

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## FOR WANT OF A NAIL

MA Ford

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## FOR WANT OF A NAIL

**By MA Ford**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

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# FOR WANT OF A NAIL

By MA Ford

## Photo Description

Two men, naked, on a clear Perspex chair, chest to chest, forehead to forehead, looking intently into each other's eyes.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It seemed like a good way to make a few extra bucks. The new semester was starting and my scholarship didn't quite cover all my expenses. I'd never thought of myself as particularly photogenic, but when I saw the advertisement for male models hanging on the bulletin board in the Art building, AND saw how much they offered to pay, I was in.*

*My first shock was that I was expected to model nude for the cameras. I was nervous, but the professor assured me that everything important would be covered in a "truly artistic manner." Not what I expected, but I was sure I could handle it.*

*My second surprise was that I was not the only model. Not a big deal. I'm comfortable with my body and my masculinity. It was just a job—a rather well-paying job. Nothing personal. Nothing real. So when I opened my eyes and saw that look, why did my insides start to burn?*

*Sincerely,*

*Chris*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, British, family drama, non-explicit, coming out, sweet

**Word Count:** 12,593

# FOR WANT OF A NAIL

By MA Ford

You know that old saying? The one that starts off “for want of a nail...” and ends up with the kingdom being lost?

Well, in my case, it wasn't a nail. It was a button.

To be more precise, a shirt button, from my best white shirt, the one I was supposed to be wearing for the posh dinner to celebrate my parents' silver wedding anniversary.

My sister Liz had ironed it, but it was rather tight. Too tight. But with an effort, I breathed in, and grinned. Not bad, if I said so myself. And then I breathed out, and...

*Ping.* The button flew across the room.

I knew I'd put on weight during my first year at Uni. Everyone does, don't they? But it wasn't until that button popped that I took a long, hard look at myself in the mirror.

I think my jaw dropped a mile. Who was that porky guy looking back at me from the wardrobe door? Not exactly ugly, but podgy, with no definition, no muscles. White, fat male.

At that moment Liz came bursting in to the room, in her usual way. No boundaries, my sis. She stared at me for a moment. “You look about six months gone,” she said in her frank way. “What have you been up to?”

I scratched my head, and thought back over the past year. Too much beer, too little exercise. My mate Toby had gone off to Manchester, and without his constant urging to run, cycle, and swim as he trained for yet another triathlon, I'd become lazy. I'd joined the rugby club, but hadn't even made the second team, so I'd given up on training, and instead I'd become part of their social club. Believe me, ten pints of beer is a different kind of exercise, and one I'd excelled in.

I breathed in and looked in the mirror, then turned to face my giggling sister. “Okay, needs some work,” I said. “What did you want, by the way?”

She held out a hand. "Your filthy lucre, brother dearest. Your share of the silver cufflinks for Dad and the silver vase for Mum. I did all the hard work, remember, but you owe me half of the cash."

Shit. My bank account was empty, and my credit card maxed out. I decided to try and bluff it out. "Hard work? I thought you loved that sort of browsing round antique fairs and junk shops?"

She glared at me, her best librarian-cum-school-mistress look. "You're broke, aren't you?"

I've never been able to hide anything from her. "Things are pretty tough at the moment," I said. "Can you sub me, just for a while, just till I get back on my feet?"

She stood there, curly hair pulled into a pretty up-do, weighing me up. "I don't get it, Chris. You've got that great scholarship, plus your student loan. You should be living the life of luxury. What happened?"

I shrugged, but her glare, a mix of threat and compassion that was specifically Liz, and one I'd known all my life, did its usual trick, and I spilled the beans. "I suppose it all went to my head, being away from home, away from Mum and Dad. It's the first time in my life I've had cash in my pocket. Liz, you must know what it's like. You've been through exactly the same."

She sat down on my bed, and shook her head sadly. "I know, Chris. I know the pressure of growing up in a vicarage, of never having enough money, of having a dad who'd give away the contents of house and home if someone only asked, a mum who is always busy with committees and the garden. And when I went away to university, I did go a bit crazy to start with. But I soon realized what a great opportunity I had to make something of myself, so I buckled down and started to work and to save." She bit her lower lip, a nervous gesture so familiar from our shared childhood, us two and our brother Rob. "I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty, Chris. But you know there's no money to spare, and you can't go getting into debt. It would kill Dad, and he's already worrying about everyone in the parish."

"I know, I know, sis. But what do I do? How do I get myself sorted out?"

She gave me another one of her looks. "Start exercising again? Get rid of that belly that makes you look as if you're about to go into labour. Study hard, eat properly, and find yourself a job. There'll be plenty of them on the notice boards at Uni if you look hard enough."

I groaned. “Liz, it’s hard enough trying to keep up with my studying without getting a job too. Aren’t there all sorts of rules about working as well?”

“Now you’re just making excuses. You know I did babysitting all the way through. Three years of spending most of my evenings in someone else’s living room, enjoying their heating, eating their food, watching their TV and getting paid for it. Sort yourself out, Chris. I know you can do it.”

She got up and gave me a quick hug. Not much of a demonstrative family, ours. Then she smiled. “Now find a shirt that fits, and come downstairs. Rob and his brood should be arriving soon, and the table’s booked for eight.”

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We had a great evening, and I nearly forgot about my troubles, falling back into the old family dynamics, and treating our parents to a well-deserved celebration. But Liz’s words had gotten through to me, and the next morning, I ran my slight hangover away with a circuit around the village. By the time I caught the train back to the college, I was already looking seriously more toned, and I was determined not to let it drift again.

But then there was the work issue. Liz was right, I had to find some alternate income to avoid worrying my parents. The scholarship money that had been deposited in my account had paid back the overdraft, but I’d be really tight for the year ahead if I didn’t find something.

I didn’t really fancy the usual jobs, stacking shelves in Sainsbury’s, or working in the burger van parked outside the Student Union on party nights. I applied for the sort of baby-sitter/nanny positions that had worked so well for Liz, but I was made to feel rather uncomfortable for wanting to work with kids. There were some fruit picking positions available locally, but the hours didn’t really suit my lectures, and the pay was awful. So for the first few days back, I just spent as much time as possible in the library, avoiding the ten-pints-down-the-pub rugby crowd as much as I could.

It takes something like that to really make you take a long, hard look at your life. It soon became clear that, apart from the hard-drinking rugby crowd like Gazza and Trev, I hadn’t really made any friends since I’d left home.

I’m not really a party person. Or perhaps I could be, but I hadn’t found the right party yet. I hadn’t dated since leaving home, partly because I missed Toby. We’d been best friends since we were eleven and found ourselves sitting next to each other on our first day at senior school. We’d always hunted as a



pair, with Toby searching out girls, the prettiest one for him, and her friend for me. Not that it really bothered me—usually it worked out just fine. The last year at school we'd had a steady foursome, Toby, his girl Mattie, tall and gorgeous with sleek brown hair, normally to be found at the stables, Sue, and me. Sue was short and bubbly, energetic, and enthusiastic about everything. She got into Southampton, and she's studying marine biology. Making a splash, as we joked. But we decided to split up before leaving home. Long distance relationships and all that stuff... And I had to admit that although she was fun to be around, I wasn't heartbroken. Sue was great, but she didn't make my heart skip a beat. So far, no one had...

There were plenty of pretty girls around, but I hadn't really made any connections. So there I was, alone, broke, and studying like crazy.

After a long day studying, while queuing to check out one of the reserved texts I needed to read for History of Computing, I suddenly remembered there was another notice board in the library. So far I'd been concentrating on the Student Union one, the main focus for all that sort of thing. The library one was inter-college, and included all the rubbish like calls for auditions from the drama courses, and rehearsals for the orchestra. Not my sort of thing.

But there were a few job offers as well. A part-time lab assistant seemed rather down my path. I was sure it would mainly be washing up, and if there's one thing I'm well trained for, it's doing dishes. The psychiatric department was looking for volunteers for some sort of survey, for which they were offering a fiver for every one completed. Not to be sneezed at, but I knew it would involve long, cold evenings stopping students going about their business.

And then I saw it. "Male Models Wanted", with an hourly rate of pay that quite honestly made my eyes pop.

But modelling? I was no model. I was looking a lot better, it was true, but I was not what my sister and her friends had called "knicker man material", the sort of guy you'd see on the front of underwear packets.

I read the advert again. *Male models wanted. All shapes and sizes considered. Some nudity required.*

Well, I was a shape and size. As for nudity—well, it was just skin, wasn't it? We were all covered with it. Even a few hours' work with that sort of salary would make my bank balance look a lot happier. It would be easier and far drier than standing in the square with one of those ubiquitous blue clipboards the psych department always used.

I jotted down the internal phone number. Worth a try. Why not? What did I have to lose?

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When I got back to the dorm, I found Trev in the kitchen, an impressive array of empty Corona bottles in front of him. "Hey, mate," he said, handing me a bottle. "Where've you been? No one's seen you around."

I shrugged, not really wanting to go into the reasons behind my sudden disappearance, but feeling some sort of explanation was due. "Time to buckle down a bit, if I want to get through," I said. "Parental lectures and so forth."

"Ah, mate, sympathy," Trev said. "I know what that's like. But don't drop totally out of circulation. Away match against Norwich this weekend, you can't miss that one."

I made some vague noises. Tempting, but I knew that as soon as I was back with the gang I'd be downing the pints, singing the raucous songs with the rest of the social crew and cheering on our mates on the pitch. Before I knew it, I'd be another hundred or so worse off. Better to stick to the library.

Unless that model thing really paid that sort of money. Four hours and I'd have plenty of funds for Norwich. It was so tempting. *Some nudity*. Nudity. I thought instantly of the rugby locker room, hairy sweaty men and blue jokes. Would anyone really want to draw that, and pay money for it? Hard to imagine.

I went to my room, and stripped down, looking at myself in the narrow strip of mirror on the door. Medium height, brown hair, pretty nondescript, I thought. The beer belly had totally disappeared, and the steady exercise had begun to define my muscles. Nothing to send people screaming. But model material? Was it even worth a try?

The next morning, a bank statement came in the post, and that made up my mind. I was nearly at the limits of my overdraft, my credit card was full, and if I didn't take care I'd be starving by the end of the week. I had to earn some money somehow, and fast. I went to the phone and dialled the internal number.

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With an appointment to discuss the position the next afternoon, I headed off to lectures feeling slightly more optimistic. I was imagining the work: myself draped tastefully over a couch, filmy gauze over the more daring areas, while a class full of modest, serious young ladies surrounded me, carefully sketching

my hands or shoulders on their large easels. Don't know where the image came from. I seemed to be channelling the 1920s.

My illusions lasted all the way through to the interview. I'd been surprised to find it was in the History department, as I'd really expected the Arts, but it was still pretty much uncharted territory as far as this science undergrad was concerned. I was greeted by a large, bubbly female, nothing like the demure demoiselle of my imagination. "Hi Chris, I'm Tabs," she said with a smile. "Short for Tabitha. Thanks for answering the ad. I've been a bit short on replies. They seem to be a timid lot around here. So, what brought you along?"

Rather unsure of what to say, I shrugged and decided to be truthful. "The pay sounded good," I said after a moment's reflection. "I doubt if I'm what you need."

She looked me up and down, thoroughly, but impersonally, as if she was a tailor measuring me up for a suit of clothes. "You'll do," she said. And then suddenly grinned. "Let me tell you a bit more about it, and then I'll ask you to strip off for a couple of photos."

"Sounds good," I said, as my stomach rumbled. "How long until you take a decision? And how soon would it start?"

"Right, first things first. It's all part of my postgrad research, and I want to set up one session a week for the rest of the term. A minimum of four hours per session, possibly more. Mainly photography. And rather more nudity than the advert might have suggested. The results will appear in my dissertation, and possibly some articles in print with an academic press, but it is unlikely you will be recognizable. Still interested?"

I was calculating. Say five hours a week, until the end of term. I'd clear my overdraft, get a bit of space on the credit card and even be able to get home to see the parents for the next break. I grinned, and Tabs must have known she had me hooked. I'm an idiot like that: you can always see everything on my face. Otherwise perhaps I could have even strung her out for a better rate...

No, that was just stupidity talking. The rates offered were astronomical compared to anything else available on campus, and it wasn't as if I was a Diet Coke style model. Be nice, Chris, and accept gracefully. "Sounds great," I said. "Where do I sign up?"

"Not so fast," she said with a smile. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I looked at her. "Here? Now?"

“If you can’t do it now, will you be able to in front of the camera?”

Good point. But it still felt weird, as if there should be something against me just removing my clobber in this anonymous university office.

Then she gave another of her explosive laughs. “Come on, into the studio. I’ve got a camera set up there. I just need to take a few snaps. My assistant’s there too, in case you think I’m going to ravish you.”

I blushed crimson. It was as if she read my mind. I picked up my bag and followed Tabs as she led the way through a door at the back of her office, up a flight of stairs, over one of the strangely placed air bridges the university architecture specialized in, and into a large, airy room.

A young man with a goatee was fiddling with an expensive looking camera. “Another one, Tabs?” he asked. “Are you getting the whole male population in here?”

“Shut up, Frederick,” she said. “I’ll try out as many as I need to, until we find the right models. Concentrate on your photography.”

The said Frederick looked at me dismissively. “I’m sure you could find better samples, anyway,” he sniffed, and then sighed. “Go on, then. Down to your underwear, please, then stand on that spot.”

There was a green cross on the ground. I slipped off my jeans and T-shirt, and then was suddenly hit by a new raft of worries. What if these pictures turned up in some uni rag, or in one of the red-tops? “Just a moment,” I paused. “These photos... If you don’t choose me, what will happen to them?”

“Don’t worry, they won’t go anywhere out of this studio,” Tabs said, walking around Chris purposefully. “And nothing’s going to end up somewhere you wouldn’t want people seeing it,” she said, once again somehow picking up on my thoughts in that almost eerie way.

Feeling rather stupid, I stood on the green cross, and waited patiently while Frederick did his job. Then he walked over to an open laptop.

“Not bad,” he said to Tabitha, scrolling through his images. “Nice bone structure. Should be suitable, if you don’t want to take more time looking.”

Feeling rather like a horse that had been taken to market and found to be just about adequate, I picked up my jeans and got dressed. *Remember the money*, I said to myself. It had to be worth it. Better than starving. Much better than confessing to my dad what an idiot I’d been.

“Right, you’re on,” Tabitha said. “Are you available on Friday afternoon?”

First things first. “When will I get paid?”

“Four hours, four till eight, cash in a brown envelope when you finish the session.”

What more could I ask for? Cash on Friday, the rugby on Saturday... and out of debt by the end of the term. Life was picking up. What could possibly go wrong?

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Back in the student accommodation, I bumped into Trev, unshaven, hair awry, tucking into beans on toast.

“Mate!” he said, through a mouthful of beans. “Coming down to the bar?”

I shook my head. “Can’t afford it. Anyway, I’ve got an essay.”

Trev looked up at me through his messy fringe. “What’s got into you, mate? You’re looking different. You’re not coming out with us, no one’s seen you in the bar for days. You are coming on Saturday, aren’t you?”

I shouldn’t. I should save my money. But I had to keep in with my mates as well. Didn’t I? “Course, mate. I’ll be okay by then.” I grinned, then left the room, leaving him to his baked beans.

Back in my room, I flung myself on the bed, and began to wonder what I’d done. I realized I didn’t have any information on the sort of photos or artwork, or what the dissertation was even about. What if something got out, if everyone saw me in the altogether? What if my father... That’s the problem of having a vicar for a dad. You spend all your time hoping that nothing gets reported back to him, especially if it’s something that would shock the parishioners. I went hot and cold at the thought of a photo of me, in the altogether, on display in the church vestibule...

As the days went by, my nerve began to falter.

I thought of ringing up, cancelling, saying I was ill, caught some horrible, disfiguring skin complaint or something. But a text message from Liz—*Found a job yet? Remember you still owe me*—and the prospect of nothing but beans on toast for the rest of the year girded my loins.

So there I was, Friday afternoon, in my cleanest underpants and clothes that wouldn’t leave marks on me—one of Tabs’ final instructions before I left the

interview. I'd skipped lunch, hoping my stomach would look flat, and even tried to address a few ragged hairs on my eyebrows. Taking a deep breath, I left my room and headed for the studio.

Tabbs greeted me at the door. "Glad you made it," she said with a rather knowing look in her eyes. "I thought you might have bottled out."

I shrugged, but then turned it into a grin. This woman was far too knowing. "I did have a few second thoughts," I said. "I mean, I'm no Brad Pitt."

"Don't worry, we do wonders with soft focus," she said with a laugh. "No, I'm not really looking for Brad either. But I'll explain more afterwards. Clothes off, please, and you'll find a thong behind the screen."

It was tiny, skin-coloured, and all I was allowed to wear. I'd never felt so exposed in my life.

Tabbs looked at me as I stood in the studio, critically, almost clinically. And then she nodded, and picked up a heavy-looking book from the bench, opening it at a tab and showing it to me.

To my surprise, it was a photo of some ancient Greek pottery. A naked man, holding something that looked rather like a discus.

"Right, that's going to be you," Tabbs said. And she handed me a brightly coloured Frisbee.

I followed her instructions, and tried to keep the pose. Not easy, as I was up on one leg, off balance and uncomfortable. I was afraid I'd topple over exactly when the photographer told me to stand as still as possible.

You know, I'll never go on about top models and the ridiculous amounts they earn again. It was exhausting.

But eventually, Frederick seemed content. "That'll do nicely, thanks," he said. "Tabbs, Lysander'll be here in a few minutes. How about the chair shot? We could try it again."

"Good idea," she said. "But first, perhaps I owe you a few explanations, Chris?"

I was rubbing my leg, which had begun to cramp up, but looked up and shrugged. "You're only paying me to model, you don't have to explain," I said.

"It might help. I'm trying to recreate the images from ancient Greek pottery and other such things in the style of modern erotic photography. It's all part of my thesis."

“Porn, you mean?” I asked, a shiver running down my back despite the robe Frederick had handed me.

“Not porn, definitely not. But possibly exploring the boundaries between eroticism and something more explicit. Don’t worry, as I said before, you won’t be recognizable, it’s going to be really artistic, and I promise this is not going to end up on the Internet. This is real historic research, I promise.” She looked at me, as if she was weighing me up. “There’s one reconstruction I want to do, and you’ve got the perfect physique for it.” She turned to the photographer. “You’re right, Fred, with Lysander this will be just great.”

At that moment, the door to the studio opened rather tentatively, and a slight, dark-haired guy with close-cropped hair peeked round. “Not interrupting, am I?” he asked.

“Lysander, great timing, come on in,” Tabs said. “Meet Chris. He’ll be partnering with you in some of these reconstructions.”

Lysander—what sort of name is that?—stuck out his hand, and seemed to rake me up and down with his dark eyes. I felt suddenly totally inadequate and extremely insecure. Some of this must have come over in my body language, because Tabs quickly sent the other man to get undressed, and called me over.

“Don’t worry about Lysander,” she said. “He’s my regular model, and is a bit miffed that I need more people for this project. You’ll look great together. But I’m afraid for this one I need to see your buttocks, so no thong. You’ll find a modesty pouch over there.”

I felt rather as if I’d fallen down the rabbit hole, as things were getting stranger and stranger. Part of me wanted to call out that I hadn’t signed up for all this, which was much more than “some nudity”. But my rational side was going “cha-ching” and counting out the money. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound as they said, as I stuffed my junk into the pocket.

Frederick had placed this Perspex chair in the middle of his stage, and changed the backdrop for a light grey fadeout. Lysander was lounging elegantly on the chair, apparently unconcerned by being totally naked. His skin was lightly tanned, and he had impressive musculature. I was trying to remain nonchalant in this unfamiliar situation, but couldn’t help glancing over at Lysander, as if my eyes were magnetically drawn to him.

Tabs came back into the room and instantly took charge. “Right, Chris, Lysander, this one is going to need you two to get extremely close. Chris, you

sit on the chair, on the edge, leaning back. And Lysander, you get on top of him, chest-to-chest, forehead-to-forehead. The two of you need to be almost fused together.”

Lysander raised an eyebrow. “You sure about this, Tabs? We tried it before, remember. It was a disaster. The chair broke.”

She nodded. “I know. But this is a new chair. And I know exactly what I’m looking for. Fred will get the photos done quickly. I know it’s not going to be comfortable for either of you, but grin and bear it, please.”

After a rather nervous look around, I sat down on the transparent chair. It was cold and smooth, and I could feel my skin sticking. This was not going to be pleasant. “This okay, Tabs?” I asked.

“Not quite, Chris. You need to be nearly horizontal, just leaning on the very top of the back of the chair.”

I tried again, scooting forwards and trying to put my body as she described.

Tabs nodded. “That’s better! Now, Lysander, assume the position.”

He looked at her, clearly dubious. “Okay, but I’d just like to state my concerns in advance. If we end up in a heap on the floor, you’ve been warned.”

“Just try it again, Lysander,” she said.

“Okay. Chris, hold on, I’m coming!” Lysander said with a wink.

And then he was lying on top of me, moulding his body to mine. I gasped with the sudden weight, pushing me into the chair. He slipped his hands between my arms and those of the chair, holding on and taking some of the weight. “Better?” he asked.

I nodded. I couldn’t remember ever being quite so close to anyone, not even on the couple of times I’d been intimate with Sue. His smooth skin was touching mine from head to toe, the warm, almost spicy smell of him invading my nostrils. It was all too much, and I closed my eyes to escape from the overwhelming proximity.

“Okay, that’s a good start,” Tabs said. “Now, Lysander, push yourself up a bit. You need to open up a space between your chests, and rest your foreheads together. A bit more, Lysander. Chris, move your head a bit. Your neck needs to be straight. I’m looking for a heart-shaped gap between your bodies. Yes, much better. Chris! This will never work if you don’t open your eyes, lad!”



On command, I opened my eyes, and looked straight at Lysander. He was staring at me with the most intense look I have ever seen in my life. It seared into me like a knife, igniting something deep inside that I had never really felt before.

And suddenly, I was hard, more erect than I could ever remember being before, spilling out of the modesty pouch. If only the world could have ended at that very moment, I would have been eternally grateful.

Tabs' words washed over me, but I was beyond listening. It was all emotion, sensation, tactile sensations washing over me.

I had to stop this, quickly. I resorted to the tactics of my teenager years, the words of one of the Sunday Collects I'd had to memorise coming back to me. Picturing the old ladies of the parish quickly made things subside. But Lysander must have noticed...

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear Tabs shouting out instructions, Frederick ordering us to hold. But I was not there anymore. It was just Lysander and me and an ocean of new, strange emotions.

Lysander's voice suddenly got through to me. "Chris? You okay? We're done here. Hold on while I lift myself off."

A sudden boost of pressure, and then he was gone. For a moment, I felt bereft. And then my cheeks were burning as I realized I was still semi-erect. I couldn't meet anyone's eyes, but Lysander threw me the robe, which I gratefully slipped on.

Tabs was over with Frederick, leaning over his shoulder to look at the small screen on the back of the DLR. "It's looking really great, guys," she gushed. "Exactly what I was looking for. I think we're done for today. Your envelopes are on the desk—next week, same time, same place?"

"Great—thanks, Tabs," Lysander said, glancing over at me. "Come on, Chris. Let's get some clothes back on and get out of here."

I felt as if I was walking through concrete, confused, embarrassed, but at least it was over for the day, and I could escape. I grabbed my jeans and T-shirt, and got dressed quicker than I ever had in my life, dashing down the stairs while Lysander was still dressing behind the screen.

Outside, in the cool air, I opened the envelope with my name printed on it. It lived up to all promises. The £20 notes beckoned to me: beer, toast, cheddar,

cereals, even a pizza or two. And the overdraft, of course. A couple more sessions and I'd even be able to pay Liz back. If I could do it. If I could cope. If I could control my treacherous dick... Perhaps I should ask Tabs just to do the solo stuff—that I could cope with.

I was debating what to do—a coffee in the Union bar, or calling Trev to go for a beer—when Lysander suddenly appeared in front of me. And all over again, I felt embarrassed about what had happened.

“You got out of there quickly,” Lysander said, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of the long Captain Jack Harkness style greatcoat.

I shrugged. “Needed some fresh air,” I said truthfully. And then I paused. I needed to mention it, to say something. “I just wanted to say—” I began.

At exactly the same moment, Lysander started to speak. “You know, you don't have to be embarrassed,” he said.

“I don't? I think I do, you know. Getting hard like that. What must you be thinking of me?”

He shrugged. “Flattering in a way,” he commented. “But I haven't seen you around, Chris. Are you a student?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, surprised at the question. “Engineering and Computing. Second year. You?”

“Drama and literature. Third year. So my question again—why haven't I seen you around? I can't remember seeing you at the Soc, or the Paradise, or even down the Willow Arms.”

I recognized the names from a list of pubs issued by the Rugby Club Society, of places to avoid on a pub-crawl. Some being gay bars, some being those frequented by squaddies. The ones Lysander had mentioned—well, let's say that they weren't too popular with the Army barracks. “Possibly because I'm not gay,” I commented with another shrug.

Lysander looked at me with a lazy smile. “You might want to revise that statement, Chris,” he said. “Considering the evidence, of course, you being a scientist.”

“Evidence?” I asked, although my mind was filling up with screaming voices and my body felt as if I was caught in the flight or fight mechanism. “What evidence?”

He put down his bag, and counted out on his fingers. "Well, we have that glorious erection you popped out as soon as I touched you as exhibit number one," he said.

"Just a reaction. A loose wire somewhere," I blustered.

"Two, just the fact that you signed up for that project," he said.

"Hey, I need the money!" I protested.

"Three, I pride myself on having the most finely tuned gaydar in the county, and you set it off into the red zone." He looked at me, that lazy smile and those incredible eyes boring into my soul. "Of course, I suppose you're now going to produce a devoted girlfriend or, even better, a fiancée to prove me wrong."

He had me there. I couldn't even name a less-than-devoted girlfriend. But still, he wasn't right. Was he? "I'm the son of a priest," I commented. "Perhaps you're confusing the natural reserve emanating from a vicarage childhood for repression of a different nature."

He gave a little laugh and shook his head. "Chris, I think you're so far into the wardrobe you're even beyond Narnia. But I'll leave you to enjoy your little delusions. It was fun working with you, and I'll enjoy seeing how you cope with the rest of the project. We're doing the Warren Cup images soon. Just imagine what fun that's going to be!"

The Warren Cup? It didn't mean anything to me at that point, so I just hunched my shoulders. "See you next week, then," I said.

To my surprise, he pulled me close and kissed me right on the lips, his tongue grazing my startled, partly open mouth. I caught my breath, and my treacherous dick decided to react again, leaping to attention in my luckily baggy trousers.

"See you, kid," Lysander said, his eyes shining, as he picked up his bag again and disappeared up the path towards the sports centre and the car park.

I remained standing, stunned, shaken, stirred. A martini, basically.

I gave a shudder, pushed the feelings out of my mind, and headed back to the student flat. At least I had a huge wodge of twenties in my pocket, enough to go to the away match tomorrow, and to splash out on a burger from the van parked outside the Student Union Bar. Gay? Me? I'd show him...

We went out that night, me and Trev and Gazza and the rest of the rugby social crowd, and I enjoyed my first pint for weeks. I was clearly out of practice, and the alcohol went slightly to my head. But instead of following the others off on a preparatory pub-crawl before the next day's match, I chickened out and went back to bed, pleading exhaustion. They teased me about being a wuss and a pansy, but I was shattered, and just wanted to sleep.

Of course, as always, the moment I lay down in my bed my mind cleared and I was wide awake, my mind buzzing with the day's events. No matter what I tried, one picture kept coming back to me, like a screensaver, or a pop-up that won't go away. Lysander's eyes, boring into my very soul. His lips, his smell. Clean, fresh, masculine. The touch of his skin against mine. I sighed, and allowed myself to run through the thoughts, without prejudice, without self-editing. And once again my body responded, tension deep inside, and an erection harder than I'd ever had in my life.

Almost without a conscious decision, I reached down under the bedclothes and took hold of myself, moving slowly, then faster; picturing Lysander in my mind, quicker than ever, I came.

Oh shit. He was right after all. What on earth was I going to do?

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In the few lucid moments before sleep overcame me, it all seemed so clear, so perfect. Yes, I was gay, but it didn't change anything. It all made sense, somehow. My ambivalence when it came to girls, the faint distaste I'd felt on the couple of occasions Sue and I had made love. I'd thought it was all something people made too much about, all exaggeration and hype. I was a vicar's son, and that was why I was almost chaste, all that religion and stuff growing up. Made sense, didn't it?

I fell asleep feeling almost content with my new sense of self-discovery, but woke up the next morning with the beginning of a hangover and a feeling of doom and dread hanging over me. I couldn't be gay. What would my family say? What would Trev and the other guys in the rugby club say? I'd be drummed out...

It was all nonsense. Nothing had changed. It had just been a strange moment. Something in my brain. Perhaps all that dieting, exercising, studying, along with the lack of sex... I'd just lacked human contact, and had reacted to it. Nothing more serious than that.

I looked over at my desk, with the envelope full of twenties. Result! Worth every moment. I got up and had a quick shower, rushing to get ready for the coach for the away game. As I stood under the pounding water—pounding being a relative term, as the water pressure was never that great in the student accommodation—thoughts of the night before flooded back, and my cock woke up again, collaborating with my brain to demand more images, more action.

I quickly jerked off, trying to think of Sue, but my thoughts kept zapping back to Lysander until I gave up and gave in to it.

A day of rugby, coarse jokes and beer took my mind off things. It was good to be out with my mates again, after my monkish isolation since Liz had brought me back to earth with a bang. But even as I sang rude songs and downed pints, part of me kept thinking back to the day before, and Lysander.

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I've always found it strange how you can meet someone new, and then somehow they are everywhere. It was like that with Lysander. I could have sworn I had never seen him before in my life, but suddenly I was catching sight of him all over the place. In the queue in the cafeteria, in the middle of a group of drama-type students in the coffee bar, waiting outside a lecture hall, striding down towards the sports hall...

On the Thursday, I went up to the sports hall to use one of the running machines. It was wet and windy out, a typical November evening, and I had no desire to do my usual circuit around the campus. I might be keen on keeping in shape, but running in the rain was not for me. The gym equipment was in a large room separated from one of the sports halls by a glass wall. I clipped myself onto the machine and set the programme, then settled down to a run accompanied by my iPod.

A fencing class was going on in the next room. They were just warming up when I started, lots of lunges and lengths of the room with strange steps. But as they paired off and began parrying with foils, one of the fencers caught my eye.

Slender and lithe, he seemed by far the most agile and skilful of the group, darting forward and back, his foil gleaming under the bright lights. I'd never really watched fencing before, but it was far more interesting than the podcasts on my iPod. He was elegant, beautiful to watch.

However, you could have easily knocked me off the running machine when the fencer removed his mask, to reveal the close-cropped hair and vivid gaze of Lysander.

My heart missed a beat as those eyes met mine through the pane of glass. Then he gave a cheeky smile and raised his eyebrows. I blushed beetroot red. What was happening to me? What was this guy doing to me?

He gestured to me through the window, which I interpreted as a request to see him outside. I shook my head, suddenly scared of what my treacherous body would do if I let it. I indicated my watch, hoping he'd understand that I needed to carry on running. He disappeared, so I guessed he'd gotten the message. I readjusted my iPod and increased the pace, trying to run away any stray feelings.

So why did I feel so bereft?

It must have been ten minutes later when I opened my eyes to see Lysander standing before me, looking up at me with a lazy smile. "Enjoyed the view?" he asked. "Much of a fencing fan?"

"I like a nice wrought-iron one myself," I managed to say, before grinning. "You're pretty good."

"Thank you," Lysander said with a bow. "Comes in useful for drama. And good exercise, better than that barbaric machine you're on. You should give it a try one day."

"Maybe I will," I said. "I don't seem to be getting very far with rugby..."

"Ah, all those thighs and the mud..." He fanned his face. "I thought you said you weren't gay."

"I'm not! You don't have to be gay to play rugby. We're not all Gareth Thomas!" But even as the words came out of my mouth I remembered the huge poster of him above my bed as a rugby-mad teenager, and blushed scarlet again. Flustered and losing my coordination, I went backwards and the stop cord came unhooked, stopping the machine.

"Ah, that's better," Lysander said. "Come on, get showered and meet me outside. I'm taking you for a drink."

"You are?"

"Call it research. We are on duty for Tabs again tomorrow, aren't we?"

He had an elderly two-seater Toyota MR2 car, and I had to bend practically to the ground to get into it. The seats were sporty and so low that I felt I was practically sitting on the tarmac. "Fantastic car," I said as we got underway.

“Glad you like it. She’s elderly, but I love her, and I dread the day I can’t get her repaired. So, how’s life in the closet?”

I gave him a soft punch on the shoulder. “Shut up. I’m fine. Enjoying life with more than a can of beans between me and the weekend.”

“Did you look up the Warren Cup for tomorrow?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t seem much point. I just thought I’d let Tabs tell me what to do like last time.”

Lysander raised his expressive eyebrows. “It might be better if you looked at this. I don’t want you to be fainting on me or anything like that. There’s a folder on the shelf behind you. Have a look.”

The folder contained photos and photocopies of a silver cup, with bas-relief images on it. I screwed up my eyes to see better and tried to work out the pictures. I’d never been good at this sort of thing—I’d been so bad at art history at school that the teacher had refused to let me sit the GSCE. Then it dawned. “They’re having sex?” I asked, aghast.

“Yep, that’s it,” Lysander said. “All very tasteful and classical, of course. But still shocking. On display at the British Museum now, but there were all sorts of complaints when it was first offered for display last century. I’m not sure what Tabs has planned. She won’t tell me, which is slightly worrying in itself. I just thought you should be aware.”

I turned the pictures over and over, looking at the two youths with long locks, their bodies entwined. It woke something deep in my loins, a longing.

Was Lysander right? Was I kidding myself that I’d always been straight, that this was just a one-off thing? My thoughts were broken off as he pulled into a parking space.

“Come on, I didn’t mean to scare you. Buy you a drink?”

The bar was narrow and crowded, with a noisy, cheerful group of people drinking elaborate, colourful cocktails. Not the sort of place to find Trev and the rest of the rugby crowd, I thought. Squeezing past the milling people, greeting everyone, Lysander led me through to the back, where, miraculously, a small sofa was unoccupied. He waved to the bartender—tall, blond, with eyeliner and earrings—and gestured some sort of order to him before sitting and pulling me down next to him.

Two frosted, frozen glasses arrived before I’d even caught my breath. Lysander raised his glass. “To new friends,” he said. “And Tabs’ project.”

I chinked glasses with him, and took a sip. It was icy cold and very refreshing, but I was sure the sugar hid copious quantities of alcohol. Give me a beer any day.

“So,” Lysander said, putting his glass down. “You say you’re not gay. So you have a girlfriend?”

“Not any more. Didn’t want a long-distance relationship. And you? You have a boyfriend?”

Lysander grinned. “I’m hopeful,” he said, raising his eyebrows with that trademark gesture of his, and winking at me.

“Idiot,” I said, gulping down another mouthful of the frozen beverage, hoping to hide the jump of interest in my loins and the strange, fluttering feeling in the pit of my stomach. “So how did you get involved in this project?”

“Tabs does some work in the drama department. And Frederick—well, he’s sort of an ex. I was one of the first people Tabs called on when she realized she needed models. I’d have done it for nothing, but the money comes in handy.”

I rubbed my eyes. “It was just the money for me. She pays way over any other campus jobs. You can’t imagine how broke I am. But I never thought... I suppose I pictured a tastefully draped male figure and a prim drawing class. I didn’t think it would be like this.” I realized I was babbling on, and that Lysander was watching me, a thoughtful, almost hungry look in his eyes.

“Shhh,” he said after a moment, and reached out with a finger to touch me under my chin. He lifted it up, then caressed the side of my face with his other hand. It was chilly from the drink, but the shivers down my spine had nothing to do with the cold. Then he leaned in and kissed me.

It was unexpected, unasked for, but strangely not unwelcome. He teased open my lips with his tongue, deepened the contact. I reached out, wrapping my arms round his chest, pulling him closer to me. I felt as if I needed to merge with him, to become one, to somehow quell the amazing feeling in my body.

After what seemed like an archaeological era, he pulled away, leaving a final soft kiss on my nose. I collapsed back on the sofa as he took a sip of his drink, then grinned.

“Still somewhere on the other side of Narnia?” he asked, that incredible intense look in his eyes again.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Making my way out very slowly,” I said. “Lysander, what are you doing to me?”



“It’s a talent I have,” he said smugly, then he shook his head, his face serious. “You have no idea how lovely you are, do you? The moment I saw you in that chair, I just thanked Tabs and my lucky stars.” He took another sip of the drink.

I could feel my face burning, my stomach churning, my legs weak and wobbly. “Lysander, this is all totally new to me. I don’t know how I’ll feel tomorrow. But tonight—tonight I’m going with this. Because... because I’ve never felt the way you make me feel. And just now, I don’t want to stop.”

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Looking back, I don’t know how I had the nerve to say that, or how I managed to turn off nearly twenty years of habits and preconceived ideas to fall into Lysander’s arms. But he was there, enticing and inviting, with those amazing arms and incredible mouth, with that body and...

And he rushed me out of the bar back to his flat, a tiny loft in the town centre, all bare floorboards and flimsy curtains. He lay me down on the futon, and slowly removed my clothing, kissing me, caressing me, making me feel as if I had no bones in my body. His scent enveloped me, strong and masculine. And then he took me in his mouth, and everything seemed so right, so perfect, so wonderful.

Afterwards, there were tears in my eyes, and I could barely talk. He looked down at me, and lifted a finger to wipe a stray drop from my cheek.

“Why the tears?” he asked. “I thought you liked it.”

I bit my lip. “It was wonderful and you know it. I just can’t believe that I could have been so close to this for so long and pushed it away. I’d given up on sex, because I thought it was squishy and smelly and somehow unpleasant. But now I realize I was just in the wrong place. How could I have been so wrong about myself for so very long?”

“That wardrobe,” he said with a slight smile. “Glad to have pulled you out of it.”

I grinned, then took his arms and flipped him over on his back. “Again?”

And he was happy to comply.

By the next afternoon, we managed to drag ourselves out of bed to get to Tabs’ studio. She was nervously fussing around with drapery on a chaise

longue, while Frederick adjusted lighting. A copy of the Warren Cup stood on her workbench. She gave a final twitch to the fabric, then looked up at us, and gave a smirk. "So I guess I won't have too many problems persuading you to do these poses?" she asked.

I shrugged. "We've been practising," I said calmly.

Lysander laughed. "He's a quick learner," he replied.

Tabs looked from one to the other, and shook her head. "Get undressed. And try to keep your hands off each other until I'm ready for you."

I have to say, that afternoon's work was amazingly tough, and if not for Lysander, I think I would have run screaming. But Tabs was practically purring with pleasure at the photos, and even Frederick looked pleased.

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I'd love to say that it was happily ever after for Lysander and me. But unfortunately life is not a fairy tale... or perhaps it is, because some of those tales ended pretty nastily. We spent a wonderful week together, hardly stirring from Lysander's heavenly flat. I missed classes—most unlike me—we ordered take-away, and hardly got out of bed. I began to relax, and the world took on different colours for me as Lysander brought out a new side of me, an aspect I'd never, ever expected.

But like all dreams, you have to wake up sometime.

Trev was waiting for me when I got back to my flat; his face was like thunder. "Where on earth have you been?" he demanded. "You didn't even come to the rugby meeting last night. I've sent you dozens of messages, and you didn't even reply."

"I ran out of credit on my phone weeks ago," I admitted sheepishly. "Sorry, Trev. But you know what it's like when you meet someone..."

"Mate! You've met someone? Result! Who is she?"

I grinned. "He's called Lysander. He's great—"

Trev's face dropped. "He? What do you mean, he?"

My face suddenly broke into a wide grin. "I met a bloke."

Trev sat down, looking vaguely shocked. "You mean you're gay? I didn't realise..." His voice trailed off.

His reaction took me by surprise. This was the twenty-first-Century, wasn't it? Was I going to get this from everyone? "Trev? You okay? This isn't going to be an issue between us, is it?"

Trev shrugged, but he looked slightly green, and wouldn't meet my eyes. "Not sure. I'm going to have to get used to it. It's a bit of a shock, Chris. I never even imagined... I mean, you're a rugby player! What are the rest of the guys going to say?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters. To me. And it'll matter to the guys." He shook his head. "You're going to have to give me some time to get used to this, Chris."

As he sat there in silence, I suddenly felt a rush of anger at his reaction. I headed for my room, shutting my door firmly and threw myself on the bed. My earlier sense of elation had evaporated. If Trev, who I'd thought to be an all-round good bloke, was giving me this silent treatment, what would other people be like? What about my family? How on earth would my father react?

I came down to earth with a bump. What was I doing here? Was this really what I wanted? Away from Lysander, all my worries and fears came flooding back.

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I was supposed to meet Lysander for dinner, but I cancelled it. We met up the next afternoon at Tabs' studio, but we worked separately, and I kept aloof. I knew I was hurting Lysander; he kept on glancing at me, but I looked away.

On the way out of the studio, he grabbed my arm. "What's going on, Chris?"

I shrugged out of his hand, and shook my head at him. "Sorry, Lysander. I made a mistake. I can't go on with this." I lifted my head to look at him, and was dismayed to see the tears in his eyes.

I hated to be hurting him so badly. But how could I go on like this? It had just been a dream, nothing real. I turned and rushed down the stairs, ignoring Lysander, who was calling to me.

Back in the flat, Trev was pacing up and down in the communal living area. "You got over this gay phase yet?" he asked.

"Yep," I said baldly. "Coming out for a pint?"

He shook his head. "Don't think so, mate. Perhaps tomorrow." And he went away.

I sat down at the table, looking around the bleak room, imagining myself back in Lysander's elegant little loft. What on earth had I done?

For the next twenty-four hours, I basically hibernated. Cocooned in my bed, with only the kettle and a jar of instant for company, I studied and ignored the world. Who cared if I was straight or gay? When it came down to it, I was here to study, to get a degree. That was all it was about.

That Sunday, I'd promised to go home for the day, to attend church and have lunch with the family. I felt like death warmed up, and it was the last thing I wanted to do, but I'd promised. So I slipped out of the flat early, just pausing to pick up a pile of post from the communal table, and dashed to the railway station.

Of course, I was late, slipping into the church once they had already started singing the first hymn. Dad was up there, in the new vestments provided by the energetic fund-raising activities of the devoted ladies of the parish. I could see Mum and Liz on the front pew, with big brother Rob, his wife and kids. I skulked into the back row and picked up the shabby hymnal.

Gradually, the familiar words and rituals calmed me down and made everything seem as if my life was not coming to an end, as if there was still hope. And Dad's words during the sermon, all about the infinite ability to forgive, seemed somehow to make me feel that possibly, just possibly, I could get back with Lysander.

Back at the vicarage, while my mother put the finishing touches to the Sunday roast, I found myself reluctant to deal with the assorted nieces and nephews, and escaped to my old refuge, the shed at the bottom of the garden. It didn't take long for Liz to find me there.

She gave me a quick hug. "Good to see you," she said, looking at me with her usual intensity. "I have to say, there's a lot less of the Tom Kitten about you now!"

I grinned, pulling my now baggy white shirt away from my chest. "No risks from exploding buttons today," I confirmed. "And by the way—your money," I said, handing over a pile of twenties.

She took it with a wry grin, not bothering to check the amount. "Thank you. I take it this is honestly come by, and will not leave you starving for the rest of the term?"

I shook my head. "Honest hard labour," I said, before the words sank in and I felt myself blushing.

Her eyes narrowed. "There's something else about you," she said slowly. "Come on, baby brother. Spill the beans. What's been going on?"

I took a deep breath. I could never keep anything from my sister; she had this way about her that makes you bare your soul. She'll make a good priest. Although I know she's aiming for Bishop at the least. I won't be surprised if she ends up the first female Archbishop of Canterbury. And she'll be a damned good one. "I met someone," I confessed.

Her face broke into a wide grin. "And what's his name?" she asked.

Honestly, you could have knocked me over with a feather. "You knew?"

She wrapped her arms around me. "Of course I knew. I'm omniscient, haven't you realized that by now?" She kissed me soundly on the cheek. "Let's just say it was a good guess. I have been watching you for some time, you know."

I sank to the dirty floor, my legs unwilling to hold me. "Do you think other people know already?"

"You mean Mum and Dad? I doubt it. Although Mum may have her suspicions. And don't go thinking Dad is going to send you straight to hell for this. He's not like that. I've sat in on some of his counselling. He's not going to treat you differently because you're his son." She crouched down by me. "So come on, spill the beans. What's his name? How did you meet?"

So, sitting there in the chilly shed, I told her all an edited version of my meeting with Lysander. "But after Trev's reaction, I got cold feet. Freezing cold. So I broke it off. But now I'm wondering if I was an idiot."

"Wondering? Of course you were an idiot!" Liz exclaimed. "And you haven't been in touch with him since?"

"It was only Friday," I commented. "But I just don't know what to do."

"And this modelling stuff, you've really earned enough to put yourself back in the black?"

I pulled out the pile of post I'd grabbed before leaving from my pocket, and handed it to Liz. "There's a bank statement there. Check it with your own eyes."

“No, I believe you,” she said, riffling through the letters idly. “Good on you, Chris.” She turned another envelope over. “What’s this one? Looks like it was delivered by hand.”

The envelope was heavy, cream-coloured paper, the writing in brown ink, elaborate and stylish. It just said “Chris”.

I knew it had to be from Lysander, and my stomach plummeted down through the foundations of the shed.

“It’s from him?” Liz asked.

I nodded, turning it over and over in my hands.

She squeezed my shoulder, then got up. “I’ll leave you to read it.”

“Don’t. Stay, Liz, please. I may need your shoulder to cry on.” I opened the heavy envelope, and spread out a thick sheet of paper. So like him, a real quality item. It even had his name printed at the top: Lysander Chateris.

*Chris,*

*I know I pushed you into this, dragged you out of the closet, and generally took away your option to choose. And it’s my fault you’re having second thoughts. But please believe me, I miss you so much. I really thought we had something special. Give me another chance? We can take it slower... And whatever happens, we can’t let Tabs down. She was worried about us.*

*Ring me?*

*L.*

I read it through again and again. Liz was looking at me, obviously dying to know what he said, but trying not to pry. “He wants me to ring him,” I said.

“Then ring him!” she urged.

I shrugged. “No credit on my phone.”

“I thought you were floating in cash now?” she asked.

Another shrug. “Perhaps I exaggerated. I’m in the black, and I’ll have enough to be able to get through if I keep on with this job. But the phone’s a luxury I can live without. Even in this day and age...”

“You know, there is such a thing as a landline. Go, ring him. I’ll keep the hordes at bay.”

I went into the study, where the vicarage's only phone was based. I know, terribly antiquated. It still seemed near sacrilege to use it, after being lectured so often about the expense, and all that. My hands were trembling as I tapped in the number—luckily, written on the bottom of Lysander's letter. My fingers ran over the heavy paper—amazing, really. Who wrote letters in this day and age, let alone had engraved paper. It made me realise just how little I knew him. But I really wanted to get to know more.

The phone rang, then picked up. "Hello?"

For a brief moment, terrified, I thought of slamming the phone down. But I realised that I'd have to face Liz's wrath, which, so to speak, girded my loins.

"Lysander? I got your note."

"Chris! I didn't recognise the number. You're lucky I picked up." He paused for a moment. "You read it?"

"I did, and I have to admit it's not your fault. I panicked. You didn't make me do anything I didn't want, deep down. I was just so deeply in denial... I didn't realise myself. You woke me up, pulled me out."

"I know, other side of Narnia," he said with warmth in his voice. "So can we try again?"

"I'd—I'd like that, Lysander. I'm catching the 5:05 train back. See you this evening?"

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Mum's roast was, as always, delicious, and it was good to catch up with the family, especially now I knew everything was going to be okay. But I couldn't wait to catch the train and head back to Lysander.

Liz offered to walk with me to the station, so we strolled down the lane past the church, round by the little school where we'd both started our lessons, and down the hill to the station. Then I spotted an unusual car in the station car park. Low, black, two-seater. Lysander. "Thanks for everything, sis," I said, giving her a quick hug. "I think he's come to pick me up. And I'm not quite ready for the meet the family thing yet."

"I'll let you off this time," she said, poking me in the ribs as she'd done when I'd been a pesky kid. "But you're not going to get away with it for long, you know. You've got to tell Mum and Dad someday soon."

“I promise. But now—go!”

She left, blowing me a kiss as she headed back up the hill.

Lysander had got out of the car and was lounging on the bonnet. He looked like something out of a gay fantasy, lithe and handsome, dressed to perfection. I looked down at my scruffy jeans and trainers, and inwardly shrugged. It wasn't as if I could wave a wand and turn into something from an Attitude front cover between the steps and the car park.

He looked up at me rather shyly as I approached the car. “Thought I'd give you a lift,” he said. “Then I got scared and nearly turned round again. But I saw you coming down the hill...”

I took him in my arms, and kissed him. Sometime later, I pulled away. “And now it's going to be all over the parish,” I said. “The poor vicar, they'll say. What he has to go through with his children.”

“You don't sound as if you mind too much,” Lysander said, draping one arm around me.

“My sister told me some home truths. Made me see life was not as black and white as I'd thought it was. And—I missed you, Lysander. You didn't push me into anything. I'm grateful for everything. And I want to try again. If—if you'll have me, that is?”

“Idiot,” he said, pulling me close to him. “Why do you think I drove up here? Come on, let's get back to Uni, see if we can make things work this time. Deal?”

“Deal.”

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So that's what we did. I'd love to say he swept me off my feet, put rose petals around the bed, touched my life with magic, but it wasn't like that. We just became part of each other's lives, almost seamlessly. And everything was better because he was there.

Trev and I sorted things out, gradually, although we never fell back into quite the same mates-down-the-pub rhythm as before. With my new, fitter physique, I left the social crew and started rugby training again. I might even make it onto the team next season. Lysander loves watching me, although he isn't so keen on the bumps and bruises.



We finished the work for Tabs, but now that my finances are in the black, I don't think I'm going to do any more modelling work. It was never really my sort of thing, although I have a new respect for the patience and skill of those who do it full time. Not for me.

However, there was one final consequence of all that stuff, which I really need to get down on paper. You see, after Lysander and I had been going out for about four months, and we were seriously beginning to look at shared flats for the next year, when I'd be in my third year and he was planning to carry on post-grad, I had a call from my Dad on my finally reconnected phone. He was in the area for a regional meeting with the Bishop, and would like to meet up for lunch.

I had to admit I wondered what was going on, but I'm never going to be one to turn down a free meal, so I went to the old-fashioned restaurant in the town centre. To my surprise, before the soup arrived, he passed me a magazine, with a coloured tab marking a page.

"Like to explain this to me, Christopher?" he said, as I noted the title—'*New Studies in Classics*' and opened the page.

The article was titled "A New Look at the Warren Cup" and there, in all its academic glory, was a photo of me and Lysander.

Well, I didn't know where to look. In doubt, fall on family habits and blame your siblings. "I was overdrawn. Liz told me to sort myself out. So I did some modelling..." I began. Then I glanced up at my father, and was relieved to see that he was smiling. "You don't mind?"

"Well, I have to say it was a bit of a shock to see quite so much of my youngest son in a scholarly revue, but... no, I don't mind, Chris. I'm disappointed that you didn't think you could share your pecuniary problems with me, though."

I took a deep breath. "Then perhaps I should tell you now, Dad. The other boy in the photo, Lysander, he's my boyfriend."

The soup arrived at that moment, giving me a moment to persuade my heart to start beating again.

Dad looked at me, took a spoonful of soup, then put his spoon down. "And when do we get to meet him?"

Was that all? For a brief moment I almost felt cheated, as if the big coming-out speech and horrified reaction was something I'd been cherishing. But who

was I kidding? As if my father, compassionate and loving, could ever really be like that. "You want to meet him?"

"Of course. Why not bring him home for Easter? You are helping out for the Good Friday service as usual, aren't you?"

I have to admit that I almost groaned, as the sheer bleakness of Good Friday and the interminable anthem St Ethelred's always sings is not exactly something I look forward to, but I'd never tell Dad that. "Of course. I'd love to."

For a moment, Dad looked solemn. "Your mother warned me about this. She had this feeling about you. You know, I'd always dreamt of officiating at the ceremonies for my children. But Rob chose to get married by the army chaplain. Liz says she's not planning to marry. And now... there's actually an act of parliament to say you can't marry in church."

I reached out for Dad's hand. "Perhaps that'll change one day. Not that we're even close to think of getting married. But at the rate which things are changing..."

And Dad smiled. And I did too.

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A couple of months after that, Lysander and I were in my room at home, getting ready for another family dinner. Bit of a squash, it was, but I was grateful that no one had tried to make us sleep in different rooms.

"Pass me my hair gel?" Lysander said, contorting in front of the mirror.

I reached over the bed, picked it up and then somehow slipped and ended on my knees by the bed, the gel rolling underneath.

"Clumsy," he said as I shimmied down, trying to fish it out. It was almost out of reach. I stretched as far as I could, but instead of the can, managed to grab something small and shiny.

I looked at the button in my fingers. "Wow," I said, turning it over. "You'll never believe it, but without this button, we'd never have met."

Lysander, trying to tame his hair without the missing gel, looked puzzled, so I explained, told him about the year before, the shirt, the debt, everything. He leant over and kissed me. "Glad you took your sister's advice," he said. "I really owe her my thanks."

We got ready, and went downstairs. As I closed the door behind me, I couldn't help thinking how lucky I was. For want of a button... I gained everything.

Better than a nail any day.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*After what feels like a lifetime working in motorsport—not F1, as she frequently has to explain—Melandra has finally achieved her dream of turning the real motorsport world into fiction. Her first romance, Track Limits, was published in December by Dreamspinner Press, followed by three short stories, also with a motorsport element. She is now working on books two and three with the heroes of her book, Mark and Jordan.*

*When not at work or at the track, Melandra reads as much as she can manage (or as much as she can afford) and is very grateful for the invention of e-books, without which her home would by now be struggling under archeological layers of paper. She lives in Europe but longs to move to the Shetland Islands one day.*

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