

ALEKSANDR VOINOV



VOLUME I

TASTER
ANTHOLOGY

Intro

I get often asked: “Where do I start?”

While that’s a simple question, it can be difficult to answer. In my 20 or so years of publishing, I’ve jumped across genres, forms, lengths, even languages, so finding the perfect match requires more context.

Personally, when trying a new author, I read their latest work, since I believe writers are usually getting better with experience, and if I really like what I read, I start at the beginning and read everything they’ve written in chronological order. But there are readers who’ll avoid, strenuously, certain genres (say, historicals) and certain lengths (anything under a novel won’t do), and that’s fair enough.

Sometimes, people ask me what my own favourite story. Without a doubt, it’s usually the one I’m currently working on. All the energy is in where I’m focused, much like a surgeon only has headspace for the patient who’s right there on the table *right now*. That’s not helpful, because it might be months or years away from being published.

When I’m not currently writing, I’m much more able to step back, look at my books like over a string of pearls and tell you which ones keep attracting my attention, which ones shine just a little bit brighter in my own memory.

What are the books I’m most proud of?

No hesitation here. *Nightingale* is the best text I’ve written so far. I took risks there, the story happened quite despite myself, and I can still hear the voice.

In second place is *Return on Investment*, which is so autobiographical in its themes that I cringed when I re-read it while editing. It doesn’t matter that I put masks on the people and changed some things—the themes are the ones I’ve wrestled with myself, a lot, when I was Martin’s age and when I first entered the financial services sector, even if just as an observer.

So there you have my personal list. And yes, they’re all solo works, not because I don’t love my co-written works, but because solo works are really just about me. In co-written works, the co-writer brings half of everything to the table, and sometimes more than that. My solo work is me, myself and I, wrestling with myself and my angels on the page.

What a writer works with is their personal issues, hang-ups, biographical scars. You’ll notice that almost all my father/son relationships are difficult. If the father isn’t present, the main character rebels/copies with/undermines/struggles against authority figures or society. After a good twenty-five years of writing, I’m mostly done with my own father issues, but I can see that it takes effort for me to create a positive father/son relationship, while dysfunctional, dangerous, absent/dead fathers are more natural.

Another very large theme is alienation. My characters are often strangers, feel like, or conceive themselves as strangers. They are different, wear masks. Martin in *Return on Investment* is a displaced Northerner who came to London for work, for opportunity, “to be somebody” and for much of the book he feels inconsequential, insufficient, and out of place both spatially and socially.

A very big theme is loyalty. Many of my characters are loyal to something or somebody—their friends, their superiors, their bosses, and all of them come to question and redefine this loyalty. What is worth being loyal to?

Sub-themes to that are religion and war. War requires us to be loyal to a flag, an idea, often at enormous costs. It’s been said that war unleashes the very best and the very worst of the human animal. You have inspiring acts of courage and self-sacrifice, and atrocities, cruelty and de-humanization—and they’re often committed by the same person. Same with religion; we accept a higher moral authority, but how moral is it to persecute fellow human beings in the name of a god?

Lastly, obviously, love. As estranged and conflicted as my characters are, they all have a run-in with love. Love is the one power that can challenge everything. We might be alienated from everybody and even ourselves, but we can still find complete peace and joy and acceptance in another person's arms. A lover can civilise us and help us make a home, in ourselves, with them. We may question all the things we used to believe in—our very identity—when faced with true, unconditional love.

Love can be scary like that. It's a transformative power, and suddenly everything we cling to is up in the air. Love invites us to become better versions of ourselves, to open up, be vulnerable, allow ourselves to change and grow. That's what I'm interested in: how love changes us and others.

The reason why I gathered these excerpts is two-fold. One, it's about offering a go-to place for readers who are confused at the sheer size of my backlist. Compiling the beginning of every book I currently have out and for sale seemed like a great way to offer tasters without the reader having to go to Amazon or wherever and clicking through a million links and buttons in an effort to find one that intrigues them.

This is also why I've not added anything from books I've pulled from sale—this is purely the list of works I'm still proud of, that are written to the best of my ability and that readers can actually read. It's an invitation to browse, with small comments from me about the history behind the work.

The second reason is that I'm on the verge of returning to a day job after a year living off writing/freelancing, and I feel like I'm in the middle of a major life shift (never mind it's my 40th birthday next month). My natural response to that shift is to consolidate, clean up and look back.

And as I look back, I can say I've achieved almost all of my writing-related goals; I've had readings, attended big conference, was a keynote speaker, panellist, wrote some good books, had beautiful, meaningful reader emails that assured me I'd inspired people or helped them through dark days. I'll never forget the email from the reader who chose to read "Lion of Kent" right before a risky operation that she might not have survived.

I've continuously grown as a writer. I've inspired other writers, helped them as an editor or coach, and grown my own sales well beyond the initial goal of "helping with my mortgage".

One big lesson I've just learned is that once you've achieved our goals, you need to set new ones, or it can feel like you're drifting or just repeating yourself, which is really no fun.

Over the last weeks I've set new goals for my writing, for my finances, travel, health, spirituality, and I'm excited about them. Moving the goal posts further out than I would have thought possible just five years ago feels like I'm starting again, which keeps things fresh and interesting.

In any case, the e-book you're reading represents my work from 2009 to 2014 (technically, *No Place That Far* came out in January 2015, and the one 2009 release was re-released in 2015). They run the gamut from historical, fantasy, contemporary to cyberpunk and sci-fi and range from short stories to long novels. Some have lots of sex, some almost none. Some are romances, others barely qualify as love stories.

To those of you who have read all or most of them, I hope you find the commentary interesting. To those of you just starting out, I hope one or more of these jump out at you and you enjoy both the quest and what you'll find.

To all of you, thank you for your support!

About Deliverance

This historical short story has a special place in my heart. Firstly, back in 2009, it was my first English commercial m/m story, meaning, I wrote this piece to actually sell it. I was new to the market and still wrapping my head around how things worked there. I spotted a call for short stories issued by an m/m publisher seeking medieval stories. Since I'm a historian by training, that felt like a natural fit, so I wrote it and submitted it to that publisher. It was rejected and I was told to "learn the basics". I never submitted to that publisher again – I hold a grudge with the best of them.

Luckily, or rather unluckily, another erotic romance publisher was willing to buy it, and I had my first "official" publication in m/m. I was astonished that it not only made a (modest) advance, but kept earning a few dollars every month. I'd been used to getting an advance and never making anything more, so this was odd and different and pretty cool. That said, the publisher went under a couple years later. That's where the unlucky part comes in – I bought my rights back to make sure the rights didn't vanish down in the bottomless pit that's bankruptcy proceedings. These days, I'm not signing up with places I know very well, and this is where I learned that the hard way.

Once I had it back, there was no doubt I wanted to polish it up and release it back into the wild. When I was approached to donate a story to the charity anthology *Another Place in Time*, I happily donated the anthology rights and six months of exclusivity to an excellent cause. This version is a bit longer, a lot cleaner than the first version – I did learn a lot about writing in those five years. At the same time, I refrained from completely gutting and restructuring it, because I did like the old version. As a writer, I can't run around in my past and constantly update/rewrite every book to reflect my current skill level.

The story is a hat tip to the Templars, which were the reason why I ended up studying medieval history, against every sensible career advice I ever received (I followed none of it and still did all right). *Deliverance* is connected with *The Lion of Kent*, which is the actual prequel but written much later.

Blurb

Once a renowned tournament fighter known as the "Lion of Kent," William Raven joined the Templars in the Holy Land to escape his past and the political machinations of his enemies. Called to protect travelling pilgrims bound for Jerusalem, William comes face to face with Guy de Metz, his lover from the past. But Guy is no longer the foppish young noble William knew.

Guy de Metz once tamed the famous Lion, but failed to hold onto the man. Rumours and intrigue tore them apart, and William left seemingly without a thought. Now as they meet again, William claims he has sworn himself to God and God alone, but Guy believes that somewhere inside William's chest, the proud, fierce man he used to love is still alive, and he will prove it.

Deliverance

The hushed tones of the evening prayer stopped when the chapel doors were flung open. William, who always struggled to settle his mind and emotions just after training, craned his neck.

A black-clad sergeant brother rushed along the aisle towards Master Arnould, who awaited him with calm and dignity. William found himself straining to listen to their whispered exchange; already, his blood was coursing faster, his body straining to stand and fight instead of kneel.

Master Arnould thanked the sergeant with a nod, then swept his gaze over the gathered brothers. "To arms, with God's will." The room erupted into fast, efficient movement.

The knights who had just come in from arms training gathered in the yard; others rushed to squires waiting with armour, horses and weapons. William spotted his squire Hamo waiting for him near the gates, the dappled grey destrier pawing the parched ground as if the beast were imploring them to make more haste.

William strode towards them. "What is this about?"

"Saracen incursion. They attacked a group of Christians on the road, not far from here." Hamo placed William's white cappa round his shoulders. "One boy escaped to beg for help."

"He lived?" William mounted the warhorse, which shifted eagerly underneath him.

Hamo shrugged. "He had a couple arrows sticking out of him. Damned heathens must have thought him dead."

Saracen incursions were, sadly, a frequent occurrence ever since the dog Saladin had found his courage and started to attack the Christian heartlands.

His destrier tossed its head, and William reached down to pat the stallion's neck.

Finally, all the knights were mounted; further back, the sergeant brothers, more numerous, had gathered around their commander too. William put on his helmet, then gripped his lance, his sword and mace girded at his side. The master signalled and the knights rode out into the searing sun, falling into formation out on the road. Once through the gate, their horses broke into a canter, and William's heart widened, opened.

Bernard of Clairvaux had described the Templars as lions in war and lambs in the convent. But as much as William had tried, he couldn't for the life of him imagine what a lamb would feel like. While their sacred rule forbade falconry and all other hunting, they were allowed to hunt lions; William had once stood over a slain lion, then knelt and touched one of those fearsome paws, gazed into the golden eyes. Even in death, his red blood buzzing with flies, the lion had looked nothing like a lamb.

Just then, William thought he heard screams, even through the helmet; shrill sounds of fear and agony carried far in this land. He couldn't be sure over the noise of hooves and his armour, but then the master signalled the charge.

The knights moved closer together, thighs almost touching as the formation tightened closed, horses reaching and straining, foam splattering the cloth coverings of white and black and red. White for their purity. Black for the terror in the hearts of the heathens. And the red, red cross of martyrdom.

They came over the hill, and the sight below made William's breath catch in his throat. He'd worried they'd be too late—and for some of the pilgrims, they were. Several lay dead already; others cowered, screaming for help. Amid them stood one man who had seized a Saracen sword and shield and fought against four heathens, an upturned cart to his back.

Other Saracens were plundering, women and children already bound under guard to be carried off into slavery. The attackers might be mere bandits or an advance unit of Saladin's army. Maybe foragers who'd seen fit to harass Christians wherever they encountered them.

A warning cry rang out—a number of Saracens hurried to their horses; others turned, swords in hands, eyes betraying surprise and hatred, but above all, fear.

William gritted his teeth. Along with the other knights, he couched his lance in his elbow and aligned the triangular shield. Together, they drove into the Saracens like a thunderbolt, the sheer force grinding the Saracens into the dust. William's lance broke in the chest of an enemy, and his heavy destrier toppled the Saracen's horse. He let the ashwood shaft drop away, then pulled his sword from its scabbard and hacked at the enemies, who turned and ran, cowards that they were.

Two brethren pursued one infidel who made a desperate bid for escape, but a sergeant had his crossbow cocked and shot the bastard square between the shoulders. The man lost his balance on his galloping horse, tilted first to the left, then the right, and eventually fell backwards, foot caught in his stirrup. His horse dragged him for several hundred yards across stones and dried bush before he finally came loose and lay motionless.

William left the dying foes to the sergeants and squires, who finished the wounded off before they searched them. Saracens kept their valuables on their bodies, which provided some immediate satisfaction to those who killed them. It was a ghastly thing, plundering a still-warm body, but the Saracens' outlandish customs had caused the Christians to adopt many a ghastly behaviour.

William pulled his helmet off and turned his horse to face the fighting pilgrim, who only now lowered his sword and shield. His wide-brimmed hat half-obscured a fierce face, sharp features under the blond, unkempt beard. Standing tall and proud, he was clearly no stranger to knightly skills, having felled the three Saracens whose bodies lay at his feet.

Master Arnould rode in a circle, then removed his helmet and spoke to the survivors. "We will escort you to our preceptory, where, with God's grace, you will be safe."

The pilgrims had no horses but the draft animals on the carts. It would be fastest to take them to the fortress on the Templars' horses. William nodded toward the fighting pilgrim and motioned him to come closer, then bent down to offer the man a hand. "They may return with more men. Saladin's army is close."

The pilgrim gripped his wrist and mounted the horse. His arms closed around William's waist, and his solid body pressed closer than any man had been for a long time. William usually liked to keep his distance from others, but even the master took a wounded man on his destrier. The old symbol of the order, two knights on one horse. Sometimes, that was simply a necessity.

"Who are you?" demanded the pilgrim.

William bristled at the gruff tone, but after standing alone against Saracens and being barely rescued alive from slavery or worse, the pilgrim could be forgiven his lack of manners. "Brother William Raven. And you?"

There was a long pause. "William Raven? Of Kent?"

"Yes." William turned his horse and followed the other brethren back to the fortress, too aware of the other man behind him, the touch and press of his body as inevitable as unwelcome. It unnerved him, too, that the pilgrim knew him, but then, he had been famous in his time, even if that life now lay far behind him. "Who are you?"

The pilgrim didn't grace him with an answer, not even when they reached the fortress. There, servants were helping the pilgrims off the horses and leading them away to the guest quarters, where they would receive care for their wounds, water, and food.

Relieved when the man dismounted, William expected him to leave with his companions, but the pilgrim turned and met his gaze in a clear challenge. Something about the defiant look, the flaring nostrils . . . William racked his mind for a memory. The longer they held each other's gaze, the more urgent the question became. If not for the hat, he might be able to recognise him.

But this way, all he had was a vague sense that he knew the man, or at least had encountered him before. William had crossed blades all over Europe with friend and foe, ever hungry for the next challenge, unable to settle down for fear of being known for what he was.

“You do not remember,” the pilgrim said, sneering. He pulled off the hat to bare blond, sweat-matted hair. “I shall help you, then. Remember Metz.”

Guy de Metz. William felt cold in the scorching midday sun. The shadeless, murderous heat allowed no escape, and he stood, transfixed.

Guy. Of all people. Him, here. The scion of an eminent family in the city of Metz, with lands and riches far beyond anything William had ever achieved, even at the height of his fame and fortune. Guy. His shame, his sin, his guilt. Bearded, sunburned, in his simple pilgrim’s clothes, it was hard to recognise the fashionable young nobleman he had been, what, only six years ago?

Guy followed the other pilgrims, but his face betrayed anger. The man held the key to destroy him.

The thought sobered William as if a loaded crossbow were pointed at his heart. He had to force himself to turn away, but it was hard to breathe the hot air. Terror had set into his soul, and fear and longing, because he *remembered* Guy now. Remembered his own flight from what had begun during that saint’s festival in Metz, when the nobles jostled and celebrated. He’d run as far as he could, seeking solace and redemption, until, finally, the Templars had welcomed him. They knew not his sin, but they told him that all his past misdeeds would be forgiven if he fought the heathens rather than his Christian brothers. That he would go to Heaven if he fell in service of the Lord. This had been the most generous offer for which he could have hoped. Unable to escape his shame, he’d finally found peace of a kind in subservience to God.

About The Lion of Kent

I've been known to start in the wrong place. But then, I'd compare writing to digging up dinosaur bones. When you get that first glimpse of a shape that's not rock but something else, it's really hard to predict whether you're digging up a chicken or a T-Rex.

Some of my favourite stories just came to me in those bits and pieces, and while *Deliverance* was absolutely meant as a standalone short story, I found William compelling for months after finishing *Deliverance*. I couldn't stop wondering how he ended up with the Templars in the first place – and Kate Cotoner was intrigued too. So we sat down to write *The Lion of Kent* about how William came of age, how he became a knight and who his first lover was. I had no doubt that this first lover had had a strong hand in shaping the man William would become. As the saying goes, you never forget the first one.

We sold this story to Carina Press, which released it on 30 August 2010. We were pleasantly shocked when it was also chosen to become an audiobook (released in November 2010). I do struggle listening to my own words read aloud (it still makes me squirm), but that was still pretty damn cool. And just recently I received the author copy of the Japanese edition that was released on 24 December 2014 (the title is “Beautiful Beasts”).

My original plan was to write a novella/novel each about the three main past times of the medieval upper-class male: hunting, jousting, and war. *Lion of Kent* is obviously about hunting, but the other two are still missing. I'm hoping to complete the set in the next few years, but for the moment, each one stands on its own and can be read on its own.

Blurb

Squire William Raven has only one goal—to finally receive his spurs and become a knight. When his lord, Sir Robert de Cantilou, returns from a five-year crusade in the Holy Land, William wants nothing more than to impress him.

After Sir Robert's return, noble guests arrive from France, bringing intrigue to the castle. William is oblivious to the politics, as he's distracted by nightly visits from a faceless lover—a man who pleasures him in the dark and then leaves—a man he soon discovers is none other than his master, Sir Robert.

But William can't ignore the scheming around him when he overhears a plot to murder Robert. He becomes intent on saving his lord and lover from those who would see him killed.

The Lion of Kent

England, 1176

William gave no quarter. He struck blow by blow—fast, vicious, with little technique, but enough strength to make up for it, and an uncontrollable anger. John had hit him so hard in the knee that everything felt numb there, and William’s reaction was as much pain as surprise, which made him fly into a rage. Everything around him blurred until he was aware of nothing but his enemy. The pain radiated through him, firing his anger. His arm ached with tiredness, yet there was always another blow in him, and even though he could see fear in the other squire’s eyes, it didn’t occur to him to relent.

“Enough! William!”

He ignored the voice, refusing to obey the order. He wanted John to yield, wanted him to fall to his knees, to give up, to beg for mercy.

“William!”

Strong hands gripped his sword arm, one hand on his elbow, the other on his wrist. He whirled around, wincing when the instructor used the grip against him, changed the angle and almost made him drop to his knees. He gave up the sword, snarled, but there was also a yelp of pain.

“Sir Robert is back, you bloody fool,” Ulric hissed and let him go after a punch in the arm.

William straightened, considered taking up the training sword again, but then he realised what the instructor had said, and turned.

Men on horseback had entered the cobbled courtyard. Richly clothed, swords and shields at their sides as if they’d been worried about robbers on the road, they made a bright display against the dull stonework of the castle keep. Sir Robert de Cantilou was their leader, and William thought his lord had changed much since the day he’d left his lands. When had that been? Five years ago?

Robert’s dark hair looked now like it would in winter, in a heavy snowfall, the colour more grey than black even though his lord wasn’t an old man. He sat proud in the saddle and, William thought with a hint of shame, he wore an expression of amusement. Sir Robert must have seen him fight and lose his control.

“Well, then, now that the squires are listening, too... It’s good to be back.” Sir Robert slid off his horse, hands adjusting his sword belt. The household gathered in the yard, regarding their master in amazement. He’d arrived completely unannounced, and William wondered why that was. Why had he not sent a messenger first so everything was prepared?

Instead of lowering his gaze, William stared open-mouthed at his lord. Sir Robert was tanned, his blue eyes seemingly glowing in the dark face, and his rich red clothes played around his form in strange, outlandish splendour. His sword hilt now bore a large jewel in the pommel, and the heavy rings on his gloves sparkled in the late autumn sun. He must have made a fortune abroad, but it wasn’t the flaunting of wealth that impressed William so much. Instead, it was Robert’s bearing.

Five years ago Sir Robert had seemed cold and distant, and though he was a lord admired and respected by the people of his manor as well as by his peers, he had too little humour and too much impatience. Always fair, always just, but somehow lacking. The death of his wife had not improved matters. Rather than seeking a new bride, Robert had announced he would go on crusade. He took with him five senior knights and left the castle and his children in the capable hands of his widowed sister, Lady Alais.

In William’s limited experience, the Robert of five years ago had been much the same as any other noble, but now he’d changed. It was said that the Holy Land made its mark on a man’s soul, scouring away the bad and revealing the good. According to the Church’s rhetoric, no one—except the heathen Saracens—could walk on the

same soil as the Christ and not be humbled and remade for the better. William had been sceptical, but looking on Sir Robert now, the claims seemed to be true. Never had William seen a man more confident and assured. This was how a knight should be—composed, gracious, benevolent.

He stepped forward as Robert strode past. “It’s good to see you back, sir.”

Robert paused, then glanced over his shoulder. His sharp gaze raked over William as if remembering the gangly youth he’d been and fitting that old image against the man who stood before him now.

“And you, William,” Robert said. “Seems we have a young lion in the dog kennel.”

William flushed, unable to tell what his lord meant by the comment, understanding only that Robert was making fun of his family and upbringing. The acknowledged bastard son of the manor’s reeve, William owed his place at the castle to the charity of Sir Robert’s late wife. Regardless of the knowledge that he should guard his tongue in the presence of his benefactor, he couldn’t stop the angry retort from springing to his lips. “If a kennel is what you call your house, sir.”

Sir Robert turned, making William’s heart pound with sudden anxiety. He tried to rein in his anger, which wasn’t directed at Sir Robert at all, but at Ulric for twisting his arm and at John for not yielding. Sir Robert’s eyes grew hard and William winced inwardly, but he’d take his punishment without flinching. At least that.

The darkly tanned face didn’t betray any emotion as he was measured, and William fought the embarrassment under his liege lord’s gaze.

“I wager, young William, next time I sail for Constantinople, I’ll take you with me to unleash on the heathens. They would certainly deserve your belligerence.”

“Forgive me, sir.”

Sir Robert gave him another of those level, unblinking stares, then turned, heading for Lady Alais, who emerged from the keep with smiles of welcome for her brother, Robert’s three children following after her.

William hung back, mingling with the other squires who nudged one another and whispered, some in excitement and others in apprehension. The younger lads scarce remembered Sir Robert and knew him more from the songs of travelling minstrels than from deed. William had always thought minstrels embroidered their tales, spinning webs of fantasy for the enjoyment of whoever gave them shelter for the night, but as he stared at his lord’s sumptuous velvet cloak and those jewelled rings glinting from his gloved fingers, he wondered if the songs were true and if Robert really had discovered a basilisk’s nest, saved a princess of the Comneni and fought off twenty-eight Saracens single-handed.

Robert greeted his children before giving his attention to his sister. He drew her into an embrace, pressing a kiss to her forehead, then spoke a few quiet words for her ears alone. A moment later he turned to include the men at his back and raised his voice. “Call Philip and Ranulf to the solar. You squires, too—you will need to hear this. I bring news and a command from the king.”

Ushering his sister and children ahead of him, Robert strode into the keep, followed by the knights who’d accompanied him on the road. The squires shoved forward to get inside the castle, and John, William’s opponent from a few moments ago, elbowed him, catching his sore arm in his haste. William snarled, whipping around.

John stumbled backward with a good-natured laugh, lifting his hands in apology. “An accident, my friend—I didn’t mean anything by it...”

“Careful, lad.” His instructor’s hand clamped on his shoulder, holding him back. He shrugged Ulric off, impatient to be on his way, and only half listened to the words called after him. “Watch that temper of yours, William Raven! Unless you learn some control, it’ll bring you to Sir Robert’s attention in all the wrong ways.”

William shook the warning aside and ran into the keep, dashing up the main stairs and only slowing his pace as he crossed the great hall. The shutters were open, revealing the long tables pushed up against the walls and, in one corner, the bedding reserved for the squires, men-at-arms and upstairs servants who slept in the communal space. Three wolfhounds lay sprawled on the rushes in front of the hearth where a couple of serving boys raked through last night’s embers before laying the fire for the evening.

As he ducked beneath the lintel at the far end of the hall to enter the private quarters of Sir Robert's family, William paused to allow a maid carrying a basin of hot water to pass in the narrow corridor. A door opened and he heard the calm voice of Lady Alais giving the maid instructions to attend the knights who'd come with his lord.

William went in the opposite direction, running up a short spiral staircase to the lord's withdrawing rooms, following the sound of excited chatter. He shoved at the door to the solar and went in, placing himself against the wall near the window. The other squires crowded close to the small fireplace, surrounding the stool where the clerk, Ranulf, sat. Philip, the castle steward, stood on the other side of the room clutching his account books. Both men had known William's father when he still lived, yet as usual they didn't even look in William's direction.

Conversations faded when Sir Robert entered the room. He strode to his chair, giving William a brief, inquisitive glance as he passed. Though he had put off his riding cloak, the dust of the road still clung to his boots and he looked weary. Philip put down his ledgers long enough to pour his master a cup of wine. Robert drank deep, wiping his mouth on his hand when he'd finished. He leaned against the chair, gripping its back, and looked around the room. His gaze came to rest on William, who fidgeted slightly in response.

Robert inclined his head toward his men. "I apologise for causing such disarray with my early arrival. I can travel as quickly as any messenger, so thought to bring the news myself." He paused for effect, then continued, "A hunt will be held here within the month, by order of the king. We are to entertain certain French nobility from the County of Toulouse."

A murmur of comment washed around the room. William shifted against the wall and folded his arms. A hunt could be the outlet he needed. He'd have to borrow a horse from Sir Robert's stables, but if he acquitted himself during the hunt, perhaps he'd gain his spurs at last. If he performed well, he might even catch the interest of one of the visiting nobles. Not that he wanted to leave the de Cantilou household, but a knight needed to win renown and riches, and he had been five years waiting for the chance to make his mark.

He paid attention as Robert lifted a hand for quiet. "The emissaries from Toulouse are as yet at Westminster and will make their way here in a week or so. His Majesty indicated that their business is somewhat delicate...which is no doubt why he wants them rustivating here in Kent."

A few chuckles sounded, but Robert didn't smile. William wondered what sort of business the Frenchmen wished to discuss with the king. As William understood it, the southern French squabbled periodically with their northern neighbours and feared the day the French king and the Duke of Burgundy put aside their differences and combined forces to bring Toulouse within their fold.

Ranulf spoke up. "My lord, are we to assume these noblemen from Toulouse are here for a diplomatic purpose?"

"We are to assume nothing without His Majesty's permission." Finally a wry smile warmed Robert's expression. "Perhaps they have simply heard about the good hunting in these parts."

More laughter from the squires, though the knights who'd accompanied Robert from London wore smiles more cautious than genuine. William straightened, his curiosity piqued.

"All that's necessary for us to know," Robert said, raising his voice a little, his gaze hard, "is that the French are our guests and we are duty-bound to entertain them. There will be no discussion of any other matters. Do I make myself understood?"

The men murmured their assent, and Ranulf scratched out whatever he'd written in his day-book. William knew what must be on everyone's minds—the attempted rebellion of Young Henry and Princes Richard and Geoffrey, three years ago. Sir Robert had been on crusade at the time, far from the political maelstrom that had swirled through England and France. William envied his lord that distance and wished he, too, could have avoided the revolt. William's father had been one of the men-at-arms who'd died in the quelling of the Earl of Leicester's uprising, and though William and his father hadn't been on the best of terms, William felt the loss in other ways.

Now, with the news of the emissaries from Toulouse, it seemed as if trouble was stirring again across the Channel. This time William was old enough and experienced enough in practice combat to wield a sword for real on

the battlefield. The thought of fighting alongside his lord made William curl his hands as if to grip a weapon. Sir Robert's family had done more for him than his own father, and William would repay the debt with his loyalty all his life.

Robert spoke again, this time without tone, though a curl of his lip indicated his emotions. "When our noble guests arrive, they will be accompanied by my brother Stephen."

William frowned. Everyone knew there was no love lost between the two de Cantilou brothers, but five years ago Robert and Stephen had had a common purpose. He spoke up, posing the question he was sure no one else would dare to ask, "Did your brother go with you to the Holy Land, sir?"

Robert gave him a quicksilver look and uttered a bark of laughter. "That was his plan, but in the end Stephen saw no profit in it. Too much risk and not enough gain. Only a churchman would see the world in such mercenary terms. No, my brother did not come with me. He went as far as Marseilles. By then he'd attached himself to the Bishop of Poitiers and has since been travelling thither and nigh across the length and breadth of France." Resignation crossed Robert's face, and he shrugged. "Stephen has been busy. Busier than me. But he is still my brother, and I must welcome him into my house."

He paused, once again gazing at the assembled men as if he debated telling them something more, and then he gave a snort. "Be on your best behaviour when Stephen arrives. He's aiming for a bishopric. Loose talk and immoral actions make him fly into a rage, and he's likely to begin excommunications before he's even invested."

The men chuckled and called aloud the names of those most likely to cause offence. William started when he heard his own name shouted out. Before he thought better of it, he stepped forward, his fists bunching.

"Who said that? Who says I will give offence to our lord's brother?" He stared at his fellow squires and the senior members of the household, then realised he'd spoken out of turn again. He winced inwardly, remembering too late Ulric's admonishment to guard his temper. The damage was done, and now he needed to prove himself humble.

He turned to Robert and bowed. "Forgive me, sir. I am too quick to anger and hasty in my judgments."

Robert narrowed his eyes. "Indeed. You may take comfort in the fact that these are not grievous sins. My brother would probably commend you, for he makes all his decisions with remarkable swiftness." He walked toward William, the sunlight through the quarries of the window playing shadows upon his face. "For myself, I prefer the men who share my hearth to be more temperate in their manners."

William lifted his chin. "I was not sent here to become a milksop."

"No." Robert seemed amused. "You would be wasted as a serving maid."

Guffaws broke out around the room. William stood firm, refusing to succumb to humiliation. He had not half the wealth and connections of the other squires, but he had more pride than all of them combined, and the fighting skills to match any of them in battle. Swallowing hard, he met Robert's light gaze. "At least a serving maid can use what skills she has, my lord."

There was a collective in-draw of breath around them, followed by a sharp titter from Ranulf.

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Do you feel neglected, William?"

Now William couldn't stop the blush, and the hearty laughter of the other men made him even more embarrassed. "It's not a complaint, sir. Just..."

"You wish to be used. Or useful, at least." Robert came closer, his lips quirking. "You are the oldest of the squires in my service. My absence these past years will not have been easy for you."

William held his tongue. He'd heard tales of men who'd gained their spurs at the age of fourteen or fifteen, when they were scarce old enough to become a squire, and he'd dreamed of such an achievement for himself when he'd been younger. Those days were long gone. Now he just wanted the chance to become a knight. "I am impatient to prove myself to you, my lord."

Robert's eyes gleamed. "Patience is a virtue."

"I fear I am not a truly virtuous man."

A look of devilry came into Robert's expression. "Then perhaps you need to be taught a lesson."
William stepped back in confusion. "Forgive my forwardness, sir. I only wanted to get your attention."
Robert gave him another sparking look. "You have it. Don't waste it."

About Dark Edge of Honor

I can't quite remember who started this project, but I suspect it was Rhi's idea. I was clearly still working through some of my long-standing fascination with Afghanistan, the Great Game and Cold War. I've also always had an interest in totalitarian systems and what they do to the individual (which would later lead to several other books about WWII, which is where the Doctrine came from. And Rhi was the perfect co-writer on this—nothing like writing military romance with somebody who knows their stuff.

In any case, this book greatly benefited from our editor at Carina Press, Deborah Nemeth, who made us re-write the last, oh, 80 pages or so and ramp up the intensity (and torture both of characters and readers). And it's one of two books that has an audio version—and the narrator does a brilliant job.

We are planning to do a few more in this universe, but for those of you who enjoy such things, *Dark Edge of Honor* and *Incursion* are both set in the same universe, and I'm definitely planning to one day let the Glyrinny loose on the Doctrine.

Blurb

Sergei Stolkov is a faithful officer, though his deepest desires go against the Doctrine. A captain with the invading Coalition forces, he believes that self-sacrifice is the most heroic act and his own needs are only valid if they serve the state.

Mike, an operative planted within Cirokko's rebels, has been ordered to seduce Sergei and pry from him the Coalition's military secrets. His mission is a success, but as he captures Sergei's heart, Mike is tempted by his own charade and falls in love.

When the hostile natives of the planet Cirokko make their move, all seems lost. Can Mike and Sergei survive when the Coalition's internal affairs division takes an interest in what happened in the dusty mountains of Zasadka Pass...?

Dark Edge of Honor

Chapter One

Planet Cirokko, mountains outside the planetary capital Rhada

Spring

Mike never thought there'd come a day when he'd be thankful for his childhood. He saw much of his home planet—it had been Hades in all but fucking name—in the harsh landscape around him.

The fucking sun, for one. She was a merciless, stone-cold bitch.

“Why couldn't the Doctrine make a grab for something more hospitable? This planet reminds me of holidays at the in-laws.”

Mike tugged at the cloth wrapped around his head and barked a laugh. The local dialect didn't sound as strange to his ears as it had six months ago. He and Pat had spoken nothing else from the time Alliance CovOps Command had started planning this operation. Didn't know how long ago that was. Or how long they'd been freezing their nuts off in the mountains. Mike swore his were finally beginning to thaw out.

Not that he had any real use for them, currently. Didn't know why he was bothering to complain, even inside his own head. In another couple months, his nuts would be cooking instead.

“There.” Pat growled the word and twisted on his side, aiming digital binoculars at a faint smudge on the horizon. The dust plume kicking up into the cloudless sky was unmistakable. “Just what we've been waiting for. If that's not a sizable troop movement, my name is river mud.”

“Rivers don't have mud around here, jackass. Just rocks,” he muttered, not even moving his lips. Long moments and a few rock bruises later, the plume discharged its source into sight.

“Breaker, breaker, looks like we got ourselves a convoy!”

The sudden injection of Alliance standard, spoken in a heavily accented drawl that reminded him of home, was so disjointed and foreign to Mike's ears that he just shifted his gaze and stared at his fellow CovOp in disbelief.

Thank the gods they were out alone on this little venture. It was rare; usually the local resistance fighters eagerly served as guides. Even something like six months wasn't enough to know this geography as well as the natives. Or eight months. Or however fucking long they'd been here. He'd lost track of when exactly the Doctrine had begun massing troops on the neighboring planet—a sure sign their rhetoric about invading Cirokko would be turned into reality.

At least winter was over now, and for the next month or so they'd be able to feel like semicivilized humans, while green things grew not only in the lowlands but also in the mountains, and it might actually rain. Knowing that the current weather patterns wouldn't last long did nothing for his mood.

Those were infantry transports. Hovercraft variety, most likely. Easier on rough, unpredictable terrain, negating the impact of minefields and booby traps. Cirokko was littered with them, its history rife with sociocultural unrest. And invasion attempts. One thing about Cirokkans—they definitely learned from their past.

“That's a roger on the supply-line route.” Mike felt the grin on his face—it was cracking his lips. He took a moment to suck the abused flesh into his mouth, enjoying the painful sting of sweat burning the wound before his saliva washed it away. Sweat was a luxury they'd be doing without before too long. In another couple months, moisture would evaporate before the skin could even register its presence. The metallic tang of blood sang against his taste buds, and he chewed on his tongue to distract himself. “And if that isn't enough good news, I'm seeing what looks like a security detail leading the way.”

Pat lowered the flat-black sighting device to share a cheesy, shit-eating grin with Mike. “Boo-yah, baby.”

Anything was a change from endless meetings with local leaders. Even bullshit-spewing Doctrine forces moving in for occupation. This wasn't the first military convoy to come out of Rhada, the planetary capital, but it was the first with a notable presence of command personnel. Headed toward the provincial capital Dedis, no less.

It was what they'd been waiting for. Mike eased the slim videofeed link from his buttpack, fumbled with the shoddy uplink connection and aimed it at the encroaching line of vehicles. CovOp Command would be toasting with champagne when they got this upload. In a few hours, given the lag time.

He could see right into the vehicle at the center of the security detail. Backseat occupied with a roughhewn older man, silver heavy in his hair, the glitter of medals and flashing color of ribbons decorating the crisp uniform. He tightened the frame and followed the officer for a few seconds, making sure the image was as crisp and clear as he could manage through the screen of dust.

Nobody else in the car, except the driver. Mike captured the man just for reference, and was about to dismiss him.

But then the man turned, head canting down, that gaze hard over the top edge of the polarized shades, and Mike swore the young Doctrine officer was looking right at him.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzt. His finger depressed the zoom control instinctively, the same clench-response that made a falling soldier pull the trigger. The driver's image filled his vision, larger than life. Young, but not lacking intensity for it.

Shit. He lowered the digital cam and secured the complete feed for upload, purely on instinct, his brain unaware of what his fingers did.

Things were about to get interesting, to say the least. He hadn't caught sight of any forward unit, but no use risking it. Time to move before they got flanked.

"Let's go earn our hazard pay," Mike muttered, stashing the cam in his pack. They reverse bellycrawled off the ridge, until well below the line of sight, an uncomfortable experience that invited grit and dirt and sand into places on a human body where such things just should not be. But they did it anyway.

Partially habit, but that driver's eyes were too sharp for comfort. Mike wondered if the guy had cybernetic ocular implants or something.

Oblivious to Mike's discomfort, Pat sucked on his teeth, gave a vigorous snort and pulled the cloth back up to cover the lower half of his face. "Best thing I've seen since that back-issue of *Exotica* ten months ago."

"Makes you want to light up, yeah?" He didn't care much for holo-porn, but Pat was one person he understood well enough even if the reverse wasn't true. They retrieved their kits from the small rock outcropping and turned back toward the insurgent camp. "What I'd give for a bit of nicotine right now."

The locals preferred to grow hallucinogens instead. He wouldn't mind settling for a long, hot, old-fashioned soak.

"Don't remind me," his partner grumbled. "At least you'll have a shot of scoring when you get into Dedis. Lucky me, stuck up here in the mountains with the hillbillies and their goats."

Right, because tagging and bagging a Doctrine officer was going to be a cakewalk. "What exactly is it you think I'll be scoring? A quick lay? A hit?" Mike laughed, the sound harsh in his dry throat, and swigged on the tepid water in his canteen. Didn't stop scanning the area, nerves strung tight. Any other time, he wouldn't have dared to turn his back to a threat, even at this distance. Gave him the heebie-jeebies. He was trained better than to attack when at such an obvious disadvantage.

What he'd seen on the feed, though. Yeah, that was definitely a threat.

He saw that face a hundred times on his trek down out of the mountains toward Dedis, following the Doctrine invasion.

The uplinked cam burned a hole in his lower back, straight through the pack. When it chimed the completion alert, he all but jumped out of his skin. Stumbled on the loose scree, managed to catch himself on a rough outcropping of rock, avoid some bruises. Or a couple broken bones. That gaze haunted him every step of the

way, staring back at him from every moon shadow—hard, scarred, calculating. As dark as the well-hidden corners of his mind.

Chapter Two

Mike sank into the hot water and sighed, eyes closed and muscles lax. His knees jutted out of the water, the tub too small to accommodate his legs completely, but the sensation of stress vacating his body, of ingrained dirt dissolving from every crease, made it a good trade-off. Beat the sonic cleansing stalls they used shipside.

His embedded intel contact had taken his report in silence, downloading the contents of the datachip with the finesse of a professional hacker. Dark-skinned, black-haired and whipcord lean, Herschel melded into the native populace like hundred-proof alcohol in orange juice. Perfect for moving information back and forth between CovOps and the Alliance's closest planetside base of operations for this mission. The neighboring planet Arrif was as close as they could get without being detected, even though its western continent swarmed with Doctrine military. The numerous islands in its eastern ocean weren't worth the bother for them, and the CovOps personnel weren't large enough numbers to draw attention.

Herschel's dark gaze was nothing like what had stared back at him through that camera lens. Mike couldn't distinguish the nuances, though. It was just gut. A split-second, visceral reaction the likes of which he'd never experienced before. That residual awareness still pinged through his veins.

"I'll get you names and profiles, as much as I can." The harsh rasp of Herschel's voice grated Mike's nerves, every bit as calloused as the face weathered by the elements. "The main force of troops is massed east of Dedis, but I expect they'll set up a command post and barracks somewhere more comfortable, probably in Dedis itself. Maintain the surveillance. That officer is going to be our best opportunity for intel. Touch base with your local contacts, and keep your finger to the pulse. I'll meet you here in two weeks' time to swap notes."

That had been the debrief, in its entirety. A few images of convoys, taken from shipside, land craft winding out of the mountains like ant trails, heading straight for them. Mike studied the details closely, memorizing every line and speck. The detailed imagery flashed through his mind's eye, one after another like a slideshow. Snow-capped peaks, greenflushed passes crammed with activity, armored war machines and innumerable infantry. No doubt the mining equipment and endless streams of workers would follow by summer's end.

It was an endless flow, would overrun the immediate area within a week. For points south and east, thankfully, but that would put him firmly entrenched behind enemy lines by the time summer rolled in.

Nothing less than he'd expected, though.

Mike paused for a moment, replaying that last thought in his head. He was starting to *think* in Cirokkan. *Took long enough.*

Time to brush up on his Doctrine standard, though. He had to, if he wanted to lip-read conversations with any accuracy.

His photographic memory might have once felt like a curse, but reciting entire passages of *Sacrifice & Triumph* in its native language went a long way toward soothing his nerves.

He lifted his arm from the lip of the tub long enough to take a long drag from his contraband cigarette. No filter, and the hot tobacco burned his throat, but the buzz was welcome. His handler had left him a small stash of luxuries, priceless commodities in this backwater hole. Most of it would serve as bribes, passed off to local contacts to grease the wheels. Being an ideological dissident beneath the onslaught of encroaching Doctrine occupation was far from settling.

That damned driver's face kept haunting him, eyes darkened by distance, gaze remote and hard over the sunglasses.

With a grunt, Mike levered himself out of the tepid water, took one last drag off the smoke before dropping it into the bathwater. It gave a hiss as he stepped out onto the cool stone.

It took him the better part of the afternoon to work through his local contacts and get a bead on the command post. The phrase *Doctrine aggressors* was getting horrendously threadbare, by then. Not that he didn't sympathize with the mind-set of the locals. Some days, though, it seemed they had as much originality as they did road-building talent.

Which was to say, none at all.

He lost track of how many cups of tea he drank, but the urge to piss gained momentum. The conversations all blurred together—he cared not a whit how well the local crop was looking, and if it was destroyed by the encroaching forces...well. It wasn't like they were growing food.

Granted, losing an entire growing season's crop would make things difficult for the local economy, but he wouldn't lose any sleep over it. Drugs and guns feeding each other was a familiar symbiosis, and some nights Mike entertained the thought that they were going about this all wrong. That was Pat's priority, though, not his.

His was the Doctrine officers.

Leaving his last contact behind with a grin and a warm farewell, he wandered aimlessly through Dedis, past the local marketplace, heading in the general direction of the diplomatic quarter. The large building his contact had pinpointed was impossible to miss, and he took a leisurely route. Turned down a walled alley catty-corner from it and paused to take piss, his gaze trained on the flow of activity.

The weight of his sidearm, harnessed at his side beneath the shroud of his loose robes, suddenly dragged at him like an anchor. Between his shoulder blades, against his thighs, the knives. Taking stock of his arsenal reassured him, but the weapons were far from necessary. His body was a more lethal weapon than the sharp, serrated blades or hollow-point bullets. Rudimentary weapons. Old and outdated, some would say, but he could use them with skill and accuracy. The same could not be said for laser weapons designed to function in space. Sensitive technology had a severe dust allergy.

Large windows, which maximized the flow of air through the structure, proved a godsend. That, and it was just pure dumb luck that the driver's unmistakable profile appeared out the door of a second-story balcony.

"Hello, sunshine," Mike whispered, indulging a loose, lopsided grin. It faded quickly, though, when the Doctrine soldier came into full view, stepping out into the open.

He wasn't just a driver. The metallic glint of rank, polished brass contrasting on the crisp dark navy blue uniform, told a different story entirely. Not highranking, but if this man was a peon then Mike had just hit a fucking jackpot.

The mother lode.

"This is far from secure, Brother General." The deep baritone carried across the short distance, smooth and thick, so heavily accented it took a few seconds of lag for Mike's brain to translate. It was a pathetic excuse for a balcony—forget a lounge chair, the soldier barely had room to pace its measure, let alone turn around. The man studied the structure, bounced his weight back and forth in his widespread stance, arms folded. Mother of gods, the man was built like a battle cruiser and easily topped six foot. The spread of his shoulders dwarfed the doorway at his back. There was no missing the strain of musculature beneath the dark fabric and blood-red pinstriped trousers as he shifted his weight, then twisted to glance back over his shoulder, into the dark confines of the room behind him.

Words were exchanged, unintelligible. The driver turned his back to the room again, looking tense, stiff. Or maybe that was just how he always was. That steelrod-for-a-spine look might be as relaxed as he got.

"Yes, Brother General. This entire region is a security nightmare. It's not just the building."

Mike wondered if someone got paid to pee in their cornflakes each morning. Grinning, he tucked his clothing back into order and turned away, heading down the cattle-chute alley in search of a surveillance spot.

Anger pulsed in Sergei's veins, a sullen, vibrating rage that threatened to take over his mind and was already pounding against the inside of his skull. Doing a job was one thing—and stabilizing the region was a job—but not having the tools to achieve it was a totally different matter. While men and matériel streamed into the area via the neighboring planet Arrif, and then from Rhada into Dedis, the most strategically important provincial capital, it took no imagination to see that this would be anything but an easy game.

Liberty's military academy had educated him thoroughly in military history. Enough to understand that, unless they found a way to defeat Cirokko in an entirely new way, the planet would earn its nickname once again. *Fool's Gambit.*

He knew better than to mention it. The brother general wasn't stupid. He would have voiced objections to the methods, but the decisions were made by the Committee back home on Liberty. The general merely made it happen. His career depended on it. Sergei's too. But it was impossible to think "Cirokko" without remembering other powers that had tried to take a bite out of it. The Alliance, about a hundred years ago, before it joined the Intergalactic Peace League and became non-expansionist. The League of Seven just twenty years ago. Unable to cut its losses, the League had bled itself dry in a way that it couldn't have won anyway. But the Seven had then been swept up in the Doctrine, desperate to rebuild its morale and sense of purpose.

No Doctrine theory would solve the riddle of how a backwater planet like this could break the spirit of armies and their leaders.

"Brooding?" the general asked.

Sergei snapped back into reality. "Brother General." He straightened.

"What's going on in your head?"

"Nothing, Brother General." The only safe answer. He didn't actually believe the general believed him, but at least the man would know he preferred to play dumb and thoughtless. Such a non-Doctrine pastime, speaking one's mind when it had nothing to do with duty.

"We'll meet the local leaders tonight. How good is your Cirokkan?"

"Don't they speak Doctrine standard?" The interplanetary trade with this rock went back far enough. "Most will be able to. I know some of them from their time on Liberty. A few have studied there, but it will be useful to show some goodwill and respect. We are guests, after all."

Guests coming in with a few thousand armored assault vehicles and tens of thousands of men. Sergei inhaled deeper, held the breath so it didn't turn into a sigh. The general's clear light blue eyes still seemed able to read his anger, his dissent. Dangerous. Sergei sometimes wondered if the man protected or just indulged him. He had to turn away to not see the general's powerful build, so at odds with the high rank. What he really wanted to do was fight, do what he'd been trained for, to lead and fight and win. After having been penned up so long in transit, he was burning for action.

"We might stay overnight at his guesthouse. It might be too late to return to the Dedis barracks."

Sergei paused, then looked into his superior's face again but wasn't sure what he saw there. Humor? Something else? "I will pack a change of clothes."

"Good. Dismissed. I'll see you in two hours, Brother Captain."

Sergei busied himself with all the little details military life required—inspections, making sure things functioned, paperwork, writing reports. He changed clothes and picked up the general in his quarters. The man looked refreshed as if he'd had a nap and a shower. The best way to spend time in this infernal heat.

With the brother general in the backseat, nose buried in his pad, intent on personal correspondences, Sergei drove to an older building on the southeastern side of Dedis that the local province leader used as his formal residence. Inside the high white wall, a well kept garden belied the starkness of the surrounding mountains. Fruit trees and lush green. The owner welcomed them both in perfect Doctrine standard, and the general and Sergei responded with a few words in Cirokkan before they settled for standard.

Sergei struggled with his impatience while the general and the local leader exchanged small talk about families and the weather and the trip. It amazed him how they could talk for hours, smiling and pleasant, but saying absolutely nothing of consequence. Sergei forced himself to smile and nod every now and then and say something in the affirmative.

Other guests joined them, and the natives served them many courses of food, invariably spicy and rich. The small talk continued for a few more hours. This was a complete waste of time. The evening dragged on forever, increasing the irritation and frustration he'd harbored for weeks.

Worse, still, he was watching the brother general, and that was always a bad idea. Something about the strong lines of the man's jaw and lips, the sunburned face, the clear eyes and the air of authority hit him low in the guts, and he had to remind himself not to stare.

Every now and then the man's gaze flickered to him and Sergei turned his eyes away. The last thing he wanted was for his superior to notice.

No. Impossible. He couldn't possibly know that.

It was well past midnight when the host finally broke off the chat and had servants lead the guests to their quarters. The vast house contained large, airy rooms with wide-open windows. Yet another security nightmare. They were the kind of windows that made Sergei want to drop into a combat crouch, knowing a sniper could stalk him from afar.

Before the servant could guide Sergei off down the hall to his room, the general intervened. "Brother Captain, stay for a moment?"

Sergei inhaled deeply, expecting a chewing out for not having said much. But he simply wasn't a social butterfly. Not after a long day of guarding his emotions and responses. It had left him withdrawn and angry at nothing in particular. "Of course." He waved the servant off. He'd find his own way, later. Or ask. He knew that much Cirokkan.

The general closed the door and locked it, then settled on a couch. Sergei stood there, waiting, watching the man take off the hat and place it on the wooden table. The shorn silvery hair shimmered in the golden light of two lamps in the far corners. Sergei looked at the balcony for a moment to avoid staring at the strong, tanned neck.

The general seemed lost in thought, his gaze on the center of Sergei's body for a full minute. When he glanced up, his eyes were hard and searching at the same time. "Stay the night."

Sergei stiffened. It was half order, half offer, and had him breathless like a punch to the short ribs. He began to question, to ask for clarification, but that stare told him he'd heard correctly. His hands tightened into fists. A test? A trap? Or was the general the same as him? What had given him away?

"Go into the main bedroom. Through that door." The general leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Undress and get into the bed. Switch off the light."

Sergei swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. His heart was pounding, all tiredness and boredom gone, replaced with a sense of danger. If this was a test...he was failing it.

He looked at the man's face but couldn't detect anything beyond the general's expectation of obedience. He went into the bedroom and undressed, glad to get out of the stiff uniform and let the night breeze cool him somewhat. The shutters were closed but a breeze still came through the woven material.

He arranged his uniform like he would in the barracks, so he could get dressed quickly in case of an alarm. He slid between the cotton sheets and switched off the only lamp. A bit of blue-white moonlight poured in over the rugs on the stone floor. He lay there, eyes adjusting to the darkness, feeling naked and in terrible danger that he couldn't resist.

Just when he was about to lose his nerve, the door opened. He heard somebody undress. The moonlight played over the short silver hair, but Sergei didn't watch the man. In the dark, he could have been a stranger. That was the reason behind this. They were just bodies.

A weight settled on the mattress. A hand brushed away the thin covers, ran over his body from his pecs to his abs, to his cock. Sergei inhaled when the hand began to stroke him. He hadn't been touched like this for too long. He bit back a sound when that hand concentrated on the tip of his cock, keeping it covered with the foreskin but massaging it skillfully. Not a word, not a sound from the other man. Sergei closed his eyes, thrusting into that hand, wanting more than the slowly grinding pleasure. His hands dug into the mattress because he wasn't sure he was allowed to touch the general—the *general* was doing this, what an outrageous thought.

No sound. His breath speeding up, Sergei fought every small moan that tried to escape with each exhale, tried to still himself and keep from squirming. When he was getting close, the general stopped and drew back. "Turn around."

Sergei turned but grimaced. He wasn't sure he wanted this, wasn't convinced he should allow it. But they'd come this far. The officer left for a moment, then came back and knelt between his knees.

Something hot and slick and blunt nudged his ass. He inhaled sharply. The officer pushed, and Sergei gritted his teeth. The first sound. A groan when he couldn't enter immediately. He struggled, slipped, then pulled Sergei's hips toward him, fingertips digging roughly into his skin. Obedient, Sergei pushed back, flattened his spine and waited for his superior.

Another attempt to get inside him, this time, slower, more insistent, until Sergei had no choice but to yield. The general must have used some oil or grease. Nevertheless, the burn was hard to ignore.

Damn, he was big, Sergei thought as the stretch really registered. Then the rest of the cock shoved in, making him rock forward. *No. Too much.*

Careful what you wish for.

The man's body was flush with his—pubic hair, balls, strong thighs. Hot skin on hot skin, then one of the hands found his cock again, stroked him, which took his mind off the burn. Damn it, general knew what he was doing.

Sergei grew completely hard again, then the other man moved inside him, against him, his oiled fist rewarding him for the burning sensation. Sergei couldn't help but groan, pushed back and forward, wanting both now. The burn had melted into something else, was now welcome, and the harsh, quick thrusts were perfect together with the way the man pumped him.

He came with such force that it surprised him, but the general wasn't done. He pushed Sergei forward into the mattress and fucked him harder, and harder still. This didn't feel good anymore, but Sergei was too exhausted to resist or protest. After all, that man was still his superior.

He tightened against the intrusion, making it worse for him, but he sensed a new urgency in the thrusts and concentrated on suppressing the discomfort and helping the general get to orgasm. Finally, it came.

Sergei felt the spurts inside, noticed the fingers dig into his shoulders, arms, that deep, shuddering sound from on top of him.

The general pulled out and rolled off him. Sergei turned away to get out of the wet patch and stared at the ceiling. He was sore, sated, no longer brimming with energy and anger. It had calmed him, even if it was also disturbing. He slid to the side of the bed to get dressed.

"Where are you going?"

Sergei hesitated. "Where should I go?"

"Stay," the general said. Hardly more than a sleepy murmur.

The door was bolted and locked. He'd just have to remember to rumple the bed in the other room tomorrow. Just to be safe.

About Quid Pro Quo (Market Garden #1)

Quid Pro Quo is actually not the first *Market Garden* story we wrote. That was *If It Flies*. *Quid Pro Quo* happened one day while I was at work and suffering badly from boredom. Nothing was happening, absolutely nothing, and yet I was stuck in an office. My boss and her boss were both out, so when Lori pinged me on chat, she suggested to write “some porn, just for fun.”

So we did that, and wrote most of the story in an afternoon and the rest when I got home. It was much better than attacking people in the office with a stapler just to have some entertainment.

Blurb

For the past six months, Jared's been selling sex at Market Garden, a London club that caters to the better-off. But business is slow in the run-up to Christmas, when businessmen and bankers are too busy bickering over bonuses to rent themselves a little high-class action.

Though Jared's wallet finds the downtime unnerving, the rest of him rather enjoys the opportunity it gives him to admire Tristan, an old hand in the club whose reputation usually sees him well-booked. Jared has been crushing on Tristan for months—he's no more immune to Tristan's cockiness and confidence than the johns, and those are just Tristan's inner qualities.

Just as Jared's about to chat Tristan up, a businessman asks for something a little different: he wants to book them both. They agree—and Jared finds himself going from crush to mind-bending lust as he's made the pawn in a sexual power game. Tristan shows him how a pro handles a john while delivering the top-shelf sex for which the Market Garden is so rightly renowned.

Quid Pro Quo (Market Garden #1)

“Feast or famine in this place, isn’t it?” Tristan sighed heavily. He wore his boredom as if he wondered how *dare* the universe not entertain him, and lounged as much as anyone could on a barstool. He was like a cat in that respect. He could stretch and bend to get comfortable—at least, Jared assumed he was comfortable—anywhere he damn well pleased. Right now, his arm seemed like the only solid piece of his body, his elbow on the bar and his hand against his face, holding up his head as the rest of him poured over the edge of the bar, onto the seat, and down the stool leg to where the toe of his boot touched the floor.

Jared wasn’t quite so comfortable. It was hard to relax when the wallet in the back pocket of his tight leather trousers was getting close to empty. Looking out at Market Garden’s mostly vacant lounge, where each of the few potential johns were already under the spells of at least one or two other rentboys, he said, “Does it get like this a lot in December?” It had been for two weeks. Almost three now.

Tristan shrugged. “Sometimes. Economy and all that.” He sighed again and waved his hand. “Apparently people think it’s a good idea to buy food before renting a cock or an arse for the evening.”

Jared would’ve laughed at the comment—so very typically Tristan—but it was hard to find the humour when he was in possession of a cock and an arse that desperately needed renting. After all, *he* needed to buy food. Never mind Christmas presents. And probably a new fridge.

“Relax.” Tristan smoothed a few long strands of ink-black hair out of his own face. “Payday’s coming up for most of them. They’ll be back.”

Question is, will they be back before rent’s due?

“Everything changes with bonus season. Guys’ll have money to burn, and they’ll celebrate *not* getting laid off before Christmas by getting laid.” Tristan’s boneless figure solidified one liquid joint at a time, and he sat up, rolling his shoulders under his slick, black shirt. “Well, as long as there’s some booths that aren’t occupied, we should go sit someplace more comfortable.”

Jared hesitated. “W-we?”

Tristan paused. “You don’t want to?”

“I didn’t say that. I just—” *Didn’t think you’d . . . I mean, guys like you don’t usually . . . I’m me, and you’re you, and. . .* Jared shook himself to life. “Sure. Yeah.”

Tristan gave him a puzzled look, but didn’t say anything and started across the lounge.

Jared picked up his drink. It was nonalcoholic, of course, since employees weren’t allowed anything else on the job. The rule was enforced too. There were a few guys who’d thought giving Raoul, the head bartender, a free blowjob would result in him breaking the rules and spiking their orange juices with vodka or the Coke with rum, but rumour had it all they got was a belly full of cum and, worst-case scenario, a swift and permanent dismissal from Market Garden.

Jared stood and followed his catlike colleague across the lounge, which was more crowded with tables and chairs than with anyone occupying them. Well, maybe tonight wasn’t all bad. He might not get paid, but it also didn’t cost him anything to look Tristan up and down as he walked. Tight leather, lithe body, slinking gait; God, it was no wonder he was in such high demand. Most of the time, anyway. Higher demand than a lot of the guys here, Jared included, but lower than food, heating, and mobile phones.

Jared reminded himself he just hadn’t been here long enough to be in demand like Tristan. He’d worked for Market Garden for about six months, ever since post-exam boredom had led him to search for more excitement than he’d found stripping on the weekends, which he’d done since his second semester of university. This was more enjoyable and much more profitable, so he’d stuck with it even after classes had started again.

He never imagined he'd ever be a rentboy. Might be something to leave off the CV, but he'd deal with that if there were any jobs available at all when he graduated. For now, he enjoyed it, especially with that thick wad of quid he had in his back pocket at the end of an evening.

At the end of *most* evenings. Before the past three weeks or so, anyway.

Part of him still thought a guy paying for sex was somewhat pathetic, even though he now understood that not everybody who did so was too ugly or too creepy to score on the open market, as it were. Some guys just considered it a legitimate shortcut past all the wining and dining or even getting onto Grindr and dealing with people who faked their profile pictures—or total sexual incompatibility even if they hadn't.

He could get behind that, he supposed, certainly with the income possibilities it opened up, though he was studying bloody hard for his exams and thus had cut back on the work. He didn't need slow nights like this at all. He was too skint. And his landlord was an asshole, one of those buy-to-let vampires that kept increasing rents at least every year but consistently failed to get even the most basic repairs done.

Though, it was really hard to think about broken fridges when he watched Tristan walk. Jared just hoped he looked even half as nonchalant when he planted himself down in the booth next to Tristan.

About Take It Off (Market Garden #2)

Take It Off happened right after *Quid Pro Quo*—we'd been surprised how many readers had liked Tristan and Jared, so we figured, what the hell, let's do another one.

As to the research, I'm not sure who came up with the idea of stripping (probably Lori), but I do remember spending two days or so on youtube, watching instruction videos and trying to translate those movements into words, which was fun, and got me strange looks from my partner.

This time, we decided to switch the characters around and have Jared in charge, which worked really well.

Blurb

Turnabout is foreplay.

High-end Market Garden rentboys Tristan and Jared have found their niche. Men are willing to pay good money to watch Tristan tease Jared, and the two of them seduce London's elite with sex and power games.

Except Tristan is less and less interested in getting money out of the johns these days. He wants his partner in crime, and he wants the seduction to be real. But is Jared just in this for the pay?

When Rolex, the john who started it all, returns to Market Garden, the boys jump on the opportunity to service him—and each other—for a fresh pile of cash. Rolex isn't the only one itching for a rematch, though. Jared's been waiting for a chance to get back at Tristan for teasing him so mercilessly the first time.

And for a former stripper, revenge is a dish best served extra hot.

Take It Off (Market Garden #2)

Tristan was bored.

At least business had been steadier lately at Market Garden, ever since the Christmas lull had ended. Apparently the wealthy elite had placated all the annual demands for gifts and family time, and could now spare money and evenings for expensive rentboys. Great for the wallet, but as far as Tristan was concerned, the only thing worse than no john was the same john every bloody night. Well, not the exact same guy. Just an endless stream of clones coming through the black curtain in search of a night's entertainment. Every one of them wanted the same thing, and they all grinned and smirked like they were the first mugs ever to ask a rentboy to suck a cock or bend over. Yawn.

"I could use a refill." Jared held up his empty glass. "You?"

Tristan looked into his own glass and realised he was almost to the bottom. "Sure. I'll pick up the next one." The drinks were free, but he and Jared took turns fighting the crowd to the bar for refills.

"Sounds good." Jared slid out of the booth and headed for the bar.

Tristan watched him, and couldn't help grinning. There was a sexy little strut in Jared's step these days. Ever since the two of them had started working together and double-teaming johns, Jared had gained some much-needed confidence, and it showed. God, but he was both cute and mouth-watering, and that gorgeous little arse in those tight leather trousers was icing on the cake. He even flirted shamelessly with Raoul and the other bartenders now.

Johns and rentboys alike glanced at Jared, checking out his lithe body in all that gorgeous, tight leather. As Tristan watched them watch Jared, both pride and a hint of jealousy swelled in his chest.

Look all you want, lads. I get to fuck him.

Tristan shivered at the thought. Even if it was only for the sake of performing for their johns and making a few hundred quid, he enjoyed the hell out of being with Jared. With a body like that and a mouth that talented, who wouldn't? Even if they didn't know Jared was also sweet, funny, smart....

Jared came back a moment later, drinks in hand, and slid into the booth beside Tristan.

"Thanks," Tristan said.

"Don't mention it."

Tristan slid his hand over Jared's leather-clad thigh under the table in their shadowy booth. At least things had been more interesting since they'd started working together. Fucking a john while Jared watched, or — even better — fucking Jared while the john watched, that kept his interest. Most of the time, anyway. Lately, even that was getting repetitive.

Or rather, frustrating. They had to concentrate on pleasing their paying clients, and those clients nearly always wanted to get involved in more ways than just sitting back and watching, which meant Tristan never could focus exclusively on Jared. The more they did this, the more he wanted to do exactly that. What he wouldn't have given to get Jared alone for a little while, away from the distraction and interference of the guys who kept their wallets nice and fat. The uptight kid had relaxed a lot recently. He'd been inching out of his shell ever since they'd partnered up, and Tristan wanted to know what else Jared had up his sleeve.

Except the more Jared came into his own, the less interested he seemed in Tristan. Lately, it'd been strictly business for him. A performance he could have put on with any other rentboy. He'd even gone back to taking a lot of johns on his own. As more men turned Jared's head, Tristan desperately wanted to work up the nerve to suggest skipping out of work and spending a little time in his flat, doing what they wanted rather than what someone else wanted them to do. Jared seemed to enjoy working with him, but how would he feel about sleeping with Tristan for free? Or even just hanging out and having a conversation that didn't include keeping an eye on the door for would-

be clients? Tristan could've sworn there'd been a little crush going on in the beginning, and now he was kicking himself for not making his move before Jared's interest in him cooled in favour of johns and money.

"You boys look bored." Nick, one of the kinkier rentboys, appeared beside their booth with a characteristic smirk on his thin lips. "Slow night?"

"Night's still young." Tristan sipped his soft drink. "What about you?"

Nick shrugged, the gesture extra flippant in true Nick style. "Just waiting for a worthwhile victim to show up." He shifted his always-predatory gaze towards Jared. "You sure you don't want to play with some of the kinky customers?"

Tristan slid his hand further over Jared's leg.

"I don't know," Jared said. "I'm having a pretty good time with the ones I get."

Another shrug. "Suit yourself. But if you ever change your mind...."

"I'll give it some thought." Jared sounded sincere. Genuinely interested, not just being polite.

Nick grinned. Tristan said nothing, just ran his thumb back and forth over the inseam of Jared's trousers. Funny, Jared used to squirm under Tristan's touch, but now it was as routine as flirting with potential clients. Something to entice johns and establish that Jared and Tristan worked together with no implications that they *were* together.

Nick glanced at the door, and straightened. "Oh. Looks like tonight's paycheque just arrived. I'll talk to you guys later." With that, he was gone.

"Think we'll ever get a client like one of his?" Jared asked.

"You never know."

"Could be fun." Jared played with his straw. "Good money, too."

"It could." Jealousy flared in Tristan's chest. He wasn't into the same things Nick was. The bondage, the pain play, it was all fine and good, but it wasn't his thing. He liked the power games, just not the implements and bloodshed. He hadn't thought Jared was into that kind of thing either, but everyone knew Nick made a killing servicing the kinkier johns. There was nothing stopping Jared from partnering up with him and getting in on that action.

How the hell do I tell him I want him for myself?

"Hey." Jared leaned closer, lips brushing Tristan's ear. "You remember that guy who paid us to fool around while he watched? The first time, I mean?"

Tristan shivered and squeezed Jared's leg. "How could I forget?"

"Yeah, well." Jared tilted his head towards the door. "Look who just walked in."

Tristan turned his head.

Well, fuck me.

There he was. Suited and booted, looking like he owned the place, flashy gold watch peeking out from the end of an expensively tailored suit.

Rolex. We meet again.

And he was coming right towards them, too.

"Looks like we might be making some money tonight," Jared said with a grin.

Is that opportunity I hear knocking? Tristan ran his hand higher up Jared's leg. "Hope he stopped at the bank on his way here."

Rolex strolled up to their table. He gave Jared a long look, then Tristan. "I was hoping you boys would be here tonight."

"We are." Tristan offered a toothy grin. "And you found us. Now what are you going to do with us?"

Rolex seemed to think on it for a moment, as if thrown off his stride, then grinned. "Oh, I've got a little fantasy in mind."

"How kinky are we talking?" Tristan asked. "The place has specialists for the weirder shit." His teeth snapped shut. Best not to give Rolex — or Jared — any ideas that might subtract Tristan from the night's equation.

Rolex glanced around. "Nothing weird. You guys know I like to watch." He leaned closer, flattening his palms on the table. "And give some orders along the way."

"Orders, eh?" Tristan flashed him a wide grin, and Rolex laughed, clearly picking up the challenge. Tristan reached for his drink. "It's a rematch, then?"

Rolex pushed his tongue against his teeth. "Yeah. In a manner of speaking."

Tristan was intrigued enough that he glanced at Jared, picking up the nod there. It might not be just watching, but by now they'd had enough experience to play basically any john who entered the Garden by ear. Oddly, two against one wasn't fair — even if the other guy called the shots. Totally different to play this game as a team. And they were a bloody good team, especially when paired up with a john as hands-off as Rolex.

"You ready to spend some money?" Tristan asked. *You ready to watch me seduce him for real?*

Rolex didn't flinch. "I think I'm over my sticker shock from the last time."

"Good. Let's go."

About *If It Flies* (Market Garden #3)

If It Flies is actually where Market Garden started, but novellas take much longer to edit, so we wrote both *Quid Pro Quo* and *Take It Off* before *If It Flies* saw the light of day.

And everything started with reading a newspaper article, where a journalist asked a very rich banker what advice he'd give to somebody just starting out in Finance. And the banker, clearly a very smart, very cynical and somewhat narcissistic type answered something along the lines of: "If it flies, drives or fornicates, it's cheaper to rent it."

Meaning of course, he'd lost a lot of money to ex-wives, expensive cars and planes. But I sat on the bus, thunderstruck by that sentence. Whores and rentals. Perfect. I told Lori, who loved the idea, and we figured we'll play with the rent boy theme on this and look at gay or bi bankers and financial people getting their rocks off, paying lots of money and getting in over their head.

The first was Spencer, who takes some very bad or very good advice from Percy (who may or may not have been modelled in his attitudes on that real-life banker I read about). And Percy of course also tries to mess up Malcolm's life in *City Mouse*, so his record in terms of friendly advice is pretty mixed.

What we definitely wanted to do in *If It Flies* was look at the power dynamic between rent boy and john, and mess with that. The whole series is about negotiating power and control, and that is what kept things fresh for me throughout several books.

Blurb

If it flies, drives, or fornicates, it's cheaper to rent it.

Spencer is in a rut. Long hours at the law firm are sucking the life out of him, and he doesn't have time or energy for a relationship. He's lonely, horny, and itching for something new, so he tries the Market Garden, an exclusive—and expensive—brothel. Spencer isn't in the door five minutes before a cocky rentboy makes his move.

Nick isn't just any rentboy, though. He's a Dom, he's a sadist, and he's everything Spencer didn't know he was missing. One night turns into more, and before long, Spencer is one of Nick's regular clients.

Both men think they're just scratching each other's backs: Spencer's exploring a submissive, masochistic side he never knew he had, and Nick is getting off and getting paid. But as time goes on, it's clear their strictly professional arrangement . . . isn't, and if Nick has one hard limit, it's that he doesn't get romantically entangled with his johns. The problem is, while Nick doesn't want to be owned, Spencer's no longer content with just renting.

If It Flies (Market Garden #3)

Chapter One

“Trust me, Spence,” Percy said during a mostly liquid lunch. “If it flies, drives, or fornicates, it’s always cheaper to rent it.” A few other restaurant patrons gave him disgusted looks.

Spencer laughed humourlessly over the rim of a Moscow Mule. “Yeah. A lot of good that philosophy did *you*.”

“Now, now.” Percy wagged a finger at him. “It wasn’t the rentboy who cost me half of everything I own. It was the wife.”

“Mm-hmm. Because you rented something that fornicates, yes?” Married or not, Percy never could resist his penchant for rentboys, especially that gorgeous Jamaican guy he hadn’t managed to keep a secret.

“Wasn’t his fault. But her?” Percy shook his head. “Christ. With what that woman cost me, I could’ve thrown orgies with a pile of supermodels for years, snorting Class A drugs off the most expensive tits in London.” He shrugged, probably unaware he’d once again turned the heads of a few people at nearby tables. “Though you’ve got to admit, she does know how to skin a guy.”

The perverse, masochistic respect on his face gave Spencer pause, and he stabbed a bite of chicken. “There’s a dubious skill set.”

“And one of the biggest risks of the whole marriage trap.” Percy raised his glass as if in a toast. “That’s why you don’t *buy*, Spence. When you rent, you get all the good stuff and don’t set yourself up for a government-sanctioned bank account massacre.”

“Quite honestly,” Spencer muttered, keeping his voice down unlike his lunch companion, “I think I’d rather just find someone I didn’t feel the need to run around on.”

Percy waved a hand. “Just a fantasy, lad. Save yourself the trouble. You don’t need a relationship, you just need to get your arse into bed with someone who fucks off before dawn.”

“Charming.” Spencer eyed his own drink. It was way too early to be drinking, he knew that, but when Percy was buying, you didn’t say no, or a rumour might go round the firm that you couldn’t hold your liquor. Only problem was, his mouth was a little dry right now—these conversations never took long to get more personal than he liked—but his head was already light. Drink to wet the mouth? Or abstain to keep the head clear? Or maybe pick someone else to ask for advice to get out of this overstressed, undersexed rut he was stuck in? Percy was the only man at the firm who knew Spencer was gay, though, and Spencer wasn’t keen to let that information get around.

Unbidden, he wondered what crazy stuff Percy got up to—or off on—with his various rentboys, and quickly decided he couldn’t have lunch with the guy again if he knew. Bad enough he knew about Percy’s fetish for dark skin, which made their “friendship” a little bit awkward. He’d long go convinced himself that the man was not flirting, just loved riding his superiority complex with him, and left it at that.

“You need to loosen up.” Percy declared, and smacked the table with an open palm, rattling some cutlery and startling half the restaurant, Spencer included.

And on that note, drinking it was. Spencer picked up his glass and quickly sucked down two deep swallows of the Moscow Mule, a hellish concoction of ginger beer and vodka. Spencer’s eyes watered a little, and he coughed as he put the glass down again.

“Loosen up.” He held Percy’s gaze. “Which in this case means following your lead and finding a prostitute.”

“Why the hell not?” Percy asked like the idea made perfect sense. “You need to relax, mate. Every time I’ve seen you recently, you’re wound tighter than the time before, and you weren’t any better when you were still with that fuckwit boyfriend of yours.” He made a sharp, dismissive gesture, as if shooing away an apparition of Spencer’s

ex. “Which further proves my point: Rent. Don’t buy. It’ll do you some good.” He winked, lowering his voice again to a conspiratorial whisper. “It’s worth the money, I promise.”

“It’s just not my thing. We’ve been over this.”

“Mm-hmm.” That damned eyebrow was like a fucking lie detector, and its current arch said *bollocks*. “It’s not your thing? And being on the fast track to ulcers and a heart attack is your thing? Come on.” He shrugged. “One night. One trip. It’ll do you some good. I promise.”

Spencer gnawed the inside of his lower lip. He was on that fast track, wasn’t he, what with the last few months of stress—*mergers and job cuts and bollocks, oh my!*

Even though he knew it was a bad idea—but then, there was more Moscow Mule in his gut than in his glass—he finished the last of his drink and flagged down the waitress for another. He’d be taking the afternoon off now, that was for sure. Or at least barricading himself in his office under the pretence of studying contracts.

Before the second drink came, he tapped his fingers on the rim of the empty one. “So, this place you go to . . .”

Immediately, the judgmental eyebrow returned to its launch position, and Percy’s eyes lit up. “That’s my boy!” He folded his arms and leaned in closer like they were planning a murder or some bloody thing. “What about it?”

Spencer swallowed. *Where’s that drink?* “I’ve heard things about those places. Human trafficking and—”

“Don’t worry about that shit.” Percy waved the concern away. “Trust me, I checked their background, foreground, underground, whatever. Probably the cleanest whorehouse in the city.”

Drink? Please? Now?

“That’s not saying much, you know.”

Percy laughed. “Look, it’s not a bunch of underage kids working against their will. Most of them are jaded university students.”

Spencer blinked. “What?” Last thing he wanted was to walk into one of them as an intern in a year or so.

“Yeah. Crazy, isn’t it?” Percy picked up his own cocktail and took a drink, making Spencer’s mouth water. “Apparently, some of them start stripping between studying, and go on from there.”

Spencer couldn’t argue with that; it only made economic sense, sordid as it was.

“It’s ironic, you know?” Percy mused. “If the economy were better, we’d probably be working with these guys instead of fucking them.”

Spencer bit back the observation that he, as yet, hadn’t encountered a Jamaican lawyer—but who was he to judge? The banks were getting more “colourful,” even though the odd Indian or Pakistani were still assumed to be quantitative analysts rather than movers and shakers, and he himself still raised a few eyebrows as the one black corporate lawyer in the firm. Never mind he had the Oxbridge accent to prove that he belonged.

“Top talent always gets a place,” he muttered, trying to move the conversation elsewhere.

“I imagine it’s easier than working eighty-hour weeks to get onto the career ladder.” Percy was clearly enjoying himself way too much.

Thank God Spencer’s drink arrived.

He sipped the ginger-flavoured cocktail while Percy talked about whoring being the true equal-opportunity sector out there, though, in Percy’s typical way, even this romantic notion was distorted by a jaded lens. He cleared his throat. “Okay.”

“I’ll introduce you,” Percy said.

“Can’t I just go alone?”

“Na-ah.” Percy grinned at him. “I’d suggest getting a membership. It is quite classy—certainly a good variety, if you know what I mean. They even have a pair of shemales.”

Good God, this was *not* something he needed to learn during lunch.

“I’ll . . . have the usual configuration.”

“What about after work today?” That gleam in Percy’s eyes was equal parts unnerving and intriguing. “I’ll introduce you, you get a membership, and after that you’re on your own, stud.”

This was getting too familiar way too fast. Kicked along by the Mule, no doubt. Their relationship was friendly enough, but Spencer still felt a bit weird. As ex-head of sales in an investment bank, Percy likely knew every high-class prostitute in the City, and had very likely covered the partying under “expenses” when he “entertained clients,” so his experience on that front could clearly be trusted. Spencer had just never expected to find himself at the receiving end of Percy’s magnanimity.

“So.” Percy set his drink down sharply, emphatically, like he’d just closed a deal. “What do you say we meet at the Market Garden tonight? Say, nine-thirty?”

Uh, no, mate. No way. I’m not . . . there’s no . . .

But the Mule spoke before Spencer could: “I’ll be there.”

Chapter Two

There was only one problem with a liquid lunch. Well, okay, besides the fact that it meant Spencer’s mouth had moved before his brain did and he’d wound up walking into a place like Market Garden at nine-thirty, hanging back behind Percy like that somehow made him safer. Yeah, right. Percy was enough of a troublemaker for both of them. Nobody was safe with that guy.

No, the problem was that after three drinks at lunch, Spencer was already a little hung-over when he followed Percy into the club. His temples throbbed, a clear reminder why drinking with Percy during the day was a bad idea. But what was done was done, and now they were here.

God, Market Garden really didn’t go to any great lengths to mask its purpose, did it? Signs warning against cameras. Disco lights flickering off the polished bald heads of the massive—and numerous—bouncers standing around to make sure no one got too frisky with the merchandise. Not without paying for it, anyway.

Obviously Percy wasn’t the only man who “entertained clients” here. There was no shortage of patrons in suits pawing at scantily clad women.

“Thought you said this place catered to guys like us,” he said to Percy.

The man glanced at him, eyes narrow and sly. “They do. But when you want top shelf, you have to *ask* for it.”

Spencer just followed Percy deeper into the club. They stopped at the bar, which was staffed by half a dozen men, any one of which Spencer would have emptied his wallet to—

Slow down.

He shook his head. Apparently he was getting used to this idea faster than he’d thought.

Percy leaned over the bar and exchanged a few brief, hushed words with one of the bartenders. Then came the nod, the head tilt, and when Spencer followed the trajectory of the tilt, he saw a door tucked into the shadows at one end of the bar. It had windows, but they’d been blacked out, and a couple of the bouncers loitered nearby.

“Let’s go.” Percy beckoned to Spencer and strolled towards that blacked-out door like he owned the place.

Now his heart quickened, and he wondered if he should grab Percy, ask him to wait, and order himself a glass of liquid courage before he started traipsing into guarded, darkened back rooms in a bar full of prostitutes.

I should’ve just gone to the gym tonight.

One of the bouncers saw them coming and stepped in front of the door. A swell of panic almost stopped Spencer in his tracks, but instead of warning them away, the bouncer pulled open the door and gave them a “go on” gesture.

Even if the windows hadn’t been blacked out, there wouldn’t have been much light coming from the room on the other side. It looked like a huge, dark void, forbidding but attractive, pulling him in like the black hole it resembled.

The door shut heavily behind them. Percy pushed aside a thick curtain. And beyond the portal: the men of Market Garden. They all wore black leather in various configurations, though most went for leather trousers with

either a skin-tight black T-shirt or a bondage harness. And no two guys were alike. Twinks. Bodybuilders. Girly boys. Guys who looked like they'd escaped a Goth convention with free mascara.

One guy in particular immediately caught his eyes. Slim, wearing low-riding leather trousers that revealed chiselled groin lines, and Spencer couldn't decide what he wanted to touch more—the bulge in the guy's trousers or the two pierced nipples that he displayed proudly without a T-shirt or so much as a harness.

"You look like you're in a supermarket in front of fifty types of orange juice," Percy whispered to him. "Definitely a membership for you. You can try them all."

Spencer pulled at his tie. It was getting hot in here. "Not sure how I—" he managed to bite the rest of the sentence off before it escaped. *How I feel about fucking a guy you fucked.* But it didn't really matter, did it? Would he rent a car that Percy had rented before him?

Probably.

The guy in leather was just turning away with a laugh from a friend wearing a chainmail shirt.

"Drink?" Percy asked.

Best way to shed Percy, however briefly. The man's peanut gallery comments were a serious distraction, never mind the potential for embarrassment. "Sure."

Percy vanished in the gloom towards the bar, and Spencer watched the guy in leather for a minute or so. He must have been in his early twenties. Not quite a twink, but that lean build suggested a dancer or something. The guy couldn't weigh more than sixty, sixty-five kilos. No, he hadn't looked at profiles on Grindr too long. You could just tell the guy didn't have a spare kilo on his frame. Maybe he was a go-go dancer rather than a rentboy?

The guy looked at him, and a smile curled the corner of his mouth.

And then he came walking over.

Not walking. Sauntering. Hell, he was strutting.

And looking Spencer up and down like *he* was sizing up a rental instead of being the merchandise on display.

A little too close—*oh God, come closer*—he stopped. Spencer was almost a head taller, but couldn't shake the feeling that the leather-clad almost-twink was looking down at *him*. He wasn't intimidating, per se, he just radiated a cockiness that tightened Spencer's balls.

Spencer cleared his throat. "Um . . . hello." Good thing nobody expected a client to come up with a pickup line. Though that one had been exceptionally lame.

"You got a name?" Direct. No surprise there.

He considered a fake name, but what the hell? Another quiet cough, and he said, "Spencer."

"Nick." With a faint smirk, Nick nodded towards the bar on the opposite end of the shadowy room. "You look like the kind of guy who could buy me a drink."

Spencer's breath tangled up somewhere in his airway. "I . . . excuse me?"

An eyebrow lifted. Not judgmental and telepathic like Percy's always was. Purely challenging. A thin curve of "You heard me."

"Look, I'm . . ." *I'm sounding like an idiot already.* Guess this isn't much different from the dating scene. "I'll be honest here. I'm new to this."

"I know. I've never seen you here before, and you look lost." Nick quirked his eyebrow again. "Your dad didn't bring you here to lose your virginity, did he?"

At that, Spencer laughed. Well, that was something: he was breathing now. "No. Not quite. But I've, um, never done . . . this."

"What? Had an awkward conversation with a prostitute in a whorehouse?" No smile cracked his lips, but Spencer could tell Nick was enjoying this. Immensely.

"Something like that," Spencer muttered. "So, how does this work, exactly?"

"Well." Nick tossed his head to get that blond fringe out of his eyes. "You buy me a drink, it's a fiver. You want to lick it off me? It's a hundred."

Holy. Fuck.

Nick brought up a hand—long, fine fingers—and arranged his unruly fringe as he casually added, “And it just goes up from there.”

“Based on the number of drinks?”

“Based on the number of licks.”

Spencer blinked. This kid really knew how to catch a man off-guard, didn’t he? Getting his wits about him, he said, “And if I want you to lick it off me?”

Nick sniffed derisively and smirked. “Then you’re talking to the wrong whore.”

Spencer looked around, but his gaze returned to Nick’s nipple piercings, light sparking off them, making them shine like diamonds. Maybe Nick was the right guy, though he’d always assumed prostitutes were more—accommodating. He’d never hired a prostitute. He could have one-night stands; until a few months ago, he’d even had a relationship, of sorts, if falling asleep together over paperwork was a relationship. Normally, these days he expended his last bit of energy on porn.

The thing that tipped him over the edge was—Nick wasn’t selling. He didn’t try to influence the decision one way or the other. Spencer couldn’t possibly put into words how refreshing it was to not be sold to or pressured. In a world of BUY THIS NEW PHONE and YOU’RE NOTHING WITHOUT THIS WATCH, encountering a guy who didn’t bend over backwards to close a deal felt like stepping into a calm spot he hadn’t known existed.

“All right,” he said, eventually.

Nick nodded. “Get me a drink.”

He turned and headed to the bar, then, remembering Percy had gone to get *him* a drink, glanced around.

Percy had apparently forgotten about Spencer’s drink. He was sitting at a table with two prostitutes around him, one in each arm. From behind their backs, he gave him a double thumbs-up.

Spencer pushed through to the bar and bought two drinks. He tried for beers, but the bartender shook his head and handed him a beer and a cola, “For Nick.”

When he returned to Nick, he said, “Maybe we should sit down.”

Nick nodded and led the way to a somewhat more secluded booth at the far end. “I figure you’ll have less performance anxiety if your friend can’t see you.”

“Uh, yeah. Good idea.”

Nick glanced back in Percy’s direction, and said, “I’m sure he’ll keep them busy for at least . . . a *couple* minutes.” Then he turned away and slid into the booth, and Spencer couldn’t tell if he’d heard that little snicker or if he’d imagined it.

Nick moved far enough into the booth to leave space for Spencer, and in spite of his pounding heart and the “what the ever-loving fuck are you doing?” in the back of his brain, Spencer joined him. He wasn’t sure what the protocol was here. Treat it like a date? Arm around the shoulders leads to hand on the thigh leads to—

Oh, God, apparently we’re going straight to the hand on the crotch.

Spencer tensed, pressing back against the leather upholstery. “Oh. Wow.”

Nick snickered for real this time, and his breath tickled the side of Spencer’s neck. Spencer pulled in a gasp, but a firm-and-not-so-gentle squeeze below the belt knocked that air right back out.

“Fuck.” He put up a hand. “I . . . whoa. This is . . .”

Nick’s hand retreated to Spencer’s thigh. “You really are new at this, aren’t you?”

“Just . . . just a bit. Yeah.” He grabbed his drink and swallowed as much as it took to cool him off. Which was better than half the damned glass. *Here we go again.* “Sorry, I’m . . .”

“Relax.” Nick grinned. “I don’t bite.”

Spencer eyed him, waiting for the inevitable “. . . hard” or “. . . unless you want me to.” It didn’t come, though. In fact, Nick took his hand off Spencer’s leg and reached for his own drink.

It was quickly becoming apparent there wasn't a thing Nick did that he couldn't make sexy. Not overtly sexual, but sexy. Right down to the way his hand was arranged on the glass, like it was deliberate, even artful, every finger placed just so to make the simple gesture of picking up a drink look . . . elegant? Maybe it was just the fine bones of his wrist and hand. The black nail varnish didn't hurt the effect, like staccato marks at the end of each finger.

With his other hand, he steadied the straw. No suggestive stroking or up-down motion, but he looked right at Spencer while he sucked some of his cola up into his mouth. His eyes—green, stunning pale green—locked on Spencer's, narrowing just enough to make Spencer wonder what was going on in that mind of his.

Nick swallowed his drink, paused to run the tip of his tongue around the end of the straw. Spencer suddenly wanted to loosen his tie. He gulped, which only made the tie and collar tighter.

Nick's eyes darted towards Spencer's throat. "How can you even breathe in that thing?" Before Spencer could choke out a response, Nick's glass clinked on the table and those slim, staccato-tipped fingers reached for his neck.

One finger hooked the knot of the tie and pulled. With a swift, precise gesture, Nick undid the top button. And for some reason, Spencer still couldn't fucking breathe.

"There." Nick drew back, smirking. "Much better."

"Yeah. Thanks." Spencer managed to grin. "Do I have to pay extra for that?"

Nick moistened his lips and turned his attention to the straw in his drink, which he'd pinched between his thumb and middle finger. "No. The first button's complimentary." He covered the end of the straw with his index finger and withdrew it from his glass. The vacuum held the cola inside the straw, and Nick paused, letting the opposite end drip for a second, before he brought that end up to his lips. "Any more than that? We'll have to discuss prices." He slid the tip of the straw under his tongue, and lifted his index finger so all the liquid slipped out and into his mouth.

Yeah. The tie and collar weren't the problem. There wasn't enough air in this room when Nick was around.

"So." Nick slid the straw back into his drink. He sucked his index finger into his mouth and, watching Spencer's eyes, slowly slipped it free. "What the hell is a man like you doing here?"

"Is that your way of asking what's a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?"

"No." He covered the end of his straw again and grinned at Spencer. "It's me asking what exactly you're looking for so I can decide how much you'll pay me."

God, but he was direct. Of course he wasn't trying to sell anything or close the deal. It seemed that in Nick's mind, the deal was already closed, and there was nothing left to do but sign on the dotted line, exchange money, and . . .

Holy fuck. He could afford it, that wasn't a concern, but a night alone and naked with a man like this? Spencer would never have to give Percy details because there was no way he'd survive until morning. Or maybe Percy would have the good grace to leave him alone about it? Well, he could dream.

"Uhm." He blew out a breath. "I'd be looking for a . . . a top."

There, he'd said it. Somehow, his concept of male whores involved them getting it up the arse all night—which sounded like a pretty good deal, though it was likely humiliating.

Maybe he'll be rough.

Spencer clamped down on that thought quicker than he'd have stomped on a cockroach in his student accommodations—what, ten years ago?

Nick kept looking at him. "And?"

So that part of the deal was on. "I'm in charge."

"You're the customer. Of course you're in charge." Those lips quirked with the most devilish little grin that made Spencer grateful he could just sit here for a while. That way, nobody had a clear view of his trousers.

"My place?"

“After you’ve done the membership application, yes.” Nick nodded towards one of the guys at the bar. “There’s a background check, but they’re discreet.” The grin was still there, as if the whole thing was an elaborate prank.

“How quickly can they do it?”

“Pretty quickly.” Nick nodded over. “You can do that now.”

Spencer hesitated, then figured Nick would probably wait those five or ten minutes, so he stood and headed over to the bar.

It took twenty-five minutes altogether, and he grew more and more impatient. Nick wouldn’t wait this long, would he?

But he had, chasing melting ice cubes around in his drink with the straw.

Spencer rejoined him in the booth. “All right. Paperwork is taken care of. So how much are we talking?” The implication—obligation?—in his own words rattled him.

Naturally, Nick wasn’t fazed at all. “Want an hour, half a night, whole night?”

“When do I have to decide that?”

Nick *tsked*. “Well, I need a baseline to give you a quote. Personally, I recommend more than an hour, so we can get to know each other better.” And how did he manage to be so suggestive without waggling his brows or giving him a wink? The inflection in his voice was so subtle the come-on was barely there.

Spencer exhaled. “Why don’t we start with two hours?”

Nick studied him for a little while. “Five hundred.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Two hours. Five hundred quid.”

Spencer grinned. “You’re charging partner rates.” Not quite. At his firm, partners didn’t get out of bed for any less than £650 an hour. Still, nice little student job if you could get it. Of course, Nick might have to pay off the establishment, possibly a pimp.

“You a lawyer?”

Spencer’s grin died. “Uh. Never mind. Five hundred quid is fine.” He’d hardly need dozens of hours—he wasn’t trying to solve a tricky legal problem. Besides, he did believe in paying specialists what they were worth, and Nick was making him hard just with his cocky arrogance. If he was any good at fucking—and he’d likely had the practise—that would be more than worth it. Spencer swallowed. “I’m assuming I can feed the meter if I want to go on longer?”

An incredibly subtle laugh curled Nick’s lips. There was no middle ground with this man: either everything was blatant and in your face, or subtle to the point that Spencer couldn’t always tell if it was really there.

“Feed the meter. Cute.” Nick dipped his straw in his drink and covered it with his finger again. After he’d released the liquid into his mouth, swallowed it—God, he could even make that sexy, the way he raised his chin to expose his entire throat—he put the straw back in his drink and said, “We can always negotiate extensions.”

This was strictly business to him, wasn’t it? He enjoyed it, got a charge out of it, but when it came to transactions, it was all black and white. Cash and sex. Nothing more.

“Two hours, then.” Spencer tried not to shift around, keeping both his nerves and impatience as far up his sleeve as he could. “What does two hours with Nick get me, anyway?”

Nick grinned. Nothing subtle this time, not even a little. “It gets you two hours with Nick.” The grin broadened a little more, pale green eyes narrowing like he could see right through to anything Spencer was trying to keep up his sleeve. “After all, Spencer, what more could you possibly want?”

He gulped. Nick laughed. So much for hiding a damned thing from him.

Nick drained his drink and pushed the glass away, sliding up next to Spencer so they were *almost* touching. “So. Two hours? Let’s go.”

“Does that two hours start now?” Spencer was already sliding out of the booth because according to Nick this was a done deal, and who was he to argue? “Or when we get to—” *I’m really doing this?* “—my place?”

Nick slid partway out of the booth, but didn’t get up. He pursed his lips and ran his gaze up and down Spencer’s body, a gesture that registered on his nerve endings like an actual touch. Their eyes met, and Nick pushed himself to his feet. “Assuming you’re local, we’ll start the clock when we get there.”

Spencer’s heart pounded. His wallet had hoped for that answer, but his body wasn’t entirely sure what to do with two solid hours of Nick.

He’d find out soon enough, though. Nick pulled a black leather jacket over his otherwise bare torso. Spencer got up and—oh God—Nick gave a nod to Percy, who gave him a two-fingered salute before he resumed making out with a blue-haired black twink, and they were out the door.

The back door, fortunately, rather than through the lounge where the female strippers did their thing, and then down an alley to a different road from where the cab had deposited Percy and him earlier. They had discretion down to a science in this place.

About No Distance Left to Run (The Distance Between Us, #4)

I know next to nothing about Mormons. I sometimes see them standing on the High Street (British version of Main Street) and I was vaguely aware that a recent Presidential candidate was a Mormon. I was more interested in his private equity background, to be honest. But Lori grew up in Washington State and answered my questions and it all began to dawn on me.

Lori invited me into her series, and the bunny was that a guy was coming back from a few years with the French Foreign Legion. Combine that with a successful series, Mormons, and my endless fascination with religion and all the issues around religion, personal conscience, and social/family pressure, and we had a book on our hands that was great fun to write.

Blurb

The night before Chris and his best friend Joshua were sent thousands of miles apart on their respective Mormon missions, they finally gave in to their mutual desire. Left trying to make sense of what happened, Chris's already shaky faith crumbled altogether a year later when Joshua suddenly died.

Inconsolable, ostracized by his family and the only community he'd ever known, Chris found his way on his own. Now he's going to school and loves his job as a bartender at Wilde's. Years after Joshua's death, he's finally moving on.

Then a familiar face rocks his world. Joshua isn't dead. He's back in Seattle to make peace with his dying father, with a new name, a new accent...and old feelings for Chris that are alive and well.

Forgiveness doesn't come easy for anyone, but just as Chris is accepting that the man he loves isn't going to run away this time, their families threaten to pull them apart all over again...

Warning: Contains two lost boys who need to make up for a hell of a lot of lost time. There's also a military uniform, a tuxedo, and a knife. In the same scene. And yes, it's that kind of scene.

No Distance Left to Run (The Distance Between Us, #4)

The text from Deb wasn't entirely out of the blue, but I always got nervous when I saw her name on my phone. With her father in fading health, no news was usually good news, so a message could mean anything.

Can we meet for lunch?

Well, that wasn't too bad, then.

Sure. When?

I didn't have to be at work for a few hours. She probably had a pretty short window between dropping the kids off at school and picking them up. While I waited for a response, I pulled up the traffic app and checked traffic between Seattle and the Eastside where she lived, which gave me something to do besides worry that she was going to tell me her dad's condition had worsened. I hadn't even seen much of the Hawthorne family since I'd left the Church, but they'd been like my second family when I was growing up.

She texted me back with the time and suggested a place on my side of Lake Washington. Convenient. Just in case we ran late—when didn't we?—I put my work clothes in a bag and left them in the backseat of my car.

At twelve thirty on the nose, she pulled into the parking lot of one of those insanely healthy vegan cafés in Fremont, just outside of downtown Seattle. *Hope you're buying this time*, I thought. Places like this were *not* cheap.

As soon as I saw her, my heart dropped. She always looked tired—six kids under seven will do that to you—but she was tense. Really tense. Nervous.

"Hey." I hugged her gently. "You all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." She pulled back and plastered on a phony smile that was totally out of character for her. This wasn't good.

"How's your dad?" I asked quietly.

Deb straightened a bit, the smile faltering. "He's not well, but that's not why I'm here." She gestured at the coffee shop. "Let's go in and sit. I...need to talk to you about something."

Yeah. Definitely not good.

"Deb." I touched her arm. "Just tell me. Straight out."

She shook her head. "I don't think this is—"

"Please. No beating around the bush."

She held my gaze for a moment and then swallowed hard. "It's about my brother."

Something twisted deep in my gut. She had four brothers, three of them still living. I cleared my throat. "Okay. Which one?"

Deb locked eyes with me, though it seemed to take a lot of effort. "Joshua."

I winced and shifted my gaze away. "How in the world is this urgent, then?" Unless someone had found his body. At least then, maybe we could all have some closure, but God, his parents didn't need—

"Chris." When I met her eyes again, she whispered, "He's alive."

"*What?*" My knees buckled. I grabbed the side of her minivan and leaned hard against it. "How the hell... He's alive?"

She smiled, but that nervous tension remained in her expression. "It's a long story. I've...I've been back in contact with him for a while. Almost a year now, off and on."

I could barely breathe. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because he didn't want anyone to know." She exhaled. "He knows people were hurt when he left."

"Left?" I growled. "What do you mean he *left*?"

"Exactly that. He left."

Left. I had a hard time trying to work out whether this was one of those horrible nice phrases, like “he passed away” or “he’s gone home to Jesus,” a pretty veneer for something awful, or whether she was really so blasé about it. Seeing the tension around her jaw, the second option looked a great deal unlikely. “Explain. Please?”

She tugged at my arm toward the café, and I got the hint and sighed.

We found a table—she’d selected a quiet corner—and then we went through the torturous process of ordering drinks while *he left, he left* echoed through my head.

When she leaned forward again, her eyes were all soft. “So, yes. Joshua left. That’s how he puts it.”

It was only really sinking in that he was alive. He could still do that. Use words. Give things names and descriptions. Something shifted in my chest, some kind of weight, or maybe grief, or maybe something else entirely. I wanted to strangle him, but this was only his sister, and she didn’t deserve that.

Deb went on. “Joshua reached out to me about a year ago. He found me on Facebook, of all places.” She leaned back when the waiter brought our coffees—decaf for her, of course—and ordered her superfood salad. I shook my head when the waiter asked me if I wanted anything. My stomach was too busy knotting and twisting.

“So, how is he?”

She drew up her shoulders. “Well enough, I think. I asked him to come home to make his peace with Dad.”

Another one of those pretty words. Whether the old man wanted to be made peace with was an entirely different matter, but we both knew that. Deb always believed in family and forgiveness. I wasn’t so sure about all that. I had precious little experience with happy family reunions.

“And?”

“He’s coming.”

My stomach was busy enough to tolerate the sip of coffee. No way could I have eaten anything now. “All right.”

“He’s arriving this evening at Sea-Tac.” She lifted her eyebrows.

Oh no. I’m not picking him up with you. No way.

I started to shake my head, but she reached across the table and put a hand on my arm. “He wants to see you. He’s here to make peace with our father, but...you’re the one he’s been talking about recently.”

“And after five years of thinking he’s dead, I’m supposed to show up at the airport with flowers and a smile?” I pulled my arm back. “No. Just...no. I can’t.”

“It doesn’t have to be tonight. He’ll probably need to rest and settle in anyway. I’m sure he’ll be jetlagged, and...” She trailed off, then lowered her gaze and picked up her coffee.

“Jetlagged.” I tilted my head. “Where exactly is he coming from?”

Deb took a sip of coffee, rolling it around for a moment before she set it back down. “France.”

I blinked. “France? What in the...” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Last I heard, he was missing and presumed dead. Now he’s alive and flying in from *France*?” I sat up. “What is going on?”

She took a deep breath. Folding her hands on the table, she met my eyes, her expression taut and stoic like it probably was whenever she had to explain something difficult to one of her children. “When he disappeared from his mission, it was because he left. He just...left. He wasn’t kidnapped or killed or anything like that. He left, he changed his name, and he joined the French Foreign Legion.”

I stared at her, waiting for the punch line. That was not the Joshua I knew. Not even close. He was the straight-A student, the track star, the football star, the everything-he-ever-did star. The first-chair trumpet player and promising business student who’d locked in a full-ride scholarship to Brigham Young, only to have his life tragically cut short during his two-year mission. People like that grew up to be CEOs. Or bishops. Or senators. They didn’t just up and walk away from everything to join the...

“The French Foreign Legion. You’re serious.”

Deb nodded. “I didn’t believe it either, but then I could barely believe he was alive until I talked to him.”

The words thumped against my chest. “You’ve actually talked to him? Like, on the phone?”

She nodded again.

So he was alive. His sister would have known if he was an imposter or a scam artist. If she'd spoken to him and still believed him, then he really was alive.

Laughing softly, she said, "He sounds a lot different now. I mean, it's his voice. I knew it was him the moment I answered the phone."

"Then how is he different?"

"He's got an accent now. French, I guess. His English was actually a little rough."

I struggled to imagine Mr. Class President, he of the eloquent speeches even in high school, having any difficulty with the English language. "But you're sure it was him."

Her laughter vanished, and she nodded slowly. "Absolutely. Chris, I wouldn't lie to you. Not about this. Joshua is alive."

Something shifted again in my chest. Like every damn organ I possessed. Maybe her relief or her love for her brother—some of that translated itself to me, though I didn't want it to. I'd mourned him for so long that hearing he was alive was actually painful. But the whole story seemed unbelievable at the same time, exotic and strange and so not Joshua. I wanted to see him. And I never wanted to see him again. All this was half a dream and half *Careful what you wish for*. Alive. And soon back home.

"What else...did he say?"

"He mostly asked about the family, but he didn't say much more apart from what I told you. He seemed to be really...I don't know. Relaxed? About some things? Laid back?"

"Really?"

"Well, I asked him what he was going to do if he decides to get out, and he said, 'Something will come up'." She shook her head. "Like it didn't matter and like he wasn't worried at all."

Not like Joshua either. I wouldn't exactly call him a control freak, but he liked his plans and his schedules, and he was usually extremely well prepared. A shrugged *God will provide* attitude was out of character for him.

"Where is he staying?"

"He didn't say. I offered, but maybe my house is a bit too busy. Can't have him overdose on family right away." She smiled a little. "I'll let him recover from the trip before I introduce him to the other kids."

Five years. Good heavens. He didn't know most of her kids. She'd been pregnant with the third and fourth when he'd allegedly died, and there'd been two more since then. His own family was full of strangers now.

And maybe it was wise to give him some space. He'd bolted once—though the why was what really interested me. The Legion? What kind of harebrained idea was that? Who ran away from home—or a mission, for God's sake—and joined the Legion?

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "When are you going to pick him up?"

"At seven."

Her face was all open and inviting. Somehow, she managed to put the possibility out there in the room without applying pressure or guilt-tripping me. Then again, there was no guilt to trip over. If anybody, that was Joshua's role.

"International flight? He might be delayed."

"I think it's a connecting flight."

So epic possibilities for delays and other clusterfucks.

I sucked on my teeth for a moment. Though, how bad could it be?

Pretty damn bad. You could try to punch him, and you both get arrested.

"I could wait with you."

She smiled and reached over the table to touch my hand. "Thank you, Chris. I'm sure it'll mean the world to him."

Unless I punch him. Bastard.

About No Place that Far (The Distance Between Us, #5)

No Place That Far was sparked by a conversation that Julien/Joshua had with Chris and where he mentions Timur. Lori and I immediately wanted to write a book for him, because the set-up intrigued us: Another Legionnaire who comes over for the same-sex marriage of a comrade/crush.

And Marcus seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn't be cowed or intimidated by a professional soldier, so we went with those two. It's a story about overcoming old grudges, about taking risks for the right thing, and about un-hardening our hearts, because not doing so can detract from love, life, and joy.

Blurb

Still finding his footing after a long-overdue divorce, Marcus is looking forward to some mind-numbing drinking while ogling the grooms at Chris and Julien's wedding. He never expected his attention to be diverted by the gorgeous best man.

One of Julien's French Foreign Legion buddies, Timur doesn't speak much English, but language is no barrier to Marcus understanding exactly what the huge Tartar wants—a one-night stand.

Except that one night turns into two, three, then more, which puts Marcus on edge. After Timur is done house-sitting for the honeymooning couple, he's headed back to the Legion for another five years. Like it or not, once Timur gets on that plane, the fling is over.

Unfortunately, Marcus forgot to tell his heart not to fall in love. And this time, if history repeats and he makes another wrong decision, he may never see his tattooed Legionnaire lover again.

Warning: Contains a soldier who makes up for his lack of English by using his hands to read his lover's body; a chef-turned-bartender who no longer believes in love; a length of paracord that probably wasn't meant to be used this way; and a couple of newlyweds who are game for some four-way play.

No Place that Far (The Distance Between Us, #5)

Chapter One

Marcus had had a crush on both grooms for as long as he'd known them. Well, okay, that had only been a few months, but still. Chris was smoking hot, and his French-accented fiancé Julien was...yeah. *Hot*. So Marcus had come to the wedding with every expectation of ogling the two men getting married.

What he hadn't counted on was the best man. One of the best men. The one standing behind Julien. That one.

Jesus fuck, that man.

The ceremony was the same script as every ceremony—*Do you? Do you? Let's eat cake*—so it wasn't like Marcus needed to hang on every word. And he'd helped the guys with their vows, so he'd heard them already. Which was good, because he spent the entire ceremony completely focused on that guy standing behind Julien.

For one, he was built—the kind of tall and broad-shouldered that required an expensively tailored suit to look smooth, though the rent-a-tux shop had done a good job matching him up, despite his height and wide shoulders. Black hair, shorn at the sides, just slightly longer on top. And although he was built like a guy who could take a truck apart with his bare hands, his demeanor was sweet and attentive, watching over the couple like a very big and devoted dog. A gentle, unflappable presence that shouted calm and reliable, rather than aloof or arrogant, and Marcus was a sucker for the type.

He'd been distracting enough during the ceremony, the receiving line, the speeches and all of the usual *this is a wedding so we must do this, just play along* crap that Marcus *so* loved.

Not that he was bitter or anything about how this all had reopened the rather raw wound left by his divorce.

But now the music was blasting, and everyone was crowded onto a dance floor that was probably meant to hold about a third of this particular group. Marcus stood back and watched, hoping to God they didn't do the chicken dance like everyone seemed insistent on doing at weddings these days. It didn't annoy him—well, no more than it annoyed anyone—but that irritating upbeat music reminded him a little too much of how Ray had, during the same dance at their wedding, taken advantage of the loud tune to whisper in Marcus's ear the things he had planned for their honeymoon suite that night. Damn it. He was probably the only one on the planet who got teary-eyed hearing the goddamned chicken dance.

It hadn't been played so far tonight, though, and he hung back, drinking a whiskey sour that was a little weaker than he would have mixed it, but strong enough to make his head pleasantly light. He watched, laughed at some of the drunken antics, and, in spite of the sting of being a too recently divorced man at a deliriously happy wedding, he was having a pretty good time.

"You don't dance?"

The bizarre accent should have tipped him off. French? Some Eastern European accent?

A mix of the two? Nothing he'd ever heard before, anyway. Which meant it shouldn't have surprised him when he turned his head and saw...that guy.

"I..." Marcus cleared his throat. So he hadn't imagined how green the best man's eyes were. Holy Christ. They were even more surprisingly intense because he hadn't expected that color with almond-shaped eyes. "I'm, uh. Not much of a... I have..." *Come on, come on. Speech. English. You know this!* "I have two left feet."

The guy cocked his head, genuine confusion furrowing his brow. His gaze flicked down toward Marcus's highly polished shoes, then came back up. "Two left feet?"

"Yeah, you know." Marcus nodded toward the dance floor. "I can't dance."

"Because you have two left feet?"

“Yeah, I—” Oh. *Ob.* Right. Accent meant he came from somewhere other than the States, and there was a good chance English—especially American slang—wasn’t his first language. In fact, now that Marcus had a chance to look at him up close, it occurred to him that Julien’s best man must’ve come from wherever Julien himself had come from before shacking up with Chris. French Foreign Legion, wasn’t that what Chris had said? Well, whatever the case, there was no way this guy had acquired *that* tan in Seattle.

Marcus shifted a little. “It’s just an expression. I’m, um, not very coordinated. Can’t dance.”

The stranger looked him up and down, but not in a teasing, flirting way, then cracked a smile. “You’re not drunk enough.”

Maybe not. Though Marcus preferred to stay in control of his senses and emotions while in this kind of mood. “I still have to drive.” He lifted his glass. “This is as much as I’ll drink.”

Marcus had braced himself for ribbing or mocking—after all, the alcohol was free, and what was a party without getting shitfaced—but the guy just nodded to him. Silence settled, three seconds, four, five, hitting the point of *say something or find a reason to turn away to keep face*. And maybe he should have turned away, though the man did intrigue him, partly because of that strange, steady calm so at odds with the other laughing, partying guests, and partly because he looked like nobody Marcus had ever seen.

“I’m, um, Marcus.” He extended a hand.

The stranger took it—strong hands, calloused, warm and dry. “Timur. I’m Julien’s friend.”

“I figured.” Marcus was happy for him to keep his hand a little bit longer than a handshake warranted. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but you’re from the Legion too?”

“Yes. Between contracts. Promised Julien to come over for his marriage.” He turned around, seeking out Julien in the crowd. Julien and Chris were posing in front of the rainbow-colored wedding cake for photos with Julien’s vast family. His expression was hard to read—maybe part bemused confusion and part wistfulness.

“This whole thing must look strange to you.”

Timur looked back at him and lifted his wide shoulders, and the whole tux lifted with them. “Not expected, no.”

Marcus reached out for a passing waiter and plucked a fresh glass of rum and coke off the tray, offering it to Timur. They both weren’t drunk enough for this, apparently. Timur took it, lifted it and smelled it, then took a mouthful. Every one of those movements was a little tentative and awkward. Yep, fish out of water.

“Your first time in Seattle?”

Timur nodded. “First time in America.”

“Do you like it?”

Timur lifted his shoulders again. “It’s different.”

“Where are you from?”

Timur gave a quiet laugh, one that disappeared into the background music, and lifted his drink to his lips. “That’s a complicated answer.”

“Is it?”

The man rolled a sip of rum and coke around in his mouth for a moment, subtle, smooth motions of lips and jaw that had way too strong a hold on Marcus’s attention. Timur was clean-shaven, but Marcus caught himself wondering if that was as normal for him as the tuxedo. Something about him convinced Marcus that this man’s natural state included at least a few days’ worth of stubble on his sharp jaw and down onto his throat.

And suddenly Marcus’s drink was not nearly cold enough, despite being comprised almost entirely of ice. When the hell had he drunk the majority of it? And where the fuck was that waiter?

Timur swallowed, somehow managing to make even that into a mind-bending action.

Marcus wasn’t usually so taken with the way a man’s Adam’s apple moved, but, hell, he was drunk and hoping to God no one played that stupid song—what was it again? He’d completely forgotten—because he was the

only man on the planet who'd get misty-eyed over it. Obsessing over a stranger's Adam's apple wouldn't be the weirdest thing he'd done tonight.

"Ukraine." Timur shook his head, another of those quiet laughs escaping his barely parted lips. "Been many years."

"So you haven't been home in years?" *No shit, Sherlock.* Marcus cringed. Conversation wasn't usually this much of a challenge for him. For God's sake, he was a bartender. Had been for the last few months, anyway. He made his living conversing with men who were drunk off their asses. That was almost the same thing as talking with someone who didn't speak the same language. And a lot of those guys were hot too—guys who trolled for tail at Wilde's weren't exactly scraping the bottom of the barrel.

But Timur... Fuck.

Apparently oblivious to how stupid Marcus had suddenly become, Timur shrugged. "No reason to go back."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Why?" Another shrug, this one even more casual. "Leave places. Go to new places."

"Oh." Marcus shifted his weight, staring into the glass of melting ice and completely at a loss for what to say. He doubted this guy was keen on rehashing whatever life story had driven him to leave home and never look back. It seemed like guys who joined the Legion were prone to exceedingly sad backstories. Or maybe that was just Julien. For some reason, Marcus didn't imagine Timur as being an ex-Mormon missionary who'd faked his own death after a legionnaire orgy, though some four-on-one sex did sound like a pretty persuasive recruiting technique.

"You are alone?"

"Hmm?" Marcus met Timur's eyes. "Alone?"

"Yes." Timur gestured around. "Here? No...uh..."

"No partner?"

"Yes."

"No." Marcus pressed his lips together and glanced out at the wedding guests, wondering for the hundredth time today—and the millionth time this week—if coming to a wedding was such a good idea. "I'm divorced."

"Oh." Timur stiffened slightly. "Sorry."

"Eh. It happens." Marcus forced back the bitterness and shook his head. "We just weren't..." Oh, save it. He'd given himself the spiel enough times, and he didn't feel like breaking it down to someone who might not be familiar with phrases like "made better friends and lovers than spouses", "business and marriage don't mix" and "I'll work with my husband but not for him". He was exhausted just thinking about it, and especially in this setting, it hurt too much. More than he'd thought it would.

So much for being over it.

Timur sipped his drink and set the empty glass aside. "Never had a wife."

Marcus laughed humorlessly. "Neither have I."

Timur cocked his head. "But you are divorced?"

"Yes, but I—" He waved a hand. "Divorced from my husband."

"Your... Oh." Timur's eyebrows rose slightly, and Marcus wasn't sure what to make of his expression. It wasn't like the guy was homophobic—he'd just stood with a pair of men getting married—but something about Marcus's comment had given him pause. And he'd gone to "wife" rather than "husband" for himself, though all Marcus knew of Ukraine was that it was in the general geographic area where gays and lesbians were still getting their teeth kicked in by cops on a regular basis, so maybe that was a cultural thing. Or the whole fish-out-of-water air about him was that he was the only straight guy who wasn't a brother of a groom. And if he was straight, lusting after him was pointless. Well, and safe. Still, Marcus seemed to be the only guy who'd talked to Timur—there were glances from other guests, but nobody'd approached him, and Julien, his only friend in this place, was understandably busy with his other guests and family.

"So you've done all this..." Timur let his voice trail off and looked around to include all of the venue.

“Yep. Up in Canada, before it was legal here.” Which probably made him something of a gay-marriage hipster, but whatever. It also made him a gay-divorce hipster. Cut that thought right there.

Timur nodded. “It’s nice.”

Diplomatic statement, or very restricted vocabulary? “Well, gay marriages are a boon for the hospitality industry and the overall economy. So, yeah, it’s a good thing.” Yep, he could be bitter, though inwardly he was happy for Chris and Julien. They’d practically grown up together, so maybe they stood a better chance at making it work than Marcus and his ex had. He wished them the best of luck in any case. He tried not to become the type of miserable human being who ruined other people’s happiness with too much reality.

Timur finished his drink. “How do you know them?”

“I work at the same place as Chris. I’m a bartender.”

“And you don’t drink?”

“I try not to. It becomes a habit too easily.” And he would definitely not crawl back into a bottle to self-medicate. First, it didn’t work; second, he was putting his life back together, not taking it apart. Speaking of which, the waiter passed them again, and this time he picked up two glasses. When Marcus handed it over to Timur, interestingly, their fingers touched by accident, but Timur didn’t jump back or even twitch at the touch. Either not straight or supremely confident in his sexuality.

Maybe both, judging by the way he unflinchingly held Marcus’s gaze while he took a drink. Which made Marcus wonder...

“And you?” Marcus gestured at the crowd. “Are you here with anyone?”

Timur shook his head. “Only know Julien.” His eyes darted toward the grooms, easily finding them in the mass of people, as if he’d known exactly where Julien would be at any given moment. “No one else.”

Was that a note of sadness in his voice? Marcus couldn’t tell. Nor could he tell if “only know Julien” meant Julien was his only acquaintance in this room—hell, this country—or if he and Julien also knew each other in the biblical sense.

God. Wasn’t *that* a hot mental image?

Marcus shivered.

“You are cold?”

Cold isn’t the word I’d use, amigo.

“No. No.” Marcus glanced at Julien, gave himself a split second to ponder who’d be on top in that little arrangement, and then drained most of his glass in one swallow.

Timur laughed that quiet little laugh of his. “You don’t drink, no?”

“Not often.” Marcus raised his glass, nearly unloading the ice onto the floor between them. Or rather, onto the man who he could’ve sworn hadn’t been standing quite so close to him. “S-sorry. Almost got”—he lifted the glass again, with slightly more coordination this time—“almost dumped this on you.”

Timur’s eyebrows jumped. “Why?”

“Why? I—oh, I mean I almost did it by accident.” He set the glass down before he embarrassed them both. “Clumsy.”

The corner of Timur’s mouth lifted slightly. “Drunk?”

“I think so, yes.” Marcus laughed. “I guess I won’t be driving home tonight after all.”

It was only after the words came out that he realized he and Timur had locked eyes, and that for all the limitations of Timur’s English, there was at least one way that comment could be interpreted that Marcus really, really hadn’t meant. But now that he’d said it, it didn’t seem like such a bad idea. In fact, it seemed like a pretty fucking good idea.

Wow. I am really drunk, aren’t I?

And he is really hot.

And I need another fucking drink.

“I mean, I...” He cleared his throat and picked up his glass, hoping it still had at least a few precious drops of booze pooling at the bottom. “Can’t drive after I’ve been...” He gestured with the glass, and, Christ on a cracker, he *was* drunk, because his brain registered a second too late that the damp glass had slipped through his sweaty fingers.

Timur’s hand came out of nowhere and caught the glass.

For a moment, they both froze, Marcus’s empty hand hovering in the air, Timur’s holding the glass a couple of inches below it.

Then Timur chuckled, his eyes narrowing just right to make the tanned skin at the corners crinkle, which did all kinds of crazy fuckery to Marcus’s pulse. He set the glass down again and faced Marcus. “Two left hands, yes?”

It had to be a joke, because there was no recrimination in it, and Timur smiled at him again. If a guy built like a wall could be playful, it was this. “Looks like it.” Their eyes met again, and there was definitely interest in Timur’s, though Marcus was just drunk enough to jump to conclusions. But Timur was standing really close now, and Marcus only hoped it wasn’t because the man thought he’d keel over drunk. Though ending up in those arms might not be the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

Marcus glanced around, but the party was still going strong and likely would be for several hours. This was the Wilde’s crowd. They had stamina when it came to dancing and alcohol. He and Timur wouldn’t even be missed if they left now. Under slightly different circumstances, he’d just ask Timur straight out whether he fancied a bit of action, but he didn’t feel quite so confident with this man. He might misread Timur so badly it’d end in embarrassment and awkwardness, and while Marcus wouldn’t have minded the risk with a total stranger, Timur struck him as too sweet and gentle to be embarrassed like that. Damn his soft spot for big teddy bear types.

“I think I’ll check if the hotel has a free room.” He turned away a bit. “Shower might be good to clear my head.”

“You could use my shower.”

There was no way to misread that, was there? Marcus looked into Timur’s eyes, but the color distracted him from the expression. Marcus drew closer, close enough to whisper in Timur’s ear, “You inviting me to your room?” Just making sure Timur knew what he was asking.

Again, Timur didn’t pull back, didn’t insist on any distance between their bodies, and Marcus placed a hand on Timur’s shoulder to test the theory. Solid muscle, but not so much as a shrug. Nobody paid them any mind. And getting laid would get Marcus away from the wedding for a little while and away from his dark and bitter thoughts. Doing the best man at a wedding—well, it was a first, but it seemed like a really good idea just then.

Timur half turned and placed a hand between Marcus’s shoulder blades. “My room is that way.”

About Return on Investment

Return on Investment is one of the few things I salvaged from about four years in financial journalism. Financial services is very much its own little universe, and I was fortunate in that I entered the profession a few months before the banking crisis; I got to see what “normal” business was like and then saw it unravel.

Return on Investment is one of those stories that forced their way out. In many, many ways, it’s a very personal book, and one that’s haunted me for almost six years. It doesn’t really fit into any little box, and that used to be enough of a problem to delay its publication for so long.

In 2009, a gay literature publisher turned it down for being “immoral” due to drug use and unprotected sex—whereas I figured that those two are the least of the problems and issues my financial guys are dealing with.

It’s also not suitable for gay romance publishers, as the love story doesn’t follow the usual trajectory. My own (now ex-) publisher rejected the book and would have required massive rewrites that would have changed the story I wanted to tell beyond recognition. A literary agent told me he loved the story, but that I need more “drama” (ie, car chases, a stand-off with guns/violence) to be a “proper” thriller. I didn’t feel that was authentic to the industry I wanted to write about—yes, bankers killed themselves and their families during the crisis, but London isn’t really a place for car chases or shootouts. That’s not how these guys deal with their enemies.

Also, Alec isn’t the villain in a fantasy saga who gets vanquished with a drawn sword. If we’ve learned anything from the crisis, then that defeated villains in finance set their LinkedIn status to “seeking new opportunities” and resurface a few years later in a different firm. I can’t see it any other way.

With all these factors arrayed against *Return on Investment*, I still couldn’t let the story die. It didn’t fit anywhere, but I believed in its energy and life. In the absence of interested publishers I can trust with the material, I decided to do that one alone. If anything, I believe that every book eventually finds the readers it’s meant for—an author’s job is to do the best they can and put it out there.

Blurb

Martin David, an eager but inexperienced financial analyst, is the newest member of the investment team at Skeiron Capital Partners in London. His boss is an avowed financial genius, but he's also overbearing and intense. Despite his erratic behaviour, Martin can't help being drawn to him both professionally and personally.

Too bad his boss doesn't seem to feel the same. In a firm where pedigree and connections mean far more than Martin's newly-minted business degree, Martin feels desperately inadequate—at least until he meets the enigmatic investment manager Alec Berger, who promises to help Martin establish himself in the financial community. Martin is so charmed by Alec's sophistication and wit that he gives him data that should have stayed confidential.

Then the financial crisis hits. Banks burn, companies teeter on the brink, and Skeiron's survival is at stake. Martin is pushed into the middle of the fight for Skeiron—against both the tanking economy and a ruthless enemy who's stepped out of the shadows to collect the spoils.

Return on Investment

Prologue

The damascene blade was the most beautiful thing in his office. Francis de Bracy had kept the letter opener in the top drawer of his desk. Now it was resting near the laptop. The blade was three hundred years old, and the pattern of the soft and hard steel layers reminded him of stripes on a tiger, or maybe thin, cold blue gas flames.

Francis checked his inbox, made sure he hadn't forgotten to answer important emails, then switched on the out of office.

Thank you for your email. I am no longer available at fdebracy@skeironcap.co.uk.

Anything more seemed too much. He switched off the laptop and closed it. The fan inside fell silent.

He took off his suit jacket and hung it up by the door. After brief consideration, he pulled the tie loose and rolled it up, then pushed it into the right pocket. He opened the shirt button at his throat, as if he wanted to have more air to breathe.

He walked over to the windows. Most of his working life here, he had turned his back to London. The view was novel and intense, that motley mix of styles, of Victorian and art deco and the bell towers of a church somewhere beyond the shopping mile.

Afternoon sun washed into the room, red and low over the rooftops, the kind of colourful December dusk that his mother said meant that the angels were baking cakes for Christmas.

There was no reason to go home; he hardly spent time there anyway. He had thought about it, but he didn't want to do this there.

He poured himself another whisky—a gift from a grateful CEO he had made a multi-millionaire. Francis smiled and enjoyed the well-aged warmth that spread from so little liquid. Oak and caramel flavours, a mild, round taste. This glass would dull his mind, set it adrift, moving it away from the one, enormous thought. He savoured it.

A red LED blinked on the phone. The display indicated five messages waiting. Emails were one thing, but he did not want to deal with voices, and he did not want to call anybody back. He was no longer available.

And why not in the office? Francis drank more whisky. He had often wondered what Cato had felt in Utica. How determined to escape humiliation and Caesar. *By all means must we flee, not with our feet, however, but with our hands.* Plutarch.

He turned back to the window, glanced down to the empty street. Everything would go to hell. Had gone to hell already. Hell had many chambers. More doors would be opening, and everybody would continue walking towards the heart of it. He did not want to fight any more; he had lost that battle, and he was no longer responsible. The weight had crushed him. The humiliation and the pain of loss and defeat just added to that. He could not go through this again; he had lost that fire, that lust for battle, that anger. He had lost, as simple as that, just like Cato, however much the knowledge made his heart pound. The stress of ten years, a carefully built career that had doubled for a life. This was the only way to make it all stop. Escape, if not with his feet, then with his hands.

He stowed the whisky glass away with the bottle, sat down at the desk, then opened the left cufflink and pulled it out. He flicked the bar back into its old position and placed it on the dark wood, then pushed the cuff back, baring his arm to the elbow, repeating the actions on the right side. The knife had a reassuring weight. Forged from a single piece, it was too elegant and sharp to be used just as a letter opener.

The phone LED blinked, but Francis kept his eyes on his arm, his hand. He cut into the muscle of his right arm, opening dark red, then running with blood. He kept the arm level so the blood only ran down to the floor, not down his arm. The pain was like ice and soothed his mind. The only way to deal with the anger, the humiliation, all those emotions stored in his blood, was letting them out, draining them like pus from an ancient, restless wound.

Second cut, deeper, halfway down the arm. More blood. Warmth on his skin, forbidden, but part of his body. No different from the other fluids. The third cut did not go as far down into the meat, and he could feel the wounds open, cold in places that had never been exposed to air.

He placed the knife in his right hand, which refused to obey him. The grip was precarious. He'd damaged tendons. He used his wrist to press on the blade. The blood ran into his trousers, making the light grey cloth cling to his skin like he had been caught by rain. This was easier than expected, and the second cut went satisfyingly deep.

Just then, the alcohol kicked in. Maybe that was the reason why he felt light-headed, or maybe it was the rather gratifying pool of blood around his chair. Two more cuts, and he placed the knife back on the desk, where a drop formed at the tip, then fell softly onto the wood.

He lowered his arms and leaned back, breathing deeply, blood running through his half-open fingers. He was finally numbing; he just wished he was still wearing the jacket against the cold. Another reason for doing this in the bath, except he didn't want to be naked when they found him.

His leg pushed against the floor and the chair swivelled around, so he could watch the darkening sky over London.

Chapter 1

Studded with light like something out of a modern fairy tale, the skyscrapers whizzed past the car. While Alec kissed his throat and neck, Martin ran his fingers through his hair, then pulled Alec in for another hungry kiss. Had Alec actually wanted Francis, and was he just the second best choice? Right now, that didn't matter.

The car stopped in an underground garage. Alec thumbed in a code at the elevator, then took out the card again. The cabin ascended, the motion smooth but fast. It was hardly worth getting back to the kissing because the doors opened just a few seconds later, right into a penthouse that seemed outrageously spacious compared to London's crammed Victorian set-up. Alec typed in another code, and an LED turned red, then he switched on the light—a gradual, golden glow. The cream carpet stretched for miles, and the whole place was surrounded by glass, beyond which shone the lights of Dubai, far below.

“Jacuzzi?” Alec pulled his tie loose. “Out on the terrace. Come.” He slid a glass panel out of the way, revealing a palm garden, what, twenty floors above the city?, and a Jacuzzi glowing light blue.

“Nice pad.” Martin placed his jacket on a bench and slipped out of his shoes. The view of the glittering city was gorgeous, though the monstrous heat of the day lingered as a far too recent memory. He undressed, folding up his clothes neatly, glad for every dessert he'd skipped and every gym session. He was all right—not as chiselled as Francis, of course.

“Relax. I fully intend to keep you here all night.” Alec nodded towards the Jacuzzi, and Martin slipped into the water. The temperature was perfect, and he did relax, feeling the flight, the tension, and all the frustration he'd built up now turned into a mellow desire for nobody in particular; Alec would do just fine.

Alec came back, and handed him a glass with chilled white wine from behind. “How adventurous are you?”

“I'll tell you if I don't like it.”

“That's good enough for me.” Alec's hand re-appeared in his sight, offering two pills. Martin glanced over his shoulder, saw Alec crouched there, naked, smiling; nothing weird, nothing threatening about it, and he had the clear feeling that if he decided he wasn't up for that, there would be no problem.

“Both?”

“One might not be enough.”

Martin leaned in and kissed the hand, held it close with his fingers, then opened his mouth. Fuck it; why not. He swallowed both pills dry, then took Alec's two first fingers between his lips and began to suck on them.

Alec hissed softly, set down the wine glass and joined him in the Jacuzzi, kissing again, pressing against him, body against body, skin, hardening cock. One thing he hadn't expected about Alec—he didn't seem like somebody who was tattooed, but he was—an abstract, tribal-style gecko ran up his obliques.

“A gecko?”

Alec glanced down, then straightened to show off the tattoo. “It's ten years old. Back in the finance days . . .”

“Not Gordon Gekko?”

Alec laughed. “Clever boy.”

“Oh, you sad fuck.” Martin drank more wine, kept a mouthful and kissed Alec again, who kissed back, sharing the fruity, acidic, cool taste, hands moving up his thighs again. They kept the desire on that level, exploring, touching and kneading, but neither of them pushed for more.

While Alec was sucking on his left nipple, it suddenly hit Martin. The light shifted, he felt relaxed and tingly, and Alec's teasing became far more intense. He groaned, let his head fall back; it had suddenly become too heavy, and he felt himself drift, float. “Shit, I'm . . .”

“Safe,” Alec murmured against his lips. “Let's get to bed.” He had to help Martin out of the water, because he wasn't quite sure where his legs were or what to do with his hands. Too much, maybe one pill would have been enough, but he did feel completely calm and peaceful, while his skin was sensitive as if sunburned. The towel felt too rough, at the same time weirdly sexy, and he lazily fought those touches off.

The bed stood out in the open, the glass barriers removed; night wind came in, and Alec made him lie down. Then, Alec slid down his body, and when his lips closed around Martin's cock, he was shaking with need, at the same time far removed from his own body, floating pleasantly, his very few thoughts suspended like strange insects in amber. He thrust his hips up, watched Alec suck him down deep, with uncanny skill stopping whenever he got close, but Martin was too spaced out to ask, beg, or even think how much he wanted to come.

“Turn.”

It taxed his focus to gather his arms and legs, and Martin was about to get on hands and knees, but Alec made him sit up on his haunches, which was difficult until Alec pulled him back. A reflection in the glass around them: two naked men, just shadows. Martin barely recognised himself. Then Alec slipped a blindfold over his eyes. It shut down his sight and left him with the sense of touch, which drove him mad especially when Alec pushed oily fingers into him.

Martin fell forwards on his elbows, thighs against his belly as two fingers pushed into him, making him groan with every motion.

A shifting on the bed. Hands ran down his flanks, then an insistent hand in the small of his back urged him to stay down and flat like that, and then something entered him, and it wasn't fingers, something bigger, blunt, hot, and Martin whimpered. Somebody fucked him, and it could have been Francis instead of Alec. With the blindfold, it was easy to pretend. His drugged-up mind found it easy to imagine anything he wished. It was so good getting filled, the slight soreness easily wiped out by the sheer jolt of pleasure when the cock hit him right, thrusting in, rocking him, so he stretched out his arms to steady himself.

He was still floating, not quite sure of his balance, but the fucking was great, slow, forceful, and he found himself begging, in sounds and motions, pushing back against the intrusion, his own desire stoked just by the fucking.

Alec was keeping his desire under control because Martin wouldn't be able to. Hands settled on his hips, keeping him in that position, pressed flat, and then the fucking stopped. Martin groaned. He wasn't quite sure of his own position, if he was moving, or it was just the waterbed, then the cock filled him again, insistent again, hard, powerful thrusts that drove him insane. He started to rebel against the hand.

Somebody grabbed his head and forced it forwards. A cock was pushed between his lips, and Martin just followed the drug-fuelled need, took the cock and sucked. He'd have sucked anybody. While the other fucked him, he took the cock into his throat, shutting off his breath. After several more, powerful thrusts— fingers in his hair to

control him, but Martin was too far gone—the one in his mouth finally came, forcing him to swallow. Martin didn't care, instead begging the other man, the one fucking him, for faster and harder, to which he complied. Thank God. A merciful hand went between his legs and pumped him, taking control of his lust, then thrust hard into Martin's tightening body, coming inside him.

The drugs made the climax painfully intense; he was numb and hyper-sensitive at the same time. He wasn't inhibited at all in bed, but this even took all thoughts and calculations away.

He lay on his side, breathing hard, sated, while somebody toyed with his still hard cock, stroking his abs, hip. There were two bodies close; one kept him close to his shoulder, and Martin almost climbed on top, one leg across the other's legs, while the second body was resting against his back.

He drifted off, and time moved, but he couldn't have said whether it was minutes or hours, only that at some point, he was on top of the body that held him, and somebody was fucking him hard, almost as if in rage, and he was pressed against somebody's hard cock, and that fucking seemed to take forever, longer than he lasted because he came soon against the man below him, but kept getting pounded into; whoever that was—Alec, or a stranger, or Francis, fucked him until he was sore, until his body had recovered enough and got half-hard again, and then until he got hard.

It hurt by now; he was sore and tired, but again it didn't matter. It didn't detract from the calm and the feeling that all sensations were good and too much at the same time. The dreamlike quality blunted the discomfort. He drifted off to sleep or unconsciousness; in any case, it was a place without dreams.

Sunlight across his face, a cool breeze over his shoulders. Martin stretched when a hand touched his back. "Seven o' clock. Your plane leaves at ten."

Plane. Why had they booked so early? Right. Client meeting later today. Martin yawned and opened his eyes. Alec was already dressed but for the jacket. Only two buttons undone, his shirt was hiding the tattoo, tie draped across his neck, hair still damp from the shower.

"Unless, of course, you want me to re-book." Alec stepped back.

"No, that's all still on company time." Martin pushed himself half up, noticed that he was sore and sticky.

"Saving up your holiday allowance for a big holiday?"

Martin smirked. "I wish. No, we're just really busy." He stood and the soreness became a non-too-subtle pain. "Jesus, what have you done to me?" he murmured.

"Shower is that way."

Under the shower Martin had a quick check. Nothing broken. He was just goddamned sore; he'd be careful with the soap. Seemed like they'd got somewhat overenthusiastic last night. *They*. He frowned. There had been another guy. Definitely one other guy—Alec didn't have two cocks and could certainly not fuck him from both ends at the same time.

He found Alec in his kitchenette, surrounded by the smell of oranges, and squeezing the last of what looked like a dozen oranges on a steel-and-chrome contraption that had sprung from the fevered dream of an Italian designer.

"I need to get back to the hotel."

"No, you don't. Just call them to pack up your stuff and have it couriered to the airport." When Martin hesitated, Alec added, "Don't worry; they have seen worse than worn underwear."

Martin snorted and took the offered orange juice. It was tangy and sweet and he immediately felt better. "And a fresh suit?"

Alec gathered the orange halves and tossed them in the bin, then cleaned the work surface and washed his hands. "Borrow one of my shirts. The suit seems good to go."

“You think?”

“I do. Would I let you get into the same plane with your obsessive-compulsive boss?”

“What would you have to lose?”

“I can see finance has already corrupted you, poor sod.” Alec moved closer and tilted his head for a kiss. Martin wasn’t quite sure; that soreness was a bastard, but no harm in a kiss. Hmm, none at all. Alec’s hand strayed to his arse and squeezed it, and Martin twitched.

“No way.” Martin laughed. “I’ll be late, and I bloody hurt.” Keyword. Hurt. Why. “What happened? I’m not quite sure I remember the whole night.”

“I’m devastated.” Alec let him go. “What about the hotel? Call them?”

“Yeah. Shit, and I don’t have the number.”

“Don’t worry about it. I do.” Alec fished his mobile phone out of his pocket and called the hotel, arranging for his clothes and everything else to be packed up, while Martin put his suit back on, at least the trousers and socks and shoes.

Alec pointed him to a large walk-in wardrobe, opened it and indicated he could choose while he made a second call, speaking Arabic. Martin went for a white shirt. Freshly ironed, it was very smooth on his skin like completely new clothes never were, pleasant and cool and worn. No doubt each of those was terribly expensive.

“Here. Sit down.” Alec motioned to the kitchen bar, and the breakfast there would have made any personal trainer happy: cereal, fresh fruit, fragrant orange juice, yoghurt.

“I can tell you’re Swiss.” Martin carefully sat down on the padded stool, feet hooking around the legs.

“Half-Swiss,” Alec corrected. “Why’s that?”

“It’s all very healthy. You know, muesli.”

“I doubt I could find an English-style fry-up in any reasonable amount of time.” Alec lifted the glass with the orange juice. “Cheers.”

Martin raised the glass and drank—the bits of pulp tickled his throat, but he figured asking for smooth juice when his host had gone to the length of squeezing the stuff would be rude. Plus, he’d be laughed at. He portioned some yoghurt into his bowl, added heaped spoonfuls of cereals—oats, bran flakes—and some of the cut-up fruit, mixing it all together.

Alec carefully selected an orange from the fruit bowl, turned it in his hands, then sliced the peel with a manicured fingernail, working with the precision of a surgeon—or taxidermist.

“So, did you enjoy it?” He glanced up, one wedge poised between his fingers.

“I did.” Martin swallowed. “Not what I was expecting, but yes, enjoyable.”

“Good.” Alec gave him a smile, then chewed on the piece of fruit, licked juice off his lips. “I’d appreciate it if we could stay in touch.” He sounded too business-like to be discarded in the *of course I’ll call you* pile. “You know. Professionally. I’d like to know what’s going on at Skeiron.”

“If your clients are going to invest, we’ll send you the limited partners’ reports anyway. That’s part of the usual disclosure.”

“Of course.” Alec grinned sharply. “But I’m not a limited partner yet, and I’d still like to know what’s going on. The presentation was nice, but I like my numbers virginal. Whatever your boss presented to us was fucked around with, I know that.”

“No. Skeiron is a top-decile fund. Consistently. The last four were, too, and Skeiron Five is no different. The strategy hasn’t changed. This is private equity bedrock.”

“Ah yes.” Alec’s eyes shone with amusement. “You’ve been in that firm for how long? Twenty years?”

“Eighteen months.”

“So don’t fuck with me. I want the numbers, the raw data. I can fool around with it myself if need be.”

Martin glanced at his watch. Maybe he should make that exit soon. Too bad he didn’t have to be at the airport yet, there was still too much time for a hurried escape.

Alec reached across the bar and took his wrist. “Call it a favour. We’re talking huge sums here, and I want to help you guys, but I’m wary of your boss’s numbers. Francis de Bracy doesn’t have the kind of track record in terms of honesty that encourages me to bet that many millions on.”

“I really can’t do that.” Martin didn’t pull his wrist back, worried too much that Alec might not let him go, and that would be awkward. “It wouldn’t be fair to the other investors. Those numbers—I put them together. I do nothing but crunch numbers all day.” And he sometimes hated being just the research guy, being the auxiliary brain of Francis de Bracy, the dealmaker, the longest swinging dick at Skeiron Capital Partners Limited.

“Hence I’m asking you.” Alec smiled at him and squeezed his hand, the touch more firm than affectionate. “If you’re disclosing the numbers anyway, what harm is there?”

Where was this going? Why did Alec push for it? “I could get fired.”

“If they find out.” Alec grinned at him. “But you’re cleverer than that, aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

Alec’s expression changed, softened, as if he’d got what he wanted and relaxed now. Martin didn’t like that at all; Alec had been just an unexpected fling in the most unlikely place of them all. The Emirates didn’t see the whole gay thing too kindly, but Alec had come on to him with the subtlety of a train wreck.

“I’m sure you’ll come round to it eventually.” Alec sounded almost off-handed, and Martin chose not to comment and eat the muesli. There was no obligation; he didn’t owe this guy anything. It had been nice, sure, and Martin wasn’t averse to having fun, especially if it didn’t interfere with his job, but this was a straight ten in terms of awkward morning-after conversation. And this was exactly why he didn’t like sticking around until the next morning.

Alec got up and finished dressing—he bound his tie and slipped into his jacket, brushed through his hair and smiled at Martin. “The driver’s outside. I’ll get you to the airport. Can’t have Mr de Bracy worrying too much.”

He ushered Martin into the elevator. The car seemed more impressive in the daylight. But discomfort nagged at him with every step. If he’d never meet this guy again, he still wanted an answer or two. “Is there a reason why you won’t tell me what happened last night?”

Alec gave him a lop-sided grin. “Yeah.”

“Okay, badly worded question. What happened last night? Could you not insult my intelligence by trying to distract me?” Martin watched him intently, ready to pick up every shift in Alec’s expression. “Or was I not supposed to remember? Is that why you brought in the drugs?”

“Whoa. One moment, hold it right there.” Alec faced him fully, eyes narrow, judging, measuring. “Do you think I’d really do that?”

“Drug me so I don’t remember? Depends on who the other guy was. Who was it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both. As in, it doesn’t matter and I won’t tell you, and apart from that, I’d be in breach of contract. And no, that contract has nothing to do with you or third parties. I’m just bound by so many layers of confidentiality that I can’t tell you.”

“One of your contacts.”

“Stop it, Martin.” Alec’s voice made it clear that it was an order. No joke, no fun, but a blunt order, as clear as any that his boss had ever given him. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter to you, and it has very little to do with business.”

“All right.”

Alec exhaled. “Of course you’d remember. I’m not a date rapist.”

“I didn’t say that.” Martin rubbed his temples. “Sorry.”

“Yeah.” Alec fell silent, and Martin didn’t know what to say. It was just weird that there had been a third guy and he didn’t have the slightest idea who it had been.

“You’re right, I could have said something, but I didn’t, because . . . I enjoyed myself.” Regrets the next morning didn’t wash. He’d done more stupid things, like get completely wasted and not remember how he’d got home, with his dad’s car. Even though the pills had blunted his mind, he’d still been aware of what was going on, right? He’d simply fallen asleep and not passed out? That part was harder to verify. He couldn’t ask a witness. And Alec had asked how adventurous he was. A threesome was nothing new. And, truth be told, he’d never learnt the names of some people he’d slept with. Why did it bug him now?

They reached the airport. Alec got out as well, offered a hand, and, when Martin took it, an embrace, which pacified the resentment. Maybe Alec had just tested his integrity. “It was good meeting you.”

“Good meeting you.”

“One thing.” Alec stepped to the car, opened the passenger door and took out something—a square box, like the boxes that fancy ties came in. “It’s a gift.”

“Thank you.”

Alec pressed his hand again, then let him go. “Tell your boss I’ll be in touch next week. Things to set up, contracts to sign, cases to plead.” He waved as he got back in the car, and Martin headed into the terminal, glad to escape the glare of the sun.

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About the Author

EPIC Award winner and Lambda Award finalist Aleksandr Voinov is an emigrant German author living near London, where he works as an editor in financial services. His genres range from science fiction and fantasy to thriller, historical, contemporary, thriller, and erotica. His books were/are published by Random House Germany, Samhain Publishing, and others.

If he isn't writing, he explores historical sites, and meets other writers. He single-handedly sustains two London bookstores with his ever-changing research projects. His current interests include World War II, the history of chess, European magical traditions, and how to destroy the world and plunge it into a nuclear winter without having the benefit of nuclear weapons.

Visit Aleksandr's website at <http://www.aleksandrvoinov.com>, his blog at <http://www.aleksandrvoinov.blogspot.com>, follow him on Twitter, where he tweets as [@aleksandrvoinov](https://twitter.com/aleksandrvoinov), and/or subscribe to his newsletter at: <http://eepurl.com/71jNz>.