his sleep and wriggled backwards. Dorian closed his arms tighter around Alex's middle, Alex fitted perfectly against him. His little spoon. Even Robin hadn't felt this right, a bit too tall, and was broader than Alex, it was as if Alex was meant to have come into his life and stay there.

More signs of waking came from his bed partner and Alex stretched his body and legs, like his mum's cat. He turned around and his eyes fluttered open. The sleepy smile and blue eyes made Dorian want to shout from the rooftops that Alex was his.

Alex blinked a few times and his smile faltered. He reached up and stroked Dorian's cheek. "Good morning."

"Morning, to you too."

"I should probably go, right? The clock's struck twelve and I'm going to miss my pumpkin."

Dorian didn't want Alex going anywhere. "There's no need to be rushing back."

"I think it better I do. Last night was everything I wanted, but it's morning now and the world keeps turning, and I've had my time with you."

Alex began to pull away, but Dorian wasn't going to let him leave. "No, you don't have to go."

"Dorian, if I stay it'll be a mess—I'll be a mess. Having to watch you go off and find happiness with someone else. I'm not a masochist, I need to stop this before it hurts so badly I'll never recover from it."

Alex couldn't really think Dorian wanted someone else? But Dorian knew he'd not been clear, not told Alex that what he'd asked of him was so easy to give because it was what he had wanted himself.

Somehow, Alex was now sitting up and moving to get out of bed. Dorian needed to stop him. He grabbed him and hauled them both backwards, before scrabbling to kneel over him. "No, you're not going. I don't want you to. This isn't one-way, Alex."

"Don't play with me!" Alex tried to push him off.

"I'm not playing. I've been trying to fight the attraction for weeks, longer even."

Alex stared up at him incredulously. "You can't possibly ___"

Dorian kissed him. He didn't want to hear reasons why he wouldn't want Alex. He reckoned he could guess them all. Instead, he poured everything he had into the kiss. Alex moaned and Dorian rolled them onto their sides, pulling Alex flush against him.

"Before you get any daft notions, I don't care what it is you're not, only what you are. Which is why you are my wonderful bossy blond. I need someone who won't put up with my bullshit all of the time, but will indulge me to a certain extent. I need someone who doesn't care about red carpets and premieres but will go to them if I ask and only

moan a little bit because he'll know we'll sequester ourselves away to make up for it." He pressed kisses to Alex's eyelids. "Someone who'll shackle himself to an asshole because he loves his parents, someone who'll give a damn about Dorian Forbes not Dorian Marsten."

"Oh."

"*Oh?* I empty my soul and I get an *oh?*"

Alex pushed him back and lay on top of him. "You're still an asshole, but you're *my* asshole."

"That I am."

"Then you need to fuck me again, just to make sure that last night wasn't a fluke and you're a good enough shag that I want to be shackled to you for even longer... and without being paid."

"Cheeky fucker."

Alex let out a mock sigh. "Looks like I have to do everything myself."

He sat up and scooted backwards, rocking against Dorian's cock, which had been at full mast for a while and was very interested in Alex's intentions.

"I am a spoilt movie star. Maybe I should lie back and let you get on with it."

Alex grabbed the lube and a condom. "I'll ride, but I'm not doing all the work. You can at least make sure I'm good and slick."

"Jesus, Alex, you're so fucking hot."

Alex grinned and got off him, positioning himself on all fours with his arse presented to Dorian. He was a glorious sight and Dorian didn't hesitate to sit behind. He placed a hand on his lower back, making long strokes over his arse and skirting between Alex's buttocks.

"No need to tease, I need your fingers in me so I can spear myself on your cock," he demanded.

He'd slept with a fair collection of men, and a couple of women when he was younger and he'd never had someone be so forthright. Robin hadn't been reluctant to express his wishes but Alex's tone and turn of phrase pierced him to the core and he wanted to please him. Dorian wanted to ensure his performance was worthy of his firecracker and he was going to make him moan in pleasure as often as Alex let him.

Alex wagged his arse at him and Dorian got the message. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

"Only once you're in me, or you'll be in big trouble."

He bit his tongue to keep in his snarky retort and coated his fingers with lube. He teased Alex's entrance.

"For fuck's sake, Dorian, get them in me. If I'm not on your cock soon I'm going to beat myself off and go home."

There was no real threat behind his words but Dorian gave Alex what he was waiting for, pushing his fingers deep inside. Alex sat back and let out the most debauched of noises and Dorian thought he could have had a brilliant career in porn, but no one else would get to touch him. Alex was his now.

He added another finger, Alex was panting and rocking back and forth. "Enough. I need more," Alex demanded.

Dorian moved away and lay down, snatching up the condom and making sure he had it in place as quickly as possible so Alex would have no reason for complaints. Alex was lithe and long-limbed, and Dorian didn't want to change a thing.

"Ready when you are," Dorian said, grabbing the base of his cock for it to be in the best position for Alex.

"I knew you could do as you were told with the right persuasion."

Dorian watched in awe as Alex sat astride him and lowered himself down. His cock engulfed in Alex's tight heat made his head spin, it took every fibre of his being not to buck upwards. Alex was in charge and Dorian was loving it.

He would never cast doubt on Alex's stamina or flexibility, his grace and beauty mouth-watering. Dorian knew he was blessed with such a show and when Alex sped up it was accompanied by a series of breathy moans.

"Get your hand on my cock," Alex ordered. "I'm close."

He pumped Alex's cock in rhythm with his hips, his own body singing with exhilaration. Alex came with a shout, and Dorian let himself follow, emptying into Alex, the rush of adrenaline blinding as if fireworks had gone off behind his eyes.

Alex collapsed beside him and Dorian dealt with the condom. He pulled Alex into his arms.

"Sorry, I get a bit bossy," Alex said snuggling closer.

"No complaints from my side. I think I've found a new favourite kink... being ordered around by Alex Reynolds."

"That's rather specialised."

Dorian kissed him. "Exclusive, I'd say. And I wouldn't want anyone else getting the opportunity to discover the joys."

"Is that a fact?" Alex smiled. "Better behave yourself then."

"Great sex aside. I meant what I said. We could be brilliant together. We'd need to talk through how protective we want to be of our relationship, I don't want the world to know our business."

"You kind of bugged that up by coming out in a chaotic gay flounce."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

Alex snuggled closer. "Yes, and you won't be doing anything like that again. Now you've got an agent, you should get your coms team and business manager in place, but I'll be keeping an eye out. Not full-time, I have an earl to wrangle."

"I was thinking of stealing you away from Ben..."

"No chance. I'm not working for you. I'm his secretary, you can have all the other bits."

It was probably for the best, he'd hire a PA at some point. It had worked with Robin because it had to but with Alex they would never have to hide. People already knew he existed, and his fans seemed as smitten with him as he was, especially after the ice cream pictures.

"I guess Ben does need you too."

"Oh, yeah, he still hasn't been able to wriggle out of the bachelor auction... he's in a bit of a pickle because although he says Ashley's okay with it, I'm not sure he's happy about someone going on a date with his husband even if it is for charity."

A horrible thought crossed his mind. "Please don't make me do it instead."

Alex scoffed. "No chance. You're mine now, no one else's sticky paws will be allowed close unless it's for work and even then I'm not going to be able to watch it."

That would be a conversation for another day, as he was likely to have a few leading ladies and maybe even a couple of leading men in his career. For now he was going to find all the ways to enjoy being with Alex in private as well as the odd public appearance.

"Fancy a shower?" he asked.

"Reckon you can hold me up? Be an interesting alternative to your usual weight training routine."

Dorian kissed him. "I love the way your mind works."

He hadn't felt this happy in years. The world could get to know the real Dorian Forbes and he would get to explore it with Alex by his side. He still had a lot to sort out, his career, and somewhere long-term to live once he left Crofton Hall but he had no plans to do that for a while unless Ben kicked him out. For now, it could all wait as Alex was heading towards the shower and he was already giving Dorian a look that made him want to do exactly what he was told.

CHAPTER 39



*B*en tugged on his collar and wished this wasn't a black-tie event. No, what he wished was that he hadn't agreed to take part in a bachelor auction and he wasn't about to be put in front of an audience of feisty men and women. Mainly women if he were honest, who had been plied with enough champagne to forget their maximum budgets. He'd been herded into a reception room with his fellow bachelors and bachelorettes, where he'd engaged in polite conversation which centred on them all believing they had made a terrible mistake. One by one his fellow inmates were taken away to meet their fate and there were only a handful of them left.

He was surprised to see Alex, dressed in a dinner jacket and bow tie, enter the room. "Alex?"

"Good evening, my lord. I thought I'd check in and see that everything was going to plan."

"Not my plan, maybe Mel's."

"There's been a lot of money raised so far, and the secret ballot system is causing a great deal of excitement."

"*Secret ballot?*" He didn't think he'd been told about that.

"Yes, remember, it was explained that the bidders would use code names and bid via an app they downloaded onto their phones."

He recalled something but he'd still thought there'd be people holding up numbers and he'd be able to get a first look at who he would have to fend off at a future evening.

“Dear God help me.”

“I don’t think you’ll need to worry.” Alex had a very reassuring demeanour about him, and despite his original misgivings, it seemed Alex and Dorian were a lot more suited than he’d given them credit for. Dorian was like a little ray of sunshine at the moment, and had continued to be for the last couple of weeks since him and Alex had come to a proper understanding.

“I’m not convinced. But I still don’t know what you are doing here. You didn’t have to come to help.”

Alex smiled. “I’m here as Dorian’s plus one. He bought a table.”

“What?”

“Yes, Robin and Simon are here as well. With Ashley—they bought six seats for the evening.”

“But there’s only five of them.”

“It’s a spare seat... Ashley said he fancied bidding on the fireman.” Alex checked his watch. “I better get back. Dorian was ordering more champagne and I’m not sure that was a particularly wise decision.”

Before Ben could argue, Alex was gone and he was now faced with the horror of having his husband trying to bag a fireman while surrounded by his friends no doubt egging him on and even bankrolling the endeavour. He was going to kill Dorian, and Robin, and not even Simon could save them from a slow and painful death.

“Lord Crofton, we’re ready for you.”

The ever dependable Mr Hill was ensuring the chattel were in place. Ben wished he’d taken the opportunity to down a large brandy but that sweet respite was lost to him now. “Best get this over with.”

When he’d been younger he had loved the premise, and had taken part in an auction and had been fought over by a load of horny strangers—he’d included more than just dinner as part of the prize. But that was a lifetime ago, and all he

wanted was to be back at the hall singing nursery rhymes and letting Davy fall asleep in his arms. Fucking hell, life had changed and he could only say it was for the better.

Ben drew himself to his full height and prepared himself for battle, in a way he imagined his great-great grandfather had done during the war when he had to face Churchill after a mission had gone south. There was a minor local celebrity acting as compere, who no doubt had his ego deflated once word got around that Dorian was in the building, and he was starting with his patter.

“Now ladies and gentlemen, one of our prime lots,” began Terence, who Ben thought was a local newscaster. “Benjamin Redbourn is the 16th Earl of Crofton, a patron to many local charities and friend to countless worthy organisations. He has spoken at length about being openly bisexual, so there’s no reason for any of you not to place a bid.”

That was his cue and he walked out onto the stage to loud applause and several catcalls.

“We’ve already surpassed our minimum bid of a thousand pounds for his lordship, so let’s see where we can go from here...”

Ben slapped on his trademark charming smile—he’d not been instructed to speak but to stand there and look pretty, and that was what he would do. The great hall of the manor had been set out with tables and he scanned the room to see where his rat of a husband was with his traitorous friends. Ashley was laughing, Simon leaning in and whispering in his ear and Robin and Dorian were waving their champagne glasses in his direction. At least there was no sign of the fucking fireman so he hoped Ashley had been unsuccessful. He recognised several other faces in the room, some of them were friends he’d known biblically for a night and many others were people he knew from estate business, including the mayor who appeared delighted. Maybe he was lucky and she was bidding, because they could have a nice chat about local primary schools over dinner.

Ben's ego didn't need any encouragement most days, but he couldn't help being smug when the bids hit ten grand and there seemed to be a battle between two fervent supporters, which was getting Terence super excited. To many of the people in the room ten grand was small change but it would be huge for the charity and he had already decided to match the winning bid with a personal donation.

"Bloody hell!" cried Terence. "It appears someone really wants to get their sticky paws on Ben—the bid has jumped to fifty grand!"

He'd been hoping that Ashley might have been one of the bidders, but there was no way he would have considered Ben worth that much, no matter the charity. But the mega bid did seem to seal the deal.

"Final call, ladies and gentlemen. Three, two, one... and sold. For the price of fifty thousand pounds to Robin MacLove."

He didn't know what was more shocking, Robin using Simon's last name or the amount he'd bid. Bastard. But at least Ashley would be happy.

Mel came over to greet him as he jogged down the stairs from the stage, she'd been delivering the goods to their temporary owners. "I knew you'd be smashing, darling. I can't believe how brilliant the outcome is."

"Given the name of the winning bid, I might make him chip in a little more. He didn't tell me he'd be here."

"Can't say I know the name."

"Come now, Mel. Who's the Robin in the room who can drop fifty grand without a thought?"

"But he's a Flint not a MacLove." She glanced at the table number. "But you're right it is that table."

"MacLove is his partner's name."

"Ooooh. Does that mean they've bought you together for a bit of fun?"

He thought he did well not to call her a rude name. “Unlikely, especially with my husband at the table, and Simon being one of Ashley’s good friends.”

“Silly me. Well, since you know who’s who I’ll let you toddle off to your new owner. I think Miss Tinker has had a few too many glasses of champagne and might need reminding that there are boundaries to be observed.”

Ben sauntered over to the table to the hoots and wolf whistles of his so-called friends. Robin pushed away from the table and patted his lap. “Over here, cupcake. Let’s have a proper look at my winnings.”

Simon whacked him one. “Remember I told you to behave or I’d cut off the booze? Well, this is your second warning.”

“Hey, he’s cost me fifty big ones, I should get a little fondle.”

“According to the stories, you’ve had more than a fondle in the past so quit it.” Simon was joking but there was only so far either him or Robin would joke over this one. “Besides, you said he was a present for Ashley for looking after me so well, and it’s rude to play with other people’s gifts.”

Ben should have realised Simon was the mastermind behind all this. He would have known Ashley wasn’t so happy with Ben taking part but felt he couldn’t object after their fight.

Ashley smirked. “Over here, honey. I want to inspect the goods.”

He took the spare seat at the table. “There are strict rules, Mr Redbourn. You should have read the small print.”

Dorian slid him a glass of champagne. “Get that down you, looks like you need it.”

“Besides, I didn’t buy Ben for Ashley as a thanks for looking after you,” Robin said smiling at Simon. “I recall it was more like a dowry.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “It was most certainly not.”

The use of Simon's surname in the bid suddenly became more significant although there would be no chance in hell Robin would change his name from Flint. "Hang on," Ben said. "Have you something to share with the rest of the class?"

Robin reached over and took Simon's hand. "After our families, you lot are the first to know. I asked Simon to marry me and the daft fucker said yes."

"I have no idea what I was thinking. It must be the influence of the meds."

"Simon, that's no way for a future Flint to talk."

Simon snorted. "I'm not changing my name any more than you are. Knob."

The way Robin smiled made Ben think that Robin had not given up on that conversation yet.

"Congratulations, are you planning on a long engagement?" Alex asked.

Dorian laughed. "I fucking doubt it."

"Piss off, Forbes," Robin shot back. "Not too lengthy. We were thinking by the end of the year."

"Oh, I thought..." Alex stopped himself. "Never mind."

"No, no, Alex. What were you going to say?" Robin asked.

"Well, it's a famous story that your parents met and married within a couple of months, I sort of assumed once you were engaged it would be the same."

Simon's eyes narrowed. "Christmas is quite soon enough."

"He has got a point, Simon. My father did make a comment that the sooner the better as far as he was concerned, and if we manage it before the end of October you'll still either be on medical leave or lighter hours so it would be easier to organise."

Ben held his breath, he wasn't sure how Simon would take this. Ashley had said Simon had been worried about Robin's commitment to their relationship but had also been on the

overbearing side and he didn't know where this particular nugget would land.

“We can talk about it later.”

Ben smirked into his glass of champagne, better make sure he kept his calendar clear for October because there was going to be a wedding. “I take it you'll get married at Fairbanks?”

Simon rolled his eyes. “As if anywhere else could compete with the Flint ancestral home. At least it'll keep the numbers down.”

“For the ceremony and wedding breakfast, yes. But there'll be an additional event to celebrate with a wider audience.”

By the expression on Simon's face this was news to him. “What?”

Ashley laughed. “You're marrying into the Flints. I mean Ben showed off as much as he could for our wedding, but compared to what the billionaire Claude Flint will do for his son and heir it'll be nothing.”

“I think I've changed my mind. Or we can elope.”

Robin kissed his hands. “No, darling. I need to completely obliterate all memories of your previous marriage, and so we're going to start as I mean to go on.”

Dorian leant over to Alex. “I had a lucky escape.”

“I heard that!” called Robin. “I won't say the best thing I ever did was leaving you, but it's up there in the top five.”

Dorian winked at Alex and then smiled at Robin. “You know what, I agree with you. I might not have a year ago, but you did us both a favour and I don't think I've ever thanked you for it.”

“I daresay you'll get an invitation to the wedding.”

Ben was struck by the lack of malice on both sides, as if they'd reached the mythological stage of friends after a relationship.

Simon laughed then winced and he saw the brief look of panic on Robin's face. Simon shook his head. “Before you

even open your mouth, I'm fine. This is my first night out in forever and I'm good. Honestly."

"I worry."

"I'd noticed."

Ben watched as Ashley got out of his seat and came around to his side of the table. He placed his hand on Ben's shoulder and leant in close. "I thought I'd mention we have a babysitter for the night and Alex booked us a room at a nearby hotel."

"You should take the opportunity to inspect your recent gift."

Ashley kissed him. "I've ordered a taxi. We're out of here."

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Not since this morning, but you can make it up to me."

Ben let Ashley pull him to his feet and to the background of cat calls they left. A night for just the two of them wasn't to be sniffed at, but he'd be equally glad to be with Davy in the morning at Crofton Hall. Back home. A place where he had his family both blood and found, and he'd never been happier and life couldn't get better.

CHAPTER 40



The private investigator had gathered enough evidence to satisfy Dorian that it was Zak behind the leaking of the information around Dorian's previous involvement with Robin. Marisa was off the hook, and of the two she'd never been the main instigator of Dorian staying in the closet so he'd decided he'd concentrate his efforts on Zak.

The party was in full swing, and he had forgotten how much of these events involved nodding, smiling and not pissing someone off, but since Gail had thought to invite him to her thirtieth party bash along with half of Hollywood it seemed a perfect opportunity to visit Los Angeles and let Zak know the whole world of shit he was in.

"Dorian, it is simply marvellous that you're here!"

Dorian tightened his grip on Alex's waist. He plastered on his fakest, widest smile as he couldn't for the life of him remember the name of the woman who had greeted him. "Darling, it's been forever."

"Who's fault is that? You scurry off to England, find yourself a delicious young man." She looked Alex up and down. "And go into hiding in a stately home."

He spotted Zak talking to a studio exec, slickly styled as usual, and carrying the silver fox vibe to perfection. Zak had always been a bit of an arrogant bastard, and Dorian didn't think he'd realised Dorian was here. "Needs must. But you have to forgive me but I need to speak to Gail, wish her a happy birthday."

Without waiting for an answer he guided Alex away.

He was doing his best not to yawn. “Sorry, jet lag is still kicking my arse.”

“After tonight we can do anything you like. Enjoy your holiday.”

Alex smiled. “You know I’m happy to be here. I quite like getting the WTF gazes of some folks when they realise I’m DDB.”

The last couple of months had been wonderful and after he’d got this evening out of the way he had a decadent holiday planned to spoil Alex rotten around closing up some of his US-based loose ends.

“I think my fans are beginning to love you more than me.”

“I doubt that. But you know it’s only your love I care about.”

“Good job I adore you then.” Dorian pressed a brief kiss to his lips. “I’m going to round up our friend and deal with the trash, and then I’m all yours.”

“I will top up my glass. I’m sure you won’t be long.”

He saw his opportunity as Zak was now on his own—it wouldn’t be for long. Zak spotted him as he approached. “Dorian.”

“Do you have a minute?”

“I thought you said everything you had to say through your legal team.”

Dorian crossed his arms over his chest. “Two minutes in private and we’ll be done.”

Zak knocked back his drink. “All right. For old times’ sake.”

The party was in a club, Gail having hired the whole place for the evening. “There’s an office we can use.”

On paper his parting company with his US-based management team had been affable with no hint of animosity

on either side, but since his arrival in LA two days ago Dorian had answered anyone who'd asked with a wry smile and allusions to being better off out. He wasn't stupid enough to spread rumours himself.

"So you here to apologise for running off and dumping me?" Zak said, smirking as they entered the small office.

"You're fucking joking right? Not even you think you're the victim in this."

"Dorian, I know you think coming out and prancing about with your new boy toy will make you the darling of La La Land, but the reality is, you're finished for the big screen. And what you achieved is because I pushed you every step of the way."

"I don't deny you were instrumental in my career, and you made a lot of money from it too. But you also manipulated me for a long time, to make sure the cash cow kept delivering the goods."

Zak snorted. "Cry more. You were more than happy to go along with it and rake in the money too."

"You knew I wanted to come out and you should have supported it. But that's not what I give a shit about anymore. You're right that I could and should have been more of a master of my own destiny, but it's what you did after that's the nail in your fucking coffin."

"What exactly are you threatening me with?" He sneered and Dorian knew he had no other way to react.

"My relationship with Robin was firmly under wraps, until it wasn't. And I know it was you who spread it about."

"What does it matter? You're out, the truth's out... it's a non-issue."

"I'm pretty sure Simon MacLove didn't think being knifed in the stomach a non-issue. If you hadn't leaked that me and Robin were together then it wouldn't have happened."

Zak scowled. "Hardly my fault."

"Indirectly, you're to blame. And you'll pay for it."

“Fucking listen to yourself. You’re not important anymore—you never really were. The talent swans around thinking it’s irreplaceable but you can’t do shit to me.”

Dorian turned as the door was pushed open wider and Robin appeared. “But he can.”

Zak rolled his eyes. “Maybe one day, but Baby Flint hasn’t got any claws.”

“You’ve always been a massive asshole,” Robin said. He sauntered in and perched on the desk. “But reputation is everything, and I intend to ensure yours is going to be shit-smearred.”

“I should have gotten rid of you years ago, but Dorian stuck to his little friend. You spout your bullshit but what can you do?”

Robin laughed. “You’re labouring under the impression that it’s only me in the Flint family you need to worry about. My father adores Simon, some days more than me, and when I told him what you’d done he was... not pleased.”

Zak’s expression changed in an instant, shuttered and stern. “Claude Flint has better things to do than bother with the likes of me.”

Dorian could see Zak was worried, and so he should be. Robin’s father was beyond wealthy, and his influence snaked into every corner. Flint Industries covered many sectors and Claude could deliver favours to people not possible by anyone else. “Flints are loyal, and there is nothing more important than family. Unfortunately for you, your actions endangered Claude Flint’s future son-in-law.”

Robin didn’t need to elaborate further, Zak had got the message.

“Come on, Dorian,” Robin said, stood up straight and clapped him on the shoulder. “How about a few Slammer Royales for old time’s sake?”

They wandered back to the rest of the party, happy to leave Zak to wallow in his misery. Dorian didn’t feel sorry for him, Zak had made millions off him and his other clients, he wasn’t

going to end up on the street but at least he wouldn't get richer.

Robin stopped and Dorian realised he was watching Simon and Alex chatting. "You know, it should be odd, us double dating, but it doesn't feel it."

Dorian smiled. "I'd like to think we're friends now, and we've managed to get ourselves a couple of decent partners."

"Alex is perfect for you. He's got Ben in order which even Ashley didn't succeed with and he had other ways of making Ben do what he was told."

"Appears I like being bossed about by blonds."

Robin laughed. "That was never up for debate. But that particular blond does so with aplomb."

"Whereas you have finally met your match when it comes to stubbornness."

Robin stared back at Simon, and Dorian couldn't say he remembered Robin ever looking at him in such a way, as if the stars and heaven were nothing in comparison. "I would say it was an even heat. Although I have managed to have him agree that he'll step back from the police when we have children."

"*When*, not if?"

Robin smirked. "Oh, it's a definite when. I have to ensure the succession, and Simon is so ridiculously good with kids it would be a crime if he wasn't a father."

They'd never talked about children but then they'd never committed to a future. "I can't quite imagine you with a clutch of kids."

"Maybe that was our problem. But we were always heading on different trajectories and now we've found the right people to travel them with."

Robin would always be important to him, but he could accept that he was his past, whereas Alex was his future. They'd not been together long, but he was already thinking of all the things they might do and unlike with Robin there was no outside influence to steer them off-course. "Then we should

probably join them before they come to their senses and leave us.”

Alex beamed as Dorian stood beside him, and took his hand. “Is your unfinished business finished?” Alex asked.

“Yep. So now it’s time for more pleasant things like tequila and champagne.”

He pressed a kiss to Alex’s lips. Dorian couldn’t remember feeling so happy, or free. Alex stared up at him and Dorian fell in love a little bit more.

GLOSSARY

A Glossary of British Terms

Presented By

The Right Honourable. The 16th Earl of Crofton, Benjamin
Redbourn

Well, colour me surprised, our sixth instalment of British words. I'm a little discombobulated but very happy to help out again—I've had some lovely feedback so I'm going to keep going! We have another interesting selection, and I do fear my husband's delightful Essex twang is infiltrating my polished vowels alongside a great dollop of sleep deprivation. As with my previous endeavours, what follows is not what you'll find in the dear old *Oxford English Dictionary*, but they'll give the jolly old gist.

If you have other British words you'd like me to explain, just drop Ms Cohen a line, and she'll pass on the request, and I'll do my best to untangle the mysteries of the British tongue.

Faffing

Faffing is the great British art of prevaricating, messing about and not getting things done or getting to the point. It is one of my most honed skills, much to the despair of my husband, under butler, and secretary. But between the three of them, they manage to somehow keep me on track.

Trainers

I believe my American friends refer to this type of footwear as sneakers, the sort of springy-soled beasts used for

the gym—I certainly don't wear them with my suits! The thing is I've trained in my trainers but I've never sneaked in them so I'm a bit confused on the US etymology.

Boot

This is another word that divides us Brits from our American cousins, and this time it is not footwear-related. The boot of the car is the trunk, so named (according to my bit of Googling) after boot boxes on carriages. All I know is you need a boot big enough to throw in a couple of bags and a case of champagne in order to whisk your other half away for a sexy weekend.

Suss

I often say Ashley is ruining my vocabulary, and I will need to be careful with Davy, and suss is such a word (ho ho!). It's short for suspicious, so if something is a bit suss then it's not to be trusted. A bit like Ashley's choice of senior schools...

Brassic

Another word that wouldn't usually be in my repertoire... it means to be short of cash. Now at one point I was in the dire situation of being brassic, when my dear mother's gambling debts nearly did for us all, but these days life is far more comfortable.

Paps

When I told Catlin, my favourite but only sister, I was including this word she laughed like a drain and said she hoped it wasn't to do with cervical smear testing. You'll be relieved, gentle reader, that in this case it's short for paparazzi and means the press. Although Catlin did mutter something about rather having a speculum up her chuff than dealing with reporters but I'm feigning ignorance on what she meant by that.

Copper

Simon is a copper, meaning he is a police officer. And Robin likes to cop a feel of his copper. Smirk. Sorry, couldn't resist!

Skanky

This is a rather specific insult, to be a little loose in the morals department, especially in terms of cheating on your partner. It's another term from Ashley's lexicography I've caught myself using, although it does paint the picture well. I've been accused of many things in my time, but I'm not skanky, and with a husband as wonderful as mine, I never will be.

RADA

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, one of the specialist institutions for the study of acting. Dorian went to RADA, and got spotted while there. I have certainly enjoyed the pleasure of some of the connections he made at RADA and in LA over the years.

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ABOUT REBECCA COHEN

REBECCA COHEN spends her days dreaming of living in a Tudor manor house, or a Georgian mansion. Alas, the closest she comes to this is through her characters in her historical romance novels. She also dreams of intergalactic adventures and fantasy realms, but because she's not yet finalised her space or dimensional travel plans, she lives happily in leafy Hertfordshire, England, with her husband and son. She can often be found with a pen in one hand and a sloe gin with lemon tonic in the other.

<http://rebeccacohenwrites.wordpress.com>

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