

The Mission

A vibrant winter scene featuring a ski resort. In the background, snow-capped mountains are dotted with evergreen trees and a ski lift. The middle ground shows a yellow building on the left and a brown wooden cabin on the right. In the foreground, two men in winter coats are embracing. To the right, a decorated Christmas tree stands in the snow. The sky is light blue with falling snow.

Barbara Elsborg

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Please note that this story was originally released as a short story as part of the Winter Wonderland Prolific Works giveaway. The story has been revised and is now more than three times the length of the original.

Thanks

Thanks to all who read the first version of this and more thanks to Rita, Amanda and Angela for going over it again.

The Mission

Snow! Tick.

Skiing! Tick.

Christmas! Tick.

Stalker! Er...

When Conrad and his ex split up three months before their upcoming work ski trip, Conrad's unwavering passion for the slopes overshadows his reservations about a holiday anywhere near his ex and his new partner. But as 'friends' keep hinting he should cancel, he wishes he'd seen sense earlier. Now it's too late to get his money back.

A clash of heads at check-in with a handsome stranger sets Conrad's heart racing. Arlo is bound for the same Austrian resort, sparking Conrad's daydreams of shared slopes, shared après-ski, shared hot tubs and more...while fully aware that spotting Arlo in the mountains will be almost impossible.

Little does Conrad know Arlo has orchestrated this moment. Now all Arlo has to do is convince Conrad he has the best of intentions. After all, if they don't click by the end of the flight, Conrad will never know he's been stalked.

Warning

There is a short description of sexual assault.

Conrad wondered if there was a record for the number of times you could get dumped by the same guy. He didn't want to add—in the space of a few months— because that made him feel even more pathetic.

Being dumped once should have been enough for anyone with an ounce of sense in their head—right? But he was either a masochist or stupid or both or... Well, he was a whole lot of things, but definitely, positively, absolutely *never* going to go out with Mark again, so that was something. Though it had taken long enough for him to realise it.

That annoying little voice inside his head chimed in with *Did you ever really love him?* The answer was *probably not*. But when no one had ever loved Conrad, how was he to know how love should make him feel? He'd been taken in by a narcissist, who, for a while, had made Conrad feel better than he ever had in his life, but that was no consolation, no excuse.

Painful lessons had been learned. Eventually. He was ashamed it had taken so long.

First time it ended

New Year's Eve—technically—New Year's Day, but the trouble started at the party. It had all been fine. They'd been dancing and drinking and chatting to friends, then Mark had disappeared. When he'd reappeared, albeit not sniffing and rubbing his nose so that Conrad could have sat more firmly on his high horse about drugs, though it was enough to make Conrad confront him, especially when Mark had promised he wouldn't do coke any more. Not surprisingly, Mark had blown up when Conrad had spoken to him.

“Just because I know how to have a good time and you don't,” Mark had raged. “You sanctimonious piece of shit. Just lighten up.”

There was some truth in that. The first part, anyway. Conrad had never been the life and soul of anything. He'd always been the one standing in the corner, or with his back to any spare bit of wall he could find. Too anxious to ask anyone to dance—when he'd been into dancing. Too shy to ask anyone out—in case they said no. That night, he couldn't prove Mark had taken something so he backed down. *Yes, I even bloody apologised.* And Mark had forgiven him. It made Conrad cringe to think about how he'd behaved.

They'd admired the London fireworks from the balcony of the flat they were in, Mark pressing his erection into Conrad's arse, then gone to Mark's place and Mark had left bruises on Conrad's arms from how hard he'd held him when he fucked him.

That should have given Conrad a warning of what was to come, but it hadn't. Well, not one that had sunk in.

“New Year's resolutions,” Conrad said brightly as he brought Mark breakfast in bed at eleven on New Year's Day, then settled beside him.

Though he didn't feel bright because not only had he drunk too much but he'd not stopped Mark when he was hurting him. *Pathetic, weak, too easily placated...* Nor was Conrad in favour of making New Year resolutions, partly because he always broke them. Served him right for picking things he wasn't likely to stick to. No alcohol and no chocolate for the whole of January was never going to work. He needed some pleasures.

But he figured if he and Mark made—or rather—chose things they could do or not do together, then maybe it would be good for their relationship, which Conrad had to admit, wasn't all he'd hoped it would be two months down the line. Conrad had been on his own over Christmas—as usual—while Mark had swanned off skiing. It had been booked long before they got together so Conrad *did* understand, but he was disappointed.

Mark could be so great—*I wouldn't be with him otherwise, would I?* — except the guy lay in bed, looking at Conrad with

a sort of shifty, irritated expression that wasn't down to Conrad not putting enough Marmite on his toast.

Is he that great? asked that little voice in his head.

Everyone loves him, Conrad replied.

“A different activity every week,” Conrad said quickly, already sensing the *no*. “I thought we could try that climbing wall near Victoria station. You mentioned it once and—”

“Don't think so, babe.”

“Roller blading?” Though the thought of it made Conrad cringe.

“No.”

“Something else then?”

“Nah. Nothing else. Not sure I'm really into you anymore.”

Oh. Well, that had hurt.

A lot.

But then they'd had sex again and Mark had changed his mind. Though Conrad wasn't so sure anymore.

Second time—Am I a glutton for punishment? Don't answer that.

Conrad couldn't really explain why three months into the year, they were still together, especially when Mark continued to leave bruises on his arms and occasionally elsewhere. It wasn't an abusive relationship; it was just that Mark got a little rough sometimes.

Listen to yourself! It is not okay.

But...

It is NOT okay.

Mark, at his best, was lovely, but at his worst, not in the least lovely. *Lovely* had still outweighed *not in the least*. *Yes, I know it shouldn't have.* Good thing the only person around to

point out his stupidity was himself—to himself. Though Conrad had occasional moments of panic wondering if others saw him as too passive and weak.

Because you are! Idiot.

It was Conrad's birthday and Mark had arranged to meet him at a shop in Notting Hill. Conrad had thought they'd go there together at lunchtime—after all they worked for the same company, though their offices were on different floors—but apparently Mark was coming from somewhere else.

Conrad had arrived at the shop early and while he waited, he looked around wondering what it was that Mark was going to buy him, because why else would he want to meet here? Not a suit, obviously, but maybe those blue enamelled cufflinks that were calling—maybe yelling—Conrad's name, or perhaps a tie. If Mark was going to let him choose, he'd go for the cufflinks. He couldn't stop looking at them. They were so pretty. If he wasn't careful, the shop assistants were going to think he was contemplating nicking them.

Mark strolled in—twenty minutes late—by which time Conrad was familiar with every item in the shop, and the two assistants had barely taken their eyes off him.

Mark beckoned him over to the suits. “This is the one...” He pulled out a charcoal grey jacket with a pink lining. “What do you think?”

Conrad caught a glimpse of the price and gulped. He wasn't sure he wanted to be bought something that expensive.

“It's...okay,” Conrad said.

“More than okay. I think I'd look great in this. What's your opinion? You're good with clothes.”

The compliment was lost as Conrad's heart sank to somewhere below his knees. Probably under his feet so he could trample on it himself. *Not for me. Nothing for me. Why did I even think it might be?*

“Well?” Mark asked.

“It’s okay.” Conrad couldn’t bring himself to sound enthusiastic. He was now wondering if Mark had even remembered it was his birthday.

Mark sighed. “I don’t think this is working.”

Conrad allowed himself a moment of trying to think what that could refer to other than the obvious. Then he clenched his teeth. If he was being honest with himself, he knew Mark didn’t want him anymore. He’d seen the signs, the way Mark now turned his charm on for anyone but him, arranging things without asking him and just assuming Conrad would go along with his choice. *I’m being ghosted. I feel like a ghost. And it’s my own fault. I have to change. I have to.*

What he hadn’t expected was that he’d get dumped on his thirtieth birthday. He turned for one last look at the present he wasn’t going to get. *Goodbye, beautiful cufflinks.*

He had a moment of hope when Mark spotted the direction of his gaze and asked to see them. The assistant took them out of the glass display case.

“Why isn’t it working?” Conrad asked. *Oh God, I could make a list of reasons.* Self-awareness was no excuse for weakness. *I’m pathetic. Who would want me?* His ribs clamped around his heart. Well, it felt like they did and it served him bloody right.

“It’s my birthday.” Conrad wanted the words back the moment they’d escaped. He’d also said them too loudly. The shop assistant perked up, thinking he’d get a sale but Conrad had lost hope of that. What he should have said was—*You’re dumping me on my birthday, you bastard?*

But he didn’t. He’d spent so much of his life—his childhood—being told to be quiet, to keep his opinions to himself, to know his place, that he felt trapped by the barriers he’d built up in his head. Maybe he ought to see a therapist. That was progress, thinking that. Wasn’t it?

He waited for Mark to at least say happy birthday, callous dickhead that he was, but he just shrugged and it was the shrug that nailed down the lid on what they had. Their relationship

was dead and buried. Was that all he was worth? A shrug? *I should have seen through him right from the start.* Mark had to be admired, had to have everyone's attention. His sense of self-importance was mind-boggling. Conrad had fed Mark's ego and he had to stop it. Right now.

Yet when Mark actually bought the cufflinks, Conrad still felt a flare of hope. *I'm a complete idiot.* Was there a course he could sign up for that showed you how to grow a pair of balls? He needed to walk out now. Accept it. They were done.

As Conrad moved towards the door, proud of himself for finally walking out on him, somehow Mark stepped into his path and a display of wallets went tumbling. *Oh shit, did I do that?* A security alarm went off and Conrad groaned. *Oh God.* He didn't think it was his fault but he bent to help pick up the fallen goods and so did Mark.

"What have I done wrong?" Conrad whispered.

"Things like this," Mark hissed. "You're fucking embarrassing."

Conrad tensed. How did 'adorably dorky' end up as 'fucking embarrassing'? In the end, it was Mark who stalked out of the shop as the sales people helped Conrad rescue the display.

"I'm so sorry," Conrad found himself gulping. *Do not cry!* Though he could feel himself welling up, his throat thickening. He pressed his lips together and sank his teeth into his cheek. *Stop being a baby.*

His own thoughts were hurting him, memories of his parents flinging those words at him every time he got upset blocked his throat, filled his eyes.

These were not the sort of assistants who'd take pity on him, more like ones who'd look down their noses at him because he was obviously not worthy to lick the shoes of the god who'd just walked out. Why did everyone love Mark? Conrad just didn't get it.

Yes, you do.

Mark no longer wore his *costume* in front of Conrad. He no longer needed Conrad to adore him. He had someone else. *Did he?* It made sense. Conrad had trusted too much.

As the three of them put the wallets on the glass counter, one of the assistants said, “There’s one missing.”

“Has it slipped under somewhere?” Conrad bent to look but there were no more wallets on the floor.

“You and your friend...” the other assistant said.

The accusatory stare said everything. That *was* a message Conrad picked up loud and clear, despite his blindness as far as his relationship went. Had Mark taken it? *Of course he fucking has.* It wouldn’t be the first time he’d stolen something, but it was the first time Conrad had been with him, and helped him, albeit inadvertently. Usually, it was just Mark bragging to him later about what he’d walked out with.

“We’re calling the police,” the pair said in unison.

Conrad’s life almost ended at that point because he could see where that would lead. The wallet would be long gone by the time the police spoke to Mark and Conrad would get the blame. Though how they’d figure that out when he didn’t have the wallet on his person... Though he did check just in case Mark had slipped it into his pocket. Thank God, he hadn’t.

In the end, they didn’t call the police, although probably not because Conrad paid for the wallet, but more because he was so clearly shocked, that he collapsed and slumped to the floor. No one rushed to see if he was okay. Maybe they thought he was pretending. He wasn’t. Or maybe it was more trouble than it was worth to call the police, or an ambulance, plus they still got commission on the sale. So they took his money and ushered him out of the shop.

No more Mark.

No more Mark.

He was still shaky as he set off back to work, but he kept repeating those words in his head. When a hundred metres down the road, Mark stepped out in front of him, Conrad almost fell over. Except he didn’t, because Mark caught hold

of him, dragged him into an alleyway and kissed his socks off. The sort of kiss he used to give Conrad, the sort of kiss that had blinded Conrad to the things he didn't like about him. Why didn't that list of *why Mark is wrong for me* stay in his head at times like this? He could feel Mark's cock jutting into him.

"I am so hard," Mark said with a laugh as they broke apart. "We'll do that again."

No, they wouldn't, and they didn't, but Conrad was still an idiot because the relationship continued, even when Mark kept the cufflinks for himself.

He'd skip three, four, five and six because... *Yeah well, I'm an idiot. The evidence is there.*

Seventh time

And yes, he was deeply ashamed it had got to that point. Yes, he should have *I'm a gullible fool* tattooed on his forehead, along with *But I'm a nice guy*. As if that made any difference.

What excuses did he have? *I blame my parents*. He did, he really did, but it was his own fault that Mark was still in his life.

Conrad was...

Too nice.

Too trusting.

Too amenable.

Too desperate.

Too forgiving.

Too unwilling to accept he'd made a mistake and that Mark wasn't Mr Right, wasn't even Mr Nearly Right, in fact was Mr Completely and Utterly Wrong.

Conrad wasn't happy, Mark was oblivious and thought everyone loved him, but had stopped bothering about whether

or not Conrad loved him, or even liked him. Mark took him for granted. Conrad had still been making excuses for the guy because... *No one is ever going to want a pathetic thing like me.* But no amount of self-flagellation seemed to drive any sense into Conrad's head.

This time, which was lucky number seven, though he hadn't thought it at the time, Conrad hadn't seen it coming. Though to be fair, had he ever? He should have done, but that was a different story.

He and Mark had been getting on well. Mark had asked him to move in... Cue moment of complete shock and joy! And the joy had continued even though the bills had turned out to be a lot more than Conrad had expected, *and* Mark had wanted three months' rent in advance. The flat was far better than any Conrad would have been able to afford now or in the foreseeable future and every time he walked into it, he almost had to pinch himself that he lived there.

It was in Wapping, in a block overlooking the Thames and had a balcony where they sat and ate breakfast, and had a drink in the evening on those increasingly rare occasions when they were both home at the same time. He and Mark might work at the same finance company but Mark was in BD, Business Development, and had do a lot of schmoozing. Conrad was just a number cruncher. So he got the need for Mark to be out at Ascot and Henley and Formula One and polo and golf days with clients— two, three and four days a week. Weekends included.

But Conrad was lonely.

Still, being lonely in a building that had a gym and decent-sized swimming pool in the basement wasn't so bad. The pool was where Conrad intended to go this evening and unwind. If Mark hadn't eaten by the time he got back from wherever he'd been that day, they could order a pizza. If he wasn't in, and not due back, Conrad would order one anyway. Conrad had been to Manchester on business and wasn't due home until the next day, but the work was finished so he'd changed his train and maybe he'd surprise Mark.

He *did* surprise Mark but he surprised himself more when he saw Mark hammering his cock into a young guy who, at a single glance, looked vaguely familiar. Not just that, but Mark was saying, “I love you,” over and over again. Yes, he was probably on the point of coming, but those words had never been said to Conrad.

He didn't linger. He backed out of the bedroom before he was spotted, his heart hammering in his chest, his lungs so tight that breathing was becoming increasingly difficult.

There would be no eighth chance.

This was it. The straw that broke this particularly mentally deficient camel's back. It wasn't even so much the infidelity, but hearing Mark saying words he'd always laughingly claimed *Aren't in my vocabulary, babe* that finally knocked sense into Conrad's skull. He picked up his overnight bag from where he'd left it just inside the front door and walked out, quietly closing the door behind him. He'd come and get his stuff at a later date. Not that there was much of it. A lot had been vetoed by Mark. Now he'd have to buy it all over again.

Conrad wasn't sure why he headed for work. Probably because everyone would have gone home and his office was his safe space. He was good at his job. Respected. Admired. Praised. Nothing he'd ever had from Mark. Though Conrad was a different person at work.

As he walked away, he wondered if he should have confronted the two of them? But what would that have achieved? Mark would have found a way to blame Conrad, say he was crap in bed, or never did what he wanted and no wonder he'd had to look elsewhere... *I don't need to hear any of that.*

This was the night he changed.

He held himself together until he was sitting behind his desk. Then he cried. There were a lot of tears, a box of tissues used, but that was okay because no one could see what a pathetic mess he was. And this really was the last time he'd let Mark hurt him.

Never again. That was the promise he made to himself.

“He’s crying,” Arlo whispered.

His brother muttered under his breath, then said, “It has nothing to do with you. Stop staring at him.”

“But he’s upset.”

“And it has nothing to do with you. Perhaps his mother’s died or his father or his dog. He’s having a quiet weep on his own. Leave him in peace.”

Arlo didn’t like to see people upset. He was a sucker for a sob story. Even when it had been proved to him that the guy who’d told him he’d been robbed and had no money to get home, had said the same thing to someone else a few minutes after Arlo had given him twenty quid, it made no difference. Not everyone was a liar. This guy was so sad.

“No,” his brother said.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re thinking about it.”

True. Arlo desperately wanted to go and ask what was wrong. The guy couldn’t see him, Arlo was sitting in the dark, but he had a good view of the man in the office down the glass corridor. Well, he did when the guy hadn’t got his head in his hands. Dark hair, long eyelashes. He looked...devastated.

“What’s his name?” Arlo asked.

His brother snorted from behind his laptop. “I’m not telling you.”

Arlo whined.

“You think that will make me change my mind? I’ll be finished in a minute and we can leave him in peace.”

“He won’t be in peace, will he?” Arlo couldn’t stop looking. He felt bad, knew he shouldn’t be watching but he was incapable of stopping. He also had no idea why it hurt him

so much to see a stranger crying, but it did. Tears trickled down Arlo's cheeks and he rubbed his sleeve across his face before his brother noticed.

“Oh God, Arlo! Stop it. He's not another of your lame ducks.”

Why not? It wasn't wrong to want to help people. To be fair, it had mostly been animals Arlo had helped but he liked people to be happy.

“I want to know why he's crying.”

“Stop being so nosy.”

Had he found out he was ill, seriously ill? Maybe he just needed a hug. Arlo could do that. Was he stressed about his job? Made a mistake he didn't know how to put right? Why else would he have come to work? Arlo turned to his brother. “Have you upset him?”

“What? No. He's...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Whatever's wrong has nothing to do with you or me. Give it a rest. Anyway, he's in a relationship with a guy on the next floor.”

Maybe he wasn't anymore. Maybe that was what was wrong.

Arlo opened his mouth and his brother got there first. “No more, Arlo. Not another word. Let him have a moment on his own. He wouldn't have come into the office if he'd wanted company.”

So not another word, but Arlo could have another thought. Or ten. Or a hundred. When he and his brother made their way to the restaurant, all Arlo could think about was that guy, sitting in his office, all on his own, crying and how much Arlo had wanted to put his arms around him and give him a hug, make his world turn again.

He couldn't let this go.

Three months after seeing Big Arsehole fuck Little Arsehole

I am a changed man. Conrad looked in the mirror before he left his flat and told himself to keep smiling. No matter how aggravated he was with his friends, and he used the word *friends* loosely, since most of them weren't the friends he'd like them to be, that smile would stay in place. He was more than aggravated with those who *were* supposed to be his friends, but there was no way he was going to show it. Because if he did, they'd have won and Conrad wouldn't let that happen. He'd been wearing this mask for the last three months and he was *not* going to let it slip even if no one he knew was around to be fooled by it. It was good practice. *I am a changed man.*

So, he'd given a painful smile after he'd run all the way across the station concourse only for the train doors to shut just as he'd reached them. Smiled through gritted teeth when someone had banged their luggage trolley into his heel as he was walking into the airport. And finally, plastered a beaming smile on his face when he'd seen the group he was travelling with waiting near the check-in desk. It had been a little easier to smile than it might have been because Ernesto and Mark weren't there yet. Although no one had noticed a smiling Conrad approach, it still wasn't a waste because the more he smiled, the more natural it would look. Possibly. *Unlikely* said that horrible sarcastic little voice in his head.

Pleasantries were exchanged, and Conrad felt more uncomfortable than he'd anticipated. He didn't know five of these guys. They were clients of the firm and theoretically shouldn't know about his past history with Big Arsehole, but if Mark had said anything, it wouldn't have been to paint Conrad in a favourable light. He had to face it, the likelihood was that Mark had told them, with a roll of his eyes, that his ex was coming on the ski trip. Conrad knew he wasn't wanted. One hint after another had been dropped over the last three months,

hints that had become more frequent over the last couple of weeks. *As if I'm going to cancel now!*

The others resumed their conversation and Conrad stood to the side, not really caring that he wasn't being included. He remembered exactly what had been said to encourage him to cancel and who had said it.

Won't you feel awkward?

Won't they feel awkward?

Sure you can cope?

Wouldn't you rather...?

It would be better for everyone if...

After he and Mark had imploded, everyone from work going on the trip—and people who weren't going on the trip but liked to stick their noses into other people's business—had thought Conrad would cancel. At first, it had been sheer pig-headedness that had made him stick to his plans. Later, he'd thought again, and if he'd been able to get all his money back, he might have done. Served him right for not reading every line of the small print.

Apparently, *finding your boyfriend with his cock in another guy's arse* didn't qualify as a valid reason for getting a refund. Who'd have guessed? So Conrad had to either say goodbye to fourteen hundred pounds and spend a miserable Christmas alone. Again. Or spend a miserable Christmas with people who didn't want him around, though he did get to ski. *Ugh and yippee!*

Tough choice. But showing Mark that he didn't *fucking* care—and he really didn't—meant more to Conrad than it should have done. And there was the skiing. Conrad really liked skiing. *That* was the holiday he took every year. *That* was the holiday he saved for. Though not usually at Christmas because it was too expensive. But there was something about being up in the mountains, breathing in that crisp cold air and feeling as if he was on top of the world, before launching himself down a slope at breakneck speed that made his heart sing. All he needed to do was eat breakfast and dinner in the

catered chalet with this lot. There didn't need to be any other contact.

He was happy to ski on his own. *Almost* happy. He usually found someone to join up with when he shared chair lifts. Last year, he'd spent three days with an Austrian in his sixties who was a better skier than him. Conrad learnt a lot and improved his German.

Mark and Ernesto arrived in a swirl of expensive aftershave and a few paparazzi. *Oh my God. Really!* There was a loud welcome and lots of backslapping for Mr Popular and his famous model-about-to-turn-actor boyfriend. That had been why Conrad recognised him. He'd seen him in the *Sunday Times* magazine. *New star in Hollywood*. More than once. *The face of an angel or a devil?* Ernesto definitely had the skinny, pouty, slightly anaemic, gormless look of a model—though that might be an unkind thing to say since Conrad had never spoken to any model, let alone to Ernesto with his flawless skin—did he even shave?—eyes that could launch a thousand hot air balloons, and leonine mane of fair hair. *Stop looking at him!*

Conrad kept smiling. The pair had matching expensive luggage and matching pale blue Patagonia ski jackets. *I want to be sick*. When the group headed to join the queue at check-in, Mark and Ernesto leading the way, Conrad tagged along at the rear. Mark hadn't even acknowledged his presence. Conrad was irritated with himself for being irritated. Mark's arm was around Ernesto's neck, his fingers twisting in the guy's hair. Conrad remembered Mark telling him he didn't like long hair on a guy—a hint that Conrad needed a haircut—but he'd clearly changed his mind. Conrad really was over the wanker. What he hadn't gotten over was his annoyance about how pathetic he'd been to let it carry on so long.

No more of that. He was a changed man. He really was. The more he told himself that, the more he believed it. He'd never be so stupid again. It was a promise he'd made to himself. Three months of not going out with anyone. Three months of sleeping better. Three months of pulling himself together so that when he *did* meet someone, he'd—

A passport dropped to the floor at Conrad's side and as he bent to pick it up, he clashed heads with its owner who was also reaching for it.

"Ow, sorry," Conrad said.

"My fault." The owner of the British passport was a guy about Conrad's age—tall and clean-shaven with short dark hair. He had amazing blue eyes, a brilliant smile with lovely white teeth, and Conrad's heart lurched in a pleasant way for the first time in months. Significantly, the first time in several months. *Oh good. I still have a heart then.*

"I think I've got it now," the guy said.

"What?" It took a moment to register he was talking about the passport that Conrad was still holding, and Conrad let it go. "Sorry," he said again. *I am always fucking apologising.* Still, it was an accident they were both responsible for. Apologising was polite.

"Flying to Salzburg?" the guy asked.

"Uh huh." *Think of something nice to say. And don't rub your sore head, even though you want to! Shit! What can I say?*

They shuffled forward.

Hope there's plenty of snow? Do you board or ski? Are you gay?

Conrad's group were noisy, discussing some ad Ernesto was doing for Armani, and the film he was going to be in, and who was starring in the film, and Conrad winced. Mark at his arrogant worst.

"Are you with them?"

"Trying to pretend I'm not," Conrad muttered.

The guy chuckled. "I assume you're going skiing?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yep. Which resort?"

"Kitzbühel."

“Me too.”

Conrad smiled. First genuine smile for quite a while. Mark had suggested Verbier but when it came time to book, he'd changed it to Kitzbühel. No one minded because no one ever disagreed with Mark. He'd conned them all into believing that he knew best.

Maybe Conrad would bump into this guy on the slopes. Though even as he thought it, he knew the chances of spotting anyone he knew in such a huge ski area were zero, especially when almost everyone would be wearing goggles and helmets. He could have been skiing next to Chris Salvatore and he wouldn't have known. Unless he'd broken out into song. Maybe not even then.

“Conrad! Get a move on and we can all sit together,” David called, suddenly acknowledging Conrad was part of the group.

You are the last person I'd want to sit with. You arrogant, whiny asshole. David worked in HR and was one of the least empathetic people Conrad had ever met, apart from Mark. Conrad remembered emailing David to say he was too sick to come into work, but he was well enough to work from home and David had emailed back three pages of information that still left Conrad unsure whether he should be working or not. Nowhere had it said—*Get better soon.*

Conrad was sort of hoping the guy behind him might end up sitting next to him. Hope quickly morphed into *maybe we can ski together, and après-ski together, then do all sorts of other stuff together, including live happily ever after together. Hilarious.* Because even after everything that had happened, Conrad remained a self-deluded idiot. But not into Mark. *Thank God for that.*

“Nice to meet you, Conrad. I'm Arlo.” He held out his hand and Conrad shook it.

He wished there was some secret handshake—like the Masons were supposed to have—that told you whether or not someone was gay and if they were interested. That would make life so much easier. To Conrad's shame, he had a

virtually non-existent gaydar. Probably because he'd once made an assumption, been spectacularly wrong and felt so mortified after word had spread around the school, that he'd sworn he'd never assume again. Though he had been fourteen at the time. Was that any excuse? School had been hell after that. He was teased so badly. And he still wasn't sure he'd been wrong about Gareth Jones.

There was no electrical charge from Arlo's fingers to his—damn those deceitful romance novels—though Conrad didn't want to let his hand go. Maybe there *was* some magnetism, though he did manage to release Arlo's fingers before anything was said.

“You don't want to sit with your friends?” Arlo asked.

Oh look. They'd moved en masse to a check-in desk and Conrad hadn't followed. *Well done, legs!*

“Bad enough that I have to spend a week in the same chalet,” Conrad said. *Do not open your mouth and let the whole sordid mess flood out.* “I'd have cancelled if I could, but it meant losing too much money.” *Not another fucking word. Say something happy!* “Maybe I'll get lucky and meet someone to ski with.”

Conrad could feel his face heating and turned away. Luckily, another check-in came free so he shot Arlo a smile—a genuine one—and rolled his case over.

Get lucky? Ha! Knowing Conrad's luck, he'd end up sitting behind Big Arsehole and Little Arsehole. Difficult enough that Conrad saw Mark several times a week, though he didn't speak to him unless he couldn't help it. Conrad liked his job and didn't see why he should leave it, though he'd been tempted. Clean slate, fresh start. That he was still working there maybe meant there *was* a bit of masochist in him.

Conrad took the seat he was given, said a mental ‘see you later’ to his case and headed for security, remembering too late that he'd meant to ask to sit by a window. Still, it would be dark when they arrived so not much to see below.

No one had waited for him. He'd walked past Arlo who was laughing with the guy behind the desk and Conrad felt a pang of lust. He used to laugh like that. *And I will again!*

He knew the others planned to get several drinks in before the flight and Conrad didn't want to get drunk, so he sat reading his Jussi Adler-Olsen thriller in the departure lounge until the gate number was displayed. When it was, he made his way there, and dropped down at the back of the seating area. He wasn't doing a good job of looking as though he wasn't bothered by what had happened. But then, why should he? He could just do his own thing and ignore them. Everyone would be happier then.

There was no sign of any of the group which was a little worrying, but Conrad definitely had the right gate. The seats began to fill up in front of him and Conrad concentrated on his book.

"Where did you disappear to?" David gave him a nudge as he sat down next to him, managing to press his knee against Conrad's at the same time. Not accidentally.

Conrad was *not* interested in David, but the guy was either thick as a brick or deluded. Probably both. *Hello kettle!* "Had some calls to make."

"All work and no play makes Conrad a dull boy," Mark called.

Conrad looked up to see him in the seat opposite.

"Where are you sitting?" David pulled the boarding card out of Conrad's book. Bang went his bookmark. "Oh, next to me. Great!"

What! Fuck, fuck, fuck! Conrad took the slip of paper from David's fingers and put it in his passport. He wondered if there was any chance of changing his seat, then thought how that would look and knew he wouldn't. Much as he dreaded two hours of David, he didn't want to hurt his feelings because he knew how he'd feel if someone did that to him.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to this British Airways flight to Salzburg."

Conrad looked up when he heard the announcement.

“Would the following passengers please make their way to the desk. Jennifer Shannon. Eli Wiseman. Conrad Hamilton.”

“Oh, what did you do?” Mark asked. “Make a joke about a B.O.M.B?”

You are such a fuckwit. Conrad wished Mark had said that louder and been hauled off by security. What had he ever seen in this idiot? Well, he knew what he’d seen. Someone who could have had anyone but had wanted him. Being wanted was the key. Conrad had never been wanted. But Mark had love-bombed him until he was hooked. It hadn’t taken long. Conrad didn’t blame himself for that. Of course, he’d reacted to Mark’s flattery. And they’d been good for a while, Conrad wasn’t going to deny that. They’d had fun, made each other laugh, enjoyed each other’s company. For a while. Except how long had that *while* actually lasted?

He went to the desk and waited his turn. He half-hoped the clerk wanted to tell him that the plane was full and he could go home. *Back to pathetic Conrad already?* He offered her his passport and boarding card.

“We’re moving you to Business,” she said with a smile.

Conrad gaped at her. Was this a joke? For one horrible moment, he wondered if Mark had set him up and that everyone was sniggering behind him. But she took his boarding card, printed off another and handed it to him. *Bloody hell!*

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Enjoy the flight.”

Conrad didn’t say anything when he got back to his seat. Mark was the type to go and demand that he and the twink were upgraded too, and he’d do it in such a way that it would probably happen. Maybe they were already in Business, though Conrad wasn’t sure how Mark would explain that to the others, especially to the clients.

“What did they want?” David asked.

“A mix-up with the boarding card. Apparently, I was sitting on the wing. They’ve moved me inside.”

At least a few of the group laughed.

Mark had his arm around Ernesto again. *Not my type*. He was too skinny, too wide-eyed and his arse was too big. *I am such a bitch*. Maybe Ernesto was a nice guy. After he and Mark had broken up, Conrad had still occasionally met up with the group because he didn’t see why he had to drop out. Mark hadn’t always been there when they got together. But gradually, Conrad had realised that he didn’t much like any of them. After this trip, he’d not be joining them again. It was time he made his own friends.

Passengers in Business were invited to board first, but Conrad hung back. He had this image of himself turning left on the plane right in front of Mark and relishing the shock on his face. Then Conrad wanted to smack himself around the head for being so childish. Though he still hoped Mark was behind him when he boarded.

General boarding started just after Mark had gone off to the toilets and Conrad found himself standing next to Ernesto in the queue. *Be nice*.

“Looking forward to skiing?” Conrad asked.

“Yeah.”

“Have you been before?”

“Yeah.”

“To Kitzbühel?”

“Nah.”

Well, Mark probably didn’t want him for his scintillating conversation.

“Where have you skied?” Conrad asked.

“America.”

“I’ve been there a couple of times. The snow was great.”

“Yeah.”

Conrad gave up. “I hope you have a lovely time.” *No, I don’t. Break your leg.* Then he felt bad for the sentiment.

In the end, he was nowhere near any of the group when he got on because they opened up two lanes to check boarding cards and passports, and as usual, Conrad picked the slowest line.

He did his usual quick lucky touch of the outside of the plane as he stepped on board, then showed one of the cabin crew his boarding card. He was directed left—*oh the thrill of it*—and made his way down the aisle.

When he reached his seat and saw Arlo, Conrad’s smile matched the one on Arlo’s face.

“Hey, how about that? You want to sit next to the window?” Arlo offered.

I love you. No one had ever offered him the window seat, not even his parents. “I’m fine here. But thank you.”

Conrad took off his ski jacket and put it in the overhead locker along with his backpack. He moved the pillow and the amenity bag so he could sit down. The seatbelt sign was on, so he fastened it.

“Champagne? Orange juice?” A steward held out a tray.

“Champagne, please.”

Arlo took one too.

“This isn’t a coincidence,” Conrad said, because he wasn’t completely stupid.

“No. I admit to skulduggery. I’m a pilot with this airline and I have a few powers of persuasion. I hoped you’d rather sit with me than with the friends you don’t appear to be friends with.”

I really love you. “Big Arsehole, Little Arsehole and all the other arseholes—not including the firm’s clients? Oh yes. You’re absolutely right. I’d much rather sit with you.”

“I might be an arsehole too.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

“What if *you* are?” Arlo’s eyes twinkled.

“In case you’re worried, I won’t spend the next two hours moaning.”

“Now I’m disappointed.”

Conrad grinned. Thank God he had a sense of humour. “Thank you for this chance to sample the delights of pampering in Business. Do I get a massage and foot rub as well as champagne? Is there champagne?”

Arlo leaned in. “Yes, and the rest if you’re lucky.”

Oh fuck. You’re definitely gay. Forget Conrad’s malfunctioning gaydar, Arlo had dangled a glittery pink hook and Conrad had swallowed it. *Now reel me in.*

“What do you do for a living?” Arlo asked.

“I’m an accountant.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, I do. It’s rewarding.” His standard answer, though it wasn’t his dream job. But lead cellist with the London Symphony Orchestra was taken. He’d almost applied, then thought better of it.

“Do you live in London?”

“Richmond.”

“I live in Uxbridge. Not far away from Richmond. A hop, skip and a jump.”

You’re flirting with me. Ask him if he’s single.

Conrad waited for a pig to fly past because that was more likely.

“Are you going out to meet family or friends?” That was as near as Conrad was likely to get to asking him if he had a boyfriend.

“My family has a chalet in Kitzbühel.”

“Lucky you.”

“So why are you spending Christmas with guys you clearly don’t want to be with?”

“It was booked a while ago and until the middle of September I was going out with Big Arsehole.”

“Though now you can’t remember why?”

Conrad chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Does he happen to be the one with Little Mister Gorgeous?”

“How did you guess?”

“I saw him watching you.”

Conrad raised his eyebrows. “Really?” *Shit, was he?*

“I got the feeling he wanted you to look at him.”

He probably did. Despite it being Mark who’d cheated, the guy had still wanted Conrad to weep, wail, gnash his teeth and plead with him to give him another chance. Conrad hadn’t. He’d said nothing. He’d only cried when he was alone. None of it was his fault—apart from still being with Mark long after he should have put an end to it.

“Is it rude to ask what happened?”

Do not ask him which time! “I caught him in bed with someone else.”

“Little Arsehole?”

Conrad nodded. “The twink is an international model, on the verge of a career in Hollywood, apparently. Better eye candy than me.”

“I don’t think so.”

Conrad swallowed hard. “Are you blind? Shit. I didn’t mean to say that out loud. You’re obviously not blind. You’re a pilot. Being blind would be a disaster. Have I distracted you enough yet?”

“No. How long had you been together?”

“You’re full of questions. Are you really a pilot? You don’t work for MI5?”

“Really a pilot. I’m just nosy.”

“I was trying not to unload everything in case you decided to go and sit in the cockpit.”

“Nah. I know the pilot and he’s not as interesting as you.”

Conrad tried to think if he’d ever been called interesting.

“I’m just intrigued as to why you’d come on holiday with your ex and his new bit of fluff and presumably a bunch of mates who for some inexplicable reason are not on your side.”

“Apart from a few clients, and a few personal friends of Big Arsehole, most of us work at the same place. That’s how we know one another. I love skiing and after Mark and I broke up, I thought I could still go and not be bothered, but later I saw the light. By which I mean, I eventually saw that it probably would have been better not to have come. By then, it was too late to cancel.”

“You’d lose your money?”

Conrad nodded. “I can ski on my own, so I’ll only be around them at breakfast and dinner time. I can cope with that.”

“Why did they side with him?”

“Mark might be an arsehole, but he’s Mr Popular. Do anything for anyone sort of guy. Skydives for charity. Sends flowers when someone’s ill. Always steps in to help when it’s needed. Organises all the fun things at work, especially events that involve alcohol. Plays hilarious practical jokes that I personally hated, but everyone else seemed to love, such as covering someone’s desk and everything on it with clingfilm. He’s generous, always happy and the life and soul of everything that he’s part of. No one wanted to believe it was his fault we split up.” *It probably wasn’t.*

Oh yes it fucking was!

Conrad bit his lip. *Really—no more!*

“He cheated on you. Nothing more to be said.” Arlo shot him a smile.

“Sounds like you need a new circle of friends.”

“Know any airline pilots?” Conrad asked. “I’ve heard they’re fun.”

Arlo grinned. “They can be. So before the flirting gets out of hand, are you single?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

“I’m shocked.” Conrad flinched. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud either.

“It’s completely shocking.” Arlo raised his eyebrows. “But truthfully, me being a pilot can cause difficulties in a relationship. It’s not a nine-to-five job. I might work three hours one day or twelve. I could be flying early morning or late at night. Sometimes I can get home every night, other times I don’t go home for a week, but then have three or four days off. I’d like to do long haul and that means even more time away from home, but I’d have ten to fifteen days free a month to see friends and family. Not everyone wants to put up with the irregularity of that.”

“Do you have a big family?”

“Four older brothers who are all married with kids.”

“I was an only child.” Conrad had longed for brothers or sisters, longed for parents who wanted him.

“Spoilt rotten?”

Conrad went for an enigmatic shrug.

The safety briefing began as the aircraft began to taxi and Conrad paid attention. When it was done and the cabin crew had been told to take their seats, Arlo leaned a little closer. “Are you usually that attentive?”

Conrad nodded. “They’re doing their job and they should be listened to. Even if you think you’ve heard it all before, the less time you need to spend thinking what you should be doing if there’s an emergency, the better. Though I figure you’ll

know exactly what to do if anything happens so I'm going to glue myself to you."

"That sounds fun."

"Not if it's Superglue."

"Oh I don't know." Arlo grinned.

Conrad's heart lifted off faster than the plane. He wasn't a guy who went for quick encounters. He'd never used Grindr, never picked up or been picked up in a club or in a bar with the awareness that one night was all he wanted or all the other guy might be looking for. But maybe he could change. Maybe a week's skiing over Christmas and having fun with Arlo would flick his life back into gear. Even if it was a different gear. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Conrad's life was one of logic and rules and balance, measured and predictable. It was time he took a chance.

Moments after the seat belt sign went off, David appeared at Conrad's side.

"There you are. Mark was wondering if you were on the plane. He thought you might have chick—er...decided not to come."

David put his hand on Conrad's shoulder and Conrad lifted it off.

"Tell him not to worry."

David frowned. "I don't think he was worried, just wondering where you were. Don't you want to come sit next to me? We're going to be sharing at the chalet, so I thought we could have a chat."

What? "I like where I'm sitting. See you later."

David glanced at Arlo and walked away.

Oh fuck. In all Conrad's internal debates of *should I, shouldn't I go*, he'd never factored in that he'd have to share with someone. He'd just thought that as Ernesto would be sharing with Mark, he'd get a room of his own. *I'm an idiot.*

“You look as though someone’s just told you that you made a mistake on a balance sheet,” Arlo said. “Added two and two and got five. I’m guessing you don’t want to share a room with him.”

“No.” Conrad groaned. “I think I’d actually pay now *not* to be going.”

“But then you wouldn’t have met me.”

“For fourteen hundred pounds, you’d better be good entertainment, glue or no glue.”

“I love a challenge!”

“Apparently, I am very challenging.”

“You’re very charming and very funny and very good-looking. A lot of *verys*.”

Conrad’s brain turned to mush.

Arlo was relieved Conrad was such a nice guy. More than nice. He really *was* charming, funny and good-looking. *Very*. The head-butting over the passport hadn’t been planned, but standing behind him in the queue had been. The rest had worked out perfectly and if after two hours they hadn’t hit it off, then Arlo would have been disappointed but sanguine, and he’d have enjoyed the slopes with his brothers and not thought of all the time he’d wasted getting to this point. Well, not thought about it much. And Conrad would have never known that he’d been stalked.

Two hours flew by and Conrad had never enjoyed a flight more. The meal had been great, the champagne had flowed and so had the conversation. Books, music, films, food... especially music. They had a lot in common apart from the size of their families, the love of their parents, the schools they went to, the holidays they took and... *Stop it.* There was a spark. Conrad felt it. And that they both played the cello... Well, that revelation had amazed him, though Arlo hadn't seemed quite as surprised. Conrad didn't believe in love at first sight or love at first conversation, but...

Arlo's family was huge. His father was Austrian and Arlo had relations in the country as well as in the UK. Conrad had enjoyed hearing about them, though it had also slightly depressed him because Arlo clearly had plenty of people to ski with and didn't need to pair up with a Johnny-no-mates. So Conrad held back his suggestion that maybe he might like to meet up on the slopes, or in a bar, or in his bed. Arlo's bed, not his, not with David likely to interrupt. *Oh God, as if I was likely to suggest any of that.* But daydreaming was nice.

One thing that Arlo had unwittingly done was restore a little of Conrad's confidence. He'd felt more like his old self—the pre-Mark self. Though sadly not confident enough to ask for Arlo's number. But even if he never saw the guy again, he was so glad he'd met him. *I am better than I was. I'm not weak anymore.*

Conrad had done therapy. Several sessions online had made a real difference. Isabella had brought him to appreciate some home truths. Even though Conrad's parents had damaged him, Mark too, he wasn't mortally wounded. He could be a better man.

He was a work in progress. Though he did wonder about Arlo getting him upgraded. Should he be worried or flattered? He'd go for flattered.

The plane landed and Conrad turned to face him. “Thanks so much for getting me upgraded. I really enjoyed myself. You were great company. Well worth the fourteen hundred pounds, even if I’m going to question that the moment David and I are in a room together.”

“I hope you don’t!” Arlo took out his phone. “Want to exchange numbers?”

Hell yes! “Okay.”

“Only *okay*? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Conrad groaned. “You were almost treated to me jiggling up and down the aisle in delight, *and* the seat belt sign is still on. You must have noticed by now I’m a stickler for rules. I was trying to play it cool. Read much more into that *okay*, please.”

Arlo’s little finger touched Conrad’s and Conrad’s lungs locked. *Oh God.* That was most definitely a spark. *I could convince myself I’d actually seen a little arc of current zapping between us.*

“Do you believe in spontaneous combustion?” Conrad asked.

“Not until now.” Arlo’s eyes looked glazed. “I’ll call you. Don’t spontaneously combust in the meantime. I’d be so disappointed. Save it for when we’re together. Except not literally because we’d make a horrible mess and that’s not the sort of mess I want to make with you.”

Conrad’s heart was busy bouncing up and down. A holiday romance was all this would be, probably, but he’d take it. A Christmas present to himself. It would be the only one he got and the thought of it made him feel as if he’d waited all his life to get the very best of presents this year. Time with Arlo. And no, flings weren’t his thing but look where holding out for a relationship had landed him, with a guy who was *not* what he wanted, needed or deserved. He and Mark had never been on the same page. That *was* his fault as much as Mark’s. *So be nice.*

“Would you rather call me?” Arlo asked as they headed into the terminal.

“Yes. Either. Please. I’ve forgotten sentences how to talk in.”

Arlo smiled. “Do you need a lift?”

“We’re being collected, but thanks.”

“I’m using my Austrian passport to bypass the queue, so we part ways here. My brother’s picking me up. See you soon, okay?”

Conrad nodded.

He hoped for one last glimpse of Arlo as he waited for his suitcase to appear on the conveyor belt, but didn’t see him. Once the group had their luggage, they left through the *Nothing to Declare* exit and Conrad followed them over to the holiday rep. He wore a blue ski jacket, and was holding up a Trueblue Chalets sign, waving it from side to side. Once names were ticked off the list, they were sent outside to bus seven.

Conrad sucked in a breath at the bite of cold air as he left the terminal. *Wow, that’s chilly.* But a good chilly. He hoped there was plenty of snow where it mattered because there wasn’t much here. Once he’d handed his case to the driver to stow in the luggage compartment, he climbed on the bus and sat down. As he stared through the window, he saw Arlo hugging a guy. *Must be his brother.* Conrad couldn’t see his face.

Then a little niggles of doubt crept in. What if that was Arlo’s boyfriend? *What? Are you nuts? Stop it right now.* Not everyone was a liar. But once Arlo was with his family, why would he bother about him? The exchange of phone numbers meant nothing. Conrad sighed. *I am such a bloody misery. Smile, for fuck’s sake!* But he couldn’t.

He put his hands on his forearms and stroked up and down. Therapy advice. *I’m all right. More than all right. Everything is fine.* He pulled out his AirPods, listened to his favourite version of Vivaldi’s Double Concerto for Two Cellos, and

found himself wondering if he'd ever get to play it with Arlo. Conrad's heart pinged at the thought. Then the ping faded. *I'm delusional*. But the instrument was a big thing to have in common. To meet someone who played the cello was a huge deal. The only reason Mark had tolerated Conrad playing his was because Conrad could do it silently. He only used his wooden cello when Mark wasn't around.

The bus gradually filled. No one sat next to him. Not even David. That *did* make Conrad give a small smile. He was tempted to change his plan of 'total avoidance wherever possible' and instead endeavour to ensure he was right there when the group planned what they were going to do that day. They could ignore him, and be rude to him and he was going to let it roll right over his head. He didn't want to get accused of being a killjoy.

Conrad removed his AirPods when the rep talked to them. The guy came round distributing the pre-booked lift passes, and information about activities. He was trying to get them to sign up for snowmobiling, horse riding, tubing, a trip to ice caves, a visit to a spa, tobogganing, ice skating, spending money at a Christmas market, visiting Santa Claus, heli-skiing... The thought of doing any of them on his own was depressing, as was the thought of doing them with the group. Even David didn't bother to come and ask Conrad to join whatever activities the group had decided to do. Conrad signed to do nothing.

He reversed his plans yet again and decided to do everything on his own. This was *his* holiday. Why should he spend a moment of it with people he didn't like? He just hoped he could spend some of it with a guy he *did* like.

It took ninety minutes to get to the chalet. Conrad spent the journey listening to music, his face pressed to the window, taking in as much as he could in the darkness. There were Christmas lights in all the villages, illuminated Christmas trees outside houses, roof lines outlined with dangling lights and snow was softly falling. It all looked cute, romantic and chocolate boxy.

Only their group was dropped at Chalet Alpenland. It was a typical Austrian chalet made of wood with a wide, gently sloping, snow-covered roof, the upper floors protruding over the storeys below, though this chalet was hotel-sized, with hotel facilities, huge and luxurious. There were two brightly lit Christmas trees either side of the glass-doored main entrance and the eaves were lined with icicle lights. It looked lovely, but then Mark had chosen it and he didn't like second best of anything.

He did choose me. But Conrad had failed to make the grade. *I'm lucky. I escaped.* He made himself smile.

Conrad hung back until everyone had gone inside because he wanted to ask if there was a single room he could have, and didn't want anyone to hear. He took a few breaths of the cold night air and sighed. Whether he enjoyed this holiday or not was up to him. He really *was* over Mark. It didn't hurt that he was wrapped around Ernesto. It *did* hurt that this holiday wasn't the 'friends go skiing' that Conrad had hoped for. But it might be *Conrad goes skiing with Arlo*. A thought that cheered him up.

When he joined the line at the desk, he was glad to see David well ahead of him. The lobby was warm and cosy. There was another Christmas tree in there, a big one, decorated with blue and silver baubles. Massive garlands were draped around windows and up the stairs, and there was a blazing fire in the hearth. He could see plenty of comfy-looking chairs and Conrad imagined himself whiling away a few hours in the evening with a drink and a book, after taking a dip in the outdoor pool.

Finally, it was his turn at the desk and he gave his name to the receptionist. "Is there by any chance a single room I could have?" he asked in German. He spoke a little though he wasn't fluent.

The man shook his head. "I'm sorry, no. We're completely booked."

"Okay." Conrad wasn't surprised. It was Christmas, after all. "If you have a cancellation...?"

“We’ll let you know.”

He took his keycard and followed the directions to the third floor. When he opened the door, David was unpacking. He’d chosen the bed next to the window. Conrad’s was by the bathroom door. Well, that served him right for delaying.

“We’re meeting at the bar.” David’s tone was a little short. “Coming?”

“No, thanks.” He figured they’d all be happier without him around. He thought about going for a walk, but instead unpacked.

“I tried to get a room on my own,” David said. “There aren’t any. The clients are all in suites so we have to share.”

“I don’t mind sharing with you,” Conrad said.

David smiled and took a step towards him.

Shit. That wasn’t an invitation!

“Then come down to the bar.”

“Not tonight. I’m too tired.”

Not that tired. But David left and Conrad got ready for bed, even though it was too early to go to sleep. He was trying to read his book and thinking about whether he should call Arlo, when his phone vibrated. When he saw Arlo’s name, he felt as if he’d swallowed sunshine.

“Hi,” Conrad said.

“Am I disturbing you?”

“I had a choice of getting drunk with people I don’t want to get drunk with, going for a walk on my own or going to bed with a book. Guess where I am?”

“On the phone with me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you naked?” Arlo asked in a husky voice.

Conrad groaned. “No.”

“Not out for a walk then. Sure you’re not naked?”

“I don’t want to give David any ideas.”

“Do you usually sleep naked?”

Conrad hesitated.

“Could I persuade you to?”

A choked cough escaped from Conrad’s mouth and Arlo moaned.

“Yes,” Conrad said while his brain was still functioning.

“How would you like to ski with me tomorrow?” Arlo asked.

Yes! “I’d love to. Did you notice I avoided the use of *okay?*”

“I was hoping you would. I might have taken the offer back otherwise. Meet you at the foot of the Hahnenkammbahn cable car at nine? Look for Rudolph.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait. Night, Conrad.”

“Night, Arlo.”

“Sleep tight.”

Conrad actually contemplated locking himself in the bathroom and taking care of the issue in his shorts, but resisted. *I’m not that desperate.*

Actually, he was.

A depressingly short time later, he was back in bed, but he was fairly sure he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

The next thing he knew, it was morning. David was gently snoring and Conrad slipped into the bathroom, showered and dressed. When he emerged, David was just stirring but Conrad wasn’t going to wait for him. He headed down to breakfast on

his own. He was delighted to find no one he knew in the dining room, though he wouldn't be that lucky every day.

The others came in as he was finishing. Conrad said "Good morning," as brightly as he could, then went upstairs to change into his ski gear.

He caught the shuttle bus to the ski rental shop where he'd prepaid for his skis, then made his way to the cable car. Early as usual. He didn't think he'd ever been late for anything in his entire life, and yet strangely, he didn't feel proud of that. *I'm too uptight.* But being on time was ingrained into him. *Thank you, shitty parents.*

As nine came and went, his disappointment slid further down the scale from mildly upset to deeply distressed. He'd really wanted Arlo to be on time. How long was he supposed to wait? *Call him!* But he didn't. He waited. At nine thirty he gave up and made the call except Arlo didn't answer. *Ten more minutes.* By then the lines were growing, and he spotted Mark and the rest heading towards him. *Shit.*

"Waiting for us?" Mark asked.

"No, he's waiting for me." Arlo stepped into Conrad's space and kissed him.

Whoa! A bolt of heat erupted between them and while Conrad had thought maybe it would just be a sweet, short kiss, it was anything but. They were kissing properly, open-mouthed, arms snaking around each other and the world caught fire. Conrad could hear someone whistling, but he didn't want to stop. Ever. It was Arlo who pulled back, his eyes wide, his mouth curved in a smile.

"Have they gone?" Conrad whispered.

"Who? Where are we?" He grinned. "I'm in a quandary now."

"Why?" Conrad was still trying to catch his breath and reorientate himself.

"I wanted to piss off your ex, only I hadn't realised that with one kiss we'd make enough electricity to fire up the

National Energy Grid. Forget hydropower, I'm still sparking. Is my hair standing on end?"

"Is mine?"

Arlo smiled. "Let's go skiing. You're not going to disappear on me, are you? I'm greedy. Skiing and lots of electric kissing sound like the perfect combination to me."

Conrad smiled. *To me too.*

"And I'm so sorry I'm late. My fucking brother wouldn't hurry up. Then he nicked my phone and when he finally gave it back, I saw you'd called. Then I spotted you and the group heading towards you. So maybe things happen for a reason. We got a wolf-whistle! I've not had one of those before."

Me neither.

Arlo jerked forward into Conrad as a guy slapped him on the back. He turned and glared. "Dickhead! Conrad, this is my brother Benedikt. Benedikt, this is Conrad. Be nice."

"Want me to kiss you as well?" Benedikt asked. "Did he use his tongue? Careful. You never know where it's been. I'm sugar and spice and all things nice, but Arlo—"

"Touch him and die," Arlo said through clenched teeth.

Benedikt widened his eyes. "Ooh. Interesting." He backed away. "See you later, Squirt."

Arlo gave a heavy sigh. "Let's get on the cable car before the rest of my family try to kiss you."

Conrad followed him and when Arlo put on his helmet, and Conrad saw the antlers, he smiled.

"You won't lose me now. I was going to wear the red nose too but I thought it might be a bit much."

"Only if you'd wanted me to shout out in glee."

Arlo beamed.

Conditions were perfect. They were both good skiers, well matched to ski together. Arlo knew the mountain and Conrad

was happy to let him lead—with or without his shining nose. He didn't see any of his group for the entire day, which was brilliant. He and Arlo explored the mountain, stopping for Germknödel, huge hemispherical dumplings filled with plum jam, topped by molten butter, with sugar and poppy seeds sprinkled on top. *So bad but so good.* It wouldn't be the last one Conrad ate. They were irresistible.

A late afternoon Glühwein was the perfect end to the skiing. Sipping mulled wine while they lounged outside one of the restaurants, faces tipped to the winter sun, made Conrad so relaxed, he could have nodded off.

“Isn't this perfect?” Arlo whispered.

“Absolutely perfect.” Even the Christmas carols being piped over the decking didn't annoy him.

When they made their way back down to the bottom, he was exhausted but happy. Smiling was easy. That was down to Arlo.

Arlo pressed up against him in the cable car. “What are you grinning about?”

“I've had more fun with you today than I've had in years.” *Maybe in forever.* “Which I'm aware makes me sound like a very sad excuse for a human being, but it was a great day.”

“And it's not over. My parents asked me to ask you to dinner. I'd really like to keep you out of the clutches of my family, but if they like you, they'll be okay about you coming to share my room for the rest of your holiday.”

What? Conrad gulped. “No pressure then.”

“They'll like you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I like you.”

Conrad swallowed his whine of distress. “Why didn't we spend the day with you coaching me on what to say and not say?”

Arlo chuckled. “Just be yourself.”

“A boring accountant? A mad axe murderer?” Conrad took a deep breath. “You don’t have to ask me to stay with you. The chalet is fine. The company isn’t, but I’m a big boy, I can cope.”

“Are you?” Arlo whispered.

“Am I what?”

“A big boy?” Arlo pressed back into him.

Conrad tried not to groan. “I wasn’t. But I think I might grow into one if you keep doing that.”

“How exciting.”

“While I still have some function in my brain—taboo topics? Things that will impress them? I’m serious. I don’t want to put my foot in it the moment I open my mouth.”

“I don’t want *your* foot in it either.” Arlo stared at him and licked his lips.

“Oh God.”

“Can you do magic tricks?”

“What? No.”

“Are you any good at board games?”

“I have no idea.”

“Tell me one interesting thing about yourself.”

“I can tie a knot in a cherry stalk with my tongue.”

Arlo froze.

“What’s wrong?” Conrad whispered. *Why did I tell him that?*

“I was just wondering if there’s anywhere to buy cherries with stalks at this time of year.” He winked. “Maybe I can think of another use for that clever tongue.”

Conrad swallowed hard.

“Just when I think you can’t be more perfect, I find that you can.” Arlo tapped into his phone. “I’ve sent you the

address. You can walk to us from where you're staying. It's not too far, just through the town and up the hill. Or get a cab."

"How do you know where I'm staying?"

"I saw you with Trueblue Chalets at the airport. I got my brother Dieter, not Benedikt because he's a dick—they picked the perfect name—to follow the coach to see which chalet you were taken to."

"I've never had a stalker before."

"Are you scared?"

"Petrified."

Arlo grinned. "I'm a man on a mission."

They got out of the gondola and grabbed their skis from the racks before the car turned to make its way back up the mountain.

"Know where to get the bus to your chalet?" Arlo asked.

"Yes, thanks."

"I have to wait for my brothers. Come at seven tonight. Okay?"

Conrad nodded. They stepped forward at the same time and kissed. And kissed. Conrad didn't want to stop. It had been a long time since he'd kissed anyone so much and never like this.

Arlo pulled back, gasping. "Oh shit. We're going to get arrested. No more locking lips in public." He dropped his voice. "Because it's made me want to rip off all your clothes and fuck you in the snow."

"Are you okay with me fucking *you* in the snow as well?" Conrad mentally crossed his fingers.

"Your new name is Mr Perfect."

Oh God. Thank fuck his ski jacket and trousers hid what was happening below his waist.

"Too much. Sorry. I get over-enthusiastic," Arlo said.

Just like a certain part of Conrad's anatomy. "You're fun. I like that."

"Good. Bring your swimming trunks. We have a plunge pool."

Conrad shuddered. "Aren't they cold? I'm not sure that sounds very enticing."

Arlo shrugged. "Well, we have a hot tub and sauna too, but the plunge pool is a rite of passage."

To what?

"See you later."

Conrad watched Arlo make his way to one of the cafés before he turned to head for the bus stop. If he'd not been wearing such heavy ski boots, he'd have had a spring in his step, so he made do with the spring in his heart.

That little doubting voice in his head kept trying to tell him that this was just a holiday romance, that there was no future in it, but Conrad shushed it. They had a week to find out if it was going to be more. Though Conrad already knew what he wanted. Time to see if he really was a changed man.

Arlo sighed as he saw his brothers heading towards him. The expression on their faces said he was in for a grilling.

"Can he ski?" Dieter asked.

"Yes."

"Do you still like him?" Rurik asked.

"Yes."

"Did you ask him for dinner?" Julian's turn.

"He said yes."

"Does he know the extent to which you stalked him?" Benedikt grinned.

Fuck off. "Not yet. He plays the cello."

His brothers all stared at him.

“That’s interesting,” Rurik said.

“We need a drink before we go back.” Julian led the way to their favourite bar.

“Tell us everything,” Dieter said.

“Fuck off.”

David was in the shower when Conrad got back to the room. While Conrad had been on the shuttle, he'd checked the distance to Arlo's family chalet and decided to walk there and on the way find something to take as a present for Arlo's parents. A bottle of wine if he couldn't come up with something better. But what the hell could he take for people he didn't know? Hopefully, they weren't non-drinkers. He tucked his swimming trunks into a pocket of his ski jacket, took out his other gloves and hat from a drawer and as he laid them on the bed, David emerged from the bathroom.

"Hi," David said.

"Have a good day?" Conrad asked.

"Great. Though we continually had to wait for Ernesto. He kept snowploughing when it was the slightest bit steep. Drove Mark mad."

Good. "Oh dear."

"Shall I wait while you shower and we can go down to the bar together?" David asked.

"Thanks, but I'm going out. I won't be back for dinner." Conrad closed and locked the bathroom door. That had been very satisfying. He wished he could have said that he wouldn't be back for the rest of the holiday, but maybe Arlo's family wouldn't like him. Plus, it was a big risk. What if he ended up not liking Arlo? He might feel that was impossible right now, but he hardly knew the guy. And really, sharing his bedroom so quickly? What the hell would his family think about that? Even if it had been a serious offer, Conrad wasn't sure he was brave enough to stay.

In fact, he knew he wasn't.

He liked that Arlo wanted to move that fast, but Conrad couldn't.

Finding a present proved as difficult as Conrad thought it might be. He almost bought champagne, then decided it gave the wrong message so he picked out a bottle of expensive red wine and a box of Swiss chocolates. Boring but safe. *Shit, is that me?* But he didn't know these people. What else could he get? *Nothing. Calm the hell down.*

The closer he got to the address, the more nervous he became. It wasn't too late to turn back, manufacture some excuse, but he didn't want to disappoint Arlo. He didn't know why he was so anxious. He didn't have a problem meeting strangers. *Er...strangers who know you have your eye on their youngest son, youngest brother?* Conrad definitely wasn't staying the night. Best behaviour was called for. In other words, the way he usually behaved.

Arlo must have been watching for him because he opened the door before Conrad could knock.

"Hello, gorgeous," Arlo said and kissed him.

Conrad's anxiety melted along with his heart.

Arlo hung up his coat, gave him felt slippers to put on instead of his walking boots and led him up the stairs. "Give the wine to my mother, the chocolates to my father," he whispered. "And whatever happens remember I'm sorry, but I don't regret a thing."

"What?"

"You'll see."

Conrad took a deep breath before he followed Arlo into the room. The moment he stepped inside, he was bombarded with Christmas. There was a huge tree, lights and decorations everywhere, music playing, a fire blazing, *The Grinch* on the TV and so many people and kids, one of whom was on roller blades while two wielded lightsabres. The ones with weapons advanced on him. And there was a flying globe circling his head. *Bloody hell.*

"Friend or foe?" demanded the tallest Jedi.

"Let him breathe!" Arlo yelled. "For Pete's sake, back off, you two. Do you want him to think we're all crazy?" Arlo

stood in front of him with his hands on his hips.

“He’s going to find that out soon enough,” a guy called. Conrad thought it was Benedikt.

An older couple stepped forward in matching Christmas sweaters, but tasteful Fair Isle ones that could have been knitted by Conrad’s mother.

“You must be Arlo’s brother and sister,” Conrad said in German and immediately wished he hadn’t. What if he’d not said it right? But they both laughed. Hopefully for the right reason. He offered the wine to Arlo’s mother and the chocolates to his father, then held out his hand. “I’m Conrad Hamilton. Thank you for inviting me for dinner. It’s very kind of you.” English this time, just in case.

“You’re welcome. I’m Sam and this is my wife, Hannah.”

Hannah shook Conrad’s hand. “Lovely to meet you, Conrad.”

“You can speak German.” Arlo gazed at him. “Pretend you don’t and you can catch my brothers out.”

Arlo’s parents rolled their eyes.

“Come and get introduced to everyone. Don’t worry about remembering names.” Arlo tugged at Conrad’s elbow. “Oh, and please don’t freak out. You haven’t yet, but I don’t think you’ve seen the reason I said that.”

“Why would I fr...?” Conrad’s feet stopped moving though he managed to complete the sentence. “...eak out?” Then he wondered why he’d bothered. *Oh my God*. He was officially freaking out. He could feel himself shaking.

He shook hand after hand with three of Arlo’s brothers, their wives and then all the kids who were introduced as One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven. Not their age but order of birth. Just as well he hadn’t been given their names or told which brother they belonged to because of who he could see looming on the other side of the room. Really? *Really!* Passing out seemed a possibility.

Do not pass out! Arlo grabbed Conrad's hand and clung tight as he tugged him in front of Rurik Lehner, Conrad's boss's boss. The guy in charge of the whole company. *Jesus Christ. Almost literally.* And Conrad was holding the hand of his baby brother. *I feel sick.*

"This is my oldest brother," Arlo said. "I think you two might know one another."

Think? And define know.

"You don't have to call him *sir* here. Or your majesty. Or pain in the neck."

Rurik held out his hand. Conrad shook it, awash in a maelstrom of emotions. It felt as if his body didn't know which to go with. Embarrassment? Annoyance? Regret? Disappointment? Anxiety? Fear? Throwing up?

"Hello, Conrad," Rurik said.

"Hello, Mr Lehner." Had that come out right?

"Call me Rurik."

I don't think I can!

"Yes, you can," Rurik said.

Arlo elbowed Conrad. "He reads minds."

Oh God. Conrad was rerunning what Arlo had said, that he was sorry but didn't regret it. So Arlo already knew Conrad worked for Rurik's company. At what point had he known that? Conrad hadn't told him the firm's name on the plane. They hadn't exchanged surnames which might have clued Conrad in, but not... How much of a stalker was Arlo really?

"Would you prefer that I left?" Conrad asked Rurik quietly.

Rurik widened his eyes. "Are you kidding? Arlo would never forgive me." Rurik put his hand on Conrad's shoulder, pulled him in close and put his mouth to his ear. "Be kind to him, please."

"What did you say?" Arlo demanded. He tugged Conrad away. "What did he tell you?"

“That he’d beat the shit out of you if I ended up resigning.”
Oh shit. Open mouth. Insert foot. But Rurik laughed and so did Arlo. Conrad’s anxiety eased. Slightly.

Arlo guided Conrad over to the window to a spot near the Christmas tree, a space free of people, and held out both his hands. “Sorry.”

Conrad put his hands in Arlo’s. “So...you planned everything, Mr Man-On-A-Mission? Getting behind me in the queue at check-in. Dropping your passport. Making sure there was a seat next to you. Did you persuade your father to buy a chalet in Kitzbühel when you knew I was coming here on holiday?”

“Yes.”

Conrad gaped until Arlo rolled his eyes. “No. Not the last, obviously. And I did drop my passport accidentally. The head clash wasn’t intended.”

“But you *are* a stalker.”

Arlo winced. “That doesn’t make me sound very appealing.”

“Explain then, in a way that does make you sound appealing.” Though Conrad was sort of flattered that Arlo had made so much effort. But how and why?

“Only Rurik knows what I did, so please be careful what you say. Everyone else thinks I met you in line for the plane. I did. The first time I spoke to you was in the check-in queue, but it wasn’t the first time I’d seen you. I came to the office one night to meet Rurik to go for a meal, and everyone had gone home except for you and him. I don’t think you even knew he was still there. His office was dark. You were... crying.”

Conrad knew when that was. The evening he’d walked in on Mark and Ernesto.

“I wanted to go and hug you but I knew I shouldn’t, couldn’t. Rurik told me to leave you alone. I cried too. I know that sounds pathetic, but you were hurting and somehow that

hurt me and I didn't even know you, but I knew that I was going to get to know you. If I could."

Conrad swallowed hard.

"I know it doesn't make sense. Well, it makes sense but it doesn't make me sound good. You probably think I'm some weirdo now, but I felt a connection. There'd been a time when I'd sat in the dark and cried like that too. Men aren't supposed to cry, are they? You'd found a place where you thought you'd be on your own and I'd done the same a few months before, except there was no one watching me."

"I didn't think anyone was watching *me*."

"I couldn't help it. My mum said my heart's always been too big for my chest. When I was a little kid, I wanted to help everyone. My family took care of me, protected me and in a way, they didn't help me prepare for the real world. I was shocked when I realised how mean people could be. I promised myself I'd never walk away from anyone who needed help. But I knew that night, when I saw you, I had to. For a while at least. Whatever had upset you had nothing to do with me, but I wanted to make you smile again."

Conrad squeezed Arlo's fingers. "So you stalked me."

"I dropped hints to my brother about meeting you and he wouldn't even tell me your name. I love your name."

Conrad sighed.

"When I found out why you'd been crying that night, because Rurik eventually gave in and told me what had happened—well not all of it, just that you'd been dumped by a guy who worked at the same place, and he only told me after the whole office knew, I *did* leave you alone, but I never forgot you."

"Mark said he'd dumped me?" Conrad could actually feel his blood pressure surge.

Conrad hadn't known. He kept his private life—private. He'd not wanted to tell the truth and that had let Mark create his own version. *The bloody bastard*. But what did it matter? He was better off without him.

“I could see you doing a lot of thinking just then. You told me you found him in bed with Little Arsehole. Why would he tell the office he’d dumped you?”

“Because he’s a control freak.”

“I’ve wasted all this time waiting for you to get over him when I didn’t need to. Three months. I am so...cross.” Arlo frowned.

Conrad smiled. “Maybe I wasn’t ready until we bumped heads. I needed to learn some harsh truths about myself. I’d lost my sense of worth along with my self-respect. I stayed with Mark far longer than I should have. The day he first told me he wasn’t that into me anymore was the day I should have walked away.”

Arlo huffed. “I’m angry with him because he’s an idiot. How could he not be into you? But I’m a bit angry with you as well.”

Conrad couldn’t help laughing at that.

“Even though you were sad when I first saw you, I thought you were gorgeous,” Arlo whispered. “I just hoped you weren’t sick or had something wrong that I couldn’t fix. I didn’t actually stalk you, I promise. I left you alone. I didn’t try to find out where you lived. I didn’t follow you. But I didn’t forget you either, and I hoped that one day maybe we could meet. I will confess I sort of pushed Rurik into suggesting Kitzbühel as a destination to Big Arsehole when I found out there was a company ski trip and you were going.”

“I’d wondered why Mark changed his mind.”

“I just hoped you wouldn’t still be going out with him by the time the trip came round.”

“If I had been?”

“I don’t know what I’d have done. But you weren’t and I still left you alone and hoped. I thought if we sat together on the plane and there was no spark, then we’d walk away from each other and you’d never know what I’d dreamed of, but there was a spark. I knew there would be.” Arlo gave a quiet moan. “Are you creeped out?”

Conrad wasn't sure what he thought anymore.

"You are, aren't you?" Arlo whispered. His shoulders fell.

To be wanted for so long... All that time spent being miserable when he could have been happy with Arlo. "I'm not creeped out. I'm thinking you shouldn't have waited so long but that's my fault because I didn't know what Mark had told people. My fault because my head was a mess."

Arlo shot him a little smile. "Not your fault. Well, not entirely. Rurik told me to give you time and space, and reminded me that I needed that too. Let's go and sit outside for a while. Away from everyone. Please. They're staring at us now, wondering what we've been talking about for so long."

Conrad let Arlo pull him down the stairs. Boots and coats were put on along with hats and gloves and he went outside holding Arlo's hand. They walked through falling snow to a flat area at the side of the house, excavated into the hillside, where there was a large hot tub, a plunge pool and a covered swimming pool. Arlo brushed the snow from two loungers and then tugged Conrad down onto one and he took the other.

"This is all going wrong. You're too quiet." Arlo chewed his lip. "Rurik warned me."

"What did he say?"

"That I suffer from spoilt youngest child syndrome, that I'm too used to getting my own way, that I always treat everything like a mission, that I think I can sort out everyone's problems and I'm too single-minded. But not like Tom Cruise. I've pushed too hard. I'm sorry." He gulped. "Rurik said I always go for impossible guys."

"Such as?"

"Zachary Quinto, Darryl Stephens, Chris Colfer, my ex, now you."

Conrad chuckled. "I'm not impossible."

"I really like you."

"I really like you too."

“But I’ve gone too fast, haven’t I?”

“Too fast, too slow, does it matter? Come over here.”

Arlo slid onto the lounge, facing him and Conrad pulled him in so they lay wedged together and as he leaned in for a kiss, Arlo’s arms snaked around to hold him tight. And as their lips met, all Conrad’s anxiety washed away. It felt so long since he’d been wanted by anyone.

“I love kissing you,” Arlo told him.

“Less talking, more kissing.”

Moments later, Arlo’s fingers were busy unfastening their coats, and Conrad could feel the hard length of Arlo’s cock pressed against him through their trousers. While their tongues tangled, they groaned into each other’s mouths and kissed harder. Even in his lust-fuelled state of desperation, Conrad knew they had to stop. Arlo’s family were probably glued to the window, staring down at them, taking all this in. All he needed was enough resolve to actually stop. But he wanted to keep lying there in the snow, him and Arlo pressing themselves together, kissing and kissing and kissing.

“Dinner’s ready!” a voice called from somewhere above them.

Fuck. Conrad was so close to the edge that in a short time he wasn’t going to be fit to sit and have dinner. Arlo was breathing hard and rocking against him.

“Arlo!” Conrad whispered his name. “We need to stop.”

“I know. “

But he didn’t.

“Arlo!”

“I don’t want to stop.”

“If we don’t, I’m going to have to go back to the hotel.”

“Why?” Arlo exhaled against Conrad’s neck and Conrad shivered.

“Newton’s third law.”

Arlo sat bolt upright, then nodded. “For every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. Ah. Right.”

He levered himself to his feet, brushed off the snow and took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to go back tonight.”

Conrad could think of nothing he wanted more than to stay with Arlo, but... How would that look? He couldn’t do it.

“All we’ll need to do is be quiet,” Arlo said. “Are you quiet? I’m not. Damn.” He whined.

“I’ll stay for a while and we’ll talk, but I didn’t ought to stay the night. Not this fast.”

Arlo whined louder.

“Ask me another day.”

“I’ll keep asking until you say yes.”

It was going to be hard to say no, but Arlo had to see that it wouldn’t be right.

The meal was fantastic. Fondue *and* raclette because there was disagreement among the brothers as to which was best, and for dessert, *palatschink*, scrambled sweet pancakes served with powdered sugar and stewed plums. Conrad had to make a conscious effort not to eat too much, in the same way that he was having to stop himself from touching Arlo, though their knees were pressed together under the table.

The kids watched TV while the adults did the dishes, then Conrad, Arlo and his four brothers ended up in the hot tub.

Conrad usually considered sitting in a hot tub at night, surrounded by snow—especially when snow was actually falling from the sky, which it was currently doing—as one of his favourite things. But under the scrutiny of five guys, one of whom was the big boss, and one of whom looked too edible to resist, he might end up rethinking that. There was no way Rurik would think he was good for his younger brother, even though Rurik had no idea just how pathetic Conrad had been over Mark. *I hope*. And he’d changed. He really had.

“That was good work on Blackshore,” Rurik said. “You saved us a lot of money.”

“Thank you,” Conrad answered.

Arlo *tsked*. “You are *not* to talk about work.”

“I want Conrad to feel comfortable,” Rurik said.

“Don’t gang up on him then. You’re a lot to deal with.” Under the water, Arlo slid his hand into Conrad’s.

“Did you go down the Hahnenkammbahn?” Dieter asked.

“Yep,” Benedikt said.

Dieter rolled his eyes. “I know you did. I was with you.”

“How’s it running?” Rurik asked.

“How do you think?” Dieter shrugged. “Fast and furious.”

“Fancy a race tomorrow?” Benedikt was looking at Conrad.

“Racing down one of the most dangerous ski runs in the world?” Conrad raised his eyebrows. “Couldn’t you just pummel me in a snowball fight instead?”

They all laughed and Conrad’s chest eased. Arlo cuddled up against him and wormed his way under Conrad’s arm.

“We’re very protective of Arlo,” Rurik said.

“All my life.” Arlo gave a heavy sigh. “I was never bullied at school. One look from any of these four and no one came near me. Why do you think I became a pilot? I had to get a long way away from you lot.”

“He tried to fly off the roof when he was a little boy,” Benedikt said. “Broke both his legs.”

“We got into trouble for not stopping him.” Dieter splashed water across at Arlo and Conrad.

“No more stories about me,” Arlo said.

“Remember the time he took all his clothes off in the Ladies’ while Mum was in the cubicle? Even his nappy,” Dieter said.

“Please,” Arlo pleaded.

“He gave her a running commentary on what he was doing,” Julian said. “Even when he—”

“I’m going in the plunge pool,” Conrad said and brought all the attention back to him. “And so is Arlo.”

“No,” Arlo shrieked.

“You’ll never get him in there,” Rurik said.

Conrad climbed out of the hot tub, his skin and wet hair prickling in the cold air. He held out his hand to Arlo.

Arlo muttered under his breath, but took it. Though when they reached the pool, Conrad was pretty sure there was a layer of ice over the top. He touched it with his toe. *Fuck!* No ice but...

“You don’t have to, Arlo,” Rurik shouted.

Arlo turned to Conrad. “In on three?”

“How deep is it?”

“Fifteen feet.”

“What?”

“Three!” Arlo shouted and pulled him in.

Conrad was pretty sure his heart stopped. *Fucking hell.* Cold was too mild a word. The water was only around five feet deep so both he and Arlo could stand up, but all Conrad could think about was getting out.

“Okay?” Conrad’s teeth chattered as he spoke.

“Out,” Arlo gasped.

Conrad helped him up the steps first and then led him back to the hot tub.

“This is going to hurt,” Arlo warned as they stepped in.

It did, but only for a moment before it turned into spiky bliss, then complete bliss.

“I can’t believe you persuaded him to do that,” Benedikt said. “The last time Arlo went in—”

“You stopped me getting out. Bastards. Conrad helped me out *and* he let me get out first.”

“We noticed,” Rurik said. “Come on. Let’s leave them alone for a while. Don’t stay out here too long.”

As they climbed out, Arlo’s fingers slid back around Conrad’s. “Was that the only way you could think of to distract them?”

“I thought about throwing a snowball at my boss and then thought again.”

Arlo laughed.

“And you did say the plunge pool was a rite of passage.”

“You took care of me. They liked that. They like you.”

“I like them.”

“Only because you didn’t grow up with them.”

“Maybe, but being an only child was lonely.”

“Are your parents still alive?”

“Possibly.”

“What does that mean?”

“They went to live in Canada when I was eighteen. I haven’t seen or heard from them since.”

“What the fuck?” Arlo shook his head in disbelief.

“They’re a bit...weird.”

“A bit weird? That’s more than a bit. What does—did your father do?”

“He was a pipeline engineer, away for long periods at a time. My mum had a wool shop and she used to knit jumpers for a boutique in Edinburgh. Chunky things. Some were nice. They hadn’t wanted a child. I was the result of a faulty condom.”

“They told you that?” Arlo looked horrified.

“A couple of times.” More than that. “She didn’t realise she was pregnant until it was too late for an abortion.”

“They told you *that*? Oh my God, and I’m moaning about my family.” Arlo moved so he straddled Conrad’s lap.

Conrad lost his train of thought for a moment. “It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. They mostly left me to my own devices. I was never any trouble. I don’t remember ever getting told off. I just did as they wanted, but they never wanted me to do much except be quiet and be a good boy. Though I think that did more damage than they or I realised. I should have taken a few risks, lived a little and not followed every rule.”

“Rurik’s big on following rules. I’m not. Well, I wasn’t. I’m better at it now. I have to be as a pilot.”

“I had several therapy sessions a few months ago. I think they helped me understand why I stayed with Mark longer than I should have. I felt I’d been weak, and I had been but in my professional life, I wasn’t like that. She—the therapist—helped me see how abusive my parents had been, how I’d felt abandoned and that had led me to fall for Mark’s manipulations. Mark’s narcissistic. He preyed on me. I thought I let it happen, but I was in part of victim of his personality. A boy who’d never been loved, grew into a man desperate for love.”

“Did you love him?” Arlo asked quietly.

“I thought I did. I was wrong. I know he never loved me. The way he treated me was...bad on so many levels. He almost set me up to look like a thief on one occasion. He took a wallet from a shop after he knocked me into a display so it fell over. I ended up paying for it just to stop the police being called. He thought it was a joke. He stole a lot of stuff just because he was sure he’d get away with it. The more I read about narcissistic personality disorder, the more I saw Mark as a poster boy for it and the more liberated I felt.”

“He sounds awful.”

“He’d charm you. He charms everyone. But not me anymore. All those times I talked myself into staying with him, or going back to him, I regret every one of them. But I did some growing up. Mark was cruel and disrespectful and he doesn’t deserve another thought from me.”

“Do your parents? Have you thought about getting in touch with them?”

“No. They made it clear how they felt about me and that’s fine. I tried to be a good son and I was until the day I told them I was gay. It didn’t go down well. I actually thought they wouldn’t give a shit, but I was wrong. Coming out as gay made me someone they didn’t even want in their house anymore and that was that. They’re no loss to me.”

“Except they are. Well, not them, they’re no loss at all, but you should have had parents like mine.” Arlo kissed him. “The day I told my mother I was gay, she said, ‘Finally. Sweetheart, I knew when you were ten. So did your father. We wondered how long we’d have to wait for you to realise.’ They were never anything but supportive. My brothers too. I was a little shit when I was young. Four older brothers meant I got away with more than I should have.”

“They don’t want you hurt. They seem very clear about that. Especially Rurik.”

Arlo sighed.

“What happened?” Conrad asked.

“A mess.”

“I’ve taken the lid off my mess and stirred it so...”

“I was in a relationship with a guy who lived in Berlin. I met him when I was positioning to Berlin to fly another aircraft back. We hit it off, and I used to bid to fly to Berlin all the time so I could see him. He came to see me in the UK. I thought he was the one. He was nothing like Mark. He was kind and fun and he never disrespected me. Until one day, he did. I’d bought a ring for him and when I tried to give it to him, he burst out laughing.” Arlo pressed himself harder against Conrad. “He said I’d only ever been his bit on the side, that he and his...husband had an open relationship, but I’d got too clingy. He’d shared everything we’d done with his husband. They got off on it. We’d been together a year and I had no idea he had another life.”

“Oh Christ.”

“I was so shocked that I had a breakdown. I couldn’t function. My mum had to force me to eat. My brothers came and made me shower. They did everything they could to snap me out of it. I was lucky to have them. I *am* lucky. Even so, things were really dark for a long time. I felt so stupid, humiliated. Why hadn’t I seen? But I hadn’t.”

“That’s a horrible thing to do to someone.”

“It was. I finally plucked up the courage to tell him what I thought of him. I thought that would help me stop mourning, because that’s what I was doing, but before I had the chance, I found out he’d died in a car crash.” Arlo gave him a tight-mouthed smile. “I am over him now, over what happened. I made a mistake but I didn’t let it keep hurting me. Just a hard life-lesson.”

Conrad wanted to kiss him. It was all he could think about. Finally, he stopped thinking and pulled him in, keeping his hand at the back of Arlo’s head until their mouths were a breath apart. Arlo was breathing fast, but Conrad’s lungs seemed to have forgotten how to work. Then their lips were together and when their tongues touched, they both moaned.

They’d both been hurt. They were damaged but not broken. Even though they’d only just met, Conrad knew Arlo was special. Arlo stroked Conrad’s cheek and teased his tongue. The kiss was deep and hot, and Conrad found himself moving the pair of them to the middle of the tub so that they were on their knees, just their heads out of the bubbling water. Conrad felt as if he was in another world, maybe heaven, because this was all he wanted to do. Keep kissing Arlo, be part of his world and never let him get hurt again because he knew what that felt like.

I am so fucking yours, Arlo Lehner. Please don’t let me go.

5

Except you have to let me go tonight.

When Conrad said he wouldn't stay the night, for one awful moment, he thought Arlo hadn't understood, that he might imagine he was being rejected, when that was the last thing Conrad wanted him to feel.

"It isn't that I don't want to stay, but it seems disrespectful to you and to your family."

"But you can stay here for the whole of the time you're in Austria," Arlo said. "I want you to. They won't mind. I'm not a child."

They stood at the door of Arlo's family's chalet and Conrad took his hands. "It feels wrong to climb into your bed the day after we met, with your family all around us."

"They won't be watching."

Conrad laughed. "I didn't express myself very well."

"I won't feel disrespected. Move in tomorrow then?"

Conrad smiled. "I want this to be the start."

"It *is* the start. You feel it?"

"I do. But let's take it steady. We only get one first time. We shouldn't rush it."

"I've been waiting so long."

Conrad could so easily waver, so easily fall. "Make me wait, then."

"I don't want you to." Arlo whined. "I can wait until tomorrow, if pushed."

Conrad chuckled. "Well, I'm pushing. I'll meet you by the Hahnenkammbahn cable car at nine."

"And wait for forty minutes again?"

"I'd have waited far longer than that."

“Another five minutes?”

“If I’d known you’d be coming, then I’d have waited all day.”

Arlo smiled and kissed him.

The kiss went on until Conrad could feel Arlo getting cold.

“Text me when you get back so I know you’re safe and not stuck in a snowdrift,” Arlo said.

Conrad nodded.

He tried to ignore the disappointed look on Arlo’s face, and set off back to the hotel. Why did doing the right thing feel like he’d done the exact opposite? Even if Rurik hadn’t been Arlo’s elder brother, Conrad would have still gone back to the hotel. He wasn’t sure he could have faced Arlo’s parents in the morning, let alone a pack of scowling brothers.

The town was still busy with après-skiers having a good time, light and sound spilling from bars into the streets. The snow continued to fall and everywhere looked beautiful, sparkling under the street lights, with all sharp edges softened. Maybe this was going to be the best Christmas he’d ever had. Conrad told himself not to hope for too much, but it was hard not to. He’d opened up to Arlo. Told him stuff that he’d only told the therapist. Not told him just how bad it had been with Mark, but that was behind him. He was a different person now. Emotional neglect had led him into Mark’s arms and ironically, the same thing had led him out of them.

His therapist had made him understand that he was more of a victim than he’d ever seen himself. No more thinking he was too passive, too weak. He’d made a mistake. He’d learned and now he was a different person.

David was fast asleep when Conrad went into the hotel room, a lump under the covers. Conrad was as quiet as he undressed. After he’d used the bathroom, he slipped into bed and pulled the covers over his head.

I’m back he tapped into his phone.

The reply came quickly. **I wish you were here.**

I'm sorry I left.

I understand. I do.

It's your parents' chalet. It feels...difficult.

I am a bit of a screamer.

Conrad smiled. *Well then! Think how you'd feel if one of your brothers rushed in thinking I was killing you.*

LOL Rurik said Big Arsehole—well he didn't call him that—has organised a race tomorrow at 10 at the Kitzbüheler Horn slalom course. Rurik's going because clients are racing. You should ski too. I'll meet you there instead of the base and watch you beat Rurik.

As if I'd dare.

If you lose deliberately, he'll know and so will I. You're good! I'll see you at the top at 10. Night xx

Night xxx

xxxx

Conrad smiled and tapped xxxxx

Arlo sent him a happy face along with **I'm letting you win with the xs** and Conrad set his phone aside. He wondered if Mark would even tell him about the race. Probably not, since he'd not skied with them today.

The next morning, he went down for breakfast with David. Everyone else was already down there, sitting at one long table. Conrad collected a variety of items from the buffet; cheese, ham, fruit and bread, and sat at the end next to Simon, one of the clients. Mark and Ernesto were at the opposite end.

“The food here is so good,” Simon said. “You missed a delicious meal last night.”

“I was eating with a friend.”

“This place is just fantastic. The suite I'm in has a hot tub. Does yours?”

“No.”

“My girlfriend would love it here.”

“Does she mind you missing Christmas?”

“Nope. It’s my ex-wife’s turn to have the kids and Christabel’s gone to the Canary Islands with her friends for some winter sun. I might bring the kids here next year. Her too, if we’re still together.”

“The skiing is hard though.”

“That’s true. I hope I survive this race that Mark’s organised so I can enjoy the slopes again this afternoon.”

Conrad chatted to him about the slopes he and Arlo had been down and when Simon took out a piste map, Conrad showed him the slopes he’d enjoyed.

“I’ll give those a try. Thank you.”

While everyone was eating, Mark came down the table, chatting and putting his hand on people’s shoulders. *If he touches me, I’m going to... What?* Well, he wasn’t going to leap up and smack his hand away. What he had to do was sit there and do nothing. Mark was no more than a colleague now, so no reaction was the way to go.

Mark didn’t touch him but dropped into the empty seat next to him. “We’re racing this morning at ten. I booked a session on the Kitzbüheler Horn. We ski in pairs, then the fastest go again in pairs until we get a winner. You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. Ernesto isn’t racing.” He lowered his voice. “You can watch with him, but I want you up there showing support for the clients. Whoop or something.”

Fuck you. “I’ll race.”

Mark gave a short laugh, then pushed to his feet and went round to the other side of the table.

Conrad noticed that they’d already split into groups. Friends of Mark’s were sitting together, as were clients and firm employees. Conrad had paid the full amount for the trip but he knew Mark had negotiated a deal for himself as the organiser, with no mention of sharing that discount among the rest of them. If there had been any effort needed to arrange the

trip that might have been acceptable but all he'd had to do was go online and fill in a few forms.

Conrad was under no obligation to ski with them or do anything with them. The clients were Mark's responsibility, but Conrad did feel a duty to the firm, particularly now he knew Rurik was Arlo's brother, so he'd race and he'd cheer everyone on. Except for Mark. Conrad would have to try very hard not to wish Mark fell flat on his face. And broke his teeth.

When Conrad and the others reached the start of the slalom course, all the Lehnners were there. Not that Conrad could see their faces, but five tall guys standing together and Arlo's little wave gave them away. Well, that and the antlers stuck to his helmet and the wide smile on his face. Rurik skied over and shook hands with everyone. Mark was in full guy-in-charge-of-the-fun mode, and busy announcing the racing order and handing out numbered vests. Conrad was in the fourth race against Simon. The drop through the gates was steep but it led straight to the chair lift that would bring them back to the top.

Conrad wasn't especially competitive. He'd not been in a ski race since he was a teenager, but he'd taken part in them since he was four. His parents had never come to see him in the races that concluded a week in ski school. When they came to collect him on the final day, there was a prize giving and Conrad had usually won something. Most spectacular wipe-out one year. It had been. He'd been lucky not to break anything.

His parents had never wanted to stay for the ceremony, but sometimes instructors had persuaded them to when Conrad had won a medal. He'd wanted them to be thrilled for him, but if they said 'well done' it was as much as he got. He still had the medals, though the certificates had been thrown away.

Today, he was going to do his best to at least win the race against Simon. He rolled his eyes when Mark insisted on doing a run down the course on his own, to 'show them the way'. Even Rurik had huffed at that. They all knew Mark was giving himself an advantage by checking out the gates.

“Shouldn’t we all have had a chance to do one practice run?” Conrad asked when Mark was back.

He had support for that idea, but Mark shook his head. “No time. Sorry. Right, first race.”

While two of Mark’s friends were gingerly negotiating their way down the slope, Mark slid to Conrad’s side. “Let Simon win,” he said.

“Are you going to let Matteo win?” That was who Mark was paired with.

Mark didn’t say anything, but the glare he gave Conrad was answer enough. Of course he wasn’t.

Several spectators had been given cowbells. Arlo was furiously shaking his. As Conrad stood waiting for his turn, he watched the line others took down the course, noting spots that seemed to cause issues. Just before Conrad was up, he spotted Arlo speeding down at the side, ringing his bell, and he smiled.

“Good luck,” he said to Simon.

“You too.”

The countdown started, and Conrad’s pulse jumped. He launched himself off with as much force as he could, and after he’d negotiated the first gate, he fell into a rhythm. Everything flowed. He neither missed a gate nor came off line, and he felt he’d had a good run. Arlo was at his side before Simon had even finished.

“I knew you could do it.” Arlo grinned. “Now beat the rest of them.”

“Including your brother?”

He winced. “You might.”

Simon skied over and shook Conrad’s hand. “Wow, you were fast. Well done.”

“Thank you.”

As he and Arlo rode the two-seater chair back to the top, another pair were skiing down. Matteo and Mark. Conrad

didn't turn to see who'd won but Arlo did.

"Big Arsehole is through to the next round. He's not as good as you. He's trying too hard."

Could I win? Conrad hadn't been bothered but now he wanted the final race to be between him and Mark. *Even if you don't win?* asked that annoying voice. *Fuck off!* Conrad thought that had gone for good.

"I know what you're thinking," Arlo said. "If you two are the last pair, and you're too far ahead to catch, I bet he falls over."

"He'll be too determined to beat me."

"If I'm right, and he throws the race, you have to stay over Christmas Eve."

"Does that mean if you're wrong, I can't stay over?"

"No," Arlo said as they lifted the bar and slid off at the top. "If I'm wrong, you can choose whether to stay or not. If he throws the race, you *have* to stay."

Sounded like a win-win to Conrad, but he still worried about intruding on a family gathering.

When he found himself skiing against Rurik, Conrad sighed.

He sighed even harder when he beat him. Just. Rurik skied over and shook his hand.

"Congratulations. Your technique is excellent."

"Thank you."

They poled over to the lift.

"How long have you been skiing?" Rurik asked.

"Since I was four."

"As long as me."

But Conrad had only skied for one week a year. Plus, Rurik was at least ten years older than him. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if Rurik had let him win, but he didn't because Rurik would say no and Conrad would have offended

him. When they reached the top, Arlo was full of glee about him beating his brother, and Conrad swallowed his doubts.

When he and Mark were the last ones standing—literally—after two guys had wiped out, and another declared that he'd had enough, Conrad was surprised by how calm yet determined he felt. He had no idea whether he could beat Mark or not, but he'd give it everything he'd got. Mark was fast and skied aggressively, but maybe Conrad was faster. *I can be aggressive too.* There was no way of cheating at this, otherwise he was pretty sure Mark would have.

Conrad made sure he got the fastest start he possibly could, then tucked in, poles under his arms and raced for the first gate. He could vaguely hear the cowbells, then all he could hear was the thudding of his heart as he wound his way down, keeping as tight to the posts as he could. Some he hit, where there was a faster line to take than going wider. He'd watched and learned. He was flying. This was the fastest he'd been so far. But fast enough?

Even when he was over the finishing line, he wasn't sure if he'd won but Arlo was poling over to him, and there was no sign of Mark. When Conrad looked back up the slope, he saw Mark being helped to his feet at the netting. Mark shook off the helping hand and skied down.

"Told you," Arlo said. "You were clearly going to win so he deliberately fell over."

Mark turned hard when he reached their side and showered them both with a wave of snow.

"Arsehole," Arlo muttered.

"Caught a ridge of some sort," Mark said. "The groomers must have missed it. I had no idea you were such a good skier."

Conrad waited for the next comment which he'd already predicted.

"If I'd not fallen, I'd have given you a run for your money."

"Want to race again?" Conrad asked.

“No time.” Mark skied off to the chairlift.

“Coward,” Arlo muttered. “That’s Benedikt and Julian coming down now. Oh look, is that Little Arsehole snowploughing the course behind them?”

“Yes. Good for him.” Maybe Ernesto had only been skiing a couple of times. Conrad ought to feel sorry for him, stuck with Mark. He even thought about warning him but decided to stay quiet.

“I told you to wait for me,” Mark shouted from the chairlift, but Ernesto couldn’t hear him, or maybe was ignoring him. Was he that brave? Conrad hoped he’d started to see through Mark. He wouldn’t wish the guy on anyone.

“Race me down, then let’s have lunch,” Arlo said.

“Sounds good.”

They went up on the chairlift and Arlo beamed at him. “Think there’s a prize?”

“Because *I* won, unlikely. If anyone else had won, then I suspect there would have been one.”

“He really is an arsehole.”

When they’d skied to the finish line and Conrad had beaten Arlo, he felt awash in adrenaline. Arlo skied to his side and Conrad gave him a hug.

“Have they approached you about the World Championships?” Arlo asked.

“Yes,” Conrad said with a straight face and for a moment, Arlo was taken in.

“Bastard,” he muttered.

6

They had lunch with Arlo's brothers, apart from Rurik who'd gone to a different restaurant to eat with the clients. The brothers were all impressed he'd beaten their elder brother. It was hard not to bask in the compliments.

"Do you think I did beat him?" Conrad whispered to Arlo.

"Of course you did." Arlo sounded aghast.

"Definitely." Julian nodded.

"They all have bat-like hearing." Arlo shrugged.

"No way would Rurik *let* anyone win anything," Benedikt said. "When we were kids, he wouldn't even let us win at Snap. Said it was character-building. It made us all hate him." But he chuckled and so did his brothers.

"It did mean that when we won, we knew we deserved it," Dieter said.

"I take it board games in the Lehner household are tense affairs," Conrad said.

"We cheat if it gets too serious," Dieter said. "Rurik throws a fit of temper at how childish we are, then gives up."

Conrad enjoyed the lunch. He was disappointed when Arlo told him he couldn't ski that afternoon but had to go back to the chalet with his brothers. The husbands were taking over childcare duty to let their wives have a turn on the slopes and Arlo had been roped in to help his mother to cook.

"You'll come tonight, right?" Arlo asked as they left the restaurant.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Mum wants you to come almost as much as me and I *really* want you to come."

With all Arlo's winks and nudges, Conrad didn't miss the other meaning. "Okay. Call and tell me when you want me

there. I'm going to have a few more runs and then go back and use the pool."

"Snow's forecast for this afternoon, so take care."

They shared a kiss before they put on their helmets and skis and when Arlo went down on the cable car, Conrad skied across to a chair back up the mountain.

He discovered a lovely but tricky blue run fed by a two-person chair and went down that twice. As he queued to go up for a third and final time, he spotted Mark and several others from the group ahead of him in the queue. He thought about leaving the line but why should he? He knew he'd been seen because David called and waved to him. One more run and he'd go back to the chalet.

As Conrad came off the chairlift at the top, he skied left, taking it a little wide because the person next to him turned left as well. Mark and the others hadn't skied down yet but were standing near the top of the slope. Other skiers were crossing in front of them and there was just room to sneak through between the back of the group and the danger marker poles. But as Conrad edged through, Mark slid back and to avoid going over his skis, Conrad was forced to move closer to the yellow and black tape. As he did, the snow dropped away beneath him and he fell sideways, tumbling down a steep slope, and he kept falling. *Shit!*

Conrad didn't panic at first but when he didn't stop sliding, his heart started to jump. He was aware that a much larger drop lay below if he didn't stop, but to his immense relief, he slithered to a halt part-upside down, half-buried in the snow. For a long moment, he didn't try to move. He was pretty sure he'd not broken anything, it had been a long slithering slide rather than a violent tumbling one, though he'd lost a ski. *Shit!* He still didn't move but lay still, getting his breath back, waiting for the shock to fade so he could take in the situation and assess what he needed to do.

"You okay?" someone shouted down.

Not absolutely sure yet, but fairly sure. "Yes."

He heard someone else laugh. No surprise that it was Mark. *Fuck you.*

Conrad carefully twisted himself round so he was lying with his head above his legs. His ski was there so he grabbed it and hauled it over. If he lost that, he was definitely in trouble. Though when he looked up, his heart sank. *I'm in trouble anyway.* He must have fallen about thirty feet and getting himself out of this dip was going to be hard work. The only way out was by sidestepping up, except he was faced with an almost vertical bank of soft snow, only marred by his descent. A glance downslope was even more alarming. Skiing that way was definitely not an option. He could see the town what looked like miles below.

“The rest of you ski down, I’ll stick around,” Mark said.

Conrad struggled to get to his feet, his poles and the ski he was holding, disappearing in the deep snow and offering no support. He had to clear snow from his boot before he could try to get the ski on, but to his immense relief, it clipped into place on the first attempt. He was exhausted even before he started to climb.

“Doesn’t look as though I can do anything to help,” Mark called.

Conrad wasn’t imagining the glee in his voice. “I know what you did.”

“Me? I didn’t do anything.”

“You saw me and moved back to block me.”

“You should have watched where you were going. Well, you’re the right way up and no bones are broken. I’m not waiting.”

Conrad clenched his teeth. No way would he have left anyone on their own in this position. What if he couldn’t make it to the top? What if no one else noticed he was here? There was no attendant on that lift.

He started the long climb back to the top, literally moving no more than a few centimetres or so at a time, though sometimes slipping back and losing a little of the progress

he'd made. He was trying to make a sort of ladder in the snow, but every step was painfully slow and very tiring. Conrad was hot and sweaty, yet cold at the same time. He had water trickling down his back from snow that had found a way into the neck of his jacket below his helmet.

Despite his shivers, he didn't stop moving. One step after another. He blinked as a snowflake caught on his eyelashes. A moment later, the snow wasn't just floating down but falling so thick and fast, that visibility plummeted. *Shit*. Still, the only way for him was up. Couldn't get that wrong.

It didn't take long before Conrad was more than exhausted. Who knew there were various levels of being incredibly tired? He kept having to stop and catch his breath, only his breath didn't want to be caught. Giving his legs a rest made no difference because he still had a mountain to climb. He even tried calling out because he wanted someone to know he was up here but no one answered and he couldn't hear voices anymore. Or the rattle and swish of the chairlift.

One careless move made him slide back to almost where he'd started, and he could have cried. All that wasted effort. He had no choice but to start again. At least it was a little easier now he'd pressed down the snow and he risked taking bigger steps.

When he reached the point at which he'd slid back and took in how sheer it was from this point, his heart jumped out of his throat and ran up to the top on its own. *If only it was that easy*. Conrad was anxious about falling again. Not just because he wasn't sure how many more levels of exhaustion he had before he ran out, but if he couldn't stop himself sliding, he'd drop off the lip and fall into a place where no one would see him. He took off a glove, made sure he wasn't going to lose it, and called Arlo.

"Yes, you can come round now," Arlo said.

For a moment, Conrad was so relieved to hear his voice, he couldn't speak.

"Have you butt-dialed me? Not that I'm complaining."

“No,” Conrad managed. “I’ve fallen.”

“What? Where? Are you okay?”

“Top of the Turmwiese.”

“The top? Where at the top? Are you injured?”

“No injuries. I’m on the left of the chairlift. I fell off-piste. I’m slowly sidestepping my way back up, but I’m really tired.”

“Oh God. Don’t take any risks. I’m coming.”

“You don’t need to come. You can’t help me up. I just wanted you to know where I was.”

“So I can retrieve your body? Good idea. Shit! Horrible thing to say because now I’m terrified. I’ll call Ski Patrol. The mountain’s closed.”

“No need to call them. I have to get myself out of this. I can ski down.” *I hope.*

“Conrad! Please be careful. I can’t... Please!”

“I’ll be fine. See you tonight.” Conrad put his phone away and pulled his glove back on.

Talking to Arlo had given him the morale boost he’d needed. He summoned more energy from somewhere and made a little more progress. He’d never had to work his way up anything this steep before. If he fell again, he really wasn’t sure he could climb out without help. Could they drop a rope and haul him up?

The snow was still falling thickly and the light was fading. He didn’t want to ski down in visibility as low as this but there was no choice. *One last push. Think about Christmas with Arlo and his family. Do not let yourself fall!*

He was so close to the top, but not close enough to risk throwing himself at it only for the snow to collapse under him and send him plummeting, so he kept going and going until he felt he could risk dropping sideways. *Please!* When he found firm snow under him, he could have cried.

He squirmed away from the edge, and lay for a while with his heart hammering, cold seeping into his bones. When he

pushed himself up, his legs were shaking. He called Arlo again.

“Are you out?” Arlo asked.

“I’m okay. I’m on the level now. Safe. Except the chair lift has stopped working so I’ll definitely have to ski down to the cable car.”

“I’ve been trying to get them to restart that lift but the wind’s picked up and they’re being awkward. Sure you’re all right? They want to know if they should come and get you.”

“I’m fine. As long as the cable car is still working.”

“Yes, it is. I’ll be waiting. Snowplough. Don’t take any risks. No jumps. No back flips. Be careful.”

“See you soon.” Conrad looked over at the marker poles. The one that he’d hit lay flat on the edge of the slope and didn’t look in line with the rest. Had it been moved closer to the edge? Mark wouldn’t... No, surely not. But when he slid over to have a look, not too close because there was no way he could climb up again, one of the standing poles wasn’t in line with the others. He’d tell someone when he got down. Mark’s work or not, it was still dangerous.

It was a slow, cautious descent. He didn’t snowplough but made shallow turns, kept his speed low and stopped every now and again to make sure he was on the right track. When he saw the cable car station shining in the gloom, he was so relieved, he caught an edge and fell. This time it was just a matter of pushing to his feet and skiing on.

Rurik was waiting with Arlo who threw his arms around him. “Oh God, oh God,” he kept saying.

“Do you need any medical attention?” Rurik asked.

“No, I’m just tired and cold.”

Conrad clipped off his skis and picked them up.

Rurik took them off him. “Let me carry them.”

Conrad didn’t argue. When he was sitting in the cable car, Arlo snuggled up to him. Twelve minutes to get to the bottom

and Conrad was getting colder and colder.

“You’re white,” Rurik said. “So what happened?”

“I’d been down that run a couple of times and the last time I went up Mark and the rest were ahead in the queue. When I skied off the chairlift, they were gathered at the top of the slope. It was busy in front of them, and there looked to be enough room to get past behind. I was on the correct side of the barrier, but the edge collapsed under me.”

“There’s no way that should have happened,” Rurik said. “There’s a steep drop off from the bottom of that gulley.”

“It needs looking at.” Conrad wasn’t sure he’d have the energy to get to his feet when the car pulled into the station.

“I’ll tell someone,” Rurik said. “So Mark and the others were aware you’d fallen?”

“Yes.”

“Who was in the group? Staff? Clients?”

“I didn’t really notice.”

“And they left you?”

“Mark told them to ski down. There was nothing they could do. No point in hanging around getting cold. I was fine with that. I’d have told them myself. Mark said he’d stay.”

“And did he?” Rurik asked.

“For a while.”

“How long?” Arlo sounded furious.

“Not long.”

“Did he at least wait until it was clear you’d be able to reach the top?” Rurik asked.

Why should he make excuses for Mark. “No, but if you asked him, he’d say he did. I wouldn’t have left anyone until they were on their feet at the top with firm snow under them. Then I’d have skied down with them.”

“What a bastard,” Arlo muttered. “Do you want to come straight to our place?”

“I need to go back to the hotel to get changed.”

“But you’ll still come tonight?”

“Yes.” If he could stay awake.

“Rurik brought his car so we can take you back to your hotel and wait for you.”

“I can make my way to yours. But I’d appreciate a lift back. What time is it?”

“Five,” Arlo said. “Come as soon as you like.”

Conrad almost fell asleep in the car. Arlo nudged him when Rurik pulled up outside the Alpenland Chalet.

“Sure you’re all right?” Arlo asked.

“Yep. Thanks for the lift, Rurik.”

“You’re welcome.”

Arlo helped Conrad get his skis from the roof rack.

“I was scared,” Arlo whispered.

“So was I.”

“You’re not to leave my sight tomorrow.”

Conrad smiled. “What if I need the loo?”

“Hey, there are terrible dangers in toilets. No peeing by yourself. And don’t poke anything through any holes. I’m going to stay right next to you.” He gave Conrad a quick kiss and got back in the car.

Conrad went into the chalet through the basement entrance and changed out of his boots into his shoes. He left the skis and poles in the drying rack and made his way upstairs. He spotted Mark and the others in the bar, but they didn’t see him. Conrad was really tired but he thought a swim might warm him up and ease his aches and pains, so he hung his stuff up to dry and put on his swim shorts.

It was still snowing when he opened the door onto the deck, so he left his gown and flipflops under cover and walked

through the snow to the water. *Cold, cold, cold!* The hot tubs were busy but the pool was empty, water vapour curling up into the air in snaky tendrils. He was hoping the pool was the perfect temperature and it was. Hard not to moan in pleasure when he submerged himself.

Conrad swam slowly, going over what had happened. Was he being paranoid imagining Mark had moved those poles? Were they easy to move? That didn't seem sensible, but then who'd imagine someone would want another person to fall? If Mark had moved them, Conrad didn't think he'd meant to do anything more than scare him. Well, he had scared him, but the outcome could easily have been a whole lot worse. If he'd fallen off the lip at the bottom... Conrad gulped.

He wasn't sorry that Rurik now knew Mark had walked off and left him. Mark had got away with too much for too long. The first time he'd left bruises on Conrad's arms should have been the last time. Conrad refused to be a victim anymore. Maybe he ought to look for another place to work. He had a horrible feeling Mark was always going to be a thorn in his side one way or another.

Thirty minutes later, and feeling a lot better, he was on his way to the Lehner chalet. He wasn't sure whether or not to buy another bottle of wine, but when he passed an open store, he decided he should.

Yet again, Arlo had the door open before he knocked and Conrad had this image of Arlo with his face pressed to the window watching for him. Mark had never done that. No one had ever done that. Nor smiled so happily to see him.

"How are you feeling?" Arlo asked.

"Fine." Though he had some bruises blossoming on his calves and lower thighs probably caused by his skis and boots, or maybe his poles. At least he hadn't hit any rocks.

"Really?" Arlo handed him the slippers and hung up his jacket.

"I'm a bit shaken up," he admitted.

“How far did you fall?”

“About thirty feet.”

“Oh God, that’s a long way to have to side step up.”

He led Conrad back into Christmas where the kids were watching *Home Alone* and eating pizza. It looked so cosy that Conrad’s heart lurched. He gave the wine to Arlo’s mum and received a hug. Conrad stiffened. He wasn’t used to women hugging him. Or men.

“Thank you, Conrad. I’m so glad you’re okay. Sit down and take it easy.”

“Thank you for letting me eat with you again. It’s very kind of you.”

“It’s a pleasure to have you.”

Rurik passed him a glass of red wine. “I told Ski Patrol you were okay and I had a word with the QParks guys. When the wind dropped, they went up to check the barrier. Looks as though it had been put up too close to the edge, though the guy responsible for checking it this morning said it was fine. He’s going up first thing tomorrow to look for himself.”

He stared at Conrad as if he expected him to say something but Conrad kept quiet. Mark had definitely caused him to ski too close to the edge, but Conrad wouldn’t accuse him of shifting the poles.

When the adults sat to eat, Rurik stood up before they started the meal and raised his glass. “I want to toast Conrad, who beat all comers on the slalom today, including myself. What he doesn’t know is that he has the fastest time so far this season. Now, I know the season’s only just started but if it was a time from last season, in the amateur field, he’d be ranked seventh. So well done, Conrad.”

They all raised their glasses and toasted him and Conrad felt his face flush with heat. He *still* wasn’t convinced that Rurik hadn’t let him win, but it was lovely to have his victory celebrated.

Conrad found his eyes being pried open by child Three—Katie, he thought, and realised he'd spent the night on the Lehnerts' couch. He had no memory of the evening after sitting down with Arlo following dinner. Someone had taken off his slippers and put a blanket over him. There was daylight coming in through the windows. *Oh my God.*

"Are you awake?" Three asked.

"Yes, thank you." Conrad sat up.

"Can I watch TV now?"

"Yes, sweetheart." Rurik's voice.

A moment later, Rurik was sitting next to him. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. So I stayed then? Sorry."

Rurik was clearly amused. "I don't think you were supposed to go to sleep until Arlo had had his wicked way with you. Want some breakfast?"

"I better get back to the hotel. I suppose there's a vague possibility they might be worried. I don't think anyone saw me yesterday evening. Please tell Arlo I'll call him."

"I will."

"Thank you."

Conrad was relieved to escape before anyone else got up. He wanted to clean his teeth before he came anywhere near Arlo. *Ugh.* As he made his way back to the chalet, he realised he was going to have to buy gifts that afternoon. If all the shops hadn't been shut, he'd have done it now. When he sent a message to Arlo asking what time he wanted to meet up to ski, he noted that he'd had no other calls. Mark and a few others knew his number so had he been seen last night? Had anyone thought to check whether his equipment was in the boot room?

If they had, they'd have known he'd got down off the mountain.

The bedroom was empty and Conrad showered, then went down for breakfast. Most of the group were in there, though not Mark or Ernesto. Conrad collected his food from the buffet and went to sit with the others.

“Good morning,” Conrad said and everyone greeted him back.

No one looked worried or shocked to see him.

“I thought you must have gone out for breakfast,” David said. “I didn't hear you come in or go out this morning.”

“That was quite a fall yesterday,” Simon said from higher up the table. “I'm amazed you managed to get back up so quickly.”

Conrad shook his head. “I didn't.”

“But Mark caught up with us before we reached the bottom of the slope.” David frowned.

“He didn't wait for me to get to the top.”

That *did* get a reaction.

“Well, that's not on,” one of the clients said. “Are you okay?”

Thank you. “I'm fine.”

Part of Conrad wanted to hang around until Mark appeared to see if anyone said anything to him, but he knew Mark would just lie his way out of any questions. There was no point falling into an argument. One person's word against another's, and Conrad could guess who they'd believe.

As he made his way upstairs, he had a call from Arlo.

“That was the couch, not my bed,” Arlo said indignantly. “You were too heavy to move and no one would help me.”

“I think I fell unconscious, not asleep. I'd have been no use for anything.”

“I am a well-known necromancer with an impressive raising-the-dead sucking speed.”

Conrad let out a choked laugh just as Mark was coming out of his room. Not with Ernesto. Mark smirked as he walked past.

“I need to do some shopping,” Arlo said.

“Me too.”

“You want to do it together? We could have a rest from skiing today and do something different this afternoon.”

“That sounds good.” *Nothing too energetic.*

“I’ll plan something for later. We’ll meet outside Schroll on the main street at ten. The Rolex shop. We’re not going in. We’re just going to ogle and drool.”

“Okay.” Conrad smiled.

He cleaned his teeth again. He was too early to meet Arlo, but he wanted to see if he could find a present for him before they met up.

What to buy for a guy he didn’t know very well, but wanted desperately to get to know really well? He wanted to see Arlo’s face light up when he opened the gift, which wasn’t going to be a Rolex.

Good news and bad news about Kitzbühel. It was an upmarket resort and the brightly painted facades of the buildings made it look attractive and charming, but sadly, everything was expensive. High-end boutiques and designer labels abounded. There was no Primark or Pound Stretcher in sight. Not that he wanted to buy Arlo something cheap. But he didn’t want to go mad either.

The views were spectacular. He’d love to live in a place like this. Mountainous panoramas, Christmas everywhere he looked, beautifully decorated shopfronts and a Christmas market. Though that wasn’t open until after lunch. He had no idea what he was looking for but he did spot some attractive scarves and bought ones for Arlo’s parents. No one would

expect him to buy presents for all the brothers, wives and children, would they? One joint gift seemed the best bet.

Conrad was beginning to give up hope of finding anything different for Arlo when he spotted a little gift shop on a side street. Almost immediately, he knew what he wanted to buy. It was a well-made, intricate wooden puzzle box that required several clues to be solved before the box could be opened.

“How easy is it?” Conrad asked in German.

“Not very easy. I can do it quite quickly but I’ve been doing them for years. People bring them back when they can’t get them open. It takes several hours for most people to figure it all out.”

“If I wrote a message, could you put it in the box and reassemble it?”

The man smiled. “I can do that.” He gave Conrad paper and pencil and started to dismantle the box. Once Conrad had written his message, he folded it up and waited until the central box was open so he could slip it inside.

It wasn’t the only gift he bought in there and he slotted his purchases into his backpack.

Arlo was staring into the jeweller’s window when Conrad came up behind him.

“That will be the one he buys me,” Arlo said. “Or maybe that one. Only twenty-three thousand Euros.” Then he turned. “Oh, you’re here.”

Conrad gave him a quick kiss. “Who were you talking to? The invisible man? What do you need to buy?”

“It depends on what I see you smiling at.”

“You don’t need to get me anything, especially from this shop, but I want to buy a game for your family. Let’s look for a toyshop and you can tell me which ones you already have.”

They had fun shopping, even though Conrad spent more than he’d intended. But he’d never had anyone to buy gifts for

at Christmas – apart from Big Arsehole—what a waste that had been. Conrad had no idea what Arlo had bought him because Arlo sat him on a bench with two cups of Glühwein, then disappeared. He came back with a bag, slipped it into one of his other carriers and picked up his drink.

“We need wrapping paper too,” Arlo said. “Mum has plenty of Sellotape and tags.”

“Do you give gifts tomorrow or on Christmas Day?” Conrad knew it was a tradition in Austria to open presents on Christmas Eve.

“Christmas Day. Lehner Christmases are a mix of British and Austrian. All my brothers’ wives are British, so Mum and Dad compromise.”

“Church?” Conrad asked.

“Not unless you want to. Do you want to?”

Conrad shook his head. If he’d been on his own, he might have gone tomorrow. There was something lovely about a Christmas Eve service—the singing, the music. A reminder of what Christmas was really about.

“What do you have planned for this afternoon?” Conrad asked.

“The Christmas market, then lunch out or we can go back to the chalet and have lunch there. Then we can choose between paragliding, ice diving, ski jumping, skeleton bob sleigh, ice climbing—though they did say it was a bit early in the season so not entirely safe—but hey, we can take the risk, or an ice hockey experience—definitely not safe, freestyle aerial skiing—easy peasy, or snow kiting.”

Conrad made sure he kept his face straight. “Or?”

“No, that was it. That’s the choice. But...”

“But what?”

Arlo gave him a slow smile. “Everyone is out this afternoon. The kids are with their parents and grandparents visiting Santa Claus, poor guy, then they’re going ice skating and I thought how tired you must be after yesterday and how

lying down would be good for you, especially if it's somewhere comfortable. I could massage bits of you."

"Are you any good at that?"

"Particularly good at some bits, yes. Want me to show you?"

Conrad gave a quiet groan. "Yes."

"One hour before they go out. Let's get the rest of the things we need."

They made their way to the chalet, eating *Bratkartoffel*, thin, crispy slices of fried potatoes, and Arlo struggled to contain his annoyance that his family were still there when they got back. He was even more annoyed when Benedikt helped himself to a handful of his lunch.

"Buy your own," Arlo told him.

"But your food always tastes better."

Conrad handed his to Arlo. "You can finish mine."

"See! Selfish brother!" Arlo gave them back to Conrad. "I'm fine. Benedikt's just a pig."

Arlo kept checking the time, ushering his family to get ready to go out. He even helped get the kids into their warm gear.

"Anyone would think you were desperate for us to leave," Dieter said with a smirk.

Arlo glared. "We have presents to wrap."

"But Santa does that," said 4.

"Not the grown-ups' presents," Arlo told her, quick as a flash.

When they'd all gone, Arlo groaned. "I thought they'd never leave. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to wrap presents."

"Now?"

“Yes.”

Arlo let out a long whine. “Fine. Do them in my room and hide them in the bottom of the wardrobe. I’ll do mine in the lounge.”

When Arlo was ready to take his wrapped gifts into his bedroom, he knocked on the door. “Finished?”

“No but you can come in.”

Conrad was in his bed. His clothes were on the floor. Arlo heard a whimpering sound lurch from his throat and snapped it off. He stuffed his gifts in the wardrobe with Conrad’s and got in such a tangle taking off his clothes that he found himself hopping around with his T-shirt stuck over his face and a foot trapped in his trousers. Then Conrad got out of bed to help and the feel of him naked against him, along with the kisses he was landing all over Arlo’s face, sent Arlo’s heart racing.

They dropped onto the bed, still kissing, arms wrapped around each other, and Arlo’s head swam with lust. He didn’t want his lips away from Conrad’s but Conrad started to lick his way down his neck and that was...hot. Then lick down the centre of his body and that was...hotter.

“Oh God,” Arlo muttered. *Oh God!*

Licks and sucks around his navel were...hottest. Arlo was almost levitating. Words were spilling from his mouth but he didn’t think any of them made sense. His balls were in Conrad’s hand and he pressed them against Arlo’s body, pushing down at the base of his cock and Arlo’s breathing stuttered, only to stop when Conrad let go with his hands and took him in his mouth.

“What... What...” Arlo couldn’t speak or breathe or make sense.

Conrad’s hands slid under Arlo’s arse and held him in place.

Arlo looked down. *Mistake*. How could Conrad get so much in his mouth? Not that Arlo was saying he was huge, but... “Fuuuuck,” he gasped.

Conrad did magic with his tongue, with his lips, his fingers, his throat. Arlo couldn't hold out. He'd maybe named ten of the controls on an Airbus before the inevitable happened and he came in a stormy torrent, his hips thrusting up, pushing his cock harder into Conrad's mouth.

Arlo sank down, felt Conrad pull back to breathe, and then Conrad was holding him, petting him, kissing and stroking his face and Arlo clung on for bloody life. He felt like he'd landed on another planet. One with no air, but that was fine. He'd cope. He wasn't leaving anytime soon.

It took a little while before his brain restarted. Forget trying to play it cool, or making some ill-advised joke about... *Damn!* He couldn't even think of a joke. His mind had officially exploded.

"Okay?" Conrad whispered. "You're too quiet."

"Uh."

"I wasn't timing you."

Arlo whimpered. "That's my funny line."

Conrad brushed Arlo's hair from his eyes. "*Are* you okay?"

"You know I don't like that word. I mean the word *okay* if you were wondering."

Conrad chuckled.

"I am..." Arlo hunted for the right word. "Astounded."

"At?"

"How perfect we are. Do you want to fuck me?"

That wiped the smile off Conrad's face, which was not Arlo's intention.

"I've never said that to anyone before," Arlo whispered. "Not that exactly. I should have used other words. Would you like to make sweet, passionate rumpy pumpy with me? Would you like to spear me with your...spear? See? My brain has gone into meltdown... Sadly for you, I have to keep talking. It's a combination of embarrassment and need-to-tell-you-stuff. I've mostly bottomed but I do top, though not usually

after I've emptied my balls in that spectacular fashion. I guess that means I'm vers though I've never had that conversation with anyone except myself. Something about me seems to shout *want my arse?* to entirely the wrong people. Not that I have since Herr Pratface and not that you're a wrong person. I think you're a very right person. Now I'm going to put my fist in my mouth to shut me up."

Conrad took hold of Arlo's hand. "I'm vers too but in my last relationship, I only bottomed. I made a bad decision when I let myself get love-bombed by a narcissist. Not that I realised what I was doing at the time." Conrad kissed Arlo's nose. "He is nothing like you. I don't think I've ever met anyone like you." He smiled and Arlo smiled back. "I feel so lucky. After a lifetime of not being lucky, this is like a miracle."

"I would like you inside me," Arlo whispered. "I bought stuff—it's in the bedside drawer—or would you like it if I wrapped my mouth around you?" He looked down at Conrad's cock. *Wow*. "Though I'd probably need to practise before I could tackle all of it without gagging, which is making me wonder how it's going to fit in my backside."

"We don't—"

Arlo put his finger over Conrad's lips. "I want to. Not that I'm trying to rush you but they are all going to come back at some point in the next 59 minutes. And I was hoping to do this more than once."

Conrad smiled. He reached for the lube and a condom and after he'd brought Arlo to a writhing, soggy mess with his fingers, he knelt between his thighs. Arlo lifted his hips and as Conrad held him behind his knees, he let out a long moan.

"Are you in?" Arlo whispered.

"If you make me laugh, I'm not going to be able to do this."

But the head of his cock found the entrance to Arlo's body and he pushed. Arlo sucked in a breath. It...hurt but Conrad was gentle, putting his arms around him, embracing him, not pushing too much, just easing his way inside. Arlo shifted his

hips, the angle changed, and Conrad slipped all the way in. *Wow, wow, wow!* Arlo arched his back and howled.

“Oh God, oh my God. Now you need to move. A lot. Please.”

Conrad’s first stroke brushed his prostate and Arlo writhed and bucked as Conrad continued to thrust into him. He could feel orgasm begin to blaze a path through his body, somehow racing from his feet to his balls, from his brain and down his spine. He cried out again as Conrad moved faster, then Arlo was convulsing with the joy of it, squeezing Conrad’s cock as his muscles locked around his length. He came with a loud cry and then Conrad did too, though not with a wail, more of a deep gasp, and they lay tight together, still joined in that most intimate of ways, and Arlo never wanted to move again. Ever.

He came back down to earth with Conrad stroking his skin, drawing patterns, his fingers dancing.

“Told you I was noisy,” Arlo whispered. “Sorry.”

“What? Don’t you dare apologise. But I need to buy all your family noise-cancelling headphones.”

Arlo roared with laughter.

They showered together in too small a space, but that was fine. The closer he was to Conrad, the better.

“I’m a bit worried your family are going to know exactly what we’ve been up to.” Conrad tugged him out of the shower and started to dry him.

“Don’t care.” Arlo sighed. “I’m on cloud nine.”

“Not ten?”

Arlo smiled into Conrad’s shoulder. “You know where the saying comes from?”

“No, I don’t think I’ve thought about it.”

“In 1896 the greatest cloud in the world was listed as Cloud 9 in a new cloud classification. So if you’re on cloud nine, you’re on the tallest cloud on Earth. I love clouds,

though not always when I have to fly through difficult ones. Lightning isn't fun when you're in it."

"Oh God. I don't need to hear that. I think we'd better get dressed."

"Are you still worrying about what my family will think? They like you. They'll be fine with you staying over."

Conrad pulled on his shorts. "Not tonight. If it's all right with your mum I'll stay on Christmas Eve and maybe for Christmas Day. I fly home the day after Boxing Day."

"And I fly home the day after that." Arlo hesitated. "I..."

Conrad kissed him. "Yes, I want to see you again. We'll exchange addresses. Your schedule's likely to be trickier than mine so you just tell me when we can meet up."

"New Year. I'll come to you."

"I'll cook."

"Can you cook?"

"Beans on toast."

Arlo's mouth dropped open.

"Or toast on beans. I could add cheese."

"My jaw won't drop any further."

Conrad smiled. "Yes, I can cook. Sure you want to come to mine and not go to a party?"

"We can have our own party. I need you to keep taking me to the top of cloud nine. Maybe we can find a cloud ten." Then Arlo groaned. "No, I can't. I've just remembered. I'm flying on New Year's Eve. Damn it!"

"Then we'll have our New Year's Eve on a different day. I'll do a lightshow with my torch. I can do all sorts of animal impressions with my hands. Maybe with my body too, I've never tried that."

"I can't wait."

8

Conrad had the best evening in forever. He'd not really played games before, not since he was at school, but teaming up with Arlo had been fun. They'd played *Go Fish* with the children, and Conrad had made sure he didn't win because the delight on the face of whichever kid *had* won was greater than winning himself. Though sometimes it was hard to cheat, especially when some sharp-eyed youngster pointed out that Conrad *did* have a sea turtle.

Then they played some dinosaur game that Conrad didn't even have to try to lose because even by the time they were packing it away, he hadn't understood what was happening. Maybe the kids had made up their own rules. That was fine, they'd enjoyed themselves.

Once the children were in bed, the adults played *Balderdash*, and Conrad had found he was funnier than he'd realised. The game involved making up what you thought a weird word meant but somehow Conrad managed to think up funny things that amused everyone. Batrachian was not a tailless amphibian but an orgy between a bat, a rat and a guy named Ian. Contributed by Conrad.

Though he'd struggled with the second game, *Who's in the Bag*. The aim was for your partner to guess who or what was named on the card you were holding without saying the word, so by singing, miming, describing or impersonating. The Lehnars were so tuned in to each other that they seemed to guess correctly in an instant, whereas Conrad struggled to identify anyone Arlo was pretending to be. He didn't even get Madonna, not until their time was up. Arlo's attempt to make his hands into pointed breasts led Conrad down the entirely wrong path to a T-Rex. After he said that, everyone was hysterical.

But it was fun and that was all that mattered. Somehow *not* playing the game properly was more enjoyable than following the rules. Conrad couldn't remember when he'd laughed so much. If he ever had.

I fit in.

That feeling was so strong and comforting that it made his chest tight with emotion. What had Arlo seen in him? Some guy crying in an office. How had Arlo seen more than that? But somehow he had and Conrad had let himself open up, take a chance and his world had grown bigger.

When people began to make their excuses and slope off to bed, Conrad knew he couldn't stay. Somehow it felt even more important to show sufficient respect to Arlo and his family. This was not a fling. This was something special. And waiting would prove that. Well, they hadn't waited but there was a difference between having fun on their own and getting into Arlo's bed when all his family were watching.

Rurik came over. "Had a message from the QParks team. The guy who put the poles in place is adamant that two were moved, even though you flattened one of them. We can't prove Warner did it, but either way, it wasn't your fault that you fell."

Conrad nodded.

"Is there anything else I should know about him?"

"Probably, but... I don't feel comfortable telling you."

"Anything that would cause issues for the business?"

Conrad wasn't sure how to answer that. Not giving an answer was enough for Rurik to sigh and say, "Right. I'll be keeping an eye on him."

"I think he's good at his job," Conrad said. "He's very popular. Most people like him. He's charismatic, overflowing with self-confidence, but—"

Conrad hadn't meant to slip in the *but*. Though...

"But what?" Rurik asked.

"There are flaws in his personality, in my opinion. He thinks he's never wrong. He believes he's better than everyone else. I wouldn't want to work directly for him. I don't know how those who do feel about him. He's not good at delegating. He thinks no one else can do such a good job as him. He

thrives on adoration and he lacks empathy. But he can make you feel like you're the most important person in his world. He's good at that, good at lying." *Too much!*

"You think he's narcissistic?"

Conrad was relieved it had been Rurik who'd used the word. "Yes."

"Okay." Rurik nodded, then left him and Arlo alone.

"You should have told him everything," Arlo said. "About the stealing."

"Mark's too cunning to get caught out." Conrad sighed. "I need to go."

"But I want more of what we did this afternoon," Arlo whispered in his ear.

The sensation, let alone the memory, was enough for Conrad's cock to unfurl.

"So do I, but we're going to wait."

He pulled down his sweater and went to say goodnight to Arlo's father. "Thank you for letting me share this evening with you all. It was so much fun."

"Do you not have a big family, Conrad?" Arlo's mother said.

"Don't ask him." Arlo put his hand on Conrad's arm.

"It's okay." Conrad patted his fingers. "No, I don't. No siblings. No relations that I know of."

"His parents abandoned him when he was eighteen and they were shitty parents before that."

"Arlo!" That earned Arlo a glare from his father.

"Well, they were," Arlo said. "They didn't want him."

"Arlo! No more," his father said.

"What do you usually do at Christmas?" his mother asked. "Go skiing?"

“Not at Christmas. It’s too expensive. I...make myself Christmas dinner and watch TV.” With a box of After Eight mints. *And I eat them all.*

They looked at him as if he was a puppy that had been thrown out of a car, and Conrad cringed. He didn’t need or want anyone to feel sorry for him.

“I want him to stay,” Arlo muttered behind him. “Dad!”

“I think you’re old enough for me not to be involved in this,” his father said.

“Can Conrad come tomorrow and stay over, and on Christmas Day?”

Conrad curled his toes inside his slippers. “It’s not fair to put your parents on the spot like that. It’s family time.”

“Conrad can play the cello.”

What did that have to do with anything? But both Arlo’s parents were suddenly staring at him wide-eyed with broad smiles on their faces.

“Please,” Arlo whispered.

“Conrad,” said Arlo’s father. “I’d like to formally invite you to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with the Lehner family.”

Though that wasn’t an invitation to spend the night in their youngest son’s bed.

“Thank you,” Conrad said. “I’d be delighted to accept.”

“Good.” Arlo’s father nodded. “See you tomorrow. We ski in the morning, tube or toboggan in the afternoon and you’ll play for your supper.”

Arlo held Conrad’s hand all the way to the bottom of the stairs.

“Scared I’ll fall?” Conrad asked.

“Worried I will.”

I think I already have. How could anyone not fall for Arlo?

Conrad changed into his boots and Arlo kissed his head.

“My mum thinks you’re lovely by the way.”

“Because I’m not staying the night?”

“She said you’re different and you’re considerate. Polite and smart and funny and handsome. Perfect. And now she knows you can play the cello...”

“I’m not perfect.”

“No! Don’t say that.”

Conrad smiled.

“Though I did tell her that when you stay, you’ll be sleeping on the blow-up mattress. You will, but so will I. I might need to improvise a gag.”

They kissed again on the doorstep and it was hard for Conrad to let Arlo go.

“Back inside before you freeze.”

Arlo pulled Conrad’s scarf more tightly around his neck and kissed his nose. “Message me when you get back.”

Conrad made his way through the town, kicking himself that he’d not thought to ask Arlo more about the cello playing. Presumably it was just a family recital. Though whatever they wanted him to play, he’d probably be able to do it. Playing the cello was his one talent, just not something he’d ever be able to earn a living from.

He’d need to come back to the Alpenland Chalet to get his clothes and toiletries at some point tomorrow. He’d brought something smart to wear in case the chalet put on a special meal on Christmas Day. He probably ought to tell them he wouldn’t be there. His ski equipment had to go back to the hire shop on Boxing Day because the bus was coming to take them to the airport at ten the following morning, so no time to do it then.

When he and Arlo met up again in London for their own New Year’s Eve, Conrad wanted to do something special. He’d have a think about what they could do, how he could make it fun.

David was under the covers when he got back to the room. Conrad crept around, used the bathroom, then climbed into bed in his shorts, holding his phone.

Back safe and sound. Are you going to message me from wherever you fly to?

You want me to?

Yes.

Can we have phone sex?

Now?

No, I was thinking at three thirty. That was a joke. Yes, now.

Conrad gave a quiet groan. *I don't want to wake David.*

We're definitely doing it when I'm in a hotel room and you're at your place. You might forget how hot I am.

Conrad smiled. *Impossible. See you at 9.15 tomorrow.*

**Night! Sweet dreams—of me obviously. Don't let the bed bugs bite or anything else. Only me
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX**

Conrad sent back *to x∞* An infinity of kisses because he'd never tire of kissing Arlo.

Arlo messaged **To infinity and beyond! Night.**

Conrad had just set the phone aside when he found himself being pressed facedown into the bed. David had climbed on top of him.

“What the fuck, David?” Conrad struggled to get his head out from under the covers. But when he did, he swallowed hard.

Not David but Mark.

“Been w-waiting for you t'come back.” Mark slurred his words, clearly drunk. He reeked of alcohol. “Where've you been?”

“Where's David?”

“My room. Me’n Ernesto had a row. He’s flown home.” Mark tried to kiss him and Conrad managed to push him off. He scrambled to his feet and backed away.

“Made mistake.” Mark stood up, stark naked, with an erection. *Oh God.*

“Yeah, you did.” Conrad reached for his trousers.

“Not me. Him. Stupid shit.” Mark stepped towards him.

Conrad stepped back. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like?” Mark wrenched the trousers from Conrad’s grasp. “You’re not leaving. I’m all ready for you. Little pill works wonders.”

Conrad grabbed his trousers back, his heart pounding. As he pulled them on, he didn’t take his eyes off Mark. Even so, when Mark suddenly threw himself at him, Conrad was too slow to avoid being knocked down. They crashed to the floor, Conrad crushed under Mark’s weight, gasping as an elbow dug into his ribs.

“Yeah, babe,” Mark muttered. “Know you like it rough. Let’s do a line and get into bed.”

“I’m not taking drugs. Leave me the fuck alone.”

Conrad managed to squirm free and made a grab for his T-shirt and sweater which had been knocked onto the floor. Mark stood, palming his cock as Conrad yanked on his T-shirt but as he pulled the sweater over his head, he felt Mark press up against him, forcing him back against the wall, and pinning him with his body.

“Get off me!”

Conrad struggled but Mark wrapped his fingers around his neck and squeezed hard. As Conrad reached up with both hands, trying to prise Mark’s fingers off, Mark slid his other hand down the front of Conrad’s trousers, which he’d not fucking managed to zip up, and fingers tightened around his cock. Conrad struggled even more desperately to get free.

“Fucking hell, Mark!” Conrad choked out. “Stop it!”

“No. You want me. Stop fucking whining.”

Conrad’s heart was almost vibrating with fear. There was no way Mark could or would force him...would he? But he had such a tight hold of Conrad’s cock that he was afraid to pull away without doing himself some damage.

“You’re hurting me. Let me go.” It was hard to get the words out but he couldn’t get Mark’s fingers off his throat.

Mark was nuzzling into Conrad’s neck and moaning, pressing his erection into Conrad’s thigh.

Think smart! “Not like this,” Conrad choked out. “The bed.”

The moment Mark relaxed his hold just a little, Conrad wrenched free only for Mark to grab his shoulder and shove him hard. Conrad fell against the wardrobe door and cried out in pain. *God, that hurt.* His cheek had borne the brunt of the collision. He put out a hand to steady himself. If he fell to the carpet, Mark would be on him. He’d wanted to pack up all his stuff and leave. Now he just wanted to leave, but he had to have his boots and coat. *And my phone.*

Mark reached for Conrad’s face and he reared back. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“Made yourself bleed.” Mark chuckled. “Clumsy twat.”

“*You* made me bleed.” Conrad could feel blood trickling down his cheek onto his neck. He could see blood on the wardrobe door. If he yelled for help, would anyone hear?

“What you fighting for?” Mark was wobbling in front of him, but at least he wasn’t trying to grab him again.

“I don’t want anything to do with you. I don’t know now why I ever did. You could have killed me at the top of that slope. I know you moved the poles.”

When he saw the way Mark’s face hardened, he realised he should have kept quiet about that.

“Fucking liar.” Mark came right up into his space.

“Go to sleep. You’re drunk and high.” More drunk than he’d ever seen him.

Conrad backed away and grabbed his jacket. His boots were by the door. His phone was probably on the floor. He kept glancing down, trying to spot it.

“Where d’you think you going to go? No rooms here. Won’t be anywhere else.”

“I’ll sleep in the lounge if I have to. I don’t want to be anywhere near you.”

“You think you’re all that. You’re not. Sainly Conrad. *Pfft*,” he said mockingly. “Mr Never-puts-a-foot-wrong. Wait until I tell them you’re a thief and a cheat, and take coke.”

“What?” Conrad snapped. “I’ve never stolen anything, never taken drugs and never cheated.”

“All those things you stole and gave me. That wallet.”

“Are you rewriting history? You’re the thief.”

“Take your clothes off and let me fuck you.”

This time when Mark approached, Conrad stood his ground. “You’ll never touch me again.”

He’d hardly finished speaking when one blow from Mark took him down and his head collided with the edge of the wooden bed. For a moment, the room disappeared in a blaze of pain, then came back when Mark stamped on his stomach. Conrad was still struggling to accept what was happening. Part of him wanted to pummel Mark into the ground, another part of him knew that any bruise on Mark would be used to that arsehole’s advantage. He sat up, felt his phone under his fingers and slipped it into his pocket. *Thank God for that.*

“Just go to fuckin’ bed then, you cocktease. Ugh.” He gave a loud groan.

As Mark lurched for the bathroom with his hand over his mouth, retching, Conrad grabbed his boots and jacket, and fled.

Once he was down the corridor, he put on the boots, though he couldn't seem to tie the laces properly. Nor could he zip his jacket. By the time he reached the lift, he was shaking. A hand to his cheek and his fingers came away bloody. There was a mirror in the lift and he could see the cut on his cheekbone. It was still bleeding.

Reception was empty. There were no guests around. He didn't want to stay there anyway. He called Arlo as he stepped outside.

"Hey! Can't you sleep without me?" Arlo asked.

"Can I come and stay?"

"Of course you can. What changed your mind?"

"Is there someone...who can... fetch me?" He staggered down towards the road. "Not sure I can walk...all that way. No cars around anymore. I don't feel well."

"Where are you?" Arlo's tone was different. "Tell me where you are, Conrad. Something's happened, hasn't it?"

"Yes. Something. I'm walking towards where you live. I don't feel..."

"Go back into the hotel and wait."

"No! Don't want to do that."

"I'm coming to get you. Stay on the line."

Conrad couldn't talk any more. He was having enough problems breathing and putting one foot in front of the other. He was cold. His stomach ached, so did his head and his face. He couldn't believe Mark had behaved like that. The guy hadn't known the shove would end up with him cutting his cheek but... *Stop it! He shouldn't have shoved me! Or stamped on me. Or...put his hands on me.*

"Keep talking," Arlo said.

"I'm okay." But he wasn't. *My head!* He was really cold now. Where were his gloves and his hat? He felt as if he was moving backwards.

When he saw headlights coming towards him, Conrad really hoped it was Arlo because he couldn't walk any further. His knees buckled as the car pulled up beside him. Arlo leapt out followed by Rurik, and they both caught hold of him.

“What the fuck?” Arlo gasped.

“What the hell's happened?” Rurik helped Conrad into the car.

Arlo climbed in the back with him, pulled him close and clung to his hand. “You're freezing. Where's your hat? Your gloves? You were in your room...”

“Do you need the hospital?” Rurik asked.

“No. I think...I'm in shock.” But he was safe now.

“You didn't fall, did you?” Arlo whispered.

Conrad wouldn't lie. Mark would find a way to hurt him whether he told the truth or not.

“I thought David was asleep in his bed. It was Mark.”

“Warner?” Rurik asked sharply.

“Yes. He'd had a row with his boyfriend...and swapped rooms. He tried to... He was drunk. And high.” Conrad shivered. “He pushed me and I hit the wardrobe. Cut my cheek. He hit me... He stamped on me. I hit my head on the bed surround. He fled to the bathroom to throw up and I grabbed what I could and left.” The effort to say all that had exhausted him.

“Was he trying to...rape you?” Arlo clutched his fingers.

Oh God. “Going to be sick.”

Rurik pulled the car to a halt. Conrad stumbled out and threw up in the gutter. When he'd emptied his stomach, with Arlo rubbing his hand over his back, he stood upright.

“This snow is clean.” Arlo offered him a handful and Conrad pressed it into his mouth, then spat it out.

“Okay?” Rurik asked.

Conrad nodded and got back in the car.

There was silence for a moment.

“Being drunk and high is not an excuse for assault,” Rurik said. “You should report him to the police.”

“He’d make it look like my fault, say that I attacked him or tried to get into bed with him. It’s only my word against his.”

“Conrad, I really think you need to speak to the police and go to the hospital,” Arlo said. “Please. He’s a monster. He needs to be stopped.”

Conrad felt too out of it to protest. Arlo was right. Mark needed stopping. “All right.”

Arlo was torn between being frantically worried about Conrad and furiously angry with Mark Warner. The nearest hospital open at this time of the morning was St Johann in Tirol, just over ten kilometres away. Conrad didn't appear to be seriously injured though the head injury was concerning and his face looked bruised. At least he'd stopped bleeding.

"Sorry," Conrad mumbled.

"What for?" Arlo squeezed his fingers.

"For throwing up that lovely food. For being a nuisance. For spoiling the day, which until a short while ago, had been one of the best of my life. It's so late. Well, early morning now. Everyone should be in bed. I'm sorry."

"This isn't your fault," Rurik said. "You're lucky that I didn't drink much tonight. We take it in turns to stay sober in case we have an emergency. Julian's son is asthmatic and he's been hospitalised a lot. I'm going to call the police as I drive. They need to see the state you're in before you're treated, if possible."

"Oh God," Conrad mumbled.

As Rurik spoke to the police, Conrad slumped against Arlo. "I feel... I don't..."

"It's the right thing to do," Arlo whispered.

Doing the right thing took just over an hour and Arlo stayed at Conrad's side apart from when the police interviewed him. He would have stayed then but he kept interrupting so they made him leave. The hospital said there was no need for Conrad to be admitted. Steri-Strips had been put across the cut in his cheek, X-rays had revealed no issues, though he was bruised, with finger marks on his neck and a heel mark on his stomach. If Conrad *did* have a concussion, it was a mild one. Arlo thought he was shocked, more than anything else.

Once the car had warmed up and Rurik set off, Conrad fell asleep almost immediately.

“Is he okay?” Rurik asked.

“He’s probably exhausted.”

“The police are going to the Alpenland Chalet,” Rurik told him. “Hopefully Warner will have been too out of it to clean up the mess. They’ll look for evidence of drugs too. Conrad will have been caught on CCTV leaving the room and exiting the building. I don’t want Warner wriggling out of what he’s done. He’s going to be out of a job anyway. He represents the business. This behaviour is unacceptable. Gross misconduct.”

“Thanks, Rurik,” Arlo whispered.

“I’m not sure that the police will charge him. Maybe if they find drugs, but the injury is just one person’s word against another. Warner could claim Conrad slipped.”

“I think Conrad knows that, but Warner should at least be scared. What about the moving of those marker poles? What if someone saw him?”

“Then they’d have said something.”

“Those that were skiing with him could be asked. He might lie but what he did endangered lives. That could get him arrested.”

“They’ll probably order him to go to the police station later today.” Rurik gave a heavy sigh. “I can’t believe Warner behaved like that. I mean, I *do* believe Conrad but...bloody hell.”

“He’s stolen from shops,” Arlo said quietly. “Conrad wouldn’t tell you but he told me. Warner only did it once in front of him and Conrad almost got blamed, but Conrad said Warner used to brag about things he’d shoplifted. He’s an arrogant twat.”

“I’ve never actually liked him as a person but he does a good job with BD. Clients like him.”

“Will you really be able to sack him?”

“Yes. Though that doesn’t mean he’ll go quietly.”

Arlo woke Conrad when they got back home. He looked confused for a moment, then he sighed.

“Think you can manage the stairs or do we have to carry you?”

“I can walk.”

Arlo helped him take off his boots and hung up their coats, then went up behind him, just in case.

When they reached the door to Arlo’s room, Rurik leaned on the wall. “I want us to go for breakfast at the chalet in the morning. If you feel up to it. Not you, Arlo. My guess is that Warner will be there regardless of how he feels. He’ll have a story ready in case anyone knows the police came to speak to him. Setting his own narrative for what’s happened will be all-important. He doesn’t know you and Conrad are an item, unless he’s seen you together.”

“We were all at the slalom race.”

“In helmets and goggles. He also doesn’t know you’re my brother. I’d rather you keep out of it. We need to get all of Conrad’s stuff from the Alpenland, including his ski equipment, because he’s not staying at that place any longer. Okay, Conrad?”

He nodded.

When he was in Arlo’s bedroom, sitting on his bed, Arlo sighed. “Bit of a drastic way to get into bed with me.”

“Worked though.”

Arlo laughed, then cut it off. “I want to kill him.” He sat next to Conrad and gently wrapped his arm around him.

“Don’t you dare. I’ve only just found you. I don’t want to lose you to a murder charge.”

“Rurik will sack him.”

“Maybe, but Mark won’t just accept it.”

“You’re not regretting speaking to the police, are you?”

“No. They’re going to look further into the moving of those poles too. I think they were more bothered about that than our fight.” He pushed to his feet. “I need to clean my teeth.”

“I’ll get you a toothbrush.” He tugged Conrad over to the bathroom.

Arlo found a new toothbrush under the sink and put it next to his toothpaste. “Can you manage?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Arlo sat on the bed and waited. What an awful end to the night. It made him feel sick, thinking about it.

Conrad came out of the bathroom in just his shorts, carrying his clothes. The hospital had cleaned off most of the blood, Conrad had removed the rest. Arlo groaned when he saw his neck and bruised stomach. “Wear a T-shirt when you go with Rurik to the chalet. See how that bastard explains those finger marks.”

“He’ll probably say it was consensual, that I like being strangled.”

“And having your head split open? And being stamped on?” Arlo folded Conrad’s clothes and put them on a chair.

Conrad groaned. “I can’t think about it anymore.”

“Get into bed. I’m just going to use the bathroom.”

When Arlo came out in his sleep shorts, he saw Conrad curled up under the covers.

“Where are you going to sleep?” Conrad had a smile on his face.

“Move over.”

Arlo tucked in behind him and kissed Conrad’s shoulder. “I’m so angry that he did that to you. Whatever happens, he won’t dare touch you again.”

“Do you dare?”

“Not now you’re hurt!” Arlo glared.

“My important parts aren’t hurt.”

“Your head’s important.”

“My head’s telling me I’m exhausted. I was just checking you hadn’t gone off me.”

“Go to sleep. I’ll watch over you.”

“So like a stalker.”

“Keep your shorts on so I’m not tempted.”

“You’re only tempted by what’s in my shorts?” Conrad asked.

Arlo quietly whined.

When Rurik woke them the next morning, Conrad found himself wrapped around Arlo and gulped at the sight of Rurik trying not to look at them.

“Feel up to going along with my plan?” Rurik asked.

“Give me ten minutes.”

Conrad left Arlo sleeping and went into the bathroom. He ached, particularly his stomach, but his head was fine. He looked pale though, which made the marks on his face and neck stand out.

“Need a coffee?” Rurik asked when Conrad emerged into the main room.

“No thanks.”

“Then let’s do this.”

They headed downstairs. Conrad changed into his boots and put on his jacket. There was blood on it and he sighed.

“How do you feel about seeing him again?” Rurik asked.

“Better than I thought I would.”

“If he’s not eating breakfast, I’ll call him down,” Rurik told him.

Conrad grew more nervous as they approached the chalet, but he did see the sense in doing this. Why should he let Mark tell lies when he wasn't there to defend himself?

When they reached the Alpenland, Rurik left him in the lounge by the fire while he went to have a word with the manager, then came back to get him.

“Ready?”

Not really but... Conrad nodded.

“Take your jacket off. Let them see your neck.”

Rurik took his jacket off too. “Sit as near to the door as you can. Most people are here. I think a couple of clients with families flew home last night but...”

Mark wasn't in the dining room, but almost everyone else was. Rurik greeted the clients, then collected coffee and croissants for himself and Conrad. Conrad sat opposite David, who was staring at him in shock.

“Did you have an accident yesterday?” David gestured at Conrad's cheek.

“No, he didn't,” Rurik said as he dropped down beside Conrad.

David's gaze fell to Conrad's neck. “Oh God.” He leaned forward. “Did Mark do that?” he whispered.

Conrad nodded.

“Oh shit. I had no idea he was... He just asked me to swap rooms. He said you two were... I didn't... I'm sorry.”

“Was he drunk when he asked you?” Conrad stared at David.

“No. We'd had a drink but he wasn't drunk. We changed over before we went out.”

“Was that why the police were here in the early hours?” one of Mark's friends asked.

“Yes,” Rurik said.

A buzz of conversation went around the table. Conrad spotted another of Mark's pals with his phone out, texting. *Telling Mark to get down here?*

"What happened with Ernesto?" Conrad asked.

"Mark got fed up of waiting for him on the slopes," Lee, a guy from work, chimed in. "He's only been skiing twice before. Plus, Ernesto attracted a lot of attention in the clubs and bars, and Mark got a bit loud. I think Ernesto was due to leave today anyway but he decided to go early."

"I'm just going to have a chat with Sean," Rurik told Conrad, and took his drink and croissant to the far end of the table.

It wasn't long before Mark turned up. The moment he spotted Conrad he put a smile on his face. "Morning, everyone," Mark called, but didn't look at anyone but Conrad. Maybe he didn't even notice the lack of a response to his greeting.

"Deigned to grace us with your presence?" Mark went to get a coffee, then sat opposite Conrad, next to David, who decided to get up and go back to the buffet.

"I thought you might like to know that I'm still alive." Conrad spoke quietly but knew everyone was listening.

Mark let out a choked laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"You changed rooms without telling me. I thought it was David asleep in the other bed, then you threw yourself on top of me."

Conrad saw the moment Mark switched into attack mode. His eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened. "Don't be ridiculous. This is not the place to have this discussion, but what happened last night was consensual."

"No, it wasn't. How could hitting me and strangling me be consensual? That was why I spoke to the police when I went to the hospital."

No one at the table was speaking. Or eating. They were glued to the scene playing out in front of them.

“This is all a misunderstanding. I will admit I’d had a few too many, but nothing I did was without your consent.”

“You’re lying,” Conrad said quietly. “Well, not about being drunk. I was glad you were so drunk because you rushing off to throw up gave me the chance to get out of the room.”

“I didn’t fucking touch you. You fell into the wardrobe. You were drunk as well.”

“You pushed me. You stamped on me. You wrapped your hands around my neck. You assaulted me. I wasn’t drunk.” Conrad pushed to his feet. He felt as if he’d found his voice. Finally. “I regret ever going out with you. I’m glad you cheated on me with Ernesto because I finally saw the real you. You’re a guy who everyone loves, but you *need* that love in an unhealthy way. You *have* to be adored. You *have* to feel that you’re right all the time. You’re the heart of any party but you have no heart. The only person you’ve ever loved is yourself.”

Mark sneered. “Bitter much about me dumping you?”

“Not bitter. Relieved. And you didn’t dump me. I walked out on you when I found you in bed with Ernesto. I pity the next poor sod that you love-bomb, some guy who won’t see through you until you’ve sucked him dry. I don’t want to press charges for what you did last night. But if it had gone the way you wanted, I would have done. You’re not worth my time and energy in this case going to court, though maybe the Austrian police will feel differently. You don’t deserve another thought from me and you won’t get one.”

Mark slowly clapped his hands. “Drama Llama Conrad. You always have been. Fuck off then.”

“Not yet,” Rurik said from the end of the table.

When Rurik stood, Mark paled. Conrad had never seen Mark that colour before.

“I’d like a word with you, Mark. Now. Conrad, please wait here.”

Conrad sat down again and watched Mark and Rurik walk out.

“Bloody hell,” David whispered as he slunk back to his seat with a plate of food.

Bloody hell indeed. Conrad’s heart was galloping.

No one else said anything. Conrad managed to sip his coffee but couldn’t eat.

It wasn’t long before Rurik was back at his side. There was no sign of Mark. “Let’s get your ski equipment. We can’t get your other stuff until later today. I can find you a pair of gloves and a hat to wear under your helmet if you want to ski.”

“Is—?”

“We’ll talk when we’re in the car.”

Conrad’s stomach was churning. He was glad he’d not eaten anything.

Once they were in the car, Rurik turned to face him. “Well done. I know that was difficult but you needed to do it.”

He was right. Conrad had stayed quiet when he shouldn’t have. He felt...brighter, lighter somehow.

“He’s protesting his innocence but by the time the police have done with him, he’ll realise he’s in serious shit. Even if you don’t want to press charges, the police might. You can report the assault in the UK too if you want. How...far did he get?”

“Not far. He...grabbed my cock, rubbed himself against me... I just want to forget it ever happened.”

“I understand that.”

“The sad thing is that I don’t think Mark will ever change. Narcissists *can* change if they’re able to see things from someone else’s perspective and ready to come to terms with the way they behave, but I’m not sure that will ever be Mark. He doesn’t understand that the way he’s behaving is wrong.”

“You’re probably right. I sacked him this morning. Instant dismissal.”

Conrad gave a quiet gasp. “What did he say?”

“That you’d been out to get him since he broke up with you. That he was defending himself. I pointed out you were injured, he wasn’t. *You* went to the hospital for treatment. *You* reported him to the police. He’d taken drugs. You hadn’t. I know exactly how much you drank and it wasn’t much.”

“What did he say?”

“Bumbled on about defending himself.” Rurik shrugged. “They moved him into another room last night so he couldn’t mess with any evidence. When I asked him what the police might find, he went quiet. I hope they find drugs. It serves him right.”

Was it really over? Conrad still didn’t think Mark would go quietly.

When they got back to the chalet, the adults were eating breakfast and the kids were nowhere to be seen.

“Ski school, then a party and we pick them up after lunch,” Rurik answered Conrad’s unasked question.

Arlo came straight to him and wrapped his arms around him. “I’d hug you tighter but I don’t want to hurt you. How did you get on?”

He pulled Conrad down to sit next to him.

“How are you?” Arlo’s mum asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Everyone knows what happened,” Arlo said. “Well, some of it.”

“Want us to beat him up?” Benedikt asked.

Rurik gave a heavy sigh.

Conrad felt embarrassed.

“I’ve sacked him,” Rurik said. “I don’t want his name mentioned again this Christmas.”

Nor did Conrad.

Arlo was relieved when Conrad said he didn't feel up to skiing, because he looked worn out. Moments after they settled on Arlo's bed, Conrad fell asleep. Arlo laid his hand over Conrad's and stared at the cut on his cheek. He was awash with emotions about what Warner had done, angry that he'd dared touch Conrad, frightened to think what might have happened and concerned that Conrad had been hurt. Warner's arrogance was astounding. At least Rurik had sacked him, though Arlo wished for more of a punishment than that. Still, it was up to Conrad whether he wanted Mark charged with assault or not.

He left Conrad sleeping and joined his mum in the kitchen.

"Conrad asleep?" she asked.

"Yes. Can I do anything to help?"

"Mince pies? I've made the pastry. All you have to do is roll it out and cut it."

Arlo washed his hands and set to work. His mum was making *Vanillekipferl*, crescent-shaped biscuits made from ground almonds and dusted with vanilla sugar.

Arlo slipped a piece of the uncooked mixture into his mouth. "*Hmmm.*"

"No more!"

"Not after this bit." He took another chunk and she rapped his knuckles with a spoon.

"Ouch. What was that for?"

"To remind you not to take anymore. I know you."

Arlo did his puppy-dog impression and his mum chuckled.

"You really like him," she said quietly.

"I really do."

"You don't think you're rushing this, just a little?"

Arlo shook his head. "I've been waiting for months!"

"But Conrad hasn't. You fall fast and hard, Arlo. You always have."

"This is different. Conrad is different. It's like unwrapping a parcel with lots of layers of paper and sometimes a treat between the layers. I just..." His shoulders fell. "You like him too though, don't you? You said you did."

"He's lovely, but you're my boy. I don't want to see you hurt."

She didn't say *again* but Arlo heard it.

"This time Conrad's the one who's been hurt. I feel so sad for him that he's not had a family like ours. I'm lucky to have you." Arlo hugged his mum with his elbows so he didn't get flour on her.

"Does he ever see them?"

"They went to live in Canada when he was eighteen and he's not seen or heard from them since. They said he was a mistake. A faulty condom."

"Ah. That's very unkind."

"I want to be the best friend he's ever had."

She was biting her lip when she turned to him. "Just let him breathe, sweetheart. You have such a lot of love to give but don't smother him."

An hour later, when the cooking was done and everywhere was clean, Conrad emerged from the bedroom, rubbing his eyes, his hair sticking up. He looked adorable.

"Feel better?" Arlo went over to him.

"I do. I just had a call from the police saying I can collect my belongings from the chalet."

"I'll take you."

"Is it all right if I stay here for the rest of my holiday?" Conrad asked Arlo's mother. "I'm sorry to have to ask but I

doubt I'll find a room anywhere. I fly back on the morning of the twenty-seventh. I can get the coach with the others. Apparently, Mark is flying home today."

"Of course you can stay," his mum said.

"I wonder if Rurik has thought to stop him getting into the office." Arlo called his brother.

"Hi."

"Did you know that the guy whose name we're not allowed to say is flying home today? Should you stop him getting—"

"Already done."

"I was going to say *through customs*." Arlo put as much indignation into his voice as he could.

"My reach doesn't stretch that far."

"What about a tip-off that he's carrying drugs into the UK?"

"Is he carrying drugs?"

Arlo looked at Conrad.

"He might be," Conrad said.

"Good enough. I'll see what I can do."

When the call ended, Conrad looked uneasy. "Are you sure it's all right if I stay here?"

"Yes. You're very welcome," said Arlo's mum.

"Can I buy some wine or champagne? I feel like I'm imposing."

"You're not and no need to buy anything. We're well stocked! We have more than enough food. Go and get your things with Arlo."

Conrad was very quiet as Arlo drove him there. He hoped they didn't bump into the person whose name they couldn't mention again. Just because he was leaving today didn't mean he'd already gone. But the only person they saw was the chalet

manager who apologised to Conrad as if what had happened had been his fault. Apparently, Mark had already left.

“I hope he’s not done anything to my stuff,” Conrad muttered as they went up on the lift.

Arlo hadn’t even thought of that possibility.

Conrad opened the door and took a deep breath before he went inside.

“At least he’s not wrecked the room,” Conrad said. He grabbed his case from the corner and opened it on the bed.

“Just check there’s nothing in the side pockets.”

“Why? Oh.” Conrad gulped and checked them. “Nothing. That was a good point. I’d better look in my trouser pockets too.”

“Does he take drugs a lot?”

“Despite me asking him not to when I was with him, he continued to snort coke. He’d taken something last night. Coke and maybe Viagra. That’s a new one though, well, as far as I know. I don’t know why he’d need that. He never had any issues getting hard.”

“Maybe because he was drunk and high?”

Conrad shrugged.

Arlo was relieved when everything was packed and nothing had been found. He drove them back and his mum had lunch waiting: crusty bread, sliced meats, a variety of cheeses and a small salad. She sat and ate with them.

“Are you going tobogganing this afternoon?” she asked.

“I’d like to,” Conrad said.

“Really?” Arlo raised his eyebrows.

“I could do with some fresh air.”

Arlo looked aghast. “You don’t need to recklessly hurl yourself down the side of a mountain to get some fresh air. Just stick your head out of the window.”

“Who said anything about recklessly hurling?”

Arlo's mother laughed.

"Ah, the Lehner way, is it?" Conrad smiled.

"For some of us," Arlo said.

"My five have always treated everything as a competitive sport. Poor Arlo, being the youngest, was never able to beat them. Now he sometimes can. He's faster than Rurik on skis."

"Mum!"

Conrad frowned, then *tsked*. "You let me win?"

Arlo didn't answer.

"Arlo!" Conrad said more insistently.

"I might have."

"Don't ever do that again." Conrad paused. "Well, not unless I'm sobbing because I'm desperate to win and you can do it without me finding out. Ever."

His mum sighed. "Don't take any silly risks, either of you. Bad enough having five daredevils let alone six."

"I don't take risks," Conrad said. "I'm a sure thing sort of person." He smiled at Arlo.

His mum began to clear away the lunch and Conrad got up to help her.

"I'm looking forward to a quiet afternoon on my own with a book and a drink," she said. "I bought a bottle of cream sherry for this specific moment. You two go and join them at the toboggan course."

Darn it! Arlo had other ideas, but if they didn't have the place to themselves, then there would be no recklessly hurling themselves onto the bed.

"Are you sure there isn't anything I can help with?" Conrad asked.

"Absolutely not. Everything that needs to be prepped, has been prepped. Go and have fun."

By the time they met up with everyone at the toboggan station, Arlo was satisfied that Conrad was okay. When

Conrad won the first race, after recklessly hurling himself down the slope, he knew Conrad was more than okay. Arlo still watched him, just in case, but Conrad didn't fall off once. By accident anyway. He did when he was racing the children. He was lovely with Arlo's nephews and nieces, gentle and kind, and even Rurik came over to tell Arlo how impressed he was with him.

"I know I said we're not talking about Dickhead, but Conrad did well this morning when he confronted him. He stood up to him and I know Warner's not an easy guy to stand up to, especially not in front of his friends."

"You didn't mind that some of your firm's clients were there?"

"No. I've spoken privately to all of them and explained the situation. Warner no longer works for the firm and that's that. I think Conrad will feel stronger by having spoken out this morning. Though there may be repercussions. Depends on whether Warner tries for unfair dismissal, but I think he's more likely to try and take clients with him when he moves elsewhere. That's not likely to happen now."

"Assuming he can get another job."

"There's always going to be jobs for people like him. The bad news is I can't give him the reference he really deserves, not that I think he'd ask me. The good news is that if he does try to find another job with any big firms in the finance industry, he'll probably find it harder than he thinks. With a bit of luck, we'll never see or hear of him again."

"Good."

"I like Conrad. I liked him at work but I didn't really know him other than being aware he was a quiet guy, but a hard worker and very smart. Now I really like him. Don't fuck it up, Arlo. I don't want him to leave."

Arlo glared. Rurik ducked as his wife threw a snowball and it hit Arlo.

"Sorry, Arlo," Lorna called.

"You will be," Arlo called back.

The tobogganing was turning into a snowball fight. Conrad was building up a huge pile of snowballs for the kids to throw.

“When did you know that Lorna was the one for you?” Arlo asked as he threw a snowball at Benedikt. “Damn, missed.”

“Our first day at uni. Mum and Dad had just driven away from the halls of residence and there was a knock on my door. She asked me for a hammer. I didn’t have one and she was clearly disgusted. I went and bought one, left it by her door with a bow around it and a note asking her if she wanted to go for a drink and that was that.”

“You knew then that you wanted to marry her?”

“I wasn’t thinking of marriage, but I suspected I was never going to look at anyone else the way I looked at her. I saw that in her eyes too. Conrad is a nice guy but don’t rush him.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Because you’re in deep very quickly. We can all see that. You’ve only known him a few days.”

“I’ve pined for him since I saw him crying.”

Rurik slung his arm over Arlo’s shoulder. “You’re a sweet guy but I still don’t know how you saw so much in him from that one night.”

I saw the other half of me.

It was dark by the time they returned to the chalet. Conrad was feeling back to normal. Well, no, he wasn’t. Normal had never been as good as this. While the children were given an evening meal by their grandparents, the rest of them had chosen to swim, use the sauna, or like him and Arlo, sit in the hot tub. When it started to snow, Conrad tipped back his head and sighed.

“Did you arrange the snowfall?” he asked.

“I did put in a request.”

Conrad smiled. "I can't help wondering what's going to go wrong because I'm just not this lucky."

"Nothing's going to go wrong."

"Think I've left it too late to get presents for everyone?" *Please say I don't need to.* Though he had bought those scarves for Arlo's parents as well as *Sequence*, a game for the family. "I feel I should have bought more."

"Don't even think about it. We don't go mad with each other anyway. I always give my brothers and their wives the same thing."

"Which is?"

"You'll have to wait and see." Arlo sighed and snuggled closer. "I did notice no inflatable mattress had been put in my room."

"Then where are you going to sleep?"

"On top of you?"

"Maybe we were supposed to get it and inflate it," Conrad said.

"I'll puncture it if I get the chance."

Conrad laughed. "While I think about it, what's the cello playing about? Why did your parents' eyes light up as if I'd just told them they'd won the lottery?"

"It's a family thing. None of my brothers' wives play, much to my parents' disappointment. We're a musical family. Anyway, we perform before dinner. Then we eat. Kids watch TV before bed, and as soon as the last child is unconscious, I go to bed and amazingly Santa comes. It's a miracle."

"Do you wish you had a child?" Conrad asked quietly.

"My family think I'm still a child but one day, yes, I'd like a family. What about you?"

Conrad nodded. "Me too. I like the idea of adopting, giving some kid a chance."

“That sounds good to me. I’m not keen on babies. Every time I had to change a nappy, I gagged. Everyone still pisses themselves laughing about that. Bastards.”

“Do you have a cello over here?”

“Yes, and there’s a spare one for you. My grandfather’s. That stays here year-round. Julian brought mine over with the other instruments because he drove. His wife is afraid of flying.”

“Why don’t you play your grandfather’s cello?”

“We can’t agree who should have it.” Arlo hesitated. “You can actually play, right? Not just *Twinkle, Twinkle*?”

“I’m pretty good at *Baa Baa Black Sheep*.”

When Arlo brought out the cello that Conrad was to play, there was a lull in the conversation, but no one made any comments. The instrument was beautiful and the bow was a good one. Conrad could feel all eyes on him as he tuned up, which made him nervous. Rurik and Julian had cellos too, while Dieter, Benedikt and their father tuned violins, and their mother a viola. Two of the children had violins as well. Conrad’s parents hadn’t been musical, but when he’d asked for a cello, he’d been bought one. Though they’d never come to listen to him in a concert.

The other kids and their mums sat on the couch and on the floor in front of the couch. The furniture had been moved to make more space and four chairs set out for the cellists. The other players were standing up, only the children had music stands.

“No music for the rest of us?” Conrad asked.

“Just screech in tune,” Arlo said.

“I barely progressed beyond *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*,” Conrad whispered.

“We’ll start with that then. Hey, Rurik! *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*.”

Rurik rolled his eyes but started to play the children's roundel. One by one the rest of them joined in, including the children. Conrad joined in too. He loved the rich sound that came from this cello. He liked his own better, but this was a quality instrument with a beautiful tone.

"You can play!" Arlo said.

"A bit."

Rurik called out carol after carol and Conrad was impressed that everyone could play so well. The children didn't join in with every carol, but if they had the music for it, they did. Arlo was mesmerising, his bowing style fluent and powerful. *He loves the instrument just like I do.*

Two of the children sang *Away in a Manger* with Benedikt accompanying them on the violin and they sounded like angels. Everyone joined in to sing and play *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht* and Arlo's mum shed tears when it was done.

"Don't make any jokes about us being like the von Trapps," Arlo whispered.

"Who are they?"

Arlo froze, then *tsked* when he realised Conrad was joking.

"The Lehner family Christmas is a hodgepodge of Austrian and English traditions," Arlo told him. "We didn't wait until tonight to switch on the Christmas tree lights, but this is the first time that 'Silent Night' has been sung. That's very Austrian."

"Do you have anything you'd like to play?" Rurik asked Conrad.

"I'm so rusty."

Rurik and Arlo made scoffing sounds.

"What grade did you get to?" Arlo asked.

"Eight."

"Of course you did. Distinction?"

Conrad shrugged. “I studied at the Royal School of Music. I only went into accountancy because there’s no money in cello playing. Well, there is, but you have to be one in a million. I’m not.”

“Oh yes you are,” Arlo whispered in his ear.

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“One last piece,” Arlo’s father said. “Conrad can choose.”

Arlo glanced at Conrad. “You look as if your mind’s gone blank.”

“I’m trying to decide between Prokofiev’s *Sinfonia Concertante* and Barber’s *Cello Concerto in A minor*.”

All the string-playing adults laughed.

“What’s so funny?” asked Lorna.

“Probably the two most difficult pieces for the cello,” Arlo said.

“I like this better. More appropriate.” Conrad put his bow to the strings and within a couple of notes Arlo knew exactly what he was playing and joined in.

A moment later, they were all playing *Wizards in Winter* and the kids were dancing to the beat, freezing on the staccato notes, then going crazy when the beat picked up.

When Arlo looked at Conrad, he was staring at him. It was as if they were singing to each other as they played faster and faster.

In the end, it was just the two of them still playing. The kids were out of breath and slumped on the floor while Arlo and Conrad played their hearts out.

When the last note died away, Arlo found it hard to breathe. In how many more ways was this guy perfect for him?

They had a huge round of applause and Arlo’s brothers slapped Conrad on the back.

“You were amazing,” Arlo said as they put the instruments away.

How often do you get to play?” Rurik asked.

“My acoustic cello—not often. I play my electric one several times a week. I can use headphones and not disturb anyone.”

“Disturb someone?” Arlo’s mum sounded horror-struck. “They should be grateful to have you living next door.”

“I have neighbours on both sides and above and below.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. “You play so beautifully. I could have listened to you all night.”

“Supper time,” said Arlo’s father.

Arlo pulled Conrad down next to him. “You get a choice tonight. Carp fried in butter, which is traditional...” He quietly made a retching sound. “Or nut rissoles, not traditional, served with roast vegetables sprinkled with herbs. Parsnips, potatoes, carrots, celeriac, red onions... My mouth is watering.”

“What’s wrong with the carp?”

“I don’t like carp, too many bones, though I will say that Mum’s carp does not taste muddy and she does debone it well, but even so.”

“The rissoles sound good.”

But when Conrad was offered carp, he did accept some and she beamed at him.

“Now try and persuade Arlo that it’s not going to kill him.”

Arlo groaned and took some.

“I’ll eat yours,” Conrad said quietly and Arlo whimpered.

The meal was fun and though Conrad was a little quiet, Arlo thought he was enjoying himself. He could imagine how it must feel to be the stranger in a big family gathering like this, but he kept pressing his knee against Conrad’s and Conrad did the same back to him.

“I want to play the cello just with you,” Arlo told him. “For us to go someplace where we can go wild and it won’t matter.”

“Can I come?” Julian asked from across the table. “Ask Rurik too and we could play as a quartet.”

Arlo glared.

“Ask me what?” Rurik said.

“The four of us playing together. I think it’s Conrad we’ve been waiting for.” Julian’s face had lit up.

“Julian thinks we should go in for Britain’s Got Talent or a show like it,” Arlo said.

“Melanie can video us. Put it on YouTube.” Julian turned to his wife. “We need a place to practise and a place to record. Too cold to be outside otherwise I’d have said outside.”

Arlo watched Conrad as his brothers chatted and saw how intently he listened. *So you’re interested.*

“Might you be up for that?” Arlo nudged him.

“I’m wondering how many more dreams can come true.”

“Sachertorte!” Arlo’s father bought a huge version of the chocolate dessert to the table.

“And there’s another one,” Conrad said.

Arlo chuckled.

Conrad had eaten all of his before Arlo had time to tell him that the first to finish had to help with the washing up. But when he did tell him, Conrad just shrugged.

“I ate your carp. You can help me wash up.”

Arlo and Conrad did it together. The kids had put out oats for the reindeer, a mince pie and a drink of sherry for Santa—not an Austrian tradition—and finally the last child had been persuaded into bed by Rurik. Arlo’s parents had already retired, but his brothers and their wives were sprawled on the couches waiting for the children to fall asleep so they could put the presents under the tree.

“You two don’t need to stay up,” Rurik told them. “Just don’t wake the kids who’ve fallen asleep.” He raised his eyebrows.

Arlo didn't think he'd seen Conrad blush like that before. He took Conrad's hand and tugged him to his room.

"Still no inflatable mattress!" Arlo said in delight.

"Can you be really quiet?" Conrad began to get undressed.

"Yes." *Maybe.*

Conrad smiled. "Why don't I believe you?"

"I'll try. I promise."

Arlo was hard before he'd finished taking his clothes off.

"The shower is on an outside wall," Arlo whispered.

"What—? Oh." Conrad's eyes widened.

Within moments, they were in the shower, Conrad soaping Arlo's body and Arlo trying his hardest not to groan as Conrad squeezed and teased his cock. Arlo leaned back against the tiles and pressed his arm across his mouth as Conrad continued to play with him. Conrad turned Arlo round and leaned against his back, nipping the place where Arlo's neck met his shoulder before he nuzzled his way down his spine, and all the time running his hand up and down the length of Arlo's cock.

Conrad traced every bump in Arlo's spine with his fingers and tongue as he slowly sank to his knees. Arlo put his arm back against his mouth. Conrad had one finger in the seam of Arlo's backside, pressing along the strip of flesh between the entrance to his body and his balls, and Arlo's legs trembled. When Conrad's finger slid a little way inside, Arlo humped the shower wall, his cock saved from collision with the tiles by Conrad's hand.

"Ouch," Conrad said.

"Sorry. My ouch would have been louder, so thank you."

Conrad pushed to his feet, spun Arlo round and kissed him. Arlo wrapped his hand around Conrad's cock, and they caressed each other, mouths together, hips rocking as water poured over them. Arlo was swamped with lust. He had one

hand on Conrad's arse, pulling him in, matching the action of his hand with the thrust of his hips.

They came almost at the same time, moaning into each other's mouths as their hands filled with come. Arlo's cock seemed to pulse long after he'd thought it would stop, and he wondered if something was wrong, only it felt so good, so right. They washed each other, still kissing and finally Arlo turned off the water.

Back in bed, they lay in each other's arms. Conrad kissed the bite marks on Arlo's forearm.

"How are you going to explain those?" Conrad asked.

"I'll say you're a werewolf."

Conrad was still laughing when Arlo turned out the light.

The following morning, Conrad almost reeled when they walked into the main room. It looked as if a wrapping paper bomb had exploded—was still exploding—balls of paper flying across the room lobbed at one brother by another. Julian was covered in bows of every colour, and the kids were fighting to stick more on him. Conrad had heard the excited chatter from the bedroom but in here, it seemed overwhelming—Christmas music blaring out along with the sounds of children playing with their toys, and in one case crying. The return of a plastic robot seemed to sort that. Conrad and Arlo put their gifts under the tree.

"They are not yours," Rurik called to an encroaching child. "Grown-ups only now."

Conrad had never been part of anything like this...chaos. His Christmases had been quiet, sedate affairs. His parents put one present under the tree for him. Usually something fairly expensive. He always knew what he was getting because they asked him what he wanted. Cello, games console, phone...He guessed some people just weren't good at parenting. Christmas had never been fun. This was.

The adults were making a concerted effort to stuff all the wrapping paper into bin liners and within a few minutes, the room was mostly clear of paper. The majority of the kids were playing with their presents on the other side of the room and Arlo's father handed out glasses of champagne. "Merry Christmas. *Frohe Weihnachten!*"

They went round touching their glasses and wishing each other happy Christmas. He and Arlo sat snuggled together on a large armchair and within minutes, another wrapping paper bomb was detonated. Conrad was glad he'd bought the relatively expensive scarves for Arlo's parents. He'd have felt bad if he'd not had anything to give them, and they did seem to like them. While Arlo's brothers and their wives were busy unwrapping their gifts, he and Arlo exchanged theirs.

"Oh, what's this?" Arlo asked as he took the wooden box from the paper. "Wow! A puzzle box?" He turned it in his hands. "I love it. Thank you. It's so intricate."

"There's a message in the middle from me. The guy in the shop said it takes a long..."

Conrad watched in disbelief as Arlo managed to open the first two sections at almost the speed of the man in the shop.

"How did you manage that?" he asked. "Do you already have one?"

"No. I've never seen one before." He leaned closer. "I'm just good with my hands."

Conrad stopped Arlo before he figured out the next bit. He didn't want him to see the message too soon. "Do it later. I thought it would take you ages."

"Define ages."

"At least a month." Though to be honest, if Arlo read the message now, maybe it would be okay.

Arlo set it aside. "What's this?" He picked up a tiny package and began to open it.

Conrad had bought him a blue marble of the Earth, showing all the continents and major rivers.

“In case you get lost and end up in space,” Conrad said. “You’ll know which planet to look out for.”

“It’s really beautiful. Thank you. I wonder if you’ll think the same about this. Open this.”

Conrad had to work his way through ten layers of wrapping paper before he realised Arlo had bought him the same marble and his face creased in a smile.

“You can keep it in your pocket and follow my route when I’m flying,” Arlo said.

“Something else.” Conrad held out another package.

Arlo spluttered when he opened it. Three tubes of Superglue.

“Careful how you use it,” Conrad told him.

“Now this.” He handed Conrad an envelope.

Inside was a piece of card. It said *Be at Heathrow Terminal 5 on 31st December at 5.00am for 7.20am flight. Dress warmly. We’re going to Iceland. We’ll be back the next day around three in the afternoon.* Conrad’s jaw dropped.

Arlo smiled. “I’ll be your pilot. I thought—why am I letting us spend New Year’s Eve apart when we can spend it together? That’s not to say I don’t want your New Year’s Eve entertainment another day. You promised that light show.”

Conrad kissed him. He didn’t care that all Arlo’s family were watching.

When they broke apart, Arlo whispered, “Whatever you do, don’t move or my family will see how much you turn me on.”

“Thank you, Arlo.” Rurik had come over to them.

“What for?” Arlo pulled paper over his lap.

Rurik raised his eyebrows. “The flight vouchers.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for all your presents too.”

“You haven’t opened them.”

“I can thank you without doing that.”

“Come and get them.”

“In a minute. Where do you think you’d like to go on your trip? You have to tell me so I can get you the right dates.”

Maybe Rurik saw the slightly desperate look on Arlo’s face because he walked away.

There was a chorus of thanks to Arlo.

“It’s almost the best thing about being a pilot,” Arlo said. “I can keep giving them the same thing year after year. Saves so much work.”

A little later, Conrad realised he’d not seen Arlo for several minutes. When he went to look for him, he found him in the bedroom working on the puzzle box.

“Really?” Conrad asked.

“I can’t stop,” Arlo said with a moan. “I’ve nearly... Oh, there we go. Now the last bit.”

“I think I need to take it back to the shop and complain. It was supposed to be challenging.”

“What does the message say?”

“I’m not going to tell you. I’m going to sit next to you and rip it from your fingers the moment you grab it.”

“Ha!”

Conrad gave in to the inevitable. Arlo was going to get to the message in a few minutes. Conrad didn’t regret writing it. He could have left off the word *think* but he sat next to Arlo and watched.

Arlo gave a yell of triumph and flung himself off the bed when he got hold of the piece of paper.

“I’m rethinking the *think*,” Conrad said as Arlo opened it.

Arlo looked at the message and bit his lip. “Rethinking it to *I don’t think*? Your handwriting is terrible.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Come and tell me what it says.”

Conrad crossed the room and pulled Arlo into his arms. “I know it’s too quick, too soon, too fast... That it might be lust talking... That it probably *is* lust talking... But...”

“That’s not what it says.”

Conrad swallowed hard. “All that’s understood and you weren’t supposed to be reading it yet.”

“But you meant it when you wrote it. You mean it *now*.”

Conrad nodded.

“So say it.”

“I think I love you.”

Arlo’s eyes brimmed with tears. “Yes, it’s crazy fast and all the rest, but unless you turn out to have some horrible habits, or hog the remote, I already know we’re meant to be together. I think I love you too. We’re not allowed to say the three words on their own for at least six months. Okay? Then my mother and Rurik won’t accuse me of rushing this, rushing you.”

“But we can say *I think I love you*?”

“Absolutely. Not in English, but in as many languages as we can manage.”

Conrad smiled. “This is the best Christmas ever.”

“Then what can we do next year?”

“We’ll think of something.”

Six days later they were in Iceland! Together! Arlo was beside himself with joy. He and Conrad were waiting for the minibus to take them on their excursion.

“Had fun?” Arlo asked.

“I can’t believe how much we packed into one day. And this—oh wow—if we see the Northern Lights—it will be just amazing.”

There were already lights in the sky when they pulled up. Conrad stood behind Arlo and wrapped his arms around him.

“I’ll keep your back warm,” Conrad whispered.

They stared up and watched as the Earth performed its magic. Arlo had seen it before, from the ground and from the air, but Conrad hadn’t. Judging by the gasps at Arlo’s ear, Conrad was as impressed as Arlo had been on the first occasion—and still was impressed. The spectacle was different every time, amazing each time and humbling.

“*Ég held ég elski þig,*” Conrad whispered.

“*Ki taku whakaaro e aroha ana ahau ki a koe.*”

Conrad smiled. “What language is that?”

“Maori. I knew you’d pick Icelandic so I went for something a long way away.”

“Do you think we’ll get through all seven thousand and eleven languages in the world in six months?”

Arlo leaned back into him. “Let’s try.”

“Oh look,” Conrad whispered. “It’s as if the sky is playing music to us. It’s so beautiful.”

“It is.”

“But I need to tell you that as wonderful as this is, you’re the most beautiful part of my world and you always will be. Thank you for being you, Arlo.”

“Now I can’t see and my tears are going to freeze in my eyes.”

Conrad shook as he laughed. “Let me kiss them better.”

“Then your tongue will get stuck.”

“You think I care?”

I love you now. But Arlo would wait to say it. And then he’d never stop saying it. Ever. Ever. Ever.

Epilogue

December 14th A year later

A cameraman stood in the corner of Arlo's parents' house, his assistant next to him, lots of wires and equipment everywhere. This Christmas, the Lehnrs had not gone to Austria. The trip had been delayed until the New Year. The whole family was glued to the TV watching a show hosted by Dig and Jonah, two well-known presenters, and Arlo clung to Conrad's hand.

Arlo had struggled to get Rurik to agree to taking part in this. It was a little like Britain's Got Talent but for charity. Even so, Rurik had said *no* for a long while, fearing the reaction of shareholders and stakeholders, but Arlo had persisted, reassured his brother that no one would be taking any clothes off, and finally Rurik gave in. *Not because of that* Rurik had yelled. Arlo smiled as he remembered.

The format was different to most talent shows. A TV production company had invited musicians and singers to submit a four-minute video of a performance of any piece. Over a period of weeks, the chosen videos had been broadcast and the public had voted for their favourite by text. Twelve had made it through to the final. They'd all been given a chance to make another recording and those videos would be played tonight.

Their quartet was called Three Plus One.

Three plus one awkward one Arlo had looked at Rurik.

Three brothers and me Conrad had said.

Three talented ones and me said Julian.

Three brought to life by one Rurik looked at Conrad.

A cameraman and an assistant had been sent to each of the finalists' homes, ready to capture cries of joy or tears of

disappointment. Arlo assumed not much of the latter would be shown. Rurik had managed to persuade the company to make a donation to the charity the four of them had chosen, so even if they didn't win, the charity wouldn't lose out. It seemed a bit mean that one charity would get it all and when Arlo had spoken to the production company, they'd agreed that the other eleven charities would be given something.

Julian's wife had made both videos. The one that would be shown tonight had been set in a rundown area of East London where quite a crowd had gathered to watch them—and they'd danced as the four of them had performed. Melanie had a guy with her who'd used a drone to film them too. Though the actual music they'd hear tonight had been recorded in a studio arranged by the TV company who'd also paid the royalty fees for using another artist's music. The winner won a hundred thousand pounds for the charity of their choice.

Arlo had wondered if Rurik would have time to rehearse but his brother turned out to be just as keen as the rest of them, if not keener. Well, maybe not as keen as Arlo and Conrad. God, he was an amazing cellist! It felt as if Conrad hardly had to make any effort to be brilliant, though Arlo knew that wasn't true. Arlo could go hard just listening to him. Conrad was wasted in accountancy, but every time he said that in the hearing of his brother, he got a Rurik killer-glare. Arlo loved his cello but the relationship Conrad had with his was... something else.

"It's starting," his mother said.

Only the four of them and Melanie had seen the finished film. After tonight, the video would go online. Three Plus One might not make much from that, but when they uploaded their own stuff, someone might spot them and offer them a recording contract. Though Arlo had kept his thoughts about that to himself because he sort of knew Rurik wouldn't do more of this.

"She's good," Conrad said.

Arlo tuned back in to the woman who was singing. She was good. *Damn it.*

All the acts were good, and aware the camera *might* be recording them even now, they were complimentary about everyone. A young man singing Puccini had an amazing voice, a pianist who played and sang a composition of his own brought a lump to Arlo's throat with the lyrics about loneliness and loss, though he thought they'd have been better picking something more upbeat. Like the fabulous Gospel choir that had everyone enthralled, but there were no other instrumental groups like them.

"You're up next," said Arlo's father.

Conrad gripped Arlo's hand more tightly.

The four of them were in white shirts, sleeves rolled up, and black trousers. Melanie had done such a good job with the video too. She'd got permission to use the drone over London and had shots of Canary Wharf in there. The drone filmed from high above the city, then dropped down to street level. They played in a line, Conrad at one end, his hair longer than he usually had it and floppy, Arlo next to him, then Julian with Rurik at the other end. The piece they'd chosen was Coldplay's *La Vida Loca* with Conrad's cello as Chris Martin's *voice*. They'd played it so many times it was a miracle that any of them could bear to hear it again, but Arlo found his foot tapping next to Conrad's.

Watching and hearing Conrad play always gave him goose bumps. There was an energy and vibrancy about him that set every one of Arlo's nerve endings tingling. The way he bowed, his intensity, the way he embraced the cello, the sound he seduced from it... He was mesmerising to watch. There were even sections with the crowd dancing, but most of the video was of the four of them, each of them in their own world with their instrument but still joined in some sort of magic harmony, captured by the camera in the way they looked at each other, played to each other.

One by one, all but Conrad stopped playing, then he bowed the last few notes, the sound dying away as his head dropped.

The room was silent for a moment, then everyone started to chatter at once. Arlo didn't care if they didn't win. Seeing themselves on the TV had been everything.

"We were good, weren't we?" Conrad's face was alight with pleasure.

"Not bad. I played an E and not a G at one point."

Conrad *tsked*. "You were note perfect."

"It will be a travesty if you don't win," said Arlo's mother.

Though the next act was a nine-year-old girl who had the most amazing soprano voice. How could you pick between any of them? It was viewers who'd vote and Arlo's cabin crew had been telling everyone on board the planes he'd flown over the last few weeks, to vote for him.

"Okay?" Melanie asked.

Arlo and Conrad both gave her a hug.

"You did a brilliant job," Conrad said. "Made us look amazing. Thank you. The setting was perfect. They'll think we organised those people and got them to dance and we didn't." He gulped. "You didn't, did you?"

"No. Totally spontaneous. I think people respond to music that makes them want to move. The song is just brilliant for that. I know there might have been better pieces to play, but it's always good to go with something most of the audience will recognise."

They had to wait another fifty minutes before the results were announced. They showed the acts live on a split screen, four at a time, not them the first time, and then three were blanked out. Arlo's throat closed up when they saw themselves on the TV in the next group. When their image remained when the other three went blank, they all shouted and hugged each other. A final act was selected from the last four. Three Plus One were in the final three.

Everyone in the room was silent.

Please, please, please Arlo begged.

“In third place is...” said Dig.

Why did they have to drag it out so long?

“The Southern Gospel Choir,” Jonah shouted.

The studio audience clapped and cheered. Everyone in the room shot each other glances

“We’re second or first,” Rurik said.

“We’re not going to win,” Julian said. “Are we? I mean... are we?”

“And in first place, winner of one hundred thousand pounds is...”

Another long pause.

“Three Plus One!”

For a moment, no one reacted. Arlo wondered if he’d heard that right and he wasn’t just imagining he’d heard their name. Then everyone was shouting and yelling and the camera was in Rurik’s face and he was being asked to talk on live TV.

“Congratulations!” Dig said.

“Thank you.” Rurik’s voice was croaky. “We’re completely overwhelmed. Thank you so much to everyone who voted for us.”

“We’ll be seeing a lot more of you in future, I’m sure,” Jonah said. “Tell us which charity is getting the money.”

“We’re giving it to a music school in the area where we filmed the video,” Rurik said. “They can make changes to the premises and buy more instruments. Help children and adults.”

“That’s fantastic. Don’t you think so, ladies and gentlemen?”

The audience cheered.

When the cameraman and his assistant had gone, they all relaxed. Arlo’s father opened two bottles of champagne and

made a toast.

“I was very proud of you all tonight. You’ve worked so hard and you deserve this success. Well done!”

Arlo and Conrad snuggled back on the chair.

“Want to give up the day job?” Arlo whispered.

“No. Not unless we get a call from Simon Cowell.”

Rurik’s phone rang on cue and they both froze.

“No way,” said Arlo.

“It was fun and I’d love to do it again,” Conrad said quietly. “I really like the idea of us putting videos on YouTube or Spotify, but I don’t think it’s fair to expect Rurik and Julian to travel around playing all over the country, or in other countries, when they’ve got young families. And you have a tricky job.”

“Just the two of us could do it.”

Conrad cocked his head. “Would you want to?”

Arlo hesitated. He *did* want to but he was aware that if he said that, Conrad might feel he had to agree.

“They might not want just two of us,” Arlo said.

“But if they did?”

“If...” Arlo took a chance. “Yes. For a while. It would be fun, don’t you think?”

Conrad’s smile would have taken Arlo out at the knees if he hadn’t been sitting down.

“If they want two of us then?” Conrad whispered.

“Rurik is going to kill me if you resign.”

“I won’t let him.”

“*Chan rak khun,*” Arlo said.

“Thai.”

“How did you know?” Arlo gaped at him.

“I looked it up too. And I know what it means. It’s not I *think* I love you. It’s I love you. I *know* I love you. I always will.”

“Can’t be many people who marry their stalker.”

Conrad gasped. “Was that a proposal?”

“Depends on whether you say yes or not.”

“Arlo, the day you saw me crying was the luckiest day of my life. Yes, I would love to marry you.”

When they broke from their kiss, everyone was looking at them.

“He said yes.” Arlo looked into Conrad’s eyes and smiled.

“Welcome to the family,” the Lehnrs chorused.

THE END

Well almost

For those who want guys like Mark to get their comeuppance, he was fined by the Austrian courts for drug possession. Back in the UK, he brought a case of unfair dismissal against the company, and lost. The costs he incurred meant he had to sell his swanky flat. He now works for a small PR company and doesn’t have a boyfriend. He still protests his innocence. Narcissists are unlikely to change.

~

Thanks so much for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it. If you have time, I’d appreciate a review to help me find more readers.

My next release will be another Christmas story called **A Spaceman Came Travelling**. [aspacemancametravelling](#) Release date 1st December. It was originally published last year in a charity anthology which is no longer available. It's been lightly revised.

You can find out about what's coming up by signing up for my newsletter via my website. As a thank you for joining, I'll send you a link to exclusive short stories that are on my website. [Barbara Elsborg](#) I have a readers' group on Facebook. [Barbara's Besties](#)

My other Christmas and New Year books!

[This is Real](#)

[What If?](#)

[a faerie story.](#)

[Where Forever Started](#)

[Winterworld](#)

[not over yet](#)

[The Choice](#)

[The Santa Problem](#)

[jontys christmas](#)

[aspacemancametravelling](#)

About the Author

Barbara Elsborg lives in Kent in the south of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Volcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm) she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying plugged-in male, her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they are to write.

She loves hearing from readers and can be contacted at bjelsborg@gmail.com If you'd like to hear about future releases, please ask to be put on her mailing list.

Contemporary MMs

The Jonty books

The Making of Jonty Bloom (Unfinished Busi 1) [themakingofjontybloom](#)

A Long Way Back (Unfinished Business 2) [alongwayback](#)

Reinventing Cato (Unfinished Business 3) [reinventing_cato](#)

Waiting for Ru (Unfinished Business 4) [waiting_for_ru](#)

Jonty's Christmas – novella [jontys_christmas](#)

Jonty in Russia – novella [jonty_in_russia](#)

Jonty's Halloween – novella [Jontys Halloween](#)

Jonty and Devan's Big Day – novella [BigDay](#)

MMs

He's The One [hestheone](#)

Hold On [pge.me/holdon](#)

The Mission [pge.me/themission](#)

Whatever it Takes [whatever_it_takes](#)

The Story of Us [The Story of us](#)

Tell No One [Tell No One](#)
Edge of Forever [edge of forever](#)
Cowboys Down [Cowboys Down](#)
With or Without Him [with or without him](#)
Every Move He Makes [every move he makes](#)
Give Yourself Away [Give yourself away](#)
Falling (Fall and Break book 1) [Falling](#)
Breaking (Fall and Break book 2) [Breaking](#)
Drawn In [Drawn In](#)
This is Real [This is Real](#)
Dirty Games [Dirty Games](#)

Paranormal MMs

Double Trouble (Lost and Found 1) [Double Trouble](#)
What If? (Lost and Found 2) [What If?](#)
Inbetweeners (Lost and Found 3) [Inbetweeners](#)
Broken Things (Lost and Found 4) [Broken Things](#)
Archangel's Assassin [Archangel's Assassin](#)
Dirty Angel [dirty angel](#)
Bloodline (Norwood book 2) [Bloodline](#)
The Demon You Know (Norwood book 3) [The demon you know](#)
Second Chance [Second Chance](#)
A Faerie Story MMM [a faerie story](#)
Winterworld [Winterworld](#)
Not Over Yet [not over yet](#)
The Santa Problem [The Santa Problem](#)

Short Stories (MM)

Zeke's Wood [Zekes Wood](#)

The Choice (Free) [The Choice](#)

Where Forever Started (Free) [Where Forever Started](#)

A Spaceman Came Travelling [aspacemancametravelling](#)

Contemporary MMFs

Anna in the Middle [Anna in the middle](#)

Susie's Choice [Susies choice](#)

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Talking Trouble [Talking Trouble](#)

Just What She Wants (novella) [Just what she wants](#)

Starting Over (novella) [Starting over](#)

Contemporary MFs

Strangers [Strangers](#)

Summer Girl Winter Boy [Summer Girl Winter Boy](#)

Kiss a Falling Star [Kiss a falling star](#)

An Ordinary Girl [An Ordinary Girl](#)

Perfect Timing (Bedlingham brothers book 1) [Perfect Timing](#)

Something About Polly (Bedlingham bros 2) [Something about Polly](#)

Doing the Right Thing (Mansell bros 1) [Doing the right thing](#)

Finding the Right One (Mansell bros 2) [Finding the right one](#)

Digging Deeper [Digging Deeper](#)

The Princess and the Prepper (novella) [Princess and the prepper](#)

Snow Play (novella) [Snowplay](#)

On the Right Track (novella) [On the right track](#)

Short Stories (MF)

(Saying Yes (free) [Saying Yes](#)

The Bad Widow (free) [Bad Widow](#)

The Gift (free) [The Gift](#)

Dragon Race (free) [Dragon Race](#)

Two Birds, One Stone (free) [Two Birds One Stone](#)

Paranormal MFs and MMFs

Power of Love MF [Power of love](#)

Kiss Interrupted MF [Kiss Interrupted](#)

Jumping in Puddles MF (Norwood 1) [Jumping in puddles](#)

Rocked MMF [Rocked](#)

The Small Print MMF [The Small Print](#)

Worlds Apart MMF [Worlds Apart](#)

The Consolation Prize MF (Trueblood 1) [The consolation prize](#)

Falling for You MF (Trueblood 2) [Falling for you](#)

Lightning in a Bottle MF (Trueblood 3) [Lightning in a bottle](#)

The Misfits MMF (Trueblood 4) [Misfits](#)

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Taking Stock MMF (sci-fi) [Taking stock](#)

Just One Bite MF novella [Just one bite](#)

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