



SAMHAIN

MUSCLING THROUGH

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Dedication

For Anna, who helped me carry this story to term and bring it, red-faced and howling, into the world; and for Shelley, who taught it its first words and smacked its bottom when it was naughty.

Chapter One

I know it's just fucking, Larry and me. That's what all his mates at college say, only they say it fancy, like "Well, quite clearly it's not his *brains* Lawrence goes for," and "God, when is he going to tire of slumming it with this moron?" I just smile at them, 'cause they're his mates, and it's all right. It doesn't matter what they say about me, just as long as they're nice to Larry.

Larry never says nothing like that. He's got class, Larry has. He's clever and all. He works at the University, teaching people about paintings. I like paintings. Art was the only thing I could do at school, that and cookery. Domestic Science, they called it. Steve Hunter used to have a laugh about that, saying I'd make someone a lovely wife one day, until I got fed up with it and hit him, and after that he never said nothing about me no more.

That's the other thing I'm good at. Hitting. My PE teacher, Mr. Sanders, said I should get into boxing. He wanted to give me private lessons and not charge for them or nothing, but my mum wouldn't let me. She said from what she'd heard, boxing wouldn't be the only thing he'd be teaching me, but she never said what she meant, even when I asked her. I was dead surprised when he got sacked for being a kiddie-fiddler. So I started going to a gym instead and sparring around with the lads, but I never took it serious or nothing. Larry says that's just as well, 'cause I'm scary enough already.

People always ask how me and Larry met, and Larry tells this really complicated story how he thought he was going to be mugged or raped or something, and then I came along, and everyone always laughs, but it wasn't like that, really. See, I'd just been to the pub with Daz and Phil and a couple of other lads. We was supposed to be cheering Phil up 'cause he'd broken up with his girlfriend, Leanne, who works on the checkout at Lidl, but some of them were pissing me off going on about poofs, so I left early. I got caught short on the way home, so I stopped to have a wazz in the street. I mean, I checked to make sure there wasn't no one there before I got my cock out. I didn't want to shock no one.

But it took a while, 'cause I'd had a few pints, so by the time I was almost finished, this bloke had turned into the street. I could hear his footsteps, so I looked up, 'cause I didn't want no one sneaking up on me when I had my cock out, and there he was. I mean, it was Larry, but I didn't know that then. I just saw this really pretty guy in a posh suit. He had brownny-blond hair, like straw that's been left out in the rain—I don't mean it was messy or nothing, it was just that mix of colours, like it couldn't make its mind up if it wanted to be yellow or brown. And his face was kind of delicate, and he was really little. Way shorter than me. Skinny too. I like them skinny. And he was looking at my cock. So I smiled at him, 'cause he was pretty, and then I zipped up and headed his way. Which was my way home, I mean. I wasn't planning to make a pass or nothing, 'cause I could tell he was too posh for me.

"Shit," he said, and he started backing up like he was scared or something. "Ah, sorry. I didn't mean to—"

I wasn't sure what he was on about, so I smiled again. He looked like he was about to piss himself, and I didn't like it, you know? It's not right, people being scared like that. "You look like you're about to piss yourself," I told him when I got close.

"Shit," he said again, and he sort of leaned against the wall and closed his eyes like he wasn't feeling well, so I stopped and leaned over him.

"You should let me take you home," I said, 'cause I was worried he might not make it on his own.

“Nice-looking bloke like you, stuff could happen. You meet all sorts on these streets. I saw a bloke getting the crap beat out of him last week just a couple of streets from here.”

“You want money?” he said, and he was shaking a bit. “I’ve got money.”

I didn’t say nothing for a bit, ’cause he was confusing me, and I don’t like making a prick of myself. See, you keep your mouth shut, most times people don’t realise you don’t know what they’re on about. So I just took his arm and set off down the alley, ’cause that was the way he’d been going. He came along with me all right, but he was still shaking. “You live near here?”

“No! Er, yes—please don’t hurt me!”

I didn’t say nothing for a bit, ’cause I didn’t understand why he thought I’d do that. I thought he must have had a lot to drink.

“Your mates shouldn’t of let you go home on your own,” I told him. See, he’s just a little thing; you’d need about three of him to make one of me. “You’re such a little thing.”

“Oh God,” he said, and his voice was all thin and shaky, like the rest of him. “Look, take my wallet please?”

So I stopped while he got his wallet out, and he had his driving licence in there, so I read his name—Lawrence Morton—and his address. “Fifteen Bewdsley Close, Cambridge. That’s that posh bit near the river,” I said to prove I’d read it. I tried to give him his wallet back, but he had his eyes shut again, so I put it in my pocket. I think he needed to get to bed. “I’m going to get you home and in bed,” I told him.

He wasn’t walking too good, so I put my arm round his skinny little waist. I could have snapped him in half. “I could snap you in half,” I said, and I smiled so he’d know it was a joke, but he still had his eyes shut.

We went down the back ways ’cause it’s quicker and I wasn’t sure how long he was going to be able to stand up. I mean, I could have carried him easy, but I thought he might have thrown up on me, and I didn’t fancy that, no matter how pretty he was. He was all pale and shaky still. “This it?” I asked when we got to number fifteen. It was a nice place—one of those terraced houses, all tall and thin with no front garden and a skylight into the basement. Pretty windows.

“Yes—please, you’ve been really kind helping me home, but I’ll be fine now,” he said, but he looked funny when he said it, so I didn’t think I ought to leave him till he was safe inside. His hands were shaking, and the key skidded on the lock, so I took it from him and opened the door.

“You didn’t ought to drink so much,” I told him as I went in. I thought I’d better make sure he had a glass of water or something, or he’d be feeling like crap in the morning. He looked funny, like he was going to run away or something, which would have been a bit weird as there I was in his house and him still standing on the doorstep. I grabbed his arm and pulled him in after me, in case he was so drunk he’d forgotten this was where he lived. “You got a kitchen?”

“Yes—this way,” he said, like he’d just woken up, and he darted through a door. I was surprised he could move so quick, him being drunk and all, so I let go of his arm and just followed him into the kitchen.

He was standing by a knife block with this big knife in one hand and a phone in the other. I thought he’s going to have trouble trying to dial one-handed. “I’m calling the police,” he said in this funny high voice.

I didn’t get why he wanted the police, but the knife in his hand was shaking all over the shop, so I went and took it off him before he could hurt himself. Then he sort of collapsed down on the floor and said, “Please don’t hurt me” again.

“Okay,” I said, and I took the knives over to the other side of the kitchen and got the biggest mug I

could find and filled it with water. I held it out to him, but he had his eyes shut again and didn't take it. "You should drink this. Then you won't feel so bad in the morning."

He looked up, and his brown eyes were all wild-looking. "No drugs!"

"Good," I said, 'cause drugs and stuff are really bad for you. I put the mug down where he could reach it and sat cross-legged on the floor so I could keep an eye on him, 'cause he was freaking me out a bit. It wasn't very comfortable. I got big thighs.

"Please go," he said. "Just take my money—take anything—and go."

I didn't get why he wanted me to take something, but he seemed really worried about it. So I looked around, and he had a bowl of fruit on the side, so I grabbed an apple, 'cause I always get hungry after I've been drinking. "I'll take this, okay?" Then I left him there, but I took the knives and I hid them in the hall cupboard, just in case.

When I got out in the street, I could see there was a light on in the next-door house, so I knocked on the door. It opened on the security chain, and I could see a thin slice of a woman in a dressing gown the colour of marshmallows. I thought, good, she'll take care of him. "Sorry to bother you, but I just brought your neighbour home and he's not looking too good. I'd of stayed with him, but he told me to go."

Her eye went all big as she looked at me through the gap. "And you are?"

"Al Fletcher. I work down Scudamore's. I pull the punts in when the tourists have finished with them." I don't do the guided tours, 'cause my boss Harry says I'd scare off the customers and sink the bloody punt. Plus I'm no good at remembering stuff, like which bridge is s'posed to be mathematical and why.

She nodded. "I'll get my husband to go round." And she shut the door.

I wasn't sure if I should wait or not, but then I remembered I still had Lawrence's wallet, so I stood there by the front door, eating my apple. I was wondering what to do with the core when a bloke came out, nearly as tall as me but not so built. "You still here, are you?"

I didn't say anything, 'cause he could see I was. I don't think he meant it as a question.

"What happened? You two have a fight?"

That made me laugh. If I'd tried to fight Lawrence, I'd have probably killed him.

I don't think he liked me laughing. "Try anything with me and you'll be sorry, mate," he said as he pushed Lawrence's door open. "Bigger they come, harder they fall, you remember that."

He was all talk, though. I could've had him easy. Knockout in the first round. But I didn't say nothing, 'cause if you say stuff like that, some blokes think you're asking for a fight, and I didn't want to knock him down. I wanted him to look after Lawrence. "I can't go in," I told him.

"You what?"

"He told me to go away. I think he's a bit pissed. Can you give him this? It's his wallet."

"I can see it's his bleeding wallet. Why've you got it, then?"

"He said to take it, but I think he's just drunk. I don't think he really wants me to have it."

"You don't bloody say. All right, give it here."

I gave it to him, and he went into Lawrence's house, so I went home.

Next day, I'd hauled in a punt and was mopping out the water from the bottom, 'cause they'd been playing silly buggers with the punt pole, and I heard this sort of cough behind me. So I looked round and it was Lawrence. I checked, but he didn't have a knife in his hand.

He was still looking like he was going to piss himself, though. "Er, Al?" he said. "That is your

name?”

I smiled and nodded.

“I appear to have made the most awful fool of myself last night,” he said, his face all red.

I thought he must mean the stuff with the knives. “You just had a few, that was all,” I said, ’cause didn’t like to see him looking so unhappy. “Wasn’t your fault. But you ought to get one of your mates to walk you home next time.”

He wasn’t looking as posh as he had last night. He was wearing a sort of crumpled blue jacket. Linen, I think it was. Or cotton, maybe. No tie. He had his hands balled up in his pockets and his shoulders hunched, and he looked so sweet standing there, his dirty-blond hair all over his collar. Made me want to push it back and kiss his neck. I wondered what he’d say if I told him that. He’d probably freak out again, I thought.

He coughed again. “Thank you for giving back my wallet. And for taking the trouble to make sure was all right. That was kind of you, although I’m not sure I’ll be able to face my neighbours for a while.” He laughed, so I guess he didn’t mean it, really.

“’S all right,” I said.

He was drawing patterns in the dust with his feet. It was making his nice shoes all dirty, but he didn’t seem to mind. “Can I, ah, buy you a drink after you finish work?” he asked, giving me a quick look, then staring down at the dirt again. “To make up for being such an awful bother?”

I wanted to tell him he wasn’t a bother, but I wanted him to go for a drink with me more, so I just nodded. “Six. ’S when I finish.”

I hadn’t seen him smile before. It was lovely, like my sister in her wedding photos or her kids at Christmas. So I smiled back, and then I got on with my work.

He wasn’t there when I finished, and I thought maybe he’d changed his mind, but he came running up looking worried after I’d hung about for ten minutes or so. “Al, I am so sorry. Got grabbed by the Praelector just as I was leaving college.”

I laughed, ’cause it sounded funny. He smiled back at me. He’d changed into a pale cream shirt that made his hair look blonder and a navy jacket. He looked really posh again. I looked down at my work clothes, which was a Scudamore’s T-shirt and jogging bottoms, ’cause they dry faster than jeans when you get them wet. “Do I need to get changed first?”

“No! No, you look great.” He blushed a bit. “And we’re only going to the pub.”

“I’m all sweaty,” I said, ’cause it’d been a warm day.

He went even redder. “It’s all right—we can sit outside if you feel uncomfortable.”

We went to this place down the river. Punters, it’s called. Used to be the Red Lion, but it’s gone all trendy. We sat outside and looked at the river, except I kept looking at Lawrence, and half the time, he was looking back at me. “Um,” he said, holding a glass of wine in his little hand. His nails were really clean. “Tell me about yourself?”

I just shrugged and had a swig of my pint, because I never know what people want to hear when they say that stuff. And it’s not like anything about me is interesting or nothing.

“Have you always lived in Cambridge?”

I nodded.

“Do you live alone?”

I nodded again.

So then he gave up on twenty questions and started telling me about himself. I liked hearing him

talk. I thought he had a lovely voice. He talked with his hands, too, waving them about like he was doing sign language. He told me about teaching History of Art, about how the students didn't get stuck like making Jesus bigger than the saints in the pictures because he was more important.

"I used to think that was funny too," I said. "But my art teacher explained it to me. It's like this modern art stuff, innit? You're showing what stuff's like inside, not on the outside like a photo."

"Yes! Yes, that's it!" He smiled at me and leaned over the table, and I felt a bit funny, so I had another swig of my pint.

"Did you know you have the most incredibly sinister smile?" Lawrence said after a bit. He put his elbows on the table and leaned over toward me again. "It's that scar by your mouth—sort of twists. I think that's what really scared the shit out of me last night—your smile."

I frowned, because why would anyone be scared of a smile? "You got a lovely smile," I said, because I knew that was true. He went all pink. "Are you a poof?" I asked. I didn't think he'd mind. And even if he did, there wasn't nothing a little bloke like him could do to me, so that was all right.

"Er, yes. I hope that's not a problem?" His ears went so red it was like they was sunburnt, and he leaned back a bit.

"Nah. I'm a poof and all."

Lawrence laughed. "You know, you're really rather refreshingly direct." He didn't say nothing for a minute, just put his elbows on the table again and played with the beer mats. "So, have you, er, got a partner?"

"Nah. I had this bloke, Ryan, but we split up."

"Oh. What was he like?"

I had to think about it. See, I could have drawn him a picture easy, but I didn't have a pencil. "Little," I said. "And pretty." I smiled, remembering, 'cause I'd thought Ryan was really pretty, but Lawrence was much prettier.

"Oh," said Lawrence. His shoulders went a bit stiff. "That's the sort of men you find attractive?"

I didn't say nothing, because there Lawrence was sitting in front of me and he was perfect, but I knew I couldn't say that, because it'd get awkward. I knew he wouldn't fancy me or nothing.

He was building card houses with the beer mats. I couldn't do nothing like that. My hands are too big and clumsy, 'cept when I've got a pencil or a brush in them. 'Course, Lawrence couldn't bench press the table we were sitting at, neither. "Would you... Would you consider going out with someone like me?" he asked without looking at me.

Someone like him? That was all right, because then we weren't talking about him. "Yeah, but someone like you wouldn't go for a bloke like me."

He looked up then. "Why not?"

"Someone like you'd want someone he could talk to. Not someone thick as pigshit."

He looked at me like I'd told him he was a wanker or something. "We've been talking just fine."

I had to think about that. 'Cause it was true, we'd been talking for ages, and he didn't look like he was bored. I smiled. Then I remembered what he'd said and wondered if I should stop smiling, but I thought, what the hell.

"The last thing I want on a date is intellectual conversation," Lawrence carried on. "I get *quite* enough of that at work—bloody Hardwicke with his *well, of course, if you want to take the simplistic view of the Renaissance*." Lawrence put on a funny voice for that bit. I thought he probably didn't like that Hardwicke bloke much. Then he downed his drink in one. I probably should have told him to slow down, 'cause of how he'd been last night, but I didn't want to make him not like me so much, so I didn't. "Come back to my place. We'll get a takeaway—you like Chinese?" I nodded. I love Chinese.

He laughed. “You’ll probably need to order the banquet for four, the size you are.” He got up, and so did I, and then he said, “~~And while we’re there, maybe you can tell me what happened to my kitchen knives? I haven’t been able to find them since last night!~~”

So we went back to his place, and we had a Chinese takeaway, and we watched old Charlie Chaplin films. I like them ’cause you don’t have to be clever to get the jokes. I never thought someone smart like Lawrence would like them too.

And it got a bit late, and I thought, well, Larry’s a poof—see, he said I could call him Larry, ’cause nobody else did—and he keeps smiling at me, so maybe I should make a move? So I put my arm round him and pulled him close, but he sort of shivered, so I let go again. I didn’t want him to start shaking like last night.

“No, come back,” Larry said, and he snuggled into my side. I liked that. Then he reached up and kissed me, and I liked that more, so I put my arm round him again and pulled him onto my lap. He laughed. “If we tried this the other way round, you’d flatten me,” he said, and then he kissed me again. So I didn’t have to try and think of nothing to say. I liked the way his kisses tasted—all sweet-and-sour sauce and white wine—and the way his lips were so soft, but his chin was rough with stubble.

“Where did you get this scar from?” he asked, rubbing his thumb along it. It tickled when he got to my lip.

“Beer glass.”

“Were you attempting to drink from it at the time?”

“Nah. Some wanker in the pub din’t like my face.”

Larry’s eyes went wide. “So he shoved a glass in it? Christ!”

“’S all right. I broke his jaw.”

“God, I bet you did.” He laughed. “You know, you’re really not the sort of person I’d want to meet down a dark alleyway.” I didn’t say nothing, ’cause where we’d met last night had been down a dark alley. Maybe he wished we’d never met? “Joke, Al, joke,” he said, stroking my face, and I felt better.

We kissed again, and I shoved my hand up his shirt so I could feel his chest. Larry hasn’t got any chest hair, and his skin felt so smooth and soft I was worried I was going to scratch it with my rough hands. “Oh, that feels good,” he said, like he could read my mind.

Sometimes I wonder, if people get really clever, can they read minds? But I don’t think Larry can read mine. Not really.

I put my other hand on his arse and pulled him in tight, but it wasn’t so good with stuff in the way. “Get your clothes off,” I said, and it probably sounded a bit rough, but there wasn’t nothing I could do about that, I was so turned on.

Larry sort of shivered again, and scrambled off my lap. It felt cold and empty without him. I pulled off my shirt while he was unbuttoning his, and Larry’s eyes went really wide. I guess he’d seen my tats. I got them all over my chest, plus the spider’s web on my neck that he’d seen already. I got more on my back too, but he couldn’t see those.

Larry got his trousers and underpants off really quick, and climbed back on my lap, his cock bobbing. It was a nice cock, thicker than you’d expect but not so long you’d gag on it. He didn’t kiss me, just ran his hands all over my shoulders and chest. “God, you’re a work of art all by yourself,” Larry said. “I mean, even without the tattoos you’d be amazing, but with them—where did you get them? I’ve never seen designs like these. They’re reminiscent of Australian aboriginal art, but there’s a subtle difference—it’s intriguing.”

I liked that he liked them. “There’s this bloke on Orwell Street. I told him what I wanted, and he done them for me.”

“You designed them?”

“Nah, I just drew a picture on some paper and told him what colours I wanted and stuff. It was him what done the tattoos.”

Larry smiled. “That means you designed them.” He started to kiss me all over, which felt really nice. I grabbed hold of his arse with both hands, squeezing it and pulling his arse cheeks apart. I think he liked that, 'cause he sort of moaned and started kissing me harder.

I still had my jogging bottoms on, but they were stretchy enough I didn't need to take them off to get my cock out. I wanted him to ride me, but I didn't think he'd want to do that on a first date, so I didn't say nothing. So I rubbed our cocks together, and he wrapped one of his little hands around us both, and then I forgot all about doing anything else, 'cause it felt so good. I used my hands on his arse to move him up and down, rubbing up against me, and he made those little moaning sounds and threw his head back. I wanted to bite his neck, mark it, but I didn't think he'd like that, so I bit and sucked at his chest instead where no one would see it. His skin tasted sweet, like white chocolate and fortune cookies.

“Oh!” he gasped, and I felt his hot spunk hitting my chest. It was so good, watching him come. He didn't look like a teacher no more. He looked wild and happy. I could have watched him all night.

When he'd finished, he put his arms round my neck. “Oh God, that was... You didn't come?” He looked worried.

“'S okay, I'm close,” I said, and I started jacking myself off.

“No, let me.” He slid off my lap onto the floor and put his mouth on my cock, and it felt like heaven. I think I grunted a bit. He started bobbing his head up and down, moving his tongue over the head of my cock every now and then. Watching his pretty little face, his lips stretched round my cock was better than the best porno I'd ever seen.

“Going to come,” I told him, but he didn't lift off. I tried to move his head, but my hands weren't working so good, and I shot in his mouth. He swallowed me down, except for a little bit that dripped from the corner of his mouth.

When my breathing had steadied, I said, “You should of made me wear a condom.”

“Statistically, unless I had an open cut in my mouth—which I don't—the chance of transmission this way is very low,” Larry said. He sounded like a teacher again. Then he looked a bit worried. “Um, are you positive, then?”

“Nah, my mum makes me get tested regular, but I always use a condom anyhow.”

“Thank God for that,” he said with a little laugh. “I'm not normally this reckless, believe me.”

I pulled him back up into my lap so we could kiss, 'cause I liked kissing him, but then we remembered at the same time that I was still covered in spunk, so we didn't get that far. “Would you like a shower?” Larry asked, still half on my lap and half off.

“'S all right. I can have one at home,” I said, 'cause I didn't want to be a bother.

“Actually, I was rather hoping you might stay the night? I have to get up for work, and I'm sure you can do, but, well...”

I hope I wasn't scaring him, 'cause I think I had a big grin on my face. “All right,” I said. I got up, lifting Larry up too. “Let's shower.” Larry laughed and told me to put him down, but I could tell he didn't mind, really. So I carried him upstairs to the bathroom, and then I put him down on his feet on the bathmat. He was still laughing when he put his arms round me and kissed me. He's good at kissing, Larry is, even when he's laughing.

There wasn't a lot of room for both of us in the shower, so we had to stand really close together. Larry said he wanted to wash me, so he soaped me up with about half a bottle of this expensive show

gel that smelled like wood and leather. By the time he'd rinsed me off, we were both hard again, so we jerked each other off in the shower, and I got spunk all over me again. It was magic.

We felt really sleepy after that, so we went to bed. Larry's got this really big bed. Emperor size, they call it. It takes up most of the space in his bedroom. I had to laugh at the thought of little Larry sleeping in there all on his own—but when I thought about it more, it didn't seem so funny. I didn't like to think of Larry being alone. "You must've been waiting for someone like me to come along," I said. I meant, because of the big bed.

But Larry looked at me all funny and said, "Yes, I think I was."

Chapter Two

So after that we kept on seeing each other, and Larry started asking me to these University dinners and stuff. He said he'd buy me a suit, but I told him I had one already from when I used to work as a bouncer. "Why did you give that up?" he asked. "I'd have thought that kind of thing would be perfect for you."

"Din't like the hours. It's nice, working outside in the day and hearing the birds and stuff."

"You're just a big softy inside, aren't you?" Larry smiled at me.

I shrugged. If anyone else called me a softy, I'd deck them. But I didn't mind Larry saying it.

The night of the first dinner, Larry was all keyed up like I used to be before a fight. I didn't get why he was nervous, 'cause he must have been to loads of them, so I thought about it, and I thought it must be 'cause of me. "Are you worried about your mates seeing you with me?" I asked him.

"No! No, Al, of course not!" He smiled at me and gave me a kiss. "I'm looking forward to it."

So I kissed him back, and we ended up on the floor and had to really rush to get changed in time after.

When we walked into this big hall with the fancy woodwork, everyone stared at me and Larry. I wasn't sure if it was 'cause of me or 'cause we were two poofs, but there was loads of other blokes without girlfriends, so maybe they were used to poofs.

We walked past this tall bloke going bald on top, and he looked at Larry and me and said, "My God. Since when have gorillas been allowed into Hall?"

Larry sort of huffed. "Really, *Doctor* Hardwicke, one would have hoped that an English don would have been able to come up with something a little more original and pithy."

I know he said pithy, not pissy. I asked him afterward.

Larry carried on. "May I introduce you? This is Alan, a very close friend of mine. Al, this is Clive Hardwicke, one of the English fellows."

He meant one of the University English teachers. Not that Clive was an English bloke, although he was that too.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, and I smiled at him. He looked a bit worried.

"Ah, likewise, I'm sure. Don't let me keep you from your seats."

So we sat down, and they said grace, but it was in Latin, so I don't know how we was meant to understand it. It seems daft, praying something when you don't know what you're saying. But maybe they were all clever and understood it, and it was just me. So I just said my own grace in my head, which was much shorter.

"Do you know which cutlery to use?" Larry whispered to me.

I thought maybe he hadn't been to one of these dinners before after all. No wonder he'd been nervous. I mean, no one expects anything much from me, but a clever bloke like him wouldn't want to look stupid. "You just work from the outside in," I whispered back. "My mum taught me that. I'll tell you if you get it wrong."

Larry laughed, but I guess I must have missed the joke. That happens a lot, so it didn't bother me or nothing. I just gave him a big grin.

After dinner we had tiny little drinks of port in tiny little glasses. I was worried I was going to crush mine with my fingers, so I just held it and didn't drink it or nothing. I met some more of Larry's mates, and they all asked me what I did and where I'd studied, which didn't seem very clever as I

don't think I look like I've got a degree or nothing.

Larry was in a good mood when we left. "God, did you see their faces? The entire evening?— Especially Hardwicke. I don't think he's been so shocked since the college started admitting women!"

"Yeah, I've had other blokes who went out with me so they could shock their mates or their folks," I said, 'cause it was true.

Larry stopped dead in the street, and I wondered if he'd had too much of that port to drink. And then I thought, nah, no way, the glasses were so tiny you'd need about a hundred to get pissed. Though he's kind of little and he gets pissed easy. "Al," he said, "you know that's not why I'm with you, don't you?"

"I don't know why you're with me," I said, 'cause I didn't.

He looked hurt. "Why are you with me?"

That was easy. "Because you're pretty and you're clever and you know about paintings and you like Charlie Chaplin."

Larry gave me a big smile. He grabbed my arm and we carried on walking. "Well, then. I'm with you because you're gorgeous and kind and we have the same taste in comedy."

"Okay." I was pleased. Usually people can't think of more than one reason why they're with me. I know he didn't mean it about me being gorgeous, 'cause I got a face like a squashed potato, and I know he likes cleverer stuff than Charlie Chaplin, but it was sweet of him to say it.

We did sixty-nine that night. Larry went on top so he didn't get squished. He's really good at sucking dick. I wondered if he'd got exams in that too, and I had to stop sucking him 'cause I was laughing.

"What's funny?" he asked with a smile like he was getting ready for the joke.

I told him, and he laughed too. I like it when he laughs, so I tickled him, and he tried to get away, but I grabbed him round the waist and lifted him off the floor, and then he couldn't stop laughing. So we gave up on sixty-nine and just rubbed off on each other, nice and slow, and then we cuddled up in Larry's bed and went to sleep.

In the end, I spent so much time round at Larry's house that he said why don't I move in? So the next Sunday, I got all my stuff together and I borrowed a van from my boss and drove it round. We hung my punch bag up in the basement, and Larry had a go at it, but he can't punch for shit. I told him that's okay, 'cause he'd got me to look after him now. And then we ended up kissing and stuff, and I had him over the boxes my weights were in and was late taking the van back. I didn't get into trouble though. The boss just said I'd better get my lazy arse in to work on time tomorrow, and I did, so that was all right. I didn't tell him I'd been late because I'd been fucking Larry. I thought he might be more cross if I'd said that.

Larry's got this loft conversion. It's a big, open room with these huge skylights and the walls painted blue like the sky in winter the morning after it's snowed. First time I went up there, I just stood in the middle and turned round, looking at it. I guess I probably looked a bit stupid. Larry came up and hugged me and laughed. "You like it?"

"It's amazing," I said. "It'd be perfect for doing painting and stuff in."

"Really? Why don't you do that, then? Use it as a studio. I'd love to see some more of your art." Larry had his hands on my chest, so I guessed he was talking about my tats.

I shrugged. "Haven't got any stuff. I mean, apart from my sketchbook and that. Didn't have room for it, my old place."

“We’ll get you some. There’s an art shop on King Street. They should have most of the things you need there.”

“’S expensive.”

“So? We’ll call it your moving-in present.”

I felt a bit bad. “I haven’t got you nothing.”

“Oh?” Larry looked up at me with big eyes. I started getting hard, ’cause he’d put his hand on my cock. “You haven’t got anything for me? Anything at all?” He gave me a little squeeze. “I think you’re wrong about that,” he said. “I think you’ve got something for me right here.” Then he stopped talking ’cause I grabbed his arse and pulled him against me hard and kissed him.

So we never got to the art shop that day. But we went soon after, and I got all kinds of stuff—a proper easel and brushes and paints and canvases and all that crap. I didn’t let Larry pay for it all. I think he was relieved.

I got Larry to pose for me first off. It took awhile before I got any sketches done, though, ’cause every time he got his kit off, we ended up fucking. Then Larry had a good idea. He said we should fuck first and do pictures after, and that worked pretty good. I love looking at Larry when he’s just been fucked. He gets this smile on his face that doesn’t go away even when he’s nearly asleep, and his whole body gets kind of softer.

I knew he’d get hacked off if I asked him to stand up for me, so I got him to pose lying down like he was asleep. I got the outline drawn, and I was filling in the detail of his face when he started making these snuffly noises, and I realised he was asleep. That was good, ’cause I didn’t have to worry about him getting bored no more. Larry slept for ages. I guess he’d been working too hard. I got sketches of him done from all different angles, and when my hand started to cramp, I went and kissed him to wake him up just like Sleeping Beauty. Although I guess with me it was more like Beauty and the Beast.

I thought Larry might want to fuck again when he woke up, but he was dead keen to see my sketches. He seemed to really like them. “These are fantastic!” he said. “Very reminiscent of early Lucian Freud—it’s a damned shame you weren’t able to study at the Slade. Although come to think of it, maybe it’s just as well—you seem to have such an instinctive grasp of perspective and composition, I’d hate to see that homogenised out of you. Look—like this one—why did you put the book there?”

I shrugged. I’d just thought it would look nice. Like, there was a gap there that was book-shaped? But I didn’t say that, ’cause it would’ve sounded silly.

“And this one—such economy!” Larry looked at me, and I guess I must’ve looked kind of blank. “I mean, you haven’t used many pencil strokes, but you’ve nevertheless created a strong image out of them.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “My arm was getting kind of tired.”

Larry smiled at me. I wanted to kiss him, but I stared at him instead, ’cause I wanted to remember that smile, it was so perfect. Like he was looking at something really beautiful. Even though it was just my ugly mug.

Then he frowned and looked at his watch, except it wasn’t there ’cause he still wasn’t wearing anything. “What time is it?”

I got my watch out of my pocket. I don’t wear it while I’m painting ’cause my mum gave it to me when she won on the bingo and I don’t want to ruin it. So I take it off when I’m sketching too, so I won’t forget when I get my paints out. “It’s quarter to eight.”

“Bugger, bugger, bugger!” Larry hurried over to where he’d left his clothes. His cock was jiggling about, and it made me smile. “Department meeting at eight, dammit! Need to get a bloody shift on.”

“But we haven’t had dinner or nothing,” I said. I didn’t want him to go. I wanted to pick him up and kiss him and do other stuff too.

“I’ll have to skip it,” Larry said. “Damn, damn, damn. Where the hell are my socks?” Larry was out of the house by ten to eight. He works too hard.

I cooked up a big pan of pasta so he could eat some when he got home, ’cause he doesn’t eat enough. It’s no wonder he’s so little.

The next day, I didn’t have work and Larry didn’t neither, so we had a lie in. We got a big window in our bedroom that faces east or west, whichever side the sun gets up on. I can never remember stuff like that. But it’s great, when it comes through the curtains and falls on us, all warm ’cause we got real curtains. Larry and me picked them out together.

Larry’s really sweet when he first wakes up. Not when it’s a work day, ’cause he gets a bit grumpy then ’cause he has to hurry. But when we got a day off, he wakes up really slow and happy.

I always wake up horny, and that morning I was hornier than ever, ’cause we hadn’t done nothing the night before, ’cause Larry had been too tired after his meeting. So when he snuggled up to me, I pulled him on top of me so he could feel how hard I was. I like the way Larry smells in the morning, all warm and a bit sweaty, but clean too. Larry always has a bath before bed. He uses posh soap too, stuff you have to go to a special shop for ’cause they don’t have it in Sainsbury’s. It smells sort of woody. Larry says it’s sandalwood, and it’s called that ’cause of the Latin name. They don’t make sandals out of it or nothing.

“Mmm,” Larry said. “Someone’s up bright and early.” He pressed his hips down so his cock was rubbing against mine. Then he started kissing all round my neck. I liked that a lot. I liked it even more when he moved down to my chest. He was being a cock-tease, kissing everywhere but my nipples, but I didn’t mind, ’cause I knew he’d get there in the end.

Then he surprised me by going straight down to my cock, but I wasn’t going to complain about that. Larry’s got a great little mouth. He can’t get all my cock in it, but that don’t matter, ’cause he does great stuff with what he can manage.

Larry had his hand on my balls, rolling them about. I love it when he does that. He pulled off a bit and swirled his tongue around the head of my cock, looking up at me while he did it, ’cause he knows that drives me crazy. It was great, but I wanted to touch Larry. I wanted to make him feel good too.

“Turn around,” I said. “Put your arse in my face.”

Larry scrambled round on the bed till he had his knees either side of my chest. Then he bent down and put his mouth on my cock again. It was magic, him sucking me off with his pretty little arse in my face. I could feel the muscles flexing as I grabbed hold of his arse cheeks, and when I shoved my tongue in his crack, his hand tightened on the base of my cock so hard I nearly came right then.

I knew I was getting to him, ’cause when I started rimming Larry, he pulled off my cock again and went, “Oh God!” really breathy. I kept licking him, and he kept panting, and he was working away at my cock with his hand, but all jerky, like he couldn’t control what he was doing.

I felt really close, and I wasn’t sure if he’d mind if I came all over his face, so I said, “Jerk yourself off while I rim you,” and he took his hand off my cock and put it on his, and then he was coming straight away, his whole body shaking. I had to hold his hips really tight so I could keep my tongue on him.

When he’d finished he said, “Oh God!” again, and then he sort of flopped down on me and put his mouth on my cock again, and he only had to suck three times before I came.

We had bacon and eggs for breakfast. Mum reckons it's not healthy, but we only have it on days off, so I guess it's okay. And it makes the kitchen smell great. I made sure the yolks were all runny 'cause Larry likes to dip his toast in. "You know what we haven't done?" Larry asked when we'd nearly finished.

I didn't say nothing 'cause there was lots of stuff we hadn't done. I hoped Larry didn't want to get into weird shit like PVC, 'cause that stuff gives me a rash.

"We've never gone punting!" Larry said, and he smiled at me.

I smiled back, 'cause I was kind of relieved.

"We should get a picnic together and go—it's a glorious day out there," Larry said. Then he frowned. "Unless it's a bit too much like a busman's holiday for you?"

"Nah," I said, 'cause we can walk down to the river easy from Larry's house. We don't need to take a bus.

"Excellent! Tell you what, I'll go to Marks and Spencer's and get in some supplies. Got to do things properly!"

I wasn't sure what he meant by doing things properly. When my mum used to take me and my sister on picnics, she just used to make ham sandwiches and bung them in a bag. She used the square pink ham you get from Sainsbury's, not the posh stuff Larry buys that tastes like real meat. So I thought it was probably good he didn't want me to do the shopping.

When Larry came back from Marks and Spencer's, he had four bags of stuff. Some of them was clinking. "I got some champagne, to go with the strawberries," he said. He looked really happy about it, so I didn't tell him I don't like fizzy wine much. There was so much stuff that in the end we decided just to take the champagne and strawberries and have a picnic on the Backs after we'd taken the punt back, 'cause you're not supposed to moor punts up or nothing.

When we went down to Scudamore's, my boss said, "Bleedin' 'ell, I thought we were getting a break from your ugly mug today." I laughed, but Larry didn't. My boss let us jump the queue for punts, though, so Larry cheered up a bit then.

I thought Larry'd want me to do the punting, but he grabbed the pole and got up on the back of the punt. "Haven't done this in years," he said. He was smiling like he was all excited to be doing it again. "Wonder if I've still got the knack?"

I had to smile too, 'cause he looked even littler with a great big pole in his hands. Then I thought about that some more and I started to get a stiffie, so I grabbed the bags and asked Larry if he wanted me to open the wine and the strawberries.

"Wait until we get out along the Backs," Larry said. "Actually, no—you might as well get it open now." So I got out the champagne and popped the cork off. It went in the river and started bobbing about. I was worried about littering, but Larry said it was okay 'cause corks come from trees and are natural and stuff. Only he used longer words than that.

Larry wasn't doing too bad at punting, but it's a good thing he's little, 'cause he forgot to duck when we was going under Silver Street bridge. I think it's 'cause we'd started heading for the side, and he was worried we'd get stuck. But I gave a shove off the side, and we was all right. I warned Larry before I did it. I didn't want him to fall in or nothing.

The next bridge is made of wood. I always thought maybe it was a temporary one and they'd build a proper one when they got round to it, but Larry said no, it's a mathematical bridge. That's the one I can never remember about. I thought maybe if Larry explained it I might be able to remember this

time. I looked, but it didn't have any sums on it or nothing.

"It's the design," Larry said, "Popular legend has it that when it was built, no nuts and bolts were used in the construction, because of the precise mathematical design. As you can see, it's got them now, but they're supposed to have been a later addition."

"Yeah," I said. "I wouldn't trust a wooden bridge built by a mathematician neither. You want to get a proper carpenter in to do that kind of stuff."

Larry laughed. I did too, 'cause I like seeing him laugh.

When we got out at the back of King's College, I poured out the champagne. I like King's College. It's the one with the really posh chapel that looks more like a cathedral. I always thought chapels were supposed to be really small, but you could fit a whole row of houses from Larry's street into King's College chapel. There's this huge patch of grass next to it, going down to the river. I don't do landscapes, but if I did, I'd do this one. Even the bridges are really pretty down the Backs.

"Al, you're woolgathering! How about passing me that champagne?"

I was wondering how Larry was going to manage to drink wine while he was punting. He had the glass in one hand and the punt pole in the other, which was okay to start with, but when you pull the pole back, you need to move your hand on it. Larry shifted his hand down by sort of jerks, and he ended up spilling most of his champagne, but he seemed happy enough about it. "Like riding a bike!" he said with a big grin on his face. "Oops—bugger! Ah. Top-up?"

So I didn't have to drink much fizzy wine after all, 'cause Larry kept spilling his, so that was good. But he drank enough that he got a bit wobbly, so I said, "All right if I have a go?" and we swapped over. I didn't want him falling in. When I got up, I was a bit worried, 'cause I'm a bit big to stand up in a boat, but punts are really flat, so it was okay.

Punting's dead easy, 'cause you use the pole to push off with, and when you've done that, you can use it to steer with. So you don't have to think about two things at once. I didn't try and hold a glass while I was doing it, though. Larry got a bit giggly, and he got me to open my mouth so he could throw strawberries at me. But we had to stop 'cause Larry can't throw for shit, and people in other punts were complaining about being hit by strawberries. Even though they was Marks and Spencer's strawberries.

Up past King's is this stone bridge with big stone balls on it. Larry said it was Clare Bridge. I said I hoped they'd stuck those balls down properly, 'cause I didn't fancy one of them coming down on us when we went underneath. Larry thought that was really funny, but I don't think he'd have been laughing if half a ton of stone dropped through the bottom of the punt.

We got up as far as the Bridge of Sighs before we thought we ought to turn back. Larry said the bridge was named after a famous one in Venice, and that he'd take me to see it one day. The one in Venice, he meant. But I know people often say they're going to do stuff for you when they don't really mean it, so I didn't get my hopes up or nothing.

After we took the punt back, we had our picnic up by Trinity College. It's really pretty there, with trees leaning down into the water like they're having a drink. Larry had a bit of a headache, so we sat in the shade of one of them. There was lots of students around, reading books and eating sandwiches. Lots of them had their bikes with them, just lying on the ground 'cause there was nothing to stand them up against. "It must be great, being clever," I said, 'cause I've often thought that.

Larry smiled, though he had his eyes closed. He'd finished eating and was lying down, with his jacket rolled up as a pillow, getting all crumpled. "It's all relative, you know. And being clever academically doesn't mean you're any good at other things."

I don't know about that. I think you need to be clever for most things. Except maybe seeing that it

good to be clever. I think maybe that's easier if you're not clever. "Like what?" I asked.

~~"Oh, you know. Life. People. The important stuff."~~

I thought about that for a bit. I wanted to ask Larry what he meant by the important stuff, but his breathing sounded like it was getting slower, and his nose sort of twitched like he was about to make one of those snuffly noises he makes while he's asleep. So I kept quiet and leaned back on my elbow, looking at the trees and the river and Larry, and I thought about how glad I was I'd walked him home that night we met.

Chapter Three

Once I'd sketched Larry, I wanted to do a proper painting of him. It was kind of difficult to choose what pose, but I went for the one where he's all sprawled out on the rug. You can see his cock just resting on his thigh, like a little animal that's gone to sleep. I like seeing him like that, 'cause I know I'm the one that's going to wake him up.

I like waking Larry up with a kiss. Only, you know, it's not always his mouth I kiss him on. I think Larry likes that too.

I didn't let Larry see the painting of him until it was finished. And then I pretended it wasn't finished for a while longer, 'cause I was worried he mightn't like it. But then I thought, this is crazy, got to get this over with, so when he came home from work one day, I dragged him straight up the stairs to look at it.

Larry was laughing and saying, "Al, could I at least put my briefcase down? Maybe change my shoes?" And then he saw my picture of him, and he didn't say nothing for a really long time. I was shitting myself. I thought he hated it. I thought he'd never let me paint him again, and if I couldn't do that, I didn't want to paint nothing ever again.

But then he just grabbed me and held me with his face in my chest, and when he looked up again his eyes were all shiny. "How did you...? No, don't try and tell me—words would just cheapen it." I was glad he said that, 'cause I'm not that good with words. I thought he was going to cry, but he was smiling too, so I guessed he didn't hate it too much. "Is this really how you see me?"

"S what you look like," I said, only I guess I kind of mumbled it.

"You have to do more of these," Larry said. It sounded like he wanted me to do them right now. "Not of me, though." He smiled sort of funny. "Will you hate me if I ask you not to show this one?" I thought that was a daft question. I couldn't never hate Larry even if I tried. "I almost hate myself," he said, "But it's just too...too private. It's wonderful, Al—really wonderful. You need to do more paintings like this, with—with other models, and I guarantee you they'll be a huge success."

My stomach felt a bit funny, 'cause I'd never really thought of showing other people my paintings anyway. But I didn't want to disappoint Larry. "Okay," I said. "But I don't know where I'll get guys to model for me."

"Oh, students," Larry said, like it was obvious. Which it probably was, to him, 'cause he's clever. "Offer them a few pounds an hour just to sit around with their clothes off, and they'll be on you like flies. I'll put a notice up in the Porter's Lodge tomorrow." He smiled at me. "After I see someone about having this framed. You have signed it, haven't you?"

"I never thought of it," I said, 'cause I hadn't.

"What? You've got to sign it! Do it now!"

So I got my brush and I signed it, Alan Fletcher. I did it small, 'cause I didn't want to ruin the picture or nothing.

Larry kissed me. "We'll hang it in the bedroom."

No one's ever hung one of my pictures in their house before, 'cept my mum. I felt so proud, it was like when I brought home my first pay packet.

We had Larry's family round for dinner a few weeks after I moved into his flat. I didn't think they

liked me at first, but then Larry's mum said she could see I'd concentrated on my physical education which I thought was nice of her, though Larry didn't smile or nothing. Larry's mum looks just like him, all little and pretty, except she's older, of course, and she doesn't smile as much. Least, not when she's looking at me. His dad's kind of little too, but his hair's getting thin, and he's got a face like he's been pissed off about stuff for so long it's stuck that way. I'm glad Larry doesn't look like him, 'cause how would I tell if he was really pissed off about stuff or if it was just his face?

Larry's sister Alicia came too. She's younger than him and even littler, but she's not as pretty, which must be kind of tough, her being a girl. She looks more like Larry's dad, except she's not been pissed off about stuff for long enough for it to stick yet. And she's a girl, so she's got all her own hair. She's a lawyer. I like lawyers. I told Alicia I had a great lawyer when I got stitched up on this assault charge when I was working as a bouncer. He got me off all right. Alicia said she did mostly road traffic and family law, and anyway she didn't do special rates for family and friends.

We were sitting round the table eating pasta bolognese and salad, and they started having this conversation about people I didn't know, so I stopped listening. I started trying to work out if I could bench-press the whole of Larry's little family, or just him and his mum and his sister, or maybe him and his dad and his sister, and it made me smile. Then I realised everyone was looking at me.

"I just asked you, Alan, what was your opinion about the trend towards modernisation in the performance of the classics?" Larry's dad said, with his lip curled up all funny.

I think he thought I wouldn't know what he meant, but I did, 'cause Larry and me had gone to see this weird Greek play only the last week where this guy pokes his eyes out 'cause he found out his wife was really his mum, and they did it in all jeans and stuff. So I just said, "I think it's okay. I don't think you should diss actors just 'cause they can't afford proper costumes."

Then Larry laughed, but his family all looked at me like I had sauce all over my face or something. So I wiped my mouth, but it was clean anyhow. But I made sure I was extra careful eating after that, just in case.

Larry's mum and dad went home straight after dinner, but his sister stayed so she could have a row with Larry. They did it in the kitchen, and I was in the living room, so I couldn't hear much. They weren't shouting like my mum and stepdad used to, but sometimes I heard bits. I heard a couple of words like "taking advantage" and "just using" and I worried she'd make Larry think he couldn't trust me, but he argued back, so I guess he didn't agree with her.

Then she said, "You can't possibly *love* him," and I didn't want to hear no more, so I turned on the TV and watched some program. I don't remember what it was about.

When they came out of the kitchen, Larry and his sister weren't talking anymore. She had this sort of tight look on her face, and Larry looked all sad. After she left, I put my arms round him and just held him. I knew he'd tell me about it if he wanted to.

He sniffed. "I just wish they'd accept that we're *happy*. You're happy with me, aren't you?"

I said "Yeah," 'cause although I wasn't feeling happy right then, most of the time he makes me happier than I've ever been in my life.

"I don't see what the hell our living arrangements have to do with them," Larry said.

"I could move out if it'd make it easier," I said, but I didn't want to. I just didn't like seeing Larry sad.

"No! No, you're staying here," Larry said. I got that. He's a grown man; he don't want his family to push him around and run his life. Sometimes you got to make a stand on something, even when the

thing itself isn't that important. It's like the difference between paintings and photos—it's what you don't see in the photo that matters.

But I kind of wished it was the photo that was real this time.

We went to bed, and I fucked him extra gentle, and afterward, he cuddled up and said, "You know why I'm with you, don't you, Al?"

'Cause my head was still full of the paintings and the photos and which one was the truth, I didn't really think before I answered. "You like the way I fuck you," I said. I mean, I didn't say it nasty or nothing; it just came out.

I knew I'd said something wrong straight away when he sat up in bed and looked at me like he did the night we met. "Is that what you really think?" he asked.

I didn't say nothing, 'cause I was worried I'd make it worse.

"Al? Is that all it is for you? You just like the way we...fuck?" I was going to say, he said "fuck" like it's a dirty word, but I guess it is, isn't it? But he said it like that anyhow.

But the question was okay; I could answer that. "I like everything about you, Larry. I like the way you look and how you're so clever, and I like it when we laugh together and watch TV together. I like going to art galleries with you and hearing you get all bitchy about some of the artists. I like watching you when you're doing marking, 'cause you get these funny looks on your face. I like watching you sleep and hearing that snuffly noise you make. I like waking up with you at weekends and spending the day together, just doing stuff like walking round town and shopping and cooking and stuff." I kind of ran out of breath after that.

For a moment, I thought he was going to cry. "Is there anything you don't like about me?"

I had to think. "Well, it pisses me off a bit when you finish up the milk and don't say nothing."

Then he was laughing, but he still looked a bit weepy. "Al. Listen to me. I love you, okay?"

"Okay," I said, and I put my arms around him and pulled him back down against me.

Chapter Four

Larry came back from work one day and told me he'd been teaching his students about tempera, and had I ever tried painting with it? And I said no, so he said we should mix some up and I could give it a try. He had a recipe and everything.

Tempera's what they used to do paintings with in the old days, back before they invented proper paints and paint shops. You make it with eggs, but the paintings don't smell bad or nothing. So we got some eggs and some pigments, and on my day off we had a go at making tempera. It was kind of like cooking. We had to separate the yolks from the eggs, 'cause you don't use the whites, and then squeeze them out into a bowl. You dry them off with kitchen towels first so they don't slip out of your fingers. I laughed a bit when I did that, 'cause they felt a lot like bollocks. I told Larry, and he thought it was funny too.

Then we had to prick them with a pin and squeeze out the insides, and it didn't seem so funny no more.

We added a couple of teaspoons of water and the pigment. It was dead easy, really. I mean, we had to wear masks and stuff while we was grinding the pigments, 'cause that stuff's nasty if you breathe it in, and measure it all out careful, but there wasn't nothing to it, really. It's funny what they make the pigments out of. Some of them are made out of bugs and snails and stuff, which is a bit gross, but most of it's just posh mud.

I had to get the panels ready to paint on first, but I did that a couple of weeks earlier while Larry was at work, 'cause it takes a few days and Larry gets bored easy. I used hardwood panels, little ones 'cause I wanted to paint miniatures of Larry. I thought that would be funny, me painting little Larry in a miniature. I didn't say that to Larry, though. I thought he might not have got the joke.

I used rabbit-skin glue to size the panels. I got it from the art shop. I don't know if they use real rabbits in it. It seems kind of a shame if they do, but then it's not like there's a rabbit shortage, is it? And maybe they only used rabbits that would've died anyhow. I had to boil the glue up in a pan, and stunk worse than my sister's kids' nappies. Even when they was ill. So I was glad Larry was out all day. I had all the windows open, but it still whiffed a bit, so in the evening I cooked up a curry really slow in the oven so Larry wouldn't notice nothing.

I primed the panels with chalk gesso, just like they would've done in the old days. I had to sand them down after. It made them really smooth. Like Larry's skin. I thought about what that'd be like, painting on Larry's skin, and I got so hard I had to jerk off 'cause I couldn't concentrate on nothing. Then I looked stuff up on Larry's computer. You can get all sorts of body paints. Some of them even have flavours. So I put in an order.

I didn't wait to ask Larry first. I was pretty sure he wouldn't mind.

When we finally got down to making the paints, Larry got kind of uptight when we was measuring out the water and stuff, 'cause he thought we had to do it exactly how the recipe said, but I knew the texture wasn't right for what I wanted to do with it. So I just put in what I thought was right, and it worked a treat, and afterward Larry came and put his arms around me while I was painting with it.

"You know," he said, "you never cease to amaze me."

I didn't say nothing. I thought he'd tell me what he was on about if I waited.

"Here you are, a damning indictment of our education system, only one GCSE to your name, and you're mixing up tempera like a modern-day Michelangelo."

I felt kind of hot and prickly when he said that, sort of half in a good way and half not. “I’m not Michelangelo,” I said, ’cause I know my paintings are okay, but they ain’t nothing special.

“Mmm,” Larry said in my ear. “Michelangelo wasn’t anything like as sexy as you. Are you nearly finished there?” He put his hand inside my T-shirt and started feeling up my pecs. I wasn’t finished with the layer, but I figured it could wait a bit, ’specially when he started squeezing on my nipples.

I put down my brushes, and I got hold of Larry and pulled him toward me. My cock was hard already, so I grabbed his hips and pressed him against it. “Oh yes!” he said, all breathy, and he shoved his hands back up my T-shirt. I yanked it off, ’cause I wanted him to suck my nipples. He’s really good at that.

I think Larry knew what I wanted, but he made me wait. He bent his head down and kissed all round my chest, and then he nuzzled into my armpit. I thought it probably smelled a bit strong, but he didn’t seem to mind. He kissed me there too, and then he licked me, right where the hair was. It felt way better than you’d think it would, but I still wanted him to suck my tit. Just as I was about to say something, Larry started to circle my nipple with his tongue. It jumped up almost as hard as my cock and I ground up against him. He started sucking on my nipple, and it felt great, but it still wasn’t enough. “Want to fuck you,” I said.

Larry pulled his mouth off my tit, sucking all the way so it got even bigger. His hair was all mussed up, and his lips were shining red. “How do you want me?” he asked. “From behind? Bent over the workbench?”

“No, I want to see your face,” I said, ’cause I had a plan. I hadn’t had a plan before we started this, but it just came to me sudden. I wanted to paint Larry how he looks when he comes, so I wanted a good view of his face so it’d be fresh in my mind, though I don’t think I could ever forget that, really.

So I let Larry go, and he took his clothes off as quick as he could. I pulled off my jogging bottoms and that’s when I remembered we didn’t have any stuff for fucking up here. “We got to go down to the bedroom,” I said. “Get the lube.” We weren’t using condoms no more ’cause we’d both had tests and come back negative.

Larry had all his kit off by then. “Isn’t there anything round here we could use? Aren’t oil paints, well, slippery?”

I know Larry’s way cleverer than me, but that didn’t seem like such a good idea. “Uh, yeah, but I really don’t think you’d want them up there. They’re kind of toxic.”

Larry shuddered. “Fair enough. Just use spit, then. It’ll be okay.”

I wasn’t sure, ’cause he’s such a little guy, and my dick ain’t small. Then I remembered the boiled linseed oil I got for when I’m using oil paints. You get different effects if you mix it in. “I got this,” I said, grabbing the bottle. “This’ll be okay.”

“See?” Larry grinned at me. “I knew you’d come up with something.” He put his arms round me and kissed me while our cocks rubbed together. Then he lay back on the floor, all sprawled out and waiting for me. I nearly dropped the bottle, I was so keen to get down there on top of him. He pulled up his legs so I could slick him up and stretch him out a bit, and my dick was aching, I needed him so much. “Put it in,” Larry said, so I used some more of the oil getting myself ready, and then I lined up with his hole and pushed.

Larry always looks so little, folded up beneath me. It makes me kind of scared I’m going to hurt him. I pushed in really slow and gentle, so he could stop me if he needed to. “Yes, yes—don’t stop!” he said, and I thought it was probably okay. He was still hard, so I guess it couldn’t have hurt that much.

When I was all the way in, I stopped for a minute, just so I could feel him around me. I felt like the

luckiest guy in the world. But then Larry said, “Move! Now, for God’s sake!” so I started thrusting in and out of him, and when I do that, I always get carried away, going faster even if I don’t mean to, and soon I was slamming into him like my dick was a fist and Larry was a punch bag. “Yes! God, just like—yes!”

Larry’s face was all pink, and his hair was dark with sweat. He looked beautiful. I told him to want himself off, and when his hand wrapped round his dick, it felt like it was around mine too, and I couldn’t help, I started coming ’cause it was all so fucking amazing. And then Larry went “Oh God!” and he was coming too, shooting his load up between us.

I just kept looking at his face, and it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

I got the egg tempera pictures finished in the end. I did one miniature of Larry all normal, just smiling, and one of his face when he comes.

Larry really liked the normal one, and he put it up on the mantelpiece so everyone could see it. He made me promise never to show anyone the other one.

Ever since I moved in with Larry, my mum had been on at me ’cause she hadn’t met him yet. So I was going to ask her round, but Larry said we should take her out somewhere. Somewhere proper. So we took her for afternoon tea at the University Arms hotel. Larry thought it would be a nice place to go. I thought my mum would probably rather have us round for tea in her front room, but Larry said I wanted to take her out proper.

I liked that idea because it was like he thought we was proper, you know? Like, not just fucking. So I told Mum where we was going, and she said “Bleedin’ hell, that’s posh! Do I have to buy a bloody hat?” but I asked Larry, and he said we wouldn’t need hats or nothing for afternoon tea.

So that afternoon, Mum got them to let her work a split shift at Sainsbury’s, and I went and got her and we met up with Larry at the University Arms. Mum was a bit nervous about what she was wearing, even though she bought it special from her catalogue. “Are you sure I don’t look cheap, love?” she asked me when I picked her up.

“I think you look really pretty, Mum,” I told her, ’cause she did. “I like you in pink. It looks nice with your hair.”

“You think so, love? You can say what you like about that girl at the salon, her with the piercings in her God-knows-where—and don’t think I don’t know what I’m on about, ’cause she goes to the swimming pool same as me and I’ve seen them—but she knows her way around a bottle of bleach. You don’t think these heels are too tarty?”

“Anyone calls my mum a tart, I’ll deck them,” I said.

Mum gave me a hug. “That’s nice, love, but we don’t want ’em thinking it neither. And we definitely don’t want you up on another assault charge. Sod it, I’m wearing ’em. Take me as I come, that’s what I always say.”

Larry was waiting for us in the entrance of the hotel so we’d be able to find him okay. I was really proud of him, ’cause he’d dressed up all nice for my mum. He had on a creamy shirt that toned in with his hair and made him look really pretty, but no tie or nothing, ’cause he knew I wouldn’t be wearing one. I don’t like wearing a collar and tie if I don’t have to. They don’t really make them for guys with necks as thick as mine. Larry was looking at a picture hanging on the wall and he didn’t see us come in. “Larry,” I said, and he sort of jumped and twisted round at the same time, and I worried he’d get a

crick in his neck. "This is my mum," I told him.

"So you're my Alan's fancy man, are you?" Mum asked Larry. "I must say, it's the first time he's ever introduced me to one of his boyfriends. Not that I haven't *met* them, mind, but it's the first time he ever done it proper. I always knew he was that way, though. Do your parents know you're that way, Larry?"

Larry's eyes went big, so I gave his hand a squeeze. I don't think he knew which question to answer first. He smiled at her. I smiled too. Everyone likes my mum. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Fletcher," Larry said in his posh voice. He held out his hand for Mum to shake.

"Oh, it's Mrs. Jones now, but call me Lizzie, love, everyone does. I wasn't never a *Mrs. Fletcher* anyhow, though I won't tell if you don't! You don't mind if I call you Larry, do you? That's what my Alan calls you. He talks about you all the time when he comes round these days—not that it's as often as he used to, mind, but I know what it's like when you've got a new bloke!" Mum laughed. "Alan tells me you work at the University, Larry. Teaching. My granddad was a teacher—'course, it was all different in them days. Teachers got a bit of respect, or the kids knew what was coming to them." Mum's eyes narrowed. "Do your students give you respect, Larry?"

"Er, yes, I suppose so. Well, you know." Larry looked a bit nervous.

"I'm glad to hear it, love. Now, are we going to go have a cup of tea, or are we going to stand around nattering all afternoon? Don't know about you, but I'm spitting feathers, as my old Nan used say!"

We had tea in the lounge bar. We had to walk through this circular room with the biggest chandelier I ever seen. "I'm glad I'm not having to sit underneath that thing!" Mum said. "I've seen *Phantom of the Opera*—I know them things aren't safe!" She jabbed Larry in the ribs with her elbow, and he stumbled and nearly fell over a table. I probably should've warned him she does that. "Oops! Sorry, love! Don't know my own strength sometimes!"

Larry laughed, though, so it was all right. "Well, I think I know where Al gets his impressive physique from, at any rate," he said in his smooth voice, the one he uses when he wants people to like him. He was rubbing his stomach a bit, but I don't think he was really hurt or nothing.

"You reckon? There's nothing of me in that boy. Not a bleedin' thing. When the midwife give him to me, I said 'Take him back, I asked for a small one!' And she goes 'Sorry, love, round here all sales are final!' and hands me a flippin' elephant! Bleedin' massive, he was. If it'd been up to me, I'd still've been on the gas and air three weeks later. He's the spit of his father, though, bless him."

"Al never really talks about his father," Larry said, looking at Mum all interested.

"He was a boxer. He'd just got out the nick for GBH when I met him down the pub. I was a barmaid back in them days. He'd broke some copper's nose—well, I ask you! Should of known, shouldn't I? Bloke who goes round beating up coppers ain't the sort you want to be settling down with. Poor sod didn't have two brain cells to rub together, neither."

"Mum," I said, 'cause I didn't like her talking about my dad like that.

She gave me a hug, and I felt better. "His heart was in the right place, that's what I always say. He always came round on your birthdays if he remembered, din't he, love? And give me money and stuff when he had it, which wasn't often, but not for want of trying, was it? Now, where do we sit? You two lovebirds go on the sofa. Cuddle up a bit, don't mind me!"

"Mum," I said, 'cause I felt a bit funny cuddling up with Larry in public. It's daft, 'cause I'm dead proud of him—I mean, he's the one who ought not to want to be seen with me. I guess I'm just a bit shy. So we sat on the sofa but a bit apart, and Mum had the chair on the other side of the table.

"So where is he now?" Larry asked. "Al?" I'd been looking at the windows, which had stained glass

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