



August's Thief

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Love works in mysterious ways.

August Angel walks in shadow. Permanently disfigured after a childhood accident, he's failed at finding love the conventional way and spends most of his days lonely and alone. As a last hope, he signs up to CUPID, a dating agency boasting a 100% success rate.

Collecting his first date from a police holding cell is not the promising start August anticipated. Dawson, a sassy unrepentant thief, is not the ideal boyfriend material he's been assured. But Dawson needs someone to pay his fine and August has money to spare.

As Cupid might say, they are a perfect match.

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CHAPTER 1

“Good afternoon. Make yourself at home. I’m CUPID.”

I’d been warned about this: the stern disembodied voice and the sterile room, empty save for a pink couch, a low table adjacent and a box of tissues. A peculiar set-up—all of it. But I’d failed to find love or even regular sex using conventional dating apps, so what did I have to lose? CUPID’s marketing boasted a one hundred per cent success rate in discovering a perfect match.

Every rule had an exception.

“We’ve been reviewing your dating history, August Angel,” purred CUPID from somewhere behind my head. “Quite the read.”

“Yes.”

My face heated. CUPID’s background checks had been rather thorough .

“Your Bumble profile was particularly amusing,” they added. “Shall I remind you of it?”

I hadn’t joined the app to provide entertainment. “Um... no, I’d rather you didn’t.”

No reminder necessary. That miserable attempt at finding love proved the final nail in the coffin. In desperation, I’d uploaded my photo and bio upside down, hoping some horny sod would turn their screen around and swipe right by mistake. And a few

cack-handed souls did; three even made it as far as meeting up. After asking why I had minestrone soup dripping down one side of my face, the first didn't even hang around long enough to order a beer. The second knocked back the lion's share of a bottle of wine, then suggested I join a monastery. The third, a pleasant chap named Alfie, turned out to be married and straight. Afterwards, in the pub car park, he offered me fifty quid in exchange for a blow job. We still texted occasionally.

"I suggest you break ties with Alfie. Not good for your mental health."

Christ, had this bot wormed their way into my brain?

"And anyhow, you won't need him. Not by the time we've finished with you."

No win, no fee. I admired CUPID's confidence. And their bluntness. Not that I found their company especially comfortable.

"Can we... um... move on, please? I'm paying you a considerable amount of money to find love, not rake over my previous disasters."

"So impatient!" CUPID hummed. "Very well. Close your eyes, August Angel. Relax. Breathe. Empty your mind. Then, in your own time, tell me what your heart desires."

Hah! That was just cruel.

"Allow your heart to run free."

I let out a groan. Run free? My heart had barely learned how to crawl.

"I... I want a... a man. A man I can tuck under my arm," I began. And my face heated again, because in the grand scheme of priorities 'a man I can tuck under my arm' might not be at the top. More to the point, beggars like me couldn't be choosers.

I should have just stopped at man.

“That’s good, August,” purred CUPID. “Keep going.”

Fuck it. In for a penny and all that. “I want a... a femme. Someone that likes to fool around with mascara and shit. With fabulous eyes gazing up at me like I’m everything he ever wanted too. Like he really needs me. Someone who sees beyond this shitty mess on my face. Sees beyond my pots of money but lets me spend it on him anyhow. Lets me dress him like a fucking doll. Lets me wait on him hand and foot. Pretty hands, pretty feet—I’m a sucker for pretty toes. A toe sucker. I want someone who lets me worship him like a disciple. Someone who curls up under my... my wing, for want of a better word, and lets me love him like he’s never known love before.”

Thank fuck the room didn’t have a mirror; my face must have been scarlet. The normal half, at least. Christ, what on earth had possessed me to spew all that? And where had it all come from? As the silence stretched, a dreadful thought struck me that this might be an elaborate set-up.

At last, CUPID gave a computerised version of a dry cough. “Is that... all?”

Was that sarcasm? “Yes, pretty much. I mean, it would help if he was quite local too. Not too far from London. But I’d fly to the ends of the earth for the right guy. And I’d... I’d care for him, with everything I have.”

A sigh echoed around the room, like a draft of cool air. “You have a very big heart, August Angel.”

I swallowed. “Yes, I do.”

The biggest. A huge fucking cavern overflowing with love and affection and no one

to offer it to. And right now, it was on the cusp of sobbing. “You’re not... not like other dating agencies, are you?”

“Glad you noticed,” answered CUPID drily.

“You think outside the box.”

In reply, CUPID made a tinkly little laugh, like silver bells. “Outside the box? Sweet, sweet August Angel. Look around you. Don’t you see? There is no box.”

“Not for you maybe.” By now my self-pitying tears were flowing freely. I made a hopeless gesture towards my hideous, disfigured face. “I’ve been trapped inside this one all my life.”

The purpose of the tissues became evident. As I made use of them, CUPID stayed quiet.

“So, what’s the grand plan?” I asked once I could trust my voice again. “Plastic surgery? A face transplant? A paper bag over my head?”

That tinkly laugh again. “Goodness me, no, August. None of that will be necessary at all! We’re not in the business of changing the cards you’ve been dealt; we’re here to play a poor hand well. And I have splendid news. Open your phone and click on the CUPID app. Your perfect match is ready and waiting!”

On cue, my phone pinged, and a throbbing pink heart appeared on the screen. Misery morphed into trepidation as my finger hovered over it. If this whole thing was a set-up designed to part lovelorn wealthy men from their cash, then it was an extremely elaborate one.

“Don’t be shy, August. Reach out, touch your heart. Reveal your perfect match.”

I pressed once, and the cartoon heart shimmered under my finger, then dissolved. The blurred outline of a man took its place. Fuck, how I needed this to work, almost as if my life depended on it. The image sharpened, and my own heart began pumping wildly. Then nearly stopped altogether.

I stared and stared at the photograph filling the screen. Through bottomless pupils, big and round, a vision of pretty, pretty perfection stared back.

“His name is Dawson,” offered CUPID, though I was hardly listening, already sucked into the screen. Those eyes, my goodness, those eyes. Violet pools, like old lavender crushed between the pages of a dusty, long-forgotten diary. The colour of rich wives’ jewels sparkling from heavy ropes of gold. Of fragile veins, of thunderclouds. And their watchful expression: a little sweet, a little sad, a little wary, a whole lot naughty.

“He’s a delight, is he not? You can’t see his hands and feet, but I am confident they will be to your liking.”

I tore my gaze from the eyes, though they followed me regardless. White-blond hair framing porcelain skin. CUPID had sent me a malevolent pixie—a turned-up nose in a heart-shaped face, plush lips made for kissing, now twisted in a knowing smirk. Wiry, thin arms folded across a cropped T-shirt the colour of fresh peaches.

Tell me what your heart desires.

“What’s the catch?” I demanded. “There must be a catch.”

“Why, sweet August Angel? Why must there be a catch?”

I gave a shaky laugh, still unable to drag my eyes away from the young man taking ownership of my screen. Perfect match? In my wildest fantasies, maybe. “Trust me, there’s always a catch. No way would a guy like this even look twice at a man like

me.”

“And you should trust me,” CUPID answered in a steely tone. “Dawson is your perfect match. I can feel it in my bones.”

I scoffed. “Do bots even have bones?”

“Yes, plastic ones. Now listen, your date is lined up for this evening. I’m sending you a time and an address.”

CUPID sounded awfully confident. Ah well, at the very least it would be dinner out at a smart restaurant. And hopefully across the table from a stunning companion. Unless this Dawson took one look at me and fled. “Okay,” I sighed. “You’re the boss. What’s the dress code?”

A hint of hesitancy. For the first time, CUPID appeared a little less certain. “Ah... shall we say... smart casual should suffice? And you may need a small amount of um... cash.”

“So there is a catch.” I knew it. This Dawson was too good to be true. “Come on, out with it.”

“Goodness me, is that the time? Show yourself out, August. I’ll send you the details via the app.” The bot made a little coughing noise just as my phone pinged again, and a message flashed across the screen: Time: 6.30 p.m . Place: Bethnal Green Police Station . Fine: not met, set at ?70 .

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CHAPTER 2

Counting down the days to retirement, a bored desk copper led me to the holding pen. I heard my perfect match while I was signing a form and paying his fine, way before I clapped eyes on him. Yelling at chatterbox speed with a voice like incoming artillery. “And then I said to him, what you arresting me for? Cuteness? ’Cos I’ve also got a set of guns and a six-pack if you wanna see ’em.” A round of guffaws interrupted the flow. “So, then the copper said, ‘shut the fuck up,’ or he was gonna leave the cuffs on. ‘Yes please,’ I said, ‘or maybe you could swap them for that pink furry pair sticking out your back pocket?’ Lad blushed the colour of your sweater, mate. I reckon he was only about nineteen. And then I said, ‘do you want me to put my ’ands where you can hold?—’”

“Hey, Dawson,” my companion butted in. “Pipe down. The cavalry’s arrived. You’re going home—give the rest of us a bit of peace.”

Another couple of guffaws. We rounded a corner to find two raggedly dressed blokes, of the kind seeking somewhere warm for the night, lounging on the cold floor of the holding cell. A third, very blond and slight of build, stood with his back to us, waving his arms like he was conducting an orchestra. Dawson. My perfect match . He spun around, my view of him obscured by the burly copper lumbering ahead of me.

“What, has my knight in shining armour finally come to get me out of here?”

Hefting a huge set of keys from his uniform pocket, the copper snorted. “More like that geezer from The Phantom of the Opera . But he’s paid up, and he’s taking you home. Thank fuck.” He turned to me. “When you get sick of him, mate, do us all a

favour and don't bring him back.”

Dawson sniggered. “As if I'd let him.” He patted one of his cellmates on the shoulder. “Later, Pete. See ya, Derek. And remember: deny, deny, deny, all right?”

And then, before I knew it, I was back behind the wheel of my car, with the addition of a nosy, talkative, criminal passenger.

“Who the fuck are you, then? You'd better not be a psycho 'cos I've got things I need to do. People to see, places to be. Know what I mean?”

“I'm...erm.” God, it sounded ridiculous. I pushed on. “Er... CUPID sent me? The dating app? We had a date tonight?”

“Shit, yeah, did we? Fuck.” Dawson slapped his palm against his head. “Completely forgot. Sorry about that. As you can see, something came up. Can we go to Tesco instead?”

My life hadn't veered out of its lane so much as hit a road bump and bounced into a totally foreign traffic system, one possibly belonging in an alternative universe. This whirlwind, now opening the glove box and sliding the car seat back and forth like he'd never sat on a bloody adjustable seat, was supposed to be my perfect match?

“Nice set of wheels, mate.” His blush-pink painted nails tapped approvingly on the Porsche dashboard. “Is it nicked?”

“No!” Flicking a switch, I fired up the engine, pressing my foot on the accelerator and applying much more throttle than necessary to reverse out of a police station car park. Like a kid in a sweet shop and wiggling in his seat, my companion fiddled with the air con. A jet of hot air blasted the both of us. Dawson beamed with delight.

“How old are you?” I asked as we entered the stream of traffic edging towards the centre of town.

“Twenty-six.”

My arse. “How old are you really?”

“Twenty-three,” he admitted and threw me a cheeky wink. “In six months from now. So, Tesco supermarket, yeah? I need some gear. Go left up here for a couple of miles and then third off the roundabout. Can’t miss it. It’s got a massive blue-and-red sign.”

“I know what Tesco looks like.”

He laughed. “Just checking, mate. What with you being so posh and everything. Unless it’s fake posh.” He frowned. “I told CUPID I didn’t want posh. How posh are you?”

No point lying, he’d been eyeing up my Patek Philippe since we set off. “Fairly,” I confessed.

“Do you know Prince Harry?”

“Um... yes? Although we’re not close. He’s my ah... second cousin.” A nugget of information I rarely shared, but the surprise it rendered tended to afford me a second to catch my breath. I pointed to my face. “I don’t often get invited to the family photo shoots, though.”

“Can’t think why,” Dawson responded with a chuckle. “Some of them royals look like the back-end of a horse. You wouldn’t stand out in a line-up, that’s for sure. Are you loaded?”

“Um... yes? I guess?”

He nodded as if expecting as much. “Cool beans. In that case, I’ll let CUPID off for sending someone posh. Anyhow, thanks for picking me up.”

“And paying your fine,” I pointed out.

Another laugh. “Yeah, cheers. I’d say I’ll pay you back, but then I’d be lying. I’m skint. I never pay the fines. Which means I do fuck loads of community service. Me getting arrested does the council a huge favour. You won’t find a scrap of litter in Bethnal Green. What’s your name, then? I’m Dawson.”

“August. August Angel.”

“Ooh, very swanky. Hang a left here. Corners nicely, doesn’t it? Wouldn’t have bought it in green, though. Fuck-off yellow’s the best colour for a Porsche.”

I felt dizzy by the time we arrived at Tesco. And determined not to let disappointment overwhelm me as my passenger leapt out. CUPID had been my last chance saloon. Chalking it up as one of my shortest dates yet, I didn’t notice Dawson open the door on my side until his high tenor lisped in my ear. “Are you coming, Gussie? I thought we were on a date. There’s a nice café out the front, open til nine. They do a lovely coffee and scone for only two quid. We can go there before I do my shopping, if you like. I’ll treat you, seeing as you coughed up for the fine. Unless you’re too posh for Tesco.”

I was not, and had never been, too posh for Tesco. Though I didn’t enjoy supermarkets, preferring to purchase groceries online to avoid the rude stares of random strangers and blunt comments from small children. While Dawson queued at the café counter, I chose a table for two, positioning myself with my worst side next to the window.

“What’s that shit on your face, then?” Dawson asked as he slid into the plastic seat opposite. Seemed I wasn’t going to avoid blunt comments after all. He pushed a mug of something brown and wet across the table, then proceeded to heap sugar into his own. “You can be mother,” he added, pointing to the little jug of milk. Then he began attacking his scone. “Romantic this, innit?”

I poured milk for both of us. “A burn.” In general, I left it at that.

In general, other people also left it at that.

Dawson stirred his coffee. “How?”

“In a car accident when I was a small child.” I stared out across the gloomy car park. “My father was an alcoholic and crashed into a tree. Him and my mother died. I don’t have siblings.”

Dawson’s lips pursed. “They skipped that episode of The Crown , didn’t they?”

I looked back to find his extraordinary eyes examining my burn. His frank gaze travelled from my left temple, where my thick black hair refused to grow over shiny, tight skin, across to my ragged stump of an ear and then down along the line of my cheek and jaw. Except it wasn’t a line, more of a purple treacly slide, disappearing below my collar.

“It makes you look pissed off all the time, where it pulls your mouth down.” He indicated to his own beautifully shaped lower lip, coated with a light sheen of gloss matching his nails.

I am pissed off all the time . “Yes, it does.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Sometimes. In cold weather. Why were you arrested?”

“Shoplifting,” he answered, taking a huge bite of scone. He spoke as he chewed. “From the supermarket. I don’t nick much, just a bit of stuff here and there that takes my fancy.”

Oh joy, I was consuming stolen goods.

“Not Tesco,” he added reassuringly. “Nor Sainsbury’s—I’m banned from Sainsbury’s, actually. Today I was caught in the big Lidl down the road from here. God knows how; they’ve got shite security cameras.”

I frowned. “Don’t the police normally just take a statement after an arrest for petty shoplifting, then send a fine through the post? I thought they were too under-resourced for much more these days?”

“Not when they’ve caught you eight times this year already,” he answered, cheerfully dabbing at crumbs on his plate. His hands were smaller than mine, I noticed, and elegant. “And I might have offered the copper who arrested me a blow job. He didn’t take me up on it,” he asserted as my eyes widened. “His loss.”

Unable to come up with an adequate response, I sipped at my coffee. Not as bad as I’d expected. Dawson eyed my dry-looking scone hungrily. His scrawny frame needed it more than mine, and I indicated he could have it. He watched as I spread jam for him. “You don’t sound like you’re... um... very good at shoplifting,” I ventured.

“I’m amazing at it!” Dawson shook his blond head vigorously. “I nick stuff all the time—not always from Lidl; you have to spread the love around a bit, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Anxiety flashed across his face. “The copper warned me I might get a custodial sentence this time. Like, two or three weeks or something. Said they’ve brought in a new law to teach repeat offenders a lesson.” He licked jam off the knife. “That would be a fucking disaster. Hopefully, I’ll get away with it.”

In three noisy gulps, he chugged back most of his coffee, his good humour returned. “So, August Angel. Why’s a rich, posh bloke like you on a dating app?”

I spluttered with laughter. “Isn’t it evident? More to the point, why are you on a dating app?”

He grinned at me then, wide and impish. A grin of pure mischief and, for a fleeting second, if my brain could recall the necessary muscle groups, I’d have grinned back. “Saw some bloke logging into it next to me on the Tube. For a laugh, I pinched his access details. I don’t get out much and thought I might score a free dinner or something. Changed his name to mine, blagged the online interview, then had an appointment with that weird bot and everything. Simples. I nearly pissed myself laughing when they said they had the perfect match for me.” Those beguiling eyes latched on to mine; tearing my gaze away was hard.

“You, it turns out.” Pushing his food aside, his expression turned serious again. He leaned across the table and whispered, “So I’m guessing you must be dodgy too. What have you been done for?”

He raised a smile from me after all. It didn’t happen often; smiling contorted my mouth into an ugly snarl. Dawson didn’t seem fazed, though. “I haven’t been done for anything! I... I—” I trailed off. What did I do ? What defined me ? Moping? Aimlessly meandering around art galleries, alone? Buying paintings very few could afford? Wandering the estate like the ghost of Christmas past? Or hurtling down country lanes in the Porsche late at night, at crazy speeds, half hoping I’d hit a tree like my father before me?

“I manage the family estate,” I said at last, sounding awfully prim. “I inherited it when I turned twenty-one. It has a couple of farms, land, some houses, and... and antiques and things.”

Dawson threw me a wry look. “Cool story, bro, but it needs more dragons. What do you really do?”

Often wish I’d died in the crash too. “Exactly as I said. I... Not much, I’m afraid.”

For once, Dawson was lost for words. Slipping a couple of sugar and ketchup sachets into his pocket, he stood. “I’ll nip around the supermarket for a few things, then meet you back at the car. You can give me a lift home.”

He didn’t take long. The sky had darkened, and rain drizzled down the windscreen by the time Dawson tapped on it. He stashed a couple of bags in the tiny space behind our seats, keeping hold of one. “Bloody hell, it’s cold,” he commented as he climbed into the passenger seat. With a flash of white teeth, he shook his head like a dog, sprinkling droplets of rain over my pristine interior. His thin little T-shirt was wet through.

I reached into the narrow space behind his seat. “Here, I have an old sweater you can borrow.”

“Ta.”

We shared an awkward moment as he inclined his head towards me, indicating I should drop the opening of the sweater over him. “My hands are full,” he explained, rustling the bag. “You need a bigger car, Gussie.”

In the way one would dress a child, I found myself easing the garment over his head, and he stroked the soft wool admiringly. Knitted from light-grey Italian cashmere, the

sweater was not old at all. It suited him, although it was way too big. “You can keep it if you like. It doesn’t fit me anymore,” I lied.

As he began issuing directions, he delved into his shopping and retrieved a bag of boiled sweets. Humbugs, by the colour of them, like stripey black-and-white pebbles; I hadn’t tasted a humbug in years. With hardly a pause in his commentary, he popped one into his own mouth, then unwrapped a second and leaned over to me. “Open wide.”

He’d pushed it between my lips before I had the chance to object. “Food of the gods, Gussie,” he declared with a happy moan. “They make your cock hard.”

Oh Lord.

For the rest of the journey, the car was filled with the alternating sounds of Dawson crunching through brittle sweet shells followed by noisy sucking on soft toffee centres. Describing our date as peculiar was the height of understatement. Even more bizarre, I was on the edge of enjoying myself. And rediscovering a love of humbugs.

The trip ended almost too soon, by the crunching of Dawson’s fourth humbug. Under instruction, I pulled up outside a shabby row of shops, all in darkness and one boarded up. “That’s me,” he said, unclipping his seatbelt. “In the flat up there.” He pointed above the betting shop where a thin yellow light shone behind curtained windows. Twisting awkwardly, he hauled his bags through the gap between our seats.

“Do you need a hand with those?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I caught another flash of white in the gloom of the interior. “Bet you haven’t had a date like this before, have you?” He shoved the bags from his lap to his feet. “It isn’t over yet.”

I felt a twinge of alarm. “Isn’t it?”

He chuckled. “Nah, Gussie. We haven’t had a snog yet.”

A bigger man might have struggled to clamber across the gear stick. Not Dawson. Before I knew what was happening, his skinny arse was bouncing around in my lap. Then he stilled. “Can I touch it?” he whispered. Without waiting for an answer, he brought his hand up to my cheek. The tip of his thumb stroked down the melted, roughened contours, his touch as light as a butterfly wing. “Thanks for the date,” he breathed. “And for rescuing me by paying my fine and all. That you did that means a hell of a lot, but just so you know, that’s not why I’m going to kiss you.”

The thumb smoothed over my ragged ear. Maybe he had a deformity fetish—if I’d learned anything from dating apps, it was that there was a kink for everything. “So why do you want to?”

Now his hands were cupping both cheeks, the good and the bad, and he tilted my face up to his. Violet eyes perused mine. “Because you’re kind and nice, August Angel. My imperfect match.” His plump lips curved in a cheeky grin. “And you and your fancy sweater smell fucking divine.”

Then he kissed me, thoroughly, and that lush mouth was everything it promised.

CHAPTER 3

“He kissed me on the lips,” I said. And flushed. “No... no one ever does that.”

Three wintry days had passed, and I was back on the couch. This time, the box of tissues remained undisturbed.

“You like him,” said CUPID. A statement, not a question.

“Yes. Yes, I do. He’s...” The normal side of my face dimpled into a smile at the memory of Dawson’s long fingers poking from the sleeves of my sweater as he popped a sweet into my mouth. Only Dawson had made that happen in a very long time. Our kiss had tasted of sugar and peppermint; the taste had lingered on my drive home. “He’s not like anyone I have met before.”

I remembered his delicate features too, the neat line of his glossy lips, the jut of aristocratic cheekbones (there was the irony), the velvet pull of those violet eyes. My dimple vanished. “There’s not a cat’s chance in hell the feeling is mutual, of course. Dawson’s funny and clever and stunning. And I’m... not.”

CUPID tutted, a strange, mechanical sound. “Let’s review, shall we, before we jump to conclusions?” The dry schwiff of pages flipping filled the room.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, suspicious.

“I want a femme,” CUPID quoted, in an unnervingly accurate imitation of my own dull, cultured tone. “Someone that likes to fool around with mascara and shit. Was

Dawson wearing mascara?”

“Yes.” His beautifully applied make-up was one of the first things I noticed about him. In the pause that followed, I swore I heard a soft chuckle before CUPID continued, “With fabulous eyes that gaze up at me like I’m everything he ever wanted. Like he really needs me. Someone who sees beyond this shitty mess on my face. Who sees beyond my pots of?—”

“Yes, okay, I get your point. Who knows whether he sees beyond my pots of money, but he certainly let me spend it on him. Not that I mind—it’s only money. I have more than I could ever lose.”

More pages riffling. “Ah, here we are. Did Dawson let you dress him like a doll?”

“No! Don’t be ridic—” I stopped, and my face heated some more. “Well, yes. Sort of. But only because his arms were full of shopping bags.”

A pen scratched. “We can tick that one off, then. Anything else?”

I clapped a hand to my head, recalling the scones. And the milk jug. You can be mother. God, this was awkward. “Um... yes. He seemed happy for me to wait on him hand and foot. And yes, his hands are pretty. Very. I can’t comment on his feet, yet.” Encased in tatty Converse, they were petite; I’d spotted that much.

“Something to look forward to,” purred CUPID, evidently enjoying themselves. “The rest of your desires will follow in time. You’ll see.”

I harrumphed. “You say that, but he hasn’t tried to contact me. I’m still not convinced he’s interested. And he certainly doesn’t need me—he seemed extremely capable of looking after himself. I think he viewed our trip out as nothing more than a bit of a lark. And a free ride home from the police station via one of the few remaining

supermarkets he's allowed to shop in!"

CUPID let out a long, uncannily human sigh. Followed by another mechanical tut. "You could always go and visit him . You know where he lives. Maybe he hasn't had time to visit you. Our young Dawson is quite a busy boy."

"Is he?" It hadn't occurred to me to ask Dawson if he had a job. How arrogant to presume he hadn't, having heard about the shoplifting and, oh my God, propositioning a poor naive copper. The image of those lips wrapped around my own cock flashed through my mind.

"There's more to our proud Dawson than meets the eye. Don't let outward appearances deceive you, Gussie . I told you to trust me. He's your perfect match; he fulfils every single one of your desires."

Gussie? How on earth did CUPID know about that?

I didn't set much store by material possessions, having the undeserved good fortune to be able to replace them all. Nonetheless, on clicking the lock of the Porsche, now parked outside Dawson's insalubrious row of shops, thus abandoning the vehicle to whatever fate it befell, I experienced a pulse of anxiety. Three youths of the unbelted denim and clumpy trainers variety loitered outside the scruffy Co-op, regarding it wolfishly. Until a strident voice yelled at them from up on high.

"Oi! Don't even think it, Yoz! Nor you, Sean! He's with me!" The diminutive owner of the voice, hanging out of an upstairs window, then turned his attention to me. "Gussie! Yay! Come in the back door! It's open!"

The boys sniggered. "Your back door's always open, innit, Daw? Bloody pansy!"

"Shut it, Yoz! That's not what your dad calls me when he's got his trousers round his

ankles and his mouth round my knob!"

Oh Christ. Not the happy reunion I'd envisaged, to be honest. I hurried past the youths in as dignified a manner as I could to find Dawson waiting for me at the bottom of the staircase.

"Don't worry about the car, Gussie, they'll look after it. We were only joshing."

And with that, he planted a wet smacker on my repulsive cheek. "Afternoon, lover." His breath ghosted over the remains of my ear, sweet and cool. "You've kept me waiting, haven't you?"

Without hanging around for a reply, he took my hand, tugging me up the stairs. "Sorry about the mess," he said over his shoulder. "If I'd known you were coming, I'd have put on some smarter clobber and tidied the place up a bit. And him. He likes having visitors."

Him? I had questions, but before I had a chance to pose any, Dawson was pushing through the door and into the flat. It opened straight into a small sitting room with a TV in one corner showing a children's television programme, the sound muted. A wheelchair, the comfy, big, padded sort, was positioned directly in front of it.

"Best behaviour now, Mikey. Gussie's come to see us. You know, the hot posh bloke I was telling you about."

Leaning over the chair, he planted another smacker on the face of its occupant, who responded with a happy, snuffling sound. Dawson beckoned me over.

"Come on, Gussie. Come and say hello. Mikey don't bite, not unless you're trying to give him one of them disgusting iron tablets, anyhow." He grabbed the handle of the chair, clicking off the brake. "I'm turning you around, Mikey."

There was a good reason Dawson didn't have a proper job; I realised that now. Or rather, he did, but it was more an unpaid labour of love. And, from the glowing look on his flawless face as he proudly introduced me to his flawed twin brother, a job he didn't consider onerous or laborious at all.

"Hi, Mikey." Following Dawson's cue, I took Mikey's stiff, fragile hand in mine. Replicas of Dawson's brilliant eyes flicked up at me with vague interest before sliding back to the television screen.

"He won't answer," explained Dawson. In a swift, practised move, he produced a tissue and wiped saliva from his brother's chin. "He can't. He had a knot in his umbilical cord when we were born. Starved of oxygen. I'm lucky he lived. He can't move much or talk or anything, but he can see and hear us." He gave a little laugh. "Though I bet he wishes he couldn't hear me sometimes, don't you, my love?" The hand that had been wiping drool briefly settled around his brother's thin, twisted shoulders before once more turning the wheelchair towards the TV. "I'm just going to make a cuppa for our visitor, Mikey. Back in a minute. Come into the kitchen, Gussie."

CHAPTER 4

I trailed after him into the narrow galley kitchen, experiencing a jumble of emotions, including the usual infusion of self-hatred whenever I encountered anyone with physical afflictions much, much worse than my own. I'm not sure what I had been expecting to find when I paid Dawson a visit. Not Mikey, that's for sure. No wonder he gave scant regard to my face. Truth be told, I felt like an idiot. And humbled beyond belief. And also in awe of the pocket dynamo now shimmying around his tiny kitchen, pulling out mugs and biscuits and a sippy cup and chattering non-stop.

"Shove those over there," he instructed, pointing to an open bag of adult nappies and a bumper pack of wipes. "Next to the medicines. And grab the milk. Is full-fat okay? I buy it on account of Mikey—he needs the calories. Can I squeeze past you to get to the kettle?"

When he said squeeze, Dawson wasn't kidding. Swinging a cat would be nigh on impossible. He grinned up as his graceful body brushed past mine. "Is this our second date, Gussie? Because, just so you know, if it is and you want to get to second base, this kitchen is the place to do it. Unavoidable, to be honest."

I chuckled, a rusty creaking sound as Dawson leaned across the sink to fill up the kettle, throwing me a saucy wink over his shoulder like a pose from a vintage postcard. His cute little tush encased in cute little dungarees wiggled a bare inch from my own nether regions, thanks to the minuscule dimensions of the kitchen. Bypassing second base, my mind leapt to fourth.

"Well?" He turned to face me, somehow having managed to fill the kettle and switch

it on while my brain stalled, its blood supply busily rushing south. A small smile tugged at his lips. “It takes a couple of minutes to boil, and I can think of a few ways to pass the time.”

Dawson kissed like he lived, full throttle. Like kissing was an adventure he was going to explore to the max, as though the man desperately kissing him back was everything he’d ever wanted. And I’d never been kissed that way before.

As if my face was whole.

Dawson broke away, panting, and one of his hands slid between us. Hunger flared in his eyes as his palm curled around my needy cock. “I reckon a couple of minutes will be plenty long enough.”

“Possibly too long,” I gasped as his busy fingers found my belt buckle and teased it apart. Clenched into tight fists, my own hands hung uselessly at my sides because I was so shite at this. He dragged them up to the clasps of his dungarees.

“It’s a team sport, Gussie.” He plunged his tongue into my mouth, delivering another punishing kiss, pushing me back against the door. As the heat of his lithe body pressed against mine, I forgot that a corner of my mouth didn’t move properly and that one half of my face was a mangled rope of flesh because this joyful, determined fucking radiant beam of sunshine had his hand around my cock, as though there was nowhere else he’d rather have it, and was thrusting his own hard shaft through the tunnel of my fist like it fucking belonged there.

I came, embarrassingly quickly, on legs as shaky as a newborn calf’s and accompanied by the triumphant shrill whistle of Dawson’s cheery red kettle. He pumped me until I winced and pushed him away, erupting into delighted laughter at the perfect timing, even as his own release spurted hotly across my palm. With a happy sigh, he collapsed against me, and for a long while I just held him, my arms

tight around his back.

“You okay, Gussie?” he whispered against my chest. “Your heart’s galloping like a racehorse.”

“Yes. Very.”

I didn’t add that my mind galloped faster. Cantering far ahead, to summer pastures, to the lush fields of my estate, and me, strolling through them with this beautiful boy tucked under my arm, his fabulous eyes gazing up at me like I was everything he ever wanted.

Galloping far too fast and dangerously out of control; I tugged on the reins. “But that cuppa won’t make itself.”

I teased us apart and made efficient use of the wipes. After fastening my own clothing, I reached for Dawson’s dungarees, still pooled at his knees. With a lopsided grin, he allowed me to dress him.

“Mikey gets eggy if his tea arrives late. He likes his routines.” He dropped a last soft kiss on the corner of my mouth, on the ugly corner. And my heart melted a little bit more.

“Is there just you and Mikey living here?” I asked as he poured boiling water over the teabags.

“Yeah. I’m his sole carer.”

I thought back to the police cell and our trip to Tesco. “Who looks after him if you have to go out?” Or get arrested?

“Eileen in the flat next door comes and sits with him. I only pay her five quid an hour. He loves her—she’s eighty-two with a dicky ticker, so she doesn’t get out much either. She brings her knitting and lets him get the wool in a tangle. She sings to him as well—bloody awful racket, but he loves it. Pass us the milk.”

While Eileen was undoubtedly a wonderful woman, Dawson’s back-up network sounded a little precarious. “Being his um... sole carer must be... hard work?”

Dawson threw me a friendly smile. “Nah, not really. ‘He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.’ Know what I mean?”

Fishing the teabags out of the mugs, he flicked them into the bin. “Well, that’s actually a lie. He is heavy; getting him in and out of the bath and up and down those stairs is a fucking nightmare. But he’s worth it. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Milk came next, a splash each for him and me, half and half in the sippy cup. “Like, social services wanted to put him in a home, but that’s not happening.”

My mind spooled back. “How do you get him up and down the stairs?”

“I carry him,” he answered simply. “In my arms, like this.” He made a cradling motion. “The gaffer of the betting shop below lets me stash his other wheelchair in their back office, so I don’t have to drag that down too. That would be an even bigger fucking nightmare.” He handed me my tea. “I’d like to get out more, really; Mikey loves the park, loves animals too, like dogs and sheep and cows and stuff, but the buses aren’t exactly reliable.” He shrugged. “We’re cool. We’re happy apart from, you know...” Sharp frown lines briefly creased his smooth forehead.

“Apart from what?”

He grabbed a packet of biscuits and handed them to me with a knowing wink. Lidl’s

luxury custard creams. “You know, the... um... shoplifting.”

CHAPTER 5

Dawson lavished love on his twin as if love was a bottomless well. But so casually too, as though the way he teased him, cuddled him, and so devotedly fed and watered him, was nothing exceptional when in fact, it was spectacular. And in return, his brother's hazy gaze tracked his every move. His limbs jerked excitedly, and he gurgled with pleasure at Dawson's every softly spoken word. I felt both privileged and a voyeur.

And yet.

Questions flocked like seagulls. The regular shoplifting, the multiple arrests and Dawson's studied nonchalance in the face of them. Mikey's total dependence on his adoring twin with no clear fall-back plan. Their future. And although it was way too early to dream, whether that future had me in it. Whether Dawson wanted me in it. Because while I was tumbling head over heels for him, God knew I was no catch.

"I liked what we did earlier," he said softly. Determined to be of assistance, I'd helped him manoeuvre Mikey into a reclining beanbag chair covered in a luxurious sheepskin, which Dawson explained reduced the risk of pressure sores before proudly informing me Mikey had never suffered from a single one. He'd done some stretching exercises with him then, a daily routine, to ease the stiffness in Mikey's spastic limbs. Now, surrounded by cuddly toys, Mikey was sleeping peacefully, and Dawson was snuggled up next to me on the sofa, having insisted I stay a while. I didn't take much persuading. His fingers, which had been tripping lightly up and down my thigh, gave it a gentle squeeze. "Your face is beautiful when you come, by the way."

I blushed fiercely, even as my dick stirred and even as I knew it to be a lie. “That’s um... very kind.”

He yawned. “No, it’s not, it’s the truth. But I’m happy to double-check, just to be sure.”

He cupped his palm over my groin, grinning at my involuntary little grunt of pleasure. “You make cute sounds, too.”

Dawson’s lips parted readily as I kissed him. With a hand against his chest, I pushed him back against the cushions. His mouth found mine again as he pulled me on top. “I reckon you’re just a big humbug yourself, Gussie. Hard and crunchy on the outside, with a soft gooey centre.”

I laughed; I’d lost count of how many times I’d laughed today. “I’ll take that as a compliment. You’re...um...very pretty when you come, too.”

“I know.” He threw me a devilish smirk. “And by the way, I’m loving our second date. Are we going steady now?”

“I’ve never gone steady with anyone,” I admitted. My sex life had been a series of disastrous one-night stands in darkened rooms. Once their immediate needs had been fulfilled, my partners hadn’t been able to escape quick enough and not always with good grace.

“Me neither,” said Dawson, much more cheerily. “Got myself a human chastity belt, snoring right over there.”

He cocked his chin to where Mikey lolled in his beanbag, tilted away from us and towards the television, before turning back to me. He arched his groin up into mine as his mouth, stretched wide and fighting between a grin and a kiss, landed on my jaw.

“Told you humbugs make your cock hard. We need to get rid of a couple of layers.”

He solved the clothing problem in under a minute. He also turned the tables; I became pinned down by sixty kilos of wiry, taut man, his busy hands moving over my skin, sparking fires wherever they touched. Cupping two handfuls of smooth arse cheek, my fingertips loitered over the sweet divide before skimming down lower to the parting of his thighs. His dick, hot and heavy, rubbed against mine, and a low moan erupted from his throat.

“Fuck, you feel nice, Gussie,” he whispered around my lips. “I reckon that CUPID bot knows what they’re doing, don’t you?” As his legs widened further, I stroked back up to his tight little hole, circling it, wanting to taste it, to open it up with my tongue. Fantasies I’d never had the confidence to play out. Drawing my finger away, I swiped it across his bottom lip. “Wet it for me.”

Need slackened his features as my fingertip breached him. Precum pulsed between us as he thrust against me, each push and pull sucking my finger deeper into his clinging heat. When my searching hit home, he jerked with shock. More wetness seeped between us, the satiny skin of his pretty cock sliding more easily against mine. His hazed eyes turned restless.

“Gonna come, Gussie. You’re so good, I’m gonna come.”

Liquid warmth spread across my belly as, with a shuddering moan, Dawson shattered. I was close myself and tried to get a hand between us. “Nah,” he gasped. “That’s mine.” With a wild shake of his head, he drew back on his haunches, still half hard. His dick glistened with cum; that vision alone almost tipped me over the edge.

Velvet heat enveloped me as his lips closed around my shaft. I threw my arm across my mouth, muffling the escaped groan. He didn’t use much finesse—he didn’t need to because with a couple of sucks, I was there, pumping into his hot mouth, seeing

stars, tasting sunshine, somersaulting in freefall. Tumbling into something that I realised, with a giddy sensation, might be bordering the edges of love.

When a blond head thudded onto my chest, I came to myself somewhat. “Best pillow ever, Gussie,” Dawson murmured and promptly fell asleep.

“What were you shoplifting?” I asked a little later. Neither twin had stirred, but darkness had descended, bringing a chill to the room. Worried Mikey might become cold, I’d peppered Dawson’s hair with soft kisses until he woke. “When you were caught?” Ever since our first kiss, I’d prayed drugs weren’t involved; I crossed all my fingers now.

“The usual,” Dawson responded in a sleepy voice from deep within my embrace. “I receive a carer’s allowance and a few other handouts to help with rent and stuff. But it’s not enough, not if I want Mikey to have the best, plus a few treats, and it’s not like I can get a job to top us up, is it?”

“What, you mean you’re stealing food?” Jesus, no one caring for a man as disabled as Mikey should have to resort to stealing food.

“Yeah, we’re living through a cost-of-living crisis, haven’t you heard?” He shrugged. “I guess not. Although this time I got done for nicking socks of all things. I spotted a thick, woolly pair with baby elephants all over them. He loves elephants. Last time it was a box of cereal—Weetabix—and not the supermarket’s own brand ’cos Mikey’s fussy; he insists on the real stuff. Difficult to shove a box of forty-eight Weetabix down your trousers.” Dawson laughed, though without humour. “Your new boyfriend’s a cereal thief, Gussie. And a serial thief.”

From his sheepskin throne, Mikey twitched in his sleep. Disentangling himself, Dawson slipped off the sofa and covered him with a blanket, tucking one of the toys back under Mikey’s thin arm from where it had fallen. Satisfied, he returned to the

sofa and laced his fingers through mine with a shy smile. At some point in the last few hours, this thing had moved beyond a date or two. I sensed Dawson felt it too.

“I can’t begin to know what needing to steal food and... essentials feels like,” I began slowly. “I’m spoiled and self-absorbed. And way too self-pitying.” Leaning across, I brushed my lips against his sweet, receptive ones. Never in my life had I been so confident my kisses were welcome. “I think that needs to change. Starting today. For as long as you want me, you don’t need to worry about money. You don’t need to steal anything.”

Minutes ticked by, and he didn’t reply. I wondered if I’d overstepped and gave him a nudge. “Say something, Dawson. I’m not very good at this relationship business. Or putting other people first. But I really want a relationship with you. I think you’re fucking amazing.”

Two arms came around my neck as my new boyfriend buried his face into my chest. “I really want a relationship with you too.” We stayed that way a while, me hugging him close. Pampering him. When he finally pulled away, his eyes were wet.

“Jeez, Gussie, how no one’s snapped you up before now, I have no idea.” He wiped a hand across his eyes. “This is the moment I should tell you I’m too proud to accept your money, isn’t it? That me and Mikey don’t take handouts, that we cope very well thank you very much, that we don’t need someone coming riding in on a white horse to rescue us.”

His eyes blazed with anger, passion, desperation, pride and God knew what else. I didn’t know. Whatever maelstrom was swirling in there, I was greedy for it.

“But fuck, you know something, Gussie? I’m not too proud. Not at all. Believe me, once you’ve been done for thieving bog rolls and marched out of Lidl in front of half of bloody Bethnal Green, you have no pride left. So if you’re offering something?

I'm fucking taking it."

He rattled off a list, counting on his fingers. "I buy Mikey vitamin supplements—they don't come on prescription, and they're bloody expensive. We've run out. He needs a new sheepskin for his downstairs wheelchair, and I'm saving for that. He needs equipment too. I'm in a big Facebook group that swaps and shares tips for caring for people like Mikey. And everyone is recommending a new heated massage device, which sounds awesome for helping the spasms in his legs, especially first thing when they're always worse. One guy said he stopped needing the antispasmodic medicine altogether, which would be great 'cos Mikey hates the taste of that one and it's always a battle, and now I sound like I'm gonna use you for your money and sponge off you, like you're a fucking sugar daddy or something, but I want you to know that's not true. If you had nothing, I reckon we'd still be doing what we are because even though you think that shit on your face is important, it isn't to me. You're hot stuff, Gussie; you have a great bod, a gorgeous fat dick and your posh voice says my name in such a sexy growl; I reckon I could come just having you saying it over and over in my ear. So yes, I'd be all over you anyhow, although I know that's going to be hard to believe because—" At this he paused for a much-needed breath, and an anguished, hopeless expression crossed his teary face. "Look at you. That sweater you let me borrow, which I never want to give back, by the way, is the smartest, warmest, fucking item of clothing I've ever worn, and I was actually thinking if I never saw you again, I could sell it on Vinted for, like, at least fifty quid, and use the money to buy Mikey a..."

"Hush." I pressed my thumb against his mouth, hardly recognising myself. Me, who usually lurked in the shadows, now being so bold as to shut someone up, to take charge, to tell them how it was going to be from now on. And blushing to high heaven and back even as my heart sang because this extraordinary, courageous young man wanted, wanted, wanted me. Warts and all—literally. As much as I wanted to make love to him all over again, I pushed him off and sat up.

“Get your phone. Show me this sheepskin thing Mikey needs. And the massage device. Right now. I’m going to buy them, and you’re going to let me, and then you can make a list of all the other things Mikey should have already.” I cast my eyes over the threadbare cushions. “And anything else you need.”

In a few clicks, it was done. I felt elated. Never had my money been put to such good use. Dawson’s shoulders sagged with relief. “I’ll never be able to pay you back, you know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You already have.”

CHAPTER 6

Sugar daddy . Despite my elation, that phrase had lodged in my brain, and not in a pleasing way.

“In my mind, sugar daddies are old ,” I mused to CUPID. “Leathery, tanned, old men wearing Gucci loafers and weighed down by fat gold chains and a showy Rolex. With shiny bald heads, an unquenchable thirst for twenty-somethings and an unlimited bank account. Sugar daddy signifies a very transactional relationship.”

I had become much better at expressing myself into the void since Dawson. Less self-conscious.

“If the shoe fits, wear it,” responded CUPID. They sounded amused. “Fat gold chains? I hadn’t realised you were such an old-money snob.”

“I’m not!”

Yes, definitely amused. I was being heckled by a fucking bot. “Surely there must be a dusty Rolex buried at the bottom of a drawer in that ancient pile you insist on referring to as home .”

Home. Home is where the heart is . Wasn’t that the expression? In which case my home was now a shabby one-bedroom flat above a betting shop. Because my heart stayed behind every time I reluctantly left Dawson and Mikey to drive back to my stately pile. Could I ever persuade them to move? Mikey would love the fields and gardens, especially in the spring when the lambs appeared and the daffodils pushed

through the rich, damp...

I was getting way ahead of myself again. Moreover, I had a bot to argue with. “And, in exchange for lavishing cash on the pretty young things dangling from their arms, a sugar daddy is convinced his friends stuck with jaded older partners are jealous, when in fact they’re all just thinking he’s a sad bastard. So yes, to my mind that’s very transactional. And already, I feel what Dawson and I have isn’t, even though I’ve spent my money on whatever he needs. And even though he’s pretty and young.”

“He is,” agreed CUPID. “Were any of the things he needed gifts for himself?”

“No.”

Though I wanted to buy him things. I’d love to lavish him with presents. I’d start with a sleek wristwatch, matching my own but made for a slimmer, more elegant wrist. And a soft cashmere sweater that fitted him properly, along with a winter coat, a whole palette of eye make-up, and tubes of lip gloss in every subtle shade of—

“Tell me, August Angel, in return for the money you have spent, what has he given you?”

“It isn’t transactional,” I snapped.

CUPID made a weary, electronic sigh. “Okay, let me assist you. He gives you joy. Helping Dawson makes you happy. You gain pleasure because you’ve directly experienced pain and distress yourself. You have a lot of empathy for him and Mikey and their financial struggles, so you want to take that pain away from them. That transaction is nothing to be ashamed of.” They paused. “Your turn, August.”

I winced. This bot understood me better than I understood myself. Huffing, I crossed my arms and pulled a face. I had no idea if CUPID could see me. I thought of our sex,

how right it felt cuddling on the sofa with him, how perfectly Dawson fit in my arms. “He’s given me a reason to get out of bed in the mornings. A purpose. And um... perspective on... on this.” I waved my hand at my monstrous face. “And...” My pulse quickened as I recalled Dawson greedily begging for more when I’d finger-fucked his arse.

“And the best sexual encounter of your life?”

I groaned, a rush of heat climbing my neck. “Jesus, CUPID. Don’t be coy, just bloody get it all out there.”

The odd sound of a bot sniggering echoed around the empty room. “So it is transactional,” CUPID continued in a satisfied monotone. “But, ask yourself this, August: on balance, who is gaining the most?”

That was a no-brainer. “Me. Obviously.”

“And one last thing. Tell me, August. You must know by now. Does your perfect match have pretty feet?”

A memory of them snuggled in my lap last night, as we pretended to watch the television but mostly watched each other, filled my head. Slender and pale, I’d kissed the tips of each of his ten toes, making him squeal with delight. Toe sucking. Not that I was going to share that with CUPID. “The prettiest.”

CHAPTER 7

Days turned into weeks. The Porsche became a permanent fixture outside the betting shop. Yoz and Co. extorted twenty pounds a day to guard it. I'd have happily paid two hundred if it meant spending every afternoon with Dawson and Mikey. I never stayed the night; Mikey slept in the only bedroom, and with the best will in the world, Dawson's squishy two-seater sofa, which flipped into a narrow single cot, couldn't accommodate the both of us.

Mikey's routines became my routines; I discovered he enjoyed having his palms massaged while watching Peppa Pig. I grew to adore his appreciative hums whenever Dawson produced a shortbread biscuit dipped in strawberry yoghurt. I learned his dislikes, namely every single drop of every single medicine, and Dawson's creative strategies for disguising the taste, centring around chocolate buttons. I looked after him on my own sometimes when Dawson popped to the shops, and no crises befell either of us.

Needless to say, I fell deeper in love with both.

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, a very jolly man arrived in a minibus to collect Mikey and ferry him to a day care centre. There were no prizes for guessing how Dawson and I passed the time.

"Will you come and stay at the estate for the weekend?" I asked as he lay in my arms.
"With Mikey?"

I revelled in these moments of quiet intimacy after sex, my entire world reduced to a

lumpy sofa and our two bodies nestled together. Sometimes, amongst the whispers and giggles, we'd kiss and get semi-hard again. We'd rub against each other, not taking it anywhere, just loving each other's bodies, knowing the closeness was enough. "The farmer has moved the cows to a field near the house. My housekeeper can make up a bed for Mikey in my dressing room, so he'll only be a few feet away from us."

Dawson raised his eyebrows at dressing room . "Not sure his beanie chair will fit in the Porsche." He said it teasingly, but my lover had been a little subdued today. He'd coddled Mikey as usual and taken extra special care rubbing cream into his thin, stiff calves. He'd even sung nursery rhymes and pulled silly faces to distract him during nappy changing, and Mikey had gurgled and jerked his arms like they were sharing the best joke ever. But I hadn't missed the sag of his shoulders as we waved the minibus off, nor the thin line of his lips as he turned away.

"I have another car." I nuzzled into his neck, breathing in his biscuity, warm scent. "It's plenty big enough for all of Mikey's things. A Range Rover."

"Of course you do," he chuffed. "What self-respecting gazillionaire hasn't?"

"Hey..." I stroked my fingers through his hair. "Don't be like that. What's wrong?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. Tell me what's on your mind."

Dawson sighed and sat up. "I wasn't going to bother you with it; it's only down at the local magistrate's court, but my hearing date came through this morning. Set for a week on Monday. They're not going to leave it at just a seventy quid fine."

"Bloody hell, Dawson! Why wouldn't you bother me with that?"

“Er... because it’s fucking humiliating? Going to court for thieving fucking socks and Weetabix?”

“It’s not humiliating. I won’t have you say that. I’m proud that you stole things for Mikey. That you were prepared to put everything on the line for him. And whatever the fine this time, I’ll pay it.”

“I know.” He sighed again. “Although I wish you didn’t have to. But what if it’s not a fine? I laughed it off, but that copper warned me I might get a custodial sentence. They’re clamping down on shoplifters. My solicitor agreed.”

I’d watched too many movies; images of Dawson roped to a hook in a bare grey cell with clanking chains tethering his ankles flashed through my mind. “How long for?”

“Not long,” he said. “No more than a few weeks. To teach me a lesson, make an example of me.”

Climbing off the sofa, he walked over to the narrow window above the sink and looked out, seeing nothing. A solitary tear trickled down his cheek. I was straight there after him, wrapping his trembling body in my arms, breathing him in. “It’s okay, Dawson, it will all work out.”

“It won’t, Gussie.” He shook his head as more tears fell. “What if social services get involved and I lose Mikey? It would be my own stupid fault. For thinking I could keep him. Eileen told me I should stop nicking stuff last time I got caught, and I didn’t fucking listen. Because I want Mikey to have it all. I want him to have any bloody sheepskin rug he needs. The best socks too, and the best medicines, the best Weetabix, and the best fucking custard creams. Because he’s the best brother in the world, and if I lose him, then I’ve got nothing.”

He sobbed then, an awful noise from deep in his gut and plunging straight into mine.

“No, you haven’t, Dawson, don’t say that. You’ve got me. We’re a team now, and we can sort this. Every social service report you’ve had says he’s having excellent care. They can’t fault you. You aren’t going to lose him.”

He wiped at his tears. “Most of the time I know that, but in the middle of the night my mind races, you know? I think of the worst.”

“He’ll be fine, even if you have to do a few weeks. I’ll be here—we can show we’ve got support in place. Me, Eileen, the day centre. I’ll employ a fucking nurse, just for show, if I have to. And it will be an open prison. We’ll be able to visit, and you can talk to him every day. It will be over in a flash, I promise.”

He was calming, wiping his eyes. This meltdown was always going to happen sooner or later. Better now so we could have our ducks in a row, not a last-minute scramble. Even my money couldn’t overcome the magistrate’s decision, but we’d damned well do everything to minimise the impact.

“Okay,” he said, sagging against me. “But then what? Two months ago, it was just me and Mikey, surviving. Sort of. And now, you’re offering me a dream on a plate. But have you thought it all through, Gus? What about the future? Mikey isn’t going to suddenly disappear, you know. And he won’t get any better either. He’s part of me. The routines, the responsibility, the tie of being with him 24/7. It’s my normal, and I’m happy with that, but the novelty palls pretty fast for everyone else. Wait until he gets a chest infection and we’re in and out of the hospital for days on end.”

I pressed my lips against his neck, not caring that my repulsive scarring was smooshed against his perfect flesh, for the simple reason that Dawson didn’t care either.

“If you’re trying to scare me away, my love, then it’s not working. I’m here for the long haul, and if that means doing whatever we must, and me spending whatever

money I must, to ensure Mikey has what he needs and is never parted from you, then that's what we'll do. And if dropping that on you is all a bit heavy, then I don't care. It's..." I hesitated. I love you trembled on the tip of my tongue, but it was way too soon. "Anyhow, waking up next to this ugly mug gets pretty thin pretty fast too. Who says you're not going to tire of me? I might be able to ease your money worries, but I'm not exactly a knight in shining armour, am I?"

Dawson swivelled in my arms, rising on tiptoes to kiss my mouth. "Do you mean all that, Gussie?"

Christ, how much more did I need to do to convince him that I was the winner here? That since he'd sprung into my world, I hardly recognised this new, happy, confident version of me? "Yes, I mean it. I love you, and I want you both in my life. Every day. For as long as you'll have me."

With exquisite tenderness, he traced the pitted ridges and furrows of my cheek and jaw, eyes glittering with unshed tears. And with steel behind them, too; my perfect match possessed plenty of that. "Who wants a knight in shining armour? Shining armour hasn't won any battles. Me and Mikey prefer our knights a bit battered and bruised. Like you."

CHAPTER 8

I drove Dawson and Mikey via the back way into the estate, too embarrassed by the overblown majesty of the place to bring them up the long sweeping drive. Even so, Dawson's eyes were as big as dinner plates by the time I switched off the engine. As he clambered out of the front seat, surveying his lush surroundings—and by that, I mean the huge bloody mansion passed down several inbred generations of my family and sitting on a plot of land roughly the size of Gibraltar—he performed a ridiculous curtsy.

I frowned. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Doffing my cap and tugging my forelock. This gaff is awesome!”

He beamed; it was infectious, and I found myself grinning back. “Idiot.”

Sliding my arm around his waist, I tucked him into my side. He fit against me like a hand in a glove. “This gaff is a million times nicer with you here.”

“That's good because you're gonna have to crowbar me out!” He wriggled from my grasp. “Somebody else is very impatient to see it. Let's get his things out of the car and explore. Me and Mikey want a tour of everything, even the parts you haven't discovered yourself yet, seeing as this place is so effing big!”

Our first stop was an urgent assessment of the cows. Dawson displayed a hidden talent for mooing; Mikey's attempt to copy him had all of us rolling around. After that, we waved to the sheep, who scampered away in a fluffy, panicky flock, as sheep

are wont. Then we visited the ducks, feeding them breadcrumbs specially prepared this morning, and counted how many were paddling on the pond, how many were hiding in the reeds on the far side and pondered whether any, in fact, were cygnets masquerading as ugly ducklings. For all I cared, we could have been cataloguing pterodactyls because all I saw were Dawson and Mikey. As if I was discovering the estate with them for the first time.

By the time we finally headed back up to the house, Dawson's pale cheeks were flushed with ruddy good health. The weather gods had blessed us with a cool wintry sun and nothing but a light breeze, and we took it in turns to push the wheelchair over green lawns mown especially short in preparation for this visit. For a few minutes, Mikey hummed with contentment before nodding off. I had reels of photos of the two of them, Dawson's grinning face pressed to Mikey's against a backdrop of pale blue skies, then more snaps of Dawson affecting a ridiculous lord of the manor pose.

"We need a picture of us together now," he insisted as we laboured over the gravel drive. I added an all-terrain wheelchair to my ever-expanding shopping list. "Come on, cuddle in for a selfie."

"I'll break the camera," I joked, my stock response over the years. Two photos of adult me were in circulation: one my passport, the other my driver's license. "Let me have another of you instead, next to the ivy growing up the house."

Dawson wagged an indignant finger. "Absolutely not. I need a pic of you holding the key to this huge fucking front door to show Eileen. She won't believe it otherwise." He laughed and tugged me down to crouch behind the wheelchair with him. "And I want my beautiful boyfriend as my screensaver," he added just as the camera clicked. "Because although he doesn't realise it, he's effing perfect."

After wolfing down his dinner, an exhausted but happy Mikey fell asleep again. We ate in the kitchen of my first-floor apartment, the only part of the house in regular

use. A simple bolognese prepared by my housekeeper followed by chocolate ice cream. He didn't stir as we carried him upstairs, nor as we undressed him, not even when we tucked him under the covers and arranged the pillows just so. I'd learned the routine: one behind his back, another between his knees, and a third under his left shoulder. Only then did Dawson give him a light peck on the cheek and step away.

"What job would you do if you weren't caring for Mikey?" I asked as he folded Mikey's clothes.

"Dunno. I've never given it much thought." He smiled down at his twin fondly. "This is it for me. I'd rob a bank for him if I had to."

"You'll never need to," I promised. "And this court thing will be over before you know it. Believe me."

He blew out his cheeks as rare tension crossed his face. "I do," he acknowledged. "But I've been an idiot, thinking I could get away with pinching stuff indefinitely. It was always going to catch up with me in the end. I deserve a few days in the nick, to be honest."

He fell into my arms, exactly where he belonged. "No, you don't. You did what you did for Mikey. He's special, and if anyone deserves the best, it's him."

He twisted so his mouth could meet mine. "Thank you for saying that. Most people just see someone in a wheelchair who can't do anything for themselves. Who can't talk or eat or use a toilet. Totally dependent. And those things are true. But he's also my twin and my best friend, and I hate that people with severe disabilities like him aren't seen. Because Mikey's his own person; he's sometimes funny and sometimes naughty and thinks Peppa Pig is the best TV programme ever. And he knows the difference between Tesco's Weetabix and the real stuff. And little details like that are nothing in the grand scheme of most people's lives; they're not very important at all.

But they make up Mikey's whole world. And that you understand that makes you pretty special too."

We left the room, leaving the door ajar. "But I'm warning you now," he added, "he's not going to want to go back home tomorrow." Dawson turned out the dressing room light. "Not now we've named all the cows. Prepare for World War Three, getting him back into the car."

I was still trying to recall the daft names Dawson had given the cows when he let out a screech. "OMG, you have a four-poster bed! An emperor-sized four-poster bed!"

"I do," I agreed, trying to visualise the stupidly ornate walnut monstrosity through Dawson's eyes. And for the first time in living memory, I didn't hate it. "It's for entertaining emperors, should one ever drop by."

Wiry arms wound around my neck. "No emperors." His lips latched on to mine, and as my hands automatically found his arse cheeks, he pressed up against me in one of his hugs that any minute now would turn into sex. "Just me to entertain. And Gussie, I know we haven't talked loads about this, but I've been... preparing."

Giddiness fluttered through my belly like a first taste of champagne. At last, with Mikey safely ensconced next door and a bed to ourselves, I had privacy and space to explore Dawson's body properly. To make love to him properly. Or, as my delightful boyfriend (between noisy sucks on a humbug) so eloquently phrased it in the car on the way over, fuck his brains out. Needless to say, I drove the remainder of the journey uncomfortably hard, and it had nothing to do with the humbug in my mouth.

"I... um... I'm not very good at it, just so you know," I confessed because obviously, seduction was my middle name. "Haven't had many opportunities to practice."

With an odd smile, almost self-conscious, Dawson unfastened the top buttons on my

shirt. “Shush. I’ve not exactly been out clubbing and shagging every night for the last few years either. Who cares? We love each other, Gussie, so it will be amazing anyway.”

As Dawson’s violet-hazed eyes met mine, my heartbeats somersaulted over each other. We love each other. Never mind belly flutterings and champagne, I had my mouth open heavenward and was tasting stars. I scrambled for something to say, but my mind had emptied of every single coherent thought except the only one that mattered.

We love each other.

Dawson loved me.

“We do, don’t we, Gussie?” his sweet voice questioned, a little anxiously, from somewhere back on earth. I kissed his sweet lips.

“What do you think?”

With Dawson’s love in one hand and newfound confidence in the other, I walked him backwards until his knees met the bed. He melted into it, arms pillowed under his head and a crazy grin stretched wide across his face as I eased off his shoes and socks. The soft grey sweater, now belonging to him, came next; I buried my nose in it before tossing it aside. After that his jeans, boxers too, chased down milky white limbs still dangling over the edge of the bed. And then I stood to admire him, my Dawson, naked on my four poster and smiling up at me as if he was tasting stars too.

“Your turn, Gussie.”

He played with himself as I unbuttoned the rest of my shirt, thighs spread wide, lazily stroking his rigid cock. I was surprised I still managed to undress myself.

“You’re all fingers and thumbs,” Dawson observed as I made a hash of unzipping my trousers. “Wow! And dick!” he added with a huff of laughter as I finally wrenched them down. A pearl of precum glistened at his slit, and my mouth ran dry. Sinking to my knees between his parted legs, I slid my hands up his smooth thighs, leaned over and sucked it off.

“Oh fuck,” he breathed.

I peppered his shaft with small kisses and licks. God knew I was no expert, but for all expertise was a wonderful thing, a wordless voice inside me instinctively knew how to please Dawson, and I listened to it now as I lapped at him with my tongue. As I sucked one of his tight balls into my mouth, a whimper escaped his throat. His hands twisted in the short strands of my hair, and boldly, I hefted one of his legs onto my shoulder, running my lips up the silk of his inner thigh.

“Gussie,” he moaned.

Fuck, he had a tiny little hole. Furled in a tight pink bud. On my knees and buried between his thighs, this was way beyond anything I’d ever done before. I had the urge to press my tongue against it; I tapped it with the pad of my thumb instead. He arched off the bed.

“Shit, that’s so nice.”

“I want... I want to lick it. Can I?”

He snorted, thrusting up at me, his legs impossibly wide. “Fuck, yeah. It’s not going to lick itself, Gussie.”

God knew whether I was doing it right, but from the filthy sounds Dawson made, his enjoyment was on par with crunching humbugs. As the tight bud opened up, I became

bolder still, steadying his hips, burying my tongue deeper until he pushed me away. “Gonna have to stop, Gus, too good. Come up here.”

He dragged himself up the bed, bringing me with him. The need to be inside him grew, and I fumbled for some lube. “Can... can we?” I panted as I coated myself and dribbled some more over his wet hole.

“Please.”

“Like this? Facing?”

“Yeah, I want to see your beautiful face, Gus.”

My boy was limber; one leg returned to my shoulder, and the other squeezed my waist. Dawson dragged his mouth across mine again, then gasped, sharp and sweet, as my tip breached his entrance.

A flash of pleasure filled his eyes. His slack lips parted as I inched forward into the clinging, vice-like heat of him. Then stuttered, marooned somewhere between giggling and sobbing and trying not to come. As those beautiful eyes stared up at me, I swore I caught a glimpse of a doorway through them to the rest of my life.

As if I was born to be there, I slipped inside him a little further. Like we were perfectly matched.

“Can I...?” I shifted my hips, earning a hungry sound from Dawson.

“I reckon.”

My gentle thrusts turned to bigger ones. We found a rhythm. This was no choreographed routine. Neither of us had much experience in how to make it good for

the other. I wanted to come straight away; I wanted to make it last. I wanted Dawson to scream my name; I wanted to render him silent. I wanted us to cover every inch of this stupid fucking four poster and to take him fifty different ways on it. And I also wanted to stay like this, kissing and whispering and making quiet, passionate, tender love.

We chose the latter.

Dawson came first, with his hand on his dick and his lips on mine and those brilliant eyes shuttered closed. I didn't think I could ever love him more than I did in that moment. As his channel spasmed around me, my own release followed, filling him up in a rush. Unexpected hot tears spilled from my eyes, landing on his nose and his cheeks.

“Are you always going to cry when you come inside me, Gussie?” Laughing, he kissed them away, his tongue licking across my scarred cheek. The thrill of that would never grow old. “Because we're going to need a whole lorry load of boxes of tissues if you do. Maybe even a few more tonight.”

Softening but still inside him, I thrust feebly, making him wince. “Or maybe leave it a few hours.”

“Yeah, I'd like that, Gussie. Perhaps me and Mikey could be persuaded to stay another night.”

I grinned. “And the night after that?”

He pretended like he was contemplating it. “Yeah, perhaps. I mean, I'll have to check with Mikey because, you know, he might prefer a view of a boarded-up petrol station from the sitting-room window instead of, I dunno, fifty acres of woodland and a million cows. And perhaps he really likes being serenaded by Yoz's boombox thingy

outside his bedroom at four a.m.; he might prefer that to birdsong and the rustle of falling leaves. And would Eileen still be able to visit him? No one sings Humpty Dumpty quite as well as Eileen.”

My heart clenched. Oh bloody hell, he was really going to do this. “I’ll send a car for her every day if you’d like.”

“Christ, he don’t like her that much. Once a week will be more than enough.” He threw me a naughty look and gave a wriggle. “I’d like this more than once a week though, Gussie.”

“We could go out on a date when she comes to visit,” I said, carefully gauging his expression. “Just the two of us. Not every time, of course.”

I knew Mikey would always come first, but Dawson was more than only a carer, like I was more than a saviour. Despite our comfort in both of those roles, we were partners, too, in bed and out of it. And I never wanted to lose sight of that. “I’d like to take you places and show you off.”

He smiled at me with his whole face, a little sleepily. “Like the Tesco café?”

“If that’s where you want to go. Although I was thinking maybe a little more upmarket.”

Chuckling softly, his lips found mine. “I’d like that, Gussie. Very much.”

We took a while to part. This was more than sex, more than making love even. It was a laying down of our combined future, and we were both a little shy, a little scared, a little daunted. And a few minutes later, as Dawson’s gentle snores lulled me to sleep, I was more than a little excited too.

CHAPTER 9

In the days that followed, the contours of Dawson's lithe body and the texture of his satiny limbs became so imprinted on my mind that if I closed my eyes, I could taste the salt from his skin. So in tune, I didn't need a *Pretty Woman* -style shopping spree to purchase a smart suit for the upcoming court case; his measurements had become as familiar to me as my own. I settled on a light-grey wool, not too showy, with a plain violet shirt to compliment his eyes, paired with a classic Oxford spot tie I'd enjoy teasing from around his neck later. Oh, and a rather swish watch, not too dissimilar to mine. Then, because I was in the mood for presents and Mikey had stolen my heart too, I went a little crazy in Hamley's cuddly toy department.

On the day of the case, my true match, Dawson allowed me to dress him. Him and Mikey were attending court with Eileen; she was downstairs giving Mikey his breakfast. "Are you sure you want Mikey there? Honestly, it might be a lot of waiting around for him."

Dawson chewed on his lip. "Yes. I need him close. It's difficult to explain, but he makes me stronger. And if I'm going to charm the magistrate, then I need to be at full strength."

We hadn't much of a game plan. I'd contacted a couple of lawyers and both had offered the same depressing advice; these cases were cut and dried. Serial offenders were sometimes given custodial sentences and sometimes not. It was at the magistrate's discretion, and the best Dawson could do was be honest, apologetic, and hope the magistrate was sympathetic and in a good mood.

“You will,” I answered. “I’d let you off scot-free if you were standing in front of me.”

He chuckled. “You’re a tiny bit biased.”

“I could be there for you too?” We’d had this conversation already, and he wasn’t going to change his answer.

As predicted, Dawson shook his head. “No. This is on me. This is pre-Gussie, old-life stuff, and I want to draw a line under it.”

And start anew with me. I could hardly wait, even if we would have to delay for a few weeks while he served his sentence. I knelt to tie his shoes. New black brogues from my favourite tailor and built to last. “When you had your interview with CUPID... What did you ask for? What did your heart desire?”

The question had been on my lips for weeks, but I’d been scared to pose it, fearful I might not like the answer.

I needn’t have worried.

“Nothing much.” He smiled at the memory. “I took Mikey along with me to that weird empty office, seeing as Eileen had gone to visit her sister. Thought we might get some grub there or something. We made a day of it, two buses and a long walk; I remember he was full of cold that week and coughed and coughed. Even though I had him wrapped up as snug as a bug in a rug, I nearly sacked the whole thing off.”

Fuck, I was so glad he hadn’t.

“Anyhow,” Dawson carried on while I made unnecessary adjustments to his tie as an excuse to touch him for a little longer. “That bot thing was a nosy bugger. We did get

some grub, but they asked me lots of questions first, mostly about Mikey and my background. And why we were alone in the world.” He smiled again. “I guess they was worried I was too young to shoulder that much responsibility. Hah! They wouldn’t have thought that if they’d met our parents. Fucking useless wasters, the both of them.”

Dawson didn’t mention his parents very often. Cut from the same cloth as mine by the sound of them, minus the massive bank account.

Having run out of excuses, I stepped back, admiring him. Still my irrepressible Dawson, but with a face bare of make-up and in a smart suit. Clothes didn’t make a man any more than fine feathers made a fine-tasting bird, but if decent tailoring was what it took to convince a magistrate he was an upstanding, repentant member of the human race, then a smart suit was the order of the day.

“You look great,” I said, because he did. Like always.

“Thanks to you.” He smoothed a hand down his new silk tie. “I’ll phone you as soon as it’s over. It’s a long day for Mikey. He’ll be exhausted. And tetchy. Bring his favourite blanket with you when you fetch him later.”

“I will. And I’ll be fetching you too. I know it.”

I had a whole list of instructions for if I wasn’t. But we weren’t going to dwell on that. For a few seconds, we eyed each other, me like a dramatic idiot, trying to memorise every detail of Dawson’s perfect face as if he was going to be sent to solitary confinement for fifteen years, not the local nick for fifteen days, and Dawson staring back as if I’d hung the bloody moon for him.

“Go on then,” I said. “What was this nothing much you asked CUPID for?”

His answering smile spread through every part of me. He often stroked a finger down my ugly cheek, and he did it now, tenderly and lovingly. As if marking out a map to cherish forever. “It’s crazy, Gussie. But after visiting CUPID, I knew you were right for me when you first introduced yourself.”

“Yeah? How’s that then?”

“That bot kind of gets under your skin, don’t they? Like a fucking psychiatrist or something.”

I recalled my own teary moment in the presence of CUPID. “Yes.”

“I was blubbing like a baby by the time I’d told them about how we were struggling. So when they got round to asking, ‘ What does your heart desire?’ the whole truth was fairly dripping from me! And I kind of... um... got carried away.”

I grinned, imagining it. Imagining Dawson listing a whole smorgasbord of desires, ranging from a personal manicurist to a gold-plated teapot.

“I started out trying to keep it simple; I asked for someone to look after us. Someone to love us and care for us, someone who me and Mikey would love back.”

A lump welled in my throat.

“It wasn’t very sexy or aspirational,” he carried on, oblivious. “A bit middle-aged for a twenty-two-year-old bloke, to be honest. But I was at the end of my rope; Mikey was ill, I’d just got done for nicking the Weetabix, and the rent was overdue. And I was cold and miserable and so fucking tired.”

“I’m so sorry. You must have been so desperate.”

“Yeah, I was. But I haven’t finished yet. I was also embarrassed, what with the tears and everything. So I tried to make a joke of it. I said I might as well ask for a fucking angel . A lonely, big-hearted angel looking for a home .”

He paused. “And what do you know, August Angel? That fucking weird bot only went and fucking found me one.”

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CHAPTER 10

“Not attending court?” CUPID queried in their amused tone.

“Don’t pretend you’re surprised. But no, I’m not. Dawson doesn’t need me there. He’s more than capable on his own.”

“I would agree with you,” CUPID acknowledged. “So, is this goodbye, August Angel? Has the moment come to tick off the items on your list of desires?”

I cringed. “Really, you want to do that?”

“It’s the best part of the job, Gussie.”

“For you, perhaps.” The bot cleared their throat—or made a noise approximating throat clearing. “First, is Dawson a man you can tuck under your arm?”

I groaned. This was going to be embarrassing. “You know he is. And we both know he’s femme.”

“And he has fabulous eyes. Do they gaze up at you, August Angel, like you’re everything he ever wanted?”

“Yes, strangely.”

“So he sees beyond your face,” the bot ticked off. “Good.” A pen scratched. “Sees beyond your pots of money but lets you indulge him anyhow, yes? Let’s you dress

him, yes? Let's you wait on him?"

"Yes," I agreed through gritted teeth. Was this really necessary? "And yes, he has pretty hands and feet—honestly, CUPID, we've done this already. And when I made that list, I was just throwing things out there—I wasn't expecting you to, you know... Can we skip the part about the toe sucking?"

"Certainly. I'm, oh gosh, too prudish to ask about the toes," said CUPID in a whimsical, high-pitched voice straight out of a historical romance novel. "I might short-circuit if I do."

More pages flipped, followed by throat clearing. "He lets you worship him? And—this is my favourite part, Mr Angel—so apt, so cute considering your name. Please tell me he curls under your wing and lets you love him like he's never known love before? I shall die a happy bot if he does, my work here will be well and truly done."

I chuckled, a sound that flowed rather freely from me these days. "Do bots ever die? Don't you just power down?"

In an old-mannish way, CUPID harrumphed, earning another chuckle from me. "Much less romantic, Gussie. And you're avoiding the question."

"Of course he does, you infuriating electronic know-it-all!" I shook my head incredulously. "I don't know how you did it, but yes, every single thing I asked for on that ridiculous, mortifying list you provided. Every single desire I've ever had, you made happen."

"Every single desire?" CUPID questioned. "Are you sure there aren't any more desires lurking about?"

"Of course there aren't. Except that I wish this bloody silly court thing was over and

Dawson wouldn't have to endure a stupid prison sentence he doesn't deserve. But no, you answered every single one of them. I can't thank you enough."

"Pleased to have been of service." CUPID adopted an officious tone. "And as you are another satisfied customer, the balance of funds owing will be taken from your account within three working days. Goodbye, August Angel. Good luck."

A sound not dissimilar to my iPhone switching off echoed around the room. "What? Is that... is that it?"

Seconds of silence ticked by. "CUPID? Hello?"

Nothing. I frowned. At least they could have given me a chance to thank them properly. For a few minutes I hung around, just in case they'd temporarily malfunctioned, but nothing more was forthcoming. I checked my watch. The court case was scheduled at two and would be coming to an end by the time I'd driven back across town. With a tinge of disappointment, I gathered myself to leave, halting as my phone pinged twice in my pocket. Two alerts; the first from Dawson, the second a throbbing pink heart—a summary, no doubt, of the aforementioned outstanding bill. CUPID was nothing if not efficient. Deciding to ignore it until I reached home, I clicked on Dawson's alert, my heart pounding.

OMG! They cancelled the case!! Can you believe it? I'm off the hook!! There was a last-minute mix-up—the whole thing should never have gone beyond paying the fine!! Mikey and I are waiting on the courtroom steps for you! Come and fetch us, my wonderful, beautiful angel! We're ready to start the rest of our lives!!

The rest of our lives. How amazing did that sound? Me, Dawson, and Mikey, forever and ever. Everything I'd ever desired came true. Every. Single. Desire. Every. Singl...

Hang on. What were CUPID's parting words? Are you sure there aren't any more

desires lurking about?

And my reply: only that Dawson won't have to endure this stupid prison sentence he doesn't deserve.

Hurrying back to the car, I whipped out my phone again and tapped on the throbbing pink heart. Not the invoice. A blurred message instead, swirling into focus before, in barely a single beat of my own heart, vanishing in a puff of pink stars, taking the entire app with it. If I'd blinked, I'd have missed it.

Even bots have a heart, August Angel. Go and collect yours. Tuck those beautiful boys under your wing and treasure them both.

THE END