

LESSIC ECLECTIC

A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE



VOLUME ONE
EDITED BY ROBYN NYX

LESFIC
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2019

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Dedication

To all you lovely readers who
support, read, and breathe LesFic

And to all you wonderful authors
who cry blood and make magic

Thank you,
Robyn Nyx

Reviews for the Author's Works

Lise Gold

French Summer

A perfect book for reading while lying on a sun lounger in your own back yard or by a pool somewhere warm and sunny, or equally for a cold winter's day when you need to be metaphorically transported to a place just like that! **Curve magazine**

Lily's Fire

All in all this was a lot of fun to read! Emotional, well put together and written, and very exciting. I highly recommend giving this romance a read. **LesBiReviewed**

Jeannie Levig

A Wish Upon a Star

A perfect book if you're looking for something a little different from the usual romance fare. While there's plenty of chemistry between Leslie and Erica, there are no meet-cutes or perfect people to be found in it. Instead, Levig takes us on a journey of finding love that's familial as well as romantic. If you haven't read her before this would be an excellent place to start and fans of this author are sure to be pleased too. **Lambda Literary Organization**

Into Thin Air

This story surprised me on so many levels because it is one of the few books that I have ever read that threw all of my expectations out of the window. Nothing is typical or run of the mill in this novel. I have cycled

between delight, outrage, and sorrow throughout this story, and I loved every word of this book because it sends several messages, and it is so worth the read. I can wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who loves an intriguing mystery/thriller story with life lessons thrown in for good measure.

The Lesbian Review

Jenn Matthews

Hooked on You

If you're in the mood for a quirky, sweet romance, I recommend picking up *Hooked on You*. It's Jenn Matthews's debut novel and I'm looking forward to see more stories from her in the future. **The Lesbian Review**

The Words Shimmer

This story was just so sweet that I honestly can't say there was any part of it I didn't enjoy. Romance with a difference for all those who are diverse and need representing. Jenn does a great job with this story and it really is one everyone should read. **LesBiReviewed**

Kitty McIntosh

The Woman by the River

A cute short story that brought intrigue and mystery, whilst building a beautiful scene for the reader and exquisite imagery with description of the lovely scenery by the river and where Gillian lives. Well written, and an exciting prequel to what sounds like a promising novella. **LesBiReviewed**

Gill McKnight

Ambereye

This was a wonderful, perfectly written book. The story keeps you guessing and is unique. The characters are well written and you can't help but falling in love with them. **The Lesbian Review**

Little Dip

McKnight writes fun characters. You can't help but fall in love with the Garoul family as you get to know them through the series. This book was no exception. I was neutral about Connie and Marie before but this book has endeared them to me in a way that showcases McKnight's skill as an author. The writing is superb. The characters are endearing and to see the kids as kids is wonderful. **The Lesbian Review**

Emma Nichols

Ariana

This novel gave me way more than I expected because it is so much more than a tale about love and loss. There are so many life lessons and nuggets of wisdom thrown in here for good measure. At first, I was a bit overwhelmed by Nikki and Ariana's turbulent emotions and their confusing behavior but the more I read, the more I came to love these adorable, vulnerable and flawed women. **The Lesbian Review**

Madeleine

An intriguing, tense story that was very romantic. I really enjoyed it and highly recommend this series.

LesBiReviewed

Robyn Nyx*Never Enough*

Readers will find it well balanced by plenty of romance and copious amounts of sex, as well as a solid cast of supporting characters and some insightful handling of contemporary social issues. **Publishers Weekly**

Escape in Time

The story is so packed with action and intrigue that I lost a lot of beauty sleep over it. But most of all, I was fascinated with the meticulous plotting Nyx did around the time traveling aspect. She built a process that is so rich in rules and details that I found myself working out “what if” scenarios in my head while I was cooking dinner or making my daily commute to work. The story is captivating, and the best part is that it’s the first in a fantastic trilogy. I hope you enjoy it too. **The Lesbian Review**

Jen Silver*Christmas at Winterborne*

There are moments of romance, comedy, anguish, and love. And Ms Silver does an excellent job of keeping it all clear in our minds. Thoroughly enjoyable read, excellent Christmas present and delightful English situation drama. **Lesbian Reading Room**

Deuce

Jen Silver has a talent for crafting characters and storylines that really resonate. She subtly weaves real events into her work and that makes the reader

feel more engaged. ‘Deuce’ may be my favorite of her novels so far. **Kitty Kat’s Book Review Blog**

Brey Willows

Fury’s Bridge, Fury’s Choice, and Fury’s Death: AfterLife Inc series

The romances are well done, unusual issues when eternal forces fall for mortal humans and mental concepts collide. But while the romances are central, the stories are far bigger, dealing, albeit lightly, with the constant battle between good and evil, forces of Chaos and destruction wanting humanity to destroy itself while the gods make a stand for peace, love, and ecological sanity.

Thoroughly enjoyed these; romances with a difference, fantasy set in the here and now with an interesting twist. Highly recommended. **The Lesbian Reading Room**

Chosen

Wow... now that's how you write a book. I can't believe it's over. Not only did I love this book but it made me stop and really think about global warming and how scary it actually is. I'm all together devastated this book is over and extremely happy with the overall awesomeness of this book. **Les Rêveur**

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THE BUS STOP

Valden Bush

Jo sank into the seat, and she knew that she was in the right place. This bus stop was where it had all started. Exhaustion caused her legs to tremor, and she was glad to be sitting down. She felt as if she'd walked miles. Perhaps she had. When she arrived at the bus stop, it was crowded with people, all on their journeys through life. But it'd taken a while to find it. There were a lot of bus stops in Norwich, but the river was very close by and the station wasn't far away. Jo knew in her bones that this was it. She could recall sitting here years before on a wooden bench and not these modern, plastic slippy seats. She looked at the wide road with buildings on either side heading into the centre and up to the Castle. It hadn't changed much in the last fifty years. This bus stop was the staging post of her life, but it'd taken longer than expected to find it today. She quietly exhaled, wrapped in the warm satisfaction of success. It was a shame that Mary wasn't here as well.

She stared at the people around her. Each arriving bus disgorged its travellers, swallowed up the rising tide of the bus queue, and then disappeared. The crowds changed like the ebb and flow of waves, as they moved sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly,

towards or away as a bus that came along, stopped, and then resumed its journey.

Amongst the flotsam and jetsam of travellers were two women standing together near the stop. One of the women was, like herself, nearly six feet tall with light brown hair. She had that modern hairstyle with one short side and one long side. Jo thought it a superb statement: half butch, half femme. Then she wondered if perhaps that wasn't the message it was sending. Somehow modern fashion had overtaken her. She liked the style anyway. The other woman was much smaller, both in stature and bone structure with collar-length, short blond hair. There was something about the woman that reminded her of Mary as she smiled and put out her arms to the taller woman. Jo couldn't hear what they were saying, but she remembered Mary once saying to her when they stood at that same place, "It doesn't matter, they can't hurt us."

She watched as the taller woman let herself be wrapped into the shorter woman's arms and then enveloped the blonde in her much longer arms. Her eyes were closed, and Jo imagined that, like herself all those years ago, the taller woman felt that she was coming home. She lowered her head to the blonde, and the couple kissed. It was timeless. Jo felt a burning sensation rise in her chest and tried to swallow down the jealousy. She couldn't stop watching them despite feeling nosey, all the while visualising herself and Mary in the couple's place. But for her and Mary it had been nothing like that, nothing like that at all. Because they'd never been able to stand at the bus stop and exchange a kiss.

They'd never been able to hold each other that way in public.

It was forty years ago, but it seemed like only yesterday that a small blonde woman arrived at the bus stop and dropped down on to the wooden bench beside Jo. She was beautiful.

She looked at Jo with a smile and said, "I'm looking for the castle, but I've got turned around after looking at Pull's Ferry. Can you help?"

Jo's heart hammered in her chest, surely loud enough for the woman to hear. "Er...yes...er...it's up this road here."

"Oh, good. Is it far? I'm visiting from the United States." She held out her hand. "Mary McRae."

Jo took her hand gently. "Jo Roberts. Would...would you like a guide? I have an hour to wait before my train arrives."

Jo stared at her feet, knowing that she needed to look at Mary if she wanted to make a connection. She'd used all her words. People considered her unapproachable, but it was purely because she was so very shy, lacking in confidence, and never able to say the right thing.

But Mary didn't seem to notice, her warm smile and encouraging expression seemed to reach out to Jo and offer...something special. Mary still had hold of her hand, and anticipation tingled all the way up her arm. It was an unusual connection she wanted to explore further.

She picked up her Navy kit-bag stencilled with her

name and number in white and ushered Mary in front of her. They started walking up the road.

“Are you in the Royal Navy?” Mary asked and pointed at Jo’s bag. “Seeing as your duffel is blue and has military numbers on and all.”

“Yeah, well, I’m in the women’s Navy. I’m a Wren, your equivalent of a...a WAVE. I work on helicopter engines in the Fleet Air Arm.”

Mary continued asking questions, and Jo answered, feeling an ease around Mary that was unfamiliar but very welcome. She managed to squeeze in a question or two to find that Mary was in the US Air Force stationed in Suffolk.

Jo didn’t want the day to end and assured Mary that she could catch a later train. They wandered and chatted and had tea in a department store. And although they sat on a bench by the castle moat in the late afternoon sun, they never quite managed to visit the castle. Eventually time ran out, and Jo had to leave. Mary walked her back to the station, and Jo smiled as they passed the bus stop where they’d met. They exchanged addresses and promised to try and speak on the phone. They both lived in quarters, and the phone was shared with all the girls, so they knew that could be difficult. But still...

Jo worried that she would never see Mary again. But they met a few weeks later at *their* bus stop and fell deeply in love. So began their strong and unshakable love affair.

It was a similar day ten years later when Jo

arrived at the bus stop and stared out at the river with the thoughts racing around her head like a mental roller coaster. She watched the people come and go with their busy lives and wondered how her life had come to this.

The morning before she'd gone to work on a routine and normal day. She had been escorted from the hangar by two non-commissioned officers in uniform who'd approached while she was working deep in the engine of a Wessex helicopter.

"You're coming with us to answer some questions," one of them said. "We've cleared it with your boss. Your unit officer and your divisional officer are waiting for you."

Jo's heart raced, and she couldn't move. It was as if the world had stopped, and she was the only person in it. "What's this about?"

One of the men grabbed her arm. "You'll find out."

The other man grabbed her other arm, and they marched her across the hanger and out across the square to the admin building.

The men put her in a small office with a table and a few chairs, told her to wait, and then left. Jo closed her eyes and willed the tears not to come. One of them stood outside and frequently looked through the small glass window at her. *What have I done wrong?* Why had they grabbed her and stuck her in this room? She gripped the table tightly with both hands to anchor herself, the cold sweat of fear threatening to loosen her hold. She tried to slow her breathing, but her anxiety was winning out.

Hours passed. She felt sick, her mouth dry, and the glass of water they'd given her was long gone. She struggled to work out what she'd done to end up in

this position. Jo let her mind try to make some sense of the merry-go-round of colours and thoughts that invaded her mind.

She jumped when the door swung open, and the two men that had accompanied her there re-entered. With them was a Lieutenant Commander with shark-like eyes that seemed to look straight through her, her divisional officer, and the woman in charge of all the women on the Naval Base. No-one introduced themselves. They were all dressed in full uniform. She was still wearing her overalls, her hands caked with grease and their superiority caused her to shrink into her seat. She struggled to keep tears from her eyes.

“You’re Joanne Roberts?” asked Shark Eyes.

“Yes.”

“You’ve served twelve years in the Wrens?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been named as a lesbian. Firstly, we need you to confirm this fact.”

“What?” Jo was completely blindsided. She’d been thinking that there had been some issue with her aircraft maintenance, that she’d made a professional error. That a pilot somewhere had been in an accident involving an aircraft that she’d maintained. This was something completely different. She’d heard of these “witch hunts” to remove lesbians from the Forces but had never been involved in one, nor had any idea that one was currently happening. And *she* was the focus.

“We know you’re a lesbian. There’s no need to deny it. You’ve been identified as being friends with a number of lesbians, and therefore you must be

one,” Shark Eyes said.

Jo sat quietly. Her mind screamed at her to run, to go anywhere but here. It had come down to this. She’d been outed by someone and convicted before having a chance to prove her innocence. If she admitted it, she would be discharged from the Navy, would have trouble getting any other work, and lose her pension. She’d have nothing.

But what was innocence? She was a lesbian, therefore, she was guilty as charged. But it was both unjust and unreasonable to have to defend her sexuality when it was something she couldn’t change. She’d never had a relationship with anyone in the Navy, although she did have friends who were lesbians. *Oh, Mary, what’s to become of me?* They’d been so careful. Mary wasn’t even in the UK, and they’d spent their ten years *together* always living *apart*.

“We need to know the names of all the women you’ve had a relationship with, everyone you’ve been friends with, and the dates you were with them,” Shark Eyes said. “We have all the time in the world and can wait for you to confirm everything. We already know enough to charge you.”

Jo didn’t say anything. She had nothing to say. She suddenly understood the saying “Dammed if you did and dammed if you didn’t.” No words could make this right.

Shark Eyes looked at her with no hint of emotion.

“You’ve been named, and there’s nothing you can do except tell us what we need to know. You know you’ll be leaving with a black mark against your name, but we can make things a lot easier if you help us.”

There was a moment of silence, and Jo felt everyone

in the room staring at her. Her divisional officer looked sorry for her, perhaps with a tinge of guilt because Jo was sure she was a lesbian too.

“We’ll be searching your accommodation, so you may as well come clean now and tell us everything we want to know.”

Jo couldn’t think at all. She couldn’t process what was happening. She still said nothing, her vocal chords paralysed.

“So tell us everything. You *are* a lesbian.”

Sweat beaded down her back. *Oh, Mary! Truth or lie? Do I have a choice?*

One of the other men flicked through the papers in front of him. “You play hockey?”

“Yes”. Her paralysis fell away, but her breaths stuttered in staccato bursts and her reply had come out with a squeak.

“Most of the team are lesbians.”

“Are they?” Jo asked. “I had no idea.”

“Your team will be short a few players next season... We know you’re a dyke, so just make it easy on yourself.”

Several hours of questions and comments followed. They were all in a similar vein. Finally, the onslaught stopped, and they all left.

“We’ll be back in an hour,” Shark Eyes said. “That’ll be your final chance to come clean. Think very carefully about what you want to say.”

Jo watched them go and rested her head on her arms on the table. It was silent, and she was all cried out. She was standing on a precipice and behind her was her life of the last twenty-eight years. One push from these people, and she would be over the

edge into an abyss with no work and a bad record to show for twelve years exemplary service as an aircraft mechanic.

The door burst open. Shark Eyes came in, leading the rest of his witch hunters. He smiled and looked supremely smug. Jo had reached the end of the line.

“We’ve searched your room and found a hidden suitcase with a number of love letters from a Staff Sergeant in the US Air Force. You’ve been writing to each other for ten years. It’s clear you’ve been having a relationship for at least that length of time.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “We have the evidence we need. You *are* a lesbian, and your lover has provided us with everything we need to dismiss you. You will be escorted to your room. You will pack your personal belongings whilst your Divisional Officer waits with you. She will take all your returned kit, and we’ll provide you with your paperwork. You will be dismissed from the Navy, ‘Services No Longer Required.’”

Jo was empty. There was nothing she could do about any of it. So she headed home, ashamed. Something she could still feel forty years later. She had rung Mary and explained what had happened. “They’ll be coming after you now. I’m sure they’ll share information. I’m so sorry I kept some of your letters with me, but I needed them to keep you close. I miss you.”

“Darlin’, we’ve had a good run. And it’s no good worrying about what we could have or should have done. I’ll be there as soon as I can, and we can decide what to do next.”

A week later, and she was waiting at the bus stop for Mary to arrive from America. She closed her eyes and thought about all the wonderful times they'd spent together. Her excitement made her a little giggly, but she needed to concentrate on the here and now. She hadn't seen Mary for three months, and it seemed like forever. She became conscious of someone sitting next to her, and their sensual perfume filled her nose. She opened her eyes and looked straight into Mary's.

Mary smiled and took Jo's hands. "I want to take you in my arms and give you everything I have to offer. I am so sorry about your career, sweetie. There's nothing more I can say. I hate that you've been hurt, but I'll do everything I can to make sure that no one hurts you ever again." Mary squeezed Jo's hands tighter before she released them and looked around, conscious of being seen. "I love you as much as I always have."

"I love you too," said Jo. "But I know they're going to come after you as well. Oh, what a mess!"

"We can spend the next few days looking at our options and making some decisions. I think we've both had enough of hiding, and I think we should consider that wherever we go and whatever we do next, it'll be together."

Mary's words comforted her, and she felt safer than she had for the last couple of weeks.

Two days later Jo and Mary were at the bus stop again. Jo put her hand onto the metal structure and stroked it. "I think this may be the last time we'll be here. Good-bye, my faithful bus stop. Next stop,

Portland, U S of A."

The tall woman at the bus stop smiled at Jo, and Jo felt that she should know her from somewhere. She rubbed her hand over her face as if it would help clear her mind. She seemed familiar. So did her girlfriend. She could really do with a cup of tea. *Where had Mary gone?* Surely, she'd be home soon, and perhaps she would make some of those tasty little cakes which melted in her mouth.

The tall woman came over to her. "Hello, are you feeling all right?"

Jo pondered the question. "I could do with a cup of tea and one of Mary's cakes."

"I could do with a cuppa myself." The woman continued to smile. "Is Mary picking you up from here, or are you catching a bus to her?" the woman asked.

"Sophie, she has a lanyard and label around her neck. What does it say?"

I am staying at the Hotel Norwich Room 306. If I am lost, please ring this number and speak to Mary.

Jo relaxed and looked at the river wondering where she had met these women. They reminded her of herself and Mary all those years ago.

As if thinking about Mary had somehow magically made her appear, there she was. Her short blond hair and that wonderful smile.

"Aw, sweetie. Were you looking for our bus stop again? You're all right now. You're safe. I'm here. Let's go home and have a cup of tea and some of those cakes that you love."

Then Jo felt Mary's arms around her, strong and sure. Mary kissed her, and Jo knew she would be all right.

DIARY OF A LESBIAN TAVERNA OWNER

Gill McKnight

The following is an excerpt from a work in progress.

Introduction

When I visited Lesbos for the first time, I fell in love with the Eressos valley and the surrounding mountains that turned lavender, peach, and gold at sunset. The three kilometres of unspoilt beach and the villages with tree lined squares and red-roofed houses reeled me in. Everywhere I looked I saw nature in all its beauty. I was smitten.

Before I left, I put down a deposit on a small tumbledown house with an acre and a half of tatty olive trees, which tells you that either I have an impulsive nature or I know the real deal when I see it. Many delightful holidays followed restoring the house and working on the olive grove, until a few years ago, when a change of career allowed me to move to my Greek island full time.

Life often leads us down unexplored paths, and I follow gleefully. Sort of semi-retired, sort of busy, sort of stupid, I was ready for a new adventure...and the universe plopped one straight into my lap. The universe and I enjoy this dance.

I'm prone to wander down to my favourite taverna for lunch most afternoons to see who's

around for a chat or maybe a game of backgammon. I was hanging at the *Flamingo Beach Bar* with Anita, the owner, when she told me a place further along the strip had its lease for sale.

“Why tell me?” I asked. “I’m not looking for a bar.”

She shrugged. “I just thought it’d be nice to have another gay place on this side of the river.”

Her casual words wormed into my head. I mulled her idea over for a few weeks. I talked to friends, consulted my accountant, and checked my bank balance. Everyone said it would be unwise, a gamble, a maddening adventure. I listened gravely, ignored them all, then signed a five-year lease and found myself the owner of a Greek taverna. All the time that pesky universe was whispering in my other ear.

That was a couple of years ago. The *Compass Bar* has lurched through teething pains and holiday fevers. We’ve been up and down, left, right, and centre. It’s been a ride, but now at three years in, I feel I’ve got the hang of it and can loosen my white knuckled grip just a little.

Bar staff come and bar staff go, ‘tis the nature of the beast. I’m lucky to have a few stalwarts who rock up on the island every May to help prep for the summer. Aliz floats in from Athens. She’s a tall, sultry, thirty-something, impossibly lovely, and could fill the bar to overflow with lovesick suitors. I’m perfectly happy with this. Moogi, a twenty-six-year-old ball of limitless energy, bounces over from Sydney. She is of Aussie-Italian descent so can stay in the E.U. as long as she wants, which

is all summer, thankfully, and she spends it working at my bar. Esmine, the bar baby, is nineteen and another beautiful Greek. They are a handsome race. She's a local lass, an Eressian, and is at university in Thessaloniki studying Computational Science. She comes home for the holidays to see her family and work the summer season before heading back in the autumn. Esmine has been with *Compass Bar* since the start, which was the year she started uni.

In the kitchen, I have Dorian, a Dutch friend and one helluva cook. She produces good, no nonsense food for the holidaymakers. Dorian is stoic, thoughtful, and quiet, though that may be because of the joint she always has on the go.

The rest of my staff are itinerant. They are friends, or friends of friends, looking for a working holiday on a Greek island. Aliz, Moogi, Esmine, and Dorian are my mainstays. My A team. I'm the floater. I can do bar, the floor, or KP for Dorian. I'm also the boss, so anything that goes wrong lands on my lap.

Compass Bar is now in the third year out of a five-year lease. I'm not sure if I'll extend. It's a short season and a lot of bloody hard work. It's also a lot of fun, friendship, and good times. And memories are made at times like those. So much so that when I read back on my journals—I'm a chronic journaler, though can miss out the odd day if distracted or absolutely nothing happens—I decided to share a typical year. It's not a full year. It's not particularly brilliant writing. It's my journal, and that means life as it happens in this beautiful, wonderful place.

25th July

Morning spent at the accountants collecting the work licenses for the late summer staff I've hired. August is a mad month, and we always need more people, and the September International Women's Festival means I can give up to six weeks extra work.

I arrive at the bar before lunchtime to find Moogi has created an appalling concoction from the dregs of any bottle with less than two millimetres of alcohol in it.

"I've invented a cocktail," she says. "It's called Scorpion's Kiss."

"Is this to save them going out and looking for a scorpion?" I ask.

This latest notion to be a mixologist is obsessing her, though I suspect it's more about her competitive nature and wanting to upstage Thea, the cocktail maker at the *Karma Bar*.

"Go on."

She offers me a shot glass containing a liquid the colour and consistency of a UTI sample.

"Take a sip."

I'm loath to touch the glass, never mind take a sip. "No." I'm adamant. "You drink it. You made it."

Aliz drifts over, scenting an imminent debacle. Moogi gets shifty. She has this awkward sideways shuffle that's her big tell. If we were playing poker she'd have salsa'd over to the next table, she's so agitated.

"Haven't you tried it?" I ask, suspecting the answer is no, and I'm the lab rat.

"I was saving it for you."

There's a pout to her voice, and her face creases to join in. Dorian wanders in from the kitchen. She's finished chopping the onions for the pizzas and wants to see what's going on.

“After you.” I push the shot glass back to her and cross my arms. My boss face is firmly in place. It has to be, before she poisons the customers and I'm sued off the face of the earth. On cue, with the timing of an amateur dramatical society, Ouzo Sue comes through the door. Ouzo Sue is a frequent visitor

“Freebie!” Moogi waves the shot at her.

“Ooh. What is it?”

Sue beelines for us.

“It's new,” Moogi tells her. “We're trying out samples.”

Before I can issue a health warning, Sue, not one to be shy around a shot glass, luckily has the survival instinct to sip this one cautiously. We wait with bated breath. Sue's face scrunches. She sticks out a creosote-coloured tongue and hands back the half full glass.

“It's a bit...urph.” She burps. “Oops. Sorry.”

She apologises profusely, which I think is the wrong way around. We should be on bended knee before her.

Sue heads back to the terrace and calls over her shoulder, “Can I have a Margherita with extra cheese?”

As Dorian starts for the kitchen to fulfil the lunch order, I surmise Sue's burp is all the customer feedback we'll get and possibly, all we'll need.

“Forget it,” I tell Moogi. She looks crestfallen and a little guilty. Aliz raises a perfectly winged eyebrow. “What?” I ask, alarm filling me.

“I made a pitcher,” she replies glumly. “The big pitcher.”

The big pitcher is about a gallon of whatever's in it, and I don't believe for one moment it was all scrag-ends from the unloved liqueur bottles. And even if it was, we always pour the scrag-ends into the newly opened bottles. It's called thrift, and I'm good at it, and Moogi's pitcher of sewage water is as far from thrift as is possible.

I point a finger at her. "You've wasted good drink. You'd better sell every drop of that pitcher, or it's coming out of your wages. Understood?" It's an empty threat, but I have to push back once in a while if only to curb my staff's enthusiasm.

Aliz gives Moogi an impossibly classic *told-you-so* look and goes back behind the bar. Moogi's face darkens into her petulant *no-one-understands-or-appreciates-me* look. And I leave with my best *you-better-make-this-good* look. In the kitchen, enjoying her degree of separation, Dorian whistles cheerfully.

Later that evening I pop back. It's my night off, and I'm enjoying it with friends. But it's also Saturday so it's a party night, and I ask them if it's okay to swing by and check with Aliz.

Music pounds out to greet us. The disco lights warp the dancefloor in a kaleidoscope of red, green, and yellow. The place is rammed, but then DJ Wendy House is a floor filler. What draws my attention is the crowd around the bar, three deep in places. I push through to find Moogi reclining butt naked on the counter, shot glasses of Scorpion's Kiss are lined along her body. Aliz can't take the

five euro notes fast enough as punters pay then grab a glass. Between raking it in, Aliz, with help from Esmine, is expertly restocking Moogi's flat stomach, groin, and breasts with precariously balanced shot glasses.

Aliz looks up, sees my stunned face and winks. Business is good, and the pitcher she raises to triumphantly show me is almost empty. From the countertop I get another, lewder wink from Moogi. She is reclined like a Modigliani nude, arms back and totally relaxed. She's loving the attention. Moogi gives me a little smile and gracefully jiggles her breasts. There's a collective cry, and many hands reach for the toppling glasses.

My friend, Mags, slaps me on the back.

"Now, that's want I call branding," she says.

"Last one," Aliz calls and holds the glass aloft. A flurry for fivers greet her.

"That one's for the boss."

Moogi, denuded of drink arises to sit upright on the bar. She has a shot glass in her hand and raises it to me in salute. I take the drink from Aliz, who has reserved one for herself. All three of us—Aliz, Moogi, and I—salute each other and down our shots in one.

It is *vile*. Our faces tell a story that we cannot share with the patrons, but bloody hell. Moogi's days as a mixologist are well and truly over.

15th August

I live in Kampos, the countryside between Skala Eressos, the holiday village by the sea, and Eressos, the main village at the head of the valley, in the mountains. Kampos is a latticework of winding dusty lanes and

dry riverbeds that burble into life in winter when the rains come. It's the heart of the valley, and a luscious Arcadia of green fields and silver olive groves when compared to the rocky slopes of wild thyme and sage brush surrounding it.

My nearest neighbour is Yannis Christodoulopolous. He lives nowhere near me, but our olive groves sit side by side along the dirt path that leads to my small stone house.

I've a late start this morning, which I love as I can take time watering my tomatoes and the vegetable patch. I even have a special mint patch for the mojitos we never stop serving. I love moseying around the garden inspecting this and that for pests and perhaps giving them a Bokashi feed. The first morning chore though, is always the chickens. I let them out of the coop and feed them before my coffee pot hits the stove. Dante, the red rooster, makes sure of it. There's no sleep for anyone once he starts his dawn chorus.

Chores done, I'm sitting on my terrace enjoying my coffee and the comings and goings of the swifts nesting overhead against my bargeboards. I've got the pleasure of reading the two-week-old *Guardian* newspaper that has done the rounds with all my friends. It's my turn now. But I hear Yannis bawling.

I can see him on the lane waving his arms, hat in hand, his big bald head agleam with early morning sun. If I squint into the brash light, I can make out a shadowy lump up ahead of him. It's his donkey, Malakas. I used to think that was the donkey's genuine name until I found out it was a swear word for an idle fellow with too much time (and other

things) in his hands.

“Come here,” Yannis bawls.

Malakas has escaped and is hoofing it up the lane towards me. Did I mention Yannis has a limp? One leg is shorter than the other, a bad mend on a leg broken when he was a youth, he told me, and so his gait is that of a drunken sailor in a Beaufort 10. He has no hope of catching Malakas who, aware of this, is trotting toward me in a spritely, Devil-may-care fashion.

I have two options. Ignore and let the pantomime pass me by or try and help. After all, Yannis is a neighbour, sort of. And Malakas has been part of my landscape for many a summer. When Forgall and I go for our evening stroll, we often take along a squishy carrot or mouldy apple as a supertime treat. Sometimes, Malakas waits patiently by the fence for us and is grateful for the kindness. Other times, he stands aloof, tail swishing, ignoring our mangy offerings. He has a mercurial temperament, and I suspect he’s a bit bi-polar if donkeys were inclined toward such a thing.

This time I pull a couple of Firiki apples from the tree and wander over to the fence between my property and the lane. Firiki apples are small and very sweet. But these are under ripe, not that a wayward donkey will care.

“Here, boy,” I call and Malakas slows. His long ears twitch. “Come have a munch.” I wave the apple suggestively at him and even take a bite myself to release the scent. Firiki blossom is delicious and blows the senses in May, and the flesh of the apples has a lovely smell, too.

It works. Malakas comes over. He’s probably bored and has no destination in mind other than causing

mischief for his master. Malakas likes to prove his superiority over Yannis from time to time. When he's close enough, and his fuzzy white nose nuzzles my palm for more apples, I grab his halter. It's handmade from goatskin and has a natty little fringe to keep the flies out of his eyes. With his kohl dark eyes and long eyelashes, I imagine it makes him look like a harem girl. Yannis made it for him. An act of unrequited love.

Yannis puffs up to reclaim his escapee.

"Thank you," he says in his broken English.

"No bother," I reply in my broken Greek.

My precious free time is almost spent. I go back to the house to shower and dress for work. I live in a single-story stone house with an incline to the land behind it. It's because I'm on the walls of the valley and not down in the flatlands. This means the views are great, but the land is steep, harder to work, and less fertile. It's a compromise I can deal with.

I'm half washing-half steaming myself in scalding hot, solar heated water when a thunderous bellow echoes off the bathroom walls and makes me jump. The noise is both terrifying and deafening. In saving myself from falling, I manage to rip the shower curtain off its rod. The veil rent, I find I'm face to face with Malakas again. His head is rammed through my tiny bathroom window braying for more apples. He really is a malaka.

I turn off the water, wrap a towel around myself, and go out onto my terrace. "Yanni!"

BEES

E.V. Bancroft

Don't wear knickers," Kara's voice coach said. "What?" Kara felt her jaw drop. She hoped she didn't dribble.

"You need to feel vulnerable when you sing. When you're vulnerable you sing with more emotion, and that connects more with the audience."

Her coach was right. Here she was, playing to a packed venue, full of clamouring women. Rumours spread about her lack of underwear. For each song the stage was showered with briefs of all sorts, from thongs to Spanx, including the occasional used pair. *Gross*. Kara played with the knickers provocatively and threw them back out into the audience, ideally for an attractive woman to catch and wear with pride.

This was what Kara lived for. Her set started with a few jazz standards, through Ella and Nina, to numbers by Amy, KD Lang, and Caro Emerald. Her voice flowed over four octaves, like Whitney's she'd once been told, and there was a clarity and richness of texture that oozed like honey.

"Get your kit off," someone shouted from the audience.

Kara shimmied to wolf whistles and twirled the pendant she wore for luck to every show. She blew a

kiss to the audience, still singing as she flirted with them.

Each song built on the last, rising to a crescendo of the last number. Through the energy she conjured, stirring through her chakras and projecting out through her voice, she liked to think that she touched the souls of those present. Emotion scattered from her like a blossom, shedding pollen for bees to catch and make sweet honey.

Her fans came to cry and to listen to love and loss. At the encore, they sang along to her one hit, crooning out of key, and Kara watched them as they stared deep into the eyes of their partners and chanted her lyrics, “Come meet with me.” Except they always substituted “sleep” for “meet.”

“Come to the sports bar for pool and a beer,” Sam, one of her band members said, after they’d escaped back to the hotel.

She didn’t want to be embroiled in their bickering of coupledom. Besides, it reminded her of what she’d only recently lost. Last Saturday, Fi had slipped away during the performance, leaving just a note written in cheap biro on a discarded flyer, saying, “Sorry, Kara. I can’t compete with the fans. I need to look after myself to stay sane. Good luck, love Fi.” At least she’d added a few last kisses to the message.

No partner had been able to cope with the adulation for long. They’d either tired of moving from gig to gig or found themselves locked out of their own bedroom. They were excluded from conversations or had romantic meals interrupted as women threw themselves on Kara, declaring love or

lust. However much Kara tried to extricate herself and keep a separate private space, one determined fan or another would find a way through.

She smiled a practiced smile and shook her head at Sam. "Thanks, but I probably need to meet my fans. They expect me."

Her fellow band members seemed happy. It meant they could play pool and relax without being on parade for once.

After the show, a few of those fans who had no partners discovered where Kara was staying and swarmed around her at the hotel bar. She was sure that each hoped to discover for themselves if the knicker rumours were true, and Kara basked in the adoration a little longer as she accepted their offers of a drink with a clear conscience.

"Hot water, honey, and lemon. Thank you. I need to soothe my throat."

Kara signed programmes and CDs. She smiled through the requisite amount of selfies, although Kara hated the way her nose looked in the photos that were subsequently plastered onto Facebook or Instagram. But the fans seemed to love it.

She sat in the bar, still buzzing from the performance. It had gone well tonight. Her voice had been relaxed, and Sam on the keys hadn't fluffed her cue for the first time in a few shows. The bar was full, and the mirror behind the long bar reflected the faces of joy and hope. The multi-coloured bottles of spirits sparkled with reflected lights, and the rainbow of cocktails were shaken not stirred.

Maybe tonight would be a lucky night. A couple of fans pleaded with her to sing something else, and

as a swell of affirmation broke across the room, Kara was persuaded into an *a capella* version of *Summertime*. When she finished, despite the call of encore from her groupies, Kara would not be coaxed to sing again. “I need to rest my voice.”

Kara looked around at maybe thirty lesbians, vying to get closer to her, capturing every word she spoke, and sidling up to her for a quick pic. Over to her right, standing slightly away from the crowd, Kara noticed a cute, dark-haired, woman gazing at her. As Kara returned her gaze, the woman’s eyebrows flashed, and her eyes widened in a genuine smile. *What a gorgeous smile.* Kara smiled back.

“Ooh, can you sign my shirt?”

Kara allowed herself to be dragged back to the women standing in front of her.

“Loved your set.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it. Who should I sign this for?”

Kara signed, “To Liz from Kara,” and looked across to her left as she handed back the woman’s Sharpie. Close by, a blonde blew her a kiss and smiled. Kara responded in kind. Kara glanced back to the brunette still eyeing her up, then back to the blonde. *Oh, yes. tonight will be a lucky night.*

As Kara signed the next programme and a pair of knickers—clean, thankfully—she wondered who should she choose. The blonde or the brunette? The blonde was beautiful, but there was something about the petite brunette and her dark brown eyes. How typical that there should be two on the same night. Although she was sure she could choose any one of the women here, there was something striking about

those two.

They were staying over in the hotel tonight and wouldn't have to hit the road until early afternoon. A night in a real bed with soft pillows and a late shower. *Bliss.* Kara had noted that there were some Molton Brown Jasmine and Rose beauty products in the bathroom. She could almost smell the sweet, heady scent. She imagined herself stepping into the fluffy white bath robes after a post-coital shower. Now, who would appreciate it more, the blonde or the brunette?

Kara looked up. The brunette had gone. She glanced across to the blonde. She wasn't there either. Then as Kara stared across the room, wearing her fixed smile for yet another photo, she saw them both walking off together, holding hands. *Damn.*

But what could she do? Her fans deserved their fifteen seconds on social media. So she turned her attention back to them, and smiled, and signed. This time when someone asked, she said, yes, she'd love a gin and bitter lemon, and yes, a double would be grand. The drinks continued to flow until the band members came up from playing pool in the sports bar, scooped Kara away from the remaining bees, and poured her into bed.

Kara awoke with a hangover at four in the morning and scribbled down the lyrics, "We're all sippin' the honey but who loves the flower?"

A few months later it became her second hit.

THE LIGHTER

Lise Gold

Emma scanned the audience in the busy bar, twirling her wine around in her glass. The live band that was playing at her favourite venue in Dublin had drawn a huge crowd tonight. They were good, she decided, as she unconsciously tapped her feet to the beat of the music, engulfed with the wonderful Friday feeling that always put her in a good mood. Sian was late again, but then her best friend was always late.

Never mind. She'd found herself a perfect spot at the bar to people-watch, and the abundance of new faces in here tonight made that an interesting pastime. A group of women, dressed in matching pink T-shirts with "Bride Squad" printed on them, looked like they were having a great time. Most of them were beyond intoxicated as they swayed in front of the stage, arms around each other, singing along to *Sweet Caroline*. Emma wondered if the Bride Squad was aware that this was a gay bar, as one of the squad members was giving it everything she could to impress a guy who was clearly not into women. She chuckled as she watched the girl shake her hips before him while smiling seductively through glassy, drunken eyes. The red-haired bride in question wore the same T-shirt, only with

“Bride” printed on it. The left shoulder of her shirt was soaked in beer, and her tiara wedding veil was tilting precariously on her head. Despite the ginger in their ranks, the group somehow didn’t look Irish to her and, as one of the pink-clad girls walked past her, this was confirmed when she heard her yell something that resembled Dutch or German. She wasn’t sure. A vibration in her pocket diverted Emma’s attention to her phone, and she sighed as she saw a message from Sian saying that her flight was delayed and she was still a good three hours away.

“Jesus, Sian.” Emma rolled her eyes.

“Sian late again?” Holly, the bartender, asked her.

“Yup. And of course, she couldn’t let me know earlier because …” Emma narrowed her eyes as she read the long text. “Because she was talking to some girl at the airport and lost track of time.”

“Sian needs a good telling-off, if you ask me,” Holly said matter-of-factly. “One excuse after another, that one. Want a refill?” She pointed to Emma’s glass.

“Sure. Might as well.” Emma shook off her annoyance and smiled. There was no way she was going to sit at home on her own tonight after spending five long days in the office. Living on her own, after her ex had left her a year ago for some student who was ten years her junior, had been depressing and, unsurprisingly, very boring too with no one but her cat to talk to. Although Emma was a good-looking woman and had no problem attracting female attention, none of the women she met seemed to hold her interest long enough for her

to get to know them. Maybe she wasn't ready for a new relationship. Or maybe she just hadn't met the right person. The latter was more likely the case as attractive and available lesbians seemed thin on the ground in Dublin lately. She leaned over the bar and carefully took a sip from her wine glass that Holly had filled all the way to the top in an attempt to be funny. Her eye caught a glimpse of one of the bride squad members who was sitting on a stool at one of the high tables on the other side of the venue, drinking a beer on her own. She seemed happy and relaxed, but she wasn't joining in with the drunken swaying in front of the stage, and she didn't look cross-eyed from the alcohol either. She was also remarkably beautiful. Emma turned on her stool to get a better look at her. The woman was looking at her phone every now and then and talking to one of her spirited friends who was trying to pull her onto the dance floor. She shook her head and smiled, playfully pushing the other woman away. Suddenly, she looked up, as if she could sense Emma's eyes on her. Emma held her gaze for a couple of seconds, then turned back to the bar, her cheeks flushing at getting caught staring.

“You okay?” Holly asked.

Emma nodded, running a hand through her long brown hair. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She gestured towards the bridal party. “Do you know where they’re from?”

“The Netherlands, I think.” Holly arched a brow at her. “But don’t waste your time, they’re straight as a—”

“I know.” Emma cast a fleeting glance at the woman again, only to find that she was looking at her too. The woman’s full lips pulled into a smile, and she gave her

a small nod. She had a cute, slightly pouty mouth, her upper lip curling upwards a little when she smiled. Her cheeks had tiny dimples, and her eyes were friendly, yet curious as she studied Emma. She'd ripped off the sleeves of her pink T-shirt, and the hem was tucked into the front of her jeans as if she'd attempted to turn the ridiculous hen party uniform into something more presentable. If that was the case, she'd certainly succeeded, Emma thought, now staring at her toned arms.

Emma was unable to take her eyes off the gorgeous stranger. Her heart skipped a beat when the woman held up her glass to her. Emma lifted her glass in acknowledgement and smiled, inwardly cursing herself for not having gone home to change after work. But she hadn't seen this coming. How could she have? She hadn't felt this instant attraction in a long time. The kind where she was instinctively drawn to someone's eyes, unable to resist looking into them.

"Well, I guess I was wrong. Go," Holly said, as if reading her thoughts. She put a pint of beer in front of Emma, the same label the woman was drinking. "Go talk to her. She's smoking hot, Emma."

"Thanks." Emma bit her lip as she took the glass, hesitating for a moment. She was just about to get up when she saw the woman walking towards her. She wasn't normally the shy type but right now, she was shaking in her boots. *Fuck, she really is stunning.*

"Is that for me?" the woman asked, holding her gaze as she rested her elbow on the bar next to Emma and turned towards her.

“Yes,” Emma managed to say. “Unless you prefer something else?” She swallowed as she indulged in the dark eyes that were taking her in.

“No, this is great. Thank you.”

Her voice was smooth and pleasant, Emma noticed. She had an accent, as expected, but not very strong.

“I guess it would only be polite to get you a drink too.”

She sounded calm and confident, as if she already knew she had Emma under her spell. Which, to be fair, she was right to think. The woman put down her empty pint glass and picked up the full one.

“I’m good for now,” Emma said, gesturing to her brimming wine glass. “I’m Emma.” She held out her hand. The grip that enveloped her hand was strong, and Emma shivered at the contact. *Wow.* Her body seemed to react in extreme ways to this stranger.

“Nanette. But you can call me Net. It’s very nice to meet you, Emma.” She held Emma’s hand until there was no excuse to hold it any longer.

“Likewise.” Emma paused, buying some time by clearing her throat. “Are you having a good time? I see you’ve got quite the squad over there.” She articulated the word *squad*, gently teasing Net about her T-shirt.

Net rolled her eyes and laughed. “My sister is getting married. Her friends made me wear this.” She pulled at her shirt and grimaced.

“Don’t apologise.” Emma arched an eyebrow, feeling a bit braver. “It looks good on you.” She glanced over at Net’s friends in an attempt to avoid staring at her breasts. “Why did you guys come to this place? We don’t often get hen parties in here.”

“I bet you don’t.” Net leaned in and raised her voice

a little as the fiddles in the band started playing faster and louder, overtaking the guitar as they switched to traditional Irish folk music. “I lived in Dublin for three months, so I know my way around. My sister wanted a hen weekend here, and she asked me to pick a couple of bars with live music. So, I chose this one too for somewhat selfish reasons. It’s one of my favourites.”

“I think your sister’s friend may not realise this is a gay bar,” Emma remarked, glancing at the girl who was still on a mission to impress the guy who could twerk better than her.

Net grinned. “I know. I haven’t told them yet, but we’ve been out since midday, and by the time we came here, they were already so drunk that I didn’t think they would care either way.”

“But you look sober for someone who’s been out drinking all day.” Emma allowed herself to look into Net’s eyes for a brief moment, but the dark depths were so intense that she had to look away as she felt her cheeks flush again.

“Yeah well, I’m not much of a binge drinker.” Net winked and nodded towards her sister, who was now attempting to keep up with a couple of guys who were doing an Irish jig. “Unlike some.”

“So, you liked coming here when you lived in Dublin?” Emma asked.

“Yes. This is my kind of place.” Net hesitated. “And if that was your subtle way of asking me if I’m into women, then the answer is yes.” She shot Emma a flirty smile, her dimples deepening.

Emma grinned sheepishly. “Okay...I guess that’s what I was trying to ask. Where are you from?”

“Amsterdam.”

“Nice. I’ve been there a couple of times. It’s a beautiful city.”

“It is. Wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.” Net cocked her head. “What about you? You look a bit stylish for a local, if you don’t mind me saying. It’s a good thing, don’t get me wrong,” she added. “But you stand out from the casual crowd. That sharp black suit and those sexy heels...”

“I came straight from work,” Emma said, blushing at the compliment. “I don’t usually dress like this on my down time, but I had a meeting, and I was rushing to meet my friend here who then messaged me that she was going to be three hours late.”

“So, what do you do for a living that necessitates wearing sexy suits?” Net inched even closer now, leaning into Emma’s ear as they talked.

Emma shivered at the sensation of Net’s hot breath against her ear. She felt an urge to turn her face towards Net and kiss her right there and then, and she had a feeling that Net wouldn’t mind that at all. “I’m in PR,” she said, composing herself instead. “I consult for big brands.”

“Fancy.” Net looked her up and down again. “PR huh? Yeah, I can see that.”

Emma arched a brow. “Really? I didn’t think it was that obvious. What do you do, then?”

“I’m an event organizer.” Net laughed. “No weddings, it’s mainly music related. Festivals and that kind of stuff.”

“Sounds interesting. Tell me more.” Emma could picture Net backstage, directing people and totally in control. She had quite the presence, with her tall,

slender build and her intense stare.

“I’d rather talk about you,” Net said. “You intrigue me, Emma.”

She fell silent, letting her words linger between them. Emma’s breath quickened as their eyes locked, complete and utter desire running through her veins.

“I’d be happy to continue this conversation but it’s a bit loud in here. Do you smoke? We could go outside...” Net suggested.

“Sure,” Emma stammered. The thought of being in a quieter place with Net was getting her all hot and bothered. “There’s a beer garden in the back... But you know that of course, since you’ve been here before.” *What is wrong with me? Why can’t I just be smart and funny?* Normally, words came easy, even when talking to women she liked. But not tonight. Not with Net.

Net nodded and smiled. “Let me get you a drink first.”

She ordered another wine for Emma, who chuckled and turned her face away when Holly gave her an encouraging you’ve-got-this look. To her embarrassment, Net had seen the exchange, and grinned.

“Is she your friend?”

“Yeah. Holly’s not exactly a master of subtlety either, is she?” Goosebumps appeared on Emma’s arms when she felt Net’s arm slowly wrap around her waist as they waited for her drink. Her hand snuck around the front, resting just above her hipbone. She held her breath and kept her gaze fixed on the bar, afraid Net would see the arousal in her

eyes if she looked her way.

"No, she's not," Net said, licking her lips with an amused smile. She paid Holly and took the drink. "Keep the change," she said, before turning to Emma. "Coming?"

She walked ahead through the heavy doors that led outside and into the courtyard, where round pub tables were scattered across the lawn, protected from the rain and chill by big parasols and heaters. It was busy, but they found a free bench in the back, away from the crowd. Net swung one leg over to the other side of the bench as she sat down, and Emma did the same, coming face to face with her.

"I prefer facing people when I talk to them," Net said, keeping her eyes fixed on Emma. "Especially when the company is as beautiful as you."

At that moment Emma wished the ground could have swallowed her up as she heard the sound of the giggle that escaped her mouth, but she couldn't stop smiling. *Wow, this woman is direct.* And she liked direct. She felt the heat of Net's body as their legs touched, and she couldn't help but wonder what that warm body would feel like on top of her. What Net's mouth would feel like, pressed against hers and her hands... Emma shook her head. *Jesus, Emma. Stop this. Don't get carried away now.* Net produced two cigarettes from a packet in the back pocket of her jeans and handed one to her. Then she searched her pockets for a lighter.

"I have a light," Emma said, opening her handbag. She found her silver Zippo in the side compartment and held it out for Net, who enclosed a hand around Emma's and stared down at the lighter while she lit

her cigarette. When Emma was about to retract her hand, Net held on to her wrist with a firm grip, still studying the silver Zippo as she removed the cigarette from her mouth with her other hand, exhaling a cloud of smoke in between them.

“That’s mine,” she said in a whisper, confusion written all over her face. She pulled it in to take a closer look, dragging Emma’s hand along with it.

“What do you mean?” Emma asked, astounded at what their closeness was doing to her body. She felt so flustered that she couldn’t grasp what Net was trying to tell her.

“That’s mine,” Net said again. “That’s my lighter.”

Emma frowned, as she looked down at the Zippo with the adorned silverwork, etched with an intricate Celtic pattern. “I don’t think so. I’ve had it for a while, ever since I went to Gay Pride in...in Amsterdam last year.” She looked up at Net and bit her lip. “I found it under a bench.”

Net looked up at her. “N.L.V. My initials. Nanette Laura Veermans. They’re engraved underneath. Check it.”

A shiver ran down Emma’s spine. She didn’t need to check, she’d seen the initials many times, wondering who the beautiful, personalized Zippo had belonged to.

“It really is yours,” she whispered, turning it upside down. “Fuck...this is weird.” She handed it to Net.

“Weird is an understatement.” Net ran a finger over the silverwork, kissed it, and put it in her back pocket. “My best friend gave it to me for my

twentieth birthday. The design is a Celtic love knot, apparently. She was quite spiritual back then, said it would make me lucky in love. I've had it for ten years, and then I lost it." She let out a sigh. "It's like it went off to find you..." She scooted closer, her face only inches away from Emma's as she trailed a finger over her cheek and down her neck. "What are the odds, huh?"

Emma nodded slowly, all too aware of Net's touch and her lips so close to hers. They pulled into a smile, mirroring Emma's. "It seems like we were meant to meet tonight," she whispered as she leaned in a little more, unconsciously licking her lips. She felt Net's breath on them, warm and inviting. She felt her desire too, like a magnetic force, pulling her in. The noise around them seemed to disappear, and all she could hear was her own heartbeat, fast and furious. Emma wasn't sure who started the kiss, but before she could process what was happening, her mouth was exploring Net's, kissing her softly before they parted their lips. She moaned, consumed with arousal when she felt Net's tongue playing with hers. *Oh my God...* She was pretty sure she'd never felt this while kissing someone before. Net's hands made their way into her hair, weaving her fingers through her brown locks as she deepened their kiss. Emma wrapped her arms around Net's neck, desperate for more contact. Without thinking, she lifted her legs over Net's thighs, giving in to her feverish need. A moan escaped Net's mouth too now, just before she pulled out of the kiss. She stared at Emma, as if she'd seen a ghost, her breath ragged, and her eyes dark.

"Fuck..." she said in a whisper, her hands still in

Emma's hair. "Have you ever felt this before?"

"No." Emma shook her head slowly, moving away from her, just a little. Not because she didn't want to be close to her, but because she feared what would happen if she didn't move away. The attraction was alarming, and she seemed to have lost all control over her body, which was screaming out for Net now that she'd had a taste of her. She closed her eyes and thought for a moment, then turned her gaze back to Net. "I don't know what this means," she said. "But I know it means something. And if you don't come home with me right now, we might never find out." She stood up and held out her hand.

BELIEVE ME

AJ Mason

Travelling through the inky silence between the outer planets of the solar system, the probe's lights flickered. It was comfortably sustained by the solar panels that clad its body, feeding hungrily on the dwindling light of the sun behind it. Not that it needed a great deal of power. Instead it used the winds of invisible energy to fill its wafer-thin sails, riding the solar currents and letting them propel it further out toward deep space. Its sensors pointed permanently forward, eager to explore. They fed constant information to its computers which, having analysed the data from them, sent the results back to its home planet in regular bursts of radio waves.

The probe's makers were proud of their creation. Its technologies were the pinnacle of astronomical engineering. They'd even adorned it with flags and engravings which boasted to the universe that this was the case. So, they would have surely been both surprised and disappointed to discover that its highly advanced sensor arrays had not picked up any sign of the huge object that was travelling at speed toward it. It made no attempt to avoid the probe and when they collided, the probe made as much impact on its dark surface as a fly hitting the windscreen of a car.

“Damn!” Jac recoiled at the yellowy brown smear now obscuring her view of the road. Impatiently jamming her finger against the end of the steering column, she tried to use the Landrover’s antiquated screen wash to get rid of it, but the pathetic fountain of water that emerged, diluted and spread it further across the glass.

Still, at least she was on the final stretch now. There were only a few miles of Welsh mountain roads to go, after what had turned out to be a hellish journey from London. The traffic on the M25 had been predictably bad, but she hadn’t counted on the roadworks all the way down the motorway to Wales. Her eyes were sore from having to squint into the setting sun, her back was aching, and she could have done with a comfort stop about two hours ago. However, she hadn’t been left with much choice.

“You’ve just got to come straight away, Jac. It’s really important!”

Megan’s soft welsh lilt, stronger than ever after two weeks back in her native hills, hadn’t been able to mask the urgency. Jac had spent a fruitless thirty minutes trying to prise out of her what the emergency was, but Megan had refused to say anything on the phone.

“Cariad, you don’t know who’s listening.”

“Meg, do you honestly think GCHQ are remotely interested in our conversations? Because if they are, then that one we had the other night should definitely stay an official secret.” Jac was well used

to Meg's paranoia about the security services, blaming it on a steady diet of X-Files and too much time spent at Cambridge studying astrophysics.

"If Jacqueline, if you read reliable news sources and not just the fake news that pops up in your Facebook feed, you would know that you're living in one of the most heavily monitored countries in the world. Besides, their supercomputers look for keywords and phrases, and I doubt that pink vibrator is on that list."

They'd both giggled for a bit at that, but Jac knew the only way she was going to find out any more was to do as she was told and drive to Wales. Truth be told, she didn't need much persuasion. It had been a long two weeks without Meg, and she was due to drive up on the weekend anyway. Meg had wanted some quality time on her latest project, and Jac couldn't get the time off work at her publishing company. They talked every night, but she had missed their cuddles more and more as the days had gone by. So, she'd told her boss she wasn't feeling well and got on the road.

The last of the sunset was dipping behind the mountains as she approached the turn-off for the cottage. Cotton wool clouds the colour of candy floss decorated the sky above and promised more fine weather over the weekend. She switched on the lights, and the beams lit up a startled rabbit by the side of the road, its eyes gleaming brightly before it leapt for the cover of the bushes. She strained to see the turn-off, looking for the stretch of broken fence and the abandoned rusting bicycle frame that marked it.

Turning up the track, she was pleased she drove an old Landrover. Its suspension might make driving on

motorways hell, but it took the rutted track in its stride. Swinging into the yard, she saw the cottage for the first time. It was dwarfed by the huge aerial mast erected behind it. Meg had spent all her savings buying the place, because it was the perfect place to put such a mast up. Jac thought it was a bit of an eyesore, but it was so remote here that there was no one to offend.

The cottage curtains were slightly open, and soft yellowy light from within dimly illuminated the yard. Meg came running out of the cottage. Yanking open the door, she clambered up onto the footplate.

“You came!”

Meg wrapped her arms around Jac and planted an enthusiastic kiss on her cheek.

“Said I was going to, didn’t I?” Jac smiled at the welcome. She kissed Meg and held her for a moment, breathing her in. “I’ve missed you so much.” When Meg grinned back, Jac fell in love with her all over again like she always did each time they met. “Hey, gorgeous girl, why don’t you get the kettle on, and I’ll get my bag.”

Meg didn’t need asking twice and scurried back into the cottage.

Jac uncurled from the seat and lowered herself down to the ground with a groan. The heat from the car was quickly swept away by the cool mountain air, and she shivered, ruining her choice of a thin T-shirt. Grabbing the bag, she made quickly for the cottage door and its welcome promise of warmth.

She was surprised to find that Meg wasn’t in the kitchen. There was no sign of a boiling kettle, and the range was nearly out. Jac chuckled. Predictably,

somewhere between car and cottage, Meg's busy mind had probably wandered. Still, letting the range go out was akin to heresy since it supplied all the hot water and heating. The log basket was still half full, and Jac carefully fed the fire, mindful that it needed to be nourished not suffocated. Adjusting the damper slightly to encourage it back into life, she grabbed the old kettle, filled it up, and plonked it on the hob.

Now she just needed to find her distracted genius of a girlfriend. She wandered back down the hallway, saw the dim light coming from the living room, and pushed opened the door. Meg was sat hunched over her computer, scanning the screen intensely. The room looked like a bomb had hit it. The sofa was covered with books and papers, and so was most of the floor.

“Hey, beautiful. Thought I was getting a cuppa?” Jac kept her tone light, but Meg still jumped a little and looked at her like a child caught stealing from the biscuit jar.

“Oh, sorry, Cariad. I was going to, and then I remembered something...” Her voice faded and she started turning back to the screen.

“Meg.” Jac couldn’t help laughing.

Meg turned again, looked at Jac, and her head tipped to one side. “Sorry?”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what you dragged me up here for? I do love you, but I’ve been driving for six hours. An explanation would be great.”

Meg smiled and looked a little sheepish. She grabbed the large pile of paper from the top of the stool next to the desk. After looking around, she dumped it unceremoniously on the floor and patted the seat. Navigating carefully between small towers of

precariously leaning books, Jac perched obediently on the stool and waited.

Meg chewed her lip for a moment and then pointed at the screen. “Do you see that?”

Jac looked at the screen, which was displaying lines of digits and characters constantly scrolling down against a black background. She thought about making a quip, but the intense expression on Meg’s face dissuaded her. “Sorry, Meg. What exactly am I looking at?”

“That’s data coming in from the radio telescope array that I’m working on.”

“Brilliant, Meg. Well done.” Jac was still completely in the dark, but she guessed from Meg’s expression that it was something important. Meg rolled her eyes and took her glasses off. She polished them on a corner of her T-shirt. Jac noted the dark circles around her eyes, and instinctively reached for Meg’s face, but Meg gently batted her hand away and put her glasses back on.

“Sometimes, Jac, I forget how little you know.”

“Wow, cheers. I didn’t realise that I needed a certificate from MENSA to be your girlfriend.” Jac pursed her lips and rolled her own eyes in mock outrage.

“I didn’t mean that, and you know it. You know I love you.” Meg put her hand over Jac’s and squeezed it. “I haven’t had much sleep the last couple of days.”

“I can see that. Tell you what, why don’t I find the loo and grab that coffee? Then you can tell me all about it.”

Five minutes later they were both back by the

computer, and Jac was holding a steaming cup of coffee. Meg had rustled up a packet of biscuits from somewhere, and Jac had already snaffled a couple of them.

“So, where were we? You were going to explain what that data meant.”

“Well, you remember my friend, Alex?”

Jac nodded. Alex, the tall, tanned, and unbelievably toned Australian who just happened to be a mathematical genius was hard to forget. She and Meg had only been a few months into their relationship when Alex had come to London for a conference. Jac had felt so threatened that she had actually gone to an exercise class at her local sports centre. Twice.

“Yeah, I remember her. I thought she was still in Australia?”

Meg laughed. “You know, you’re so transparent Jac. Yes, she’s safely in Australia. We’ve been working on this project together, enhancing the signals coming in from an array of telescopes around the globe. It’s been great fun, but then...” Her face fell.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Three days ago, a probe that we’ve been tracking to test our new algorithms...well, it disappeared.” Meg stared down at her feet.

“What do you mean, disappeared?”

Meg looked up again, frowning. “I mean disappeared. Vanished. It was one of the new NASA probes, kind of a follow up to Voyager. You probably saw it in the news.”

Jac did vaguely remember something on her Facebook feed. It had all looked way too technical and scientific, and she’d scrolled on. She was more of a

funny cat video girl. She nodded her head though and maintained a serious expression, and that seemed to satisfy Meg.

“It was doing really well. We last saw it about two-hundred million miles beyond Neptune. Then it vanished.” Meg chewed her lip.

“So, what’s the mystery? It probably just got hit by an asteroid or something. Bad luck, but nothing more.” Jac yawned and took a big slurp of the coffee. She needed it. The journey was starting to catch up with her.

“No, that’s the thing, Jac. There are no asteroids out in that area, and they planned its route to avoid that sort of collision.”

“Okay, so its engines exploded.”

“No engines. Solar power only.”

Jac stifled another yawn. “Look, I don’t understand, Meg. Something about that probe made you drag me all the way from Shoreditch. So what is it?”

“Alex has disappeared too.”

“What?” Jac’s fatigue retreated and was replaced by a chill down her spine. “Disappeared how?”

“I’ve had no replies to my emails, and she isn’t answering her phone.”

Meg looked so forlorn that Jac wondered again at her relationship with Alex. She pushed that thought away again and refocused. “What do you *think* has happened to her?”

“I don’t know, Jac. Honestly, I don’t. All I know is that after the last adjustment to the array, she got all excited and said that she was going to contact her friends at NASA. That was the last I heard from her,

and it's been twenty-four hours now. I think they've got her."

Oh, that was it. Meg had obviously convinced herself that the *Men in Black* were involved. Jac could think of a few hundred other explanations, but she knew from experience she had to tread carefully.

"Well, maybe she's fallen ill, or maybe she's just catching up on her sleep. It sounds like you've both been working really hard. To be honest, lovely, you look like you should get some sleep too." She looked hopefully at Meg but saw that her words had fallen on stony ground.

"I don't think so...and anyway there's the news thing as well."

"What news thing?" Jac's head was starting to spin.

"Well, it's more a lack of news really. NASA just lost their star probe. It cost billions of dollars, and there hasn't been anything on the news about it. You see, it all fits."

"Fits?" Jac shook her head, her confusion complete. This was the problem when Meg got immersed in one of her conspiracy ideas. It quickly turned into a morass of information. Jac had listened to more theories about the Grassy Knoll than she thought she'd ever need to over the last two years. She knew the signs well. The sooner they talked it out, the sooner they could have a proper snuggle under the duvet. She quickly finished her coffee and put the mug down.

"So, you think it was the Russians? I've always thought that Putin looks like the baddy out of a Bond movie. Do you think they took it out with a laser or something? Like you thought with JFK?"

"What? No, it isn't the Russians. They're part of this

project actually, along with the Chinese. Been super helpful, though Alex kept them out of the loop with this change to the code. Anyway, they obviously don't know yet, or they would've done something."

"Then what are you suggesting?" Jac looked at Meg. She had a strangely exultant air about her now, the mad glow of someone holding onto a great secret. Jac realised with a sinking heart that she knew what it might be. "Oh, you're joking, right? Are you seriously trying to tell me that little green men in a flying saucer zapped your probe with their ray gun?"

Meg smiled and grinned. "See, I knew you'd understand. I mean, we probably aren't talking green men with ray guns but certainly some kind of alien life."

Jac held back her laughter. "Meg, if there was an alien ship out there, surely the whole world would be talking about it? You were the one who told me there are thousands of people out there with telescopes and things. It'd be all over social media by now." She thought it was a winning argument. Meg was the first to say that secrets were almost impossible to keep now, because everyone had a camera on their phone.

Unfortunately, Meg was still looking triumphant. "That's why they've taken Alex. Don't you see? That change she made to the algorithm, it enabled our telescope to spot it." She pointed at the screen. "That's what I was trying to show you."

"But all I can see are numbers and hieroglyphics, Meg. None of it means anything to me. How do *you* know it means anything?"

“Because it wasn’t there before we made the change. Look.” Meg put another screen up next to the first.

Though it still didn’t make any sense to her, when Jac squinted at it closely, she thought she could see a bit of a difference in the lines of data. “I don’t know, Meg. How do you know that it isn’t just a bug?”

“We didn’t at first, but we kept on testing it. And we couldn’t see anything else wrong. Basically, something was out there that hadn’t been there before...something big.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s an alien ship though, does it? I mean, you get a few extra squiggles on a screen, your bestie falls asleep somewhere in Australia, and suddenly E.T. is out there? You have to admit, it all sounds a bit far-fetched.” Jac stood up, stretched her back, and yawned. This evening wasn’t turning out how she hoped after a six-hour drive. She was immensely proud of her girlfriend’s high IQ of over a hundred and fifty or over, but tonight it just was a little too much to bear.

“Jac, you have to believe me.” Meg banged her fist on the desk and dislodging more papers, which fell to the ground. “We’ve picked something up on the array, something big enough to destroy that probe but nobody else can see it. Alex’s code did something that made it visible. That’s why they’ve taken her.”

“Well, maybe it’s a...comet, or one of those exoplasm moons you were telling me about.”

“Everyone can see comets!” Meg threw her hands up. “And it’s exo-planet, which means a planet outside our solar system.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the astrophysics whiz, and I just edit books, remember? So, again, why does it have to

be an alien ship?"

"Because it's moving, Jac."

"What do you mean, it's moving?"

"I've been watching the data from the array for hours now. It's moving toward us, and it's moving fast."

Jac shook her head. This was pretty surreal, even for Meg. Looking down at the desk she saw a well-thumbed copy of War of the Worlds, half hidden by the Journal of Astrophysics and Astronomy. Meg's favourite mug, with Snoopy wearing an elf hat, was perched on the journal. Somehow the mess summed up the girl that Jac had fallen head over heels for and that she still loved with all her heart. She knelt down in front of Meg, who looked like she was about to cry with frustration. "Listen, gorgeous. It's not that I don't believe you. I do believe you've found something. It's just that I don't know what you've found, and I don't think you really do either. You'll feel a lot better when you've got some sleep. You'll be able to make better sense of this data. Alex will probably pop up again as if nothing has happened, and then all this will get sorted out."

She wrapped her arms around Meg and rubbed her back gently for a while. Meg's shoulders started to relax, and she felt her soft breath grow steadier. Sitting back, Jac smiled at Meg, and was relieved when she was rewarded with one in return. The fatigue of the drive was beginning to envelope her again, and Jac got to her feet. "I'm going to go outside and get some fresh air before bed. Are you going to join me? It's a lovely night. It might help clear your head a bit."

“Do you mind if I don’t? I really need to check something.” Meg looked at her.

Jac did mind, but she loved Meg too much to argue anymore. “Okay, but just another half hour, then you owe me a snuggle under the duvet. Deal?”

Meg grinned. “Deal!”

Jac grabbed a padded jacket before walking out to her car again. The wind had almost died and had been replaced with an eerie stillness. It really was beautiful up here. The air was so clean, and she never slept as well when they were back in the dirty bustle of London. Not for the first time, she wished that they could move up here permanently. Meg would certainly do so tomorrow, but there was no work round here for Jac. She had to stay in London for now.

Looking across the valley she could see the lights twinkling up at Ty Rhaeadr across the valley, the nearest farm to the cottage. They had a phone mast on their land that provided the connectivity that Meg needed, and they also made the most wonderful cheese from their own cows. What breeze was left carried the sound of one of the farm dogs barking. It’d probably sensed a fox sniffing hopefully around the hen houses.

Hearing the dog helped ground her again. The normality of it came as a relief, and the tension started to flow from her body. For a moment there she’d almost got sucked in by Meg’s enthusiasm. Something about that data, inching implacably down the screen, made it almost plausible. It wasn’t hard, even for her, to react to the mysterious pull of all those strange signals coming from the stars. For someone like Meg, whose mind constantly questioned everything, it would be impossible to resist. Jac made up her mind to have

a few words with Alex when she finally appeared. That woman had left her girlfriend in bits at this end. It wasn't funny.

The moon was high and bright in the clear sky. There was no light pollution up here, and the perfectly round mass of rocks cast long shadows across the yard. As usual Jac amused herself by tracing out the face of the man in the moon. She'd always loved that old movie where the rocket got stuck in his eye. It suddenly occurred to her that it might be good to see if there were any news reports now about that probe thing. If she found something, it would help relax Meg. She rummaged around for her phone and tugged it from her pocket.

She was just putting in her code when something caught her eye. A deep darkness inching across the yard, blotting out the moon's shadows. She looked up and saw the moon slowly disappearing as something huge and angular moved in front of it.

She heard Meg shouting triumphantly from the cottage. "I told you! I knew something was out there."

Jac stood, staring up at the sky, and finally believed.

TURNING POINT

Jeannie Levig

Well, they'd made up, Nicole supposes. After all, Kristine is asleep in Nicole's bed in the tiny room at the back of the house. Doesn't that always mean things are good again?

Nicole takes a swallow of her first cup of decaf in months. The summers here are too hot for coffee, so she eagerly awaits the first chilly fall morning each year. She sighs, trying to find the contentment she should be feeling and leans against the jamb of her open front door. She likes standing there first thing in the morning when her mind is fresh and old memories are free to drift from its dark depths like black smoke curling upward from burning garbage to dissipate into the bright blue sky.

There's so much garbage in her mind, old and rotting, stuffed way in the back, crammed into tight cracks and crevices. Wherever it can fit. The garbage she can't let go of once and for all...that's what always causes the fights. She's come close a number of times, myriad times it seems. She keeps her appointments with Ali Abbott. She calls her that in her mind, because she likes the way it rolls around her brain. And sometimes she tries to say it out loud three times really fast to feel it get tangled in her tongue like *toy boat, toy boat, toy boat*. It

makes her laugh. But in person, she calls her either Dr. Abbott or simply Ali, given the number of years she's been seeing her.

And after an appointment, her mind is clear, clean of garbage, and rot, and memories. She's free of guilt until, once again, she isn't.

Movement from the corner of her eye catches her attention. A figure in dark clothing shuffles along the sidewalk at the end of the street. Nicole doesn't react, at least not outwardly. She doesn't shift to look directly. She takes another drink of coffee then focuses on the small tuxedo cat in the window of the house across the way. She isn't prepared for an encounter this morning, and yet, she isn't surprised.

Kristine's arms slip around her waist from behind, and her warm breath caresses Nicole's bare nape.

Tension she hasn't realized she's holding flees her body, and she settles into the embrace.

"Come back to bed," Kristine whispers.

Her lips are soft against Nicole's ear. The pleasure promised in those four little words stirs arousal between Nicole's thighs, not embers reignited from the previous night, but a brand new heat sparking into flame. The cushion of Kristine's full breasts against Nicole's back pulls a soft moan from deep within. But not *just* from desire. She's missed Kristine so much. The fights have become more frequent since Kristine's big announcement two months earlier.

Nicole hates it when they fight. But *they* don't really fight. It's more like Nicole fights and Kristine waits patiently for her to finish. Sometimes, it's only

a matter of an hour. Sometimes it's weeks. Kristine understands, though. She knows Nicole, knows why she hasn't left this shitty little house in this crappy, run-down neighborhood, even though she could afford to live many other places. She knows why she won't move in with Kristine, even though they've been together for four years, and Kristine has made it clear Nicole can show up with her stuff at any time. She knows what Nicole needs and what she can't handle, and she gives her the former and never pushes for the latter. She loves Nicole, and Nicole knows it. She feels it. And yet...

Instead of answering Kristine's request, Nicole shifts in the embrace and drapes her arm around Kristine's shoulders. She rests her back against the doorjamb and pulls Kristine close against her. She nuzzles her silky, salt-and-pepper hair and kisses her temple.

Kristine caresses Nicole's hand that's holding the coffee, then slips the mug from her grasp and takes a sip. She lets out a quiet hum and snuggles into her. "That's good."

The darkly clad figure down the street has reached the first trash bin rolled out to the curb for pickup. She has a cart.

"Isn't that Mr. Cronelli?" Kristine asks, obviously having spotted the cat. "What's he doing in someone else's house?"

"I think he likes the food better over there." Nicole watches as the woman opens the lid of the bin and starts rummaging through the Watson's refuse. "He still comes to visit, though. I must be better at head scratching." She slides her fingers up into Kristine's hair and begins a gentle massage of her scalp.

Kristine tips her head into the touch and closes her eyes. "Mmm. You're the best." A slight smile plays at the corners of her mouth.

In her mind, Nicole swims through the flotsam that's broken free and is floating loose. She finds the memory of those supple lips all over her body, Kristine's deliciously skilled tongue bringing her to orgasm time after time. When they make love, she takes everything from Nicole, and yet gives so much at the same time. Nicole's body responds anew, and she leans in and kisses Kristine long and deep. Kristine turns and presses fully against her, tightening her embrace around Nicole's waist. Kristine's other arm, coffee cup still in hand, rests on Nicole's shoulder. She sucks Nicole's lower lip and moves against her.

Nicole runs her hands possessively over Kristine's satin-covered backside beneath the over-sized T-shirt from Nicole's closet, then up underneath the hem, and along the soft, bare skin of Kristine's sides. Kristine releases a needy whimper when Nicole almost reaches her breasts but doesn't touch them. She breaks the kiss and trails her mouth along Nicole's jaw, then down her neck, lightly nipping and sucking. Her skin is heated under Nicole's hands, her hips moving almost imperceptibly but obvious in her quest for more.

Nicole feels it too, the desperate need that burns between them. It's become who they are, and yet they're so much more. They *are* that lust, that need that always simmers just beneath the surface. And they're also the walks along the river, the morning conversations about life's meaning, God, and evil

in the world, the confided secrets and shared ice cream sundaes and cups of coffee. At parties and friends' barbecues, they're the single entity of Nicole and Kristine, once known as two individuals. And they're the fights, and the make-up sex, and the love that holds it all together.

"If you keep that up, we're going to scandalize Mr. Cronelli," Kristine whispers. "Not to mention any of your neighbors who are early risers."

It's only then Nicole realizes where her hands have found their way to, where her thigh is pressing. She thinks of the tiny room at the back of the house, the unmade bed, the rumpled bedding. That's where they need to be. But they can't go back there yet. Nicole has to tell Kristine before they can make love again.

Kristine isn't making it easy, not deliberately, of course. Her mouth, though...It's so gentle and demanding at the same time. She sucks hard at the pulse point of Nicole's neck, while her tongue flicks oh-so-lightly over the very same spot. The dual sensations drive Nicole wild, threatening to distract her from what needs to be said. She leans her head back against the jamb, giving Kristine more access. She has to say it before she can't. She gasps at Kristine's warm touch beneath her shirt at the small of her back. She holds in a moan and forces out words instead. "I have to make an appointment today," she says.

Kristine responds with only the slightest hesitation, more of a flinch. "Okay," she says, then her mouth is busy again.

But Nicole knows Kristine understands. And she's done what she needed to do. She's told her. They can go back to bed. She tightens her arms around Kristine

and coaxes her inside.

Their bodies remain pressed together, Kristine's mouth still on Nicole's neck.

Nicole kicks at the door, and just before it slams shut, she glimpses the woman in dark clothes, now at the bin only two doors down.

Nicole sits across from Ali Abbott, taking in her customary business suit and crisp white blouse. Today's skirt and jacket are heather gray. Ali Abbott only wears gray or beige. Nicole likes the gray better. It brings out the silvery shimmer of Ali Abbott's collar-length hair. *Ali Abbott, Ali Abbott, Ali Abbott.* The name sing-songs in her head. She wants to smile. There's something far more important than playing games in her mind, though. But the topic feels so big.

She's been here for fifteen minutes and hasn't managed to say a word. She'll have to soon if she wants anything from the appointment—the fifty-minute hour and all. But Ali won't make her talk. She never does. It's one of the things Nicole has liked about her from the start.

Their first five appointments together almost a decade ago had been completely silent. Nicole had paced the office or sat staring at the lamp in the corner, a different one than the one there today. Ali had only waited, equally silent and suspiciously patient.

Nicole hadn't yet met Kristine, so she'd never experienced such patience before. Most people

in her life, especially therapists and girlfriends, had always pushed her to talk about her past and the things from it that still lingered. Ali had taught her things like, “You can’t talk about something until you’re ready,” and “When you’re patient with yourself, you’ll find others who are patient with you as well.” And now she has both Ali and Kristine. But now isn’t the time to be patient with herself. Time’s running out. She has to make a decision, and she wants it to be a new one.

She stands and crosses to the window. She stares out at the familiar scene. It’s comforting, gazing at the same lush landscaping, the same winding path that patients walk, the same gated opening in the hedge across the grounds that leads into the Zen garden. That’s the problem though, isn’t it? The familiarity. The sameness. But not simply here. *All* the sameness in her life. It’s all been the same for too long, and so many times, she’s chosen that sameness over a new start.

But here’s Kristine, someone so different who really understands, someone who loves her just as she is. Yet, even with the differences, Nicole is at that same moment she’s faced with every other lover. That moment when it’s time to move forward, past the sameness. And this time, it’s Kristine, the one *she* has fallen in love with.

“She’s back,” Nicole says, her voice barely audible. “Yes,” Ali says just as quietly.

Nicole waits.

Silence.

“She was walking down the street,” she says voluntarily before the question is asked. “Going through the trash bins like she does.”

“And?”

Nicole knows this question, too. She knows all the questions. More sameness. “And I feel irritated.” No, this time it’s stronger. “I’m mad. I wanted her to be gone.”

No response. But Nicole hears it in her head. Ali’s tone is soft, yet carries the assurance Nicole has grown to count on. “I know,” Nicole says. “She isn’t the one who needs to leave.”

“Yes,” Ali says.

Nicole chews her lower lip as she watches someone moving along the path. It isn’t the woman in dark clothing. “Kristine and I made up.”

“Did you make love? Or did you fuck?”

Ali says fuck dispassionately. It’s Nicole’s word, not hers. Nicole has only learned to make love recently. Before Kristine, and even *with* Kristine for the first couple of years, she only fucked. “I made love to her.”

“Who initiated the reconciliation?”

“I called her,” Nicole says.

“Why?” There’s something odd in Ali’s voice. “What changed since the last time you saw her and you fought?”

Nicole thinks back over the nineteen days they’d spent apart, her conflicted feelings, the uncertainty of whether she could return to her life being a place where Kristine isn’t. She’d been surprised to conclude that she could, but she doesn’t want to. She’s afraid to say it out loud though. Once something is said, it’s a presence that has to be dealt with. She inhales a steady breath. “I don’t want her to go without me,” she blurts.

Despite the many silences that have stretched between them over the years, the one that follows her outburst tugs at Nicole like a needy child until she turns to look at Ali Abbott.

Ali is smiling. “That’s the first time you’ve ever said that. Even about Kristine.”

Anxiety wriggles its way up Nicole’s spine, tightening every muscle in her back and neck. “No, it isn’t. There have been a lot of times I’ve said I didn’t want someone to go. Even Kristine.”

Ali leans forward in her chair. “But you’ve never said you don’t want someone to go *without you*, the implication being that you’re considering going with her when she moves. Are you?”

Nicole’s heartbeat quickens, and her hands become clammy.

“Relax,” Ali says, her gaze fixed on Nicole, as if taking in every detail. “Take a breath.”

Nicole breathes deeply. She closes her eyes and counts to ten, aware it’s her guilt that’s rearing its ugly head within her. *I can do this.*

“You can do this,” Ali says. “What happened to your mother isn’t your fault. When you left for college, she was fine. You had no way of knowing...”

Nicole takes another deep breath. *Not my fault. No way of knowing...* She begins to calm. Sometimes she knows the truth of these words. And she can call that truth up when she needs to, but she also knows she has to take a stand for it, for her life...for herself. And that’s what she’s never done. Can she now? She opens her eyes and takes in Ali’s expectant expression. “Yes,” she says finally. “I’m thinking about going with her.” There, she said it.

“So why do you think your mother’s back?”

Nicole studies her. She looks as though she might be holding her breath. This woman has helped her so much. If she’s asking that question, she must believe Nicole knows the answer. She searches her brain.

“*Because I’m considering going with Kristine? And I feel guilty. I feel like I’m abandoning her all over again.*” Her tone becomes more matter-of-fact, and her doubt around the entire subject diminishes. “But...I never did.” A sheen of tears blurs her vision. She wipes them away.

Ali smiles and nods slowly. “Exactly.”

“You know I’ve been struggling ever since Kristine announced she got her promotion and she has to move to DC.”

Ali nods again. Nicole runs her hands over the front of her jeans and begins to pace. “Well, when we were apart, it hit me. I can’t stay stuck in the past *and* have a future with Kristine. I have to choose...I mean, I’ve known that before, but I guess I haven’t wanted a future with anyone else as much as I do with her. Or...I don’t know...it’s just more important this time.”

“*And...you’ve done a lot of work to be able to possibly make a different decision this time.*” Ali’s voice is gentle. “Don’t diminish that. It’s more about the changes in you than it is about Kristine, although I’m not discounting your feelings for her.”

Nicole nods as she considers this. “So...do you think I can do it? Go with her, I mean?” She ponders the shitty little house she grew up in, the bad neighborhood she’s insisted on staying in, the images of her mother living on the streets and

picking through garbage. She thinks about her mother's psychotic break when Nicole was seven, leading to the foster homes she had to live in while her mother was getting treatment, learning to live on meds, and taking classes to get Nicole back. Then the few good years they had. Then Nicole flying off across the country to attend the college of her dreams on a full-ride scholarship. The flashback to the phone call, the front door standing wide open, her mother wandering away into the storm. Deep breath. *Not my fault. Nobody's fault.*

"I think you've nailed it," Ali says. "You can't stay in the past *and* have a future somewhere else. You have to let go of one or the other." She clasps her hands in front of her as though in prayer. "I look forward to hearing what you decide."

When Nicole leaves her appointment, she buys flowers, Kristine's favorite stargazer lilies, then stops by her house to grab an overnight bag. Her head is clear, her conscience free of accusation. The street is empty except for Mr. Cronelli on the sidewalk, washing his face in the late afternoon sunshine, and the teenage boy shooting hoops in his driveway three doors down. Most of the trash bins have been put away to be refilled for next week's pickup.

Inside, the bed remains unmade, the coffee cup she and Kristine shared is still on the nightstand. The oversized T-shirt she'd peeled from Kristine's body, as well as her own lounge pants and T-shirt she'd shed for their morning lovemaking, are in a heap on the floor. In that moment, the past and the present overlap. The bedroom is almost exactly as she'd found her mother's after she'd disappeared into the night.

She shakes her head to clear it again. This isn't her mother's bedroom. It never was. When Nicole came home after graduation, she'd settled back into her own room and turned her mother's into an office where she makes her living writing novels. *This was her room*, with no reminders of her mother. And *this* unmade bed, empty cup, and pile of clothes represent something very different than anything before.

When Kristine answers her door, her gaze sweeps Nicole, then the bag, and finally lands on the flowers. She smiles, but her eyes are sad.

"Those are beautiful," she says.

Nicole holds them out to her, then moves into her open arms. It's like stepping into warm sunshine or curling up in a soft blanket.

"I wasn't expecting you tonight." Kristine says, pulling Nicole into a tight hug.

"I know, but I want to talk to you." Nicole feels Kristine tense in her embrace. "Is it okay."

Kristine eases away, her smile wider and a glint of humor in her eyes, but it seems forced. "Of course it's okay. It's always okay for you to be here. You know that." She turns and walks toward the kitchen. "Let me put these in some water."

Nicole follows.

"How was your appointment?" Kristine asks as she fills a vase.

"I think it was good." Nicole is suddenly nervous. After all this time of saying no, how can she just flip the switch to yes? "I made a decision." She pushes out the words before some other part of her can take control.

Kristine lets out a small gasp. “Wait.” She grips the edge of the counter, her back to Nicole, and her shoulders stiffen. “Not yet. Please. I’m not ready.”

“What?”

Kristine turns slowly, then lifts her gaze to meet Nicole’s. “Can we please have one more night before you say the words?”

Nicole blinks in confusion. “One more...” She searches Kristine’s face. “I—I thought you’d want to hear them.” Suddenly, she understands. “Oh. Oh no, baby.” She moves to Kristine and takes her hands. “I decided I want to go.”

Kristine starts to pull away, but stops. Her expression shifts into one of her own confusion. “To go?”

Nicole nods. “With you. To DC.” She laces her fingers between Kristine’s and tightens her grip. “When we were apart this last time, really, every time, I hated it. I know I’m the one that does it, but I hate it all the same. I don’t want to be apart from you. And it isn’t a needy thing. *I could* be without you, but I don’t want to. I want to live with you. And sleep with you every night. And wake up with you every morning. And make dinner for you. And rub your feet after you’ve had a long day.”

Tears well in Kristine’s eyes until finally they spill down her cheeks. She releases a small sob. “Are you sure?”

The question itself bolsters Nicole’s confidence. “I am. Positive.”

A brilliant smile shapes Kristine’s lips, then almost instantly dims. “But didn’t you see her this morning? Isn’t that why you made an appointment?”

“I did,” Nicole says. “But I think maybe I always will if I stay there, because that’s where she lived, where *we* lived, and where all my memories of her are.” She pauses, a twinge of uncertainty rippling through her. “And...if I’m wrong,” she pats the back pocket of her jeans. “Dr. Abbott gave me the name and number of a therapist in DC I can talk to, someone she’s worked with and trusts.”

Kristine stares at her in evident astonishment. “You’re really saying this. I’m not dreaming?”

Nicole gives a tiny shake of her head. “No, you’re not. I want to go with you if you still want me to.”

Kristine laughs through her tears and wraps her arms around Nicole’s neck. She crushes her to her. “Yes. Yes. Yes.” She plants kisses all over Nicole’s face. “God, yes. I want you to.”

Nicole kisses her, feeling the doubt and hesitation slip away. “Do we still get tonight?” she murmurs when they break for air.

Kristine holds her tightly. “We get every night.”

Nicole waits in the passenger’s seat of Kristine’s car and watches as Kristine talks with the driver of the moving van. Everything Nicole is taking is packed into the truck with Kristine’s belongings, and Nicole’s car is hitched to the back. The house will be sold by a friend who’s in real estate and the furnishings left inside will be picked up by the charity thrift store that Nicole donated them to. It feels so surreal. There was a time, not that long ago, when Nicole couldn’t conjure this day in her

imagination, what's more, be living it.

She gives Mr. Cronelli a couple more scratches behind his ears, then eases open the car door, and sets him on the sidewalk. "You be good," she says, running her hand along his back. "And don't eat Mr. McGowan out of house and home." She's told the elderly man about her move, and he's thrilled to take in a new, full-time housemate.

Mr. Cronelli lets out a soft meow, gives her a flick of his tail, and saunters across the street. Nicole chuckles. As she sits up and pulls the door shut, she sees her mother shuffling toward her. She's wearing her tattered dark clothing, and her hair hangs loose and unkempt, framing her lined face.

Their eyes meet for the first time since before her disappearance.

Nicole freezes. *Not today. Please...*

Kristine turns away from the driver and heads toward the car, her step light and her expression glowing.

Nicole's heart pounds as the two women, the two most important people in her life, pass within inches of each other at the end of the driveway.

Kristine rounds the front of the car, while Nicole's mother continues along her path directly toward Nicole. The driver's door opens, and Nicole feels the shift of the car as Kristine settles into the seat.

Behind her mother, Nicole sees the front of their house as it was described to her by the police that night: the door standing wide open, the rain and wet leaves soaking the carpet just inside. Then what she'd imagined: her mother wandering the streets in the storm in nothing but a thin nightgown. She clenches

her eyes shut and swallows hard.

“Are you ready?”

Kristine’s cheerful voice breaks Nicole’s trance, and she twists around to face her. Kristine’s smile fades, but not before it reminds Nicole of the truth and her new life.

“Are you okay?” Kristine asks.

Nicole draws in a breath, her certainty returning. “Give me a minute.”

“Of course.”

Nicole turns back to her window, praying her mother will be gone. Instead she finds a beautiful young woman with soft blond hair like her own, and shining blue eyes, smiling down at her. She’s not in dark clothing but a flowered sun dress of pinks and purples. Nicole’s breath catches. It’s her mother from Nicole’s early childhood...before the breakdown and the foster homes, before life with her on meds, before her disappearance. Nicole’s throat closes with emotion, and her eyes fill with tears.

Her mother lifts her hand and presses her fingertips to the glass. Tentatively, Nicole responds in kind. Somehow, she feels the warmth of her mother’s skin through the window. She meets her eyes in surprise. Her mother smiles, a shimmering light appearing all around her. Her lips move silently.

But Nicole hears the words.

“I love you, baby girl,” her mother says. “Be happy.”

Then the image fades. Love and relief flood Nicole. Her mother is okay. She lets her hand fall

into her lap. “Good-bye, Mama,” she whispers.

The air where her mother’s visage had been seems clearer than that around it, and through it, Nicole sees the house she grew up in as it used to be, with the swing on the front porch where her mother used to read to her and the mailbox beside the door covered in butterfly stickers. The paint is peeling, and she knows the exact spots where the roof leaks, but it was a loving home. It was *their* home. And now, she has a new one waiting for her.

She smiles and turns back to Kristine. “Okay,” she says, taking Kristine’s hand. “I’m ready.”

MY PLEASURE

Lee Haven

I traced my finger around the rim of my cocktail glass. I wasn't even sure if the elaborate drink deserved the name cocktail, since there wasn't a drop of alcohol in it. I preferred to keep a clear head whether I was playing or working, especially in this exclusive establishment where my potential clients could get into serious trouble if they overestimated their own limits physical or otherwise.

I wasn't working tonight though. It was my night off, and I wanted to chase my own pleasure instead of helping overtaxed business execs work off steam by taking complete control of them. Normally I wouldn't even be here on my day off, but I desired my own particular kind of pleasure tonight and I needed to make a quick stop to get some props from my work room.

Without my tight black leathers, killer heels, and full make up, most regulars didn't recognize me, and I liked it that way. Even some of the new girls working for Madelaine's didn't recognize me in my black boyfriend jeans and flat biker boots. A dark red, leather biker jacket completed my anonymity. My hair, usually straightened to perfection and almost touching my ass, was wound in a tight bun and flattened from my bike helmet. Hell, in the

mirror behind the bar, I'm not sure I recognized myself.

I finished my drink, ready to hit the small bar across town before all the interesting people had already found entertainment for the evening. The distant click of the front door and a subtle shift in the dim lighting signaled a new arrival. I glanced over my shoulder to the entryway, more out of habit than curiosity. I had other plans, and it didn't concern me who patronized the club tonight.

I should have looked away, but there was something about the figure standing in the dimly lit entryway that caught my attention. She ran her hand through her short hair, leaving it a bit unruly, and walked forward with a strange mix of quiet power tinged with a little insecurity, evidenced by the way she faltered slightly before approaching the bar. She managed to look like she had control of every muscle in her body but didn't quite know if she was in the right place. She wore a black tank, which gave me an unrestricted view of her finely toned shoulders and arms. I pulled my gaze back to my glass, not wanting to be caught staring.

“Scotch, please.”

The woman settled on a barstool close to me, and I could see her looking in my direction. She was nervous and unsure of herself. I'd seen that look before in other women's faces but rarely from someone who came into this place. People who came here knew exactly what they wanted and how they wanted it. But she looked like this was her first time. She'd never been here before. She'd probably never been to any club like *this* before. If you

worked long enough in the escort industry, spotting a newcomer was easy.

Her eyes gave it away. That unique sense of innocence. It was like a drug to me. Give me someone fresh to the scene over a battle-hardened bottom any day of the week and three times on Thursday. Getting to show someone what *real* pleasure could be like: there was nothing better. My lower belly tightened in anticipation. Decision time. Either I got on my way or I introduced myself.

I signaled to the bartender. "Make that a soda with lime."

I slipped off the stool and reached the stranger in two steps. She'd looked away. She hadn't responded when I changed her drinks order. It was a good sign of a perfect evening to come for both of us. The scent of sea salt and sage filled my nose when I leaned in. It made a pleasant change to the sweet, overbearing perfumes I usually endured here.

She held tightly onto the bar top like she needed the support but finally turned her head to look at me. Her pupils dilated in the dim light, and her lips slightly parted, but she said nothing. Another good sign.

I traced the back of the woman's hand. "You can have your scotch or you can come with me. Your choice," I whispered and brushed my lips across the top of her ear before I pulled away. I turned and slowly walked toward the far dark corner of the bar that led to the employee staircase. The quiet murmuring of the room made it impossible for me to hear her follow me, but I could feel her nervous energy right behind me when I started ascending the stairs. We weren't supposed to take customers this way, but it was the

fastest way to get some more privacy...and she wasn't my customer. This was personal.

I held open the door to my private room where I stored my equipment and rested. It wasn't a room where I took paying customers to play. I waved her in, and another wave of sea salt and sage washed over me as she stepped passed me, halting abruptly when she reached the center of the room. She slowly turned to face me and bit her lip. Still she said nothing, clearly needing me to lead.

I tried to see the room through her eyes, someone new to this world. The wrought iron bed in one corner looked unthreatening enough, as were the shelves and drawers lining the wall. On closer inspection the content probably seemed strange to some: a selection of classic literature tomes lined up right next to my collection of floggers, for example.

I closed and locked the door. I didn't want any interruptions if this beauty was going to explore this world with me. In the humming silence, I could hear the ice cubes clinking in her glass. A testament to her nervousness or overwhelming anticipation?

“Let me take that for you.” I stroked down her forearm over the back of her hand for her drink. She parted her lips like she wanted to speak but no words came out. Her finger loosened, so I took the glass and put it on a small credenza next to the door.

Turning back, I searched her face. “Why are you here, gorgeous?”

“You think I’m gorgeous?”

Her deep velvety voice wasn't at all what I had expected to go with that body, but I looked her over in a very obvious way, appraising her. She sure

was a stunning specimen. A finely sculpted body. I'm taller than the average woman, but she had a couple of inches over me even in her running shoes. And her faded jeans hugged firm legs. There didn't seem to be an ounce of fat on her. She was probably all delicious muscle.

Her hopeful expression fell, and she gazed down at her shoes.

“Of course you’re supposed to say that. How stupid of me.”

I tipped her chin so she was forced to look at me. “No one forces me to say or do anything I don’t want to. And I do mean it when I’m saying you are gorgeous.”

Tracing my finger across her jaw barely touching her skin, slowly moving down her neck and onto her bare shoulder before I lifted my hand away. “Why are you here?”

“Shouldn’t you ask who I am first? Or at least tell me who you are?” She frowned.

“Who do you want me to be?” The trite sentence rolled off my tongue, smooth and practiced by the thousands of times I’d said it before. But this woman made me want to become who or whatever she desired, simply for our pleasures. My body tightened in pleasant anticipation. It’d been a long time since I’d felt like this. That was the price of sharing my body for money. That was the price I paid for staying in the city whose pulse I yearned to feel beneath my skin every day.

“If you don’t want to tell me your name, I’ll call you handsome. Okay?”

Was that okay? I had a name I worked under, but

I didn't want her to use it. This definitely wasn't work. Maybe I should take her away from here and go to the club I *was* heading to. And she'd just called me handsome. If she'd really meant that then she'd already seen more of my true self than almost every other woman I'd been with.

She retreated from me. "Sorry. That was presumptuous of me."

My beautiful stranger had mistaken my silence for displeasure, which couldn't have been further from the truth. "No. That's perfect." I reached for her wrists. "What do you want me to call you?"

"Dawn."

Her eyes widened. I'd seen that reaction a few times too. It was the realization that real names were best left unsaid.

"Why are you here, Dawn?" I walked around her, leaned in close to her so that my breasts lightly brushed against her back. She went entirely still, almost like she'd even stopped breathing.

"I want to be touched by a woman."

Her words were barely loud enough to be a whisper. They floated to my ear, and goosebumps flared down my back at the revelation. Not only had she never been to a club like this before, she'd never been touched by another woman either. Dawn could truly prove to be what I yearned for tonight.

"What do you want to happen tonight?" I asked, my voice husky with desire.

"I... I don't know."

Her voice shook so badly that it was only just possible to hear what she'd said. I moved back in front of her, hoping that I could decipher in her face

what she clearly wasn't willing to say. "What do you need?"

The corners of her lips drew down and started to quiver slightly. Her shoulders slumped forward. She couldn't say what she wanted or needed. Had previous lovers been so harsh on her fantasies that they'd all but silenced her?

"Can you tell me what you don't like?" I said softly, not wanting to frighten her out of the room. She shook her head, and if it was possible, looked to retreat into herself further. She looked beyond me to the door. *Please, no.* I stepped away to give her some space. "Has anyone hurt you?"

"No." Her voice was forceful this time. "No one has touched me...ever." She drew her lower lip between her teeth and looked away.

"You've never slept with anyone?"

Her eyes locked onto mine, and she shook her head. "No."

I couldn't help but wonder why, but I didn't voice the question. If she wanted to, she could have her pick of *anyone* in *any* bar.

"Are you sure you want this to be your first time?" I reached for her hand and tenderly stroked her wrist. I needed her to know that there would be no hard feelings if she changed her mind now. *Did I really want her to change her mind?*

Dawn's other hand came up holding onto my forearm with surprising strength. "Please...I want to feel the touch of another woman on my skin. I want to feel..." She swallowed hard. "I want to be owned, explored. I need to know what desire and want feel like."

She was breathless when she finished, and her cheeks flushed a rosy pink. Her words threw my own body into wanton anticipation, each one striking a chord deep within me. For some reason, I already cared for her. I needed her to understand that spending the night with a professional was a different experience. It was nothing like sharing your first time with someone you loved and who loved you in return.

She reached out and touched my arm.

“Please. I came a long way for this.”

She let go of my arm, moved her hand to my face, and tenderly stroked my cheek.

“There’s no one back home who wants to touch me...Not after...”

The willpower I’d tried to summon to convince Dawn to wait for the right person to share this special moment was obliterated by her touch. The soft pleading in her eyes made me want to be that special woman who gave her every pleasure she could ask for.

I took off my leather jacket and threw it over the back of the chair that stood at the small desk. Dawn jumped slightly when I leaned against her back and breathed her in. *I could most definitely get addicted to you.*

I let a breath out slowly, caressing the back of her neck. “Let me know if I do something you don’t like, okay?” I wanted her to feel safe and an unexplained possessiveness towards her took up residence inside of me. I wrapped my arms around her. “We don’t have to do this.”

“I want to.”

“You can stop me at any time. All you need to say is stop.” There was no need to get creative with safe words. I’d be taking everything nice and slow and would stop at the slightest sign of resistance.

“I’m just...afraid you’ll reject me like everyone else when you see me.” Dawn’s voice was shaking like the rest of her.

I had no idea who “they” were, but they weren’t me. “I’m not like the rest of them.”

Whatever it was she was afraid of, I was fairly sure there was little I hadn’t seen in the past decade in this establishment. I gently drew her in tighter. “I want you to breath with me, slowly in through your nose, and slowly out through your mouth.” Her lung filled with air underneath my arms, and I moved with her so not to cause any extra restriction. “Again. In and out. Nice and slow. Just follow me.” After a few more slow breaths I could feel Dawn soften in my arms.

“I want you to take care of me.”

Her plea spoke of a deep desire she herself didn’t fully understand. I trailed my hands down her body, and I could feel her muscles twitch beneath my fingertips. I slowly pulled her tank out of her jeans, enjoying her soft smooth skin under my fingertips. I felt her body fill with tension again. But this time it was a different kind, the good kind.

I pulled her tank top over her head in one smooth motion and secured her wrists with it behind her back.

Dawn’s breathing slowed.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, handsome.”

The breathy answer aroused my own body, almost making the touch of my T-shirt unbearable over my

breasts. I liked her calling me handsome.

I immediately saw what she hadn't been able to say. A scar, probably a burn, started on the inner side of her right shoulder blade and trailed down and around the right side of her body, disappearing into her jeans. I stepped around her, following the burns with my eyes. It needed all of my willpower not to visibly react to its severity on the other side. Part of the marred tissue disappeared under her black sports bra. Another line continued underneath it, almost to her breastbone where it ended in something that appeared to have been once a puncture mark.

A fading pink line ran over Dawn's breastbone, a silent testimony to surgery that hadn't been long enough in the past to leave the skin the same ghostly white as her scars. I wanted to touch her scarred skin, soothe it. But I stopped my hand an inch away and lifted my gaze to look at her. Dawn's eyes were glassy. She bit her lower lip, and her eyes darted away as she started to lower her head.

"Will it hurt when I touch you?" Fear crept up my neck. I didn't want to cause her any pain.

A tear spilled down her cheek when she raised her head to look at me again. "No, it won't hurt. You don't have to touch me at all. I know they're ugly."

The despair in her face broke my heart. I was looking at the most beautiful woman I'd laid eyes on, even more so than before *because* of her scars. Her vulnerability made me ache inside. I leaned into her, kissed away the tear. Her muscles responded under my gentle touch. "Are you sure I'm not hurting you?" I whispered.

"It feels wonderful. Please don't stop."

She leaned fully into my body and pressed herself against me. I wanted to feel her fully, skin on skin, my limbs wrapped around her holding her close, holding her safe. I wanted to give her all the pleasures of the world and more.

I unzipped her jeans slowly and pulled them down with me as I sank onto my knees in front of her. The heady sent of her arousal hit me full force when my nose stopped close to her black boy shorts. Another scar sneaked up the middle of her thigh and disappeared under her shorts. Her body trembled when I traced my fingers across her thigh and onto the scar, following it all the way to the point where it disappeared under her shorts.

“Please. I need you.” Dawn pushed her hips forward until my nose softly brushed over the fabric covering her center.

I put my hands around the back of her thighs and pulled her toward me, drinking in her intimate aroma. My own core swelled with anticipation.

“Don’t stop. I need more.”

The muscles in her legs turned into bands of steel. Her voice cleared the lust fog in my head a little. I didn’t want her first time to be standing up needing to control her balance while I ravished her pussy kneeling in front of her.

The black shorts and her bra needed to go. Now. I slowly peeled her shorts down her legs and let them drop inside her jeans before I motioned for her to step out of both. The scar on her thigh ran up to a neatly trimmed triangle of soft looking dark curls, and it left a bold trail over her mound, almost reaching her outer lips.

I traced a trail of kisses up starting under her navel until I was upright. I reached around her to free her wrists with one practiced tug at her tank. A low protest escaped Dawn's lips when her hands were freed.

"I want to get this off." I pulled at one of her bra straps.

"Oh, God. Yes." Her voice was low and husky.

I could no longer bear the touch of my own shirt on my skin. I pulled it over my head and let it fall to the floor. Her black sports bra still spoiled my view, and I made quick work of it.

I caressed her body with my gaze, my hands, and my lips, drawing invisible patterns over her skin, worshipping her. But she started to pull away when I came close to the scars sneaking up over her left breast like thick snakes of twisted skin around her nipple that was unblemished.

"Don't hide." I held her shoulder to keep her from pulling away. I looked at her. Her eyes were so full of contradicting emotions. "Please. You're beautiful. This," I said as I drew my fingers across the scar underneath her left breast, "doesn't change that. If anything, it makes you more alluring." I walked us over to the bed, settled her onto the mattress, and extended her hands above her head. "Hold onto the metal for me."

Her fingers closed around the iron bars of the headboard, and I used a soft satin band to secure her hands in place. Slowly I trailed my finger down the inside of her left arm all the way down until I reached her breast. I feathered soft kisses over her scars there and around her breast. The rosy tip of

her nipple invited me to gently graze my teeth over it before I drew it into my mouth and flicked my tongue over it.

It cut me inside when I saw her turn away in an attempt to hide the moisture in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I lifted myself up to see her fully.

She shook her head. I cupped her cheek and gently turned her head back. “You can tell me.”

“I can’t feel it. The nerves were too badly damaged. It’s weird being touched there, like you’re touching something that’s not part of me.” She closed her eyes. “Sorry. I’m not making much sense.”

“Hey...look at me. This is about what feels good for you, okay?”

She looked back at me, her eyes half-lidded. “If that’s the case, could you...could you take off the rest of your clothes?”

I nodded. “Of course.” After I got completely naked, I lay down next to her and continued to draw lazy patterns over her skin, not shying away from stroking over her scars. They were a part of her, and I needed to love them the same way as the rest of her body. I gently kissed her right breast, and her skin flushed under my lips. I blew over her nipple. The soft moan that escaped her was the reassurance I needed to lavish tender attention on her nipple by closing my lips around it and circling it with my tongue.

She pushed her chest up like she wanted to encourage me to continue. Her legs parted, and my thigh slipped between hers. Every fiber in my body was alive and wanted to devour her, drink her in. But I wanted to go slow, to give Dawn time to get used to the new sensations. She lifted her hips from the bed and

pushed against my leg. *She* was in a hurry.

With gentle nips and kisses, I moved over her body to the center of her breasts. I kissed down the surgical scar but stopped over the healed puncture for some extra attention before I moved lower.

Dawn arched her body. "Oh, please. Give me more."

I moved lower, kissed and stroked her skin, giving special attention to places I suspected she normally wanted to hide. When I reached the top of the soft hair below her stomach, her legs fell open to accommodate my body between them. Her lush scent hit me even harder this time, and my own pussy clenched with want.

It almost saddened me that this wasn't the kind of encounter that would give me release. For the first time in a long time, I wanted to be touched. But giving her the kind of fulfillment she obviously yearned for would fill me with immense pleasure.

My hands trailed over the inside of her legs. Her breath quickened when I drew gentle circles with the tip of my tongue over the scars on her right thigh until I was positioned right above her clit.

Her pink folds were swollen and glistened with wetness when I pulled her lips apart to feather soft kisses on her clit before my tongue moved in lazy circles.

"Oh, God. Harder."

She wrapped her legs around my back, pulling me in closer. I trailed my tongue downward, circling her tight opening, gently probing at it. She was tight, so very tight, and that sent another pleasure wave though my body. Her breath came in short gasps,

and her body lifted beneath me.

“Close. So close. I need you inside.”

I coated my finger in her wetness before returning my tongue to circle around her opening with gentle pressure. I licked up her folds to find her clit and sucked it in between my lips. The muscles in her stomach began to flutter under my arm, telling me she was close to her release. I pressed my finger against her entrance and felt the tightness slowly give way, granting permission for me to continue. She closed around my finger as I pushed in.

A litany of her moans encouraged me to push harder. I could feel her sweet spot right under my fingertip, and I pushed down on it while sucking hard on her clit.

Her back arched for a long moment before hot liquid trickled onto my hand and her inner walls pulsed around my finger.

She took in a shallow breath. “Stop.”

The soft word that left her lips was almost lost on me with my head buried between her legs. I slowly withdrew and crawled up next to her. I released her hands then cradled her in my arms.

She buried her face in my neck. “Thank you. That was so wonderful. I never thought anyone could ever... would want...to touch me like that.”

I pulled her in closer. “True beauty comes from inside you. Don’t ever forget that. Anyone who can’t see that isn’t worth your affection.”

She lifted her head and looked at me.

“I don’t even know your name.”

I’d never spoken my real name within these walls. But then, I’d always been with customers. Dawn was someone entirely different. I smiled. “Ruby.”

She brushed her soft, warm lips over mine and tasted herself on me. She pulled away slightly, seemingly searching my eyes for something, though I didn't know what.

“So, what do *you* like, Ruby?”

I grinned and kissed her back, harder this time.
“You, for starters.”

THE SHIELD

Jenn Matthews

The three staff members Laura was inducting stood with their mouths wide. Then embarrassment caused them to turn away, to appear as if they weren't watching the barrage of abuse that rang off the metal shelves and refrigerators.

Laura's feet were glued to the lino. She lifted her hand, reached out. She wanted to go to Jessie, to enfold her in an embrace so tight she'd smother the screaming.

"I am perfectly capable of stacking shelves, Kirsty." Jessie's voice was strained. "What kind of shift runner would I be if I was unable to do such a lowlife task? Do you think I'm incapable? What? Because my body can't maintain a pregnancy, somehow I'm incompetent at everything else? I have been here for *fourteen* years, for fuck's sake. Who do you think I am?"

A long shudder captured Laura's body. She couldn't breathe. Her ribs crushed under the force of her emotion.

Jessie gestured wildly at the shelf before them. "Oh, right, it's the contents? Baby stuff, right? What, suddenly I can't possibly go near this stuff? I'm not going to melt before it all, you know? How dare you assume that I can't handle myself anymore!"

Jessie's flying hands faltered. One finger touched a bib, one of the too-sickly ones with a pink bear on it.

Kirsty stepped forward. "I don't think that. I could never—"

"You do!" Again with the flailing arms. Then Jessie turned, glared at a group of staff to Laura's right.

They slunk into the garden aisle.

"Everyone does! Too fucking old for a child, hmm? Too battered and bent? Too fucking gay?" she whirled back to Kirsty. "And you! Stop protecting me. It's not working. No one will ever be able to bring him..." She raised her fists and went at Kirsty, her whole body flying in a whirlwind of misery.

Laura gripped onto the clipboard in her arms. Tears filled her eyes. Her subordinate new starters shifted uncomfortably either side of her.

Kirsty caught Jessie with both arms, held her close against her front, stopping the tirade. The screams that shook the supermarket broke Laura's heart. All Laura could do was watch as Kirsty led Jessie away. It was a long time before she got the feeling back in her legs.

"Who was that?" asked one of the kids, fresh out of school.

Laura turned to him. She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes, hoping her tears weren't visible. "That's our head of Fresh Produce." She took a few deep, difficult breaths. "My wife."

Laura's shift finished at eleven. She was half asleep when she tripped through the door, her long hair damp from the mist that had dropped over Bristol. She placed her key over the hook allocated for her. *Home*. Laura used the memory of their housewarming to settle her, but the events of the day tried to creep in, and a battle between the two ensued. She imagined a large armoured shield, keeping the trauma at bay.

She took off her coat and pulled off her shoes. She put a hand to her cheek and screwed her eyes tight. Such a mess. Everything was such a terrible mess. She knew Jessie had gone to the local pub after being sent away from her shift by the store manager. Their young colleague and friend, Kirsty, had followed at her heels.

Guilt still squished Laura's heart. She'd wanted to follow, to comfort them both. But the new starters had been wide-eyed and so very green. Despite what had happened between Kirsty and Jessie, though, she trusted Kirsty to keep Jessie safe. At least until she could get off shift.

When she finally got off work, Kirsty and Jessie weren't at the pub. Laura had spent an age checking each toilet and asking people. She'd rung Jessie's mobile but had received no answer. She'd called Kirsty. Nothing.

Laura narrowed her eyes as she went into the kitchen and saw an unfamiliar pair of trainers kicked off under the table and two coffee cups on the work surface. Both contained the dregs of coffee. Laura hadn't heard from Jessie or Kirsty since she'd got the text from Kirsty about going to the pub. Laura hoped Jessie hadn't drunk too much. She'd taken to doing that lately.

Sickness roiled inside Laura. Her brain went into overdrive. *Wait.* Two mugs? Who had Jessie brought home? Had she been drinking? Had she picked up some girl—or even a bloke—at that pub? They obviously weren’t downstairs. Hadn’t she and Jessie been through enough now that cheating would be far from Jessie’s mind?

The image of Jessie shouting at Kirsty rose despite Laura’s battle shield. The memory racketed up the tension in Laura’s belly. Her heart thumped and growled like an angry animal in a cage, so similar to Jessie’s behaviour.

Laura thought about running. She didn’t want to walk in on the woman she had loved since school doing things with someone else. That would be the biggest drunken mistake she could think of. Her hand was on the front door knob, ready to leave, to go anywhere, perhaps her mother’s. But then she stopped. Benefit of the doubt. Be reasonable, calm. Jessie was grieving and so was Laura. She made the effort to slow her breathing and swallowed.

She went back into the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and made herself drink it. Cool, refreshing. It gave her some time for a break before she had to decide.

The shield was forged anew. She used it to protect herself from not only the memories of the day but also her fear of the unknown. Whatever Jessie had done, they would not break. It was simply a reaction to their loss.

She left her bag and shoes in the hallway, put them neatly as an act of understanding. Jessie would be fine. And if she wasn’t, Laura didn’t want her to

notice the untidiness and feel the need to comment. She was fragile, her Jessie. What had happened today had broken her apart.

She allowed the memory to come forth.

Anger. Grief. Loss.

And lovely Kirsty, who had been there when the terrible pains had begun, so many weeks ago. The rush to the hospital. She'd even held Jessie's hand during the ultrasound.

It had been high risk due to Jessie's age. They'd known that forty-five wasn't exactly the best time to try for a baby together. Six months of steadyng her pace at work. No lifting, nothing too strenuous. And all for nothing.

Laura hadn't been there. She *should* have been there. But the manager's meeting in London had been non-negotiable. Jessie had been so insistent. She was fine, and all was well. Until it wasn't. Until there was no heartbeat. But Kirsty had been there. And for all her younger years and junior status in their supermarket family, she'd been there to catch Jessie when the unthinkable happened. Jessie had spoken only a few words about it. She'd got on with her life. At least that was what she had shown Laura.

Laura carefully padded upstairs. She lingered on the top step. They were married. They loved one another. Even if Jessie *had* brought someone home, they could deal with it.

Laura pushed open their bedroom door and saw the bed they'd picked out together last year because the height of it matched the height of the crib. Jessie would be able to just reach over, take the baby, and feed him as needed. Laura could roll over and place a hand on

the baby whilst he fed.

She squeezed her eyes again, a shudder ripping through her. The bed was empty. That snapped Laura from her grief. Jessie's things were here: her car in the drive, and her keys on the hook. It would make sense that she'd be lying awake as every other night...or lying awake with someone else.

She went farther into the bedroom and peeked into the en suite. Then she looked behind the curtains and even under the bed. She stood, feeling stupid. No one and nothing.

Then she heard a voice, a man's voice, coming from the spare room. The sound had been there since she came upstairs, but she'd assumed it was background noise from a radio next door or something. Her mouth went dry.

As she listened she realised the voice was not participating in a two-way conversation. The voice was talking, explaining, telling a story.

What the hell was Stephen Fry doing in the spare bedroom?

Laura stepped into the hallway and pushed the spare room door open quietly. Stephen Fry was talking about wizards. It was an audiobook emanating from the smart phone plugged in by the side of the bed. The phone did not belong to Jessie.

Two forms, one under the duvet, the other spooned up behind it on top, lay on the queen-sized bed. Laura stepped in and blinked as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

Kirsty's hands were curled up by her face, her head snuggled between the two sets of pillows. Her hair was tucked neatly under her head like it

had been tidied after she'd fallen asleep. Stroked back perhaps. Jessie's arm was around her waist and her nose in Kirsty's hair.

It was difficult to see in the darkness, but Laura made out the sparkle of tear-stained faces. Had they been crying together?

Laura didn't know what to do. They were fully clothed: Laura in pyjamas, and Kirsty in the clothes she'd left work wearing. They were both asleep. She looked down at them, and tears filled her eyes.

Jessie was asleep. Jessie hadn't slept for weeks.

Laura quietly went into the cupboard and pulled out a large blanket, the one her mother had given them for Christmas. She slipped it over Jessie, around her shoulders and tucked it underneath her feet.

She tiptoed back to their bedroom, changed out of her uniform and into her pyjamas. She then sat on the edge of their bed. Her palm caressed the bedspread, the cotton so soft. She turned to look at the wall separating them. She imagined them both breathing deeply and slowly.

Jessie was finally asleep. But what about Laura? Would she sleep tonight?

She went back into the spare room.

She lingered by the side of the bed that Kirsty occupied. There was room this side for her to slip in without waking either of them, she hoped. The duvet rustled as Laura pulled it back. She held her breath and waited. Neither Kirsty nor Laura stirred. Laura slipped into the bed beside them, making sure she kept her distance as much as she wanted to wrap herself around the both of them. She lay her hand over the duvet near Jessie's hand, which still rested around Kirsty's waist.

She tensed as she heard Kirsty inhale deeply. Large eyes stared at Laura in the dark.

She felt like an intruder. Laura nodded once before starting to slip out of the bed. This wasn't for her to be a part of. She should comply with whatever helped Jessie right now.

"No. It's okay," Kirsty whispered. "Is she asleep?"

"Deeply." Laura matched her tone. She settled down in the bed again. The space under the duvet was warm from the bodies that already occupied it. Kirsty's eyes looked huge in the grey of the room.

"Good."

Laura shifted just a touch, bringing her knees up so they rested against Kirsty's. "What happened?"

"We went to the pub for a while, then she insisted on driving me home. But when we got here, she just started crying again." Kirsty's sigh made a stray piece of hair flutter. "She didn't want me to go...so I stayed."

"Thank you." Laura couldn't identify the surge of emotion that coursed through her. Affection, perhaps, for Kirsty who had finally got Jessie to release her pent-up emotions. And relief that she'd had the space to be able to do that.

It made Laura sad that she hadn't been able to bring the truth out of Jessie. That Jessie had felt unable to talk honestly about it with her. But it settled her knowing someone had. Kirsty's eyes looked wet once again. Laura saw sadness, tinged with understanding.

"I get it. Whatever makes it better for her." She smiled a touch, flicked her eyebrows up once. "I'd

move. And let you two...if it wouldn't wake her."

"That's alright." Laura shifted her hand on the pillow to rest against the back of Kirsty's. "Stay."

"She's as sober as a judge. *I* may have had a bit too much." Kirsty looked away. "I think she was worried about me."

"She's like that, always wants to make sure everyone else is okay." Misery twisted Laura's gut. "I hate and love that about her."

"You're both like that." Kirsty gazed at Laura and slipped her fingers between Laura's. "It's why I can never do enough for you."

Laura squeezed, causing a glimmer of a smile from Kirsty. "I think it's all going to be okay now." She allowed a single tear to fall down her face.

"I hope so."

Stephen Fry's voice droned on, but he had a soothing tone, and it stilled her brain. She allowed it to flow throughout and relax every part of her.

Very slowly, Laura shifted close and pressed her lips to Kirsty's fingers. "Get some sleep. It's been hard for you too."

A small snore emanated from the woman against Kirsty's back. They smothered snorts of amusement.

Kirsty chewed her lip. "Sorry about the audiobook. I can't sleep without them."

The mattress creaked softly as Jessie drew Kirsty closer in her slumber. Laura watched her fingers tense and release. Jessie murmured something, but she didn't seem to have woken. Kirsty closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Laura thought she was enjoying Jessie's embrace, perhaps relieved by it. "The book seems to be helping Jessie too."

“I’ll be on Amazon first thing, buying everything Stephen Fry has ever narrated.”

“Good plan.” Kirsty smiled then closed her eyes again.

Laura followed suit. Sleep was good. Sleep would be their shield and their healing potion.

Their bodies wrapped around one another in Jessie and Laura’s spare bedroom, with Stephen Fry speaking quietly into the darkness, might have seemed strange to anyone looking in. But right in that moment, tinged with grief, anxiety, and desperation, Laura knew she’d get the best sleep she’d had in a long time, and so it seemed, would Jessie. Laura could deal with whatever it all meant in the morning.

BRISTOL BLUES

Kitty McIntosh

Today was a good day. He'd only threatened to kill me once.

"I'll break your head open with a hammer," he'd said.

An average day would include at least three death threats so to get to teatime with only one promise of mutilation was something to be celebrated. My usual go-to celebratory item was a bottle of white wine. Any wine, really. I didn't care. As long as it dulled the ache and banished the spectre of depression that threatened to inveigle its way back into my life. I had to get away, even if just for a few days. My sanity depended on it.

I sat, glass of wine in hand and laptop open, clicked on Facebook, and started scrolling through my groups; my Lesfic groups. I looked up at Henry, sprawled on the couch like a cat and humming away to himself. His iPad rested on his knees as he smiled at whatever app he was playing. What a difference an hour made. One Facebook post jumped out as I returned my attention to the laptop. Someone was planning a Lesfic conference in Bristol. *Heaven*. I'd read about conferences in the US, but my budget would never stretch to that, and then there was the issue of Henry. I'd have to arrange for someone to

look after my son, the one who regularly threatened to kill me, though I knew he didn't mean it. When it first happened I thought it must be my fault, sure that I'd done something to set him off. That wasn't true, but the guilt still crushed me. I'd quickly learned to anticipate the triggers and minimize them. And I was pretty good at getting out of the way. That and a constant supply of arnica gel kept the bruises under control. Autism was a bitch. One minute he was hugging me and telling me he loved me so much, the next he was booting me away. I slumped into the chair, my heart sinking at the realization that Bristol couldn't happen for me.

Eleven o'clock, and he was finally asleep. I crawled into bed, my legs heavy and every muscle sore. My eyelids lost the struggle to stay open. Henry woke at 5.30 every morning and didn't stop all day. Having a child who had no awareness of danger was exhausting. There wasn't a single moment in the day when I could switch off. My mind had every worst-case scenario listed in order of severity, and I was sure something terrible would happen if I let up for even a second. A ringtone jolted me out of the half-sleeping state I was in, and I fumbled amongst the blankets to find my phone. Who on earth was calling at this time of night? Lou, who else?

"Hey, Lou."

"You'll never guess what I saw on Facebook?" she asked.

“Surprise me.” I rolled over and flicked on my bedside light. Lou was obsessed with social media and saw it as her mission in life to share the weird and the wonderful posts she came across.

“There’s a Lesfic conference in the UK this year. You’ve just gotta go. You must have every Lesfic book ever printed in that spare room of yours.”

“I saw it. But you know I can’t leave Henry to go swanning off to Bristol. You go. I’m sure you’d love being surrounded by a roomful of hot lesbians. It’d be your dream come true.”

My shoulders slumped as I leaned back against the headboard, but I tried to sound upbeat. I was glad Lou couldn’t see me. I was rubbish at hiding my true feelings from my best mate.

“Now that’s where you are wrong, my darling, Kerry. It may be the number one event on the Sapphic literary scene, but I’m not much of a reader. What would I talk about to a load of book nerds? No, I’m not going, but *you* are. And maybe you’ll bag yourself a gorgeous butch while you’re at it. You’ve been on your own too long and deserve to find someone. Don’t you worry about Henry. I’ll come at stay at your place for a few days. Me and the boy will have a ball playing Super Mario and eating junk food.”

I was about to argue, to state how impossible it was, but instead I let a light-hearted feeling take over me, just for a minute. Maybe, just maybe, I could do it.

Bristol, six months later

I had spent part of the afternoon familiarising myself

with the College Green area of Bristol so I would know exactly where to be for the Con Virgins meet-up tour and dinner. Being prepared and planning for every eventuality was the modus operandi of the Autism Mum. I had to stop and catch my breath by the time I had walked up the very steep hill leading to the Wills Memorial Tower and the pub where Valden, the Buddy Scheme organiser, would be waiting in her bright pink shirt. That'd make a change from the usual tour guide holding the umbrella aloft scenario! As usual I was too early. There was no sign of Valden outside or inside the pub. Plenty of students milled around. Well, I assumed they were students. I wasn't about to go up to a stranger and ask if they were there for the lesbian meet-up. My eyes flicked up and down the street as I paced in front of the entrance. The pink shirt caught my eye. A smiling Valden strode up the hill towards the door of the pub and immediately made eye contact.

‘You must be Kerry. I recognise you from your Facebook photo.’

I nodded, and she waved to a group who then crossed the road to join us, and introductions began in earnest. Not that I would remember anyone's name. There must have been twenty of them, and I was having difficulty just saying “hi,” never mind anything else. A large glass of wine started to loosen my tongue, my breathing evened out, and the tight knot in my stomach relaxed slightly. I was actually looking forward to the tour of Wills' Tower and spending the rest of the evening with these women.

The tour was a great ice-breaker, and I was enjoying the company of so many like-minded women. Even the male guide consistently calling our group of lesbians “ladies and gentlemen” failed to annoy me too much. After the strenuous stair climbing, we were all famished and glad to get to the restaurant. It was bright and informal and consisted of six long tables with bench seating at the back and a bar and ordering area to the front. I bought a large glass of Pinot Grigio and steeled myself. It looked as if our group were the only customers booked in. Some had come straight from the tour, and others were only coming for the dinner. *More new people.* I was so used to it being just me and Henry most of the time that the thought of socialising with a big group filled me with terror. Well, maybe terror was exaggerating...I’d had enough therapy sessions to control the panic attacks. And I was *not* going back to that. The seats filled up quickly, and since few people knew each other, there weren’t established cliques of friends. I would have found that too intimidating. I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. I could do this. There was an empty seat at the table nearest the kitchen hatch, so I ignored my churning stomach and made my way there.

“Okay if I sit here?” I asked.

A slim dark-haired woman smiled and motioned to the seat beside her. I remembered seeing her from a distance at the pre-tour drinks at the pub, but there had been so many new faces there that, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember her name.

“Hi, I’m Jimmy. Come squeeze in here.”

My breath caught in my throat as I took the time to really notice her. Her hair was cut short in a boyish style, and she wore well-fitting light blue jeans and a tight white T-shirt. She was gorgeous. Now, would I be able to form a coherent sentence in her presence?

Talking to Jimmy was easy. And that surprised me. I'd been so used to the underlying panic that arose anytime I spoke to a beautiful woman. I'd also gotten used to them promptly scarpering as soon as they found out about Henry. So I normally omitted to mention him. I kept it light, no details. I wanted to enjoy being with someone without worrying where it was going to go. I liked Jimmy right away and had no intention of ruining the evening, so Henry and my real life were strictly off-limits. I'd learned from experience that no woman would want a relationship with me once they found out about my son and my life as a carer.

The night passed quickly, and I was shocked when the restaurant staff started clearing the tables and not so subtly hinting that it was closing time. Had I really spent two hours in conversation with this woman? I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed so much. I didn't want it to end. When Jimmy offered to walk me back to my hotel, I didn't hesitate in accepting. I wanted to squeeze every last second out of this night. She offered me her arm as we strolled downhill towards College Green, and I snuggled as close as I could, feeling a slight trembling in her body. It felt good. It felt right. When we arrived at the front door of my hotel, she looked slightly flushed. Was that the walk or

something else?

"I've had a great time, Kerry," she said and nibbled her bottom lip. "Can I kiss you?"

I nodded and took a step towards her. My lips tingled as she gently brushed her lips against mine, and her fingers gently moved through my hair. The chaste kiss caused the butterflies in my stomach to multiply. I would've agreed to anything at that moment. And then she was gone, pulling away, leaving a gaping hole that moments before I hadn't known was there. I watched her walk away, too scared to call her back.

I stood outside the conference hotel and took in the understated grandeur. A sandstone façade gave way to an impressive lobby and a huge reception desk. This wasn't the kind of hotel I was used to. Was I under-dressed? The people milling around reception were obviously well-off if their expensive clothes were anything to go by. I thought back to the night before. The women were easy going and casually dressed. Just because the event was being held in a fancy hotel, it didn't mean I wouldn't fit in. To the left of the desk a board with Ellcon in bold lettering gave instructions for attendees on how to find the conference rooms. The butterflies in my stomach started to multiply, and my heart raced so I took the stairs instead of the lift in the hope that I could talk myself into a calmer state before reaching the first floor. The top of the wide, sweeping staircase gave way to a suite of rooms. I could see the edge of the registration desk and the friendly face of Valden. I was glad I'd arrived a bit early while it was

still quiet. I was quivering inside at the thought of all of the famous authors in the next room. On a daily basis I dealt with Henry, his extremely challenging behaviour, and all of the people involved in an autistic child's life; teachers, doctors, psychologists, consultants, disability workers, and so on. I managed to come across and fairly confident and competent even though I didn't feel that way. So why were my knees shaking at the thought of meeting these women? Surely I could hold a brief conversation with a few authors I already knew on Facebook? My sweaty palms and hammering heartbeat told me otherwise.

Then I had another reason to feel my knees go weak. Standing by the large bay window was Jimmy, coffee in hand, oblivious to the hustle and bustle around her. Last night had been wonderful, and I felt myself blushing at the memory of the kiss we shared. Would it be awkward the morning after? She looked around the room and saw me. I normally found eye contact deeply uncomfortable, but I didn't want to look away. She crossed the room with a huge smile on her face.

“Hey, Kerry. Great to see you again. Have you met anyone yet? Let me introduce you to some of the authors.”

She was so thoughtful and made it all seem so easy. Being by her side made me open up, feel able to cope with my social anxiety. I loved every minute of the day. It wasn't just about being at the conference and meeting my literary heroes, it was the pure joy of spending time with Jimmy. It was the laughter, enjoying listening to the panels, having

a raucous lunch with lots of other women. Imagine being able to talk to someone for hours and hours, where the time passes, and you don't notice. That's how I felt with Jimmy. She made me feel as if there was no one else in the room, no one else in the world. I couldn't help but tell her everything: about Henry, about how draining my life was every day looking after him, about the sleepless nights as he roamed the house singing, shouting, wide awake. I told her about the hospital appointments, the special communication unit he attended at school, the daily threats. I also told her how he could make me collapse in fits of giggles when he told me a story or a joke and how his smile could light up a room. Jimmy listened and didn't freak out. She *really* listened, and I knew she got it, got me. I'd never felt so connected to another human being in my entire life. How could that be after twenty-four hours?

“You’re a super-hero, Kerry. Don’t ever doubt yourself. Forget about other people and what they think.”

For the first time since meeting her, Jimmy looked shy. I could see she was struggling to meet my gaze. She reached over and moved a stray wisp of hair from across my eyes.

“You show more guts every day and deal with things most of us could never imagine. I’ve never met anyone with the strength you’ve got. I think I could really fall for you.”

Tears started to prick my eyes, and I couldn’t stop them falling. No-one had ever been able to see the real me. No-one had made me feel I was worth something. Until now.

“This conference ends tomorrow, but I’m not ready

to let you go.”

Her words shocked me. They were everything I wanted to hear. But could I hope that we could ever have a chance? Did fairy tales really come true?

“You know my situation, Jimmy. I want it too, but I come as a package deal. I’m not sure you want that.”

“Don’t you get it? I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you from the minute you walked in that pub last night. I made sure there was a spare seat in the restaurant beside me. I wanted you from the very first second. And everything you’ve told me has made me love you even more. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

And it was at that moment that I knew for sure, knew that no obstacle would ever keep us apart. This was the woman I had waited for my entire life, and together, we’d find a way.

FEATHERS

Jen Silver

Feathers spoke to me. It was 8:15 precisely. I was sitting just inside the bar watching the hallway, not really paying attention to the five-foot penguin dressed in a pink tutu standing on a slow-moving pedestal next to my seat. It was only a sculpture after all, part of Bristol's *Gromit Unleashed* trail. I'd seen many of the statues around the town the day before with families crowding around to take photos of their offspring.

When I first arrived at the hotel that morning and saw the Feathers McGraw edition dressed up as a ballerina, I thought he looked ridiculous. Another family arrived, and the two children posed for the obligatory photo, then quickly moved on, gazing at their phones to find the next one of Nick Park's famous animated creations on the trail.

Then I heard a voice.

“I can’t stand another day of this.”

I looked around. No one had passed in the hallway. There were no staff behind the bar.

“Help me down.”

The voice came from somewhere nearby. I turned toward the statue. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, I’m talking to you. Press that button on the wall to stop the fucking thing moving.”

I gaped up at the suddenly life like penguin. Had his beak really moved?

“Hurry up before someone comes. I don’t want to be stuck here all day again in this stupid outfit.”

Mesmerized, I obeyed and found the right button to press.

The pedestal slowed to a standstill, and Feathers hopped off, landing deftly on his flippers. With one quick movement, he shed the tutu and the pink wings, leaving only the headgear that looked remarkably like a pussy hat. The penguin held out a flipper. “Feathers McGraw at your service.”

I shook my head wondering if someone had spiked my morning orange juice. “Hi...I’m Lane.”

“Today’s your lucky day, Lane. A little penguin magic will make your dreams come true. First though, I need a disguise. Have you got anything I could wear?”

“Well...I have a spare T-shirt.” I pulled it out of my backpack: a Happy Valley Pride shirt I’d brought along in case I needed a change during the day. With the excitement of meeting so many authors, I was sure to spill something. “Will this do?” I held it up for inspection. Three colourful neon stripes on a black background announcing *Be Here, Be You, Be Proud.*

“Yeah. Cool.” He flipped it over his head and somehow it fit perfectly. “Where are you off to today? Can I tag along?”

“I’m going to a conference. You might not find it very interesting. It’s mostly about books.”

“Hey, I can read.”

“It might not be to your taste though. It’s all

lesbian fiction.”

Feathers tilted his head to the side. “What’s that when it’s at home?”

“Books for women who like women.” I said it with flair. It was something I was proud to be part of.

“Any with fish in them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

We walked toward the lifts and headed for the ELLCon registration desk. It didn’t open for another couple of hours. There was no line, but the organizers were already in position behind their tables. I touched Feathers on the shoulder to stop him before we reached the desk. “They might not let you in. You’re not a woman *or* a lesbian.”

Feathers studied me for a moment. His beak seemed to shift from orange to green and back again.

“I’m a non-binary penguin. And I’m sure I can fit in with the lesbeens.”

The woman at the table looked up from the rows of name badges she was arranging and smiled. “Welcome to ELLCon.”

I told her my name, and she quickly found the right tag attached to a rainbow-colored lanyard. I hung it around my neck. “My friend here would like to attend today but hasn’t pre-booked. I hope that’s okay.”

Feathers had adopted a suitably demure pose, flippers folded neatly in front of the shirt and head tilted to one side.

“No problem. I can make up a name badge. The fee for the day is twenty-five pounds.”

I pulled out my credit card and waved it over the card reader.

She looked toward my new penguin friend.

“What’s your name?”

“Feathers.”

She looked confused. “Heather?”

“No. Feathers. Just Feathers.”

“Ah, right. Sorry.” She wrote out the tag and attached it to a lanyard. “Here you go.”

Feathers executed a quick flip of the lanyard and looped it easily over the hat, head, and beak. “Thank you.”

I shook my head as we walked away. Had the woman not noticed that Feathers was a penguin? I knew that the character in the animation film was a master of disguise, but this was taking it too far.

There was a lot of activity in the vendor room with authors setting up their tables, putting out books and giveaway items. I started to peruse the books on the table nearest the door. Absorbed in reading the blurb of one that was definitely on my “to buy and get signed” list, I didn’t notice where Feathers had gone until I heard an indignant squawk at the other end of the room.

“I was only trying it on.”

When I looked around, I saw they were having a tug of war with Jenn Matthews. They had one of her brightly crocheted forearm warmers on one flipper.

“I like it.” Feathers held the flipper out to me when I arrived at the table. “Can I have one of these hats too?”

I addressed a flustered-looking Jenn. “It’s all right, I’ll pay for whatever they want.”

“Two of the flipper warmers and the hat.”

This penguin was going to clear me out of funds before I’d even properly looked at any of the books I

wanted to buy. Jenn was obviously thrilled to make her first sale of the day as I handed my card over. I had to admit that the crocheted beanie was a better look than the pink rubber glove from the ballet dancer outfit.

By the end of the morning, my head was buzzing with all the ideas generated during the panel discussions. I hadn't seen Feathers at any of the sessions and thought maybe they'd got bored and gone back to the pedestal in the bar. But then I spotted them loitering by the buffet table, examining the display of food.

"No fish. I thought lesbeens liked fish."

"What do you know about the eating habits of lesbians?"

"Not enough, I guess." They waved a flipper over the pizzas. "They could at least have put some anchovies on these things."

A tall figure approached and stood looking at the food. Feathers cocked a beak upwards. "Miss Archer, do you like anchovies?"

"Kiki, please. And yes, I do."

"Perhaps if *you* asked," said Feathers, "the chef would bring some out for us."

Kiki laughed and shook her head. "I'm not sure I have that kind of influence over the catering arrangements."

"Pity. Oh well." Feathers stuffed a slice of pizza in their beak and waddled away.

Kiki stared after the penguin. "I'm sure I've seen her before somewhere. Who is she?"

“Feathers. And it’s they. They identify as non-binary.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Kiki picked up a plate and started to load it up with food.

More delegates arrived and joined the queue. I selected a few items and found a place to sit in the conference room. Did no one else see Feathers was a penguin? None of the other delegates seemed at all bothered by the presence of a non-human wandering around.

After I’d finished eating, I returned to the vendor room where most of the authors were now seated at their tables. I bought three of the books on my list, and by the time the first afternoon session started, my backpack was a lot heavier. My reading list continued to grow, and my post-conference diet would be consisting of mainly Pot Noodles if I were to buy all of the books I wanted.

There was a buzz of excited anticipation as Kiki strode up onto the stage to do her reading. But before she started, a strange thing happened. The large European flag backdrop on the stage disappeared and was replaced by a vista of sweeping sand dunes. Feathers was now seated on the chair holding a microphone.

“Let me tell you a story.”

The room disappeared, and I was astride a horse in the desert landscape, a scarf wrapped around my face to block the blowing grains of sand. I haven’t ridden a horse since I was fourteen but this felt natural, as did holding the short bow with curved ends in my left hand. As my body adjusted to the rhythmical movement of the large horse between

my legs, I became aware of many others around me. A whole troop, all heavily armed with bows, arrows, and lethal-looking short swords—and all women. We must have been riding for some time, because my thighs were burning.

The horses slowed to a gentler pace, and a few words of the unfamiliar language registered: *caravan, Samarkand, gold*. I glanced around quickly. Was that where I was? Samarkand, Uzbekistan? Why would Feathers transport me here? And *how* had they transported me here? I had no time to ponder before another rider approached. She smiled, and I noticed her gold-flecked eyes as they gazed into mine. She shifted her bow into her other hand and grasped my free one.

The only gold that interested me came from the intensity of this warrior's eyes boring into mine... our night of passion reflected in the retinas that raked across my body now. The ache between my legs almost unseated me, and a flaring twist of desire shot through my core.

"Will you be leaving your quiver outside my tent again tonight?"

She had to shout for her voice to be heard above the pounding hooves. Her words were strange to my ears, muffled by her scarf, but I had no difficulty understanding the meaning.

I nodded and smiled, even though she couldn't see my mouth. She let go of my hand and spurred her mount forward. I urged my horse to keep up, every pore in my body willing the poor animal to go faster. Reaching the oasis with a chance to bathe and eat had been foremost in my mind until those golden eyes had reminded me of our lovemaking over the past

few nights. As I chased after her red cap weaving through the crowd of Amazons, my mind raced through images of our entwined limbs, smooth caresses, and explorations of each other's bodies.

Kiki stepped off the stage to applause, the European flag in place behind her. I glanced around the room. No one looked like anything unusual had occurred. I stood and a few grains of sand fell onto the floor at my feet. As I walked toward the back of the room, someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned straight into the gaze of gold-flecked eyes.

“That was some ride, wasn’t it?”

My mouth opened and closed but nothing came out.

She jutted her chin toward the stage. “It was a good reading.”

The reading. Of course. She couldn’t have shared my fantasy...the ride across the desert, the sharing of the bedroll. No, that wasn’t possible...was it?

Finally, I managed to nod and smile. “Yes, she’s a good performer.”

She pointed to her name badge. “I’m Kallie, with a K.”

“Lane.”

Kallie looked above my head. “Nice hat, by the way.”

“What hat?” I reached up, and my hand met a soft felt object. “Oh.” I knew without seeing it that I was wearing a Phrygian cap.

“I like it. Suits you.”

Her praise stopped me snatching the cap off my head. Sure. If I wanted to walk around looking like Noddy. It wasn't my idea of a sexy fashion item, and I doubted it would impress anyone. But I wasn't interested in doing that anyway, was I? I'd given up on romance after my last of a long series of failed relationships. Only the fictional kind appealed to me nowadays.

"Are you going to the dinner this evening, Lane?"

Kallie's smile lit up her face. The way she lingered over my name brought a smile to my own lips. "Yes."

"Okay. I'll see you there."

She moved ahead of me into the lobby. Her walk, the way she swayed her hips, seemed familiar. I shook my head. No, that wasn't real. We hadn't met before. I would *definitely* have remembered meeting a woman like Kallie.

Feathers was standing by the tea urn, a mug in one flipper and the other poised over the cookie jar.

"These lesbeens do like to eat. Not that I'm complaining. Well, apart from the lack of fish on the menu."

A chocolate chip cookie disappeared into their beak.

"Feathers. Did you...were you on the stage in there?"

Feathers swallowed their cookie and took a swig of tea. "Oh, look, there's Kiki. I must congratulate her on her reading. Like the headgear, by the way."

They didn't answer my question and waddled over to the author who was signing a book for someone. My mouth was parched, and I quickly drank down two glasses of water. The images from the desert still galloped through my mind. I reached up to snatch the

hat off my head before anyone else could comment on it.

And met air. No hat. Nothing. I stroked my head. All my hair was in place. Was I going mad? Both Kallie and Feathers had seen it.

I poured myself a mug of tea and wandered back into the vendor room. By the time I'd drunk it, I'd convinced myself that I must have dozed off during the reading. I could only hope I hadn't snored or dribbled with my mouth hanging open.

Something poked me from behind, and I turned to see Feathers glaring at me.

"There's a dog in here."

"Yes?" I shrugged, not seeing the issue.

Feathers looked indignant. "You didn't tell me there would be a dog."

And no one told me I'd be here with a penguin.
"I...I don't see why it's a problem."

"I hate dogs. They're always nosing into other people's business."

I frowned, a little confused by Feathers' reaction to the lovely golden retriever sitting quietly with his owner, author Jody Klaire. "That wouldn't be a problem if you have nothing to hide. You haven't stolen anything here, have you?"

Feathers' beak changed color a few times. "No."

I wasn't sure I believed them. When I glanced over to Jody Klaire's table, her assistance dog, Fergus, wasn't even looking at Feathers. "Maybe you've just had one bad experience, you know, with a certain other dog. This one is very friendly."

Feathers shook their head. "Hmmpf!"

They waddled off to the other end of the room

and stuffed down another chocolate chip cookie before engaging in conversation with May Dawney. Feathers looked more at ease talking to authors than I could manage. I barely managed to stutter out my name when asking one of them to sign a book.

The last two sessions of the day passed without any strange occurrences, and both were entertaining and informative. I was definitely awake and had no more desert dreams. Inevitably, I added more books to my list. Good thing I wasn't flying home, or I'd be paying for excess baggage.

There was no sign of Feathers at the end of the day. I'd been hoping they didn't want to join the group for the evening meal. I fell in step with the person I'd been sitting next to during the afternoon sessions.

"What did you think of Kiki's reading?" I asked.

"Oh, it was great," she said. "I love her books."

Was I the only one who saw what happened? It must have been a dream.

"Lane! Wait up."

Kallie caught up with me and took my arm. It felt natural. Warmth flowed through my lower regions.

"Hey, you found me." I felt my cheeks flush, but it couldn't be helped. All I could think about were bedrolls and our naked limbs entwined.

"Of course." Kallie pressed a little closer. "I miss the hat, though."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what to say to that. "I lost it."

"We'll find you a new one." Kallie winked and walked along beside me, past the bar.

I glanced in to check the pedestal I'd found Feathers on, and they were back on top of it, spinning slowly, still wearing my T-shirt and Jenn's crocheted warmers

and beanie.

I stopped and pulled Kallie to a halt as well.

The penguin's face came into view, and they gave me a conspiratorial wink as if to say, "See? I made your dreams come true."

"What is it?" Kallie looked over at the statue. "Oh, a Gromit character! I love those. They're magical."

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, they are." I guided Kallie towards the exit and sent a silent thank you to Feathers for bringing this Amazonian warrior into my life. "Definitely magical."

HOME FOR GOOD

Rachael Byrne

I called the service for someone to arrive at six p.m., and it's now almost seven. I'm not picky about who they send. It's about having company and something pretty to look at while I eat at a nice restaurant. I can then go home, or if I'm in the mood, have a little fun when we get back. They're always available at the extended time rate, so I keep it a mystery and make the decision closer to the end of the night. The girls aren't usually late though. If anything they can be early to show how eager they are.

My doorbell rings, and I open it to a stunning woman. She's standing in front of me in skinny black jeans, black stilettos, a white strappy top, and a black clutch. Her olive skin is highlighted by the white top, and her lips are painted fire engine red, hair hanging by her shoulder in blonde wavy strands. I'm speechless.

“Hi, Ms. Parker. I’m Dani from *Perfect Partners*. Unfortunately, your date for this evening has been detained, and I offered to take her place as your dinner companion,” Dani says and smiles.

I smile my cocky smile that I’ve perfected over the years. “Lucky me,” I say. I look her over from her toes to her gorgeous blue eyes. Oh, I’m so on for

extending this date to the bedroom. She puts up her hand to give me pause, as if knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

"Dinner is all I can offer, unfortunately. I'm the managing director and stepped away from my role as a full-service escort a few years ago," she says.

Okay, so maybe I'm not onto a winner, but if we leave now, we can still make dinner. And like I said, sometimes I just want the company. Tonight I'll make it about that. "No worries. I'm happy to just go for dinner. Are you okay for me to drive?"

She nods and heads to my car at the front of the house while I lock the door. As I turn around, I see that she must've been staring at my ass, because now she's staring directly at my crotch and has just realized that I'm packing. I'm also wearing dress jeans with a white T-shirt and leather jacket, but she doesn't appear to be noticing that. She's eyeing my cock pressed hard against my jeans. Instead of shying away—because I never do when it comes to sex—I walk directly to her and look her in the eye as I say, "Are you okay with me packing for tonight? If it's an issue, we can cancel and reschedule with someone else." I keep my tone is light and non-judgmental. She may have never seen a butch pack in public before or maybe, just maybe, she likes the idea of it.

"Erm...no. I mean, don't be silly. It's fine. It's just caught my eye...I mean, because it's bigger than I thought. Yes, that's it. It's bigger than I thought it would be."

The way she stutters out her words makes me chuckle to myself. This chick wants my cock, and

she's currently trying to convince herself that she doesn't want me to fuck her with it. But I saw her appreciative gaze. I've seen it so many times before. And I know *exactly* what it means. I may need to see where I can further this conversation at dinner.

We drive in silence the whole way to Heston Blumenthal's restaurant in Knightswood. It's called *Dinner*, and I've had it on my list to eat there for months. I work offshore on an oil rig so when I get home, after three months cooped up in the middle of the North Sea, I like to treat myself to expensive dinners with equally expensive dates. I don't do relationships...ever. The way I work this fits with my lifestyle of being gone for long expanses of time and then back for three weeks before I leave again. My co-workers have wives and struggle to make it work. How could I make it work with a girlfriend? I mean, take Dani, for example. If she was my girlfriend, I'd be scared to leave each time, worried she'd get sick of waiting around for me and find someone better who'd be there all the time. I'm not an asshole. I don't string women along. So I hire escorts and have a great time with them. Sometimes just for dinner, sometimes just sex, and sometimes both. But I respect them all. I treat them like beautiful ladies should be treated. So why am I feeling so conflicted about Dani? Why is she feeling a lot more like a proper date than just a paid-for date?

When we arrive, I jump out of the car and get the door for her. She whispers her gratitude. I place my hand on the small of her back, that place that shows everyone that she's my woman, if only for the night, and we walk into the restaurant. We're seated at a lovely table where we have our privacy but can still

see the hustle and bustle of the restaurant. I order a bottle of champagne. I've already decided that I'm interested in knowing Dani better, so I ask questions. She doesn't have to answer them if she doesn't want to. "So, why did you stop being an escort?"

She laughs quietly. "A straight shooter, eh? No bullshit for you. Okay, I'll tell you. When the company got successful, I didn't need to anymore. I now have fifteen gorgeous woman and six handsome men who work for me. Well, actually, fourteen gorgeous women. One quit yesterday, hence why I'm filling in."

She sounds hurt and a little angry about losing a staff member, so I decide not to press her further on that topic. "Did you enjoy it? The escorting, I mean."

"In the beginning, I loved it," she says. "I enjoy sex a lot, but I also enjoy going to nice restaurants and seeing plays. So yes, I did enjoy escorting, but now I love running a thriving business. I like making my clients happy by knowing who to send to make sure their evening is a pleasurable one."

When she said that she enjoys sex a lot, I didn't miss the glimmer in her eyes. This is the moment to get back to the question I really want to ask. "Would you ever go back to escorting for the right client?" I wait for her to answer, willing her words to be the ones I want to hear.

She looks around the restaurant like she's seriously considering how to answer.

"No. I'm looking for a relationship now. I'm no longer interested in sex for money when I can have a partner pleasure me, and I them, for free. I'm

looking for love over everything else though. It may sound crazy, but I want to have the wife, kids, and tree swing in the backyard.”

I watched her mouth as she voiced the word, pleasure. She’s something else. I want her in a way I’ve never wanted anyone before. I’m not the wife and kids type, but I can take her mind off it for one night. “The idea of me with a family doesn’t work with my career, so I choose to have my job, make heaps of money, and spend that money at your company. I’ll be upfront with you though, I’ve never wanted any other woman the way that I want you right now. You must have a number? An amount you would do it for one more time...say with me for example.” I lean in and whisper, “How much to let me have you for the whole night?”

Her throat strains. “You’re used to always getting your own way, aren’t you Ms. Parker?”

She’s thinking about it. I can practically hear the cogs in her brain turning the idea over. I shake my head. “I may be a little older than you, but please call me Jay.” I smile my special cocky smile for her. “It’s just one night. You can go back to searching for the fairy tale tomorrow.”

Is it possible she’s pondering the idea? After a silence that felt like it lasted a year, she sighs.

“Okay, Jay,” she says. “One night for free with me. No strings attached. But I call all the shots, and when I say when we’re done, we’re done. Deal?”

“I think I should pay for your time at least.”

“No,” she says and takes a sip of her drink. “As soon as I saw your cock, I knew I wanted it. I tried to do the professional thing, but honestly? I need

something else. I didn't only just lose my favorite escort tonight but my best friend. Emily was with me from the very beginning. I want to forget all that, if only for a few hours."

She's going to use me for stress relief. I can get on board with that.

"Anyway, this could suit us both. You can help me forget my escort issue, and I can give you what you've clearly been wanting since you opened the door to me. So, I'll say it again. Deal?"

I swallow hard. This woman is turning me on more with her honesty. I really fucking like her. It already feels like it'll be more than fucking. "Deal," I say. "Dinner then dessert back at mine." I wink. She rolls her eyes at me. This woman has me pegged. I'm screwed but in the very best way.

Dinner can't come fast enough. I hadn't planned this, but after fucking Emily quit on me, Jay was the only booking that I couldn't reschedule. I have a weakness for sensitive butches, and Jay falls one hundred percent into that category. She acts all tough and cool, but I've known plenty of women like her, and I know her sensitive side is currently being hidden very well by the mask she wears and her open bravado about the kind of lifestyle she leads.

The waiter brings our first course, and I try to take it slow. I try to eat like a lady's supposed to eat, all dainty and small bites. Jay wolfs her food down, and I wonder if that's how she likes her sex, quick

and hard.

“I have to use the bathroom,” she says and gets up.

I nod and watch her go, grateful for another chance to watch her ass. I knew the minute she opened her damn door I was smitten. Tight black jeans and that black leather jacket were enough to stop me in my tracks. As she locked the door, I had to admire the way her jeans hugged the well sculpted ass I’m enjoying again now. I was so embarrassed when she caught me staring at her ass, then crotch, but her confidence with it was such a turn on. I knew she’d be wearing it. I *hoped* she’d be wearing it. Because I know all about Jay. We keep files on each client. Just small notes so we can find them the best escort. Before I left to go to Jay’s house, I knew that she was courteous, caring, and doesn’t always have sex with the escort. I knew all about her job and how she hates it. Lastly, I knew she’s always packing and likes her strap-on to be treated as an extension of herself. If she wasn’t a client, she would be Ms. Perfect for me.

Jay returns, and I get to see what I’d been thinking about again too. It’s turning out to be a much better night than the day promised. “So, you were rather direct earlier about your package? Have you had people have issues before?” I ask, trying to not show my emotions, but I know she’s already aware of my attraction to her, so why bother hiding it now?

“I really like how direct you are.” She smirks. “Yeah, I’ve had issues before. I work with a bunch of antagonistic males on a big rig in the middle of the sea. I can’t wear anything that could lead to trouble. If I could, would I wear it all the time? Yeah, I would. So, when I’m home and strapped on, I don’t want to be

around people who have an issue with it. Plain and simple.”

I can see a lit bit of hurt in her eyes as she tells me. Something’s happened, and it’s made her double down and be stronger about the topic. She’s definitely something else, and I’m respecting the hell out of her for it.

Maybe this is a bad idea. There’s something about her that has me enthralled, but I can’t help thinking that when we part tonight, she’ll be taking a little bit of my heart with her. What am I saying? I’ve only just met her. This is ridiculous. I shake my head.

“Why are you shaking your head?” she asks. “Are you regretting our deal?”

Her words bring me back to reality. I look at her, and it’s like she’s heard my thoughts. “No. I’m just thinking...will it do either of us any good? I mean, we both want very different things.”

She looks sad with a side of panic and almost uncomfortable.

“I haven’t felt like this before, Dani. I’ve literally known you less than two hours, and I’m already feeling some deeper connection than ever before. I need to explore that, but honestly, I can’t promise more than tonight because in three days, I am gone again for another three months.”

Bam. There’s the sensitive butch I knew was in there, and she may have made me fall in love with her with that one little speech. I’m so fucked. “Take me home,” I say. “Right now.”

Before I know it, Jay has paid the bill, and we’re on our way back to her house. The nervous energy in the car is palpable, and I can tell this is either

going to be the best night of my life or it will destroy my soul.

I slide my hand up Jay's leg to the bulge resting between her legs. She gulps.

"I'll crash the car if you keep doing that," she says.

"Should I stop?" I say and give her the most devilish smile I can muster.

"Please don't. I just wanted you to know you're likely to be a crash victim." She winks. "Do you like touching my cock?"

I love when people verbalize during sex. It's like foreplay, and I love joining in and turning up the heat.

"I can't wait to put it inside me. It's so big, Jay," I say, rubbing it slowly. "You're going to stretch me open with it, aren't you?" The groan that comes from Jay makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. She's so turned on, it's obvious. She pulls the car into the driveway and unfastens my seat belt. She rushes around the car door, takes my hand, and leads me to the front door.

Once we're inside, she pushes me against the closed door. She kisses me in a way I've never been kissed, almost with reverence, and it's making me feel all sorts of things I don't want to feel. I pull back ever so slightly, and she looks at me with an awe I never expected. From her cockiness at the start of the evening to the stricken look on her face now, I can't handle the contrast. "Take me to bed, Jay," I say. "Please."

She takes my hand and leads me upstairs, and I wonder how often she's done this with another woman or with one of my team. When we reach the landing there are four doors and, as if she knows what I am thinking, she points to the furthest away door.

“That’s the guest room I normally use, but I want you in my bed, Dani. My bed. No one else has ever been in there.” She looks at the door in front of us. “What have you done to me?”

She smiles, winks, and pulls me through the door to her bedroom. She has one navy wall, and the rest are white. Navy and grey sheets adorn the bed, and there’s a big chair in the corner. The bay window has been repurposed as a day bed and is surrounded with books. This is her sanctuary, I realize. This really means something to her. My heart swells, and I fall a little deeper.

“This room is so you, Jay. The Jay with her walls down and her heart on her sleeve. I want you to take me, here on this bed where you sleep alone. Tonight, we have each other.” I almost choke on the cliched words, but somehow, they seem right.

The next thing I know she lifts me up, and I wrap my arms and legs around her. She sits on the bed with me straddling her, and she kisses me softly. Very slowly she slips off my top and kisses my chest. She unclips my bra and slowly slides it down my arms. I’m aching to be touched, aching to feel her hands on me. She keeps kissing my jaw, my neck, down to my breasts where she licks and sucks each of them for so long that I almost come undone.

She stands up with my legs still around her. I kick off my shoes, and she looks at me with a sexy smile.

“Later, I’m putting them back on you, bending you over the bed, and fucking you from behind. But first I want to go slow. But later...”

She gives me another wink before she lays me on the bed and takes off my jeans and panties at

the same time. I'm naked, and she stands there staring down at me.

"You're stunning," she says. "And also, so fucking wet."

She runs one finger through my wetness and sucks it clean. I hear the moan come from my mouth before I know what's happening. This woman is ruining me for anyone else. She starts to take off all her clothes, and I can see her body is all muscle. Her stomach looks hard, but her hips look soft. I feel myself getting wetter just watching her undress. Then it's just me and Jay and her very large cock between us.

She drops to her knees and begins to kiss my pussy slowly before sticking her tongue between my lips and dragging it all the way up to my clit. "Fuck, Jay. So good. Don't stop." I put my hand on her head and run my hand through her hair. I feel her smile against me before she sucks my clit between her lips. "Fuck. I'm coming, Jay. I'm coming in your mouth. Fuck..." My ecstasy rolls over me, and I slump back onto the bed. Holy shit, her mouth is the most heavenly thing I've ever encountered.

She crawls up my body, kisses me hard, and then puts her lips to my ear.

"God, you taste amazing," she whispers. "I can't wait to do that again. I'm sorry it was so quick, but I had to prepare you for my cock, baby. You still want me to fuck you with it, don't you?"

"Yes. Fuck me...please."

Jay smiles the most captivating smile and positions her cock between my legs. She pushes in slowly. Fuck, she's stretching me open and watching as she does.

"Good girl. You're doing so well."

I settle into the thickness and length. She knows I'm ready. It wouldn't take a genius to work it out.
"Can I fuck you now?"

I nod because I don't want to ruin the moment with words that won't match what I'm feeling inside. I watch her as she thrusts into me, slowly at first, but now faster and faster.

"Show me how you like to touch yourself, Dani."

I reach down and do as instructed. My clit is solid. I rub it fast and hard just like how Jay is fucking me. I can feel my orgasm building again, and I can see she's about to lose it too. We're both breathing heavily, and just as I am about to come, I say, "Come inside me, Jay, while you fuck me." And she comes with a loud grunt, and I follow straight after.

We're lying on the bed moments after, just looking at each other. And I say, with my heart on my sleeve, "How can I ever go looking for Ms. Right when you just ruined me for every other woman?"

Jay smiles a sad smile. "When you figure it out, I need you to let me know."

We hug, and I make a mental note to find a way to see her when she gets back. I *need* to find a way. What we just shared together, what she did to me: I want that again.

Almost three months later

I just got back from a twelve-hour shift. I lie on my bunk and look at the ceiling. Again, I'm

thinking about Dani and remembering every moment of the little time we had together. It's been two and half months since I said good-bye to Dani at my front door. We didn't exchange emails or numbers, but I know if I need to get her, I can contact the escort agency. I sigh. Escorts. Well, I'll never be able to be with any other woman again after that night. We made love until the sun came up. Then we showered together, ate toast, and drank tea in bed while snuggling until just before she needed to leave for work. We made no promises, but I could see the hope in her eyes. I packed my bags and left for Aberdeen a day later. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep in that bed without feeling the strain.

For the first time in my life I felt like I could be me, the *real* me with Dani. She completed me in ways I never knew I needed. Within twenty-four hours of her ringing my doorbell, I knew I was in love with her. I wanted to give her all the things she ever dreamt of. A wife, kids, the tree swing, and a fucking dog if she so desired. But how can it work when I work the way I do, especially if she wants kids? How could I be away from her and our child. Every time I left them, a little piece of me would die.

I fucking hate my job, but time and again I put it before my happiness. I could easily find a new job in London doing the same engineering gig but for less money. My house is free and clear. I have enough savings in the bank to last me a few years without working. Why am I doing this to myself? I don't need this. There are a million positions I could have in London and be near Dani at the same time. Just then I hear my phone ping. I look down and see a message, knowing—hoping—it's from the only person I want to

hear from. It's like she knew I needed a sign.

Why did you let me fall in love with you? Two and half months without your hands on me is too long. Dx

I stand up. Pace my room. Back and forth. Back and forth. I stare at the phone and type out what's in my heart. *Because I didn't want to be the only one falling. I love you too. One more week. Wait for me.*

Jx

I head out of the room toward the operations desk. I've got some important paperwork to fill out.

One Week Later

Aberdeen is fucking freezing. I flew into the airport this morning, and now I'm standing on the helipad after lying to security that I'm here to surprise my wife so they would let me in without a boarding pass. The things you do to get to the woman you love.

Love. I fell for Jay within hours of meeting her. But fuck it. Now I'm going all in. For the first two months she was gone, my heart and head fought until the two reconciled and joined forces to get my ass in gear to convince Jay she was my soul mate. It took me another two weeks to work out how to tell her.

I keep looking at the text she replied with that day. *Wait for me.* Like I wouldn't wait for that beautiful woman to come back to me. It's all I've been doing. *Because I didn't want to be the only one falling.* I chuckle. She was all suave and cool

when I first met her, and now the walls are down, she's crushing it with her words. *I love you too. One more week.*

So, it's been a week. I haven't heard from Jay bar one message to say when she was getting home. As soon as I knew the date and time, I formed a plan in my head. So here I am, waiting like she asked me to, but closer than she thought.

In the distance I see the helicopter approaching. It lands and the door slides open, and she jumps out with her duffel bag. God, what a sexy sight for sore eyes she is. She's running with her head down toward the door, then she straightens up and sees me straight away. She stops dead on her heels, and the most luminous smile stretches across her face. She starts running toward me at full force. She flings her bag to the side and lifts me up. My legs automatically swing around her waist, and she looks up at me.

"I love you so much, Dani."

"I love you too, baby," I say. "I think I've been waiting for you my whole life." And she kisses me right in front of everyone, making sure they know I'm all hers. She pulls back and looks at me.

"No more waiting. Just you, me, some kids, and that bloody tree swing you want so much. I don't want to miss you. So, I'm done, Dani. I'm home for good."

Her words make my tears fall. She's home for good.

THE FAN

Emma Nichols

“Did you read her new book?” the woman asked.

Kaye studied the woman’s light grey-blue eyes, her blonde hair set in a soft spiky style that highlighted high cheekbones, and her warm smile. “Yes.”

“Me too,” the woman said. “Have you met her before? I met her in London last year at the awards. She’s adorable.”

“Right.” Kaye felt tension twist in her stomach.

“Some authors can be really unapproachable, you know. I met one who looked down their nose at me like I was a piece of something they just wiped off their shoe. Luca wasn’t like that. She wanted to know who my favourite character was. Who’s yours?” the woman asked. “I love suspense, really. This is the first love story I’ve read.”

Kaye gazed at the rambling woman. *Who is my favourite character?*

“I like Leanne,” the woman said. “She’s sassy, cool, and hot.” The woman drifted, and her eyes glazed.

Kaye’s heart thumped, and she could feel the trembling through to her arms. The twisting in her stomach reached her chest, tightened, and she

felt light-headed. “Right,” she said, the sounds becoming muffled, confused by the irritation that seemed to consume her.

“What about you?” the woman said.

“Sorry?” Kaye said. “I don’t know.” The woman was looking at her with a frown, and she wondered whether she had answered the wrong question.

“I’m Rumi, by the way.”

Rumi reached out her hand, and Kaye took it. Rumi’s grip was strong, confident, and it reaffirmed the woman’s youth, or was it Kaye’s sense of vulnerability? Either way, there was a distance between them that could never be spanned through anything they had in common. It was like paying for shopping at the supermarket. You make polite conversation with the cashier, pay the bill, and leave. Except Kaye would imagine Rumi’s eyes for a long time. And that would lead her to remember her in more detail as another devoted fan competing for the attention of the woman she also worshipped.

“I’m Kaye,” she said, still feeling tense, focused on the light eyes that sparkled and highlighted the woman’s passion. Rumi reminded her of herself twenty years ago, filled with awe and excitement. Kaye felt older in her presence and less attractive. Luca would be drawn to women like Rumi. Who wouldn’t? *I don’t remember seeing you in London.* She realised the stupidity of the notion. There must have been five hundred people milling around at those awards. She’d been to all Luca’s events. She knew the regular fans.

“She’s hot, right?” Rumi said.

Kaye’s cheeks flushed, and the pressure in her

chest stilled her breath. Why couldn't she be the only one admiring of Luca Santos' sensuality? That wasn't just excitement in Rumi's eyes then. That was lust.

Christ, this is unbearable. Kaye's gaze shifted to the other women around the room. Did they all feel the same way? The animated chatter, a heady dose of anticipation and adoration mixed in a cocktail of perfume told her she would never be the only one. How could she be? Luca was famous, accessible, and loveable. Everyone wanted a piece of her, and in some small way, they all got what they wanted. *That* was the problem.

"Do you think she's like Leanne, in the book?" Rumi asked.

Kaye shrugged. Leanne Erving was a famous singer in Luca's latest romance novel, *Love Interest*. Kaye had seen the parallels with her own life instantly, the mother who had abandoned her in her early teens, and the father who had deserted them both some years earlier. Leanne had been strong and yet vulnerable beneath it all. Kaye knew that sensitivity well enough. Strangely, Leanne's talent had saved her in the story, given her something to focus on and escape her miserable existence. She'd been lucky though, finding a decent man who helped her achieve success. Some didn't fall into such caring hands. Kaye had convinced herself that Leanne's story was really *her* story. Luca was clever. She couldn't tell Rumi that though. She wouldn't understand. Rumi might think she was some crazed, obsessive fan.

Parts of the story had been changed of course, because it had to have a happy ending and couldn't be too dark. It was a love story after all. She understood

that that was necessary. All authors did it, but there were some characteristics in Leanne that Kaye didn't recognise, and she'd wondered if Luca had been trying to protect her from the others who might find out about her. In real life people didn't ride off into the sunset like in the book. Real life gets ugly, and so very painful.

The emptiness of that time tugged for her attention. It wasn't that long ago for the memory of the separation to have faded. Her therapist said the pain might never leave and asked her if she could accept that. She hadn't been able to answer him, but the memory that was coming to her now reminded her of the bitter pain of betrayal. He'd asked whether Kaye had got caught up in a world that had put *her* Leanne on a pedestal, elevated her to some god-like status, and turned her eyes to the false love that surrounded her? He had questioned whether *her* Leanne had run into the arms of another. "*What if you're mistaken?*" he'd asked. Kaye had been convinced of the affairs of course. That's how it felt. Jealousy, he'd called it. She didn't think of it that way though. Concerned. That was a more fitting word. That said, there would have to be others for *her* Leanne, because Kaye could never be enough. She knew that. She'd always known that. She'd tried to think differently, but the evidence stacked up. Other people always wanted what you had. Kaye had learned that when her mother ran off with a man and left her to fend for herself. Kaye hadn't even known his name, but he had taken the most precious thing in her life at that time, and Kaye hadn't known why. She'd never understood why. Why did people

always want what was important to her? Everyone wanted a piece of *her* Luca. She could see that too. Her Luca! Of course, people denied having an affair, they always would. Her therapist had even suggested people didn't belong to others, so Luca wasn't hers at all. It was best keeping some things to yourself, she'd decided.

"Maybe," Kaye said. Luca was...beautiful, she would say. Beautiful was way more than hot. Hot was so...she couldn't think of why the description didn't fit. Luca was so much more. She moved with elegance, carried herself with a wonderful blend of humility and confidence, and when she smiled, Kaye couldn't help but feel caressed by her. The intimacy of Luca's gaze made her feel like she was the only one. Luca was definitely the only one for Kaye. She felt it even now, in the soft warmth that filled her. Her heart fluttered at the image of Luca, with her, touching her. The sense of Luca's tender lips, hands trembling and exploring. The exquisite throb that drew her to near madness then left her wanting and needing more. *Her* Luca.

"She's coming," Rumi said.

The images vanished, and Kaye cleared her throat. The room quieted, and Kaye's eyes returned to Rumi, whose attention was now firmly fixed on the stage and the circle of light in the centre of the darkness. Waiting. Kaye's gaze followed Rumi's. Her heart raced, light and airy.

Someone must have spotted something, a small movement perhaps, because cheering whistles and loud applause filled the room on a wave, sweeping through row after row, and every woman rose to their feet. Kaye moved with Rumi but recoiled as she released a

shrill scream that drilled through Kaye.

“She’s so fucking hot,” Rumi shouted, clapping enthusiastically.

Kaye moved away from her hot breath, and the tension created a barrier between them that she had no intention of lowering in the next fifteen minutes. She fixed her gaze on the one woman deserving of her attention, the graceful movements, the positioning of the stool and opening of the folder, and the eyes that looked up for a moment and seemed to see right inside her. She felt Luca’s intensity as a shot of fire that spiralled down her spine and swirled in her stomach. *Damn you, Luca Santos, for making me feel this way.* She smiled at Luca and thought Luca had noticed her at the back of the room. Chairs huffed as the women around her sat, and silence settled over them all.

Soft, smooth like honey, Luca’s voice travelled to her. Talked only to her. Filled with tenderness, Kaye gasped for breath, waiting for the words that would come. It was her story. She knew it well, mouthed the lines in sync with Luca. The words faded, and the movement of Luca’s mouth came into sharp focus. The image of kissing those lips flew back into Kaye’s awareness. Later, she told herself.

“I love this bit,” Rumi said.

A sudden urge to tell Rumi to shut up and fuck off came to her in a fit of rage. But Luca’s sweet voice drew her back, and she became lost in her words once again. “Me too,” she whispered. Time stood still, the words from the book growing incoherent over her thoughts. Emotion swept through her as Luca finished her reading, and Kaye stood, along

with everyone else, clapping and cheering.

Kaye sat again and watched Luca move across the stage, focused on the sway of her hips as she descended the stairs. She always kept her long, muscular legs hidden from the world with sleek black trousers. Her cardigan covered an open-neck shirt, just a little revealing. Yes, she was older now, but that too was endearing. The fine lines that fanned her eyes as she smiled cause Kaye's breath to catch. There was something deeply sensual about it. The fluttering in her chest increased as Luca made her way through the room toward her, smiling warmly and shaking hands, taking the time to stop and chat, laughing, hugging. Then Luca's smile was on her, and their eyes locked. Heat flashed through Kaye, swept the breath from her again and vibrated low in her core. *I want you.* She wondered whether Luca felt the same way. She hoped she did.

Kaye noticed Luca's gaze shift to Rumi who was bouncing up and down like a puppy next to her and cold emptiness enveloped her. Rumi approached Luca, fawning. Kaye felt sure that Luca had noticed her. She had, hadn't she? The dull ache stimulated by images of being with Luca, the burning and throbbing, intensified. *I'm in love with you. Hear me.* Luca smiled, she thought.

"She spoke to me," Rumi said.

Kaye studied Rumi's flushed cheeks, reminding her of her own. Other's glowed too. In fact, the air was radiant within the aura of Luca Santos.

Kaye studied Luca intently. Her cheeks hadn't flushed as Kaye might have imagined. Luca remained the epitome of composure. It was expected of her. Did

experience bring humility and grace? Was it that, the subtlety of Luca's ageing, that Kaye found so profoundly addictive? Luca carried it well, whatever it was. Kaye groaned silently, the sense of Luca moving through her in waves of lust and desire, so powerful. *She spoke to me too.*

The chattering became loud, offensively so, and women filed past, rushing to get to the lobby like bees flocking to the honeypot. She stood to the side and observed them, as she always did, alone with her secret, her wildest dreams playing out as she watched Luca. Disgust would likely come to her with the antics of the other women, the sycophants. Pawing Luca in front of her, it made her skin crawl. They didn't know about Kaye though. No one did. Everyone thought Luca was single and available. Kaye enjoyed the feeling that she had something they didn't have. And that something gave her a taste of lightness as if walking in a protective bubble...and another thing. The sense of having something *they* all wanted felt too good to deny. She felt stronger with it. That was the feeling the therapist had said she needed to work on. That was the jealousy, he'd explained, and it only led to negativity. She didn't believe him. She didn't understand why he wouldn't want her to experience the power that came with such defining thoughts, and when she'd said she would try and control them, she lied. Should she feel sorry about not working on feeling good? She didn't. Not anymore.

"You coming?" Rumi said.

"Sure," Kaye said.

Rumi jumped up and bolted out of the room.

Another bee drawn to follow the crowd by the scent of the author who had recently walked past her.

The lights were brighter in the large lobby area. The aroma of coffee strong in the air, the hum louder with chattering clusters of women expressing their opinions about the book. She reads so well. My favourite story yet. Such depth in the characters, don't you think? I love the humour in it, so funny. I *so* fell in love with Leanne.

Yes, I did too. Kaye moved across the room and poured a coffee at the refreshment stand. She ignored the biscuits and stood away from the bees. She gazed out of the window to enjoy the chill in the stillness of winter and sipped at her drink. When she turned, she sensed Luca's eyes had just moved from her. Warmth filled her cheeks, and she smiled. Luca was looking at her and smiling too. Kaye sipped at the drink, holding Luca's gaze for what seemed like a very long time. She couldn't tell whether Luca shifted her attention unwillingly to another woman vying for her attention. She swallowed, drew in a deep breath, released it slowly, and scanned the room. Lobbies always looked the same: same pictures, same colour schemes, same furniture. No one was looking at her. No one noticed her. She turned to face the window and the frosty scene. Her pulse slowed, and her breathing returning to normal.

“Did you get a signed copy?”

Kaye turned and smiled at Rumi, whose hands were caressing the embossed cover of the book, so openly coveting the author. That fact settled within her differently now Luca had noticed her, and all was well. Rumi could want Luca, but Kaye had her. “Not yet,”

she said. “I need a pee.”

Rumi held the book firmly and smiled, her eyes still so obviously desperate for another glance at Luca.

“Sure,” she said.

“I’ll be back,” Kaye said, heading for the bathroom. She wouldn’t be.

Kaye gazed at her rouged cheeks in the mirror. *I look tired.* It had been an early start to the day, and she’d felt the anticipation of the event for weeks before. She always did, even though she tried to stay calm and balanced. Maybe the moments of uncertainty would always be with her at times like these. *Tired eyes.* The click of the door drew her attention. Her heart missed a beat, and she froze. Dark eyes locked onto her and then a smile, subtle at first, deepened and penetrated her heart.

“Hello,” Luca said.

Kaye sensed the shift in tone, so very different from her speaking voice. Deeper. More real. She tried to swallow as Luca moved toward her. Kaye leaned back and grasped the sink, trying to steady her trembling hands. “Hello.”

The door burst open, and two women entered.

“Luca!” they said in unison.

Kaye breathed deeply and let go of the cold porcelain. She left the bathroom, but not before she’d noticed Luca’s eyes linger on her.

“Hello, ladies.”

The door closed on Luca’s words, and Kaye walked in a cloak of tingling warmth back to the lobby. She gazed out of the window, thoughts of the kiss coming to her again. Her fingers were tingling

as she caressed her lips. And then the thoughts came to her again. What if the two women propositioned Luca? What then? Would she be kissing them right now? She challenged the sudden urge to return to the bathroom. *No.* Luca had looked at her in a particular way.

Maybe Leanne's happy ending was an accurate reflection of their story after all. Perhaps the relationships with the other women had merely been in her imagination. Had they? The therapist seemed to think so. He'd suggested her concerns were unwarranted, especially since they had texted each other so regularly and into the night. But, so many nights spent away from home, inundated with fan mail and the less-than-subtle advances at events like these. How could she not suspect something? Luca had lapped it up, hadn't she? Luca had craved the attention long before they had met. How could she not get sucked into the illusion of their desire for her? Luca had denied it.

This was her story. This was their story.

Luca had accused Kaye of jealousy and eventually left her. That had been a bad time, a really awful time. Not knowing what was going on had been somehow worse than suspecting the affairs. Kaye had been forced to watch Luca from a distance, just to make sure she was safe. But she'd accused Kaye of stalking, for heaven's sake. That had been a really, really dreadful time. She'd tried to explain to Luca that, with all those women, who knew what might happen? Some people were really crazy. It hadn't gone down well though, the watching. She wasn't a stalker. She didn't feel like one. She just cared, too much maybe, and she worried a lot. Wasn't that perfectly natural when you loved

someone so profoundly? And she did love Luca. She had since they met on their first day at uni. But she'd never felt that love in return, not in the way she needed to. There had always been others taking a piece of the woman she loved, not leaving enough for Kaye. Even the book readings in the Student Union bar had tested Kaye. She wanted all of Luca. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently, it was. Kaye understood that now. It had taken a lot of time with the therapist, but she'd come to believe Luca loved her, though it had been too late by then. Kaye had forced her to leave. The therapist had said, "Do you think it's possible that this is just a job to her?" He had asked the question in many ways, and she had become irritated, but it all came back to the same point. He was trying to show that Kaye was the problem, that *she* was the jealous one.

And then Luca came back. She came back, and they had talked with the therapist together. She had cried when Luca agreed to start again. And they had moved in together, and things had been better. The niggling sensation would never go away though. She had to accept that, but she knew how to handle it now. Didn't she? Women like Rumi tested her, of course. Those eyes.

"We'll be closing the lobby in ten minutes," the man said.

Kaye noticed his pristine white shirt, polite smile, and hair neatly parted. "Thank you," she said. She left the lobby and went to her room. Sitting quietly on the bed, stomach fluttering, she waited.

Click.

Kaye jolted.

The sucking sound of the door opening drew her gaze.

“Hello,” Luca said.

Kaye stood from the bed, the trembling sweeping through her stilled her thoughts.

“I’ve wanted you all day,” Luca said as she approached.

You came back. “Yes,” she said, watching Luca’s dark eyes seeing through her, sensing the softness of the lips on hers before their mouths met. The touch obliterated all concern, the truth revealed in the depth of the kiss. “You came back,” she said.

“I never left you, Kaye.” Luca smiled, swept the hair around Kaye’s ear. “I never left you,” she whispered.

Kaye nodded, and Luca’s mouth claimed hers. An overwhelming sense of certainty flooded her in a wave. And, at that moment she truly believed...Luca Santos was hers.

A COMET'S KISS

Clara David

I can't remember where we first met. Or when. I wish I could. I've strained my mind, pushed it back through time to try to recall the exact moment. For a while she was just another face in the crowd to me, grasping a homemade placard while she chanted her rage at this fucked-up world. But I remember when I first heard her sing...

The campfire was unnecessary given the warm spring evening. The countryside around us was starting to bloom, and the air was full of the scents of spring. The smoke from the fire weaved through the sweet tang, overpowering it before drifting off into the night. We may not have needed the heat, but the warm glow aided us as the sky darkened. There was no electric lighting in the camp, only an odd assortment of lanterns, a mix of oil-based lamps, and simple candle holders. Though I wouldn't publicly admit it, the flickering lights also gave our interactions a romantic edge. I couldn't help admiring the way they played on my comrades' features, bringing different aspects into sharp relief.

I tried not to stare at the angles and curves they illuminated. When I'd first started hanging out in activist circles, I imagined they would be full of queer people like me, casually opening our bodies to

each other as well as our minds. I was disappointed to discover this was not the case, or at least not for my generation.

The delicately dancing flames, low murmur of voices, and humid air lulled me. Soon the familiar opening chords of an acoustic guitar rang out from the other side of the campfire. It was joined by a chorus of voices singing along roughly and in questionable harmony, pausing every now and then to allow either the guitarist or singers to catch up. I was always torn between wanting to stop them destroying a classic or joining in with their laidback style. As usual I ended up doing neither, instead drifting off into a relaxed, unfocused state.

It took me a few moments to process that the music had stopped. Casting my eyes around our rough circle, I realized the guitar was no longer in the hands of the enthusiastic amateurs but had been taken by a woman I recognized vaguely from past protests.

Her frizzy hair was scraped back in a functional ponytail, and her full cheeks looked flushed even in the low light. She was cradling the instrument close to her body, bent over it in concentration, her strumming hand ready to strike. And then she started to sing, her voice rising effortlessly as she provided her own accompaniment. She had the soulful, unpolished sound of a natural musician, but I struggled to make out her words through the other voices around us. I didn't know the tune and suspected it was her own, an invitation into her private world.

No-one else seemed to be paying her much

attention as she sat on the fringe of the group, and she didn't appear to care. I watched her plump fingers slide gracefully over the strings and imagined it was my neck rather than the guitar's that she was caressing. Her soft edges were softened further by the dancing firelight. Transfixed, I rose and strode over. When I reached her, she lifted her eyes to meet mine. It was hard to make out their color, but their depth was unmistakable. How had I not taken more notice of her before?

For a moment we just stared at each other while she continued to strum gently, her mouth beginning to curve into a lopsided smile. Then the moment was over, and she merely nodded towards the ground. I flopped down at her feet as she started to sing once more, gazing up like an adoring fan basking in her idol's glory.

Reality crept back in as woodland debris started to dig into my arse. Then some drunk guy butted in to take the guitar, nudging her off her precarious seat on the fallen log. She landed against me, and I wrapped an arm around her to stop myself toppling over. My hand ended up directly over her right breast. Again we caught each other's gaze while I failed to breathe...or move in any other way.

"You know, in polite society you'd introduce yourself before feeling my tits," she said.

I dropped my hand.

She grinned. "I'm Amber, in case you're interested."

"Jax. And I'm pretty sure we're not in polite society."

"True. But now we're introduced."

And with that she took my hand and placed it back

on her breast.

We stayed in the clearing until the last of the natural light had left the sky, pressed together on the dirt floor. As we swapped stories of our activist exploits, we realized how many times we'd been in the same place at the same time. I was delighted to have found another woman-lover who wasn't afraid to declare it as separate from her political leanings. As much as I enjoyed experimenting, I didn't like to be an experiment even when it was in the good cause of smashing the patriarchy. Amber held the promise of something more enticing: someone who could want me simply because they *wanted* me.

She'd allowed my hand to move down to her generous thigh where I fondled her more discreetly. She didn't appear to feel any need to hold back and was soon casually stroking me. I tried to appear informed and sharp but frequently found myself stammering as she explored more of my body. Thankfully she didn't seem put off by my lack of eloquence. In fact, her grin hinted that it amused her to see me flustered.

As the encroaching night cooled the air, blankets were brought out and passed around. Amber fetched one and wrapped it around her broad shoulders before sitting back down closer to the fire. I felt a brief wave of distress that our intimate time together was over already, before I realized she was motioning for me to join her, her knees spread so I could squeeze between them. I settled into the warm embrace and even joined in when another group singalong started. Amber's strong voice vibrated though her chest as I rested against it, and it seemed

to carry on right through me.

Then her hands started to wander again. I quickly turned my gasp of surprise into a fake cough as she ran her hand up my thigh. I didn't dare turn around or ask what her intentions were, not wanting to draw attention to us. Unfortunately this meant another campmate thought it a fine time to strike up a conversation.

"Did you catch any of the speeches earlier? I heard there were some really strong women who got the crowd fired up."

It was so tempting to spit out a weak pun about the strong woman currently firing me up, but I resisted.

"Nah," Amber said. "I missed them. I was focusing on some...other preparations."

"Me too. Not that I was doing anything more exciting, I was just stuck at the back of the march stewarding."

I'd be damned if I could remember the intruders name right then, but I was pretty sure I knew her.

"I suppose someone's gotta do it." Amber's hand stroked higher.

I gasped again, this time attempting to mask it with an exaggerated yawn.

"Sounds like someone's had a long day. Hope we're not keeping you up, Jax."

Was she joking or had she seriously not clocked what was going on beneath our blanket? I was starting to not care.

"Yeah, we should let her get some rest. I better escort her back to her tent."

With that Amber stood up abruptly and pulled me to my feet. My legs were a little wobbly, and I was glad of the help. A chorus of good nights washed over me as

we headed off. Amber took my hand, and I happily followed her lead, looking forward to the relative privacy of my tent. But apparently, she had other ideas. She was heading deeper into the woods.

It was soon too dark under the shadow of the trees to see where to place my feet. Amber had brought one of the lanterns to help guide her, but the light from the single flame didn't even reach the ground. She marched through the woodland, and I had to trust she knew where she was going. I needed her to finish what she had started so would blindly follow wherever she went like a lovesick puppy. Though I didn't kid myself this was love. It was more urgent than that. The throbbing between my legs made my balance even worse than usual as I stumbled behind her.

We came to a halt in a small clearing. Amber let go of my hand to hang the lantern on an overhanging branch. It cast a faint light over her as she turned back toward me. She was a large, solid woman who could probably overpower me easily if she wanted to. The thought didn't exactly scare me...especially when I caught the look in her eyes.

After a few seconds I managed to croak out a desperate, "Please..." It was all she needed, and she rushed toward me, forcing me back against a tree. She pressed her mouth against mine, and I kissed her passionately, my tongue into her mouth to express my need. She tugged at my clothes, pushed my tee up over my unrestrained breasts, then ducked down to take a nipple in her mouth as her hands pressed me firmly against the trunk.

Unable to wait any longer, I managed to fumble

open my jeans and shoved them down over my hips along with my underwear. I shivered as my center was exposed to the night air. She took up my invitation, thrust her hand between my bare thighs, and I let out a loud moan.

The trunk was rough against my back, as she rammed me against it in time with her urgent exploration between my legs. My knees softened with each thrust as she slid inside me, and I wrapped my arms around her powerful shoulders to keep myself upright. The bark bit into my flesh, and the extra sensation helped tip me over the edge.

We spent that night pressed together in my tiny tent. After that I looked out for her whenever I headed to a protest, scanning the crowds for her powerful presence. And there was always a glint in her eyes when they met mine, a promise of further adventures.

“We were just teenagers at the start, of course. I doubt either of us thought it through.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know...” It sounded like a loaded question, one with a correct answer. “Never.” I couldn’t betray our memories.

“So how long have you been seeing her?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it seeing her. It’s too irregular for that.”

Nadine raised her eyebrow. “I would.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the sofa and widened the gap between us. It was the first time I’d told a partner about Amber, and I wasn’t prepared for an

interrogation. “The first time, we were eighteen, nineteen.”

“And the last time?”

The word caused my chest to constrict, the idea of it being our last liaison physically painful. That wasn’t what Nadine meant though. “Before I met you. Well, before we got together. At the presidential visit.”

“Of course.”

I looked up to find Nadine gazing at me intently, as if trying to read my mind.

“And the next time?”

“I don’t know.” I crossed my arms, and Nadine stared at me harder. “It’s not set. It depends when we’re next in the same place at the same time.”

“Okay.” Nadine leaned back and sank into the cushions. “You know, we have a word for someone like her.”

I flinched. Despite her polyamory, Nadine’s approval wasn’t guaranteed. Her other relationships were all much more...well, relationships.

“She sounds like a comet.”

The image instantly filled my mind. A vibrant ball of burning energy passing overhead, lighting up my world for a moment and filling me with fizzing elation. Yes, that’s what she was. I smiled and sank back into Nadine’s waiting arms.

“I’ve never had a comet in my life, but I know others who treasure them.”

“So it’s okay?” I whispered into the folds of her cardigan as I snuggled in close.

“You don’t need my permission, remember.”

Nadine tilted my chin with her hand, urging me to

meet her gaze.

"You don't need anyone's permission," Nadine said. "Except hers, of course, and your own. I can't tell you if it's right or wrong, and I won't."

I sighed. I may not have needed her permission, but Nadine's knowledge and acceptance of Amber was important to me, to us, to what we were together. "I've never been with her when I'm in a relationship with someone else."

"And how did that feel?"

I dropped my head and curled back into her. "Horrible. Like I'd lost a vital connection, like someone had pulled a cable out of me." The technological analogy snuck in, betraying me. When had I become a desk person whose main relationship was with their computer? Amber wouldn't approve.

"And what does that tell you?"

"You sound like a therapist."

"And you sound like you've got some thinking to do. She's obviously special for you to have stayed together all that time."

Nadine kissed my forehead, further softening the sharp statement. Part of me wanted to again correct the idea that we were together but another part glowed warm.

"I'd like to meet her one day, if you don't mind."

Her request was tentative, acknowledging it would mean a new path for me. The warmth in my belly grew and spread to my chest. To be able to introduce them, to not feel I have to deny either of them, how freeing might that be? To not shake my head sharply when Amber reached for me because I was with someone else, to not see the flash of hurt in her eyes as she

dropped back? “I’d like that.” My words fell short of how monumental it would be...

“So when will you see her again?”

“Hopefully soon.”

You’ve got some thinking to do. Nadine’s words echoed as I took out the fancy writing set I kept for one purpose. It was tempting to type a draft before I committed anything to paper, but the solid weight of the pen in my hand made me feel closer to Amber, the act of guiding it across the textured paper was like reaching for her. She was the only person I wrote to by hand, the only person I knew who deliberately lacked any online presence, and I barely picked up a pen except to ink my sporadic missives to her. I hadn’t told Nadine the method by which we’d kept in touch over the years. Surely even she couldn’t take a pen-pal relationship seriously.

On the desk in front of me a battered storage box overflowed with handwritten letters, all in the same scrawled hand that had become as familiar as my own. Twenty years of letters. Some expansive essays, some brief and enigmatic, some merely functional setting out dates and desires, some simply reaching out and reconnecting. It was true I’d deliberately pushed her aside while I’d been wrapped up in romances that had never stood the test of time, but she’d still been there for me through some of my darkest points. My comet, lighting up the night when I needed it most, burning away the debris of another broken relationship, family

tragedy, or failed career. She had always come back for me, and I'd always turned back to her.

So what did I want? There were times when I'd craved more than our brief moments together. I'd even fantasized about asking her to settle down with me, have babies and mortgages, and all those things we're supposed to desire. Even in my fantasies it felt wrong though, forcing us into forms we weren't built to take.

My pen started to glide over the paper, as if it knew better than me what I needed to say. I covered page after page with thoughts I'd never spoken, feelings I'd never shared. When I finished, I thrust it into the envelope and didn't give myself the chance to reread it in case I wimped out. Twenty years of writing to my lover. And yet it was the first love letter I'd ever written.

I marched to the postbox, breathing much faster than the short walk justified. Chest thumping, I pushed it in and let go.

The downside of snail mail of course was what the name suggested: the wait was interminable. I had no way of knowing if or when she'd received it. A tracked parcel, although tempting, would've seemed suspicious, and she was bound to question the need for her signature and confirmation of her location. No double ticks, no bobbing heads, not even a "mail sent." All I could do was wait and carry on as if nothing had changed. And pray nothing had.

"So where are we meeting her?"

Nadine seemed more excited than I was, given that

half my excitement had plunged into nerves and regret. Amber's eventual reply had been brief. Yes. Plus details of the next event she'd be at. But what she agreed to, or with, wasn't clear.

"I don't know. She usually finds me." I had grown to count on the way she'd suddenly appear beside me in a crowd, silently taking my hand, and I would turn to find myself gazing into those familiar deep brown eyes.

"Sooo, we wait?"

"No." I couldn't wait any longer. The weeks waiting for her reply had been hard enough. "She's performing in the pre-march rally in the square. We'll head over there and hopefully catch her before she goes on stage."

It felt good to have a plan, but it was easier said than done. The streets were already filling with protestors from all walks of life, so many more than when I'd first taken to the streets in anger all those years ago. It was no longer a band of seasoned activists. It seemed like the whole city had been activated by the high-stakes game that was being played by our leaders. The sight filled me with hope for the future but despair for my chances of finding the woman I was searching for.

We pushed through the buzzing throng, ignoring the dirty looks and tutts from those English born to queue. Thankfully the mood was positive. People were filled with purpose, allowing themselves to believe they might actually change things. It was hard to keep up that optimism when you'd been ignored so many times, but the energy of the crowd was starting to rub off on me. Adrenaline surged

through my veins as I pushed on, fueling my desire and determination.

By the time we reached the square, it was overflowing, but with a steady flow of movement in and out. I allowed myself to be squeezed through the gates in the narrow stream, holding Nadine's hand tightly to keep us from being accidentally separated in the sea of bodies. We ended up right in the middle, facing the makeshift stage. "I'm going to see if I can find her backstage. Stay right here."

For a moment, Nadine looked as if she was going to argue but said nothing.

"I won't be long, I promise. Love you." I pressed my lips to hers in a brief kiss and gave her a squeeze. She pulled me back in for a long smooch and wrapped her arms around me.

"Love you too. Now go get your girl."

The squeal of a microphone broke the moment and pierced the drone of the throng. Without any further introduction, a band started up. A bongo beat was layered with an energetic bass and blasts of rich melody from mellow strings.

And then that voice. The voice that flowed through my memories. I turned to find Amber center stage, looking so small yet not at all insignificant in the wide space. Her features had hardened over the years where mine had softened, but I would still recognize her no matter the distance between us. When she sang, I knew her with my eyes closed. It had been too long since I'd heard her husky tone, and I was taken back to that first time, transformed into her adoring teenage fan crouched at her feet, the rough dirt under my butt and the warmth of the campfire on my back. An arm curled

around my hip, and for a moment I believed it was hers. I opened my eyes to see her still up on stage, and Nadine by my side.

“That’s her,” she whispered.

It was more of a statement than a question. I nodded, still transfixed. The music was a mix of folk and something darker, with poignant lyrics. The words were hers. I knew her rhythm and tone. I’d witnessed them evolve and mature. I knew she still believed we could be saved, or she would go down fighting. Guilt tinged my appreciation, a bitter reminder of my own cynicism that although I still marched, my passion had dwindled as I’d settled into a more mainstream existence.

Their set ended with a fading beat, and the crowd roared their approval. They believed, and I was once again caught up in the wave of energy, washing away my feelings of guilt and loss. I recovered my voice and joined them.

Amber stepped back up to the mic, waiting patiently for the noise to settle so she could be heard.

“Good morning, London.”

Another roar enveloped us, and this time Amber raised her arm to squash it.

“This next song is something different, an answer for someone special.”

My heart pounded, and it seemed like the crowd parted, her words for me only. I let out a long breath, forcing myself to acknowledge they may not be. The drummer stepped forward and handed her an acoustic guitar, its worn state visible even from where I stood. He then joined the rest of the band sat

on the floor at the back of the stage, leaving Amber to perform alone. She cradled the instrument in her arms, took a few deep breaths, and then started to strum.

She sang about the fiery teenagers we once were, of desires met and unchallenged, of partings and meetings, of coming together again with an undiminished intensity. She sang about who we grew to be and the connection that stayed strong even as we moved in different directions, different worlds.

She sang for me, and one by one the crowd sank to the floor, taking the musicians lead, until it really was just me and her facing each other once more.

She sang of the lover who turned her away in the name of fairytale romance, again and again, but who she always welcomed back, the pain of separation instantly eased by the warmth of their embrace. I wanted to cry out apologies and excuses, how I thought I was doing the right thing, but the shame of my ignorance silenced me. My face burned under warm tears.

She sang of a love that had grown in a way we don't imagine, nurtured only by handwritten words and brief embraces, the joy of receiving news of her lover's life, of watching over them from the outside.

She sang of her comet, who passed through her orbit only rarely, who she didn't wait for but anticipated with deep longing as she felt them draw near. She sang of her wish that they would keep returning, that their passion would keep burning, for the rest her life.

It was all we both wished for.

HEART HALFWAY GONE

Robyn Nyx

If I said I'd been watching her for a long time, it'd make me sound pretty creepy. So I won't say it. A big part of my job is watching people, being observant, seeing the things others don't pay attention to. The little things. Mom used to say, "The Devil's in the detail, sweetheart." In other words, pay attention to the small things or you'll fail. Little did she know how true her words would be in my chosen career in forensic criminology for the police. But I digress. Back to her, back to my neighbor. She was far from the quintessential girl next door. She wasn't innocent and unassuming. She wasn't naïve and unworldly. No, this girl knew what she wanted, and she went out every weekend and brought it home. And I suppose that's where I saw the detail. There was no joy in her eyes: not when she would emerge from her car with that night's acquisition, not as they stumbled through her front door giggling and kissing, and certainly not the morning after, when she'd sit on the porch after the man or woman was long gone, sipping on a strong coffee, the aroma of which would drift into my house and announce her presence.

When Kristin Tate had moved in to the house next door two years ago, I was in a relationship

with another woman. Well, she was a woman at the time. Now she's in the process of transitioning to become a man. Lori and I had been together for three years, and things had gotten stale. She was a giver, and she just wasn't connected to her lady parts at all. She wasn't interested in receiving, and after a very short time, that was a problem for me. I'm no pillow queen. I need to see a woman's body taut and thrashing in the throes of orgasm. At the time, it didn't make sense, and I began to think it was my fault. Though I'd had no complaints before, I began to question my ability in the sack, but when she told me she was going to transition, I have to say, it all made sense.

Before all that, though, we invited Kristin around for dinner, and that's when my crush really started to gather momentum. She was beautiful, and no one could say otherwise. Long, wavy brown hair fell to just below her shoulders and framed a movie-star perfect face with the deepest brown eyes I'd ever seen. Soulful, thoughtful eyes that were hiding something, a dark pain maybe. If I had to guess, I'd say it was from the wounds of childhood, rather than any adult betrayal. She was about five-nine, with an hourglass figure, and she was always flawlessly put together, with a wardrobe straight from the pages of *Vogue*. She could've easily been a model, but instead, she was a mortician.

That fascinated me. I see a lot of dead bodies, and they're usually in a pretty messed up state. Heads smashed in, bullet wounds, acid attacks. Nobody has a handsome death. But Kristin's job was to make the dead beautiful. She was a creative with cadavers. I

found this out as we were all tucking into a medium rare, bloody steak, and she likened it to a thirty-three-year-old woman she'd been working on that day. It turned out it was the case I'd worked a week earlier. It also turned Lori's stomach, and she excused herself.

I didn't mind one bit. I wanted Kristin to myself. The way she spoke, her sharp, deadpan humor, and her insane good looks made me not want the night to end. We clicked, and because I'd only seen gentleman callers to that point, I was thinking, "This is the friend I've been looking for my whole life," not, "This is a woman I could spend the rest of my life with." Because who says that after spending a few hours with someone? That kind of shit is for the realms of the Hollywood movies, isn't it?

It went on like that for the next eighteen months. Dinners for three turned into park runs and gym sessions for two, into lunch and coffee for two, into movie nights for two, while Lori constantly found reasons to remove herself with extra shifts at the fire station. She didn't seem to care that Kristin's many one-night stands had gone from an exclusively male contingent, to a 40/60 male-to-female ratio.

I cared, though. I cared a little too much, and Lori started to notice.

"Why do you give a shit how many people she fucks, Dak?"

"I don't want her to end up as one of my cases, I guess. She's a friend, and I'm worried about her."

"If she were a guy, coming home with different partners every weekend, would you be worried for him?"

"Maybe."

“Bullshit. You think it’s okay for guys and butches to fuck around but not for ultra femme girls to do it.”

Lori called it right but with the wrong logic. If Kristin were a guy, I wouldn’t be worried because I wouldn’t have an immense infatuation for him, not because I had double standards about stud and slut-dom.

Soon after, Lori moved out. She wanted to be a guy, and that guy wanted me to be straight. That was never going to happen. Strange man parts held zero appeal even when I was a teenager playing with the boys trying to deny that I really wanted to play with the girls. I soon found out I preferred the softer give of a female body, and I never looked back.

Kristin said she wasn’t surprised and that I should forget about that relationship and find someone who deserved me. I was fast discovering she was the one I wanted to deserve, but she had no interest in me beyond our rock-steady friendship, and more importantly, no interest in love. She made it clear she was happy with uncomplicated, short-term trysts, but she never really explained why. She’d simply say, “I get my companionship from you, and my sex from strangers. I’m in hog heaven.”

But what if you got both from me?

“So what’re you doing here tonight?” It was Friday night. For the past two months, Friday night had meant a short foray to the *Titty-Titty Bang-Bang* club, and home by midnight with a gorgeous woman in tow. The house lights went on, and they didn’t go off until sunrise, around the same time as she kicked the woman out of her house.

“It’s time for you to get back out there. Get your tight ass upstairs and put on your sexy-boi black jeans. I want to see your engineer boots and the tightest white T-shirt you own. Let’s show off those biceps that can probably pump like a jackhammer.”

Her eyebrows raised wickedly, and I wondered if she liked it hard and fast. It didn’t seem like a bad idea. So I had a crush on my best friend. Who hasn’t at one time or another? Going out with Kristin as my wing-woman would be good for me. I’d just have to keep myself in check when the inevitable happened and she hooked up with some hot chick and headed homeward. I’d convinced myself that I liked having her as my best friend more than I’d enjoy fucking the life out of her for one night. We wouldn’t be able to go back to a friendship after that. My heart would be halfway gone the moment her lips pressed against mine and truly lost when her body contorted in the throes of ecstasy at my hand. I’ve never failed to fall in love with a woman after I’ve made them come. Even if the love only lasted a few weeks, I’m a hopeless romantic. I have been my whole life. Adulthood and the incestuous world of lesbianism had failed to beat it out of me.

I flexed my right arm. She was right, my biceps could go like a jackhammer if that’s what my lover wanted. Just as easily though, I could go gently for hours. It was one of the other reasons I hit the gym so often. *Was that a look of lustful appreciation I just saw?* I dismissed it as quickly as it disappeared from her gaze, though I wondered what it might be like to wake up and look in those beautiful eyes every morning.

“Okay, I’m up for that. What if we end up wanting

the same woman?"

"You can have first dibs. Or we have her together."

She gave me that same wicked look, and I was glad I was holding onto the edge of the sofa, or I might've pooled into a gooey mess right there. I wanted her. Badly. But I couldn't share. I'd had plenty of threesomes in my twenties, but the thought of having to watch while someone else's hands were on her was too much. I returned her look with disingenuous interest and had to hope the situation would never come to pass.

Titty-Titty Bang Bang lived up to its name. Lori had kept me off the scene for the duration of our relationship on the advice of a friend who'd said, "If you want to keep her, stay away from every other lesbian." It seemed like overkill, as if lesbians couldn't be trusted to be around each other without falling desperately in love and calling up for a U-Haul the next day.

The club was wall-to-wall with women of every size, shape, color, and style. I don't really have a type. There's something to love in almost any woman, but tonight I was looking for the opposite of Kristin to really take my mind off her. I wanted a hard, short-haired, cute boi-toy. I hadn't decided if I'd want to take her home. That might depend on how Kristin's night went. Maybe I'd feel the need to compete. Maybe I wouldn't.

"What're you looking for? Not another super

butch, I hope?"

Kristin's question came as if on cue. *You hope? Why would you care what I go for?* "I want a hot and hard, short-haired gym bunny."

"So you want to fuck yourself?"

She winked and sipped her cocktail, as she scanned the room for whatever it was *she* was after tonight. *She thinks I'm hot?* I took a swig of my long neck before answering. "No. What about you?"

"I think you've inspired me. Your parameters seem quite appealing."

It wasn't long before she'd spotted a match for our requirements. A beautifully handsome little dyke was strutting her stuff on the dance floor, and the girl had moves. Kristin and I looked at each other.

"You can call dibs...or there's my other suggestion."

The lewd suggestion hung thick in the air, and my stomach twisted. I'd look a fool if I didn't go for the threesome she seemed to be engineering. She'd know something was wrong. *Could I go through with it?* If I concentrated just on the little one to the exclusion of Kristin... If I ignored the soft curves of her flawless figure and stuffed lube in my ears when the third wheel was making Kristin moan in ecstasy...then, maybe.

"Or we could let her decide?" I went for the soft option. The object of our leering would be sure to pick Kristin over me. She was fabulously feminine, the kind of woman straight guys invented the ridiculous phrase, "*What a waste,*" for. The most perfect example of a woman ever to grace the luxurious confines of a pair of Jimmy Choo's, and that kind of woman is a wet dream walking.

"Let's go introduce ourselves, stud."

I liked the way she called me stud. I wanted to hear her call me all sorts of things: baby, handsome, or my love. Not friend, buddy, or pal.

I wanted to go back to the bar the moment I found out the girl's name was Tammy. Too country for me, Kristin could have her. But she wouldn't let me leave and pulled me in to make a Tammy tortilla wrap. I played along and danced *Basic Instinct*-style to Tammy's ass, while Kristin kissed her and whispered in her ear. I soon realized my jaw and fists were clenching. I wanted Kristin whispering sweet somethings into my ear and not just on the dance floor. In the bedroom, the kitchen, on the couch, in the living room.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax into the beat of the music. I was being silly. Kristin was my friend, and I should put my stupid two-year crush to rest. If she were interested at all, she would've made it clear as soon as Lori was out of the picture. But she hadn't. Because she liked to keep things simple, and she wanted me as her best friend. Wasn't that better? The sexy strangers only held her attention for a short time, but she spent hours with me. Talking about everything from politics to sex toys, from books to recipes. I shared her real life, not just her night life at weekends. I was getting something special. Something she didn't give to anyone else.

I pulled away from Tammy and shouted my excuses to Kristin. "I don't feel so good, Kris. You take this one. Tell me all about it tomorrow afternoon." I grinned the practiced grin I'd been giving for a while now to broadcast my absolute approval of her pussy prowess. She narrowed her

eyes suspiciously but nodded, and predictably, Tammy pulled her back down to suck on her face. I couldn't watch. Time to go.

I undressed and settled onto the sofa with my trusty silver bullet vibrator. I imagined Kristin letting herself in, having come to the conclusion that I was the one she'd been looking, extensively, for. She'd get naked, pull the lightweight comforter from my body, and rake her fingernails all over my skin. I'd bring her down to the bed and finally get to kiss her. It'd be electric, everything I'd fantasized it would be. A delicious blend of soft and hard, Kristin would take control. She'd wrap her hands around my wrists and not allow me to touch her as she pressed her breasts against my chest, bit my neck, snaked her tongue into my mouth, and gave me a hint of what she would do to my clit.

That's all I needed. The combination of the intense buzz of my freshly charged bullet and the thought of Kristin's naked body pressed against mine was enough to give me a quick, semi-satisfying orgasm. I closed my eyes, trying hard to imagine how she'd feel in my arms, with her head on my chest as I ran my fingers through her soft hair. The pulsating of my pussy slowed, and I pressed my finger inside to see how wet I was. I bet Kristin could make me come like a waterfall. There was nothing like sex with the woman you loved. If I wasn't in love with the woman sharing my bed, I simply wouldn't allow her to touch me. My orgasm was reserved for the one who had my heart and mind. Kristin. Right now, she had both, but she wasn't about

to give me anything other than a tight, friendly hug.

Sufficiently sobered, I got to my feet and went to bed. I wanted to be asleep so I didn't hear her return with the cute boi-toy in tow.

Saturday mornings, caseload permitting, were for washing down my beloved truck, and it was a beautiful day for it. I'd woken at six a.m. refreshed from a deep sleep, even though dreams of Kristin fucking me had tormented every second of it. I was enjoying the warmth of the morning sun on my back, bent over lathering the alloys, when I heard someone whistle.

"Nice ass."

Tammy. I looked up and acknowledged her with the universally recognized lesbian nod before going back to my wheels.

"Shame you went home last night. I was looking forward to watching you in action." She leaned over the fence, rested her head on her hands, and flashed a smile.

I nodded, not wanting to encourage the conversation and wishing I'd not come out so early. I'd assumed Kristin would've kicked her out much sooner. The fact that she hadn't riled me even more, because it probably meant the little butch was a damn good lay.

"Do you two always hunt together?"

"Nope." I moved around to the next wheel, and she cleared the fence with an athletic jump. "Is there something you want?"

She pushed her hands into her jeans pocket and stood at that cocky push-your-crotch-out angle.

“She was about to fall asleep when I left. Why don’t you and I go back for a little house invasion role play?”

“I don’t think so.”

She raised her eyebrow and gave me a sideways glance as if she suddenly understood the situation. *She didn’t.*

“You’ve never fucked her, have you?”

“You should go.” *Before I lose my shit and pound you into the ground.*

She began to nod. “And *you* should go fuck her. Boy, she takes it like a high-class whore.”

Shut the fuck up.

“I got tired, but I’ve got a feeling with your arms, you wouldn’t have that problem.”

Get the fuck off my property before I toss you like trash.

“We could take turns.”

I stood up quickly, and she took a step back. The look on my face must’ve told her she’d crossed a line, because as I started to walk forward, she began to scuttle backward. “You really shouldn’t speak about a lady like that.”

She snorted. “She’s no lady.” She tripped slightly as she backed down my drive and started to look a little worried.

I cracked my fingers and stretched my hands, as if I were preparing for exercise. To exercise my fist on her face.

“What’s your problem? Are you her knight in shining armor?”

“Fuck off, pretty boi, and don’t even think about

coming back.”

She reached the sidewalk and turned to walk away. She tried to look disaffected, but I could see the tremble in her hands and face. Disrespectful little butch didn’t know how lucky she’d been, getting her hands on a woman like Kristin.

I turned back to my truck and looked up at Kristin’s bedroom window. I thought I saw the curtain move back, but the window was open, and there was a light breeze in the air. She’d be fast asleep. No doubt she’d fill me in on all the lurid details over coffee. I sighed and carried on washing my truck. Maybe I could work out some of my frustration on it. The lawn needed doing and so did the guttering. That would be my new plan. Wear myself out doing chores so I didn’t have the energy to think about what it might be like to soap Kristin down in the shower after we’d gotten sweaty at the gym. Or wonder how good it could feel to fix her creaky porch door while she looked on longingly, waiting for me to pick her up in my arms and carry her to bed.

Kristin came over for coffee, glowing with that freshly fucked look, but unusually, she didn’t share the details of her conquest. I’d been running the morning’s confrontation over in my head, and every scenario ended with me knocking the crap out of Tammy. It wouldn’t have been a healthy way to process my feelings for Kristin, but it sure would’ve felt good.

As I watched her lips caress her cup and sip at the coffee, I wondered about telling her how I felt just to get it out in the open. Maybe that would help me get over the enigmatic wench. She'd probably laugh it off, and I could move on and start looking for a new woman instead of fantasizing daily about the unattainable one that lived next door.

My work phone ringing stopped me following my train of thought to fruition, and for once, I was thankful a crime scene had come my way. It'd probably be less bloody than the mess my heart would be in if I confessed my feelings to Kristin, and she stomped her high heel right through it. Repeatedly.

"I have to kick you out and go to work, so I guess I'll see you tomorrow afternoon." I tried to be nonchalant. Her ratio was holding steady at 40/60, so I knew tonight would be a man night. I tried to push the vivid images of her with a guy on top of her to the very deepest recesses of my overactive mind. I'd been trying to figure out if I disliked the thought of her with a man or a woman the most. At least a man could offer her something I couldn't, though I was damn accomplished with a silicone cock strapped onto my hips. A woman could offer everything I had. I think I was coming around to the idea that women were the most offensive, which was probably why I'd had to restrain myself from tearing Tammy to pieces this morning.

Kristin got up from her chair, came around, and kissed me on the forehead.

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

And she left.

"Work. Dead bodies. Gunshot wounds."

Concentrate.”

I followed Kristin outside, got into my shiny steed and drove away, wondering why she’d kissed me on the forehead, wondering why she’d kissed me at all. Not that I minded, obviously.

Ten hours later, I pulled into my drive and sat for a few moments with my head resting on the steering wheel, trying to cleanse my mind of the crime scene and get back into a more pleasant head space.

Headlights dipped into Kristin’s drive. I looked up to see a guy, built like a tank, jump out of the car and rush around to the passenger side to open the door. *Nice to see chivalry’s not dead.* I hunkered down to avoid an awkward encounter with Kristin and her Hulk-like one-nighter. Kristin stepped elegantly from the car and rose to her full height, but she was still a good few inches shorter than this guy. The full moon lit her face beautifully. I’d like to see her howl in ecstasy on a night like this, but at *my* hands and for *my* loving touch.

She smiled and said something to him, but she didn’t look comfortable. Was she giving him the brush-off? I couldn’t see his face, but suddenly he seemed to grow a few more inches. He pulled her into him and kissed her. I wished I’d gotten home a few minutes earlier and didn’t have to see this.

“No!”

Kristin shoved him, but he barely moved. Instead, he grabbed her by the hair and tried to kiss her again, as he shoved her up against the car.

I quietly opened my car door, not yet sure if these were the kinds of games she liked to play with her weekend companions. I'd seen her rough-housing with a few before but nothing quite like this. When she shoved him away again, I saw her face, and it was clear she wasn't enjoying this at all. He slapped her and started to pull her toward her house.

"I'll show you what happens to a prick tease," he growled with a menace in his voice that wasn't play-acting.

"I think the lady made it clear you should go home, buddy."

He peered at me as I sauntered into his view.

He laughed. "What do you want...dyke? Fuck off."

I looked at Kristin, and I could see the relief and panic in her eyes. "It's going to be okay, Kris." I jumped over the fence and started to walk toward them.

"Really? You're gonna make me put you down?"

He pushed Kristin to the ground, and she cried out. That made me really want to hurt him. I stopped when I was a few feet away. "I'm a cop. Get in your car and drive away. Final warning."

"Sure you are," he said.

There was a look of absolute disbelief on his face that quickly turned into a viciously ugly visage as he came forward to attack. I parried his clumsy fist, stepped to the side, and smashed my balled hand into his solar plexus with all my force. The sudden and painful pressure on his nerves and diaphragm dropped him to his knees immediately, and he struggled to breathe. I grabbed him by the back of his jacket and threw him on the hood of his car. In seconds, his wrists were locked behind his back in my handcuffs.

“You have the right to remain silent.”

He was barely breathing, let alone able to speak. Kristin came to me, and I pulled her into a tight embrace. I felt her sobbing quietly. It broke my heart and made me want to do serious damage to the guy that made her cry. “It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you.” *Baby*. It rolled off the tongue a little too easily, and I wanted to take it back. I hoped she didn’t really hear it, or that she’d take it as something comforting anyone would say in this situation. I pulled out my phone and called the station, told them what happened, and asked them to send someone out to pick this piece of shit up. I ignored his whining and threats. They were just white noise.

Kristin stayed wrapped up in my arms while we waited, and I couldn’t help but feel how good she fit against me. We didn’t have to wait long before a squad car arrived, and we both gave a quick statement. Kristin didn’t want to press charges, but I made sure they took him for an overnight stay for assaulting a police officer. It was the least he deserved.

“Let’s get you inside, baby.” *Shit, there it is again*. I started to walk her to her front door, and she held on to me, obviously not ready to let go just yet. When we got to the door, she unlocked it and invited me in.

“I need a drink. Do you want one?”

Her voice was a little shaky.

“Sure. What’ve you got?”

“I’m thinking a strong bourbon. Simple, and a quick hit.”

“Okay.” This time I managed to hold back any

term of endearment.

She came back from the kitchen with a full bottle and two tumblers chocked with ice.

“One drink?” I smiled at her and hoped she’d start to relax. *You’re safe with me, baby. I’d never let anyone hurt you.*

“One bottle.”

She laughed, and I saw the fear had already started to fade. “I love hearing you laugh...I love to see you smile.”

She sat down next to me and handed me a drink.

“Why?”

“Because you’re never more beautiful than when you’re happy. You’ve got the most adorable smile.”

What are you doing? “Gorgeous cheekbones, and your eyes look full of life.” *Stop it.* “You’re so damn beautiful, it’s painful.”

“So are you.”

Her reply was instant. Natural and unforced. She reached up and caressed my face.

“Thank you for tonight. Thank you for saving me.”

“Anytime, baby.”

She smiled, shyly, and looked away for a second, before coming back to me. Her eyes were shining brightly, full of something. Full of promise?

“I like when you call me baby.”

Bam. She moved in for a kiss, and I’d imagined it all wrong. I didn’t have the creativity to fantasize something that could feel that amazing. Everything around me faded. I didn’t know whether I was sitting or standing. I could no longer feel the couch. All I could feel was her lips on mine, her tongue gently probing into my mouth, the feel of her warm hands on

my skin.

I pulled away, not wanting to take advantage of her vulnerability. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I want to. I’ve wanted to since I first moved in two years ago, but you were with someone.”

“Why didn’t you say something when Lori left?”

“I didn’t think I was your type. Not judging by Lori, or your previous partners, and not looking at the boi-toy you wanted to play with last night. I didn’t think you were into femmes, so I stayed away. But then I saw what happened this morning, and I heard you defending my honor.”

She kissed me again, and it felt like my body lifted from the sofa.

“I saw you scare the shit out of that girl, and I started to wonder if maybe you did like me. And when you put that guy down the way you did, I figured I just had to take my chance and give it a shot. You’re so fucking hot.”

I shook my head. “Damn. I don’t have a type, baby. I should’ve made a move. I just figured you liked variety and weren’t interested in settling.”

“Settling? You’re not the kind of person someone settles for. You’re the kind of woman I’ve been searching my whole life for. You’ve been right in front of me, and I didn’t even know it, really. We wasted so much time...”

I put my glass down, slipped my arms around her and stood, loving the feel of her body in my arms.

“Then let’s not waste any more. Let me take you to bed.” Your eyes half-lidded and you moaned into my neck. I took that as a green light and began to carry you upstairs...

FATED FALLOWS

Brey Willows

Broken sunlight filtered through the heavily treed canopy, creating a strobe light effect as the car moved slowly down the precariously narrow road, deep in the Rocky Mountains.

Callie Duncan closed her eyes and shifted in her seat once again, trying to avoid the strange way the light hit her eyes and threatened to give her a headache. If it weren't for the wispy streamers of light between the trees, she'd have no idea what time of day it was. Not that it mattered. She was here, and there was no leaving what looked like the most remote place on the planet. There were no signs of life anywhere. No houses, no people, not even any birds. For the millionth time in a few days she regretted taking this job.

Leaves spun in a small gust of wind as the car passed them, and she felt a shiver up her spine. *Don't be stupid. Desolate doesn't mean dangerous.* In fact, the desolation of the job was what had enticed her in the first place. She'd been partying hard in her New York and San Francisco playgrounds, enjoying every moment of a new body on top of her and the rush of another designer drug night after night. But after one too many tabloid pictures, her father had decided it was time for her

to make it on her own and stop embarrassing the family. No money meant no more parties.

Resting her forehead against the cool window, she sighed heavily and tapped her Jimmy Choo sandal impatiently. “Is there a really low speed limit around here or something?” she asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” the driver said, her thick eyebrow arching slightly. “There are lots of deer in these parts, and if we wreck the car by hitting one, it will be quite difficult to get supplies and such.”

Callie rolled her eyes and stared back out the window, irritated by the woman’s strangely formal speech pattern and condescending tone. But, finding her irritation level rising as the silence stretched out, she said, “So, what exactly am I going to be doing for this Fallows person? I mean, the job description said secretarial and personal assistant duties, but what does that mean?”

She met the driver’s jade green eyes and was startled at the depth and hardness of them. Her lips were pressed firmly together, giving her face a decidedly unfriendly air. She definitely wasn’t someone who’d fit into Callie’s New York playground.

“Master Fallows will tell you what you should know.”

“*Master* Fallows? What the fuck is that about? Who goes by Master anymore? Oh god, is it some kind of weird sex crap?” Callie asked, snorting.

The driver’s lips pressed together even more firmly, so tightly they were nearly white. Her hands clenched on the steering wheel, but she said nothing.

“Whatever,” Callie mumbled, looking out the passenger window again.

Half an hour later they entered a clearing, and the barely there road they’d been on for ages led straight to an enormous house on a hill. Well, not a house, really... “Is that a castle? Seriously?”

“It is Master Fallows’ home. Castle Fallows has been in the family for hundreds of years. I would appreciate it if you did not make light of it.”

Callie’s head moved slightly as she silently mimicked the driver’s speech.

They pulled into the circular drive and stopped at a marbled path that led to a gargantuan front door, giant metal door knocker and all. She got out and started up the walk, stopping only when the driver cleared her throat. She was standing next to Callie’s suitcase and looked down at it pointedly.

“What? Don’t you have a porter or something? I mean, it *is* a castle, for fuck’s sake.”

“You will carry your own case. The butler will show you to your room.”

Callie crossed her arms over her chest and jutted out her hip, intent on getting her own way. Instead of staying to argue with her, however, the driver got back in the car and drove off, leaving Callie’s case at the base of the walkway.

“Neanderthal.” With a disgusted grunt she stomped to her case and released the handle, rolling it to the steps and hefting it up each step to the door. She bent double to catch her breath before knocking. Who knew all those shoes would weigh so much?

The door opened, and she glanced up at a stoop shouldered man with milky eyes, probably older than

Father Time.

“Ms. Duncan, I presume?”

“Yes. The driver made me carry my own bag up.”
She was whining but didn’t care.

“We do many things for ourselves here at Castle Fallows, Ms. Duncan. We are quite self-sufficient, as Master Fallows wishes us to be. Now, if you would like to take your case, I will show you to your room.”

“Fine. Lead the way,” she said, yanking her case over the threshold. “Jesus Christ,” she whispered, stopping in the foyer. Chandeliers hung in various spots throughout the enormous space, the ceiling so high it hurt her neck to look at it. Thick stone made up most of the walls, with beautiful black and white pictures everywhere, many of them tasteful female nudes. The staircase took up the middle of the room, wide enough to fit five people shoulder to shoulder. It led to a heavily banistered second floor, where a hallway disappeared off each side.

“If you’ll follow me, Ms. Duncan. Your room is on this floor.”

She followed him silently, examining the beautiful pictures of scenery and women on the walls as she passed them. But the old man was faster than she would have thought, and she saw most of them too quickly for her liking. He stopped at a far room, swung the door open, and entered ahead of her.

“This will be yours as long as you are in Master Fallows employ. The bathroom is there,” he indicated with a brief sweep of his hand. “And there is a small kitchenette over there. You are, of course,

welcome to take your meals in the main kitchen with the rest of the staff, but you do not have to do so. Master Fallows wishes to meet with you in exactly thirty minutes. I will leave you to get settled and come back for you at the appointed time. Master Fallows will be giving you a tour of the house.” He backed from the room, not taking his eyes off her until he turned to softly close the door behind him.

“What the hell is it with these creepy ass people?” Callie murmured to herself as she moved through the room, caressing the heavy wood furniture and feeling the thickness of the burgundy rug beneath her thin sandals.

She opened the closet, the drawers, the bedside tables. Everything was empty, and there was plenty of room for her things. There wasn’t a speck of dust, even on the excessively weighty burgundy drapes hanging over the window. She pulled them open and jumped back with a tiny squeal.

There was a small cemetery behind the house. Old stones set in neatly trimmed grass looked weathered and care worn. “Okay. Time to go home. This shit is too bizarre. I just wanted a simple secretary job, far enough from home that I could get away with telling friends I couldn’t go out without looking pitiful. I don’t need some freako castle weirdness to do that. I’ll just tell this Fallows person I’ve changed my mind.” She took a deep breath and placed her hand on her stomach. She only talked to herself out loud when she was really nervous, and right now, she was *really* nervous.

She moved her case back to the door and sat on the edge of the bed until Father Time knocked.

“Master Fallows is ready to meet you now, Ms.

Duncan. Please follow me.”

Callie nodded, unwilling to get into another conversation with the strange old butler.

She followed him into yet another gigantic room and breathed in a sigh of relief. Floor to ceiling windows looked out on the fields that crept right to the edge of the forest she had driven through to get there. It truly was beautiful, and there was no sign of the cemetery. It was just visible outside her bedroom window. Fabulous.

“Thank you, Marcus. I can handle the rest of the day on my own.”

The deep, toffee smooth voice brought Callie’s attention to the desk on the far side of the room. Her stomach lurched, and the room spun slightly. She grabbed the back of a chair to steady herself.

Sitting behind a giant, oddly modern desk was the most gorgeous woman she had ever seen. Short dark hair touched the top of her clearly expensive, black button-down shirt. Her skin was beautifully pale, made more so by the onyx of her clothing. It was her eyes, though, that made Callie nearly faint. They were the blue of Caribbean waters, so blue they were nearly translucent. Nearly...white.

“Ms. Duncan. Nice to meet you. I’m Brett Fallows. You come highly recommended.”

Brett strode around her desk, her easy grace making Callie feel downright clunky. Her hand was so warm it was almost hot when they shook hands, and her smile hinted amusement at some private joke.

“Yes. Thank you. I mean. Nice to meet you too. Your home is very interesting.”

“Interesting? I don’t think anyone has described it that way since the Victorians. I’ll take it as a compliment. Please, sit down. Tea? Something stronger?”

“Whatever you’re having, thanks.”

Callie watched as Brett deftly poured tea from a kettle on an old-fashioned serving tray. “If you don’t mind my asking, what’s with the formal stuff? I mean, your driver and butler both call you Master, and the house just seems so...” She trailed off, derailed by Brett’s direct gaze.

“Castle-like?” Brett grinned and passed her a cup of tea, complete with tiny biscotti on the side. “It has a lot to do with tradition. That and our isolation. Most of the people who work for me have family members who have worked for my family going generations back. You’re the first outsider to be brought into the castle for work in a very long time.” Brett studied her. “We’re very particular who we let into our happy little home.”

“I guess I’m honored. I mean, sorry, that sounded bad. It’s just really different from my way of life, you know? It sounds like some corny novel.”

Brett’s small smile seemed sad for a moment before she turned and looked out the window.

“I’m sure it does. To a woman of your upbringing and society, it probably seems quite archaic. But we have electricity, and running water, and heat. We have everything we need, and although being so far away from modern society does make us a bit suspicious of outsiders at times, we’re family, and we share all the secrets and vagaries most families do.”

Callie nodded as though she understood, but in truth she had no idea what the woman was talking about.

Hot, but obviously short of a full deck.

“I’m sure you’re wondering what your duties here will include. I’ve typed out a list, including times where necessary. I’m extremely punctual, and I dislike being late.”

Brett handed Callie several sheets of paper, and as she read them, she felt herself growing warmer. “Uh, excuse me. But coffee in the morning? In bed? Don’t you have, like, a maid or something for that?”

Brett raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “You applied for the job as my personal assistant. That job role includes taking care of my personal needs. As you can see at the end of the duty list, you’ll be well compensated for the job. But if it isn’t to your liking, I’d be happy to call the driver and have you back at the airport by nightfall.”

Callie flipped quickly to the end of the list, and her eyes widened. The amount of money she would make in a year working for this slightly nutty but very sexy woman would be enough to carry her for another twelve months in San Francisco after she left. Plenty of time to find a job that didn’t include serving coffee like some fucking servant. Her desire to tell Brett Fallows where she could stuff her coffee evaporated in the face of enough zeroes to make it temporarily worth it.

“No, that’s fine,” she said more calmly than she felt. “I can do whatever I need to do.”

Brett’s face lit up, and Callie’s stomach flipped. Brett’s smile made her look years younger, and suddenly Callie realized that Brett couldn’t be much older than her own twenty-eight years, even though her composure and bearing were that of someone far

older.

“C’mon, let me show you the house.”

Brett held out her hand and Callie took it, marveling at how smooth and soft her long fingers were as they closed over her own. When Brett pulled her to her feet, she noticed the way her black jeans hugged every inch of her long legs, the way her black silk shirt pulled just slightly over small, high breasts. When she looked into Brett’s eyes, she realized she’d been standing there, blatantly ogling her new employer, who was simply waiting for her to finish. But before she turned away in embarrassment, she saw a shy, kind look in Brett’s eyes that made her heart stutter.

She stepped away quickly, needing some distance. “Lead the way, Master Fallows.”

Brett winced. “I tried to get rid of the whole master thing, but the people who served my family before me won’t let it go. They say it goes with the castle, so it’s mine. Please don’t feel you need to use it. Brett is fine.”

Callie grinned at the adorable way Brett stood with her hands in her pockets, her gaze on her feet, not unlike a child getting caught doing something naughty.

“It’s a deal, if you stop with the Ms. Duncan thing and call me Callie.”

Brett flashed that devastating smile once more before taking her hand and leading her on a tour of the house. One of the first things Callie noticed was the family resemblance in the portraits on the walls. All the previous tenants had the surreal eye color Brett had, along with the high cheek bones and jet-black hair.

“Strong genes in your family, huh?”

Brett stopped short and looked confused before she

saw that Callie was looking at a portrait on the wall.

“Ah. A genetic mutation of sorts. Our eyes are incredibly light sensitive. I had the huge windows put in because direct sunlight hurts my eyes. Even sunglasses don’t help. Hence me not going out very often, but I still get the stunning view.”

Callie couldn’t fathom not being able to lather herself in suntan oil and lay on a tropical beach somewhere. “Wow. That’s a tough break.”

Brett shrugged. “When you live here, it’s not much of a problem.” She turned toward the staircase. “I work in my office on the third floor, and that’s where I’ll need most of your assistance,” Brett said, leading the way up the stairs.

Callie barely registered the words, struck dumb by Brett’s perfect, tight ass moving up the stairs in front of her. “Sure. Yeah. Okay.”

Following Brett though an enormous wooden door at the top of the stairs, Callie gaped in amazement. Three of the walls were floor to ceiling windows, and the view looking over the forest, fields, and streams was beyond spectacular. But even more spectacular was Brett, her eyes shining as she stared out the window, her hands in her pockets, sunlight caressing her face like a well-known lover. Callie swallowed hard, uncomfortable with the desire to touch Brett the same way the sunlight did.

“So, this is where I spend most of my time,” Brett said, motioning to the enormous room with her arm. “Sometimes I even sleep up here, especially on clear nights when I feel like I could touch the stars. And of course, I have electric blinds that come down if it gets too bright.”

She stopped, and Callie's heart stuttered slightly at the gentle innocence in Brett's glance.

"Anyway, I'll need you to take dictation, to type up my notes, and make some phone calls. I run an art business, finding and representing new artists, so it means a lot of paperwork, as well as occasional travel, although much of what I do is online. I get so busy I forget to eat, or drink, or sleep, which is where the personal part of your job comes in. It helps if I have someone around to remind me to take care of myself. What do you think?"

"Can I get out, occasionally? Go to a movie, shop, whatever? Or do I need to be here twenty-four seven?" Callie crossed her arms over her chest, ready to argue for time off. Clearly this had been Father Time's jail since he was born, and she wasn't going to become some creepy old lady in the year she worked there, growing cobwebs that attached her to the walls.

"Of course you get time off," Brett said, gracefully lowering herself to the floor, her back against the window. "In fact, you can leave anytime you want. I only ask that you let me know, so I can plan accordingly."

"Oh. Okay. Yeah, I can do that." Callie deflated, her arguments unnecessary, the drama she lived with daily suddenly non-existent. And, after all, it wasn't like working with someone as hot as Brett could possibly be a bad thing.

"Ms. Duncan..."

"No. I'm sorry, but I refuse. Re. Fuse. I am not

getting down on my hands and knees to do a maid's job. No fucking way."

"It would only be today, Ms. Duncan. Jean will be back in two days. We all have to pull our weight here."

Callie and Father Time faced off, her hands on her hips and his arms folded over his chest. The housekeeper had to leave the house to take care of some medical crap, and Father Time, or Marcus, if she had to use his real name, was determined to get her to do the woman's dirty work.

"I pull my weight plenty. I do the job I was hired to do."

He sighed, the fight suddenly going out of him. "Fine, Ms. Duncan. Go about your subscribed duties."

Gratified by her win, Callie sauntered off to the kitchen to get Brett's morning coffee ready, although it still irritated her that no one brought *her* coffee at the ungodly hour she had to get up to get Brett's day underway. It wasn't like she could sleep well with all the creaking and groaning the house did all night. Brett had assured her it was just the house "settling," whatever the hell that meant. It still gave her the creeps most nights.

She put everything she needed on the tray and then took a long, appreciative sip of the coffee before heading upstairs. As she turned a corner on the staircase, she saw Marcus lowering himself gingerly to his ancient knees, a bucket of soapy water next to his gnarled hands. Her stomach dropped at the sight, and she mentally cursed herself for being such an ass.

She pulled the curtains aside in Brett's room, careful not to let in too much light, placed the tray with its half-spilled cup of coffee next to the bed, and said, "I'm going to be late today. I'm going to help Marcus with a few things, and then I'll be up."

She heard Brett's sleepy reply before she headed back downstairs.

"Right. You need to go sit in that chair, right there, Marcus, and direct me. Then you can tell me what else needs to be done before I go up to Brett for the afternoon. But don't you dare mention this to anybody. I don't want them thinking I'll do it whenever."

Callie kicked off her leather sandals, set them by the door, and gave Marcus a hand up. She couldn't ignore the slight tremble in his hand as he grasped hers. *I'm such an ass. What would Brett think of me making her old Father Time work on his knees?* The thought of Brett being angry with her made her stomach tighten with dread.

Marcus dropped into an antique chair and sighed with his eyes closed. "Very well, Ms. Duncan. I won't mention that you can actually be kind, when it comes down to it. If you'll start at the side and work your way away from the front door, it will likely be dry by the time anyone comes through the foyer."

Callie frowned, caught off guard by his assessment of her. Was she really so bad? As she began cleaning the stones with the heavy brush, she knew the answer. The notion that Brett might see her the same way Marcus did made her want to cry. Dipping the brush in the warm, soapy water, she determined to be a better person. How to do that, she wasn't entirely sure.

“Fuck.” Callie hissed through her teeth as hot coffee splashed over the cup and onto her hand, staining the silk cuff at her wrist. Four months in, and she still couldn’t figure out how to get Brett’s coffee up the stairs in the morning without spilling it all over the tray.

Balancing the tray on one hand, she quickly flipped the door handle and bumped the door open with her hip. She pulled the serving table next to the bed and set the tray down carefully, trying not to dump it over as she already had several times before. She shook the coffee from her hand and pulled the blinds open, allowing light into the extremely dark room.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at Brett, sleeping so beautifully, so peacefully, like a dark angel in a cloud of white linen. The more time she spent with her, the more respect she gained for her, and the more her attraction for Brett grew into something she couldn’t fathom. Brett remained mysterious in some ways. She often dodged questions about her family or love life, and Callie had noticed she never slept inside when the moon was full. She was gone at dusk and sometimes stumbled in well after daybreak. Those days Callie usually had to herself, since Brett slept most of the day. Brett didn’t tell her what she’d been doing, and Callie didn’t push. Deep down, she had a feeling she wasn’t totally ready for the answer. And even with the mystery surrounding her, or maybe because of it, Callie’s attraction to Brett continued to grow with

each passing day.

“Wake up, sleepy-head,” she said, turning away from the luscious sight of Brett’s soft skin beneath the white tank top she slept in.

“Morning.” Brett rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands.

“You have a video conference in an hour with that painter in Brazil,” Callie said, turning her back to Brett and busying herself with the spilt coffee on the tray. She trembled with the desire to stroke Brett’s exposed skin.

“Slave driver,” Brett mumbled before taking a sip of her coffee and making the same appreciative noise she made every morning.

“Yup. See you upstairs.” Callie headed for the door.

“Callie...”

She turned and nearly sank to her knees. Her mouth went dry, and heat exploded between her thighs.

Brett stood next to the bed, loose boxers hanging low over her narrow hips, the white tank top hugging her trim stomach and perfectly small, high breasts. The shadows of her pink nipples showed through the thin material, and as Callie stared, they grew hard.

Brett met Callie’s gaze, and the need, the desire, the shy pleading in her eyes made Callie want to run to her and away from her at the same time. She backed up slowly, never breaking eye contact, until she bumped up against the door. She shook her head slowly before bolting from the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Leaving. I can’t do this. I need to go home.”

Callie continued stuffing her clothing into her suitcase, not bothering to fold it, tears blurring her vision. She jerked to a stop when Brett’s hands gripped her upper arms. Sobs wracked her. The thought of leaving Brett’s side was almost too much to bear but taking the risk of feeling more for her was too much to consider. Love wasn’t real. Money, parties, friends who left your side the moment the light faded...that was real life. What she had here was a fairy tale bubble that would burst any second. And she knew there were things in the shadow here, things waiting to creep into the light. What would she do when that happened?

“No,” Brett whispered. “No. Stay. I can *see* you, Callie. I see your beauty, your worth. I see all you are, and I want you here, with me. Stay.”

Callie closed her eyes against the onslaught of emotions Brett’s words forced through her. “I can’t. You don’t know...I’ve been so empty. So bad. The women, the drugs, the parties. I’m not like you, Brett. I’m not good, not sweet.” She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

“You are, though, Callie. You’re beautiful and amazing. Smart and sweet, and you don’t know me well enough to know who I’ve been, the things I’ve done.” She gave her a small smile. “Believe me when I say you’re a saint in comparison.” She slid her hands down Callie’s arms to hold her hands. “Over the last few months you’ve made me a better person, and I feel like there’s life in this old place for the first time ever. You’ve made me believe I can feel again, that perhaps I don’t have to hide. Don’t

run. Please. Give this a chance. Give *me* a chance.”

“Maybe I don’t know your secrets, but I know you’re sweet and kind. But what happens when you see the real me? When you see the person who makes bad decisions that hurt people? What happens when you get tired of me?”

“I could say the same thing, Callie. I could say, what happens when you get tired of living in the middle of nowhere? I could ask you what happens when you miss the excitement of the big city and the fast women. What might happen when...when you know who I am...what I am. But I won’t. Because for all that we’ve led different lives, I believe we’re meant for one another. I don’t think it’s chance that brought you here. I believe in fate, Carrie, and I think you’re my destiny. Please. Please don’t walk away.”

Callie hugged herself tightly, trying to keep her emotions from spilling through her skin. “I need to think, Brett. I need to think about what we’re doing. I’m going to go to the city tonight. I promise to come back tomorrow. But I won’t promise to stay.”

“Okay.” Brett slumped against the doorframe. “I’ll give you that. But I won’t just give up on us, Callie. You’re a different person than when you arrived here, and I’ll bet money that you wouldn’t fit into your old world anymore. But I’ll let you figure that out, however you need to.”

With one last pleading glance, Brett left the room, and left Callie feeling so very, very alone.

She had only driven for about an hour before

she'd turned back. Every mile away from Brett felt wrong, like trying on cheap clothing two sizes too small. Her breathing became more and more labored, and finally she gave up fighting the tide of emotions slamming through her as she replayed Brett's words over and over again in her mind. She might have arrived a callous, spoiled brat but being here had changed her, right down to her core. Brett had said "what I am." So, what was she? And did it matter? She'd never been opposed to the idea of the paranormal. What she knew was that Brett was gorgeous, kind, and all sorts of good stuff Callie had never thought she'd find. She'd deal with whatever it was. She wouldn't live without something this special in her life.

Dropping her bag on the floor just inside the door, Callie stopped short at the sight of Brett sitting on the stairs in the near dark, her chin in her hands. She was beyond sexy, beyond beautiful, beyond perfect.

Callie knelt in front of her and took Brett's face in her hands. "I don't know about fate, or destiny, or any of that stuff. Whatever you tell me will probably freak me out at first. But I'm not going anywhere." And then she did what she had wanted to do since the first moment she saw Brett. She kissed her, long and deeply.

Brett moaned into her mouth and wrapped her hands in Callie's hair. "I need you, Callie. You're what I've been waiting for all my existence. And the things I'll share with you... I think you're strong enough to handle them."

"Master Fallows?" Callie murmured.

"Mmm?" she said, her lips pressed against

Callie's neck, her hands moving in feather light caresses over Callie's nipples.

"Take me to bed. And then tell me who you really are."

Brett laughed and pulled Callie tightly against her. "I like your priorities."



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Upcoming Works from the Authors

Uncharted by Robyn Nyx, December 2019, Bold Strokes Books

Rayne Marcellus knows what people want, and she's damn good at getting it. Antiquities is her game, and she's the best there is, moving in the shadows even as she trades in the light. When an ambitious criminal approaches her to take on a deadlier game than even she's willing to play, she knows she has to stop him. But she'll need help...

After a previous betrayal, Chase Stinsen doesn't want anything to do with Rayne. Chase believes archeology is a tool to understand the past in an effort to help the future and has no use for profiting from the finds of history. But when Rayne proposes they track the legendary Golden Trinity, with the added benefit of helping indigenous tribes, she's hooked.

Danger lurks around every corner, and their defenses crumble as they have to depend on one another to survive. If Chase can finally trust Rayne again, she might just end up with more than the gold.

***Changing Course* by Brey Willows, November 2019, Bold Strokes Books**

When a simple mission goes wrong, intergalactic space captain Jessa Arbelle nearly goes down with her ship.

Her escape pod lands on Indemnion, a planet known for its raw, raucous societies, and Jessa's top priority is keeping the few survivors with her safe while finding a way back home. That's when she meets mysterious scrounger Kylin Enderson, a useful and attractive distraction she can hardly afford with so much at stake.

Kylin resents Jessa's silver spoon attitude, especially since Jessa has no idea what real life is like. Kylin has enough trouble keeping ahead of the creditors she owes for some of her more secretive undertakings, without having to help the beautiful captain who fell from the sky. But Kylin's always been a sucker for a damsel in distress, and this time is no different.

When Kylin's secret comes out, it puts their growing attraction, as well as Jessa's life, in

danger. Will everything come crashing down, or can they change course before it's too late?

Silk and Leather edited by Victoria Villasénor, April 2020, Bold Strokes Books

What happens when you leave your inhibitions at the door? When you're ready for something different, something that pushes your boundaries and makes your wildest, wettest fantasies come true? What would you do if no one was watching? Or if they were? Is there something you've always wanted to do but were too afraid to ask for? A bit of role play? A top to someone's bottom? That chance meeting that leads to unexpected pleasures?

Life is anything but ordinary when the lights go out and there are no rules to follow. This collection of stories by award winning authors offers fantasies as soft as silk and tough as leather. The only question is: How far will you go to make your deepest desires come true?

(Featuring stories by Robyn Nyx, Jeannie Levig, and Kitty McIntosh)

This is Me by Emma Nichols, October 2019

Claire is ex-military, a lesbian, and different. She doesn't have a problem, but she needs to get her mental health cleared for her work with the Agency. Ticking that box leads her to cross paths with Justine.

Justine is a psycho-emotional therapist. She's hiding from something and despite an instant mutual attraction, getting together is not an option.

This is Claire's story, one of deep enduring love, her faith in Justine, and her struggle to keep their relationship alive. Will their history destroy them or will love be enough to overcome the past?

Nero by Valden Bush, expected 2020, TBC

Stele Hosun is a violent and aggressive Neroian. Exiled to the planet Alton, where all outcasts are banished, Stele meets Kian Ray who offers her the chance to make something of her life by joining the Alton Defense Force. Stele has to learn to manage her temper and her newfound skills, as well as accepting the hand of friendship from Kian. And when she's faced with the opportunity to save

both her home planet and Ariane, the woman Stele has loved since they were young, Stele has to choose between losing it all and gaining everything she's ever wanted.

Cider by E.V. Bancroft, expected 2020, TBC*Ella is trapped. She works for her mother but her talents are under appreciated, and no matter what she tries to do, Ella always seems to anger her mother. Their family business takes a hit when their orchard is flooded and cider production grinds to a halt just as they've landed a lucrative supermarket contract.*

Ella's brother, the apple of their mother's eye, and presumed to eventually head up the business, is up to something. Ella has no idea what, but she's concerned it might put their livelihood at risk. Beside her father, the only person Ella can trust is her mother's efficient, and very beautiful, PA, Alex, but when Alex kisses Ella, her usually calm and ordered world is sent into complete turmoil.

When the company is threatened by a wily investor, Ella must face her demons, find her power and her voice, before she loses not just her job and family, but her whole way of life.

The Women and The Storm by Kitty McIntosh, expected 2020, TBC

Gillian knows she has to come clean to Diane about who she really is—and reveal her feelings for Diane. Being a witch makes that honesty a tad difficult. Diane's unexpected reaction causes problems for them both, and Gillian needs help from her coven to get through it.

Someone seems determined to ruin their plans for happiness, and it will take the might of the Sisters of Tarbet and Gillian and Diane's love for each other if they are ever to get their happily ever after.

Fated Choices by Lee Haven, expected 2020, TBC

When teenager Parker Snow fell in love with her stepsister, Kate, it destroyed the relationship with her family and the strain proved to be too much for young love. Needing to leave it all behind and mend a broken heart, Parker joined the military.

After nearly a decade, Parker receives an urgent message telling her that Kate has fallen seriously ill.

Faced with the choice between her career and love, will Parker make it home in time and put aside her past hurts to reconcile with those she loves before it's too late?

The Helion Band by AJ Mason, expected 2020, TBC
Rose is a gentle soul. She's loved by her friends and has found romance with a dashing privateer captain, Vash.

But Rose has a dark secret. She's a fugitive from her community and on the run from the psychotic wrath of the queen she once served. Her crime? She carries the Helion Band, a mysterious artefact that she never wanted and that she has little control over.

Now her past has caught up with her again, and she's going to have to face hard choices. Can she find the inner strength to overcome her enemies and save the woman she loves? Is she strong enough to become the true bearer of the Helion Band?

Country Living by Jen Silver, April 2020, Affinity Rainbow Publications

When Peri Sanderson achieves her dream of living in a cottage in the country she expects her life will be complete when her wife, Karla Sykes, is able to join her. Peri has romantic visions of growing her own vegetables, nurturing a few chickens, and finally getting around to re-reading all of her favourite books.

Karla has told Peri she can't make the move from their London home for at least six months as she has a number of important projects to finish up before she can leave her job. Unknown to Peri, Karla has plans that don't include a move to the country.

Peri's nearest neighbours above the cottage on the hilltop sheep farm seem like a nice family and help her to settle in and feel less lonely, but they all have secrets of their own.

Will Peri's dream turn into a nightmare? Will Karla's romantic adventure bring her the release she seeks?

***The Words Shimmer* by Jenn Matthews, out now,
Ylva Publishing**

Yorkshire anatomy lecturer Ruby Clark considers her life low-maintenance. She teaches at the local university, has two well-behaved teenage daughters, and what she doesn't know about human anatomy isn't worth knowing. Unfortunately, that knowledge doesn't stretch to plants, and she's been asked to help out on a school garden project.

Being a paramedic doesn't do Melissa Jackson's back or knees any favours, so she's looking into university courses to try a less strenuous line of her work. But the brash, proudly out, down-to-earth woman's biggest challenge is keeping her dyslexia a secret. That, and living down the stigma that follows her when people find out.

A sweet, lesbian romance about growing something unexpected and wonderful from the roots up.

***Living* by Lise Gold, out now**

During her morning exercise, yoga instructor Cam Saunders finds herself rescuing a young woman who has walked into the sea, seemingly intent on taking her own life. When the woman in question turns out to be a famous actress, Cam promises to keep her

secret safe.

Six months later, America's sweetheart Ella Temperley is working hard to get her life back on track, grieving the loss of her twin sister and fighting a deep depression. Despite her fame, she feels alone in the world and keeps thinking of the woman she owes her life to.

After Ella shows up in Cam's life again, the two become closer than they ever imagined possible. But what happens when friendship turns into attraction? Living is a slow-burn coming-out romance about loss, love, and life.

About the Authors

E.V. Bancroft What do you do, when you want to write, but you are too scared of being unable to support yourself? Well, right or wrong, E.V. spent many years working as a chartered accountant in finance and business, doing corporate life in large multinationals, and running her own business, interspersed with flying, off-road driving competitions and raising a daughter. It's all been invaluable as ammunition, er, inspiration, for her writing. She's written a children's musical, produced an animation short film, written a business book, and continues to write poetry. E.V. is currently working on her first full length novel, Cider. Needless to say, it has a business bias to it. E.V. lives near Bristol with her daughter and neurotic cat. You can connect with E.V. on Facebook and via her website, evbancroft.com

Valden Bush As an occasional reviewer for The Lesbian Review, Valden decided to put her money where her mouth is and try and write something herself. This is her first attempt, so please be gentle. She is currently working on Nero, a sci-fi novel with women in uniform.

Valden lives in the UK with her wife, and they spend much of the summer in their campervan, *The Duchess*, searching for the perfect wave. She is a Zwift cyclist and puffs her way up various hills most days; she is working toward the mountains.

She may be contacted on Facebook, Twitter, or via her website, valdenbush.com

Rachael Byrne lives in Melbourne, Australia with her wife and son. When she's not reading and reviewing Lesbian fiction on her *Les Rêveur* website, she's building Lego with her son, Rory, or making up stories with him of faraway lands. Rachael spends her days working for a start-up and daydreaming about writing her own stories. She's a fierce advocate of LGBTQIA+ rights and wear her feminist heart on her sleeve.

Clara David (They/She) lives in the middle of England with her fur babies and is most at home in the pages of a book. They are passionate about human rights and community, including using their own experience to educate and support others. An extroverted introvert, they have learned to embrace their differences over the years and have been fortunate to find others who embrace them too. Neurodiverse, polyamorous, lesbian, and non-binary, they enjoy writing about characters who also live and love queerly. They have had short stories published previously under other pen names and are currently working on their first lesfic novel.

Lise Gold's romantic attitude, enthusiasm for travel, and love for feel good stories form the heartland of her writing. Born in London to a Norwegian mother and English father, and growing up between the UK, Norway, Zambia, and the Netherlands, she feels at home pretty much everywhere and has an unending curiosity for new destinations. She goes by "write what you know" and is often found in exotic locations doing research or getting inspired for her

next novel.

When not writing from her kitchen table, Lise can be found cooking, at the gym or singing her heart out somewhere. She and her wife have settled in the UK with their dogs, El Comandante and Bubba, and their cats, Kanye and Tittie (who also has his own clothing line).

Lee Haven has worked in the creative industries for over a decade but only recently taken up writing. An accomplished media editor, when she isn't working she can be found listening to her favourite audio books, walking, and enjoying photography.

Jeannie Levig is an award-winning author of lesbian fiction. Her debut novel, *Threads of the Heart*, won the 2016 Golden Crown Literary Society (Goldie) Award in the Debut Author category and Jeannie won another Goldie in 2019 with her most recent novel, *Wish Upon a Star*.

Raised by an English teacher, Jeannie has always been surrounded by literature and novels and learned to love reading at an early age. She tried her hand at writing fiction for the first time under the loving encouragement of her eighth grade English teacher. She graduated from college with a BA in English. She is deeply committed to her spiritual path and community, her family, her four-legged best friend, Dexter, and to writing the best stories possible to share with her readers.

Visit Jeannie at her website (jeannielevig.com), or send her a note to say hi. She'd love to hear from you.

AJ Mason is an author, curious child, and geek. She loves reading and writing sci-fi, eating good food and board gaming.

Jenn Matthews lives in England's South West with her wife, dog, and cat. When not working full-time as a health-care assistant at a mental health rehab unit, she can be found avidly gardening, crocheting, writing, or visiting National Trust properties.

Inspired by life's lessons and experiences, Jenn is a passionate advocate of people on the fringe of society. She hopes to explore and represent other "invisible people" with her upcoming novels.

Kitty McIntosh is a writer living on the west coast of Scotland. She writes romance, mystery, sci-fi, and erotica. Kitty has been published with Sapphire and has an upcoming story in Bold Strokes Books anthology, *Silk and Leather*. Her story, *On The Way Out* was published in *Our Happy Hours – LGBT Voices for the Gay Bars*, won a Goldie at the GCLS 2018 awards. Her self-published story, *The Woman By The River*, hit number one in the Amazon Short Reads Chart.

Gill McKnight is Irish but spends as much time as possible in Lesbos, Greece, which she considers home. She can often be found traveling back and forth between Greece and Ireland in a rusty old camper van with her rusty wee dog. Gill enjoys writing, gardening, and, by necessity, simple DIY.

Emma Nichols lives in Buckinghamshire with

her partner and two children. She served for twelve years in the British Army, studied psychology, and has a Masters in Business Administration. Her career before fiction writing was spent as a Peak Performance Specialist, and she published several non-fiction books on the topic of sports psychology. Her debut lesbian fiction book, *Finding You*, was a global Amazon bestseller for two months in the summer of 2017. She has now published eight books in the lesbian fiction genre.

Robyn Nyx lives in England but enjoys traveling all over the world in search of inspiration. She loves to create complex characters to weave into stories that remind us of the darker side of human nature in the hope that we might cultivate the light.

Robyn's debut novel, *Never Enough*, received critical praise from Publishers Weekly and Music City Dreamers was a recommended January romance read by the mainstream international media and news organization, NPR (National Public Radio). Robyn has various short stories published by Bold Strokes Books, Harper Bliss, and Cleis Press.

When she's not writing, Robyn and her wife, author Brey Willows, run a community interest company helping marginalized groups to write and get their stories heard, and Robyn is Chief Executive of a charity working with survivors of sexual violence. Find out more and make contact on robynnyx.com

Jen Silver After retiring from full-time work, Jen thought she would spend her days playing golf, shooting arrows, reading, and enjoying quality time

with her wife (not necessarily in that order). Instead she started writing and Affinity Rainbow Publications published her debut novel, Starting Over, in 2014. Jen now has nine published novels to her name, a number of short stories, one audiobook, and not as much time as she thought for all those other activities.

For the characters in Jen's stories, life definitely begins at forty, and older, as they continue to discover and enjoy their appetites for adventure and romance.

Brey Willows is a long-time editor and writer. When she's not running a social enterprise working with marginalized communities on writing projects, she's editing other people's writing or doing her own. She lives in the middle of England with her wife and fellow author, Robyn Nyx, and spends entirely too much time exploring castles and ancient ruins while bemoaning the rain.

Connect with Brey on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and on her website, breywillows.com