

A Limited Engagement



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I heard the key in the lock, switched on the porch light, and opened the door.

The rain poured off the roof of the cabin in a shining fall of silver needles, bouncing and splashing off the redwood deck. Ross stood there, blue eyes blacker than the night, the amber porch light giving his skin a jaundiced cast.

“You’re here,” he said in disbelief. The disbelief gave way instantly to the rage he’d been banking down for — well, probably since the newspapers came out that morning. Even in the unwholesome porch light I could see his face flush dark and his eyes change.

I stepped back — partly to let him in, because really what choice did I have? Even if I’d wanted to keep him out, it was his cabin. Partly because...it was Ross and I had no walls and no doors and no defenses against him.

He followed me inside, shaking his wet, black hair out of his eyes. He wasn’t wearing gloves, and his hands were red from the cold. His Joseph Abboud overcoat dripped in a silent puddle around his expensively shod feet. “I am going to kill you,” he said carefully and quietly, and he launched himself at me.

I jumped back, my foot slipped on the little oriental throw rug, and I went down, crashing into the walnut side table, knocking it — and the globe lamp atop it — over. The lamp smashed on the wooden floor, shards of painted flowers scattering down the hallway.

Ross’s cold hands locked around my throat. Big hands, powerful hands — hands that could stroke and soothe and tease and tantalize — tightened, choking me. I clawed at his wrists, squirming, wriggling, trying to break his hold.

’Til death do you part...

“R-R-ogh —” I tried to choke out his name as he squeezed.

The blood beat in my ears with the thunder of the rain on the roof. The lights swirled and dimmed, the black edges swept forward and washed me out with the drum of the rain on the roof.

* * * * *

I could hear the rain pounding down. I opened my eyes. I was lying on the floor in the entrance hall of the cabin, the rug scrunched beneath me. The lights were out but the flickering from the fireplace in the front room sent shadows dancing across the open

beamed ceiling. I could make out broken glass winking and twinkling in the firelight like bits of broken stars fallen around me. My back hurt, my head buzzed, my throat throbbled.

There was no sign of Ross.

Levering myself up, I got to my feet, leaned dizzily against the wall while I found my bearings, then picked my way over the fallen table and through the broken glass into the front room.

Ross sat in front of the fireplace, head in his hands, unmoving.

I felt my way over to the sofa and sat down across from him.

He didn't look up. I could see that his hands were shaking a little.

Mine were shaking a lot.

I croaked, "Rawh." Tried again. "Ross...will you listen to me?" It came out in a hoarse boy demon voice.

I guess Demon Boy was about right. He looked at me then, and even in the uncertain lighting the pain in his eyes was almost more than I could take.

He said tonelessly, "Why did you do it?"

I had to struggle to get the words, and not just because of my bruised throat.

He said, "I did everything you wanted. I paid every penny of your goddamned blackmail. Why the hell did you do it?" I could tell he'd been asking himself this all the long drive, all the long day. Six hours from New York City to this little cabin in the Vermont woods. He must have left not long after the news broke.

"I —" my voice gave out on another squawk.

His eyes shone in the firelight as they turned my way. I shook my head.

"Do you have any idea what you've done to me?" he asked. "You've destroyed me. *Why?*"

I couldn't answer. The burn in the back of my throat moved to my eyes and dazzled me. I could just make him out in a kind of prism — as though he were trapped in crystal.

"You don't think you owe me that much?" He got up fast. I flinched. He stopped.

"I'm...sorry," I got out.

"*Sorry?*"

I nodded.

“You’re...sorry?” The bewilderment was painful. “You outed me to the press. You’ve ruined my career, my marriage —”

“Engagement,” I said quickly.

There was a little pause. Ross said, “You’ve ruined my life...and you’re sorry?”

I said, “I’m sorry you’re suffering. I’m not sorry I did it.”

I thought he really would kill me then. Fists clenched, he took a step toward me, and I straightened, squaring my shoulders. For a long moment he stared down at me, then, sharply, he turned away. I could hear the harshness of his breathing as he fought for control.

“Ross —”

“Don’t say anything, Adam.” His voice was muffled. “Don’t speak. I’m not —”

Neither of us said a word as the rain thundered down on the roof. I could see it glinting outside the windows like grains of polished rice — like a shower of rice outside a church. But they didn’t throw rice at weddings anymore, did they?

Finally Ross gave a long sigh. His shoulders relaxed. He moved away to the liquor cart and poured two brandies. Brandy in the wrong glasses: he really was upset. Handing me a tumbler, he down on the other sofa, and said conversationally, “That’s twice tonight I’ve almost killed you.” He met my eyes. “You shouldn’t have come here, Adam. I can’t believe you did.”

“I’m not running from you,” I said.

He raised his brows. “You should be running from me. Because I’m going to return the favor and wreck your life.”

“All right.” I tossed my drink back and then stared down at the empty glass sparkling in the firelight.

He gave me that dark, unfathomable look. “You don’t believe me?”

I actually managed a crooked smile. “I think I beat you to it, yeah?”

Yeah. Because of the two of us, my career was less likely to survive. Ross was a playwright. A brilliant, respected playwright, at that. I was an actor. A mostly out-of-work and previously not very well-known actor. Not many openly gay actors find leading man roles on or off Broadway. Especially the ones who indulge in kiss and tell with

powerful playwrights and producers. I was going to be a pariah, the Ann Heche of the *theatah, dahling*.

There also was the fact that I loved Ross — as much as he now hated me.

He swallowed a mouthful of brandy slowly, thoughtfully. “Not a smart move from a career standpoint,” he agreed. “Either of your careers. You know, you’re not going to get far as a blackmailer if you betray your paying customers.”

“Why did you pay me?” I asked.

He said as though explaining the facts of life to a numbskull, “Because you threatened to out me to the press.”

“You could have gone to the police.”

“How the hell would that have helped? It would just have outed me faster.”

“You preferred to keep sleeping with me even though I was blackmailing you.”

“You’re not hard to sleep with,” he said dryly. “Far from it. And as we — and now everyone — know, I like to sleep with men. And I’m not that choosy.”

I ignored that last comment, although it stung. I pointed out, “And then when I demanded money, you handed that over too.”

“That’s my point,” Ross said. “I gave you what you wanted. Everything you wanted, you got.”

I said bitterly, “Right.”

“What the hell did you not get? You asked for a part in the new play, and I got that for you too. Jesus Christ. I did everything I could think of —”

“That’s right,” I said, and suddenly I was on my feet and furious. “You’re so goddamned *afraid* that you let me blackmail you into a part in the new play. Was there anything you wouldn’t have done to keep my mouth shut? To keep yourself —”

He was staring at me, mouth slightly parted — not a look I’d ever seen on Ross’s face before. Ross Marlowe was the living personification of Man About Town. The suave sophisticate who knew what to do in every social situation. But I guess confronting your blackmailing ex-lover wasn’t covered in *Debrett’s Etiquette and Modern Manners*.

“What the hell are *you* crying about?” he asked.

I wiped my face on my sleeve. “Oh go to hell,” I said. “If you don’t know by now, there’s no point me spelling it out.”

He was very still.

It took some effort, but I got myself under control while he stared at me with those midnight-blue eyes.

“Look,” I said finally. “You asked why. So here’s why. Part of why. All these plays you write about characters finding their true selves and owning up to who they really are, and making difficult choices and standing behind them — *two* plays about gay men being true to themselves against the odds — and all the time you’re hiding behind this... façade of Ross Marlowe the brilliant heterosexual playwright.” Tears and my injured vocal cords closed off my words.

He said slowly, “I see. This was for my own good?”

I nodded, not looking at him, mopping again at my runny nose, leaking eyes. “I don’t expect you to understand,” I got out.

“Lucky for both of us.” Watching me, he shuddered and pulled out a pristine hanky — and who the hell carries hankies? Wasn’t that proof to the entire civilized world right then and there that Ross was gay? He tossed it my way. “Jesus, mop your face.”

I took it with muttered thanks.

“So basically,” he said, watching me scrub my face, “You had some idealistic image of me and I disappointed you, and this is your revenge?”

Horrifically the tears started again. It took effort to stop them. I managed. “You never disappointed me.”

“No.” His gaze was intent. “What then?”

I said — and I tried to be matter of fact, “I don’t believe you would have been happy like that, Ross. I don’t believe you —”

“Christ, you’re young,” he said, but he sounded weary, not angry. He set down his glass, rose, and came over to me, taking me in his arms. “Okay, listen, Adam. You’re twenty-three. I’m forty. I think I’ve got the edge in experience here. I believe in the things I write about, but I don’t want to live my life as some kind of gay poster boy for the arts, all right? I like my privacy.”

His arms felt very good around me, strong and kind and familiar. He smelled good too: a mix of rain and pipe tobacco and some overpriced herbal aftershave you probably

couldn't buy in Vermont. I put my head on his shoulder. I was very tired. I hadn't slept since I'd done the interview with the reporter from the *New York Times* Theater section.

Playing Desdemona to Ross's Othello hadn't helped much either.

"This isn't privacy," I said. "This is...a lie. You're marrying someone you don't love."

I felt the steady, even pulse in his throat against my face. He was past his anger now; Ross was the most civilized man I knew — and maybe that was part of the problem. He said levelly, "I like Anne. I do care about her, whether it meets your...naïve definition of love. It's a good working partnership — or it would have been before you blasted it to Kingdom Come with your exclusive to the papers."

Well, Kingdom Come was where I reigned. I didn't think he'd find that funny though — I didn't — and instead I said, "Marriage should be about more than friendship and respect, Ross."

"Respect and friendship — companionship, shared interests — that's a good basis."

I shook my head. "It's not enough."

"You're the expert now?" His tone was dry. "What's the longest steady relationship you've had?"

"We've been together one year, eight months and twenty-seven days," I said.

He didn't have an answer. After a moment he couldn't even meet my eyes.

I added, "Depending on how you use the word 'together.'" I pulled out of his arms.

After several minutes Ross said quite gently, "Did you feel I used you? Is that why?"

I shook my head.

I could feel his gaze on my profile. "It was never my intent. From the moment I saw you I...wanted you," he said honestly.

Yeah. No question. I still remembered looking up from reading for the part of George Deever in *All My Sons* and meeting those smiling, blue eyes. Ross, who was good friends with the show's producer, had been sitting in on the auditions that day. Every time I'd glanced up from the script I'd seen him watching me from the almost empty sea of chairs.

I hadn't got the role. Apparently I didn't look like either a lawyer or a veteran. But as I'd left the audition, Ross had followed me out of the theater. He'd offered to buy me a drink. And, as consolation prizes went, I'd have taken a drink with Ross over eating for the next three months easy.

We had cocktails at the M Bar in the Mansfield Hotel. Mahogany bookshelves, and a domed skylight. It had been raining that night too, glittering down like a fake downpour on a stage set. We drank and talked and then he took me upstairs to a luxurious suite and fucked me in the clouds of down comforter and pillow-topped mattress. In the morning he fed me cappuccino and croissants and put me in a taxi. I never expected to see him again.

I figured he did that kind of thing all the time.

Two nights later he had called me, and after a painfully stilted and painfully brief conversation, he'd asked me out. We'd had dinner at 21, and he'd taken me back to the Mansfield. And in the morning Ross had let me fuck him.

After that I'd seen him a couple of days almost every week. Stolen hours. Borrowed time.

The best had been the week we'd spent here at his cabin in Vermont just on our own.

That had been four months ago — in the summer. We'd swum in the lake and fished and sunned ourselves. We'd barbecued the rainbow trout we caught and drank too much and watched the stars blazing overhead as it got later and later. We'd talked and laughed and fucked and laughed some more. He'd let me read his new play. I told him I'd been offered a job in Los Angeles, and he told me not to go.

That was the happiest I could ever remember being — because I'd been sure Ross was falling in love with me. But the next week he'd announced his engagement to Anne Cassidy. I read it in the Theater section of the New York Times. Anne was an entertainment columnist for the *Daily News*.

Ross apologized for that, and said he had planned to tell me himself, but Anne had got a little overexcited about the upcoming nuptials. I told Ross that if he broke it off with me I'd go to the papers too. He'd laughed, but he'd kept seeing me — though not as frequently.

Their formal engagement party, a month later, received quite a bit of coverage in the local papers. I was still reading about it when Ross called and asked if I was free for the evening. I told him I wasn't free, and that if he didn't want me to tell his fiancée he was queerer than a postmodern production of *Not about Nightingales*, he would have to pay me a hundred dollars a week. He had been less amused but he'd given the money and he'd kept sleeping with me, and the wedding plans sailed smoothly along.

A month ago I'd told Ross that if he didn't get me a part in his new play, *God's Geography*, I'd go to the papers. He'd given into that too — granted, a very minor role — although he didn't sleep with me for two weeks after that escalation of hostilities.

He'd finally called me late one night, sounding faintly sloshed. I'd insisted that he come to my place, for once, and he actually had. He'd actually shown up at my battered apartment door with a bottle of Napoleon brandy, and fucked me long and hard in my blue and white striped Sears sheets while we listened to my next-door neighbors quarrel with each other to the musical accompaniment of their kid wailing in the background.

"I even want you now," he'd said, when he had rolled off me. It wasn't a compliment.

So as I stared at him in the shadowy firelight, I said, "I know. You never made any secret about it."

He said — not looking at me, "I wasn't going to dump you. You must know that. I didn't intend to stop seeing you."

"Is that supposed to make it better?"

His eyes widened at my anger. "I didn't mean to...tried not to...take advantage of you. Of your...youth, your generosity." The words seemed difficult for him. "Did you feel used? Is that why?"

The playwright always wanting the loose ends neatly tied up. Living in fear of the critics, apparently.

I said, "I don't think you used me. I think you fell in love with me."

He was silent for a long time. I thought my heart would shatter into pieces like an asteroid waiting for him to say something. In the end all he said was, "And for that —?"

I stood up, hugging myself against the cold, although between the brandy and the fireplace, the room was warm enough. "And I fell in love with you," I said. I wanted to

sound strong and convincing, but I just sounded pained. “The second morning at the Mansfield, the first time you let me fuck you. I made some stupid joke, and you laughed, and you kissed my nose. I’ve never wanted anyone or anything as much as I want you. I would give anything —”

He looked away at the fire and a muscle moved in his jaw.

“And I couldn’t stand there and watch you marry Anne Cassidy. It’s not right. It’s not fair to any of us. Not even to her.”

He said impatiently, “Anne knows exactly what she wants. And so do I.”

“Then why are you settling for companionship and respect when you could have all that and love and passion as well?”

“Because you’re twenty-three years old and queer — and what the hell does that make me?”

“Older and queer!”

He put his head in his hands.

I stared at him. “Well, that’s that,” I said. “Anyway, you’ll be okay. It’s New York. It’ll be a nine days wonder and then no one will even remember.”

He looked at me with something close to dislike. “You don’t think so?”

“Hell, I don’t know.” I rubbed my face. “I’m sorry. Sorry to hurt you, but not sorry to have stopped it.” I added, “If it is stopped.”

“Oh, it’s stopped.” He sounded sour.

And that really was that. All at once I was out of ideas — and energy. I said, “I can’t keep saying I’m sorry. I guess...you know where to find me.”

I started for the door and he said harshly, “Adam, if you thought you were in love with me, why didn’t you say so?”

At that, I had to smile. “I did Ross. I said it in every way I knew. If I’d actually said the words, you’d have broken it off. You didn’t want to know.”

“You think I do now?”

I shook my head. “No. You’d still prefer to think it was just sex.”

Ross said slowly, “But you came here anyway. Drove all the way up here on the chance that this is where I would come.”

“Yeah.”

“Knowing how I would feel about you after this.”

I admitted, “I couldn’t stay away.”

Neither of us said anything. The fire popped sending sparks showering.

His voice was very low as he said, “I could have hurt you very badly; you know that.”

“You could have killed me,” I said, “And it wouldn’t have hurt as much as watching you marry someone you don’t love just because it fits your image or whatever the hell it is with you.”

It wouldn’t hurt as much as watching him marry anyone who wasn’t me.

“You’re so sure it’s you I love?”

“I am, yeah.” I said it with a sturdy confidence I was a long way from feeling — but that’s what acting is all about. “I think that’s why you kept giving into my demands, because you didn’t want to break it off either. I don’t think you’re that afraid of me.”

“I wasn’t, no.” Astonishingly, there was a thread of humor in his voice. “But then I didn’t fully grasp what you were capable of.”

To my surprise he held out a hand. I took it, and he drew me down onto the sofa. For a moment he sat there, absently playing with the fingers of my ring hand. My fingers looked thin and brown and callused next to his own manicured ones. When I didn’t have a paying acting gig — which was usually — I worked as a bicycle messenger for a courier service. Yeah, safe to say eHarmony probably wouldn’t have set us up as the perfect match.

He said, “Has it occurred to you that if I did love you, you destroyed it with your actions?”

I swallowed painfully. Nodded.

“And you still don’t regret it?”

“Maybe I will.” I met his eyes and tried to smile. “Right now I’m sort of numb.”

“That’s two of us.” He leaned forward, finding my mouth, kissing me. I slid back into the cushions, surrendering to whatever he wanted. He kissed me softly, and then harder. His mouth bruised mine, a punishing grind of lips and teeth, but I opened to it, opened to him, and almost immediately he gentled. His hands moved under my sweater, pushing it up.

His touch was warm and sent a tingle spreading beneath my skin. I murmured approval.

“I have never known anyone like you,” he said.

“But that’s good, right?”

He snorted and sat up, but his fingers went to the buttons of his tailored shirt.

I yanked my sweater up, banging my head on the arm of the sofa as I pulled it over my head, dropped it. I humped up, wriggling out of my jeans.

Ross was hurrying to undress too, and it was a relief to know that the desire between us remained intact. It was always like this, hungry and hurried — and then sweet and satisfied. It was...nourishing.

Because, regardless of what Ross told himself, it wasn’t just sex — and it hadn’t been for a very long time.

I kicked my legs free, kicked my jeans away. Ross stood up, unzipped, and stepped out of his trousers. I brushed his long, lightly furred thigh with my hand.

Naked, he lowered himself to me and I ran my fingers through his hair that was drying in soft silky black strands smelling of rain and firelight. I pressed my face to his throat and licked him, licked at the little pulse beating there. He exhaled a long breath.

Relief? Resignation?

I said, “It wasn’t easy. Just so you know — it —”

He pulled back a little. “No. I know. When you opened the door you looked...” He considered it and then said, “Terrified and sick and hopeful all at the same time.”

“That pretty much sums it up.” I wanted to make a joke of it, but it wasn’t funny.

Everything that mattered to me was going to be settled in the next few hours. Maybe minutes. I didn’t know if this was a hello fuck or a goodbye fuck. Maybe even Ross didn’t know.

“I love you so much,” I said, and my voice shook.

“I know.” He sounded pained. So...good-bye then?

I kissed the underside of his jaw, and he tipped his face to mine and found my mouth in hot, moist pressure. Something as sweet and simple as kissing: mouths moving against each other, opening to each other, the sweet exchange of breath.

His tongue slipped into my mouth, a teasing little thrust, and I sucked back. He tasted like Ross with a brandy chaser.

I kissed him, and he whispered, “You’re fearless, aren’t you? Going to the papers, coming here tonight, opening up to me now. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone as fearless as you.”

I moved my head in denial. “I’m scared,” I said. “All the time. I’m just stuck in drive. When it comes to you, I don’t know how to stop or how to reverse.”

He shook his head a little, his mouth found mine again, nibbling my lower lip, moving his mouth against mine in feathery, teasing brush. I nuzzled him back and his kiss deepened. I liked his weight lowering on me, warm and solid, I liked the roughness of his jaw against my own, I liked his taste and scent, and the feel of his fingers against my cheek — and the insistent prod of his cock in my belly.

I put my hands on either side of his face and said, “Can you just tell me if this hello or good-bye? I just want to know, so I can stop...hoping.” The alcohol and exhaustion made it easy to be honest, to accept whatever the truth was going to be. If the answer was no, then in the morning I would deal with it but tonight we were going to make love.

A little grimly, he said, “What if it’s good-bye? Are you planning to write a book about me next?”

I shook my head. “If it really is good-bye, I’m all out of ideas.”

Ross raised one eyebrow. “No ideas at all?”

“Other than the obvious: make this a night you won’t forget.”

His face softened. He said, “There isn’t one night with you that I’ve forgotten. Nor a single day. You must know that much.”

“I know how it is for me.”

And then we said nothing for a time, communicating by touch. I thought he does love me, he does — even if he hasn’t realized it, hasn’t accepted it — he does — hissing a little breath of pleased surprise as he pinched my nipples, making them stand up in tiny buds.

“You do like that,” he whispered, his mouth tugging into another of those sexy little smiles.

“I like it when you lick them too,” I whispered, tugging him closer, smoothing my hands over the hard flesh of his back and shoulders. Hard muscle and soft skin — the musculature of a normal healthy adult man, not a movie star, not an iron man. Our naked bodies rubbed against each other, starting to find that rhythm, my own cock rock hard and requiring attention, jutting up, nestling against his.

Ross groaned, and his mouth drifted down my throat and over my shoulder, stopping to lick and kiss, to bite and linger. I groaned and my throat protested squeakily, and he kissed me there too, tenderly.

“Thank God,” he said. “Thank God, I didn’t...”

I stopped that with more kisses.

“I could make you happy,” I told him. “I’d do everything in my power to make you happy.”

He looked up, surprised. “You do make me happy.”

“Sometimes.”

He bent his head; his tongue lapped across one nipple, drawing it firm and upright instantly. I sucked in a sharp breath. Moaned. He liked that. I felt his smile as his mouth ghosted across my chest. I moaned again, and soon the rasp of his tongue wet my other nipple. I pushed against him, loving that feel, loving that lave of tongue on teat. My heart was pounding dizzily in my chest. I worked my hand down through the fissures between our bodies, slipping past his groin, cupping his balls in my palm.

He grunted, closed his eyes briefly. I caressed him languidly.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, something to have and to hold from this day forward. I got out, “Will you fuck me? I need it. Need to feel like I belong to you.”

His bit his lip. “I don’t know if I can walk.”

I chuckled, squeezed his balls, lightly.

“Hold on,” he jerked out.

I did, stroking myself leisurely until he was back. He knelt over me, his cock long and thick and beautiful as it rose out of the dark nest of his groin. He rested his hand against my cheek.

“You’re beautiful, Adam.”

“So are you.”

I started to get up, but he pushed me back, smiling. I looked my inquiry and then whimpered as he knelt and took the head of my shaft into his mouth. Oh my God how I loved this. Was there anyone who didn’t? But especially I loved it from Ross. *His* elegant, clever mouth doing those unspeakably erotic things to me: *his* wide and warm and wet hole for me to bury myself in. I began to jerk my hips in response to that slow slide. Sensation shivered through me, stripping my thoughts away, and the trembling started.

You lovely, lovely boy, Ross said, without saying a word. His tongue and lips said precious, loving things instead.

I arched my back, crying out.

He began to suck hard. I groped for him — needing something to ground me with pleasure taking me that high. My fingers dug into Ross’s broad shoulder, watching through slitted eyes, watching how beautiful he was with his mouth wrapped around my dick. I wanted to tell him so, but the sounds coming out of me were not particularly intelligent. An electrical buzz seemed to crackle up my spine, bright lights flared behind my eyelids, I wondered if I might just short circuit entirely in a kind of sensory overload.

Ross let me feel his teeth and I whimpered, and then he was sucking again so very softly, sweetly. He varied the pressure, sucking me hard and long. My balls drew tight and I began to come in hot wet spurts, crying out his name.

And Ross swallowed it. I felt tears start in my eyes, but I blinked them back. It was not like he had never done that before, it just...meant more tonight. He swallowed my cum and licked the head of my cock clean, while I lay there panting and trying not to embarrass myself.

When I finally lifted my lashes Ross was smiling. He bent his head to mine. His mouth brushed my mouth and I tasted myself on him — salty and sort of sweet.

He said, “You’ve gambled everything, haven’t you? What are you hoping for?”

I answered with a question of my own. “Did you think I might be here when you decided to come to the cabin?”

A strange expression crossed his face. "It went through my mind. I...didn't think you really would. I didn't think you'd have the nerve."

It was hard to ask, but I made myself. "Did you...hope I would be here?"

He seemed to look inside himself. "I think I did." He added ruefully, "But not necessarily for the reason you hope."

"But you did want me?"

"I always want you. That doesn't mean..."

"What?"

And he said, "It's easy to be brave when you're young."

"No, it's not."

Maybe he read something in my face because he seemed to draw on something within himself. "No. It's not always," he agreed. "And you want me to be as brave as you, don't you? Idealistic youth expects no less."

I nodded. "There is recompense, though." I slipped from the sofa and got on my hands and knees on the rug before the fireplace. I glanced back and he was already settling on his knees behind me.

"Recompense." He sounded amused. "That's a good old fashioned word." I heard the unlovely sound of something squirting, followed by the delicate scent of oranges and honey.

"Orange blossom?" I suggested.

"Dear God," he said, and his laugh had a choky sound. Still, his eyes were smoky with desire as his thighs brushed mine, and his finger pushed against my body.

Always so cautious and gentle with this, although we both knew I had three times his experience. One finger insinuating a long, slender length through that tiny puckered mouth, soothing with oil and honeyed oranges, then two slick fingers.

"I love this part," I admitted, pushing back against his hand.

He pushed the third finger in. Always, always three fingers with Ross. Such a careful circumspect man. I liked the little rituals. I reached out my hand and he squirted oil on my fingers, and I smeared the oil the full length of my cock, stroking myself, enjoying the pull while his silky fingers slid in and out, knowing exactly where and how to touch.

“Now,” I managed. “Please.”

“You do have nice manners,” he admitted. “Usually.”

He withdrew his fingers, positioning himself at the entrance of my body, nudging slowly, slowly inside. He pushed smoothly in past the ring of muscle, joining us, wedding us. I drew back on my knees, resting against Ross’s broad chest and belly. I turned and kissed the side of his throat. He stroked his hand slowly down the length of my torso, stroking my belly.

I shifted in his lap, Ross’s hips pushing against me. His voice was warm against my ear, “I’ll give you this much, Adam. I do love you. Nothing changes that. Nothing could.”

Tears blinded me for an instant as we rocked together in gentle lullaby motion, that seesaw of give and take, the balancing act...and that was love, right? That was marriage? For richer for poorer, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, push pull, an irresistible force meeting an immovable object...and somehow finding a way to make it work?

The heat built like a fever, like joy...

Ross’s hand stroked my hip as he steadied into that rhythm, and then faster and sweeter, and I thrust back at him trying to take him deeper, further, gasping with each hard stroke, shivering with the sweetness of it, the cycle, the circle, beginning and the end of us that was hopefully just another beginning.

I pressed my back and spine against Ross and his fingers laced within mine across my chest, and then he surged up into me and held very still and emptied out all the heat and hunger and heartache.

Then, another couple of tight jerks, and he was slumping forward and taking me with him in a heavy boneless sprawl on the soft fur of the carpet.

We lay there panting for a long time, unmoving. Ross lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the palm.

When his cock finally slipped from my body, he rolled off me, and the loss felt too familiar — like it could get to be a habit. But he put his arm around me, pulling me close, and we lay for a time on the rug. The rain beat on the roof in steady soothing rhythm, and the fire crackled in counterpoint, and our breathing slowed and steadied and evened out.

After a time he said, “And you think love is enough?”

“Sex helps.” He didn’t laugh and I said, “I think love is the point. Because anything else is just a business contract.”

He said wearily, “I had my life all planned out.”

“I know.”

“You’re not a very good actor,” he said. “I’ve known from the first that you were in love with me.”

“You’re not a very good actor, either,” I said.

The firelight moved across the ceiling beams in lazy, flickering shadow.

He said, “There’s a justice of the peace in Greensboro.”

“Is there?”

He turned his head and pressed his face into my hair. I felt his lips move against my forehead as he said, “Do you have any idea of what I should do with an unused marriage license?”

“I do,” I said.



Thank you for buying this book. It is only because readers like you continue purchase fiction that writers can still afford to write.

~ Josh Lanyon~

