



PASSION
THROUGH
ANOTHER
MAN'S EYES

THE
TOURIST

CLARE LONDON

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Blurb

Exploring the boundaries of love and desire through another man's eyes

What if you could visit other men's lives from within, and share their passion? Could you resist the temptation to push even further, and help shape those lives?

Meet Ace, a tourist, a wandering spirit who visits the bodies of others for entertainment and to explore his own desires. But when he enters the world of Dan and his lover, Ricky, two men in a relationship already plagued by jealousy and unspoken tensions, things take a dangerous turn.

As Ace encourages Dan to be more assertive, and Ricky to shake off his dark past, he starts to discover for himself what love can bring to a man's life. But when his hosts' newfound happiness is threatened by someone from that dark past, should Ace move on quickly, as he so often does – or should he use his very unique talents to protect the couple from harm?



Author Note: this book was originally published in 2011 with another publisher. It has been re-edited, and some of the

content improved and added to. However, the overall storyline remains the same.

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CHAPTER 1

It isn't a bad thing, you know, to find yourself stepping into a hot, fresh-smelling shower, stark bollock naked, and sporting a decent-sized morning wood. Even if the period immediately beforehand was a bit of a blurred memory. Even if you can't remember where the hell you are, exactly how you got there, what day it is, or even how much shampoo you're going to need because you can't remember if you're bewigged, buzz-cut, or bearded.

I reached for the plastic curtain, not sure how firm my grip was, tugging it back awkwardly. When I stepped forward onto the smooth tray, I stubbed my toe against the tiled wall and yelped. Seemed I couldn't even gauge the size of my own bloody feet.

You see, visiting isn't an exact science. Hell, it's no science at all, at least not for me. It's just what I *do*. I drift in my strange but by-now-familiar limbo, jumping in and out of human bodies for a bit of a laugh and—I'm not going to beat about the bush, if you'll pardon the pun—for sexual satisfaction. From *men*.

That's my life, if that's what you'd call it. I get a thrill from the sexual adventure; I get off on the new sensations.

As for today, what was the last thing I remembered? A rewarding couple of days in the bed of two very limber athletes. Moroccan, maybe. On a work visa, staying in a tiny but over-warm bedsit, the best they could afford so close to

London. I never knew whether they were legally in the country or not, and didn't really care. I was only passing through, after all. They were dark-haired, with sun-salty skin, and full of youthful strength and stamina. An imaginative collection of toys, too. *Delicious*. But their bickering wore me ragged in the end, even though it was their idea of foreplay.

And so, I moved on. I waited until they were arm in arm in the middle of a busy pub off Fulham High Street, took that deep breath of virtual anticipation, and jumped into the crowd. I couldn't always rely on who or what I'd find. I rarely knew quite where I'd end up.

But, like I said, it wasn't always a bad thing. Particularly now, when I found myself pressed up against the side of a fit body in that shower, equally naked, slick with water and warm with sexy, willing enthusiasm. How did I know "willing"? Pretty obvious, if you asked me. He had a thick, solid dick, happily nudging against my thigh. Just what I like the best. There was barely enough room to turn one person around in there, let alone two, but it didn't seem like either of us resented getting up close and personal.

I leaned in, just to make sure, and he moaned with pleasure. Yeah, that confirmed it. I gave up worrying about shampoo and went for groping his hips instead.

"Hey, there."

He sounded startled and I paused. I mumbled something under my breath that could have been taken as a tentative apology.

"No. It's fine." He twisted around fully to face me and that delicious dick rubbed against mine. It was long and curved up

towards his belly, eager for action. Mine was no slouch, either. Looked like I had plenty of inches, and at the moment they were all standing to attention. “Just... you surprised me, that’s all.” He tilted his head and touched the side of my neck with full lips, quick and sloppy. “I didn’t want to wake you just yet. You need your sleep after a long day on site. It’s not your fault I’m up so early.”

“Up?” My voice was low and firm. I liked the sound of it. I smirked and ran my hand along the length of his cock. I had a broad hand; it looked strong, the skin tanned, fingertips a little calloused.

He sucked in a breath. “God. Yeah. I mean, I know you’re not so keen on the morning...”

I squeezed, not that gently, and he shut up immediately. “You think you should be telling me what I am and what I’m not?”

He stared at me and I got a proper look at his face. He was handsome, somewhere in his early twenties I guessed, with sexy, deep brown eyes, and an expression of excitement and confusion, all mixed in with the twinkle of morning lust. And a look of delight that was even more promising. “I... guess not. Sorry.”

His hair must have reached just under his ears when it was dry. The water made it cling lower to his neck, creating small dark licks of sensuality. I imagined twisting one around my fingers and tugging. *Hard*. “So, make it up to me.”

“Dan?” He laughed shakily. “What’s up with you this morning?”

I nudged myself up against him, pressing his cock back against his stomach, feeling its weight pushing mine. There were often these awkward questions, of course, especially just after I'd arrived. But all I needed were a couple more moments—or to keep the sewer-deep levels of my mind from wallowing in thoughts of sex and nothing else—and I was sure I could field them as usual. “Nothing different. You feel good and I want it.”

He shuddered and his lips dragged across my jaw. Felt like I had quite a lot of morning stubble. His hand grasped my hip, his palm slippery with soap. “Well, this *is* a surprise, but a very pleasant one, you know?” He moaned softly and his fingers tightened on my flesh. “Very good. I think you can tell —”

I pressed against him again and he sucked the words back in. After a second's hesitation, he stepped back, close up to the tiled wall. His heart was beating so fast I could feel the vibration in his chest. I knew then what he needed. Doesn't take me long to know what a man's like, not nowadays.

“I think you do far too much of that,” I said. “*Thinking*. I'm not a whole lot keen on it myself, at least not at this moment.” As far as I was concerned, *feeling* was taking up most of my attention. I knew what I wanted, I knew what my body was aching for, and it was a special bloody treat when I found a host with a like-minded libido to explore our fantasies.

I rubbed my dick against him again, this time bending my knees to get better effect. I was an inch or so taller than he was and I needed that angle so that I was sliding against his cock, not into his navel. Though that looked and felt pretty fine, too.

The whole torso was nicely defined, not too muscle-bound. He was what they called *hot* these days, with wide shoulders and slim hips, as well-proportioned as one of those underwear models who were so popular in the magazines. I reckoned I was a few years older than him, but not *too* old to share the same styles. Perfect. His skin was slightly plump, with a healthy sheen and barely tanned. I nudged again and dropped my lips to the junction of his neck and throat. His head went back and he gasped.

He wasn't as broad as I was—I could instinctively tell from the position of our arms—and his pecs were barely covered with very fine hair. The nipples were dark brown mounds poking out at me. Made my mouth salivate. Another thing I knew instinctively—I loved nibbling his skin. I sucked at his neck and the little buds tightened. I felt them push against my own chest, and the excitement rippled straight down to my balls.

His treasure trail was darker, though that might just have been from the water running over his shoulders and down his front. My eyes slid downward, following its path, over the gentle mound of his belly, down to the curls at his groin, glistening, tangled, and then to our cocks, dancing their own version of a thrusting tango, seeking friction, swelling even further with eagerness.

He chuckled softly. “Dan, this is—”

“*I say what it is.*” I glanced back up at his face. The water pattered onto the tray at my feet and my voice had been more growl than whisper. For a second, he tensed and I wondered if I'd messed up already.

Then he relaxed, letting out a long breath. His eyes half closed. “Yes,” he murmured, a kind of awesome delight in his tone. “You do.”

I relaxed, too. I’d struck lucky. A smooth-skinned, handsome face and deliciously pouting lips. Those dark eyes had reflected amusement—and now something else I thought I could identify as surrender. And underlying it all, the unmistakable glint of desire. It wasn’t a surprise to me. I somehow knew that, for us, the sex had always been good.

“You’re safe with me. I won’t hurt you.” I don’t know why I chose those particular words but they sounded right at the time. My voice was hoarse but I didn’t think it bothered him. That was probably because, right at that moment, I slipped my palm back around his arousal and squeezed with gusto.

“Oh God,” he gasped. His back arched nicely, the muscles on his firm chest tightening even further. “I know. So do it.”

I swivelled him around so that he faced the tiles. The water bounced off the wall beside me, splattering my cheeks and down over my shoulders. It took only one more step for me to push right up against him, my breath hot and wet on his neck and my hands sliding over his arse, down between his legs and under his balls. I cupped them, enjoying the way they nestled in my palm. Heavy and hot, the wet stray hairs clinging to the wrinkles.

He groaned. This position felt perfect for me, and the animalistic sound of his voice hit like a drug, straight to my groin. Excitement coiled like hot coals in the base of my belly. My cock was rigid, aching for attention. This time, even

though my voice was still hoarse, the urgency felt good. “I’m going to fuck you. Really hard. And *now*.”

He shivered, though both of us were hot under the water. “Oh Jesus. Oh *God*. You’re so…”

“What?” I was panting.

He shook his head, droplets of water dribbling off his hair. He didn’t turn to look at me. “Nothing.” His laugh was low, more like a purr. “Dammit, I’m not complaining. You’re just not usually so fierce in the morning.”

Usually? There was nothing usual about this, not from my point of view. “If you don’t want it—”

“But I do.” He jerked in my grip, pushing his arse back at me. “Believe me, I *do*.”

His voice was even lower; did he expect me to hear it over the sound of the running water? But I did, and it was a trumpet call to proceed. My cock rubbed up between his buttocks, and his muscles clenched on either side of the split. I traced my fingers along the dimples, appreciating the firm flesh, prising the cheeks apart. I paused. “Do we need…?”

He wriggled a bit and water ran off his back to the floor, splashing into the tray. “The stuff’s on the side. The lube.” He sounded puzzled. “Where you always keep it. Remember?”

My mind cleared and I stretched over to the small shelf over the sink. I snagged lube and a condom, my fingers slippery but sure. By now he was gasping, his gorgeous arse nudging me impatiently, but I still took a moment to savour the sensory pleasure of rolling on a condom. I’d known plenty of men who hated them, who didn’t bother, who didn’t need to. And, of

course, those who did need to, but suffered the consequences. But for me, it was exciting. Every time, it felt new. I stroked my cock and felt its thickness, heavy and hot in my fist. I teased the little bubble at the top of the sheath, hearing the latex squeak. The lube spat out of the nozzle too fast, covering my fingers, but I didn't care. I dropped the bottle back onto the shelf and slicked the stuff around my dick. Bloody exquisite.

My lover shifted, shaking the water from his chin. I slid a finger into him, spreading the lube, fascinated at the way his hole flexed open for me. When my cock nudged its head up against him, he bent farther forward, his arse presenting for me. I slid in like I was coming home.

He grunted then sighed. I fit him so well. We were obviously used to this, and I started to thrust in earnest. My head dropped back and the water ran into my mouth. I spluttered, spitting it out, and he shook with laughter underneath me. He lifted one hand off the wall, where he was bracing himself, and turned down the shower.

The flow reduced to a trickle, just enough to give me warm goose bumps as it slid over my shoulders, but not enough to threaten to drown me. The spray from the really powerful ones often caught me unawares. Steam rose around us. All I could hear was my panting and the lingering gurgle of water in the tray. His hole was tight, the firm globes of his arse pushing back, pressing hard against me. I sank in up to my balls and increased my pace. My hips jerked against him; my thighs slapped the back of his legs. A small mist of water droplets bounced off his skin with each stroke.

I wasn't going to last long, but I wasn't looking to apologise. I didn't think he'd mind, either, judging from the moans he was giving up. I reached around his torso to grasp his cock, slippery and stiff in my palm.

"You're so fucking good," I murmured to him. "So tight, so sweet." I always liked using the cheap phrases, but today I meant them, too. There was a deep, poignant ache inside my host that wasn't just the result of good morning sex. "Come with me. Soon. *Now*." Things were too wet and urgent for me to concentrate on both of us coming together unless he was nearly at the same stage. But if he *was*, it'd be very, very fine. "You close?"

"Yes." He sounded both shocked and excited. "Dan... Fuck, yes."

I pumped him a few times, lazily, just to get the measure of it. My hand knew what it was doing, and it was great. His arse clenched around me and his body straightened. Pushing himself away from the wall, he locked his arms, his back slick against my chest. Taut skin and sharp shoulder blades rubbed against my nipples.

"God," he grunted. "Yes. *More*."

I was happy to comply, stroking him in the same rhythm as my thrusts, his dick jerking up and down in my fist.

"So deep. So sexy," I hissed into his ear. "Do it, now. You're *mine*. Come for me. Sticky and sweet, all over my fingers." As I watched my cock slide in and out of him, my legs started to shake.

"Shit. *Dan*." His voice was ragged.

I smiled, my lips brushing his shoulder, wondering what he'd say to a bite right now, my teeth scouring his smooth, sleek skin, my mouth sucking a mark on him that anyone might see. But then the come started thickening inside me, the climax coiling in the pit of my belly, that fabulous, fascinating excitement I never tired of. My heart was beating too fast to concentrate on anything but the pulse of blood around my body, and just one more stroke, one more, that was all it'd take...

I came, moaning, shaking, my fingers digging into him. My hips thrust against his arse and stayed there, the muscles locked. I bent my head to rest against his neck, my skin shuddering with the climax and my heart beat thudding in my ears. Water ran down over us both, dividing into rivulets, one to each of his elbows. He whimpered beneath me, his body tensing, and he came as well. His hot spunk spat out over my hand, melding with the water and dripping its way to the floor.

So very sweet.

We both stood there for a few moments more, clinging to each other. He was panting as heavily as me, coming down off the high. He groped out towards the wall, but I reached over his hand and turned off the water myself. The last trails of it ran over our backs and under his belly, washing the sticky evidence away.

CHAPTER 2

It wasn't long before the air cooled around me and my limbs started to protest. I eased carefully out of him and slid off the condom, clearing it away into the bin under the sink. He straightened, huffing a bit, and one of his shoulder joints gave a pop.

“Shit.” He turned to face me once again, his eyes very bright, his pupils dilated. “That was so intense, Dan. Where the hell did that come from?”

I didn't know what to say. My body was still humming with the pleasure of orgasm, but I'd never really been keen on post-mortems of sex. “Just felt good.”

He nodded, but he kept a half foot or so of space between us, as if he was wary of me for some reason. “Sure. You don't need to tell me that. But you don't—”

I frowned. “You're telling me again?”

His mouth closed abruptly and he flushed. It looked bloody good on his handsome face.

“I'm teasing,” I said, more softly. But I had to know, of course. “What don't I?”

“You don't often do it like that. Take control. And the talking, you know? Dirty talk.”

Dammit, I should have taken it a little easier. I grimaced, hoping he'd see it as a rueful look. “You didn't like it?”

He laughed. “Hell, yeah! I’m just used to you being more... restrained. Discreet. Whatever you’d call it.” He was still flushed and his large eyes gazed at me. He looked happily well-fucked but slightly wary, too. “Hey. No problem, right? It was hot. Different.”

I was beginning to think I was wrong about the sex between us always being good. “Just playing.”

He started; his eyes widened further. But he recovered quickly, though his smile was more brave than happy this time. “A game, yes. I understand. Like I said, it was hot.”

“You’re sure?” I shook my head and felt the water drops on my lashes. I had hair cropped to above my ears and it felt thick. I liked the way it lay close to my head, though I didn’t think it put me centre stage in the looks department. Not like *him*. “Well, maybe we can work some more on all that.”

His eyes sparkled and he suddenly looked younger. Much happier, not that I’d realised he looked troubled before. “Don’t tempt me, not just now. We should both get dressed, right?”

“Right.” What time was it? What was I getting dressed *for*? We both stepped out of the shower. The familiar way I snagged towels for us both was the final confirmation that this was my place. As I twisted one around my waist, I saw him watching me closely.

That’s when things first shifted. When I first felt the emotional conflict inside me. The affection in the other guy’s expression was clear, but I found myself wondering, what was it affection for? For me? Or just for my fucking? The uncertainty worried me, and it felt like a long-established concern. The adrenaline high had abandoned me surprisingly

quickly. Instead, something lay heavily in my gut, like I'd eaten bad seafood or drunk too much the night before, though I knew instinctively I hadn't done either of those.

I didn't say anything to my lover. I backed out of the bathroom, looking along the corridor. One of the doors was wide open and I walked into the bedroom. There were familiar clothes on the chair against the wall, and I gathered them up.

"Are you coming with me back into town?" He passed by, his hand brushing my hip. He was still half-smiling. "I know my shift doesn't start until twelve, but Matty said he could use me for the morning stock delivery. Pete needs to learn his way around that. He and I can sort it out while Matty opens the bar as usual." When I continued to stare at him, he added, "You're due at the site by ten, right?"

"Right. Yeah, that'd be good." I pulled out the top drawer of the chest and found clean underwear. *Lucky guess*. I put the other clothes on—faded jeans, spattered with paint and plaster, an undershirt and a heavy flannel shirt. I could see a pair of boots flung carelessly at the foot of the bed. Big feet, on a scale with my hands.

He went to the far side of the bed and picked up another pile of clothes, far more neatly placed than mine. He opened a drawer in the unit beside the bed and pulled out a pair of clean boxers. I knew then that he didn't live here with me—everything about this place cried "I'm a messy singleton"—but if he kept spare clothes here, it looked like he stayed over a lot. The pleasure warmed me inside, like a flicker of flame from a smouldering log. He tugged the boxers and a pair of jeans up his legs, then rolled a bright T-shirt over his head. It

was a very stimulating sight, watching the muscles of his belly tighten up as he moved. He now sported the logo Matty's Meet, Chelsea Creek, clinging attractively to his torso. God, he was gorgeous.

"Dan," he started, but we were both distracted by a shrill buzzing noise. He frowned and reached for a mobile phone that lay on the top of the unit. Pressing the receive button, he answered, "Ricky Holloway." He listened intently for a moment. "It's not really a good time now." His gaze flickered to me then away. "No, really... Yes, I understand. No, I'm not being... yes, I'll call you later." He disconnected and dropped the phone on the bed.

I didn't know what was going on, but suddenly I felt myself disconnect, just like the phone itself. The thrill and happiness of the time in the shower abruptly shifted to misery and anger. Ugly feelings. I looked at Ricky, smiling back at me rather nervously, his cute body, his strikingly good looks, his youth and charisma...

Dear God in fucking heaven, I wanted him. And not just sexually; I realised I cared a lot for him. In fact, the emotions would swamp me if I let them take a hold. But at the same time, I wondered what the fuck he was doing with *me*? I wasn't sexy like him; he was a real looker. A precious gem of the male kind. A true *catch*.

And nothing like me.

I sat down heavily on the edge of the mattress. The dip from Ricky's side was already smoothed out, his half of the covers pulled over neatly, like he'd never been there at all. An ache

caught in the back of my throat, as tight and painful as a fish hook.

What the bloody hell was up with my host?

Ricky came around the bed to stand in front of me. He slipped a hand around my neck and leant down. “You look so good, Dan.”

“I’m sure.” My voice sounded tight. Seemed I’d remembered a whole bunch of other things, and none of them bolstering my self-esteem. “Dan the builder. Plain old labourer, see my fucking work clothes. Feel my rough hands.”

He frowned at me and pulled back from the almost-kiss. “That’s rubbish. What does it matter what you do? I’m only a bartender, right?”

I stared at him, still feeling the warm pressure of his fingers on my skin. “Right.” Some kind of hot, some kind of not-my-class bartender. *Fuck.*

“Dan, I’m...” He shook his head and frowned. “Things are odd this morning. I don’t understand.” He looked like he was struggling to find the right words, but I didn’t feel like offering to help with that. He ran his hand down my cheek, smooth skin against my harsh shadow. “You’re great, I’ve always thought that. I liked you the minute you came into the bar.”

“Fixing the bloody kitchen wall. Putting up some ceiling tiles.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. Didn’t matter why you were there.” He smirked. “Hey, I could see you were good with your hands.”

I rolled my eyes at the cliched tease, but I was pleased to feel some of the tension inside me easing. Ricky could do that for me.

Dammit, my host was besotted, far as I could tell. But he was also suffering with it.

“These last few months...” Ricky’s eyes darted to my groin then back up to my face, and he smiled slyly. “We’ve had a great time, right?”

I smiled back because I knew it was true. This time I let his mouth touch mine and the kiss was fucking hot, lots of tongue and wet gasps. When we snatched a breath again, he nudged me further back onto the bed, and I braced myself on my hands. Murmuring under his breath, he clambered on after me, straddling my thighs, still kissing. He was trying to reassure me, maybe. Or was he just trying to stop me talking, hush all my crap complaints?

“I’m sorry,” I said. For a wild second, I wondered who’d spoken, then realised it was me. It wasn’t a phrase I remembered as a frequent friend.

“Huh?” Ricky paused, startled.

“In the shower. Earlier. I was... all that stuff about you being mine. I pushed you.”

Ricky’s eyes shimmered with something I wanted to read as arousal. “God, no. It was exciting. Fabulous. I like it. At least, I like it with *you*.” He grimaced, though I had no idea why, when I knew he’d been totally into it. “I wish you would... you know. Do that more often.”

I warmed at the memory of his flesh against mine, hot and smooth, smelling of the shower, his moans, my fierce desire. Demand and surrender. No apology needed from me, for fuck's sake. The desire had come from deep inside my host, but it was honest. As his visitor, I'd just helped tease it out of him—and bloody hell, I wouldn't mind doing it again. So that should have been the key to unlock more sweet and sweaty making out, right?

Instead, I opened my mouth and said, “Did Calder do that to you?”

The colour of Ricky's face changed from aroused flush to waxy shock. He slid off clumsily, the mattress groaning underneath me. “I don't want to talk about Calder. Why the hell do you?”

I was out of my depth here; I wished things were clearer, and a hell of a lot more quickly. I tried to concentrate on my host's sudden harsh words. “You were with him for a long time. You've never said much about it.”

“Why would I? What's up with you?” He gave another of those shaky laughs and ran a hand back through his hair. It was drying into silky, well-cut, chestnut waves. “Seems to me, not many guys like talking about the last man their boyfriend fucked, you know?”

I could feel the churning in my gut again. “But you don't talk about it at all. I just thought maybe he was...” What? Demanding? A pushy top? Better than me? *Jesus*. The insecurity that twisted inside me was both deep-seated and abhorrent. “Ricky?”

“Leave it.”

“Sorry.” This time I didn’t sound as sincere.

He drew a deep breath. Slowly, he lifted a hand back up to my face. “Dan, I’m not with Calder anymore. You’re not really interested in what he did, are you?”

“I’m interested in you,” I said. It spilled out of me, like I had no control over the words. “*You*. That’s what’s important to me. That’s what I care about.”

“*Dan*.” His eyes widened. “You’ve never said... Not like that.”

He started to smile, and leant in as if he wanted to say something in direct reply, but then his phone buzzed again. Peering at the number, he disconnected without answering.

“It was Calder again.” I sounded calm but my heart was racing, and you know that twisted gut feeling? It was back in force. My guy was on tenterhooks.

“Yes.” Ricky bent to pick up his shoes beside the bed. “But it’s nothing. He just wants me to collect some stuff I left at his place. Wants me to swing by there, after I finish work.”

Swing by took on a whole new meaning when I mixed it up with my thoughts about Calder. “How many calls this week?”

Ricky frowned, gaze downcast, as if he were having trouble with one of the laces on his shoe. “Don’t know what you mean.”

“He calls all the time. Anytime, anyplace. Expects you to answer.” *And you do*. Things were getting clearer to me by the minute. A sick anger boiled inside, inflaming my words. “If you can’t cope with him dumping you, maybe you’re still keen on him.”

Ricky grimaced. “We’ve had this out before, Dan. I’m *not* . I’m with you now. You’re making it into some kind of big thing. It’s just to collect a couple of boxes, I won’t stay long.” He turned his head, avoiding my eyes. “There’s nothing going on with him.”

“You can do what you want. We said at the start this was meant to be easy, we’d just see where it went. We’re both adults.” I hated sounding petulant. I was surprised to find how much it hurt, seeing his shoulders slump.

“What the hell?” He looked back, straight into my face, and his expression was pure, naked misery. “Don’t be like this. Oh, shit, I can’t make you out this morning. One minute things are great, then we’re arguing.”

“No. No, we’re not.” I took a deep breath, for the benefit of both me and my host, and I stood up. “Look, let’s forget it, you’re right. But I’ll make my own way to work. I need to get some things from the stores first.”

“You sure?” The small worry lines above his nose made him look even cuter, like a much younger college student worrying over a late essay. My cock twitched, but I knew the moment for more playing had passed. He reached for his jacket, ready to leave. “I meant it. I’m with you now. That’s what I want. That’s the truth.”

I nodded. Didn’t seem to trust my words on that subject at the moment.

“You’ll come around tonight, like you said? To the bar?”

I nodded again. *Like I must have said?* “Sure.”

Neither of us moved nearer, to kiss goodbye or anything. Ricky gave a lopsided grin, then turned and left the bedroom. I heard him walk across the living room, then the front door opened and shut again behind him.

All the rooms were silent. I could smell the faint aroma of shower gel, imagine the warm condensation drying on the bathroom tiles. A few drops of water glistened on the bedroom floor, where we'd walked from the bathroom to the bed.

My mind was full of Ricky—how adorable he was, how sexy. And the memories? They were flooding in now, and they were very good, very vivid. How I cooked for him, how he chose the TV programs for us to watch. How we checked out our work rotas at the beginning of the week, and had started to make a routine together. How he smiled, how he chattered, how he shared stories with me about his customers, about ideas he had for events at the bar, if he could persuade Matty. Most of all, how his body felt in my bed. And then I remembered that no one had ever called me handsome before, or gazed at my smile like it hung the moon—and how shocked I'd been that he came on to me in the first place.

Me.

He'd been full of chat when I was doing the renovations in Matty's bar in the summer, and he made me laugh. He was so fucking hot, all the other guys had eyes for him, and I'd been embarrassingly clumsy in asking him for a date. But his eyes had lit up like fireworks, and he said yeah, he really wanted to go out with me. Then he seemed to take a step back; he confessed he'd just split from a guy, and things were still a bit raw. *Okay*, I'd said quickly, scared I'd lost my chance, we

didn't have to rush anything. Maybe just have some fun. See how things went between us. He'd looked relieved, though there were still those exciting fireworks in his eyes, and he'd been almost awestruck when I took his hand between mine...

"I feel good with you, Dan," he'd said, a little bit shy. "I feel safe."

So, what the fuck was going on in my mind at the moment? In my *host's* mind? Too much confusion, too much *Ricky*. I had it bad for him already, it seemed. Yet I was also in a mess about it all. There was a real buzz, as they say these days, a sparkle between us when we were together. But it was bloody obvious to me, I didn't trust it.

Dan didn't trust it.

What was Ricky doing with me, nothing but a builder, rough and ready? He only wanted to have fun; I should keep reminding myself. It probably wouldn't last. Could end, any day. I should just enjoy the present, whatever time we had. Yet I also knew that was never going to be enough. And when he got tired of the fun and moved on... I couldn't get past the knot of agony in my chest that flared at the thought.

And what was the story with Calder, Ricky's ex? *There's nothing going on with him*. I didn't think the guy on the other end of Ricky's phone realised that. Maybe Ricky didn't realise it himself.

Why didn't I tell Ricky to stay away from his ex? Tell him that I didn't want him to go around there. That I wanted more than just the fun and the great sex. He was mine now, I was his, and I wanted to make that clear to everyone, a public statement we were together. The words of commitment had

formed in my mind plenty of times but I'd never said them to him. Never had the balls to. Did I think he'd laugh? Look pitying? Shut the door again on his way out, but harder this time and for good? I had no right to keep hassling him, pushing him, demanding things just for myself. I didn't deserve him.

"I've fucked up," I said aloud. My voice echoed in the quiet room, the sound of it alien yet familiar at the same time. I sank back down onto the bed, the pain in my gut something far more than physical. I'd goaded him too hard, been too jealous. Maybe I'd *royally* fucked up. The misery was a sickening taste in my mouth.

And as his tourist?

I felt it all, and it was bitter and twisted. I discovered that, for my host, failure had as foul a taste as fear. And—as for myself—it'd been a bloody long time since I'd sampled either so strongly.

CHAPTER 3

So, let's just take a step back here, or at the very least, a mental one. Maybe more than one step.

This wasn't really *me*, you see. I wasn't the well-built man sitting on the bed, his head in his hands, short dark curls still damp from the shower, skin still tingling from a great orgasm. Ears still echoing with that front door shutting behind his lover, leaving his flat.

I was just a visitor.

Like I said before, that's what I did. I *visited*. I surfed around, looking for people who were having fun, who needed some extra energy, who were open to share, whether they realised it fully or not. Then I'd drop in. Some people might call it inhabiting, some might use the word possession.

I liked to call it tourism.

And I'd seen a hell of a lot of things in my time as a tourist. Mainly through the eyes of men, my personal preference. Their lives, their sexual proclivities, their excitement, their need, their lust, and their games. Then more men, and the whole thing all over again, but with a change of intimate equipment. I'd joined in, I'd willingly watched, I'd enhanced the whole bloody thing for 'em, from within their heads and bodies. It had always been a hell of an entertainment. Still *was*, usually.

The man sitting on the bed gave a strangled sob, tugging me back into his head. *Dan*. Yeah, that was me for the moment. I

let those emotions of his swamp me, prepared to cope with it now. Total misery was never a good look on me, but I didn't think he needed any extra conflict inside his head to make it worse, at least not for a while. He had it bad for Ricky; a deep, passionate longing, way deeper than—to me, at least—the much easier-to-handle lust. So why didn't he grab it with both hands? What was the bloody problem?

Seemed like Dan was on the verge of tears. Hell's bells. That just made me itch, like I'd been bitten, like my skin was crawling. Felt like he wanted to punch someone too, which I thought was a far more constructive response. I even found myself looking around for something I could thump, but short of a couple of pillows, the place didn't have a lot to offer.

Dan looked around too. Of course; we were one and the same. But he was no more impressed than I was. The flat was a good size, but it was for a single man, a bit of a loner. Just the bed and a chest, then a glance into the living room to find a couch and a small table and chairs. An old TV, a radio, a few books. The furniture was good quality but sparse. He got up off the bed and walked over to the bedroom door. On the opposite wall in the living room was a mirror. He looked in it.

I stared more closely than he did. I mean, it was a business thing for me, right? I needed to know exactly what I had to work with. He was good-looking, no question, though not with the startling movie-star looks of Ricky. But Dan was clean and strong, and the look in his eyes was a mixture of things I didn't see that often. Constancy, truth, reliability.

There were reasons I didn't find that kind of thing in my line of work. Or leisure, whatever you wanted to call it.

Mainly it was because my kind of tourism was purely for the fun. Or, more honestly, for the sex. I loved it in life—what I could remember of that—and I continued to seek it out now. It was one of the few things you could rely on, in my opinion. Sexual passion remained the same, whatever the times. And I'd travelled through more than a few of *them*.

I was pretty young when I... you know. Croaked, passed on, died. Whatever the fuck you wanted to call it. I'd learned whole new vocabularies over the years, take my word for it. But the words for the basic things in life remained pretty constant. Birth, death, fucking. And I'd already had my fair share of fucking, you know? I'd been doing it since I learned how to use my prick and knew where to find men who enjoyed it, too. Ace, they called me. I didn't have much memory of a permanent home or family, and I couldn't recall my real name, but Ace stuck easily enough. Not that a name mattered nowadays. But while I was still living, I answered to it when I could—when some man called. It worked for me.

And then... well, one day, it didn't. Call it an accident of birth, but my time on solid earth turned out to be a really bad one to desire men rather than women. Hadn't always been the case in Queen Victoria's rule—and I'd never known any other monarch since I was born—but I soon learnt the years could show one rule for your bedroom, another for the public bar. London street gossip talked about new laws, new sentences. Seemed that the fun men had in discreet company could now earn 'em years of hard labour. Didn't stop the *wanting it*, of course, but it made a lot of 'em fight the need that much harder—and anyone offering temptation was likely to take a drubbing.

One Saturday night a group of beer-brave bastards stumbled on me around the back of my local Fulham pub, where I was on my knees to a rather shy young man, savouring the taste of something other than ale. He pulled himself out of my mouth and ran like the bloody blazes, but even before I'd scrambled to my feet, the gang grabbed ahold of me.

I knew a couple of their faces from the area—and their voices by their London accent—though the grim expression they all wore made 'em look like a bunch of gnarled apples fallen from the same tree. I'd have laughed in other circumstances. They accused me of a whole list of misdemeanours, from pick-pocketing to chicken-stealing, all of which—of course—paled into insignificance against the buggery. They grunted stupid words like “justice for perverts” and “give the sod what he deserves.” Didn't even count in my favour, that the shy young man and I had never actually got around to proper buggery. Nor did the fact I'd sucked off a couple of this gang behind the storage shed just the previous month. I tried to run but, for once, neither my speed nor my wheedling offered any escape.

There were too many of 'em.

Yeah. Like I said, death was the same, whatever the age you lived, right? I didn't dwell on the whole disgusting memory. For me, life had been there to take advantage of, and then... it wasn't. Happens.

I didn't regret a minute of my earthbound life, understand that. I knew what I was like and I knew *what* I liked. Didn't *want* to die, of course, but I knew I'd lived exactly as I pleased. And yeah, I struggled at the end, tried to escape, tried

to bite the bastard who grabbed my hands, tried to kick the one who slipped the noose over my neck. Maybe that was what saved me, if you called this salvation. Because instead of waking up as a corpse at some version of the pearly gates—depending on whether you think the great man upstairs cares for sodomites or not—I found myself somewhere and nowhere. Neither one nor t’other. Out of the loop, to use the current vernacular. But somewhere in between alive and dead, and able to move around the human race quite freely.

And that was how and where I stayed. I learned to jump, more by luck than intention and, okay, I was still perfecting that. I jumped into guys and looked through their eyes, touched with their hands, spoke with their voices. I learned languages, both colloquial and foreign to me, and social habits I never had access to as a boy or in my short-lived adulthood. It gave me an education and a life of sorts. It was exciting and so unpredictable! There was always something—or someone—new.

But the important thing was, I moved on. Often and quickly. Don’t get me wrong, I liked the men I found, appreciated the sex I had, did what I could to pay my way. But I left before those issues of constancy, truth, reliability—*love*—could take hold. Bugger it, I wasn’t in the market for that. Too much hassle. And no one ever knew I’d been there. To be honest, I wasn’t even sure I *could* stay around longer. But I’d never really felt the need to try.

I wasn’t a complete bloody parasite, though. Most times I could find a way to improve a guy’s sex life. It was like my calling card, my gift to my hosts. The level of ignorance in the world was bloody shocking, in my opinion, and when they

added love to the mix, it just stirred up a whole Pandora's Box of inhibitions and tangled, emotional expectations. Well, that was *my* experience. Of course, I couldn't make anyone do or say something that wasn't theirs to start with—that they wouldn't have done or said themselves, given other circumstances. But I could surely encourage it out of 'em.

Just took more effort with some than with others.

Dan was looking for his coat, getting ready to go to work. This was the time I'd normally go, of course. The sex had been fabulous, and he'd certainly enjoyed those dominant feelings I'd coaxed out from him. So had the luscious Ricky. But there wasn't going to be any more of that for many hours, and I'd never been interested in dropping in on a guy's work. Had never done much of that in my life, unless I was on the prowl for sundry pocket-pickings, and I wasn't keen on starting now.

But I was still there, hanging on in there. Had no idea why. I mean, his body was a fine specimen. I liked being there, feeling his strength, enjoying the confidence that he really didn't let loose often enough. So maybe I needed a rest. Maybe that last jump had taken more out of me than I thought. Or I was just intrigued to find out more about the pair of 'em, the steady Dan and the apparently flaky but gorgeous Ricky. Eager for some more of that hot, vibrant sex.

It wasn't because I was developing a taste for something more like company. Care. *Love*. Not because I was lonely or anything.

No bloody way.

CHAPTER 4

I stared at the beer in front of me and wondered why the hell it tasted so poor tonight.

“Dan?” Marianne leant over and tapped me on the arm. “For God’s sake. Did you hear a word I said?”

I stared at her. She knew the answer to that one already, of course. “Sorry.”

She wrinkled her nose at me. “You okay?” Her blue eyes were bright, her bobbed blond hair making her look even younger than her twenty-four years. At the table, sitting on her other side, her boyfriend Jerry was turned away from us, in the middle of a heated debate with some other guys from his office I’d forgotten the names of. Assuming I’d listened to the introductions in the first place. Marianne was a friend of my sister’s, and she’d been the one to look out some flats for me when I first decided to move here. And then she introduced me to Jerry, and invited me down to their local bar, Matty’s. The rest, as they say...

“Dan?”

“I’m fine.”

She looked unconvinced. “What’s going on with you and Ricky?” She glanced over to the bar then back to me. “Come on, Dan, you can tell me if there’s any problem. Maybe I can help.”

I smiled at her, because it wasn't just nosiness, she really did mean well. "It's fine. Well, as far as it goes. It's no big deal."

She gave me that "no bullshit, please" look. "It is for you, big guy. You're smitten."

I laughed. "That's such a girl's phrase. It's just a casual thing." Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I could see Ricky turning to look our way. Perhaps he heard me laugh. He was behind the bar and it was near the end of the evening. Not a lot to do then, except clear away and then he'd be free to come over and join us. Join me.

The door to the bar swung open then closed again. A small group of young men walked over to the bar, laughing too loudly. Smart clothes, confident voices, purposeful strides. The bar was small but trendy, well placed to attract the smart young professionals of Chelsea, while still being based in the less glamorous area of Fulham where we all lived. One of the new arrivals leant on the counter and called over to Ricky. Tall, well-groomed, sexy in that way male arrogance has.

It was Calder. The ex-lover. The knowledge was sudden and sharp, jealousy and anger spiking in my gut. And something else—something with a keener edge of warning. *There's danger!* What was that about? I couldn't make sense of it, not with all the angst churning about in my host's belly.

Ricky walked over and started talking to him. It looked like more words than were needed to take an order for a few beers. Calder nodded and replied. Ricky frowned but his gaze stayed on Calder. Was he deliberately trying not to look over? To

catch my eye? To have to explain what was going on over there?

“He really likes you.” Marianne was talking to me again and I didn’t have the heart to ignore her. I reluctantly turned my back on the bar, my chest tight, my mind still disturbed. “He said so. Ricky said so.”

I raised my eyebrows.

She frowned at me. “What’s that look? You’re in a strange mood tonight, aren’t you? Something’s off, anyway.”

“I’m the same as always.”

“Hm.” She huffed out a breath and sipped at her beer. “You know, he asked lots of stuff about you when you first asked him out. I hadn’t heard him go on about anyone like that for months. He was really keen. I mean, he *is* really keen.”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.” I sipped the beer but still didn’t really enjoy the taste. Pity, because its advertising insisted it was a premier brand. “We don’t need all that soul-searching stuff.”

She rolled her eyes. I knew she wanted everyone to be as happy as she and Jerry were. He lost his job last year and had only just started at a new place, but things were going well. Marianne worked fucking hard to keep things afloat for them while he found his way again; she deserved good luck in love.

And what did I deserve? A bead of sweat tickled between my shoulder blades. I could imagine it sliding down my spine, slow and warm, raising goose bumps on my flesh. I shifted my chair away from the table, wanting to turn around and look over to the bar. I thought I heard Ricky’s laugh, but I couldn’t have sworn to it. Calder’s friends came back, passing our table

on the way to grab one for themselves, but Calder wasn't with them. He was still at the bar.

“Why do you *do* that?” Marianne’s sharp-edged voice broke through my thoughts.

“Huh?”

“Always pretending you don’t care. That things don’t matter. We were really glad you got together, you know. He’s been good for you, Dan. And you’re good for him, too.”

I grimaced and looked down at my beer as if it were suddenly the most interesting thing on the planet. “I’m not really in the same league, though, am I?”

When I looked back up, her mouth had set in a grim line. “He’s dating you. He likes you. Why’s that so hard for you to take?”

I really didn’t know the answer to that one, having asked it myself earlier and got no better response. “Just leave it, please. He knows what I’m like.”

Her eyes opened wider. “You know, that’s true. I think he does. He’s a smart guy. But that’s not the way *you* think you are.”

“Marianne, please.” I half twisted on my seat, trying to look for Ricky, trying to resist looking. Fuck. What a mess. “I’m not fooling myself. Ricky’s fucking hot. I know what people think when they see us together. They think, there’s the cute guy and the other one.”

“And so... what are you really saying?” Marianne was relentless. Jerry had turned back to us by now, his expression amused.

“He could have anyone.” I felt and sounded mulish.

“You mean like Calder?” Jerry broke in.

Maybe he was being mischievous tonight or maybe he’d always been that blunt. I couldn’t answer, either way. The air in the bar suddenly seemed very thin, the voices around us fading into a dull, aching thud of sound.

“You really think you can’t compete.” Marianne shook her head. “God, you’re beyond help sometimes.”

Jerry leant across her and tapped my beer bottle with his. “Get your head out of your arse, Dan. Sounds like you don’t know a good thing when you’ve got it. Didn’t we tell you how relieved we were when they split up? When you started dating Ricky instead? Calder’s history... well, it’s weird. The guy was an arrogant prick. Still is.”

“A control freak,” Marianne murmured. She looked worried, her gaze flickering over to Jerry then back again. “There were those rumours about him, Dan...”

But I wasn’t listening. The suspense had got too much for me and I swung around on my chair to look across the room. At just the same time, Ricky appeared in front of me. There was a flurry of activity behind him, a group at one of the other tables getting up to go, grabbing jackets, calling to each other, laughing. By the time they’d gone and I could see the bar again, there was no sign of Calder.

“Hey, guys.” Ricky glanced around the whole table but his smile settled on me. “Matty let me off early, he’s got Pete and one of the casual workers helping out tonight. And I put in those extra hours this morning.”

“You want another round of beers?” Jerry sounded eager, then winced. Looked like Marianne had kicked him under the table. I hid my smile. They were good friends to me.

“You get off home,” she said, waving at the pair of us. “We’ll catch up with you later.”

Ricky seemed keen to get going, grabbing my arm, picking up my leather jacket for me. We gave hasty goodbyes to the group and made our way outside. I instinctively knew I lived and worked near enough the bar to walk there. But right now, tonight, I realised I wasn’t sure where I was going. There were still a lot of people about and I hesitated for a moment on the sidewalk. Not everything was clear in my memories. It was often that way, depending on what else was going on in a guy’s head while I was there. *Visiting*.

“Back to mine?” Ricky looked hopeful. “We can walk back this way in the morning, in time for your work. Okay?” His eyes met mine, open and questioning. “I’d like that.”

I stared back at him and nodded, slowly. The move from the stuffy, warm bar out into the cooler night air had lifted a flush on his cheeks. His hair was tousled after a busy day’s work and a lock of it had blown across his face, sticking to the corner of his mouth. He pushed it away impatiently, smiling at me. He was like drinking water after a drought; like stepping out of the wind into a warm room. I’d never felt so fucking fine, just being beside him.

“Good.” He laughed. “I need a shower and *soon*. I didn’t bother using Matty’s tonight. I wanted to get out of there, quickly as I could.”

“Why’s that?”

For a second, his eyes narrowed. Then the hesitation passed. “To be with you, stupid.”

I grinned back. I just knew how much better I looked, how happiness would light up my face. Stupid, yes. But then, there were a lot of weird things in my world just now. Before I—or more to the point, my grinning host—could think twice, I reached out and took Ricky’s hand.

He sucked in a sharp breath. The flush on his cheeks got deeper. “*Dan.*”

“What?”

He gazed at me. Honest to God, his eyes shone with some kind of zealous light. My gut lurched in an entirely different way from the earlier misery. “You know. In public. You’ve always seemed kind of nervous of PDA, like I’m going to vanish in a puff of smoke if you touch me on the street.”

“For fuck’s sake—”

“No, wait! I just meant, you never did this before.”

I think he imagined I was going to snatch my hand away because his fingers swiftly tightened around mine. He laughed, and so did I. I’m not sure either of us knew exactly what we were laughing at.

“I’m not saying no.” He looked giddy.

“You’re not getting the choice,” I said, firmly.

His mouth opened and shut again, abruptly. The molten brown of his eyes darkened almost to black. He looked spectacular, startled and excited like that, and my jeans felt uncomfortably tight. I had no trouble now recalling where I

was, where *Ricky* was. And where we'd be in just a few minutes. Half-laughing again, I let him tug me towards his flat, anticipation of the hours ahead raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

It was only a few roads in the opposite direction to mine, and we took it at a stroll. A few people passed us by, and a couple turned back to glance at Ricky. That often happened; he was a fine sight. The door to a restaurant opened across the way, spilling a burst of noise and bright lights onto the pavement, then it slammed shut again. Someone laughed in a far-distant street. The people who'd passed us ambled out of sight; a bus rumbled by on the other side of the road and turned the corner. For a second, we were completely alone on the pavement.

I paused, involuntarily this time. "Did you hear that?"

He peered at me. "What?"

I shook my head. *There's danger...* that warning again. But I didn't know, wasn't sure. I thought someone had called out Ricky's name, though I couldn't tell where from. No one had stopped to take notice of us and the traffic soon started rolling past again. But the hairs rose on the back of my neck.

Ricky wasn't interested in my hesitation. He shrugged and pulled me onwards, and I was happy to let him. I watched the way he moved, athletic, energetic, the enthusiasm barely suppressed. He was full of it, life and verve and hunger. Very delicious.

Very tempting.

In that moment, I pulled back from my host. I grew tired of Dan and his unhappy confusion. His steady ways, his caution, even his dominance, which took such energy to ignite. I needed a break—and they say a change is as good as a rest, don't they?

I drew breath, concentrated hard. The air shimmered around me and my skin felt icy cold. Something whistled in my ears. I clenched my fist.

And I jumped to Ricky.

CHAPTER 5

Did this feel fine, or what? Did *I* feel fine? I nearly laughed aloud with pleasure.

I'd gone straight to the fridge when we got back, and now I straightened up with two cold beers in hand. I caught my reflection in the silvery surface of the door.

This host was very, very rewarding. It was a rare treat to be in such a great body. Ripped, but not too heavy, you know? Good shoulders and a thick head of hair. Long legs and a way of moving that was all masculine, but graceful, like an athlete, or a dancer. I obviously worked out now and then and knew which body parts to develop. About those body parts? I cupped my groin. Yeah, I remembered, a good size.

I glanced back at my reflection, and grinned at myself. Bright eyes, young, classic features. Hell of a smile. My T-shirt clung nicely to my torso, the muscles of my belly tightening as I turned. I felt like I could attract anyone and everyone. That was what Dan had been thinking about me, right?

I paused a moment, startled, one of the beers dripping cold onto my wrist.

You see, as a tourist, I didn't always remember everything about the guys I'd left behind. I mean, they added to my experience—and how—but it'd be bloody crowded in my head if I carried all of 'em around with me forevermore, wouldn't it? So usually, I waited until I'd had my fill, then

when I jumped, it was all new. And deliberately so. This latest development was still an adventure for me, to jump between lovers. Couldn't always guarantee a safe landing, of course, though on the rare occasions I'd tried it, my accuracy seemed to be getting better. I enjoyed practising, anyway. But I had to lose most of the feelings from my previous host, as a matter of sanity.

Yet tonight... things were different.

I glanced around the kitchen. There was a lingering though pleasant aroma of cooked pasta and the satisfying domesticity of fresh fruit heaped in the bowl on the counter. The place was small but warm and relatively clean, and the beers were a familiar, welcome shape in my palm. I stretched gently and smiled to myself. I liked my flat, even though it was cramped by anyone else's standards. This promised to be a lot of fun. And I liked *me*. This host was a lot more my style.

Yes, I'd definitely arrived.

"Ricky? You need help in there?"

"I'm coming." The sound of Dan's voice prompted a spike of pleasure in my gut. I bit back my grin and went into the next room—my living room-cum-bedroom, it seemed. Just my low double bed, a chair in the corner, and a rail against the wall for shirts. Guess the bar job didn't make much money.

Something teased at the back of my mind. I should have been better off than this, shouldn't I? As far as I remembered, I'd been pretty smart at college. Yes, a lot of people described me as a looker, but I felt there was far more to me. There'd been opportunities, if I'd just had the chance. What had held

me back? Resentment sparked inside me, though I didn't know where to direct it.

Even when I shook off the thoughts and turned to Dan, a slight uneasiness remained. He took the beer I offered readily enough, but he wasn't looking at the bottle. He was sitting on the edge of my bed and looking at *me*.

Well, and hadn't I just been enjoying exactly the same thing? This time, I did laugh aloud.

He smiled back, though he looked a bit confused. "You okay?"

"Very okay." My gaze ran over him, from his tousled, short-cropped hair to the tight muscles I knew were under his flannel shirt. When he lifted the bottle to his lips and took a deep draught, I watched the swallow ripple down his throat. His broad hand gripped the bottle; his wrist was thick. *Strong*. My breath hitched in my chest.

I liked that a lot. A strong man, and one who wanted me. And yet, not one who took advantage of that—

"You drinking, too?" His words interrupted my odd, unruly thoughts, in that slow, deep voice that I swore I could feel reverberate through me.

"Sure. Of course." I dropped down onto the bed beside him, and chinked my bottle against his in a joke salute.

I was having trouble concentrating. One reason was because Dan was here in my room. *Here*. I mean, shit, what was that about? I was really excited, and not just because I hoped we'd be fucking tonight. *Soon*.

He seemed to fill the room, always in my vision, everywhere I looked. I mean, the room was the size of a human hutch, and Dan was a big guy. But it was more than that. I could feel the warmth of his body beside me as we sat on the bed, smell his soap which I often shared, hear the rhythm of his breathing, watch him drinking his beer. And enjoy his eyes on me—careful, watchful, interested. My dick stirred inside the front of my jeans.

Hungry. Both of us.

We usually went back to Dan's flat, after my sessions at the bar. I knew that, without having to search my host's memories. It was a bigger place, nearer the bar and his contract manager's office, too. All those kinds of sensible reasons. But it felt really good, seeing him here, showing him off—even if there was no one else looking. God, that sounded stupid. At least it would have, if I'd said it aloud. That was another thing I often had to watch out for, after I'd jumped. Keeping my mouth shut until I'd got the lie of the land.

But it seemed I was a happy chatterbox, or Ricky was. At least here, in my flat, on my territory. Where I felt—there was that word again—safe.

Marianne would tease me mercilessly if she'd guessed how nervous I was tonight. I'd been friends with her and Jerry for a couple of years now, but she'd be the first to confirm I didn't have many overnight visitors. Guys... well, it hadn't been easy to have a relationship, not since I moved to London from my sleepy Dorset home town. I couldn't get a regular job for a long while, so I started the bar work, and found that suited me. Plenty of men came on to me there; I never had any problems

attracting attention. But not many men had the patience for a boyfriend who worked such anti-social hours. And some of them got confused, and even irritated, that I was happy in hospitality—that I didn't want to do anything important in the city, or glamorous in the world of media. None of them seemed to find anything more interesting in me than the sex. I mean, that was great, anyway, and I had more than my fair share. But I couldn't seem to keep a guy's interest for long.

Until Calder.

I bit back an involuntary shiver. Funny how I couldn't remember the exact details of how we met. But within a couple of months, we were an item. He was a strong man, too. But, unlike with Dan, the feeling with him was... disturbing? He never came here, of course. And once he'd staked his claim, there wasn't going to be anyone else I could invite, was there?

A cheap flat, Ricky... for a cheap guy. That's all you've got.
The sudden voice in my head jarred.

For the first time I properly tapped into the emotions underlying my excitement. Things didn't feel as carefree as I'd hoped. What was going on inside my head? I swallowed some more beer, rather too quickly, just to clear my tightening throat.

Then Dan's free hand settled on my thigh and I smiled. My heartbeat started to speed up. God, it seemed like that was all it took, just a touch. A smile. Dan was far more than strong. I'd never known a man to affect me like this—like I was happy to please him, to make him feel good. Without him

asking, and without it having to be a scene. Satisfying, without giving up everything, you know? Easy. Mutual respect.

Not that you have much to give, Ricky.

Dan just made me feel *good*. Was that so bad, that it was the only way I could think of to describe him? He always talked to me, laughed at my jokes, asked me what I wanted to do. Looked genuinely interested in what I thought. And he didn't push or bully; in fact, it worried me that he seemed scared sometimes, of how I'd react to him. Like he was holding back. When he *really* didn't need to. All I wanted was to be with him, learn more about him. Build something better with him.

God dammit. I wondered briefly why I felt like an excited kid nowadays, so often breathless, finding it difficult to express myself clearly. Especially to Dan.

Beside me, sitting on the bed, he breathed deeply. I felt response like a warm caress run down my spine.

To be honest, I hadn't expected him to come back to mine tonight. It was always good to see him in the bar but I knew it was no fun, just sitting there while I worked, and so why should he bother to stay to the end of my shift? And after this morning... well, I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen tonight.

I'm not waiting all night in this godforsaken drinking hole, Ricky. You'll give it up anyway. For me. When I say so.

"You look different." Dan peered at me, a half frown on his face. "Tense."

I jumped. "Hey. No. Sorry. I'm just tired, it was busy in the bar tonight. How are Marianne and Jerry?"

“They’re good.” He smiled at me. At *just* me. I don’t think his mind was on the other guys at all.

I couldn’t seem to stop grinning. Dan didn’t talk a lot, he didn’t gossip, either. Which was a good thing, right? He always looked at me as if... well, as if I’d already know what he was thinking. As if he trusted me to do that, as if we might think the same way. I blinked hard, feeling strangely comforted.

No one had ever treated me that way before.

Dan’s eyes were dark, like this morning when he fucked me in the shower. I mean, was that hot or what? Though just for a minute, when he’d stepped in behind me and put his hands on me...

Just for that minute, I hadn’t been sure.

“Come here.” Dan slid his free arm around my waist and pulled me closer.

I nudged up against him. It felt like I fit. The feelings were rich and warm but, as his visitor, I felt surprise too. As if easy intimacy were a new thing for me.

What shit had happened in the past? Was that the reason I wasn’t fully concentrating?

Don’t fight it, Ricky. It’s what you’re here for, right?

Dan’s breath warmed my ear, sending a sudden frisson of excitement down my body. I tilted my head as his mouth ran down my neck, the lips rough and hot. His tongue flickered wetly over my pulse. My dick hardened and I turned towards him, to take my share of a kiss. This was what I craved, what I knew best.

“So hot,” he murmured.

And I was, wasn't I? Damn hot! So why did I pull back from him, and turn on what I presumably meant to be a rueful smile?

“I ought to go shower. The beer gets in your clothes, you know? I don't smell my best.”

You're dirty...

He looked at me with that slow, wide grin of his. “I like your smell. All of it.”

“Pervert.” I smiled, but my voice was shaky. “No, really.”

Dan's happy expression faltered. He loosened his hand on my waist and took another swig of beer. The last drops glistened on the rim of the bottle and his tongue flicked out to lick them off. I nearly groaned aloud. I wanted to put my fingertips to his mouth, follow the path of the liquid over his tongue, feel his lips close around my fingers. Desire was heavy and seductive in my gut.

But my hand stayed by my side.

“What am I doing wrong?” Dan was looking at me, closely.

“What?”

He flushed a little and put his almost-empty bottle down too carefully on the floor. “Not sure what the problem is, Ricky. But we can work it out, surely? The look on your face...”

“Sorry. It's just a joke.” I smiled brightly. But no, it didn't feel amusing to me, either. “Just wanted to look good for you. Dan, hey...” I put my own beer aside, turned back and slid my hand around the back of his neck. I tugged his head to mine,

took back his mouth in a firm kiss. It was a damn fine distraction.

That's all you're good for, Ricky.

Dan sighed, his tongue darting back into my mouth. "I can cope with more of this."

"Kissing?" I murmured against his mouth, savouring the shape of his lips.

He was still flushed. "I mean... yes. If you want to."

I paused. I suddenly felt his thoughts as clearly as if they were my own. If you want *me*. I shivered. More of that unusual overlap thing. Had I swapped men too quickly, too close?

"Don't be an idiot," I said. Of course I wanted it, wanted *him*. I slid my other hand down his belly, cupping his groin. He felt very good and very warm. "And what else do you want right now?"

His voice was ragged. "You, of course."

I nodded. I felt settled. This was familiar territory. "So, show me, okay?"

He laughed. "Sure." And he pulled us both down, on our backs on the bed.

CHAPTER 6

The mattress sagged underneath us and Dan got one foot caught in the covers. We both started laughing. I got a mouthful of pillow and spat it out. Fun! It made my heart race. I seemed overexcited, just from some casual horseplay. Dan's mouth pressed against my neck, and his hands ran down my sides, snagging the hem of my shirt and pulling it up my torso. I arched, rubbing myself against him, letting him peel it off over my head. When he started to undo my jeans, I leant back, letting him reach in for my dick.

God! Hard as anything, leaking at the tip. Dan laughed again, from deep in his throat. I laughed too. I wanted him so badly.

In fact, I'd wanted him the minute I saw him in the bar that first day, talking to Matty about the renovations. Sweet, *sweet* memories. I had no problem at all, remembering how I met Dan. The tight ache of lust in my belly was familiar, but what had startled me was the stirring of emotion inside me, the sudden knowledge that we should and *would* get together, the certainty as deeply lodged in my mind as the day of the week or the shape of the crate I'd been unpacking at the time.

And the excitement of that anticipation!

"So, fucking good." Back in the present, Dan slid down my body, his mouth firm, his lips thick and wet, his teeth nipping at my bare skin. When his hand curled around my dick and tugged it, I yelped with pleasure.

I'd wanted to know more about him. *Really* wanted. I couldn't explain it properly, despite the easy way I talked from behind the bar. It was different there, chatting with customers, laughing and flirting and being on duty. Just an act, right? People had asked me before if I was an actor, some even said they'd get me a screen test. Took me a while to find out what kind of movie they meant, of course. But talking about myself—how I felt, what I thought—was a hell of a sight tougher.

Dan had the most fabulous smile. Slow, sort of mischievous, it just changed his whole expression. That was what I saw first. Then he caught sight of me scoping him out and he looked over properly. His eyes darkened and I got hard, just standing there, looking back at him. Shit, I'd had to turn away and start polishing the glasses before someone saw the state I was in. But I glanced back often enough, while he was measuring up the walls, pacing out the flooring. Great body, too, and he held himself with such confidence, like he knew what he was like, like he was really steady. He'd have a partner, I told myself. Fine guy like that. He'd be taken. Or straight. Or wanting someone... not like me. Steady. Yeah.

Something you're not.

That day, it seemed to take him far too long to work his way around to the counter, even though he had to draft plans for that, too. Matty tried to send me down into the cellar for more bottles, but I held off for as long as I could. Then one time I turned around, and... Dan was there. Smiling sort of apologetically, saying something about I needed to move out of his way for a few minutes while he checked out the dimensions of the shelving. I don't remember the details; I just remember his smell and that smile and the way he moved

awkwardly past me, as if afraid to touch me, but wanting to, anyway. I knew, then, he was interested, just shy. Guys liked to touch me, it happened all the time, some of them straight, and some of them not too respectfully, either. But with Dan it was very different. It didn't feel like... using.

And me? I savoured the memory of that shock. My belly had clenched like I was back in high school and lusting after the football coach, full of terror and anguish and pure, unadulterated happiness, all over again.

He made me feel... good. I said that before, didn't I? I smiled and offered him a bottle of water, and just kept chatting, telling stupid jokes. And more smiling. Must have looked like a real moron. I hadn't come on to a guy for a long time. I'd been out of practice.

You expect me to believe that?

Anyway, he'd obviously ignored my chatter and liked the look of me enough to spend his break with me. Then a sandwich at the deli at lunchtime, though Matty bitched on about me taking time out of the building. And by the end of the day Dan had asked me out.

A very happy memory.

I found out that he was relatively new to this part of London, Marianne was a friend of his sister and Jerry had recommended him for the contracting job at Matty's. But Jerry just shrugged when I asked him things about Dan—what he was like, what he got mad at, did he really like me, what was going on in his damn head behind that slow, sexy smile? Marianne told me more, but most of the time she had a

mischievous look that made me feel I was missing something, and I shouldn't have needed telling.

“Dan is a special guy,” she said. Then when I rolled my eyes at her, she thumped me on the shoulder. “Stupid! I didn't mean... you know, him and *me*. He likes men, Ricky, not girls.” She frowned at me. “He likes *you*.”

But that wasn't what I meant. That wasn't really what I was after.

All the guys like you, Ricky. At least, at first. Until you give it up.

On my bed Dan was panting in that low, growling way that turned me right on. He wriggled out of his jeans while I tugged awkwardly at his shirt. I got him naked and rolled over against him. Shit, this was good, *I* was good. I felt proud of it, you know? I was marvellous in bed, lots of men had said so in the past. Dan couldn't keep his hands off me, and I was going to make the most of that. I was going to make the most of Dan, while we lasted.

All the guys...

He reached for me, took my hand and pulled it around behind him, onto his arse. The sparse dark hairs tickled my palm; the muscles of his buttocks clenched. My dick throbbed, pressed against his, and I started to rock, sliding us together with pre-cum to ease the way.

“What do you say?” Dan's voice was a hoarse breath in my ear. He wriggled so that my finger slid down between his buttocks. He groaned and his dick seemed to swell even more. “I want it...”

Quickly, I rolled on to my back, pulling him on top of me. Before he'd even got his balance back, I opened my legs around his hips, holding him in place against me. "You can do me."

"Yes, but..."

I nudged up at him, my dick sliding along his belly, my breath harsh. "Do *me*. Hard. Like this morning."

He hesitated, just for a second, then gripped my thighs and pulled them farther apart. I knew he wouldn't resist—they all liked this. To take me, fuck me. I liked being fucked, no question. And Dan did it the best. What's more, he never called me the names other guys had used in the past: a sweet hole, bitch, easy. Even when he took me, *really* took me.

Excitement tightened my balls. Yeah, this was the best way, the way everyone liked. Remembering the name-calling hadn't been so good, but I knew Dan was going to make me feel better.

I reached behind my head and rummaged for some supplies I kept under the pillow.

Like some sordid little porn star.

But there was sense in it, right? If I didn't know when someone was going to call, what they'd want from me, how little time I'd have to prepare before he... they got down to it.

Don't want you straying too far.

Dan leant down to kiss me, catching me unawares. His tongue slicked inside my mouth, his taste rich and greedy. I was already sweating lightly, the warmth of his skin close

against me. He'd rolled on the condom, and now his fingers were cool with lube and sliding in and out of me.

"Come on," I wheedled. "Want your dick inside me."

"No rush." But he smiled to show he wasn't complaining. "Just want to enjoy you." He crooked one of his fingers and stroked inside me.

Oh, shit. My whole body shook with pleasure.

"You like that?" he whispered. "Tell me."

"It's the best." I think I was babbling. My eyes were half-closed. "You're the best."

"Ricky." His fingers slowed, and the mattress dipped underneath me, as if he was shifting around. I opened my eyes and saw him shaking his head, gaze troubled. "This isn't a competition. And it's not about me, not right now. I want you to tell me what you like. What *you* want."

I just stared at him, at those dark, hungry, nervous eyes. My body hummed with need like the echoing buzz from a guitar string; my dick bobbed shamelessly against my belly. "Whatever. Dan, whatever you do, it's all great."

He grimaced, trying to hang on to his smile. "You deserve the best. I want it to be special."

"Special?"

He flushed, the dark red of his neck in contrast to his bare, tanned torso. "It's special for me. I want to give you that back. So you'll know."

What should I know? I pulled him back down and kissed him so damn hard he couldn't say any more. His breath

shortened and his dick nudged its head into me, breaching me, taking me. *But not using.* He moved slowly to start with, rocking against me, his hands holding my legs apart, his thumbs pressing into the tight muscle. I could feel my climax threatening way too soon. I needed him to come as well, to come with me.

God, but it was great! As the tourist in his body, it made my heart sing.

Never happier than when having sex, never calmer in my mind than when I was fucking. My host and I were fully in agreement. I'd said this would be good, hadn't I? The pleasure rippled through me and I lifted my hips, drawing Dan's cock into me, right down to his balls. I held tight to his arms so he couldn't ease up. And he didn't. He was reduced to grunting sounds, and his fucking increased to short, fierce thrusts.

Then he whispered in my ear. I didn't hear the words clearly, but I knew exactly what he'd said. I didn't have time to work out how that could be—whether it was because I was Ricky, loving every minute of the fuck, or Dan, loving every minute of... *me.*

The orgasm clenched low in my gut and I spilled before I had time to think about it further, hot thick cum spitting onto Dan's belly as well as my own. I could feel him tensing up, his thighs pressed hard against mine, his hips slapping against my flesh. He came as well, with a mixture of incoherent cry and sob. This was excellent, it was what I loved, it was what I *did.*

Dan relaxed on top of me, breathing heavily, being careful not to squash me. Like he always did. My whole body felt both exhausted and enthused. I'd never felt better...

Is that all?

But Ricky... you're still mine.

Where the bloody hell was this internal dialogue coming from? I couldn't—*Ricky couldn't*—seem to shake it off.

Something felt weird to me. Unusual. Unsettling. The physical tremors eased; the hot, lusty excitement cooled to poignant stickiness on my skin. I held Dan very tightly, for longer than usual.

As Ricky, I knew many things about myself, but it was still a shock to realise how many of them I was scared of admitting. I listened to Dan's breathing slow down, his kisses ease up into soft, feathered caresses on my face. This was special for me, too. And I wanted things to be something more. So *much* more.

But I couldn't believe that was an option.

Not for me.

CHAPTER 7

Dan followed me into the kitchen. We'd pulled on sweats but he'd borrowed a pair of mine, and they were too small for him. The soft fabric clung to his muscled arse in the most perfect way. It made it difficult for me to think clearly about what was going on inside me. My limbs felt tired, my stomach muscles sore from tensing up. But that was all good, right? And I liked the way his hand ran down my back.

So why did my body keep shivering?

My phone was on the counter, beside my keys. I glanced at the display, then put my hand over it, hiding the message notifications.

Something tasted suddenly sour in the back of my mouth.

Dan moved around so that he was in front of me. His eyes were soft when they looked at me. Hopeful, too. "So, what did Matty say about next weekend?"

Next weekend? My mind tried to shift back into gear. Always the awkward moments after the sex, slipping deeper into my host's character.

"Whether he'll let you take time off from the bar. Depends if the new guy's shaping up, you said."

I nodded. I racked my brains for the right memory. "For...?"

"Going away." Dan peered at me, his brow furrowing. "I told you all about it, remember? That place by the coast. There

are some great pubs around there. We can take a walk in the mornings, go around the town in the afternoon.”

“Just us?”

“Yeah.” He grinned, though his earnest eyes still watched me carefully. “Sea air. Outdoor hikes. Good breakfasts and a big, comfortable bed.” He was still cautious of me. Why the hell was that?

It sounded great. Get away from the city, have some fun, plenty of sex. *With Dan*. Even so, my stupid mouth opened and out came, “I don’t know.”

Dan frowned. “Why not?”

“I just need to double check, that’s all.”

He stared at me. Something dimmed in his eyes, like the sun growing misty through a too-hot summer haze. “Okay. No problem.”

Of course it fucking was. Even though I was the one messing him about, I knew how he’d be feeling. It was a shock that the overlap was still strong, maybe more so. “I just need to confirm I can take the time off.”

“Confirm with Matty?”

“Yeah. Of course.” I recognised the new expression in Dan’s eyes as well. It was pure, naked disappointment. I turned back towards the counter, nudging a couple of plates around as if I was clearing up.

“You don’t have anyone else to ask,” he said, very softly.

I tensed up. “No, of course I don’t.”

“That wasn’t a question,” Dan said, his voice clipped. “I was telling you.”

What the hell did he mean? And then, deep down, I knew he’d seen the phone.

“I’m dating *you*, Dan. There’s no one else.” I wanted to turn back around and see the expression on his face—but at the same time, I didn’t. “It’s just, no one’s ever asked me away for the weekend before.”

“Don’t patronise me, Ricky.”

“No! I mean it.” I spun around then, and grabbed for his hand. “Why’d you ask me?”

He frowned, puzzled. “Why? Because I want you to come with me.”

“Just to go to some pub by the coast—?”

“It doesn’t matter where, for God’s sake!”

Whoa. He’d never raised his voice like that before.

“Ricky.” He looked stricken. “Fuck it, I didn’t mean to shout. It’s just... back in the bedroom, I let you know how I feel. And I hoped you’d feel the same. Hell, it’s not about where we go, but the fact we’re doing things together. At least give it some thought.”

I nodded, slowly.

Dan laughed raggedly. I could see his worry, written all over his face. Obviously wasn’t much of an actor. *Not like me.* “I’m not the most talkative guy about these things. But today... it just feels right. I don’t know why, don’t know why I feel

different. It seems I've found the balls to say what I want, what I feel. Maybe because now, it matters. With *you*."

"Dan." It was like he was giving me something. With a shock, I realised I didn't know how to accept.

Ricky, why the hell do you think you deserve anything at all?

Dan sighed and ran his free hand through his hair. "It's okay if you don't want to go."

I shook my head. "But I do." And I *did*. So, what was the problem? "I just... don't know why you'd bother. We can fool around here. We can go to the bar, see friends there."

He ran his hand slowly back up my arm. "You think I don't want to spend time with you in other places? Want to do more with you than fuck?"

I just stared at him, speechless.

His eyes widened with an expression of shock and pain. "That *is* what you think—?"

Then my phone started ringing.

Dan dropped my hand as abruptly as if he'd been burned. "There's my answer."

"What the hell does that mean?" I couldn't help glancing over to the mobile—it was just instinct. Or that was what I told myself. "It could be anyone."

"Yeah." Dan's face was very tight.

Ricky, I don't like being kept waiting.

"Answer it." Dan's voice was soft again, but this time not with gentleness.

“No, it’s okay. Just let me... Look, get us both another beer.” I realised I was reaching for the phone, even as I spoke.

Dan pulled away, probably in the direction of the fridge. I didn’t need to look at the display because I knew who it’d be. Same as the messages. I wondered if Dan knew I had different call tones programmed in. Calder had done it for me at one stage, along with showing me the speed dial functions. Probably when he gave me the model in the first place. It wasn’t the best on the market—he didn’t think I needed all those features, just to take his calls—but it was a robust enough handset, did its job. Kept me in contact. With him.

I disconnected the call without answering, dropped the phone back down on the counter, then turned to face Dan.

But he was on his way out of the kitchen, his back to me, without another word. And I stood there like a fucking statue, just as silent, and listened as the front door closed quietly but firmly behind him.

What the hell was up with me? I was a gorgeous, young, fit guy with everything to offer, and I’d had a fine man in my room who wanted to take it. He wasn’t even forcing the terms. But now he’d gone. And it was my fault.

You fuck everything up.

I shuddered inside. So I’d been told, plenty of times. The panic bubbled inside me like lava. I could feel it rise up in my throat, bile pushing at the back of my tongue.

You can't cope with anything.

I didn't seem to be able to think straight. I was acting like a brat, wasn't I? Dan would get tired of me eventually. I could be a handful, you see, nothing but an attention seeker, a drama queen. Well, so Calder used to say.

Did Dan think that too? He'd waited all night at the bar for me, had come back to mine, would probably have stayed over. Had fucked me deliciously and with great care and had told me I was special.

And whispered in my ear *I love you.*

I spun the phone around on the counter, restlessly watching the light reflect off the display.

Special? Who told you that? Ten a penny, Ricky. Guys like you.

If only Calder hadn't come into the bar tonight. Why tonight? Why'd he keep coming around at all?

"I've got your boxes safe, Ricky." He'd smiled and nodded, as if we'd always agreed I'd keep stuff at his place. As if we still spent time together. As if he cared about me.

As if he ever had.

Kept me talking until Matty got mad at me for neglecting other customers, made sure all his friends saw us together. Maybe made it so Dan saw us, too. "Come around any time you like," he said, as he left. "It'll be good to see you back."

Ricky. You need me.

In that instant, my tourist mind took a step back. Ricky's thoughts felt ugly and uncomfortable. I remembered the

lovesick misery I'd felt inside Dan, disturbing enough to make me want to jump. But here, inside my new host? This wasn't what I'd expected. Much more here than fun and a hot body, a bloody sight more than a lively libido and a pleasantly blossoming new relationship. I was struggling to draw out this young man—to bring anything new to him. He was a bubbling mess of confusion and timidity, too many mixed messages. Too much buttoned down and hidden from me. And from himself.

I looked over at the fridge, admiring again Ricky's handsome features and the wide eyes, still bright with the memory of his earlier excitement and eagerness.

But now there was something else, much more disturbing.

Fear.

CHAPTER 8

I'd seen that look before, you see. Before my career in tourism started.

Not in my mirror—'cos I never had one. And the young Ace never had a bathroom to hang it in, either. As far as I remember, I'd always lived on the grubby streets of Fulham, hanging around the back of the Hand and Flower pub, grabbing jobs that barely paid a tuppence or two, and eating the leftovers from the kitchen. There was plenty going on, keeping me out of the clutches of anyone patrolling the streets for whores and pickpockets in need of re-education. We were near the harbour in Chelsea, with men and goods unloading every day, and new patrons at the pub every night. And at the end of those nights, I'd sidle into the shed and sleep on the dry straw, in a corner behind the barrels. And when the delivery man remembered to lock the door of the yard behind him, and I couldn't get in? Sometimes I was so soaked from rain running down under my collar, or so dog-tired and filthy with mud up to my calves from a day's work shifting pallets at the dock, I'd go home with any man who asked me. Just to be warm and dry again. To have a wash in warm water and a chance to take my boots off without the risk of someone nicking 'em.

Just for the company.

Don't get me wrong, I had friends. Not a total loser, like they said nowadays. I've seen so many changes as I've travelled, the way that people dress and act, the way they use

transport, the inventions they've brought into their lives. Did I ever tell you what fun it was, to use a shower the first time? To watch a TV? To walk around in jeans that were soft and loose, dragging low on my waist, seeing men's eyes drop to the trail of hair on my belly, knowing I was going commando, that maybe I'd go home with one of 'em that night—and that half their neighbours wouldn't bat an eye if I *did*?

To go by choice, not just to be warm and dry. Not just to survive.

But *men* were the same, more or less, whatever the age, whatever the class. And so was friendship. When I was alive and kicking up trouble, my friends were men like me, young and rootless and with nothing more than I had myself. Sometimes we had fun, and sometimes we shared the misery. It wasn't much of a life, or not so's you'd call it. Not compared to some of the ones I've shared since I started my travels.

Freddy was with me for months, left on the street when his mam moved on, out of touch with any other siblings. Just... abandoned. He joined up with me one dark night when I'd snagged a couple of bottles half-full of ale, and he stayed.

He was too skinny for the manual work I did, too dirty for anything inside the pub itself. He had a talent for figures; I'd seen 'im work out a bar bill faster than the staff. But no boss liked the first sight—a kid in grubby clothing, skinny, with a pockmarked face. And he had this problem with his speech, he couldn't get the bloody words out to answer questions. So, I kept 'im by me, kept us both out of trouble, and shared what we got. Well, what *I* got, mostly. But that was okay by me.

He wasn't in the market for whoring, either. Well, no decent girl would look at 'im, he knew that, and although his eyes followed men in the pub all the time, he didn't have any nerve to act on it. He begged me to do 'im one quiet, damp night in the shed together. So, we tried it, and it wasn't too bad at all, a grope of his cock and rubbing up together against a darkly shadowed wall. He groaned "Ace, Ace" a few times, held on to me like he needed support, like he didn't have control of his own limbs. He yelped with shock when he spilled and I put my arm around 'im, though I felt awkward.

Yeah, I'd say he liked it well enough, but he wasn't what I was hoping for in that department, and he didn't seem bothered to do it again too often. So, we kept it just for fun, for times when the need got too hot to hold in. We were still young, remember?

And good mates. Sometimes I'd take a customer into the shed and Freddy knew enough to keep out of the way. I wasn't in the market for forcing 'im to join in, was I? After they'd gone, he'd creep into the shed to share the cold night with me. Just sleeping, but I was grateful then for the sympathetic look in his eyes as he rolled up close to me.

Freddy wasn't a brave lad; he wasn't very bright around other people, either. He seemed to be half-scared most of the time—not of me, but of the Hand and Flower's landlord, of the drunken patrons, even of sex, in a funny kind of way. And especially of the men who often ended up in the yard at the end of the evening.

Didn't I say? I wasn't alone that night they caught me around the back of the pub. Freddy was there, keeping quiet

behind the old pallets, maybe hoping I'd be given enough coin to buy us both supper. But when that group of thugs bundled in on me...

That look of fear I mentioned? I'd never seen it as stark as in Freddy's eyes that night.

Like I said, there were too many of 'em. Fighting back wasn't an option. I knew that, Freddy knew that. We were never stupid. Freddy ran away, same as the young man I'd been servicing. I saw Freddy's eyes, terrified and huge in his dirty, haggard little face, and I gave 'im one short nod. It said, "Get the fuck out of here." It said, "Save yourself, hide, run." But as he turned tail and scarpered down the alley, he took the time to look back over his shoulder. I think he wished he could have helped me out, not that he'd have been any use. As they pushed my nose down in the straw and dirt of the yard, I saw his face as a blur at the edge of my sight. This time, my look tried to tell 'im, "I understand."

Never saw 'im again. Of course I didn't.

They hanged me that night.

I think it started as just scaring me, as teaching me a lesson—the coil of dirty rope beside the piles of rubbish, the tying of my hands behind my back and the clumsy noose around my neck, the end thrown high over the rafter. Hoisting me up on an empty barrel, then kicking it away to see me stumble and swing.

Anyway, didn't end up that way. The gang started arguing among themselves and quickly scattered. Neither Freddy nor the shy young man came back, and the pub was at least two hours away from locking up. I swung and choked.

I never saw *anyone* again.

Until I woke—or whatever the hell status I was in—and found myself wriggling in a far better bed than I'd ever seen in my real life. What's more, I was looking down into a young man's flushed face and spreading his legs apart around my thighs. He was a much prettier creature than the one in the yard. He looked plenty willing, too. The bed was soft, the bedroom door locked to outsiders.

Bloody hell, I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I wasn't going to look this particular gift horse in the mouth. I could breathe smoothly, couldn't feel any burns or welts around my neck. He called me a strange name, but I didn't disillusion him. I felt all the health and strength and *life* that Strange Name must have had in his body. And I was apparently having fun I'd never thought to have again.

I made the most of it, that night. Call it my celebration of whatever rebirth I'd been gifted with. My lover was clean and keen, with a fine cock and a sweet mouth. And no one came to beat me or string me up for enjoying what nature insisted must suit me.

It wasn't always going to be like that, I found. I made mistakes—or they made *me*. Guess there were fewer gay men like me than others, and for a while, I struggled to target them. I liked the bodies of straight men—they gave me health and stature I'd never had myself—but I got no fun from their bedroom antics. I stumbled at the beginning and jumped into women, too. Still made me shudder today, finding all that bodily stuff to deal with. And then there was the age thing. Believe me, I didn't discriminate—and how many times had I

really enjoyed a fuck with men who knew exactly what they wanted and had the maturity to pursue it?—but I'd also found more than my share of elderly pricks, all shrivelled and disinterested. Or the time I fell accidentally into a group of schoolboys, with libidos that were excited, enthusiastic and energetic—but so bloody uncontrollable I couldn't settle in another host for several days afterward. And I built my own rules, like I avoided anyone with weapons, or illegal porn, or pubescent kids in the house. What was more, until I properly mastered the jumping and *secured* myself, I ran the risk of being whisked away at any time.

It didn't make for stable liaisons, you know?

I stayed in the area, as well. Seemed I returned after choking to death—or woke up, or whatever you'd call it—in the same part of London. Weird, but no weirder than all the rest of it. The pub was always there, though I saw it through many changes of landlord and more than a few renovations, and new bars and buildings sprang up around it, all the time. One of those was Matty's, where Ricky worked. It had become a hub for people passing through, moving in, visiting the fashionable harbour area. There was plenty of choice of host without ever moving far from my virtual doorstep.

And it was important I found my path, wasn't it? The one that suited me.

But what I learned from it all was that sometimes you *did* get second chances. Albeit with conditions. I was living again, in another way, through other men. Never expected or asked for it, you know? Didn't know where I went when I croaked, or how or why I'd earned this new opportunity.

But at the back of my mind, I was really glad I'd helped Freddy escape.

CHAPTER 9

Dan came back, less than a half hour later.

He knocked at my door and we stood for a moment, semi-smiling, semi-wary towards each other, Then, of course, I let him in and he followed me back into the kitchen.

“Sorry. Just needed to cool off. You know?” His hands landed on my shoulder and he dipped his head to kiss me, but I didn’t reach back for him, and my lips were dry against his moist ones. “Tell me what’s up.”

“Nothing.” I sounded odd. I felt awkward in my skin, angry and frightened, all at the same time. I needed to get a hold of things.

You need to be steady.

Where had that thought come from? It was fierce, like someone else’s pressure on my mind. Not the inner voice like before, not mocking, not cruel. It sounded like me, yet was motivated in a way I barely recognised.

Dan must have sensed my distraction because he’d kept the kiss gentle. “Sorry if I was presuming. It was just an idea. The weekend. Something fun for us, something different.” His jaw looked tight as if speaking was hurting him, scaring him. I didn’t like to think of Dan being scared of anything. “I understand you have other things to do.”

“You don’t understand at all.” I barely recognised my voice. It was hoarse, as if I’d been shouting. My throat was dry and I

could feel my heartbeat thudding, high up in my chest. What did he think? That I had guys queuing up for my company? Even if I did, that wasn't what I wanted. Not what I *really* deserved.

Well, there was a striking thought.

“So, tell me, Ricky.”

Tell him. He'll understand. He'll help you. The urgency—the need—to confide in Dan was strong, and I knew I should listen to it. But I was weak.

He told me so.

“It's nothing,” I repeated.

Dan frowned. “You're damned jumpy.”

I pulled away, trying to look as if I was just settling against the counter. “You just... came up on me from behind.”

One of his hands remained on my shoulder. His gaze was fixed on me. “You didn't mind that in the shower this morning.”

I started to smile, then bit it back. “No, I didn't. That was good.” Damned good. Maybe just that moment of hesitation, then I'd realised it was Dan, of course. Not... anyone else.

His fingers tightened on my shirt. “But you're right, there *is* still something I don't understand. Is it to do with Calder?”

Dan's thoughts were suddenly, frightening clear in my own mind, yet tangled in with my own, a mess of hurt and anger and confusion. *God*. How could this happen, that I could link with two minds at a time? “Dan, how many times do I have to tell you? That's over.”

“It’s not me you have to tell.”

I turned slowly to face him, trying to keep my expression clear. “I won’t answer his calls. I’ll get someone else to go pick up my stuff. Is that enough for you?”

Was my voice too loud? Dan was staring at me. “What did he do to you?”

I tensed again. “What the fuck?”

“I’m not stupid. What did Calder do to you? When the phone rings... you jump.”

“Look, I just need to—”

“No, I don’t mean you jump to answer it. You actually shake.”

I felt the pressure of Dan’s hand on my arm. *Tell him!* But I didn’t know how, and I wasn’t sure what. Things buried so far inside I couldn’t see them clearly myself. Shame and fury and... fear. I wanted to keep this man for as long as I could. But if he saw what a mess I was... “Dan, it’s okay.”

“The hell it is! Why won’t you trust me?”

“What the hell’s it to do with *you*?” I snapped back.

His eyes went wide and he took a step away from me. I’d really hurt him, hadn’t I? And I didn’t even mean it. I was just lashing out, to protect myself. But I must have known I didn’t need to do that with Dan.

“Look, Dan, I won’t answer him, okay?” We both glanced instinctively towards the phone. I knew the promise was made of empty words. *He’ll keep calling, until I answer.* I knew he would.

Dan's expression was hard. "So that's it, then?"

"What?"

"Ricky, I'm not pissed off because he keeps calling you. It's because you don't tell him to go to hell."

"Don't be stupid," I countered.

He sucked in a breath. "Thanks."

I groaned. "*God*. I didn't mean—"

But Dan backed away a couple more steps, shaking his head. "If there's nothing to tell me, I'll call it as I see it. You're still thinking of him. You want to be with him. Look, I can see why. You go well together, both good-looking, he's rich, obviously devoted to you..."

"No!" Now I was pretty sure I'd raised my voice to shouting level, because Dan's eyes narrowed.

"Guy like you, you could have anyone. I understand, believe me. I'd just prefer you to be honest."

"I don't want just anyone!"

He shrugged. "So, it's your turn to find the balls for it, Ricky. To go for what you want." He looked around for his jacket, thrown over the kitchen chair when we first came in. "I'll go back to my place now. Call you in the morning."

But would he? I grabbed his arm, my mouth moving but no words coming out. He slowly pulled himself out of my grasp and shrugged on his jacket.

And I watched him leave, for good this time.

Find the balls for it!

Was Dan right? Had I become such a weakling, I'd chased him off? Maybe I was encouraging Calder, even by ignoring him. Guys like Calder didn't take hints, didn't fade discreetly into the background. So, I had to find the nerve to brush him off for good.

Did I dare?

The damn phone rang again. I glanced at the number, but why bother? I let it ring on. I knew who it was going to be. He called me plenty of times a day, and had done, since the day I told him I didn't want to see him anymore.

Yes, that was a shock, right? That I had the balls *then* to tell him. It had taken me a week to get up the courage, and I'd done it in the bar with Marianne and Jerry and other friends in the background. Just in case Calder... protested. He'd just smiled and said we'd talk about it. I repeated my statement, and I asked for my stuff back from his flat. Calder still smiled, but his eyes went hard, in the way I'd learned to dread. When he left the bar, I didn't feel the relief I'd hoped for.

It was a wrench, even though it was what I wanted. Calder was the first guy who ever paid any proper attention to me. It was obvious how different we were; I was a bartender, whereas everything about him reeked of confidence and success. He had a great job, money, smart flat by Chelsea Creek. And he apparently liked the look of me. Who wouldn't be interested in all that?

My host's body shivered. My tourist's mind remembered a cold, wet yard and a grubby coil of rope.

One night in the bar, Marianne had suggested I do a college course, and work my way into teaching or social work. It was something I'd said I might be interested in, one day. But... *No rush*, Calder had said, shutting down the whole conversation. He wanted to spend all his free time with me, he didn't want me out when he called.

And he could call any time, day or night. He laughed when, at first, I complained. What else did I have to do? he said.

That night, Marianne had just stared at me until I dropped my gaze. Just shrugged when she and Jerry decided to leave early.

Calder became my life. He got me into his private gym, bought me stuff like the phone. We didn't go out much, except to the bar, but I didn't really mind at first. Because the sex was fabulous. He was great, and said I was great, too. He wanted to show me things, experiment with me, play with me. I knew he'd done a lot more than I ever had—he'd been out and proud in the city for years. He belonged to plenty of private kink clubs too. I'd hoped he might take me to them, but he said he didn't want to share our time with others. It had sounded flattering. Instead, he brought the scene home to me.

Night after night.

I liked a lot of it, you know? Loved sex, and being submissive. The games excited me. But then they started going in a different direction. Calder's desires...

A memory hit me; *sudden, vivid pain*. My shoulders tightened.

Calder said it was all still a game, said all the smart guys played like this. Said I was weak and cowardly to complain. Said it was all I could expect, looking the way I did, blatantly inviting it like that...

I tried not to dwell on those memories. I'd stopped thinking about them.

So, start thinking again, now!

My hands landed on the kitchen counter with a force I hadn't anticipated. The impact rolled back through my muscles, shocking me. It was as if someone else had moved my limbs—had told me to pay attention to the truth.

At last!

My tourist mind wavered. Maybe I was shaken by my host's memories, emerging from a fetid, mental pool like some kind of slimy monster. Maybe I should've moved on before now. But things were coming clear to my host in a way they hadn't been before. And I didn't just seek out sex. I didn't just enjoy my host men. I could help, too... couldn't I?

Ricky knew—I knew—what I had with Calder hadn't been right. That what he did wasn't—what did they say nowadays?—safe, sane and consensual. I leant on the kitchen counter and let nausea sweep over me. Yet how long had it taken me to rebel? When I thought back, I knew Calder had never mentioned love, never said future, never asked what *I* wanted. Never told me I was special.

Far from it.

The change in his attitude to me had come slowly, so insidiously that maybe I never really noticed at the time. But after the first couple of months of what you might call courting, Calder made sure to let me know what he thought. About me. Whatever fun we had, I wasn't really as good as him. I had a bum job, a substandard education; I wasn't really his social equal. All I had going for me was my body.

And the fact I let him do what he liked.

"You're way too eager to please," he'd said. "Shame to disappoint you."

It hadn't been like that to start with. Was that any excuse? Today, in my silent kitchen, I felt my hands clench into fists, my teeth grit uncomfortably. Yes, maybe the games had been fine, but I was only ever a player for fun. It was just that Calder...

Took it further.

Marianne had taken me to the hospital that time with two fractured ribs. I told her I fell down the cellar steps at the bar, but I didn't want to report it, to get Matty in trouble. There was a whole week when I couldn't make it into work at all—could barely walk without pain. Calder wouldn't come and see me, but he made it pretty clear I wasn't to call on anyone else.

It was about then that I knew I had to get out.

So why did I hesitate for so long? The remembrance of my fear was so painful, tears prickled the edges of my eyes. So afraid of saying no. Of causing trouble. Of being found unattractive.

So bloody useless.

But I had told him. His kind of fun wasn't mine anymore. I was moving on, albeit in my shabby job, in my cheap flat, in my weakness and cowardice.

You did it once, you can do it again.

I prodded that thought, wherever it had come from, to a full-blown determination. Dan was right. I had to tell Calder to go to hell, and for good. Today I felt like I could, today was different. Funny, eh? Life was different now, full of Dan and a strange new boldness. My mind was still scared, but my hand reached out and snatched up the phone.

“Ricky? What the fuck are you playing at? I’ve been calling all night. Don’t try and tell me you worked late. I know what time you left the bar.”

“So what?” My heart started speeding up.

“What?”

“It’s none of your business, Calder, is it? What time I finish work, what I do with my time.”

There was a brief silence on the line. “Ricky, what’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing’s... the matter. I’m good. I just want you to stop calling me.”

Through another small knot of silence, I could hear Calder breathing more heavily. His voice sharpened. “I’ll call you if I want to.”

“No.” *Oh God.* “This stops now.”

“What stops, Ricky?”

What indeed? “I don’t want anything to do with you anymore, Calder. We’re finished, you know we are. We’ve both moved on.”

“Ricky.” His voice softened. To my embarrassed shock, I felt my body reacting. “Is that so? I can’t say things have changed that much for me. Let me show you. I’m not far from Fulham. I can be with you in minutes.”

“Calder, for God’s sake...”

“I can remember every moment together, Ricky. Every touch. Every groan. Every stretch of your sweet arse towards me.”

A rivulet of sweat tingled between my shoulder blades. “No...”

“Every strike.”

Every *what?* To my disgust, I was half hard, just from the sound of his voice, but there was no pleasure in it. Nausea pooled in my throat. Every *strike?* The old ache in my ribs gave a shudder of remembrance. *Calder hit me. Calder hurt me.*

“You need care, Ricky. We were good together. You can’t tell me to stop calling—”

“No?”

Calder’s voice tightened again. “Ricky, don’t be stupid. You don’t want to do this.”

Threatening me, now? I watched my fingers fold tightly around the phone. “Bye, Calder. And by the way, I’m changing numbers tomorrow.” And I disconnected.

For a second, the silence seemed to ring in my ears, a sharp hum of memory and echo. Then I heard a drop of water fall in the kitchen sink. A car swept past outside, blaring its horn. My heart thudded and my throat felt painfully dry.

But I felt good. Alive. At last, I'd finished it. And it hadn't been that bad. I just needed to find some balls, just like Dan said...

Dan!

I hit the speed dial on my phone, eager to talk to him, then quickly disconnected before speaking. No. That wasn't good enough. I needed to see him. How long had it been since he left? I was pretty sure he'd make his way back towards the bar and then beyond, going straight home. I could catch him up.

So get going!

After grabbing my jacket, keys and phone, I left the flat. Stepping out into the cool evening air, I instinctively sucked in a slow, deep breath. The street was almost empty of traffic, even fewer pedestrians. If I cut through the park, I'd be able to catch him up just past the bar. I jogged down the steps, two at a time, leaving the door to the building to close behind me with a sharp click.

CHAPTER 10

I heard footsteps behind me. A man's.

Hey. Not so strange. It was a public road; a lot of people took this shortcut to the centre of town. But no one had been behind me when I cut off into the park. I hesitated, then doubled back a short distance and turned abruptly, cutting across a different path around the perimeter.

The footsteps followed me.

I breathed carefully, though my heartbeat was thudding hard. Matty's Meet wasn't far from the park—I could head there, find somewhere open; people still around. Make sure I was safe, before going on to Dan's. I flexed the muscles of my shoulders and curled my hand into a fist at my side. I should turn around, face whatever and whoever it was, for God's sake. It'd just be another guy looking for a shortcut home, or some guy looking for his dog.

And if it wasn't?

Even if it was a mugger, I'd take him on. I'd handled ugly drunks at the bar; I'd escaped a few homophobic bullies in my teenage years. The situation didn't—shouldn't—hold any fear for me.

But it did. It did.

The sudden debilitating fear was mine, but it was still a shock as it swamped my senses. Why wouldn't my mind clear? Why couldn't I think objectively about this?

You don't understand at all! My despairing words to Dan rang in my memory. But the pain in my ribs was persistent and real; the sweat on my brow wasn't imagined. And the only face in my mind was Calder.

Calder hit me. Calder hurt me.

I couldn't shake off the agonising fear, and I stumbled to a stop. I knew I had to turn around now, before he caught me up. Better to know, right? Maybe it was a homeless man looking for a softer bed than the pavement; a kid out after his curfew, worried he'd be locked out of home.

But it was as if my legs had frozen to the spot. I stood there, panting heavily, the footsteps coming closer behind me. The fear was inside my body. It should have been controlled by my brain, guided by my senses.

But it was stronger than I was. It was nothing more than instinct and response and total, twisted terror. It had me paralysed. Helpless.

He did this to me. He destroyed my spirit.

Calder...

The footsteps paused.

Could be anyone.

But I knew it wasn't.

I recognised the smell of his cologne, the pattern of his breath when he exerted himself. Whether it was a workout at the gym, a brisk walk or... time with me.

I could taste vomit in my throat.

This had to stop. I'd told him so. It was all over—I didn't want anything to do with him now. Then I could begin to steady myself again, to erase this ridiculous fear. Dan would help me. I'd tell Dan at last what had been going on. He deserved the whole truth.

Yes. Dan.

I started to turn around.

My tourist self put all its energy into that positive feeling, to give credence to Ricky's resistance. I could remember Dan so clearly, what he meant to me, what he really thought of me. Amazing, that I could blend the two men, but perfect for finding the strength to face this. Dan was the one I wanted; I knew that. And I was braver than I thought. With Dan to help me...

The man behind Ricky coughed. Just once.

In that moment, I felt Ricky's vulnerable mind collapse into tangled ganglions of misery and surrender.

A broad hand brushed my cheek, curled around my neck.

I can't.

I strained to remember Dan's strength—the love. Something sharp pressed into me, just under my ear.

I had to pull this back, I had to get Ricky away. It had worked before; I'd manipulated the two of them. I let myself

slip slowly out of Ricky, aiming for Dan. Reaching, stretching, my connection an elastic thread into...

Nowhere.

Ricky sighed softly.

I needed to jump completely, and soon! Ricky's mind was clouding over, his limbs weakening. I didn't know if he'd been hit, or was passing out, or... worse. I couldn't allow myself to get caught up in that. In limbo.

I strained to jump. Dan wasn't far away, he mustn't be! I could remember Dan and how he'd felt, steady and strong. Caring. The way he'd told Ricky I love you...

I gripped everything close to me, concentrated, struggled. So little time, with nothing but panic to guide me.

Confusion. Anguish. Anger.

A leap into nothingness.

Then darkness.

CHAPTER 11

I knew I was awake but the darkness hadn't passed.

Had it worked? Had the jump worked?

Look, I did get lost now and then, you know. There were jumps in time, hiccups in the process. Sometimes I passed so quickly through someone, they barely had time to gasp or wonder at the sudden heartburn. Or I hopped between many, over a short period of time. Or I moved along a chronological timeline, but mislaid a few hours along the way.

But I'd never really gone completely... missing.

That was how this felt.

Time was passing but I wasn't involved. I lay—or sat, or stood? Who the bloody hell knew—and things happened around me. But I never saw or experienced 'em. All I could feel was a fierce, unfamiliar determination and such a strong mental barrier that I couldn't seem to break through.

And darkness.

There was no trace of Ricky around me. Nor was Dan like this. Dan didn't have this bleak self-control, this mental resistance. This dogged repression of everything within him.

Where was I? Who was I?

Like dawn seeping in from under a half-drawn blind, awareness started to ease its way in.

Arrogance, anger, pain.

Need.

Cruelty.

“Ricky.” I spoke quietly, but I was startled by the harshness of my tone. My voice echoed off surfaces that were cold and bare. There was no reply, though over in the corner of the room, something stirred. “Wake up.”

The shadows in the corner were settling into recognisable shapes. My vision cleared, the way clouds would drift across the moon at night. Walls of rough stone bricks, a concrete floor. No windows, no natural light. Boxes and crates piled high like adult versions of children’s building bricks. Rounded barrels, their sides swollen and black in the semi-darkness.

And a man, huddled beside them.

“Ricky.” I was stricken by the cold anger behind my words, the attempt to hide it with a near-playful tone. It seemed grotesque in this setting. I pushed that thought immediately away. My body was still, my mind determined. If there were any doubt or uncertainty, I wasn’t aware of it. “Ricky, answer me. Acknowledge me.”

Fuck.

Tourists didn’t always have an easy ride. I didn’t always get my choice of destination. And it looked like, this time, I’d badly misjudged my jump.

I knew who I was, of course. Where I'd landed, unwilling and unscripted. Out of the proverbial frying pan, I'd have said. That was if my sense of humour had remained—inside Calder.

The huddled man gave a soft exhalation of breath like a whimper. "Calder, g-get away from me. Let me go."

I frowned. A disappointing response. Though had I expected him to accept the situation more readily? His imagination had never matched my own. "You're not exactly imprisoned, Ricky." I glanced over at the door to the cellar but it was securely shut. There was no sound from anywhere else in the building. The bars and shops were closed, and very few people would dawdle on the street at this time of night. I doubted there would be any disturbance, either from outside or in this dark, chilly room.

Or in my resolve.

Ricky shifted, maybe testing his legs. He probably couldn't control them as well as he'd hoped. "Where am I? W-what the fuck have you done to me?"

I smiled. Then, when I realised he probably couldn't see me very clearly, I stepped towards him. I was impressed to see him flinch but resist the urge to shuffle back. Mind you, there was little space for him to move. The barrels pressed against him on both sides, stacked high above his head. It was a neat arrangement, allowing me to see all of him, yet keeping his gaze fixed on me alone. It had taken me a while to think of it, but not long to execute.

"Ricky, I haven't touched you. Well, except to bring you here. And you were willing enough to come with me, don't you remember?"

“No.” His eyes were unfocussed, his hands shaking. “I don’t remember...”

I wanted to smile again, but I didn’t want him to misconstrue my humour. “I merely wanted us to have enough uninterrupted, personal time to talk this through. We’ll leave here soon, go back home. Just as soon as you understand.”

His eyes narrowed. “Understand what?” He tried to shift away from the barrels, pulling himself along on his arse, but the effort was obviously too much for him. He fell back against the wall, panting. “You’ve g-given me something, haven’t you?”

“Certain steps were necessary.” I frowned at his petulance. He’d been a heavy, awkward passenger, propped against my shoulder, as we’d stumbled away from the park. My car was parked at least a mile away, and he’d been almost hysterical when I confronted him. I’d never have got him back there without someone noticing and challenging me. So, it had been a stroke of luck, catching up with him so near to the bar—and a perfect hideaway, somewhere to keep him until he saw sense. Or I had to make him see it.

“You fucker! You drugged me!”

I couldn’t remember Ricky ever shouting at me. I was sure he’d never had the nerve. “I don’t like your attitude. I’m disappointed in you, Ricky.”

“Like I fucking c-care.” His voice was shaky, but his words clear. He peered around him. “This is the bar, isn’t it? The cellar. How the hell did you get in here?”

I didn't bother answering. He always carried a spare set of keys to the bar with his own set for the flat, for the nights his far-too-casual boss left him to lock up. Did he think I hadn't noticed? I had no desire to visit this squalid establishment any more than necessary, to keep tabs on Ricky. But it had been useful to know I could use this place, if I wished to. I never knew when I might need an undisturbed place to visit, late at night.

That word sent an unpleasant shiver down my back. I had no idea why.

"You can't keep me here." Ricky was pulling himself forward again, trying to grip the shiny metal barrels. His hands slipped, his palms sweaty despite the cold down here. "I want to leave, right now. D-Dan's expecting me."

Something clenched instinctively inside me, like a fist curling around my intestines. Dan. Bile bubbled low in my throat. "I don't think so. You didn't call him before you left the flat, nor did you use your phone on the way... here."

His eyes widened again, his focus returning. "You don't know that."

I shrugged. "I know you, Ricky. A man of reaction, not pro-action. And it didn't look like you parted on speaking terms."

"You've been watching me? Watching me and Dan?"

Dan. The name jarred again in my ears like the harsh reverberation of a tin drum. I didn't dignify that with a reply. "You're not what he's used to, I daresay. You're too volatile. Too challenging, too disturbing. I'd say he's thinking right now he's glad to be rid of you." I smiled freely now. "Though

it'll probably take him a while to work that into coherent thought.”

Ricky was scrambling on the floor, trying to get up. “Fuck you, Calder. He’s worth... he’s fucking... he’s the best.” He pulled himself to his knees and started coughing. I’d need to take him in hand before he started crashing. “Help me.”

I hunkered down abruptly in front of him, startling him. “But that’s just what I can give you, Ricky. Proper help. Proper attention.” I frowned at him. “Your behaviour is childish, and your language appears to have slipped back into the gutter. But we can redress that with time. You need me.”

He stared at me. “No, I don’t. What the hell for?”

“You forget how well I know you.” And I slapped him.

His head jerked back and he gasped. He looked, suddenly, very frightened.

And me? I could feel the rush of relief and excitement through my veins. My palm stung from the impact and my cock thickened inside my trousers. I ran a hand down his arm, feeling the stubble of goose bumps, the taut definition of his muscles. He was a beautiful creature. So beautiful.

“You feel that, Ricky, don’t you?” I didn’t wait for him to answer, just leant in against him, dragging my hand over his belly, ignoring the sudden tightening of his muscles, then down between his thighs. I licked my lips. “The shock through your whole body. The strength of my blow. Your weakness. Are you hard yet?”

“Calder, you bast—”

With my other hand, I slapped him again. He rocked back on his heels. I think he sobbed. I reached out quickly and caught him, my hand around the back of his neck. I tugged him close. I knew he could feel my breath on his face. He half closed his eyes and looked away.

Unusually stubborn. The skin on his cheek had blossomed, shiny and red from the impact of my blows. I'd split his lip. A small bubble of blood welled against the ruddy flesh, the fine line of his mouth distorted by a small but ugly wound. With a wash of pure lust as hot as steam, I wanted him right here and now. My hand hovered over my belt buckle.

No!

I dropped my hand, a little surprised at the vehemence of that thought. As if something inside had challenged me at the last minute, calling my control into question. Impossible, of course. But there couldn't be a proper scene, anyway. Not here, not without equipment. In my mind, I ran over the toys I would use on him back at my flat, the things that had lain unused for several months now. Waiting for him. I smiled to myself.

And shuddered. I startled myself with the force of it, even as I pushed the unwanted response aside.

Pressing my lips to his ear, I whispered, "You understand now, don't you? It's what you need. What you crave."

"No!" He couldn't push me away—but he tried.

For the first time, I hesitated. I was still gripping him by the neck but I pulled back, staring into his eyes. "You want me,

Ricky. You're into the scene as much as I am. We're a complement..."

"What scene? You're a fucking sadist!" His words were slurred, his eyes unnaturally bright. Was it the drugs that were making him like this? Instead of making him more pliant, he seemed to be aggressive. I never knew he had it in him to resist me, not outside of the game. "I didn't know. I didn't... not at first..." He coughed again, and wrenched his head away from my grasp. "You... I had to get away from you. I told Dan... it's him I want."

Dan. Again! I didn't know why the name carved itself so deeply in my mind. Why—so laughably—it hurt. "Don't be stupid, Ricky. What makes you think he's any different?"

"He is."

I laughed loudly, the sound echoing off the barrels, hollow, vibrating in the still, slightly stale air. "He's just a man who looks at you and sees a fine, fuckable body. That's all. And he'll use that body, the same as all the other men have."

"No."

I sighed. "Your intelligence is sadly lacking, as ever. That's all you ever had to offer, Ricky. A good body. You're someone to fuck. Something to fuck. I tried to help you understand that—to use what meagre talents you had to the best of their advantage."

"No!"

I could feel anger squeezing inside my chest at his pointless, petulant repetition. "You've never kept anyone longer than a few fucks, have you? If I hadn't come along, you'd have

remained a sad trick, your good looks wasted on whoever bought the last beer of the night.”

“Dan’s different.”

I laughed, rather too loudly. “He’ll fuck you just the same, Ricky. Maybe if you’re lucky, he’ll give you some of what you need. Make it good for you, for a while. But I’m the only one who’s ever helped you with what’s inside you, what you really need.”

“That’s bullshit!” He leant away from me, his weight against one of the side barrels, his eyes darting back and forth from my face. The fear was still there in his expression, and my heart quickened.

But there was something else there, less familiar. And I’d shuddered, thinking of the plans I had for him. Why was that reaction still so vivid? “Come home with me, Ricky.”

“He’s not the same.” Breath hissed through his clenched teeth.

I stroked his hair, even though he’d turned away. It was dirty with sweat and dust from the cellar. That’s what he was to me—my dirty, helpless, pathetically lost lover. I brought him to my home, I gave him security, I made him clean by using him. “Come with me now. You’ll soon feel better.”

“Fuck off,” he muttered.

“Dammit!” I pulled right back and dropped to my knees a couple of feet away. I wanted a better view of him, an idea of how his whole body reacted. Or was there some other reason I couldn’t stay close to him? A shudder meant disgust. I looked

at Ricky and considered my desire for him. Rich, inspiring, sometimes painful. But I'd never called it disgusting.

I was unsettled for some reason, but I'd never questioned my instincts before; I wasn't starting now. Then a jerky movement caught my attention. "Ricky?"

A shuffle; a guilty look.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

CHAPTER 12

Ricky was fumbling in his trouser pocket.

I scrambled forward and grabbed his wrist. “Are you trying to phone someone? Trying to phone your precious Dan?” The mobile slipped out of his pocket, falling to the cold floor with a clatter.

“Shit. Calder, don’t—!”

Ricky tried to scoop it up, but he was still clumsy from the drugs, and I was quicker. As he flailed, trying to snatch it back from me, I held him easily at bay.

I peered at the screen. It didn’t look like it was connecting. Had he really thought he could call out for help? I stabbed at the buttons, frustrated I couldn’t see in the poor light down here. It wasn’t a recent touch-phone like mine, but something older. I’d never used it myself, just bought a basic model for keeping in touch with him. Was I turning the fucking thing on or off? All the time, he was trying to grab it back, and I was fending off his flapping hands. Enough! I stood up and lifted my arm, ready to smash it onto the floor.

“No!” Ricky reached up to me, eyes wide. “Calder, don’t! There’s everything on there, numbers for work, friends.” He flushed, pink slashes appearing on his cheeks. “Pictures of you.”

I paused. His eyes... that blush on his skin. It seemed even more potent than before.

“Please,” he whispered, looking up at me from under damp, lowered lashes.

The anger inside me abated. I threw the phone but not hard enough to break it. Just far enough away so he couldn’t reach. It hit the bottom of one of the beer barrels with a surprisingly loud metallic clang, which echoed around the room. Ricky watched it bounce on the floor. He winced.

“No matter. We’ll take more pictures.” My voice was low, meant to reassure him, the thought of pictures—poses—instinctively exciting.

He didn’t look back up at me, but remained staring at the useless phone. “Calder, why did you bring me to the bar? Down in this bloody cellar? What is it you want?”

There was something in the tone of his voice, a reluctant surrender that wasn’t like anything I’d heard from him in the past. A familiar and fascinating misery. Yet also... challenge. The mix was heady.

“I want you to pull yourself together, Ricky. I want you to recall what we are together. How much you want to please me. So, we can stay here a while, and I’ll explain things. Make you see. Though not too long, as this foul place isn’t somewhere I choose to stay. Just until you’re ready to come back to my place, but without all this emotional nonsense. Except... unless I direct it.” The excitement flickered like a flame—but just as quickly, pain followed, arcing through me with internal agony.

What the fuck? I sucked in a breath, barely holding back a groan. I didn’t understand my confusion tonight, my disturbed mood. For a moment, I’d felt an uncharacteristic stab of

sympathy for my lover's disobedience—yet, of course, he must pay for it. Why was I still hesitating? I knew what I had to do.

“I wish I'd trusted him.” Ricky ran a hand back through his tangled hair.

“What?”

“If I'd told him everything about it all, rather than being afraid he'd think less of me...” His head dropped even farther, hiding his face from my view.

I didn't ask to whom he referred. The name was dirty, like ash, in my mouth. “Told him about us?”

“About you.” Ricky's voice was clear in the bare room, but he still wouldn't look at me. “There was never really any ‘us,’ was there? It's always, only been about you. I was just there when you wanted me, when you wanted someone to hurt. It should have ended a long time ago. I wish I'd had Dan's strength.”

“I'm here now for you. That's all you need.” I tried to keep my voice steady, but I felt nauseated. “Dammit, he's no better a man than you are, Ricky.”

His head jerked up suddenly, startled at what I'd said.

“What did you think I meant?” I hardened my voice. I'd let down my guard and it couldn't happen again. “That you were strong, too? I just meant that you were both below my respect.”

Ricky's head dropped again. “Let me go home, Calder. If you care anything about me at all. Let me out of this cellar and I'll go back to Dan. I won't cause you any more trouble.”

“No. I can’t let you.”

My tourist mind stuttered; lurched. There was terrible, dawning confusion inside me. Ricky played on every nerve I had. And not just now, here in this bleak place.

I realised, for a sudden, horrible moment, I was all of them. Together.

My tourist self was suffocating inside Calder. My mind was cruel and ugly, my memories bleak. Ricky was entangled with those memories, with my desires, my dark, shocking dreams. But he was frightened, calling out to be protected and loved, not discounted as nothing more than a tool. And beyond that was Dan. Dan, the man of strength and care, loyal, honest, And Dan’s love for Ricky.

My throat tightened. As Calder, the connections needled me, like a blade in my flesh.

Which reminded me. My—Calder’s—concentration sharpened again. Inside my pocket, my fingers curled around the handle of my knife. I could bring it out, show it to Ricky. One snap, and it’d be open, glinting in this dim light. He could admire it with me. We could play with it together. I let those thoughts eddy back and forth in my mind, in turn stimulating, soothing, shocking. I wasn’t entirely aware of the passage of time.

Ricky coughed again, his breath wheezing in his throat. His gaze slid past my face to the cellar door behind me. His eyes narrowed.

Or I could show him the power of the blade, in my hands.

I wasn't conscious of making a sound, but Ricky's eyes darted back to meet mine. "Dan?" he shouted, as if the man might be on his way here to join us. As if that could ever happen. The interloper; the thief. As if I'd let him share.

Sudden cramp seized my gut and I stumbled back a few paces. My breath was harsh and my vision inexplicably clouded. And over by the barrels, Ricky was struggling to his feet.

In among my pain, I felt a fierce, white-hot anger that I knew could overcome whatever was disturbing me so viciously—if I could only regain control of it. Get the fuck out of me! I didn't accept defeat; I didn't accept fear.

My hand gripped the knife.

And what was a tourist to do? I was hanging on to that connection—Ricky's need for Dan, Dan's devotion in return. It was strong. But was it strong enough? I spent my days cruising men for fun, for desire, for sensual satisfaction. Not so much for love.

I visited, remember? I wasn't here to stay. I wasn't meant to change the path of anyone's life.

But now I was Calder.

And while Calder's urges were deep inside and horribly familiar, at the same time he sickened me. Ricky needed me to protect him, not to hurt him. Would I really do that? Hurt him?

That deep, painful anger, that firm grip on a knife. Was that me?

My throat tightened. I sickened myself. Dear God in heaven, was that true? I gave a long, gasping groan. Ricky's tentative steps faltered.

"Calder?" His voice was hoarse. Fear shone in his eyes but he kept moving towards me. "Let go of the knife. Give it up."

"No." I stretched out to him, astonished to see my hands shaking, the pressure from my mental agony like a tightening band around my skull. Why was everything, suddenly, such an effort? "Stay back. I tell you what to do."

"Not anymore." Ricky's gaze slid over my shoulder again. "I can hear voices. They're coming down here."

I frowned. My limbs felt feeble. I didn't want to show weakness in front of him... but, somehow, I couldn't help myself. "That's impossible. Just a bluff. Just your cowardice, begging for me."

There was a strange expression in his eyes. "No. No more of that."

"You can't have called anyone."

"The phone is on. It's been on all the time, even when you threw it on the floor. I dialled the minute I woke up again, and you never managed to turn it off. Someone's been listening all the time."

Someone?

I fell on my knees on the hard floor. "You wouldn't dare." I could hear footsteps on the stairs down from the bar. More

than one person. Muffled cries. The sound of officialdom. I had to get up and run, but my legs ached too much.

Ricky hitched a breath as if it pained him. “There were a lot of things I never dared. But now...”

He walked up to me, near enough that I could grab his ankle, but he just shook me free. My arms were also ridiculously weak, it seemed. What was happening to me? He reached down and lifted the knife from my hand. It didn't look right against his long pretty fingers; the handle seemed dull against his skin. None of this was how it was supposed to go. None of it was right.

But when I tried again to grab him, he pushed at me, sharply, his sudden strength catching me unawares. “Ricky! Don't go. You know you can come back to me any time.”

He stared down at me, his expression bleak. “And you can go to hell.”

The door burst open. I could hear someone grunting, someone else calling out, “Ricky!”

I looked up at Ricky. He didn't look back at me. His eyes were on the door, on the man pushing through into the room, on the arms reaching to catch him as his legs faltered. His expression was one of relief... and a desire and pleasure I'd never seen before.

Someone tried to grab my arm but I had enough energy to push them off. I retched, a dry, rasping horror. My mind was in turmoil. The fierce anger wasn't mine, this time, yet it rushed through me as strongly as before. My skin crawled and my belly heaved again.

Who are you? What are you?

“Get him out of here,” someone said. “Scan the kid for toxins. And grab that knife!”

Deep, molten darkness swamped me, when I’d expected the open door to bring more light. Darkness and nausea and a terrible, awful shame. All of it, hidden deep inside me, and always treated with superficial scorn, but still there.

Now released, to swamp me with its retribution and disgust. Of myself.

How did I ever mistake it for anything else?

Then... nothing more.

I stood outside the bar, holding Ricky close. The police blanket around his shoulders was thick enough but he was still shivering. The blue light on the police van spun around slowly, looping its beam across us, then the wall of the bar, then the figure of Calder being bundled inside.

I pulled Ricky closer.

And I thanked whatever God might have been looking my sorry-arse way that my navigational skills appeared to have returned successfully. Jumping back into Dan was like coming home, like putting on a good quality overcoat that’d been made to fit, like finding rescue and safety all over again.

Yeah, there were places I’d jumped that I didn’t want to remember. The pain and anger from Calder still reverberated

down my nerves, though they were pleasantly comforted by Dan's support. And overwritten by his astonishingly strong flow of desire and protectiveness towards Ricky.

"I got your first call—well, the one you cut off."

"Just before I left the flat." Ricky nodded, his voice still shaky. "I should have talked to you then. But I didn't know..."

"Of course you didn't. But I waited for you to call back. Then when you did, all I could hear was some kind of echo in the distance. Subdued voices. A crash, as if you'd dropped the phone."

"That was the sound when it hit the barrels. I just hoped to God it didn't break, that the line would still be connected. Then I tried to speak towards the open phone, keep my voice loud enough. Give you enough clues to know where I was, that I was in trouble." He spoke firmly and clearly, though his eyes still looked wild. "Fucking phone!" The cry startled me. "He gave it to me in the first place. Throw the damn thing away, Dan! I don't want anything to remind me."

"It's okay." I held him tight, soothing his shakes. "Listen to me, your plan worked! In fact, I'd started back towards your place—I was coming to find you, to apologise. So, I was already on my way. I just needed to know where you were—and you told me."

"I tried to distract him, to keep him talking, too."

"I know." I glanced over at the police van, the officer nodding to me. "You were great."

"But what happened to him?" Ricky stared at the car as it drove away. A couple of policemen still remained, waiting to

take us to the station for our statement. “He had a knife, you know.”

I nodded but Ricky didn't seem to expect a reply.

“He was going to cut me, I know he was. Then he just suddenly crumpled down. Like his legs wouldn't hold him. I never touched him, though. Was he ill?”

Yeah. I could agree with that.

I leant down and touched my lips to his. To hell with any police audience. Ricky relaxed totally in my arms, though he winced when my tongue brushed his lower lip.

“Ouch. He split it. Bastard. It's going to look really bad by tomorrow.”

“Yeah? You need to get it seen to? Sorry, I didn't notice.”

Ricky's eyes widened and he grinned. “You didn't notice? What about my striking good looks?”

I shrugged. “There's far more to you than that, whether your lip's fat or not. I'm just grateful I got to you in time.” And when he continued to stare at me, I dropped my head to whisper in his ear, “Let's get the paperwork done then come back to mine and I'll show you just how grateful I am.”

“You mean... after all this?” Ricky made a strange, sad little gesture that was probably meant to encompass him, his ugly split lip, the whole police rescue, and the shimmering echo of Calder's hostility. “I was a stupid victim, Dan. Always have been.”

“No.” My tone was urgent. “Bravery isn't just physical, Ricky. Sometimes it's just knowing what's right.”

Like with Freddy.

“I let him grab me. Threaten me.”

“And then,” I said gently, “you told him to go to hell so fucking perfectly, I could have cheered.”

And, his gaze fixed on mine as if it'd never waver again, Ricky started to laugh.

CHAPTER 13

I came out of the cosy hotel bathroom, drying my hands on the towel. Ricky was standing by the window, his back to me.

“It’s a good-sized bathroom, excellent power shower. Fuck it, better than mine at the flat.” I grinned, though he couldn’t see me, of course. “Instead of visiting the bars, we could spend the night here and try it out together. What do you think?”

Ricky didn’t answer. His shoulders looked hunched, as if in tension. Biting my lip, I dropped the towel onto the bed and walked towards him. The room was high-ceilinged and quiet, the only sound the muted hum of late afternoon traffic outside on the promenade, and the occasional cry of scavenging seagulls. My bare feet didn’t make any sound on the carpet. I was out of his range of sight and he never moved as I neared the window.

“Ricky? You okay?”

When I saw him shiver, I knew he was aware of me. I slid my arms around his waist and rested my chin on his shoulder. My heartbeat kicked up a notch. His hair brushed my cheek, his skin smelling salty after our walk back from the town to the hotel, and I followed his line of sight, looking out over the sea. The hotel was only a hundred or so yards away from the beach, though I reckoned it wasn’t the season for skinny dipping. But the cooler weather had kept many seaside tourists away, leaving the town less crowded, and the wind whipping frothy white heads to the waves as they hit the pebbles of the

beach. I watched them tumble for a while, admiring the patterns, imagining the spray on my face. The rhythm soothed me.

I supposed I was a seaside tourist, too, at least for the weekend. There was an ironic smile on my face.

“You don’t have to treat me like an invalid.” Ricky’s voice was hoarse, and he still didn’t turn to face me.

“What?” I pressed a kiss on his ear, rather clumsily, but it was all I could reach from that angle.

He turned his head slightly, though I was too close to see more than his profile and the blurred edge of his eye. “Dan, you’re being too nice.”

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or protest. “So I should be a shit? I’m just acting normally.”

“No, you’re not.” He sighed and turned back to the window. “And you’re not a shit, never have been.” His body relaxed a little, and he pressed his hand over one of mine. I nudged more closely up against him. I only had sweats on and my cock stirred inside them, remembering how he felt without clothes. How we *both* felt.

“Ricky.” I blew gently into his ear, and this time I reckoned his shiver was a good thing. “We don’t have to make any decisions about tonight. None at all.” I laughed, though quietly. “We’re on holiday, remember?”

He laughed too, shaking his head, though he didn’t pull away. I could feel the conflict inside him, and it wasn’t just about the heat growing between us. I wished it were that simple.

“That night, Dan...”

No. It was still too raw for us both. “Forget it, Ricky. It’s all over now. He’s gone.” Calder was on his way to a long prison sentence, I fucking well hoped so. And if not, I’d make sure he never came near Ricky again. Maybe it’d be safer to move. I wondered what the job situation was like further north, both for me and Ricky. Or maybe somewhere near the sea, like here.

Something tugged inside me, like thread caught on a nail. A visit to the beach was fine—the occasional trip out in a car—but I’d always found the thought of moving too far away from London disturbing. Nerve-wracking. But I guessed you never knew what the future would bring. Ricky’s security and happiness was the most important thing to consider.

“Damn it, you’re doing it again.” He twisted around in my grip to face me. “You’re thinking it’s all about sheltering me. Like I can’t manage. Like I need twenty-four-hour protection.”

His anger hurt. I hadn’t said anything to make him think I didn’t... what? Trust him to live his own life? But I still remembered the pain and fear that had clung to him outside the bar that night, as Calder and the cops passed us by, as they slammed the door to the cellar shut behind them all...

Ricky had needed me then.

I wasn’t sure what to do, whether I was doing it right, whatever “it” was. I’d never felt close to someone like this. It had been like that since I first met him—a strange yearning in my gut that was way beyond nerves and lust. But over the last few days, it had grown stronger than ever. Like we were bound.

I tightened my arms around him and drew him close. I didn't want us to be bound by Calder, directly or in memory. This had to be about the two of us, nothing more. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to piss you off. I'm just coping with it, too."

Ricky tensed against me. He dropped his head against my shoulder and I couldn't see his face anymore. "Yes. Right." His voice was hard, muffled. "You're the tough one, Dan. Coming through that door like some hero to save me."

"And you?"

"Me?"

I took a deep breath. I ran my hand down his back, slowly and carefully, caressing the bones of his spine, the muscles of his torso. His T-shirt was thin, and the heat from his body warmed my palm. "Yeah, *you*, playing his game, holding him at bay until I got there. Keeping cool even when he drew a knife."

"I was scared shitless."

I chuckled, the vibration making his body shake against mine. "I would have been, too."

And I was, in the past. So said my tourist self, though those memories didn't linger, not right now. Instead, fear skittered through me like a swift running man, dodging the old visions, cloaked in the memory of danger and an adrenaline rush. And perhaps, but only for a moment, the harsh, cruel kiss of rope against skin.

"But you did it, Ricky. Got through it. And you'd do it again, right?"

He pulled back from me, the movement sudden and awkward. His bright, startled eyes met mine. “Face Calder again? What the hell?”

“No, I don’t mean that.” I still held him but I loosened my hands in case he wanted to retreat farther. I watched his outraged gaze fade into confusion, willing him to understand what I was really trying to say. “I mean, you can handle yourself okay. You proved it.”

“Don’t know.” He raised his eyebrows but the anger had ebbed away. “Maybe.”

I kissed him, then. Dipped my head forward and pressed my mouth on his. His lips were salty, too. They opened immediately and I thrust my tongue into him. My heartbeat sped up yet again and goose bumps ran over my skin. His hands tightened on my arms and when a groan escaped his mouth, it reverberated deep in my belly, the echo spiking hard in my groin.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Nothing to be sorry for.” God, he tasted so good. I sucked on his lower lip, my teeth grazing his tongue. I wanted to taste so much more of him, my desire thickening like treacle.

“No, I am sorry, Dan. For taking it out on you. You were just...”

I knew he was trying to speak around my tongue and lips as they played with him, licking him, teasing, showing how much I wanted him. I took my mouth away from his with a slow, reluctant sigh. “Yeah?”

He gazed at me, his pupils dilated, his lips glistening from the kissing. “You’re just trying to look after me, I guess.”

“I guess,” I agreed. I stayed in place, just looking at him and smiling my encouragement and care, though my breath was shallow and I was sure he felt how hard I was, my cock warm and thick against his leg. But maybe he needed more time to work this through. I knew I’d wait. That was never in question.

Even if that was an unfamiliar situation for the tourist in me.

“It’s not that I don’t like being cared for. Having someone who wants to do that.” His eyes glanced down then back up to me. His cheeks were flushed and his smile had returned. “You know?”

His fingers dug into the flesh of my arms but I didn’t complain. He was explaining things his own way.

“Yeah, well, I like it too.”

“Huh?” He frowned. “What do you mean?”

I wasn’t sure what had possessed me to say that. I was the steady one, right? The one to be relied on, who didn’t need a safeguard. That’s what Ricky liked in me. But not always. What about what *I* needed? My foundations had been rocked by what I’d discovered about this man—about my feelings for him. The connection between us now ran through my veins, colouring my vision, quickening my pulse.

It was far richer than the day I found some extra courage and stepped into that shower with him. When I took some dizzy, delicious pleasure. Something else, indeed.

“I never knew if you felt the same.” I took a slow, careful breath. “I’ve been scared, too. Of not being enough for you. That you were too hot, too gorgeous for me. That I was too dull to match your smartness. That somehow... I’d spoil you. That you wouldn’t want my homespun brand of devotion, my kind of—”

“Love? Dan, no way! I love you too,” he interrupted, eyes shining. “You stupid bloody arse! And there’s me, thinking you wouldn’t want *me*, my damaged goods—”

And then I pulled him into a proper kiss, with a shared laugh, and tongues and grabby hands, and the apologies and confessions got nipped in the bud.

When I’d received Ricky’s call that night—the first, aborted call—I was back in my flat, waiting. I was sitting on my bed, still and silent, an open but untouched beer on the table, my boots thrown to the side and my shirt untucked. I hadn’t bothered turning on some music as I often did at the end of the night, and a couple of utility bills lay on the floor, the carelessly discarded remains of the day’s post I picked up on my way in. I’d dragged my heels all the way back from Ricky’s flat to mine, past the near-deserted roads, past the bar as it was finally closing, past groups and couples on their way home. I’d listened to a medley of traffic noise, distant sirens, laughter, argument, and complaint about the cold, yet all I could hear in my mind was the sharp sound of Ricky’s phone ringing with Calder’s demands. And I brooded on the memory

of Ricky's wide eyes when I questioned him—and his lack of real denial.

Waiting for him to call? I hadn't dared hope. I'd thought it was all over.

Afterwards, I wondered if I could have spotted Calder somewhere, stalking Ricky, but the bastard was probably smarter than that. I hadn't been looking for that kind of trouble anyway. All I'd wanted at the time was to get home and lick my wounds, sure that I'd lost Ricky. It was like all the energy had gone from me, like a light switch had been turned off. A strange feeling, when I'd started the day so... strong.

When I answered the phone and Ricky disconnected, it confused me. I'd never thought he could be deliberately cruel. When he called again, I'd considered ignoring it. For all of five seconds. Then I answered, my hand shaking, only to hear an odd mixture of background sounds that were barely distinct. Something kept me listening, though. And eventually I heard Ricky's voice, talking not to me, but to someone else. Shocking words, his voice high and fearful, the echo not right for his flat. When I heard the clatter of the phone falling, I was already on my feet, scrambling back into my boots. I understood enough to get Ricky's message, that he'd been taken back to the bar for some reason. That he was unwilling. In danger.

Ten seconds later I was hammering on my neighbour's door to call the police. No way was I breaking contact with Ricky's cry for help to make the call myself. And then I left my flat at a run, still listening in, on my way back to the bar.

...coming through that door like some hero...

And now we were here, together. On holiday. In love. Safe. I wasn't a guy who cried, but my eyes were itching...

"Dan?" Ricky slipped out from under my arm and turned us both towards the hotel window again. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Our shoulders touched and his arm reached across my back to rest on my opposite hip. I was very happy to stand beside him like this, gazing out on the slowly sinking evening sun.

"The sea? Yeah. I'm really glad we came." I was still half hard, thinking of him, smelling his skin close to mine, his taste still in my mouth. "We needed to get away."

"Just for a while," he murmured.

I nodded, and leant against him for a few peaceful, silent seconds. There was going to be plenty of time for us. Our homes—our *lives*—would be safe. Things were going to be all right.

"Would you have been scared of that, too?" His hand stroked almost aimlessly at the small of my back. "I mean, in the cellar..."

"Of a knife? Of a guy who'd beaten me and systematically run me down for months? Yeah, of course I would. Fuck it, Ricky..."

He made a shushing noise under his breath and slid his hand inside the back waistband of my sweats. I wasn't wearing anything underneath them. The touch of his fingers on my naked skin was both shocking and thrilling. Sure, we'd fooled around and had sex since the night with Calder, but it had been...

“Nervous,” he said, his voice low in my ear. “We’ve been nervous, right? Dan, you’ve been fucking me these last couple of days like I might break. Do you really think that’s the way I like it?”

My laugh came out on a stutter. How the hell had he known what I was thinking? Yet as his hand caressed the base of my spine, I could feel his desire easing its way to me in the same way I could see the waves lapping on the beach. My heart warmed; my skin tingled. The bond was both strong and stimulating. I’d never felt anything like it—anything as *good*. But when I tried to turn around, he pressed his other hand between my shoulder blades, guiding me face-forward against the wall beside the window, holding me in place against it. There wasn’t any coercion in it, just... demand.

“Ricky?”

He nudged his head against the back of my neck. His lips brushed the soft flesh beneath my ear. I felt every inch of my skin flush with heat.

“Oh, fuck. *Ricky*.”

He chuckled softly, his breath stirring the hairs at my nape, and he pushed me harder against the wall. The nondescript pattern of the wallpaper blurred as it met my nose, and I turned my head so I could rest my cheek. I could see the upper edge of the window frame out of the corner of my eye, and the reflected glint from the sun on the sea. I could hear myself panting.

“Ricky, I—”

“Shut up.” His voice was husky, with an edge to it I’d never heard before. “Unless you don’t like it.”

“I do.” His lips were at the junction of my neck and shoulder, his teeth nipping at the skin. “Fucking hell, I do.”

He shifted behind me for a moment, one hand always on my back as a token restraint. He tugged at my T-shirt. “Take this off.”

I tensed. I heard a diesel cab ticking over outside and someone calling, laughing. Our room was on the second floor, and I didn’t think anyone on the promenade could see us unless they made a specific effort to look up, but even so... “You want to take this to the bed?”

He laughed. “Not just yet.” Then his body pressed up against me, his chest at my shoulder blades, his knees at the back of my calves. While I’d been worrying about voyeurs, he’d stripped off his clothes. Now I felt the warmth of bare skin, his cock filling slowly with desire, heavy with promise against my arse. I reached behind me awkwardly and pulled my shirt off over my head. Ricky’s hand returned to my back, but this time as skin to skin. When he slid his other hand back into my sweats, I shivered with excitement. My cock was straining against the fabric in front, the muscles of my thighs tight with anticipation. I crossed my arms, rested them on the wall in front of me and leant my head against my forearm. My brow was damp, the pulse in my wrists fierce.

Ricky pushed my sweats to the floor and I stepped out of them. But I didn’t turn around, or even straighten back up. “What do you want?”

He hesitated. His breath was ragged. “You like this? You wanted me... you asked, once. Didn’t you?”

I nodded as best I could with my head down. I wanted to express my eagerness, every part of my body offering submission. The cooler air of the room brushed softly against my warm buttocks. I couldn’t see Ricky properly, I could only feel his possessive hand on me, sense his naked hunger matching mine. I didn’t know where he might touch me next, what he might do.

The suspense was exquisite.

“He said...”

No.

“He said you just wanted to fuck me. That’s all I was to you.”

I felt my fingers curl into a fist against the wall. “But you don’t believe that?”

I heard his breath catch. “I did. But... you’re not like that.” He wasn’t questioning me. His tone was awed, as if he’d just worked something out for himself.

“I want you to be yourself. That’s all.” I shrugged. “We work it out between us. Make it work for both of us.” *I loved him.* “Partners. That’s what I want.”

“Me too,” he whispered.

My heartbeat wondered whether to slow down with relief or speed up with excitement. As if I had any control over it at all. I wriggled my arse. “So how about...?”

He huffed, as if laughing under his breath. His fingers slipped down between my cheeks, confident and already wet with some kind of lubrication. They circled the sensitive skin, teasing at the opening, nudging a fingertip just inside. I shuddered and groaned. My muscles tensed then relaxed; my head dropped down farther. When his finger slipped into me, the pleasure rippled through every nerve. My back arched and I think I swore—I definitely wasn't thinking straight.

Ricky sucked in a breath and slid in a second finger, his excitement making him rough. I didn't care. The tip of one finger was crooked and brushed at the spot deep inside me that made every muscle ache with want.

“You need the bed?” His voice was just above a whisper.

“Not just yet,” I mimicked him, but fondly.

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Move back a foot or so, then. We can do it right here. How does that sound?”

Did he expect me to answer that coherently? I made some kind of strangled moan that I hoped he took as a hell, yeah. And *please*. I took a couple of steps back, arching my back, my hands still on the wall.

“Stop.” His voice was firm but breathy. “Don't move from there.”

He ran his hand up my arm to my shoulder and then my nape. He grasped me tight, holding me in place—not that I was looking to run away. He leant in and pressed a kiss to my neck. “I want to do this, Dan.”

“You hear me arguing?” It was a stupid joke, but I heard him chuckle.

“It’s been... I haven’t done it for a long time. I didn’t think you really wanted...”

“Oh, I want it.” I barely recognized the rough edge of need in my voice. “Ricky, I want *you*.” It wasn’t often I showed that need to someone else. It made me vulnerable. But I wanted him in me, the want as sharp and sweetly sour as if I tasted it. Ricky had stripped me of more than clothing.

I heard the rustle of a condom packet and I stretched my legs farther apart, ready for him. The fit of our bodies felt right. Soon we wouldn’t need condoms, we ‘d be the only one to feature in each other’s history. His fingers smoothed lube over me, moistening the edges of crinkled skin around my entrance, a dribble of excess running down my inner thigh.

I sighed with contentment.

His cock nudged up against me, but then he hesitated again. My flesh ached with the tension, desire tugging at my groin with greedy tendrils. And without even thinking about it, I reached out to him, my emotions guided by our longing, my will craving his.

“You had control then,” I whispered. “That night. And you’re in control, right now.”

He made a small, surprised grunt behind me. He pushed just inside me, tightening his grip on my hips. “Well. Yes. I guess I am.”

I let out a long, heavy breath. It had been a while since I’d done this, too. We shifted carefully, getting the best angle, and then he began moving in and out of me. Even though his face was hidden behind me, I could see the edge of his torso and

his elbow moving in time with each thrust. When I looked down, I could see his bare feet behind mine. On a couple of the forward thrusts, he went up on his toes.

My body rocked against his. A whisper of a draft slipped in under the window sill, teasing my shoulders. I could smell the tang of salt on the breeze and hear Ricky's harsh, excited gasps in the quiet room. Glancing through the glass, I could see a sliver of the evening sky outside, darkening to a mixture of indigo and ochre, and the reflection of Ricky himself, his body blurred, his skin glistening as it moved.

"*Dan.*" His whisper was awed.

I braced my hands on the wall, so I wouldn't slip, and pushed back. Ricky's cock sank even deeper. It was incredible, magnificent. His thrusts became shallower, faster, more urgent. I didn't want to disturb our rhythm, but I released a hand and reached down to slick my own cock, bobbing between my legs.

"Control," he whispered. "*Dan. Shit.* You feel so good."

Ricky. You can do this...

"I can do this, can't I?"

Thinking together, again. Happiness ambushed my heart and squeezed, fiercely enough to be noticed, gently enough that I welcomed it. Every movement was poignant, every sense was doubly vivid—the smell of mingled sweat in my nose, colours behind my half-closed eyelids. I wondered if Ricky was talking only about the sex, but now I was having trouble concentrating, the blood drumming a tattoo around my body,

my muscles taut, my fingers scraping against the wall as I held position.

“Yeah.” My mouth hurt as if my grin was stretching it permanently out of shape. “Yeah, you can. *We* can.”

We moved together, revelling in it, panting, sweating, drawing each other along and breathing in each other’s passion.

I was still with ’em, wasn’t I? Their tourist. Their visitor. Ace, their resident guest.

I’d seen off that bastard Calder, as best I could, breaking his will from within. And I’d made it better for Dan and Ricky, another sexy couple. I’d been with each of ’em individually, shared the anguish and the smiles, found the depths that each man had hidden too deeply for their stubbornness to find. Then found a way to combine the best of both—to reach out to the pair of ’em at once. No idea how I did it, mind you, but I’d think about the logistics another day. Just at this moment, I savoured the wiry strength of Dan’s body and the sensuous beauty of Ricky’s. Doing what I did best—enjoying sex, finding the very best in a fuck. And these guys had definite promise. I could feel climax approaching for both of ’em, in whatever fast lane they travelled.

But, bloody hell, there comes a time when no one wants to question or describe things any longer, do they? Just to experience ’em in every fibre of one’s being. I surrendered

myself, allowing the feelings in, absorbing the rutting pair, embracing both of my sexy lovers.

So, so good.

I groaned deeply, my cock jumping in my hand, the cum spurting out over the top of my fist. Bent over my back, Ricky cried out with a mixture of shock and delight as he came too, his hips slamming against my arse, his arms clinging tightly around my chest. I leant against the wall, supporting us both, trying to find my breath, until Ricky slid out of me, pulled me awkwardly around to face him again, and started to kiss me in earnest.

And I, as their tourist? I relaxed, surrendered to nothing but pure sensation, and I let 'em have their head.

CHAPTER 14

So. Yeah. I'm still here. Ace, the ace tourist.

I mean, I'm getting pretty good at the targeted jumping now. I spend a week or so in Dan, then when the itch comes on me to experience things differently, I swap to Ricky. That's a pretty unusual but effective example of *swinging*, right? Dan gets every chance to develop those dominant feelings he has towards Ricky, and Ricky's learning to take charge when *he* wants. I enjoy nudging 'em into the right patterns, I must say. I see it like a civic duty. You know—as a gift from the perfect guest. Beats a bottle of cheap wine, any day. And that day in the hotel bedroom? Yeah, I was keen to try that from the other man's point of view, as soon as the opportunity arose.

I may stay around a while longer, too. The sex from these guys is pretty hot, and there are some things I'd like to persuade 'em to try out. It's been an unusual experience for me, to be close to both men. To have shared the tension and the fear and the exhilaration of that nightmare time—oh, and did I mention the hot sex?

The love thing is new to me, too. Or maybe not so new, but something I haven't spent much time with. While I'm enhancing the physical side, I may pick up some tips myself on the emotional. Just for something to keep me warm on some of my future, less rewarding nights, you understand. Of course, that's when I decide to move on again.

Not that there's any rush, right? They've taught me that, if nothing else. That it's worth hanging around sometimes to work things out. That a relationship can be richer and stronger for it. To say nothing of the sex...

And for now? Enough of the sentimental words, you may say. Me, too. There's only so much time you can waste on 'em. So, you'll excuse me if I take my leave?

I can hear the shower running, you see.



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About Clare London

Clare London took her pen name from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home, she juggles her writing with her other day job as an accountant.

She's written in many genres and across many settings, with award-winning novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic, and sexy characters.

Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter three stage and plenty of other projects in mind... she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fuelled family home.

Clare loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her here:

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