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Trick of the Night

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Ash Penn

Blurb –

Desperate for money, exotic dancer Tony has sold practically everything he owns. All he has left is his body. When the opportunity arises to make some quick cash, Tony shoves his principles to one side and offers his services to any man willing to pay for them. The problem is his first client is nothing like he expected. In fact, Laine Lawson turns out to be more of a trick than Tony could ever imagine.

Dedication

With thanks to my writing group ER Authors. Special thanks to Lorraine Pearl, without whom this story might never have got written, and to H.C. Brown for the fantastic cover art

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Trademark: Jimmy Choo

Chapter One

It seemed simple enough. And in the great scheme of things, he'd probably done worse over the latter part of his twenty-six-and-a-half years. All he had to do was strip, lay down - on his stomach if the guy happened to be particularly gruesome in the looks department - keep his breathing even and his muscles relaxed. A lot more relaxed than they were now, if he took the advice offered by another dancer. Someone who'd whored his arse for a damn sight longer than Tony, who had yet to officially begin.

Still, he needed the cash. Otherwise he wouldn't be skulking outside the glass and steel splendour of the Maribelle of a Friday night chain-smoking his fourth cigarette of the evening. One for each of the hotel's star ratings. Some people had more money than sense. His first client demonstrated signs of being one of those people. Tony, not so much.

He'd arrived ten minutes early in order to strengthen his courage. A glance at his watch confirmed he was running ten minutes late and no closer to the cavernous lobby beyond the revolving door. In truth, only the dull throb of his knee kept him from sprinting in the opposite direction.

A frigid breeze crept beneath his jacket, tingled under his shirt and tightened his nipples to buds. His balls were tight, too, but not from the chill. More in nervous anticipation of the night ahead.

After chugging a final drag on his cigarette, he flicked the spent end into the gutter.

Enough stalling, time to head inside.

Tony scanned the lobby as he entered through the revolving doors. Some swish place, this. Gold painted walls made the place appear warm and inviting, despite its vast size. To either side of him wicker couches were set around tables adorned with vases of fresh flowers. They were nothing like the gaudy pink and blue carnations that often sat pride of place in his gran's bay window. These were long, elegant stemmed plants with fine white petals and not a single one loose on the marble tiled floor.

Laine Lawson might have more money than sense, but his taste in hotels went a ways to improving Tony's perception of a man who'd pay a total stranger for sex. He had no clue

what the guy looked like, or any knowledge of age or preferences in bed. But then, Tony had zero experience of putting out for money. His principles forbade such a thing. Or had, until a two hundred quid tax-free incentive for a loan of his body won him over.

A snotty-looking receptionist at the front desk ran a condescending eye over his supermarket shirt before ringing Lawson's room. She issued instruction to head straight for the lift and the seventh floor.

Do not speak with that gaudy Dorset accent. Keep your battle-scarred knuckles in your pockets. And leave the cheap piece of PVC tat you call a jacket at the desk. Collect on your exit. The sooner the better.

Okay, so she didn't say those words, but her pursed lips suggested she barely managed to bite them back. Maybe she'd guessed the reason for his visit. He couldn't have been the first grubby prostitute to roll up here for an early evening tryst. He'd have to get used to looks like the one she'd gifted him with if he planned to make a go of this profession.

Alone in the lift, he checked his gelled hair and lamented his crooked nose in the back mirror. He'd broken the bridge twice via other blokes' bare fists over the years, and the bone had never healed straight. Appearances didn't matter much right now, though. Lawson already knew what he was getting, since he'd asked for Tony personally.

Tony hadn't made any special preparations for tonight, apart from a quick shower and a good douse of aftershave. He refused point blank to insert a butt plug. He hoped, probably in vain, the guy wanted to be fucked. He'd much rather that than lay stewing in his own repugnance.

His knee pained him less now he'd spent a little time in the warmth. He loaded all his weight onto his left leg by raising his right foot off the ground, and in doing so tempted the throb to return, and appreciate the reminder.

He found the room halfway down a long strip of plush, carpeted hall and tapped the door just below the gold number 74. A few heartbeats later and the door drew back. Tony met a pair of eyes the colour of rich mahogany, their lids shimmering with a layer of silver and charcoal.

"Uh, sorry," he choked out. "Wro —"

"Tony, lovely to meet you." The woman extended a long-fingered hand, the nails of which sparkled with a glossy coat of fire-alarm red.

He stared at the proffered hand, then down to the long, tanned legs beginning an inch below a sliver of skirt and ending in a pair of shiny scarlet stilettos.

"I'm Laine," she said, as Tony's attention climbed back up her endless legs. His gaze skimmed over narrow hips, the gentle swell of breasts and finally halted on a wide, white smile.

Laine. Well, that shot to shit his fledgling theory she might be a hooker, or a wife who liked to watch her guy get it on with another man. Nope. Apparently, he'd just been brought for sex by a woman.

Chapter Two

Women came to the club for a laugh. They came for the dancers, sometimes literally. But he didn't recall any one of them wanting to part with more than tip money for an ogle. Most guys working at the club held a preference for men. A few were bi. Tony definitively wasn't. Since she'd booked him through Brendon, she should know it too.

"I'm thinking somebody's made a right royal fu — mistake here. I don't...I haven't..." *slept with a woman in years*. His number one rule, etched on the inside of his eyelids when agreeing to this, was to give out no personal information whatsoever. This wasn't a date. It was business. There was only one thing she needed to know. "I'm not gonna be of much use to you."

The smile faded. She lowered her hand, closely followed by her thick, fake lashes. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Tony." Her voice was husky and soft, kind of like velvet on the ears. And attractive, as was she. But so not his type. "I thought we'd start with dinner."

"Dinner?" Code for some nefarious heterosexual sex act, perchance?

"You haven't already eaten?"

Oh. So just dinner, then. "No. I was told — asked — not to." He'd assumed Brendon had offered the snippet of advice about not eating beforehand in case the guy he'd been sent to shag resembled and-slash-or reeked like a walrus's anus. Barfing in the bathroom, or worse, the bed, wouldn't bode well for future recommendations. But Laine looked nothing similar to a walrus. Or to someone he'd want to fuck, either.

"Then, you must be hungry." The door swept back, revealing a glimpse of a huge bed with a lushly padded headboard against the far wall. "Come on in."

Her richly spiced perfume swirled around his head and wafted up his nostrils. Had she worn that particular scent for him? He'd marinated himself in cheap aftershave this evening, but not to impress. He'd hoped the potent stench might mask the reek of rent boy when he left.

He glanced back down the long stretch of empty hallway. Running off wasn't any more of an option than ringing Brendon to complain. He'd already accepted he wouldn't get to choose who he slept with, although he had assumed he'd get the choice of gender.

Without a better option to fall back on, Tony shuffled into a hotel room bigger than any he'd stayed in his life. There wasn't much in the way of light, except the glow from a couple of lamps either side of the bed. A flat-screen TV dominated the wall opposite the bed, and built-in wardrobes spanned another. The fourth was taken up with a table set for dining, with regimented cutlery, napkins, menus, two glasses half full of champagne, and a waning candle captured in a glass holder as centrepiece.

Laine held out her elegant fingers. "Can I take your jacket?"

Tony shoved his own stubby digits in his pocket. "I'll hold on to it, thanks."

Laine's brow furrowed, but she turned quickly away and patted one of the ornate chairs. "Come and have a drink."

A drink, yes, to settle his nerves and arrange his words. He lowered himself into the chair and picked up a glass. The sweet fizz of the champagne lubricated his throat but did nothing to calm the nerves roiling in his stomach.

Laine took the seat opposite. In the ensuing silence, Tony wondered if he should have helped her into her chair rather than the other way around. What the fuck did he know? He was a dancer, not a waiter. No. Not even that tonight. Just a whore.

"Brendon must've told you I only do guys," he told her, as tactfully as he could manage. Which wasn't very.

Laine shrugged and lifted the champagne from the ice bucket. "I don't know any Brendon."

"The guy who runs the club."

She refreshed his glass with a steady hand. "I wouldn't know. I had this all arranged through a friend."

"What friend?" Tony knew very few of the club's patrons by name, but he'd assumed Laine had made the arrangements herself.

"Someone very dear who tempted me along to your club once or twice these past few weeks." She returned the bottle to the bucket. "He...that is, my friend, partakes of the extra services offered by several of the employees. I saw you on my second visit. I'm surprised you didn't sense my lust scorching right through your naked skin."

She studied him, maybe waiting for confirmation that, yes, indeed, her hot sensuous attention had practically scalded him alive. In truth, he always envisioned the crowd as a

solid mass, such as an audience at the Royal Opera House. If he started scanning individuals, his delusions shattered. Instead of tall, elegant men in tuxedos and their ladies dripping in diamonds, he'd see flabby bodies in muscle t-shirts and middle-aged drag queens sparkling in florescent glitter under the strobes. His delusions were the only thing keeping him going. Well, that and the money.

"Anyway," she continued when the silence ran on, "my friend noticed me noticing you and suggested I book you for some after-hours entertainment. He told me he did that sort of thing quite often, which came as quite a shock. He said he'd never done it with you, though."

Tony shrugged. "I wasn't into it. Not until recently." He'd hold back on just how recently. She was paying for his time. She probably expected an experienced whore.

"It wouldn't have made any difference if you were." She laughed "You're so not his type."

Yeah, well, can't please every fucker who skulks in for a late night perve. Tony closed his mouth. The best course of action was to say nothing.

Laine took the tiniest sip of champagne. "My friend made some discreet enquiries for me. He discovered you weren't available. I was relieved, in a way. I'd never thought of going to..." She lowered her voice as though there was some sort of surveillance equipment in the room and either one of them might get picked up by the Vice Squad at any moment, "...a *prostitute* before. I was content enough watching you dance, to be perfectly honest. But then a few weeks later all of a sudden my friend found out that you were. Available, I mean." Her lips shivered into another smile. "Now, here we are."

"Yeah," he muttered. "Here we are." And here he was, with certain keywords buzzing inside of his head. *Services. Employee. Booking. Available.* Like he was a commodity. A biological vibrator. If the evening progressed the way Laine might like, she'd soon discover she'd landed a toy with faulty batteries.

Tony picked up his glass and swallowed another hefty swig. He'd only approached Brendon a few days ago about dipping his wick into the extra services the club provided to their more discerning clientele. If Laine had noted her interest, that meant he'd already featured on a waiting list. Should he feel flattered, or appalled?

"I can do dinner," he decided. She'd gone to so much expense and trouble, after all. "But I don't know about anything else."

"You've made yourself clear to me, Tony. We'll face the anything else if - or when - the situation arises." Her languid attention eased south to where his torso met the table. Her lips tilted to a smile half-hidden behind her glass.

Was she flirting? The prospect of having to endure an evening's worth of fluttering eyelashes and girlish titters almost made him bolt there and there. Aching knee or no aching knee.

She raised the menu between them. "Are you ready to order?"

Tony wasn't hungry, but neither was he footing the bill. He squinted at the list of elaborate sounding dishes through the poor lighting. He ordered what he assumed to be the most expensive items, though the menu lacked a price list. Still, everyone knew caviar cost a bomb. And he wasn't likely to get the chance to sample such a delicacy again.

When he was done, Laine's hand trembled as she gathered up the menus. A change from when she'd poured the champagne without spilling a drop. Maybe she wasn't as cool about this evening as she might like him to think.

"Dinner will be twenty minutes," she said, retaking her seat after ordering room service over the phone by the bed. "In the meantime, tell me something about you." She rested her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together. She peered over her hands with huge brown eyes, as though he were the latest CGI blockbuster in Hi Def 3D surround sound.

Tony sighed. He'd hoped they were done discussing him. "Like what?"

"Like why you dance like a classically trained professional. Let's begin there."

Despite his vow to not talk about himself, he relished the thrill she'd noticed he knew how to dance. He never imagined his audience cared about technique so much as the size of his cock.

"Because that's what I was." He tried to keep his voice light. As if he'd long ago accepted the golden future he'd taken for granted was no longer his to claim.

"So what happened?" Laine settled back in her chair. "You gave up the hard work and glamour to become a stripper?"

Her sardonic tone hit him like a stinging slap.

He clenched his jaw. "No. I crashed my bike into a wall and smashed up my knee. I didn't have much choice but to give it all up since I could hardly walk for the best part of a year afterwards." He closed his mouth. He hadn't meant to give so much away, but her flippancy — to dare suggest he'd abandoned his entire career in order to take off his clothes to entertain a bunch of rancid queens and drunken harpies — irritated the hell out of him.

The stiff silence turned the air between them, cold as the compress he nursed over his knee after every show.

"I'm sorry." Laine's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I had no idea."

Yeah, well, she shouldn't be sorry. The accident that destroyed his future was his own fault. He'd sunk a couple of beers, and taken his brand new motorbike for a spin. The beers hadn't been enough to put him over the limit, but at twenty years old he'd assumed two things in life. One, he was indestructible, and, two, he'd always have his career. Until he was too ancient to dance, by which time he'd have long since retired.

Fast-forward six years and he spent his nights in agony, increasingly missing sequences and dreading the moment his tortured knee gave way and sent him flat on his naked arse. He didn't do much except gyrate and remove his clothing, but he performed with a touch more finesse than most.

He gulped the remainder of his drink. "Shit happens." He slammed the glass back on the table.

Laine's eyes filled with sudden sadness. "Yes...shit definitely does."

Tony shifted in his seat. This charade had run its course. First she insulted him, now she wanted to empathise? He wasn't getting paid enough for this.

"Look, Laine. I'm here for the cash, okay? I don't do dinner, or conversation...or any of this social nicety bollocks. This isn't me. I just f —"

"Fuck men?" She fixed him with a stare he couldn't hold.

He studied the gold thread weaved into the cotton tablecloth. He'd been about to say, 'I just *feel* awkward doing this,' but Laine's abbreviated version covered more ground.

"Yeah."

He knew what to expect with sex. What he didn't expect was a woman. Or dinner. Or this rank attempt at conversation. The champagne bubbled in his stomach. Could he make his excuses and leave after ordering so much food? Why not? She could afford it. Laine seemed

like the kind of pampered woman who blotted her lipstick on a clean fifty pound note every morning.

On the other hand, he needed that two hundred quid. That was his share of the money she'd paid for his time. In his mind, that money was already spent. He should keep a polite tongue in his head, especially as he didn't plan to put it to any other kind of use tonight.

"I haven't once asked you for anything other than your company." Laine's free hand formed a fist on the table. "So I'd appreciate you not acting as though you'd rather stuff your balls with mincemeat than dine with me."

She had a point. *Acting*. Wasn't that what he'd been advised to do right from the start? To think of tonight as just another performance not dissimilar to the show he put on most nights at the club. Only, this performance had to be a little more involved. She hadn't yet asked him into bed. Maybe all she did want was dinner and small talk with a stripper who turned tricks for cash. Well, not exactly true. He hadn't turned anything tonight. Least of all straight.

Chapter Three

He fished in his jacket pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes.

Laine put down her glass. "You can't smoke in here." She sounded like his old high school headmistress, a middle-aged bint with a stick up her arse. Half the boys thought she might like something else up her arse; one or two even voiced such a suggestion. Those few ended up with a suspension on a regular basis. Right now Laine looked like she might wish to suspend him. From the chandelier. By his neck.

Tony balanced the filter between his lips. With a stroke of his thumb, he flicked a flame. "Why the fuck not?"

"Because there are rules. And since this room is in my name, it's me who's going to be held responsible."

Tony inhaled a lungful of pure joy, then exhaled a stream of smoke through both nostrils. "Who's gonna know?"

"How about room service?" Her tone lifted a pitch. "Or the maid. Or *me*. We're on my time, remember? Now will you please put the *fuckin*g cigarette away?"

Prissy little bitch. Tony sighed. He'd have to get used to the occasional order if he was going to make a success out of this latest venture. He crushed the burning end against the packet and placed the cigarette back with the others.

Laine's jaw unclenched. "Thank you."

"No *fuckin*g problem." Tony grabbed the champagne from the bucket and emptied the last dribble into his glass.

When a polite tap sounded at the door, Laine was all too quick to rise. She wafted at the air with her rather wide, flat palm, and then tottered in her heels to answer. Tony followed her long bare legs with his gaze. Yeah, she had a fantastic set of pins. But he hadn't concerned himself with whether or not he found women sexually attractive in years. He'd long ago given up trying to be something he wasn't. Brendon was a conniving fuck for putting him in this position.

Laine seemed nice enough, though. A bit uptight. He couldn't for the life of him understand why she paid someone to share dinner with her. Or to fuck her. Still, that was none of his concern. He need only think about the cash.

The waiter appeared, pushing a trolley loaded with covered plates. Tony focused on the broad planes of the guy's black trouser-clad arse, but found the sight only a little more alluring than the slight swell of Laine's breasts beneath her dress.

She'd ordered another bottle of champagne, which the waiter promptly opened. Good. If he remembered rightly, and he did, feigning sexual interest in a woman would prove thirsty work.

With his glass refilled, he downed the flurry of bubbles in a single mouthful. When he offered the glass for a refill, the waiter glanced at Laine as if awaiting permission. She inclined her head and the waiter tipped the bottle.

"Clearly you enjoy a drink," she said, after the meals had been placed before them and the waiter tipped and dismissed. "Doesn't alcohol affect your fitness levels?"

Tony snorted. "If, by *fitness levels*, you mean you're worried about how it'll affect my performance in bed, then don't bother." He swallowed the contents of the glass in two gulps. "The champagne's gonna be the least of our problems." He belched with enough power to blast a ripple of shockwaves through the chandelier above the bed. Almost.

Laine pressed her lips together, picked up her fork, and set about an exotic salad full of brightly-coloured and unappetising strips of fruit and vegetables.

"We're not in bed," she said softly.

Tony reached for the bottle. "Yet."

In one fluid movement, Laine leaned over the table and grabbed the champagne by the neck. She whipped it free of the ice bucket, rose, and stormed towards what Tony suspected might be the bathroom.

She returned with an empty bottle, which she slammed between them on the table before resuming her seat. Then she picked up a fork, and stabbed a cherry tomato. Juice spewed from the puncture wounds like miniature water cannons and almost doused the already feeble candle flame.

"You want me to leave?" Tony poised to hit the hall, feet flat on the carpet, knees tensed. Even the bad one. Sooner he was gone, the better.

A flicker of rage smouldered in the depths of her dark eyes. "No. Just eat."

Great. Disappointment weighed him down and kept him seated. Short of walking out, he didn't see what else he could do. Apart from grit his teeth and hope she'd tire of him before they hit the bedroom.

He pushed his fingers into a blob of caviar set on a tiny sliver of cracker, then touched the tip to his lips. Not bad. Tasted like cum. Nothing special. Did people pay hundreds of pounds for this?

Why should he be so surprised? Wasn't any less likely than a woman paying hundreds of pounds for a couple of hours in bed with him.

He pushed the cracker around the plate, and debated on whether he could bring himself to indulge a proper taste. Just as he'd made up his mind to give it a go, the plate was whipped away as quickly as the champagne.

"Finished?" Laine dumped the plate on the trolley and set another in front of him.

"Uh, yeah. I guess. Thanks." Tony sheepishly lifted off the cover. He peered at the beef swimming in a pool of red wine sauce.

"I've never done this before, either, you know," Laine blurted out some minutes later, just loud enough to push through the stagnant air.

Tony searched for a lie within her face, but she betrayed nothing. Not a twitch.

"All of this...." Her gaze flickered around the room, "is on plastic. The only thing that isn't, is you. I just about managed to scrape up your fee with my life savings." A more natural shade of red deepened the cosmetic blush staining her cheeks. "I'm not rich, Tony. I live in a bedsit on the wrong side of town and I make plain women beautiful for a little above minimum wage."

The beef, a moment ago so lushly tender on Tony's tongue, turned tough as cow hide. He swallowed hard. So, this was all a bluff for appearances. She couldn't afford this. She couldn't afford him. *How ironic.* He'd always made for such a cheap date in the past.

"I wanted dinner and conversation with the guy who stirred my fantasies, that's all." Laine stroked the stem of her glass. "I don't blame you for resenting me. I didn't think of your feelings. I assumed I'd be buying those for the evening, too." She sighed. "Go if you want to. I can hardly stop you now, can I?"

No, she couldn't. She'd seemed so pleased to see him when he turned up, and now she looked as though someone had broken into her home and stolen her prized collection of Jimmy Choos'.

He'd been an asshole. In his head, he'd had the evening all mapped out. Of what he should do and when he should do it. Laine had thrown his plans into disarray, but he shouldn't have taken out his frustration on her. Hardly the most professional beginning to a new career.

"I agreed to dinner. So I'll stay, and try to fix my Neanderthal manners. I'm sorry." He scooped up some sauce and stuck the fork into his mouth before he could say anything else that might contradict the apology.

"You don't have to. I won't complain to your..." She appeared to search for the right term. If she said pimp, they'd fall out again, and he'd definitely have to leave. "...to your boss."

Boss, he could handle. The other word came with connotations of which he didn't need reminding.

"What about dessert?" He gestured to the huge slab of Pavlova on the trolley, oozing raspberries and sugar.

"I don't do dessert."

She'd be watching her weight, like most women. Any slimmer and she'd be able to limbo between the tines of his fork. Either that or she didn't eat much because she couldn't afford two three-course meals. Why hadn't he noticed she'd only ordered salad? No starter or dessert. Now he felt like the worst kind of parasitic low-life prostitute. Still, if that's what he was, he'd best get used to it.

"You mind if I indulge?" He feigned enthusiasm and rose to fetch the plate over.

"Go ahead," she said, her words casual, but clipped.

He ate in silence. The meringue was a little sweet, and he probably had cream running down his chin. But he kept eating because a full mouth meant he couldn't shove his foot in it again.

"What did you do to your hands?"

Tony looked up to find her eyeing his misshapen knuckles. He couldn't do much to hide them, and he didn't see the point in lying. "Got into a fight or two when I was a kid."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Because of you being gay?"

"Nope. Because of me being the only boy in ballet class."

"Oh." She reached for her glass. "Yes. Childhood can be a terrible ordeal for those of us who are...different."

She'd included herself amongst the not-quite-select few. What did she know? She was probably head prom queen or whatever they were called. The kind of kid Tony used to gaze at from afar and wonder what the fuck it might be like to be popular and normal and not scrapping at the school gates every other night in an effort to rebel against the ballet-dancing poofter cliché.

"I gave as good as I got, and sometimes better." He forced a grin.

Eventually, she smiled back. Time to take this conversation by the horns. "Okay, Laine." Tony straightened. "I know you're reluctant, but tell me one thing about yourself."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm not at all inter —"

"Craziest thing you ever did?" He spoke quickly, hoping she'd answer without thought. That was the nature of this game, after all.

She levelled a gaze at him, but waited too long to answer. The idea was to lighten the mood. Now they might as well be sucking in mud instead of air.

She opened her mouth, then closed in again. She lowered her lashes. "I...I slept with my sister's fiancé on the eve of their wedding," she said, so softly that at first Tony assumed he'd heard her wrong.

But he hadn't. Now he didn't know what to say. The meringue collapsed beneath his spoon. He'd expected her to say parachuting or cliff diving. Something crazy. Not sordid.

He managed a one word reply. "Why?"

"Because I loved him, or thought I did. More than I loved her. I was wrong." She exchanged her fork for her glass. "You weren't expecting that kind of answer were you?"

No. Maybe he'd hit on something she'd wanted to discuss with someone, but didn't dare to before. It wasn't like anything they said in here would go any farther than the door. "Did your sister find out?"

"No. And that's something to be glad about at least. I left, afterwards. I had to. I email occasionally. Just to let her know I'm still alive. We don't speak. I suppose I led her to believe

I didn't need her anymore." She knocked back the rest of her champagne and set down the empty glass.

"Sounds like that's far from the truth," Tony said, because even a socially inept whore could tell when a girl was pining for her sister.

"Perhaps..." She released a wistful sigh. "But it's a long way in the past now and too late for regrets." She fixed on her bright smile, fake as the thick make-up she used like a mask. "Now, if you'd asked what the second craziest thing I ever did was, I'd have to say paying a gay prostitute to have dinner with me."

Tepid warmth filled the space between them, neutralising much of the tension that had hampered their evening so far.

Tony took advantage of the lighter mood. "Not as crazy as paying a gay prostitute for sex."

Laine laughed, and it sounded pretty natural. "Actually, I think this evening is going rather well. I have no complaints."

She had every right to have them though, considering how he'd treated her. "I'm sorry about the way I've been. Most of my airs and graces disappear soon as I'm offstage." Much of his grace had disappeared onstage now, too, but he kept that to himself.

"Tony..." Her brow furrowed. "It's okay, really. I—"

"No, it's not." She'd done nothing to warrant the way he'd treated her. "You can say what you think. I probably deserve it."

"I was wondering, actually." She met his gaze. "Are you still as resistant to the idea of being with me as you were when you arrived?"

Being with. What a nice polite euphemism for fucking. He'd loosened up with the wine inside him. Despite what Laine had said about only wanting to enjoy a meal and small talk, he'd known sooner or later she'd want more. Four hundred quid's worth of more. Two for him. Two for Brendan. So could he do this? Go straight for pay? It was, admittedly, a novel idea. He wondered briefly if such a fad might catch on.

"I dunno. I guess...I guess we could give it a go." He didn't mean to sound quite so vague, but a humiliation in the bedroom would not be the best start to his new career. Maybe he'd imagine an ex while he fucked her. He had plenty of memories to fall back on there, and plenty of casual exes from which to choose.

Laine rose and sashayed around to his side of the table. She leaned in until soft tendrils of her hair caressed his cheek.

Tony caught a few strands in his fingers and met the liquid depths of her eyes. "Laine, I..." He didn't quite know if he wanted to kiss. He hadn't thought to ask the other guys whether they did so. Kissing as a sign of affection was one thing, kissing a stranger in a lead up to sex quite another. Kissing a stranger who'd paid for sex, quite another still.

"It's all right, Tony. Just go with it." Her lips descended, full and red, directly on course with his.

He opened his mouth. Not in order to receive her kiss, but maybe just to ask her to wait. He didn't get the chance. Her lips fell upon his harder than he'd expected, and rougher. Her tongue, ripe with the taint of champagne, thrust inside and plundered his mouth with harsh determination. The effect, when she pulled back, left him breathless.

"Damn, you kiss like a —" He bit his lip. She'd not take such a comment as a compliment.

Thankfully, she didn't ask him to finish. Instead, she turned her head and softly blew out the candle. A waft of wax scented the air. She straightened and tapped his shoulder. "Help yourself to the mini-bar. There's something I need to do." She swept away to bathroom where she'd presumably slip into something more comfortable. As toned as her body appeared in clothes, Tony wasn't sure what she might do to make *him* more comfortable without them.

A cold sweat prickled his skin. If he walked away, then this was something they'd both be able to laugh about in the future. Not together, obviously, but right now neither ego had been too badly bruised. She might complain to Brendon, but he didn't think so. He'd been honest about his sexuality. Maybe if he had a word with his boss, he'd be able to get her some of her money back.

In case she didn't change her mind, he moved to the mini-bar and grabbed a couple of miniature vodkas. He downed both in quick succession. How much did a hotel charge for those anyway? Way over what it should, especially somewhere like this.

Tony extracted a fiver and shoved the note in the bar before closing the door. Then, on second thoughts, he took out a miniature scotch, swallowed the fiery contents, and swapped the five for a ten. He'd only brought enough cash for a taxi home. Now he'd have a long

walk ahead of him. Still, the cold air would do him good, as well as the pain he'd suffer by the time he'd got there. A stark reminder of why he was doing this.

As he shut the mini-bar's door the chandelier flickered to life above the bed, and threw back the shadows in a blaze of light.

"Tony?" Laine sounded different somehow, her voice a pitch lower than before.

Tony turned around with an apology on his tongue. He'd been given permission to help himself, but, still, there was zero pride attached to having been caught mid-raid.

As soon as he saw Laine, though, all thoughts of the mini-bar fled from his head. Along with every other thought he'd had that evening.

Laine stood before him, bare of cosmetics and clad in a calf-length silk robe as black as the sleek line of her hair. Hair which was considerably shorter and finer than a few minutes before.

High cheekbones narrowed to an angular jaw, which Laine raised in a sort of haughty acknowledgement of her generous, masculine mouth.

Chapter Four

Free of the scarf she'd used to disguise a prominent Adam's apple, her throat tapered to a narrow v of olive flesh, below which Tony's attention didn't once snag on the merest hint of feminine curves.

"Why..." No. Why wasn't right. "What..." No. What wasn't right either. He closed his mouth and waited for the answer to a question he didn't know how to ask.

Laine lifted a square, distinctly mannish, shoulder. "Cosmetics and starvation, mostly."

Tony swept his gaze over the fine planes of her ultra-slim body. "You're not even kidding, are you?"

"Well, it's not easy to appear a certain way." Her - *his*- voice dropped another octave. "The older I get the more difficult it is to pass."

"You do a pretty good job." He hadn't known. The scarf should have served as a signpost. Most of the drag queens at the club used that particular disguise, though Laine didn't appear as brazen as a drag queen. "So are you like pre op or...?"

"I'm afraid I don't fit into a neat little box. No hormones. No operations. I had counselling once." A row of fine lines appeared across his brow. "I suppose that helped me get things clear in my own head of who I am."

"Which is?"

"Just me. Exactly as you see before you." He folded his arms around his slender waist. "I have no plans to transition. I'm not trapped in a body I hate. I'm comfortable in my own skin much of the time. I just..." He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, their dark depths glittered. "I just wanted tonight to be about sharing dinner and perhaps an intimate moment with someone who wouldn't be disappointed when they discover what I hide beneath my clothes."

Although the last thing Tony wanted to do was upset the guy, somewhere among the shaky foundations of this night he decided this hotel room could use another injection of humour. It had worked so well before. He plastered on a stupid grin. "That a subtle way of boasting about the size of your cock?"

A blush burned furiously on both of Laine's finely-sculpted cheeks. He swallowed hard, and lowered his natural lashes, which were still full enough to cast shadows over the delicate skin beneath his eyes. "It's not about that."

The darkness under his eyes spread to engulf the room in gloom. "I know," Tony said, wishing now he'd chosen to bite his own tongue off rather than try and joke his way free of the awkwardness. "Bad joke. Bad Tony. Sorry." Best add tact to those disappearing airs and graces. "How about we, I dunno..." He caught sight of the flat-screen on the wall. "...watch TV for a while? He scanned for a remote, grateful for the opportunity to do something other than stew in the awkwardness of this situation he found himself trapped within.

"How about we..." Laine unfastened the tie to his robe and shrugged the silky material from his shoulders. "...don't." The robe dropped to the carpet and instantly lifted the chill from the air.

Tony's roving gaze collided with the depths of Laine's naked groin and the solid length of cock thrusting from a lacy trim of black pubic hair. Laine's scrotum, cleanly hairless, crinkled around the ripe swell of his testicles which hung tense and fuelled by a dark flush of arousal.

Fucking hell! Where did he keep such a monster hidden beneath a flimsy layer of skirt?

The question teetered on the tip of Tony's tongue. He managed to rein it in, in favour of perusing Laine's willowy torso and pert, rosy nipples. When he eventually looked up, his attention snagged on Laine's perfectly arched eyebrow. An eyebrow that dared him to voice the question gnawing at his brain. A question he'd likely regret, but, what the hell, this needed to be said.

"Don't you reckon this would've gone a lot smoother for us both if you'd just...dressed like a bloke from the start?"

In the rapidly cooling silence, Laine's eyes narrowed a twitch. His lean chest expanded. The air-conditioning plunged several degrees. That was the weird thing about this room. It didn't hold heat for more than two minutes at a time.

"First of all, Tony, I'm not a *bloke*." The ice in his tone suggested this wasn't the first time he'd been presented with that particular question. "Secondly, I dress how I damn well please."

Rather than meet the cold fire blazing from Laine's eyes, Tony chose instead to indulge in the more inviting planes of Laine's naked body. His cock had flagged somewhat, but, with the drop in temperature, that was hardly surprising.

"You, uh, don't seem to be wearing much right now."

"I can always change that." Laine dipped to collect the robe.

"No!" With the force of that word, Laine straightened. He left the robe on the floor, and fixed Tony with a challenging glare. Tony cleared his throat. "That is, I just mean, you're all right as you are."

The eyebrow hitched again. "*Just* all right?"

Tony stepped forward. He made the mistake of setting his weight on his left leg. A stab of fire penetrated his knee, and throbbed right to the bone. *No*. Not now, not when he'd begun to relax to a point where he might fool himself this was all about pleasure rather than business. But sometimes it happened that way. The pain would ease to nothing, then, wham! Hit him with bone-grating force hard enough to steal his breath. He subdued a whimper.

"Tony." Laine started towards him. His anger seemed all at once to evaporate in favour of a concern Tony in no way deserved.

Tony raised his palm. "I'm okay." He smoothed the wince from his face and resumed the practised mask he wore throughout most dance routines. "Maybe you should come over here."

Laine hesitated. A trace of worry still chewed across his brow, but when he moved forward he did so with a natural sway to his hips, and, in turn, his cock. He presented a rather skewed mix of both masculine and feminine allure Tony didn't quite know what to make of.

He must have made something of it. A trace of perfume swirled up his nostrils. A tingling thrill gathered in his balls. His cock perked. He still wasn't sure why, but now was not the time for any kind of detailed thought.

When Laine stopped maybe half a metre away, Tony ran clumsy, gnarled knuckles down his slender arm. Not a spare inch of muscle to be had. Tony leaned close, and inhaled the fruity waft of shampoo from his hair.

"I suppose," Laine said, with a sigh, "I suppose I could have been more honest with you from the beginning."

"Maybe." Tony managed to speak without betraying the ache in his knee that only now began to ebb. "But that wouldn't have been half so interesting."

Laine's lashes flickered up. A light sparked to life in her eyes. "You think this is interesting?"

Tony had never had an evening quite like this one. He wasn't sure he'd volunteer for another, but he didn't regret knocking the door. He ventured the barest tips of his fingers across the tense heat of Laine's belly. "Yeah. And getting more so by the moment."

Laine let out a small groan.

Tony continued his path with feathery strokes. Just when he made to clasp the swell of Laine's shaft, Laine twined slender fingers through his own.

"Let's go to bed," he said, as gently as a lover.

Tony let himself be tugged forwards, and limped only a little. Laine either didn't notice, or, unlike Tony, knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Laine sat on the bed and shimmied up the mattress. He settled with knees raised and parted. His dark gaze weighed heavy, smouldering through Tony's clothing. For some weird inexplicable reason, a nervous thrill coursed along Tony's spine.

Showtime.

"You want the light out?" He gestured over his shoulder to where he thought the switch might lurk by the door.

"No." Laine watched him steadily. "You have a lush physique. I want to see you in all your glory."

Okay. That, he could do. Tony imagined Laine's eyes as dazzling spotlights, and shrugged off his jacket. He plucked open his shirt buttons with clean precision. He worked hard to keep himself in shape, which wasn't always easy with his injury. He liked the male attention his muscular body earned, and Laine's appreciative attention did indeed scorch his skin.

Naked now, he stood at the foot of the bed and basked under the heat. Almost as an afterthought, he remembered the condoms Brendon had supplied. He dipped and retrieved them from his jacket pocket, then casually flipped them onto the bed as if he'd done so a hundred times before. He hadn't, not quite so many, and never in this situation. But at least he held an illusion of control.

Laine grabbed the box and wrinkled his nose. "These are latex."

"So?" What other kind was he expecting?

"So, I have polyurethane in the drawer." He gestured to a bedside table. "I like to play with scented oils and latex is no good. It disintegrates." He tossed the box, which landed with a clank in the midst of the dirty dishes on the table.

"News to me," Tony muttered, and moved to the bedside table.

A fresh box of condoms sat inside, along with a couple of tiny glass bottles. He took a bottle out, uncapped it, and pulled a face at the strong aromas leaking into the air.

Laine's laughter sweetened the foul-smelling air. "It's just massage oil, Tony. Not smelling salts."

"Still rank either way." Tony held the bottle like an unpinned grenade, as far from his body as possible.

"Not when on the skin. Here." Laine thrust out a palm. "I'll show you."

Tony couldn't hide his reluctance. He didn't want to leave smelling like some sort of radioactive weed killer. What was wrong with regular lube, anyway? He had some in his jacket. Maybe he might suggest they use that instead. On the other hand, he'd often catch a whiff of his own aftershave and realised he probably smelled half that bad already. He passed the bottle over, then climbed on the bed.

Laine tipped a little into his palm and rubbed his hands together until they glistened.

Tony studied the long slender fingers and the wide palms, so mesmerised by the motion he hardly noticed when one of those hands fluttered towards his face until an oily finger passed under his nose.

He jerked back and sneezed.

Laine giggled. Whilst Tony was recovering from the sneeze, Laine straddled Tony's hips, his weight hardly more than that of a slim girl's. "You know, I'm actually beginning to like you." He clamped glistening fingers over Tony's shoulders. His breath carried a citrus tang of champagne. "Now you've stopped being a complete wanker."

Tony assumed there was a compliment hidden within that statement. "Cheers."

"You're welcome." He pushed a light kiss to Tony's lips, then flopped back on the bed. He propped himself on his elbows, and displayed his long, fine bones and smooth

hairless skin. His dick stood stiff against his belly, and practically pulsed heat. "Are we doing this or what?"

Tony reached over and grabbed the condoms from the drawer. Yeah, they were doing this. He took one out and tore into the foil. "You got a preference as far as positions go?"

Laine pressed his lips together "Does this have to be so clinical? Can't we just fall into it?"

Tony stared at Laine's cock. He wouldn't protest at taking those considerable inches inside him. His arse might ache after, but he was pretty sure he'd enjoy the ride.

Chapter Five

He ran his hand up Laine's length, teasing the tissue soft skin before wrapping his fingers around the steel-hard shaft. He pumped a couple of times. Already a pearly drop of moisture oozed from the exposed head. Tony raised his gaze to wide brown eyes glazed with lust.

"You ready now?" he asked, surprised at the breathy catch to his voice.

Laine opened his thighs. "More than."

Tony rolled the condom over Laine's shaft and paused for another quick caress. The spread thighs told him all he needed to know, but no harm in making sure.

He scanned Laine's flushed face. "Am I falling in to you, then, or...?"

With a perceptible eye roll, Laine flipped over to display the firm globes of his backside and wriggled 'til the flesh quivered. "What do you think?"

Tony didn't know if it was the wanton way Laine peered back at him, or the prospect of inching into the tiny hole nestled between those full, rounded cheeks, but a sudden burst of lust had his cock lurch to full attention.

"Oh." Laine's gaze sank low. "Scratch that question. I just read your mind."

Tony grabbed another condom and quickly captured his own erection. Lack of attraction no longer seemed to be an issue despite Laine not being his physical type. But maybe now wasn't the best time to go about analysing why.

He settled between Laine's thighs, and loaded his palm with oil. He massaged his hands together until they were nice and slick. The oil gleamed beneath the subdued lamplight, anointing his fingers with an exotic sheen.

He skimmed an oiled finger along the prominent ridge of Laine's spine from nape to butt cheeks, and left behind a shiny trail of lingering, if still a touch noxious, perfume. Laine's body was leaner and bonier than he was used to. Smoother, too. Not unpleasantly so, just different. Nicely padded arse, though. Firm enough to jiggle if slapped. Not that he'd attempt to do so lest he got a slap of his own for his trouble. He didn't know if Laine was of a disposition to appreciate those sorts of games.

Instead, he played safe and parted the cheeks with his thumbs. Catching a glimpse of puckered anus, he applied just enough pressure that the tip of his finger breached the tiny

hollow. Laine gripped him with heat. A shot of invisible flames seared the length of his forearm.

Laine's shoulder blades tensed until they resembled angular bookends. When Tony withdrew and added another finger, Laine was so tight he stalled at the first knuckles.

"You need to relax," he said softly, and stroked the palm of his free hand across Laine's arse

Laine half raised his head from the pillow. "I'm nervous. That is allowed, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's allowed." Tony had nerves enough for the pair of them, but he was supposed to know what he was doing here. He did, technically, but for all his experience, he wasn't certain if he was skilled enough to give Laine four hundred quid's worth of orgasm, even if he only saw half of the cash.

But he couldn't think like that, if for no other reason than the responsibility would have him lose his erection and he'd be lucky to have earned the bus fare home. "You want me to go easy?"

"I thought you already were." Laine pushed back against his fingers, hard enough to drive them an inch deeper. "I'd like you to fuck me now."

So much for trying to relax him enough that this might be a pleasant experience for them both.

Tony withdrew his fingers and transferred them to his cock. He shuffled closer and rubbed the covered head along the smooth strip of skin between Laine's balls and anus. Soft little strokes intended to get Laine used to a cock probing his entrance.

The tension still hadn't eased from Laine's muscles. He lay with his arms tucked in under his body. He appeared small and passive and totally at odds with his demand.

Tony inched his cock head into Laine's lubed hole. As he forged forward, the hot swathe of Laine's body enveloped him in breath-stealing heat. When his balls nudged the firm flesh of Laine's butt cheeks, a long shudder filtered through him, part pleasure part relief. He'd begun to think he was never going to plough all the way home.

"Fuck. You are..."

Laine lifted his head. "What?"

“Hot. Intense. Like...” Like the first time he’d ever fucked a guy. He recalled the perfect blend of awe and delight at the sensation of sinking in such a gripping heat. “Like a furnace.”

“Very poetic.” Laine didn’t sound overly impressed. He sighed and wriggled again. The snaky roll of his hips sent a thrilling jolt through Tony’s body.

“Oh, yeah.” Tony shuddered. “That’s good.”

“I’m not doing it for you.” Laine pushed back and hitched his calves under him, raising his arse higher in the air. “Let me move!”

Tony hissed, but went on his knees to accommodate this new position. He rocked back and forth, familiarising himself with the silken walls of Laine’s arse, waiting for a groan of approval or encouragement. Just something.

“Tony, please.” Laine raised his head off the pillow again. His left cheek bloomed the colour of a ripe cherry. “I’m not fragile. I won’t break. I like to fuck hard.”

Right. And the customer gets what the customer asks for, even if said customer looked as though hard sex for him was doing it on the floor. Tony braced himself on his knees, and blanked the pain. He gritted his teeth and yanked Laine’s hips back against him.

Laine’s breath wheezed from his lungs, and he pitched face first into the plump depths of the pillow.

With his cock smothered in heat, Tony shuddered out a single word. “Better?”

Laine pulled himself up. He grabbed hold of the padded headboard with both hands.

“Much.” He ground out the word through his teeth.

Good. Tony tightened his grip. This wasn’t the easiest of positions for his knee, but Laine’s body hugged him so firmly he couldn’t help but obey his urges despite the promise of retribution to come.

He worked a quick, punchy rhythm. His heartbeat pulsed through his head and tangled with the throbbing fire in his knee.

Laine pushed back against him with well-practised ease, defying any evidence of the inexperience Tony had suspected. Just nerves after all.

The fine bones of Laine’s spine arched against his belly. Sweat lubricated their skin. The scent of the blasted oil entwined with the earthier aroma of their slick bodies and charged the air with the heady spice of sex.

Tony reached around their bodies and gripped Laine's shaft. Uncertainty had stopped him from grappling the magnificent beast before. The first time he'd tried to touch, Laine took his hand and led him to the bed. The second time, Laine rolled away. Now Tony grasped the thick shaft in a tight fist and worked up short, rapid strokes that had Laine gasping in harmony to his own rapid breaths.

The bedsprings creaked out a tuneless percussion in accompaniment to the headboard thrashing against the wall. A muffled tapping joined the rhythm of sounds, similar to bony knuckles thumping plasterboard. The people in the next room obviously didn't appreciate a couple of guys fucking with the vigour of wild dogs. Tony filtered out everything but the harsh breaths snorting from his lungs, the sparse flesh of Laine's hips, and the silken heat clenching his shaft.

His balls burned with the urge to come. His knee throbbed with the impending collapse. Just when he thought he'd have to surrender his own orgasm first even if doing broke one of Brendon's cardinal rules, Laine tensed and groaned. A flurry of goose bumps freckled across his back. His cock jerked once, then twice, filling the condom with heat beneath Tony's fingers.

Tony continued to pump his hips, slowly now, savouring the smooth rhythmic pulses squeezing his shaft. The smooth wash of release flowed from him as naturally as if he'd fucked purely for pleasure. Each wave of sensation shuddered over and through him, leaving him exhausted but pain-free if only for a fraction of a moment.

When Laine sagged towards the headboard, the tension in Tony's muscles seeped away. In its wake his knee throbbed as though a psychotic acupuncturist-cum-sadist had shoved a dozen rusty needles through the bone.

He buried his face in Laine's shoulder and hoped the pained moans that escaped his lips had passed as the final throes of orgasm. He pulled out of Laine's arse and collapsed on his back, drenched in sweat and fighting for breath.

His knee punched out fireballs with each frenetic beat of his heart. He shut his eyes and pictured an icepack to douse the flames. He fought the hot sting of tears and hoped Laine was too caught in the aftermath to notice.

"Are you all right?" Laine asked, his shadow descending, weakening the blaze from the chandelier above.

Tony turned his face away. Wet warmth slicked across the bridge of his nose and seeped into the pillow.

"Yeah." He had difficulty keeping his voice even, let alone believable.

Firm fingers grasped his chin and forced his head around. Laine swept away the hot sting of humiliation with his fingertips. "And the truth?"

"It's nothing." Tony swallowed. "Knee hurts a bit, that's all."

Laine gaze scanned his body and centred on the tapestry of scars criss-crossing his knee. "Why didn't you say before?"

"It's not my place to say."

"Of course it is. We could've made allowances."

Allowances. Like fuck! Tony glared at the ceiling rather than at his client. "I'm not a fucking cripple."

Laine's gaze weighed heavy on his chest. "I never said that you were."

After a while he felt a soft tug at his dick as Laine deftly slipped the condom off his cock. Then his knee was lifted with gentle but cool fingers, and a pillow placed beneath. *As if that would make a damned bit of difference.*

Laine traced the scars with a light touch. "This doesn't hurt?"

"No." In truth the cool, fluid touch helped soothe the blistering heat inside.

"What about when you're dancing? How do you cope with the pain?"

Tony closed his eyes. "I manage." He injected his resentment into his tone hoping Laine would get the message and shut up.

The mattress barely dipped as Laine stretched out besides him. "Is that why you're doing this?"

So much for taking the hint. "Doing what?"

"Sleeping with people you're not attracted to for money."

That was a little strong, and not precisely true. He'd discovered a level of attraction with Laine, and he'd definitely had worse sex. Still, he'd never had a guy he'd bedded question him so thoroughly before. To be fair, he'd never had a guy pay to be bedded by him either.

"I need the cash." Simple honesty was probably going to be the easiest way to stop the questions.

“Why? Are you in trouble?”

Trouble. The word cut through his ears. He'd involved himself, most times unwittingly, in trouble for years. Rarely of the financial variety. He'd grown up with a thrifty grandmother who never lived beyond her means. He recalled her coupons boxes and her odds and ends bag full of material scraps for repairing his clothes. *Never throw out anything 'til it's beyond repair,* was her motto.

Tony had come to the point where he'd like to toss his damaged knee away. But he was too young for a replacement. He had only one option open to him, which mean making a lot of money fast or risk serious debt for the first time in his life.

He opened his eyes. Laine peered down at him with clear interest.

“There's an operation, which could fix my knee,” he said carefully, because he wasn't certain he wanted to tell. But at the same time, Laine's cash was helping to fund the op. Maybe that gave Laine the right to know. “It's experimental, so the NHS won't cover the cost. If I have it, I won't need my whole knee replacing. They'll just regenerate the damaged cartilage instead.”

Laine's fingertips tickled over his belly with arousing softness. “Sounds expensive.”

“But worth it, I hope.” A million quid would be worth it to make him whole and fit enough to dance for real again rather than strutting around as nothing more than fuck fuel for desperate queens.

Laine's focus remained steady. “So, you'll have to do a lot of...of...”

“Whoring?” The word sat uncomfortably on his tongue but he'd have to get used to that. “I've not judged you. You do the same for me, yeah?”

Laine pressed his lips together. Something flitted across his gaze like a thought, swiftly brushed aside. “I can hardly judge you. I'm the one who's paying you to grace my rented bed, remember?”

It wasn't as if he was about to forget. “So what's your reasoning? I reckon it's more than you being...y'know, how you are.”

Laine frowned. “Why on earth would you care about my reasons?”

“I don't.” He did, though, and probably more than he'd care to admit. He tried for casual. “I'm just tired of talking about myself.”

Laine remained silent a while longer, then rolled away onto his back. The chill he left behind shivered down Tony's side.

"If you must know, tonight was - *is* - about control." It was Laine's turn to stare at the ceiling. "I get to control the evening, and to some extent you as well." He swallowed. "I wanted to be sure if I decided I couldn't go through with it, then you'd...back off."

What a weird assumption to make. Especially with a stranger. Tony didn't take too kindly to the idea Laine had assumed control just because money had exchanged hands. No one controlled Tony Barton. *Ever*. "And what if I didn't back off? You don't know me from Adam. I might've -"

"Adam?" Laine practically squawked. He sat sharply, pushing himself away across the mattress. His pupils had grown wide as pool balls. "What do you mean by Adam?"

Tony rose on his elbows, completely losing his train of thought. "Nothing," he said, half in confusion. "It's just a saying."

Laine tightened his fingers on the sheet at his hips. "Is it?" He sounded full of doubt.

"Yeah." Tony frowned. He assumed everyone knew. "Why? Who's Adam to you?"

Laine lowered his lashes. Shadows cast over his cheekbones. Sweat beaded his upper lip. He looked away. "No one. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Laine's shoulders dropped. He sighed. "For making a whole *thing* about a stupid saying."

"Hey, you can make a *thing* of whatever you like. We're still on your time."

"Are we?" Laine looked up, his eyes suddenly sparkling. "How long do I get to keep you for?"

"Why?" Tony flashed a lecherous grin. "You want to go again?"

A blush worked its way across Laine's face. "I enjoy your company and I'd like you to stay, that's all. Is that okay?"

"If that's what you want." Tony wasn't averse to hanging around for another hour or so. Just until most of the pain had worn off. He'd catch the late bus home. Then again, if Laine wanted more, he'd stay the night. This place carried more heat than his flat. More comfort too.

Laine smiled, then draped himself across Tony's hip and chest. He settled his cheek over Tony's left nipple. "Tony?"

The *Tony* came pre-loaded with another awkward question. He didn't reply.

Laine lifted his head and peered up into Tony's face. "Why did you tell me about your knee and your reasoning for doing what it is you do?"

"Because..." As if it needed repeating. "You asked." *The guy never stopped asking.*

"You might have easily told me to mind my own business."

"That wouldn't have been too polite."

Laine laughed, and Tony found the sound soft and pleasant on his eardrums. Laine should definitely laugh more often. "I don't think you have many hang ups about offending people."

That wasn't entirely true, but he could hardly call Laine out on it considering the way the first part of the evening had gone. Not entirely his fault, though, seeing as he'd been deceived. He supposed if he were honest, he might've handled things better.

"Okay. I figured why make a thing about it? It's hardly a secret. Or my life story."

A sly smile teased at Laine's lips. "That I'd like to hear."

There wasn't much to tell. He'd destroyed his life before it had begun. What mystery would that add to his allure? He still liked to play the bad boy, though his rebellious streak had once cost him his career and might do so again. "It'd give you nightmares."

Laine pouted. "I'm not a naïve little girl, Tony."

True enough. Tony accepted the heavy heat of Laine's cock nestling against his thigh as conclusive proof.

"Anyway," Laine added, his tone now matching his pout, "I have some stories of my own."

"What kind of stories?"

"Fairy stories, what else?" Laine hit the punch-line before Tony could make it. "Full of giggling elves and glittering rainbows, naturally."

Right. So somewhere along the line, Tony's off-the-cuff remark had damaged the fragile bond of client-customer relations. Still, Laine had thrown some sort of lacy gauntlet. Tony decided to pick it up before it got all dirty.

"Go on, then."

Laine blinked and leaned back. "Go on, what?"

"I love a good fairy story, me." He made a point of snuggling deeper into the mattress. "You got a grandma-eating wolf to go with those elves?"

Laine placed the flat of his palm to Tony's belly. "No." His gaze hardened. "But if you like wildlife, there's a snake in human form."

Ah, so maybe this wasn't so much a fictional tale. Tony didn't know how far he could take this, but his doubts weren't enough to stop him from asking his next question. After all, Laine had thrown plenty of them his way.

"How does this story begin?"

Uncertainty flickered across Laine's face. Now he'd been put on the spot, it appeared he wasn't quite so keen to spill. That was fair enough, too. They weren't here to get to know each other.

"I'm kidding." Tony stroked Laine's cooling shoulder with his thumb. "You don't have to tell me. You can kick me out instead."

"No. I'm not ready for you to leave yet." He resettled his cheek over Tony's nipple as if to hold Tony there. His breath pulsed across to the other nipple, which sent a flood of untimely arousal to Tony's groin. "I'll tell you. If you want to listen."

"Sure." Tony's voice weakened. His erection did exactly the opposite.

"Well, like all fairytales, good and bad," Laine continued evenly, as if he couldn't feel Tony's dick thickening against his thigh, "the story begins with once upon a time."

Chapter Six

Tony closed his eyes. He tried to focus less on the nagging heat at his groin and more on Laine's words. He had no idea what kind of story this was going to turn out to be, but he'd bet his entire night's earnings another guy was involved. He'd even add a week's worth of tips that the guy's name would turn out to be Adam. Still, he'd rather listen to Laine than take centre-stage himself again.

"Once upon a time there lived a glorious princess called...Lana."

Tony opened his eyes. "Lana?"

"Short for A-Lana."

"Like Laine could be short for E-laine?"

Laine paused. "Could be but isn't."

"So this isn't about —"

"*Anyway*. Lana was in love with a handsome prince called Ad- Aidan."

"Prince Aidan?"

"Yes."

"I don't see Wills and Kate calling any of their kids Aidan."

Laine lifted his head and scowled. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

Tony bit his own tongue. Surprisingly he actually did. If only to find out more about why someone like Laine had paid him a ludicrous sum for a ten minute sex session. "I'm listening."

Laine laid his cheek on Tony's chest. He smoothed his hot palm across Tony's belly. The tingle that shot straight to Tony's balls did nothing to quell the excitement beneath the sheet. "The princess had a rival for the prince's affections."

"The snake?"

"Yes."

"Was he like a pet cobra? Or more of a trouser snake?" Tony wished Laine would shift his wandering hand a bit lower.

Laine issued a very male sounding grunt. "A snake in the grass. In human form. His name was Oliver and he was the prince's...footman. They were and, I suppose, still are, close friends. They used to attend...um...jousting and knight classes together." He paused again,

and Tony's brain ticked over. Adam and this Oliver, if that was his real name, went to school or uni together. Got it. "Oliver had always had a crush on the prince, but the prince never noticed. All the courtiers around him knew, though. Even his beloved princess had caught the depths of Oliver's affection for his oldest friend."

Tony had a question, but he needed permission to speak. He cleared his throat.

"What is it?" Laine asked, a tad snappily.

"Did the prince and the footman have a thing together in the past?"

Laine's hesitation confirmed Tony's suspicions before he spoke. "Perhaps once. A long time before the prince and princess met. But the princess didn't want to dwell on his past. She was in love. The prince loved her, too....but only when she dressed as a boy."

Laine spoke the last sentence so quietly Tony wasn't sure he was supposed to hear. But he had, and he could see why that might be a relationship breaker of itself. "Difficult situation," he said, eventually.

"She didn't mind," Laine said quickly. "She'd have done anything to please him."

"What about pleasing herself?"

"She was happy if he was happy." His voice took on an authoritative tone. "That's how relationships work. Besides, she liked to kid herself it was only about the clothes. What do clothes matter when you're in love?"

If that's how Laine imagined real relationships worked, he was more messed up than Tony thought. Still, the story had already darkened from the promise of glittering rainbows enough that Tony's erection faltered. He waited for Laine to continue.

"The prince and princess grew closer over the course of a few months, and eventually she moved into his castle. Oliver didn't approve, of course. Oh, he acted the perfect footman to the princess's face, but behind her back he was secretly plotting to get rid of her."

"How did she know he was plotting?"

"Well, Prince Aidan travelled a lot with his princely duties to far away kingdoms, leaving his princess at home alone in her castle. One night, while the prince was away on business in a distant land, Oliver invited her for a drink. She thought he was finally making the effort to be a friend. She agreed to accompany him to the local ale house for one drink. Only, little did she realise the drink was loaded with dark magic. As soon as she'd drunk it, her memory disappeared."

“What do you mean she lost her memory?” Tony tried to keep his voice unaffected, but how could he not be? This fairy story was turning into something darker than a nightmare. His erection had deflated a while ago, now his will to lie there peacefully as Laine finished telling this story dwindled, too.

“Well, she woke the following morning in bed and naked.” For the first time in a while, Laine met meet Tony’s gaze. “She had no idea how she got there. She was alone, but she knew she’d had sex because she ached inside.” His voice grew so quiet Tony strained to hear. “Later, she found a couple of condoms floating around in the toi -- the privy bowl. She was confused, and didn’t understand why Aidan’s luggage was in the hall, but there was no sign of him anywhere in the apartment.”

The penny began to drop. Only, it wasn’t so much of a penny, it was more a boulder, hurtling a long way down a fucking great well. He didn’t want to say the next words but he had to. He needed to get this straight in his head.

“So, this Oliver spiked your – her - drink at some club, and raped her?”

“No.” Laine shook his head. “Oliver isn’t- wasn’t - the sort of man to do things himself. He’d never touch m – *her* that way. She believes that he must have paid someone to do it for him.”

Someone else? Someone who’d take money to do...*that* to someone? He swallowed. “Who?”

Laine’s eyes shimmered as they filled with tears. “She had no idea. Not at the time. Later, she discovered that Adam knew of him. He was some vile troll who skulked around in the gutters, looking for any opportunity to strike.”

Setting aside for the moment his revulsion of the troll, something else needed clarifying. “He spiked her drink and sent her home with some low-life just so when her bloke got home, he’d assume she’d cheated?”

“That’s more or less it,” Laine said quietly. “Lana didn’t know Aiden was coming home on an earlier fli- carriage. He wanted it to be a surprise. He’d told Oliver, though.”

Tony had no words. He couldn’t begin to translate the events of that night to this one. “Tell me you – she – tell me she went to the police.”

Laine shook his head. "She couldn't bear to have them poking her about, asking questions and making judgements. In the end it would be his word against hers. And since the prince already took the footman's side, why would anyone else believe her?"

Tony sat, dragging his arm free. His numb fingertips surged with pins and needles, but the sudden heat didn't go near the space in his chest, the same space where Laine had so recently laid his cheek.

"What's the matter?" Laine asked as Tony swung his legs out of bed.

He sat on the edge of the mattress and stifled the urge to punch something. This had nothing to do with him. He'd provided a service and been paid in advance. Now, he could go and forget this fairy story had ever been told.

"I've got to be somewhere." He stood and stalked to the foot of the bed He dragged on his trousers and shirt. He'd have to go home and spend an hour in the shower scrubbing the stench of whoredom from his skin.

"You do believe me, though? Adam doesn't. I mean Aidan...oh what does it matter now anyway? Just don't feel bad. I did plan tonight. That's why I spent so much money, because I wanted it to be special. In a way it was. And, though I wasn't sure this would work, I was determined to go through with it. Just so I don't need to feel afraid anymore. Of sex, I mean. I don't regret a moment."

"Go through with it?" Tony paused with his jacket half on. He turned towards the bed. "Fuck. You're making me out to be as bad as him."

"As who?"

"That guy...." He opened and closed his mouth, searching for an appropriate word to fit between his lips. He could think of nothing low enough to describe such scum. "The troll."

"Oliver was worse than the troll," Laine said quietly.

Tony pushed his other arm through the jacket's sleeve. "This wasn't the right thing to do."

"What, telling you? I'm beginning to realise that." Laine knelt on the bed, junk on display and yet Tony couldn't look away from his ashen face. "So what was the right thing?"

Tony stared into eyes full of hurt and pain and...yeah, delusions, if Laine thought this was a way to reconcile what had happened to him. "It should have been with someone you care for. Not me. You don't even know me."

Laine raked a hand through his hair. "That's impossible. I can't let myself care for anyone ever again. Not after Adam. This was the only way. Why are you so upset? I don't understand."

No, he genuinely seemed not to. He sat there on the bed, naked and sweaty from sex. His head tilted and his big eyes blinking and waiting for an explanation about why Tony felt sickened to the depths of his fucking soul.

"You need to go to the police." Tony turned away before he said a whole lot of stuff best left unspoken.

"There wouldn't be any point. Too much time has passed. There's no evidence. I still don't remember a thing about that night. I don't think I ever will."

"You remembered plenty enough to tell me about it. And, *fuck*, I wish you hadn't." As if he didn't feel grubby enough in his desperation for cash already. When he glanced over his shoulder, Laine gazed at him as though he were quite insane.

"I wanted you to listen. You encouraged me. I don't understand why you're being like this."

Tony turned all the way around. "What, because I'm a whore I don't have feelings? Is that what you think?"

Laine's jaw dropped open. "Of course not."

Letting some of his anger get the better of him, he strode all the way back to the bed and pushed his face into Laine's. "Get this, Lawson. I do feel stuff. I didn't sign up for this. I'm not some kind of bargain basement therapy session."

"Bargain basement?" Laine practically shrieked. "I should say not. You cost me over a week's wages."

At those words, every bit of the pleasure that had served to warm Tony towards this guy curled up and died right there in his belly. He spun away on the balls of his feet.

"Tony, please..." were the last words he heard from Laine that night.

It was a long walk home. Weird how, despite the rain and the stench of stale beer from the drunk sitting across from him, and even with the waft of scented oils clinging determinedly to his skin, he still reeked like a rent boy all the way to his door.

Chapter Seven

Once inside his flat he took a hot shower, but couldn't rid his nostrils of the potent stench of the fancy oil. The scent mocked him just enough to prevent him from crawling into bed, yanking the covers over his head, and making out the past few hours never happened. So he paced much of the night away in between bouts of nicotine and caffeine. Once dawn threatened to pierce through his drawn blinds, he fixed a breakfast he couldn't eat and sat there staring at the wall he'd filled with photographs taken back in the days he was whole and able to dance.

A long time ago he resigned himself to the fact he'd never make the English National Ballet. His failure ached like a death sentence. A constant reminder of how he'd wrecked his future. Maybe he'd overreacted with Laine, but he felt exactly as though he'd been *the vile troll who skulked in the gutter snuffling for opportunities*.

How could he ever come to terms with selling sex to damaged people like Laine? He wasn't disgusted at the guy, but he'd taken out the disgust he felt for himself on Laine. The last thing Laine had needed was a fuck from some third-rate-dancer-cum-fourth-rate-prostitute, but, then again, he could probably have done without Tony's judgement either.

Tony smoked another cigarette and made a jug of coffee. Thick and black. He drank two steaming cupfuls. Then, because he didn't know how else to reconcile what had happened last night, he grabbed his jacket and made for the door.

He arrived back at the hotel before ten, having jogged half the way from the bus stop. He limped into the lobby, all set to leave the envelope at the front desk. He hoped Laine hadn't yet checked out.

When he entered, two things sprung to his attention. Firstly the snotty receptionist had been replaced by an older, less severe looking woman. Secondly, the long and toned legs belonging to a customer this side of the desk had drawn the focus of every straight guy in the lobby and one gay guy besides. He waited for Laine to turn around and notice him.

"Tony? What are you doing here?" She didn't sound pleased, or particularly displeased. Simply...surprised.

She'd put her feminine face on, but now he knew the truth his eye was naturally drawn to the broad curve of her jaw and the heavier brow line. But if he were meeting her for

the first time, he wouldn't have guessed she was anything other than a stunning woman. And when she was dressed like this, he couldn't think of her as anything other than a woman either.

"I came to give you this." He took a painful step forward and offered out the envelope.

"What is it?"

"Please. Just take it."

She hesitated only for a moment before doing as he asked.

Tony shoved his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet on the shiny marble floor. This would have gone a lot more simply had he arrived that little bit earlier and was able to leave the money at the desk.

"I guess," he said, eventually, "that in technical terms, it's what you'd call a refund."

"What?" She used one of her long nails to tear into the envelope, and peered in at the money nestled inside. Two hundred pounds. He didn't have enough in his account to reimburse her for Brendon's cut, or the food he'd consumed, but maybe she'd allow him to owe the rest.

"Tony, I don't want a refund." Her words echoed around the cavernous lobby. She lowered her voice. "You already know I'm perfectly happy with the service you provided."

He bit down on his irritation. "I'm not a fucking service. I'm not a whore either." He nodded at the cash in her hand. "There's your proof."

"But, what about your operation?"

He shrugged. "I'll find some other way to make the money. I've lived with this for six years. I can do another couple if I have to." In truth, he couldn't. His time to retire was close. Maybe something else would come up in the meantime. Other than his cock for cash. "Pay off your plastic. Or use the money to go home."

"Home?" She spoke as though the word was foreign, and the meaning eluded her.

"Visit your sister."

"No. It's impossible. Not after what I did."

"She doesn't know, does she?"

"But I do." Laine shook her head. "I can't face her."

Tony itched to touch her, to pull her to him, anything but leave her there thinking she was alone. He was intimately acquainted with the hollow pit of solitude and loneliness, and how all the casual sex in the world did little to ease the darkness. He wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone, least of all Laine.

"Being with your family has to be better than paying for services from losers like me. You're better than that."

She gazed steadily at him. "So are you. And you're not a *fucking* service, remember?" Her lips tugged towards a smile they couldn't quite reach.

Tony stared at his reflection peering back at him in the shiny floor. "What happened, I mean, the way I acted with you last night. Saying that shit, then walking out. My anger wasn't anything to do with you. Or the choices you made. I'm not cut out for this line of work. I realise that now." He shrugged. "So thanks for helping me find that out."

"It doesn't do much for a girl's self-esteem if I've put you off sex."

Tony looked up. *What?* "No. That's not what this is about." *Hell.* How had he led her to believe — ?

"Tony, I'm teasing." She stuffed the envelope inside her handbag. "Now, before you rush off, do you have time for breakfast? I know this gorgeous Italian coffee shop on the high street. My treat."

Although he'd already shared dinner with Laine, and a bed for a part of the night, he'd also learned things he'd rather not know. Not only about her, but himself as well. A year ago he'd never have contemplated involving himself in the seedier side of Brendon's business. And a few hours ago he'd never have imagined someone like Laine would, either. But, he couldn't forget her confiding in him had shoved him off the slippery slope that began at stripping and ended at outright prostitution. The cold shiver crawling across his skin helped make up his mind.

"I got time. But I'll treat you, okay?" He had a spare fiver, enough to cover two coffees. His reward was a full, glossy smile. "Here. Let me take that." He reached out for the handle of her case, a little pink overnight bag on wheels, and sod his reputation, as long as he was with Laine, no one was going to judge him for taking it.

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About the Author

Ash Penn is a published author from the UK. There are no fairytale romances in the world her characters inhabit. She writes about people who learn to love one another despite their faults. And usually, her characters have a lot of faults.

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