



# My Best Friend's Brother: A steamy, swoony out-for-you gay romance (Close Connections Book 2)

**Author:** *Liam Livings*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Ryan

A reserved graduate who hoped being 28 would be simpler. His actress mother is getting married to her driver, of all people, and his dad is unbelievably happy with new-husband, 28-year-old, Matt. Ryan doesn't date because relationships are for suckers, and he's never found a woman he fancies; anyway, he has his best friend Sam.

Graham

Stylist to the stars, with a keen eye for fashion, oodles of charm and confidence, he's always in demand. For years he's cared for his mum, brought up his brother Sam, and looked after his ex-boyfriend while they were together. Now he's done; at 33, he's happily single and can put himself first.

Graham is styling the family's outfits at Ryan's mother's wedding. Ryan finds his self-confidence fascinating, his gym-honed body impressive, then irresistible. Ryan needs Graham in ways he's only imagined.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

‘You’re doing what?’ Ryan asked.

His mum was perched on a stool by the kitchen island. ‘Don’t be like that. I thought you’d be happy for me.’ She held his hands, stared into his eyes. ‘Tell me you’re happy for me? Please.’

Ryan’s heart squeezed for her. He was standing in the kitchen of the family home he’d been brought up in. Had a very privileged upbringing thanks to his actor mum, and TV presenter dad. He was expecting her to tell him she had a big part in an American movie, the big break into Hollywood she’d always hoped for but had never quite happened. Not that she was getting re-married.

Ryan narrowed his eyes, how to handle this? He loved his mum, and wanted her to be happy, it was just that after one divorce, he hoped she’d have learned marriage wasn’t worth bothering with. ‘I am happy.’ He swallowed, bit his bottom lip. ‘Who is he?’

She smiled.

Good, so the lie about being happy for her was worth it. He felt a bit better.

‘He’s my driver,’ she said. ‘We’ve known each other for ages. For years, he’s worked at one of the studios where I’ve been doing that daytime TV chat show. He’s been there longer than me actually. Since he was in his twenties, so he’s worked there for nearly thirty years. He’s been taking me to work for decades. Since me and your dad were together.’

Interesting. Ryan raised an eyebrow. That made this man in his fifties, about a decade

older than his mum. Feeling less positive now, Ryan blinked.

‘Nothing untoward, of course. Back then, he was married. We both were.’ She looked away for a moment.

The pain at the divorce from his dad obviously still hurt. She’d said it had been on the rocks for a while and luckily his dad had divorced her before meeting his now husband, Matt.

Ryan swallowed. It still caught him unawares, remembering his parents were not only divorced, but his dad was married to a man Ryan’s age. It happened, of course. Just Ryan didn’t expect it to happen to them.

‘Your dad is very happy with Matt. Can’t you be happy for me. Dave is going to make me very happy. I know he will.’

How a divorced driver who was ten years older than his mum, would make her happy, Ryan had no idea. But she seemed to think he would. With care, he asked, ‘How long has he been single?’ Was he a serial womaniser, or cheated on his ex. Did he have some weird thing about his mum, sort of celebrity stalking, but allowed because he worked with her. Anything was possible. He’d read that one of the women from ABBA had been in a relationship with a man who’d stalked her. Stranger than fiction, right.

‘Few years,’ his mum said. ‘At fifty, he got divorced. Said it was the best birthday present he’d ever had. So, three years ago now.’

He sounded great. A real role model. Someone Ryan should look up to. Not. He stared at his mum.

She was looking at him with that pleading, sad look, she really wanted him to get on

board with this but he just couldn't. 'I know what you're thinking, he's marrying me for money.'

He hadn't been thinking that, but he bloody well was now. 'Why did he get divorced?' Felt an easy place to start, putting aside the gold digger aspect for one moment.

'Kids left home. Two of them. Almost the same age as you and Sophie. We used to talk about our children on my way to the studio. Friendly man.'

Yeah, he bet this bloke was friendly. To the woman who had been married to one of the highest paid TV presenters in the UK, and who herself was a well-known UK TV actress. Turn on one of the channels showing older British dramas and you couldn't escape seeing his mum's face, from decades ago, playing a wife, girlfriend, mother, or even a woman in a bonnet and big dress running to get into a horse carriage.

'So, what happened?' Ruan asked, feeling his temper fraying.

'The children flew the nest; he and his wife were knocking about the place alone. He was at work; she'd got herself a job doing something or other. And they...' She shrugged. 'Drifted, is what he said. They were living their own lives, perfectly fine, but not doing much together. Anything at all, towards the end, he said. They used to holiday together, but that tailed off. Said they'd sit at the restaurants and have nothing to say to each other. So, they knocked that on the head, he told me, pretty soon after.' She looked at him. 'Come on, it's not the first time a couple have divorced like this. He's a good man. Honest. Simple. Plain and straightforward.'

This prospective husband sounded like a tub of plain yoghurt, but Ryan didn't say so. 'Isn't it a bit...' He trailed off. Couldn't think of the right word to say without upsetting her. Slushy was what he meant. A bit sad, for two people their age falling in love again. A bit much. A bit unrealistic.

She shook her head, tutted, jumped off the stool and made coffee with the expensive shiny machine. She sniffed, lifted her head, still facing her back towards him. 'I know what you're thinking.'

He'd hurt her. Brilliant. Upset his own mum. Didn't mean to. Never did, but he was protective of her and didn't want some random nobody taking her for a ride. 'I'm just looking out for you.'

She turned, wiped tears from her cheeks, handed him a coffee. 'You think there's no fool like an old fool. Don't you?'

Basically, in not so many words, yes. He looked at the floor, couldn't make eye contact with her. 'Look, everyone deserves love. Whoever, and whatever age they are. It's just—'

'You can't bear the thought of your mum having a sex life, is that it?'

It wasn't what he'd been thinking, but it definitely was now. He knew it happened. She'd been seeing some bloke last year, said it wasn't anything serious. Just a bit of fun – her eyes had twinkled at that and Ryan knew exactly what she meant. In some ways that was easier, because there hadn't been any danger of him getting his hands on what his mum had. Or ever needing to refer to him as a step-dad.

Ugh.

He shook his head. 'I'm not gonna lie, I don't love thinking about that. But it's the same with Dad. I know he and Matt love each other, but I don't need to consider it with much more detail than that. I want you to be happy. But I don't want anyone taking you for a mug. Taking the piss out of you.' Financially, was unsaid, but he was sure she understood.

She took a sip of coffee, put her hand on one hip. 'I was not born yesterday. I had boyfriends before your dad. I've had a few since actually. But this Dave, he's the first man who I can be myself with. He's not after Julia Lopez the Actress, he just wants the woman who he drives to work.'

'At the TV studio. Being on daytime TV to three to four million viewers a day. It's hardly like he's dropping you off at Tesco, is it Mum?'

She shrugged, looked away, finished the small cup of coffee. 'I can't be someone else. I can't pretend I'm not Julia Lopez from the television. I've gone out with men who've only been interested in me because of who I am.'

'Have you? Who? When?'

She shook her head. 'Never you mind. I spotted what they were after from miles away. Dave is different. Trust me, I know what I'm doing.'

He sighed. If she'd not told him about anyone else, she was dating, except the man last year who was just a bit of fun, then possibly this was it. The real thing. Love.

She held his forearms, looking into his eyes. 'I want you to meet him. Will you do that for me?'

Another sigh. For her, he would. 'Suppose so. But I'm not calling him Dad.'

'Wouldn't expect you to. And I don't think he'd be too happy either. He has his own kids. Who I've yet to meet. We both kept it to ourselves until, we were sure. Now we're telling our families.' She made a face. 'Nervous or what. Step mum. Nice.'

So, it was serious. He nodded. 'Fine.'

‘Bring a girlfriend. You do have one now, don’t you? Handsome man like you. I don’t understand why you don’t have to beat them off with a stick.’

He shook his head. No girlfriend. Not before, not now, and not likely in future.

‘Nothing going on in that department?’ she asked.

He blushed.

‘Didn’t you get serious with some girl at uni? I’m sure Sam told me, that time you both stayed here that summer between your second and third years.’

It was the summer that Sam, Ryan’s best friend in the whole wide world, had started seeing a woman. But Ryan didn’t think she was right for him and so they decided to move away from the university town in Staffordshire, back to London for some fun. Ryan acknowledged now that he had an ulterior motive, that being a touch of jealousy about the woman spending time with Sam, when Sam was Ryan’s wing man, and had been right from the first day of the first term, when they were in halls of residence together, and on the same course.

‘Fizzled out,’ Ryan said.

‘Shame. She sounded perfect for you. How is Sam getting on, now he’s working?’

They were both on the same graduate training scheme at Soleil, a French manufacturer of luxury electric vehicles. Did the academic bits together, but were working in different departments, located in separate offices. ‘Loving it. Like me.’

‘Is it just him, or does he have a brother? I remember you saying his parents weren’t around. I wanted to mother him, feed him up.’

That had been why she'd happily agreed to them spending that summer at the house he stood in now. Great days. Long summer's evenings, hanging out together. 'Sam doesn't have a girlfriend either,' Ryan blurted, as if it made any difference to why he himself didn't have one.

'I don't want you turning out like your dad. He was a bloody workaholic and look where that got us.' She rolled her eyes.

'I'm meant to be a workaholic. I'm starting out. I want to learn as much as possible. Be like a sponge and absorb everything. Get the best job. Earn all the money. How else am I meant to afford designer clothes and the newest Apple gadgets?'

She smiled. 'So, you'll meet him? Dave?'

Ryan nodded, hugged her, holding her tightly. This house, his mum, were the only parts of his childhood that had seemed to stay the same. And now his mum was moving on, changing, and what would be left?

'Staying for dinner?' she asked.

He shrugged.

'Don't strain yourself, will you?' She opened the fridge. 'I know you're going to like Dave. He's sort of adrift with his style. A bit old-fashioned. Mid-fifties and he's...I've suggested he have a makeover. Not makeup, but you know, like those shows, where they get the person a new wardrobe, haircut, all that. I've been recommended somebody who's the best in London.'

'Great,' he said, not really meaning it, but looking forward to dinner with his mum all the same.



She seemed really happy over dinner, talking about this Dave bloke, convinced Ryan would really love him. Which made Ryan more disinclined to do so. Because he was stubborn like that.

In the car on his way home, Ryan decided it couldn't be that bad. If this man made his mum happy then who was he to argue? It was the dating thing that he returned to. The longer he went without a girlfriend the more people found it suspicious. But he just wasn't interested. Not in a relationship. Seemed all destined to end, just like his parents' so called perfect marriage. Relationships were for suckers and Ryan definitely wasn't one of those.

He arrived home, hoping the light would be on, signalling Sam was there.

No. Oh well. Living with Sam had been an easy decision, they did everything together anyway, lived together the whole time at uni. It was a shame they weren't working at the same office, but Sam was specialising in aerodynamics, and body shape design, whereas Ryan was interested in power, electric, fuel efficiencies and that sort of thing. Still, they saw plenty of each other most evenings.

He removed his shoes, then went into their small flat.

Some people had commented on them being like a couple and Ryan was sensitive about that. Sam wasn't that way inclined; he always had a girl on the go. Ryan felt prickly about it because of his dad. Him and his dad both being gay, that would seem a bit weird...wouldn't it?

He opened a bottle of lager, sat on the sofa and channel surfed, nothing on. Picking up his iPad he clicked to the tech magazine he subscribed to, wondering if there were any must-have gadgets, he could treat himself to.

The chances of father and son both being gay, that's gotta be one in a million, hasn't

it? He flicked the next page, read a review about a webcam. Couldn't pay attention.

Not about Sam, because they were like brothers, it made him feel funny even thinking about it, but Ryan had a feeling he'd ignored ever since that family holiday ten years ago.

He didn't mind seeing women, dating them, taking them out, making a big show of it, but when they got serious, he bailed. He also wasn't that into the sex side of things. He only did it occasionally when he was expected to, but before the women became too close, started wanting it regularly, wanting him to... he'd say it was all too much, too serious, too emotional and then he'd dump them.

Harrison, was his name: the swimming pool lifeguard at a holiday village. Ryan and his family had stayed in a lodge in the forest. They went swimming during the day. His parents had taken their devices off them, made them play bloody board games in the evening, they weren't allowed to even watch television. It was stupid and ridiculous.

Ryan was just eighteen and felt too old for family holidays. He had his own car, a seventeenth birthday present from his parents and they'd not let him drive there in it, waste of petrol when he could travel in the family car.

Earlier that night, he'd escaped from another round of bloody Monopoly, walked to the swimming pool, hung about buying sweets from the vending machines. Got chatting to Harrison, who'd seen him earlier with his family.

Harrison was the same age as Ryan had been. Mature for his age. Pale ginger hair, light skin, beard, worked out. They got talking about the gym at the holiday village, how most people didn't have a clue, tried to lift the heaviest weights first time, ended up injuring themselves.

‘Tomorrow night,’ Harrison said, ‘if you can get out, me and some mates are going for a drive after work. Come along. If you want.’ He said it like it was nothing, he didn’t care either way.

Ryan did. He wanted to spend more time with Harrison. He wasn’t sure why, but when he decided he liked someone, he sort of became a bit obsessed with them, very quickly developed really close friendships. Needed them.

They agreed when to meet the following evening.

Without his phone, it was like olden times, how his parents had said they met with friends. He needed to stick to the time.

The following evening, they were at a restaurant in the centre of the holiday village, talking about how great the holiday was.

Ryan said, ‘I need to go.’

‘Why?’ his dad asked with a frown. ‘I’ve not taken a week off work, we’ve both’ he looked at Julia ‘taken a week off work for you to disappear. We’re only here for seven nights.’

‘Who is it?’ his mum asked. ‘Is it the girl you were talking to when we went swimming?’ Her face lit up.

This told him that was the right answer. He looked away, tried to blush. ‘Might be.’

‘Let him go. You never know, this might be his first girlfriend.’

His sister, Sophie laughed. ‘This, I’ve got to see!’

His dad shrugged.

His mum patted his arm. 'Be back at the lodge, by ten.'

Ryan huffed. 'I'm not seven years old!'

'You're still living under our roof; you stick to our rules.' His dad stared at him.

Ryan knew he'd say that. Could have said it at the same time as his dad did. If he got back late, what were they going to do, ban him from having his phone? Not let him watch TV? This holiday was like some ridiculous boot camp for misbehaving children, nothing could make it much worse.

He stood, then left.

Harrison was in his car behind the swimming pool building. 'I thought you were bailing on me.'

Ryan got in. 'Where now?'

Harrison started the engine, left the holiday village and drove them into a nearby wood, where he parked and switched the lights off.

'What about the others?' Ryan asked.

'They're coming later.'

Something felt off. No, not quite off, but not as Ryan had expected. He didn't feel in danger, he was big enough to look after himself. He didn't get psychopath vibes off Harrison, but there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Harrison reached over to the back seat, brought two bottles of beer, opened them and gave one to Ryan.

They clinked them, toasted and sat in silence.

Ryan wondered about him driving later, but decided not to worry about that. One beer was nothing.

They talked about Harrison's job, Ryan wanting to go to university, he added that he found his sister irritating.

'Yes,' Harrison said, 'I do too. Girls aren't really worth it.' He opened the glove compartment, leaning across, his arm lightly brushing Ryan's legs. He lit a roll up cigarette, but it wasn't just tobacco, it was a spliff. Casually offered it to Ryan.

Ryan was definitely worrying about how they'd get back, if Harrison was stoned and drunk.

'Village is only round the corner. You can walk it if you don't want me to drive you.' Harrison said it as if he'd read Ryan's mind and wanted to reassure him all was fine.

Ryan took the spliff, inhaled, coughed, remembered why he didn't smoke, and felt light headed. He'd done it a few times at school, parties, never bought it himself, but at a party it was all right. Took the edge off.

The next part remained fuzzy in Ryan's memory. It was a decade ago, but also, he'd been a bit drunk and definitely stoned. He'd felt lightheaded and relaxed. Now he wasn't worrying about Harrison driving, he was leaning into the experience: enjoying the conversation, the intensity of it being just the two of them, like at the start of a best friendship.

They talked about sex and drinking and smoked some more of the spliff. Then they were discussing why they went to the gym. Harrison asked Ryan to feel his muscles on his forearms. They were hard.

Something funny happened to Ryan, a tingly sensation in his groin he'd not experienced before, not with the girls he'd kissed and fooled around with as a teenager.

Harrison lifted his T-shirt, was talking about how he wanted a six-pack, told Ryan to touch, see how hard it was.

Ryan was fascinated with the smooth stomach, how the hair became thicker running down the middle in line with Harrison's navel, then how it was thinning out to the sides. He touched it. Smooth hair, hard muscle.

Harrison held Ryan's hand there, then took a drag on the spliff, put it to Ryans lips.

Ryan opened his mouth, making eye contact with Harrison, then inhaled, shut his eyes, stopped thinking and decided he'd just do, go with what happened. If something didn't feel right, he'd stop.

Harrison rubbed the hard bulge in Ryan's jeans.

Ryan enjoyed it, it didn't feel right, but it didn't feel wrong, so he didn't stop him.

Then he unzipped Ryan's jeans, reached inside his underwear and grabbed his hard-on.

It was as if all the air in Ryan's body disappeared. The relief at his erection not being constrained, the tightness of Harrison's hand gripping around it, felt wonderful. He shut his eyes, it didn't feel wrong, it felt right. Exciting.

Harrison's hand guided Ryan's onto his own erection, he unzipped himself, then placed Ryan's hand so it was gripping his cock, the same as Harrison did to Ryan's.

They sat in silence, their fingers formed an O around each other's hard dicks, slowly pulling up and down, in time with each other.

Ryan's tingling spread through his balls, up his stiff shaft, and he wanted Harrison to go faster, so he went faster on Harrison's cock. He kept his eyes shut, it felt better, easier to ignore what was happening and just feel it through his body.

Then Harrison was using his mouth, not to kiss Ryan's lips, but on Ryan's erection. It was warm, and slick and moving up and down his shaft. It felt better than his own hand. He thrust his hips upwards, kept his eyes shut, held his arms above his head.

Harrison stopped, then guided Ryan's hand back onto his cock.

Opening his eyes, a little, Ryan saw that it stood proud, upright, ginger hair sprouting around the base, the head was shiny, rounded like a mushroom. Ryan found it fascinating. Was mesmerised by it. Probably the spliff and the beer. He wanted to do what Harrison had done to him, but it felt a bit...gay. Not that Harrison had said he was, they'd not said anything for a long time.

Ryan leaned forwards, examined Harrison's hard-on close up. If he put it in his mouth, it would mean he was gay. Wouldn't it? And he couldn't be gay. Because he wasn't like that. He didn't wear the clothes they wore, the music they liked, the things they enjoyed. He was a proper man, into cars and engineering and bodybuilding and all the manly stuff.

Except, at that moment, his head swimming slightly, and the scent of something salty, possibly cock, and Harrison's breath deep, Ryan wanted it. So. Damned. Much.

But that would mean...No. He sat upright, shaking his head. 'Can't. Don't wanna. I'm not. Don't mind it, if others are. Doesn't bother me. But I'm not.'

Harrison shrugged, put Ryan's hand so it gripped his own shaft, gently pulling it up and down, showing Ryan what he wanted.

They had more of the spliff, more beer and carried on playing for quite a while. Ryan shut his eyes, pulling up and down Harrison's shaft.

Harrison's lips and mouth were doing things to Ryan he'd never imagined possible. He didn't want to watch what was happening, but feeling it was fucking fantastic. Finally, Ryan cried out with pleasure as he finished in Harrison's mouth, who then swallowed.

Ryan opened his eyes a little, saw a cheeky grin on Harrison's face as he looked up. Ryan squeezed his hand, and shook and realised the stickiness on his fingers was Harrison, he'd already gone.

Done.

There was silence. The car smelt of spliff, lager, sweat and the milky saltiness of come – normally only something Ryan smelled when he was alone.

Harrison wiped himself with tissues from the glove compartment, handing Ryan some so he could do the same.

They pulled their clothes back in place.

Harrison started the engine.

Ryan opened the door. 'Gonna walk. Clear my head.' He slammed the door and



walked back alone. Did that really just happen? Harrison's stickiness on his hand confirmed it had. The desire to taste it, and the repulsion at what they'd done, warred deep within Ryan. He wiped his hand on some dewy grass, firmly putting his hand in his pocket for the walk back.

He avoided Harrison for the rest of the holiday. Didn't go swimming in case he bumped into him.

After the holiday, Ryan was driving his new car and his mind floated back to that night in Harrison's car, how he'd enjoyed it, but felt repulsed at himself, how he wanted it again and also wished it had never happened. How he'd been fascinated by Harrison's hard-on, wanting to, but unable to suck it. Both those feelings had existed at the same time within him. And one minute he was driving and the next his car was in a ditch, having missed a tree by a few feet. He was no longer in the car with Harrison, but in his own car, wondering what the bloody hell had happened. He told his family he was distracted by the radio, because he couldn't tell them the real reason. Sophie thought it was funny he'd written off his birthday present, before he'd even had the car a year, but he wondered if she'd find it so amusing if she knew the reason why.

During the first term at university, he was seeing a girl who lived in his halls of residence. He liked how she took charge, told him what to do. They dated for a few months until what she wanted was what Ryan had been fearing. He did the deed, concentrated hard on what he was doing, made himself try and enjoy it, but it was the most awkward experience ever. She dumped him soon afterwards, saying he wasn't as into her as she was into him. It was true and Ryan was relieved.

Ryan didn't want to wait up for Sam to come home. Felt a bit too co-dependent, clingy. They were best friends and Ryan liked it that way. Shaking off the niggling feeling the memory of the family holiday had resurfaced, he returned to the tech magazine on his iPad, until his eyes felt heavy and finally, he went to bed.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham was waiting outside the changing rooms, for his client to reappear, in one of the outfits Graham had curated and picked for him.

The man left the changing room, wearing a striped shirt and jeans, with brown leather shoes. 'I feel right dressed up like a kipper.' He shook his head, looking at his shoes.

'You look very smart. Anyone would be delighted for you to be marrying their daughter.'

'Sure?'

'Positive. It's my job to know.'

The man shrugged. 'Haven't worn a shirt since...school.'

He hadn't known what a daily skincare maintenance routine meant either, or what manscaping was either, much to Graham's chagrin. But he was soon putting that right. 'Try the next outfit on. I'm convinced you'll look perfect in that suit.'

'I'll look like I'm in court, that's what I'll look like.' He shook his head, returning to the changing room.

Graham made a mental note to arrange for the client to have a haircut and wet shave at his friend, Ali's salon. The client seemed to have kept the same look from when he was in his twenties, which now, well past forty-five, made him look a bit...how would Graham describe it, being kind...laid-back, maybe?

Graham's phone rang, it was his friend Claire.

'I'm with a client, can't really talk,' he said to her.

'I fancied some adult conversation. George is away and I'm bored. I must get better at this day off lark, but when Anna's at school, I never know what to do with myself. Sad.'

'How long's he away this time?'

Claire's husband was in the navy and away a lot, and Graham liked to keep her company, in return for her sage advice. Claire being a level-headed and pragmatic pub manager. After a long sigh, she said, 'Two frigging months! I know it's important to have space, but this is ridiculous.' A pause, and then: 'How are things with you?'

'Splendid. Busy with work. Nice variety of clients. Living my best life.'

'No desire to find a boyfriend? I told you; I'll give you a hand setting up profiles on the dating sites. I've been reading all these tips in magazines.'

'Well, you can save yourself the bother, because I'm perfectly happy being celibate. Happier than I've ever been in a relationship. Especially the last one.' He'd ended up being his ex's carer not lover, so had decided: No. Never. Again. Some days, during the breakup, the only thing that made him get out of bed was blasting Katie Perry's "Roar" and singing at the top of his voice. It had become his breakup anthem. 'Besides, I have no time.'

Claire laughed. 'You make time for what's important. I'll let you go. Can we diarise a dinner and wine evening please? Something to look forward to.'

‘Definitely.’

‘Don’t give up on love, everybody needs it and if you follow love, it’s usually a good place to start.’

‘What on earth are you on about?’ Graham frowned.

‘I’m a romantic, and you love it.’

That was true and he couldn’t have managed without her after his last breakup. The bleep on his phone signalled he had call waiting. He told her. ‘I love you, but I must go.’

‘Love you too.’ She hung up.

The call waiting was a number he didn’t recognise. He always answered it since it could be a potential client. Most of his work came from recommendations. He was very under-stated, didn’t advertise, so vulgar, just let his work speak for itself. ‘Hello, Graham Bartley, how can I help you?’

‘Are you the son of the late Mary Bartley?’

He feared what this might be, held his breath. Emptying his mum’s flat had been bad enough, all the memories of his childhood, her clothes and everywhere he looked there were bottles she’d hidden. He knew she had been lying when she said she’d stopped drinking. ‘I am. How can I help you?’

‘Did you sign as guarantor for a catalogue card for Light Home?’

‘Possibly. She’s dead, and had nothing, so you can’t have anything of hers.’ A council flat, an empty bank account and a house full of stuff she’d bought to cheer

herself up over a lifetime of disappointing others. Not much to show for fifty-three years on the planet. Grief lodged itself heavily in his stomach.

‘We have you down as guarantor to that card. Are you Mr Graham Bartley, date of birth 20 February 1990?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you owe the money.’

Graham had gone through the paperwork at his mum’s place, hadn’t found anything about this. Was pretty sure her debts would die with her. Reckoned that was the case when he’d researched it. ‘How can I, when it’s not my debt?’

‘It is, because you’re the guarantor. In the event of your mother not being able to repay the debt, you are to repay it.’

The client left the changing room, wearing a charcoal grey suit. The trousers were too tight and the jacket too loose. The white shirt was untucked. Honestly, some people, Graham thought.

The man on the phone was talking too quickly, Graham had taken his attention off it and focussed on the client’s clothes. ‘What are you saying?’ he said down the phone.

‘I said,’ the man added, on the phone, ‘we’d like to discuss a repayment plan. Monthly instalments. Clear it in no time.’

It wasn’t going to be much; his mum hadn’t had anything of value in the flat. In her life really. ‘How much?’

The client walked forwards. ‘I don’t go much on this shirt. Too long. And the jacket’s

baggy. Do they do it in a smaller size, do you think?’

Of course, they did it in a smaller size. That was the whole point of clothes. Graham started to reply to the client, ‘If you go back into the changing room, I’ll get you the correct sizes. I thought you’d told me your sizes.’

‘Thought I had, but...’ He turned and walked back to the changing room.

Graham put his ear back to the phone.

‘Are you there, Mr Bartley? I said, when can you make the first payment? We can take it by credit or debit card, then we’d very much like to set up a direct debit monthly thereafter.’

Thereafter. What was this man on about? How much was it going to be? ‘Look, I’ll put it on my card now, get it over and done with.’ Graham pulled his card from his wallet. ‘Ready for the number?’

‘Yes.’ A pause, and then, ‘Are you sure you want to pay it off now? You don’t need to. As I said, we can agree a—’

‘I told you; I want this over and done with.’ His mum making a mistake was bad enough, never mind that she’d recently died. He wanted this all over, done and dusted as soon as possible.

‘The full amount will be,’ the man coughed down the phone, ‘Fifteen-thousand, four-hundred and fifty-five pounds. And thirty-two pence.’

Graham’s heart felt as if it had jumped out of his chest. So much for living my best life. Fuck my life. ‘You what now?’

The man repeated it. 'As I said, it's quite a lot.'

'Quite a lot. Quite a lot. Fifteen grand.'

The client reappeared, wearing a white vest and grey, very much worn-out boxer shorts.

Two more things Graham needed to add to his list. The importance of underwear, particularly when trying to impress people romantically, could not be underestimated.

'Have you got them?' the client asked. 'Only, I don't fancy standing about like this. I feel a bit of an idiot as it goes. Which I said to you I didn't want. I told you I hated this crap. Explained that's why I get it all from online. Can't stand this rubbish.' He folded his arms and stared at Graham. 'What are you going to do about it?'

Quite. This man was the client and it was Graham's job to make him look modern, attractive, and someone his future in-laws would be happy to marry their daughter. All, while, in theory, enjoying himself and showing him this sort of thing was important, for his own self-care.

The client was pointing at Graham, raising his voice, saying stuff about being dragged there, he didn't want it and...

On the phone the man was saying, 'Can you give me the long card number across the front please?'

'No. I bloody well can't.' Graham ended the call. He knew he could do one thing at a time. And on some days that felt a bit too much. Outwardly he was confident, diplomatic, easy-going, but inwardly he was a bit of an emotionally mess. Turning to the client, Graham said, 'Sorry about that. Sorry. Yeah, I said that. It was—'

‘I don’t want to hear it. What I’m paying you to do is make me look better. And so far, you’ve been on your phone, and I’ve been standing here like a bloody schoolboy that’s forgot his PE kit. Are you going to get me the right sizes, or shall we give up for today?’ He stared at Graham, frowning, suddenly looking very mean and angry.

Earlier he’d seemed quite handsome, in an unkempt way. Now, not so much. ‘One suit in the right sizes, coming right up. Do you want to try on the second pair of jeans, see if they fit as well as the others?’

‘They’re the same size.’ The client shrugged.

‘Different style. Might not work on your body shape. I do think it’s best, if you can bear it.’

He shook his head, left for the changing room.

Graham fetched the correctly sized suit and waited for the client to reappear.

Graham reckoned he’d managed to salvage the afternoon. The client left pleased with a new well-fitting wardrobe, all flattering and modern, and they were now in the hairdresser, Graham, having managed to bag a last-minute appointment by pulling in a favour.

The client was sitting in the hairdresser’s chair in front of the mirror.

Ali, his friend, stood to one side, holding scissors and a comb. ‘What were you thinking?’

‘Nothing I’ve got to tittivate about with at home. I don’t have time for that.’ He stroked his long greying beard.



‘Very short sides, side parting, bit of a quiff.’

‘Are we dyeing it?’ Ali asked. ‘I ask, because silver is very in. We have clients coming in and asking to be silver. You, sir, are very fortunate in that you are blessed with being silver au naturelle. Very on trend.’

‘At least part of me is,’ the client said. ‘And I’m keeping the beard. I’m not shaving every day again. Can’t be doing with it. Haven’t got the—’

‘Time, yes,’ Ali said, ‘We understand. You’re lucky there too, because facial hair is very much on trend. Some waxing of the moustache perhaps? Beard oil maybe?’

The client looked bemused.

Graham said, ‘Trim it short.’

While the client was being seen to by Ali, Graham slipped outside to call his brother, Sam. When Sam answered, Graham said, ‘Are you sitting down?’

‘All right to you too. I’m very well. How are you? Yes, I’m okay to talk to you. I’m just on my way home from work. It’s going well, thanks. Grad scheme is hard work, but I expected that. How’s your job? Oh good.’

Graham bit the inside of his cheek. ‘Are you done?’

‘Just about.’

‘Because I’m done. Absolutely fucking done, up to my eyes in being done.’ He took a breath. ‘Guess who called today?’

‘Our long-lost dad?’

‘Ha bloody ha. Although it’s about family.’

‘Auntie Sylvie wanting some of Mum’s money.’

‘She can have it. She’s welcome to it,’ Graham said.

‘I thought there wasn’t any.’

‘Worse than.’

‘How can it be worse than having no money?’

Christ, his brother could be clueless sometimes. Graham was used to having to look after him, since their mum couldn’t as she was a barely functioning alcoholic, meaning from twelve years old, Graham had raised Sam himself.

There was a silence, then Sam said, ‘Sorry.’

‘What for? It’s not your fault, this mess.’

‘For not helping you with Mum’s flat. I couldn’t get the time off. I...’

Couldn’t face it. Didn’t want to be faced with the reality of how much of a useless mum she’d been to them both. Because thanks to Graham, Sam hadn’t gone without much, unlike Graham. He didn’t begrudge his brother that though. Loved him. Always had. ‘Doesn’t matter. I did it fine. This is worse than that. She owes money and I’m responsible for it.’

‘How? Doesn’t the debt die with the person?’

Graham explained.

‘How much is it?’ Sam asked.

‘Fifteen grand.’

‘Fuck off!’

‘Can we discuss properly later this week?’

‘Of course.’

Graham ended the call, returned to see his client, who looked like a modern well-groomed man, rather than someone who’d been living in a tent in the woods since 1995.

‘Happy?’ Graham asked.

‘Suppose so. Do I have to do this all the time?’ he asked.

That was the general idea with grooming and skincare routines, unless he soon wanted to resemble a wild man trekking through the forest. ‘It’s better if you do. Shall I send a picture to your fiancé, or do you want to surprise her in person?’

‘In person I reckon.’

And so did Graham, but he took a picture for his website, having taken the before shot when they first met.

‘So, this is it?’ The man shook Graham’s hand. ‘Cheers. Good job. I never would have believed it.’

That was why Graham was one of the best in the business, in the top five personal

shoppers within London, as well as styling and shopping for the stars. ‘You’re very welcome.’

The man looked at the floor. ‘What I said, when I lost my temper, I didn’t mean it. Shouldn’t have...’

Graham waved it away, he’d had far worse, celebrity meltdowns, brides and grooms in tears and throwing tantrums, businessmen shouting at him, but he took it all in his stride. It was part of the job description, and seeing people as he was now, transformed, a new improved version of themselves, made it all worthwhile.

The client left.

Graham wondered how on earth he was going to sort out his mum’s debt, then felt comforted that his brother was happy to help.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan was at his desk, considering how to approach the design problems related to a hydrogen fuel cell engine. He'd been reading a lot about it and it sounded perfect, just water vapour as the waste product. But he couldn't quite focus, as he was still head full of the conversation with his mum.

He wanted to be happy for her. See her settled, contented, making a new romantic life for herself, just like his dad had done. Except, because it had been a few years since the divorce and his mum hadn't mentioned she was seeing anyone, Ryan had assumed she wasn't interested, had moved on, was going to enjoy her life as a strong independent woman. And yay for her, was what he'd thought. Until Dave had been mentioned...

He'd arranged to see Sam for lunch, their paths hadn't crossed much at home in the last few days. Sam was busy with work, and his mum hadn't long passed away, so there was all that to sort out. Ryan was impressed at how well Sam was coping with it all. Ryan would be wrecked if his mum died. He supposed it helped because Sam's brother seemed to shoulder everything, was practically like Sam's dad by all accounts. Ryan couldn't have managed that either. Some people were just stronger than they first seemed. Sam was one of them, and Ryan envied him that.

The business of the morning at Soleil, seemed to drag along, Ryan made himself numerous coffees, taking the opportunity to chat to colleagues in the office kitchen, see if inspiration struck over his work problem while pouring milk into his drink.

Nope.

At lunchtime he left for the pub halfway between Sam and Ryan's offices. Wouldn't

it be easier if they worked together too, instead of this? Maybe he could ask for one of them to be transferred, he wondered, as he arrived at the pub – a Victorian building, painted glass, a saloon bar, family bar separated by different outside doors.

A quick scout about and he couldn't find Sam, so he bought two alcohol-free lagers, then sat at a table by the window and looked at the menu. Maybe it was best if he didn't suggest moving departments, people thought enough rubbish about him and Sam, without that. Jokes about them being like an old married couple. Ryan didn't find it funny though. He decided what he was having for lunch.

Sam walked past the window, waving from the pavement.

Ryan held Sam's lager aloft, shaking it slightly.

Sam joined him, sitting at the table, then ordered their food at the bar, returning to his lager and the table where Ryan was sitting. 'What's the big problem? What's the rush actually? It's been one of those weeks.' Sam rolled his eyes, took a long sip of his lager. 'Not bad for alcohol-free, is it?'

Ryan nodded. They'd been severely told off after a long lunch on a Friday when they'd returned to their desks more than a little bit tipsy. This was a place of work, and alcohol during working hours was not permitted. It was in the company handbook, hadn't they read it?

'What do you mean, one of those weeks?' Ryan asked.

Their food arrived and they ate.

Between mouthfuls, Sam said, 'It's Mum. Some debt that my brother has to repay. He's done more than enough. I'm going to help him.'

‘Good of you. Is it much, the debt?’

‘Fifteen grand.’

Wow. How were they going to repay that? It was half as much as their graduate salaries and that felt like a fortune, having lived as poor students for so long. Well, his allowance from his dad meant he hadn’t been exactly poor as a student, but everything was relative. Sam didn’t have an allowance and had worked in a pub. Another reminder for how fortunate Ryan really was.

‘Enough about me,’ Sam said, ‘what’s going on with you?’

Ryan told him about the conversation with his mum. ‘I want to be happy for her. But I’m worried. This is why I don’t bother with dating. Dating’s for suckers.’

Sam shook his head. ‘How would you know? Longest you’ve dated a girl is what, a fortnight?’

‘Two months.’

‘Hardly a long-term relationship, is it?’ Sam asked.

Ryan shrugged. ‘Enough to tell me it wasn’t for me.’ Or she wasn’t for him. Or women generally, but he wasn’t thinking about that now. Now, he was concentrating on his mum’s impending wedding.

‘Have you met him, this Dave guy?’

Ryan shook his head. ‘It’s like he’s come from nowhere. Suddenly she’s marrying him.’

‘Why so fast?’

‘She wanted to make sure it was the real thing before telling me and Sophie.’

‘Does your dad know?’

‘Don’t know. Possibly. They get on surprisingly well. Better than when they were married. Towards the end anyway.’ He shook his head, that had always baffled him.

‘What’s that all about, eh?’

‘Would you rather they were at each other’s throats?’

‘No.’ A pause, and then: ‘I want to stop her getting married. Or at least persuade her to postpone it. Until I’ve had a chance to check out this Dave guy.’

Sam finished his food, placing the cutlery carefully on the plate. ‘Don’t you think she’s done that already? She’s been dating him, how long is it?’

‘Coming up for a year.’

‘Right.’

‘But they knew each other before that. He’s been her driver for years.’

‘Right.’ Sam sounded uncertain.

‘You think I’m mad, don’t you? You think I should meet this Dave, give her away at the wedding, and accept I’ve got a new step-dad, don’t you?’

‘I think if she’s been dating him for that long, and known him before, she’s sure of who he is and what she feels about him. She’s not stupid, is she, your mum?’



‘One of the brightest people I know. I reckon she gets people because she’s pretended to be so many. In her acting.’

‘Right.’ Sam nodded. ‘So maybe, what I’m saying is, perhaps, don’t do what you’re thinking of doing. And come up with an alternative plan.’

‘But what if he’s a gold digger?’

‘Could you quietly suggest they have a pre-nup? If they stay together, it’s moot, but if they divorce, your mum keeps everything she had before.’

‘I know what a pre-nup is, thanks.’ He couldn’t keep the terseness out of his tone.

‘All right, just trying to help. You wanted to talk about it, this is me giving my opinions. Unless you only wanted me to listen and not give advice.’

Ryan shook his head. No, he’d wanted Sam’s advice. Always valued it. Needed to talk out his feelings with Sam, to see how he really felt. About most things, everything in fact, except the whispers of that night in the lifeguard’s car on the family holiday, which he kept secret from everyone. Including himself, only returning to the memory when he had no choice.

There was silence.

Sam checked the time. ‘Better get back.’

Ryan was conscious he’d hogged the conversation, wanted to see how Sam was. ‘Stay for dessert. How are you doing?’

Sam checked his watch. ‘Are you back on sugar again, or what?’

Ryan had been on a sugar-free diet to help with his bodybuilding and had been pleased with the results. He'd put on a few kilos of muscle, gained bulk in his biceps, thighs, and pectoral muscles. But it was hard keeping up the diet all the time. Going to the gym three or four times a week was easy enough. He enjoyed it.

'We can share one,' Ryan said. 'I've blown it anyway with the beers and the pie. I'll have a smoothie for dinner, even things out.'

Sam smiled. 'I don't know how you do it. I can eat anything and never seem to put on weight.' He left for the bar to order dessert.

Sam was the exact opposite shape from Ryan: thin and slender, ate whatever he liked, never exercised, except walking, and remained enviously slim. Bloody metabolism. Ryan had said when Sam turned thirty it would all change, having spoken to gym friends. Sam shrugged it off, eating more chocolate and ice-cream.

Now, Sam returned carrying their sticky toffee pudding with two spoons, and they ate.

'So, it's been quite a week. What are you doing about your mum's debt?' Ryan asked.

'That's what I'm talking to Graham about when we meet.' He looked at the table, obviously something bothering him.

Ryan wanted to reach out and touch Sam's hand to comfort him, but didn't. Couldn't. Because that's not what men do for each other. He coughed. 'What's up?'

Sam shook his head. 'We've gotta go. He'll be fine. I'm worrying over nothing. Stupid.'

‘Who, he, your brother?’

Sam nodded.

There was a long silence and Ryan wasn’t sure whether to ask more, or just leave it until Sam said what was really wrong.

Finally, Sam said, ‘He wouldn’t say. He’d just do it. I mean, he rang to ask for help. But he knows I’ve got no money. So, I don’t know how I’m going to help him. He...’ Sam looked out the window, shaking his head. ‘I forget sometimes that he’s my brother and not my dad. He seems so much older, more sorted than me. Than Mum ever was.’ He shrugged. ‘That’s why he did what he did, and he’s still doing it.’

He meant raising Sam himself, when their mum couldn’t. Bringing up Sam from two years of age, looking after him, juggling school and looking after the home, when his brother should have been enjoying becoming a teenager, discovering who he was. Instead, Graham was looking after Sam and their mum. Ryan didn’t know how Sam’s brother had done it.

Ryan didn’t know what to say. His family problem seemed trite in comparison. Was trite. Nothing really. Compared with what Sam and his brother had been through, Ryan’s childhood was like a Disney movie.

Sam stood. ‘I’ve paid.’ Nodding towards the door, he said, ‘I’d best get back.’ He left.

They usually shook hands, hugged briefly, slapping each other’s backs in a manly reserved manner. It had started as a joke at uni, then became how they always greeted and said goodbye to each other. Ryan wished he could have said something useful to help Sam. But it was way beyond his capability. Even imagining what Sam had gone through had Ryan’s throat choked with sadness.

The part that Ryan found most difficult was that Sam didn't seem to have the anger about their mum that his brother did. Sam couldn't remember their mum's behaviour, didn't know that Graham was his brother and not his dad until Sam eight or nine. Then he'd become used to it so assumed it was normal.

Families were difficult and messy at the best of times, and lately they seemed far worse.

Ryan returned to work where he managed to break through one of the problems he'd been grappling with that morning.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Later that week, Graham was in a bar, listening to his favourite Katy Perry playlist on earphones, and waiting for Sam so they could discuss what to do about their mum's debt.

Graham couldn't understand how she'd run up that sort of money. What did she have to show for it? Nothing, when he'd emptied her flat in the fortnight the council gave him before letting it out to someone else. His childhood home, where he'd been brought up – well, where he'd lived with his mum at least – and he'd brought up Sam. Years and years of hoping their mum would get better, stop drinking, sort her life out and properly step up as their only parent. Except, despite multiple promises, she hadn't been able to.

It was a disease, Graham knew now. Back then he'd thought their mum terribly selfish, but he'd researched it, went to AA meetings with her, understood it was a disease, and for some, they couldn't be saved. They weren't able to stop drinking. Their mum was one of those, sadly.

The bubbles in the golden lager rose to the surface of his glass. Where was his brother, Graham wondered. He knew Sam was just starting a proper graduate job, but he knew about work, that wasn't anything new to him. But clocking in and out of a pub wasn't the same as working in the body shop department of a car manufacturer?

Graham's mind boggled just trying to say it, never mind study and work it. They were so different in almost every way – him and Sam. And yet, they had much in common. Surviving that childhood for one.

Graham took a swallow of lager. No point dwelling on that. The past was the past and

now they had to face the future together.

His phone rang. It was Sam.

‘Are you just leaving, little brother? Because I’ve been here a while and don’t have all evening.’

‘I’m nearly there. I just needed to ask a favour. In case he turns up before I do.’

‘Who?’

‘Ryan.’

‘You invited Ryan to a discussion about our mum’s debts? Interesting approach. Please explain?’ He couldn’t stop behaving like the dad, because he’d done it for so long. He wished they could have an ordinary brotherly relationship – whatever that might be.

‘Unconventional I know. He’s having family stuff too. And he doesn’t have anyone else. I am his best friend. He relies on me.’

Graham knew what that was like. He’d heard so much about Ryan, they’d spent summers at Ryan’s parents’ place, lived together, and now were working together too. Ryan was important to Sam, so of course he could bring him now.

‘I can’t believe you’ve never met him before,’ Sam said.

Graham’s apartment was flashy but small, only one spare bedroom. So, it made sense they’d stayed at Ryan’s parents’ place that summer. ‘I’ve spoken to him on the phone though?’ He thought he had anyway.

‘When?’ Sam asked.

‘Second year at uni, when you lived in that flat above the pub where you worked.’

‘And you met him.’

‘When?’

‘First day at uni, you dropped me off and he was in the kitchen of my halls of accommodation.’

Graham had done it because their mum couldn’t drive, had promised to take Sam to university, but had gone to the pub, returning the next morning, drunk and incoherent, clearly unable to drive, or even help Sam pack. So, Graham had done it. ‘Don’t remember. It’s years ago. I dropped you off, saw you were settled okay then went home.’ Back to work, responsibilities, envying Sam of going to university, when Graham hadn’t. Couldn’t leave their mum just in case. Couldn’t justify the cost when he’d been working for years.

‘Well, you have met him. So, can he come? He’s a bit much sometimes, can get a bit clingy. I try to show him I have other friends, but he’s not interested. Puts it all on me.’

That sounded like a conversation to have another time. ‘If he’s your friend, then who am I to say no?’

‘Thanks. I’m nearly there now.’ Sam ended the call.

Graham returned to Katy Perry’s, “Roar” filled his ears and he mimed to himself, ordered another lager, checked the news, scrolled the socials, did a bit of work and rather than being annoyed at his little brother’s terrible time-keeping, decided to

enjoy the music, be relaxed and wait.

Sam arrived much later than he'd given the impression he would. With him was a huge man-mountain, short dark hair, neatly trimmed beard, designer clothes, cut to accentuate his muscular, solid, rugby player build. And goodness, did he have plenty of those to accentuate: thick biceps, clearly delineated pecs showing through the fitted shirt, big thighs in the spray on jeans that people in their twenties could effortlessly wear.

Graham removed the earphones and stopped the music.

Sam stood by Graham's table. 'This is Ryan. Meet my brother, Graham.' He went on to say something about how they'd met before.

But Graham wasn't listening. He was shaking Ryan's big hand, it gripped his own tightly, covering his, there were dark hairs on the back of it, and some peeping over the collar of his shirt, nicely fitted, accentuated his broad shoulders and narrow waist, whoever had dressed him knew what they were doing. It was probably Ryan who'd dressed himself, Graham decided. Because that was what most people did....of course...

Ryan stopped shaking Graham's hand, removed his jacket, the shirt looked even better now. He must be fifteen stone or more. There was a scent that Graham recognised, and had his senses flashing with excitement – a woody, citrusy scent – it was designer eau de toilette Graham always recommended to male clients wanting something sophisticated yet understated, and it had something else accompanying it, notes of...slightly salty and muskiness, which would be Ryan's own scent.

Graham shifted in his seat, trying to focus on what Sam was saying, rather than admiring the perfect specimen of masculinity who'd walked in with his brother. He was staring, he did this sometimes, when he was struck with handsomeness that



ticked all of his boxes.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

With clients, he found it easier, because they usually came to him needing a polish, not quite making the most of their assets. Whereas this man, here now, was definitely making the most of his assets. And Graham had to stop himself imagining Ryan in his underwear.

Magnificent, was the only word Graham could think of as he imagined it, in great detail, and full colour.

‘Sorry to crash in,’ Ryan was saying, sitting at the table, hanging his jacket over his chair. ‘I hope Sam’s explained I’ve got stuff. Not like your stuff, but family stuff anyway. I’ll get a round of drinks. Leave you two alone. And if there’s anything you’re discussing you don’t want me to hear, just give me a sign and I’ll be gone.’ He stood, looked at Graham’s drinks. ‘Same again?’

Graham’s brain had frozen. He’d lost the power of speech. Standing, in the fitted shirt and spray on jeans, Ryan was devastatingly, almost offensively handsome. Graham nodded as his throat felt dry.

Ryan said to Sam, ‘Usual?’

Sam made himself comfortable, nodded.

Ryan gambolled to the bar, wide gait, arms held out either side in a confident gesture of who he was and where he was. His behind was, as Graham expected, pert, muscular, wonderfully accentuated by the cut of the jeans. The shirt was nipped in at the back, showing off his wide back, ripples, were they muscles, not on his back, surely?

Sam looked from Ryan to Graham and frowned. 'Are you all right?'

Graham nodded. 'Fine. I do not remember meeting him.' Because if he had, he'd have remembered it.

'He wasn't that big when we started uni. He's a bit obsessive about it actually. I don't know why. Not that it matters because I'm not gay, but I don't find that attractive in men. It's a bit too artificial.'

'He's not gay, is he?' Graham asked, holding his breath in anticipation.

Sam shook his head. 'I don't think he's straight either.'

'Bi?'

'He's Ryan.'

Graham frowned. 'Which means?'

'He doesn't do relationships. Or anything else. He's Ryan and that's it.'

This, as far as Graham could see, wasn't much use to him. 'So, he's not gay or bisexual?'

'Not as far as I know. Although whether he'd have told me, I'm not sure. He briefly dated a girl at uni, then she dumped him.'

Why on earth would someone dump that man? Unless he wasn't interested in the woman and...

Before Graham could contemplate that any further, Ryan returned, carrying their

drinks. 'Have I missed much?'

Graham shot a look to his brother as if to say, don't you dare tell.

Sam took his drink. 'Mum stuff.'

'Course,' Ryan said as he sat. He remained quiet, while Graham and Sam discussed what to do about the debt.

There was a sadness to Ryan's eyes, as if he had the weight of the world on his admirably wide shoulders. He politely said nothing while the conversation went on about their mum's debt.

Graham said, 'What do you think?'

'Me?' Ryan asked.

'What would you do? Tell the debt company to go fuck themselves, or pay up?'

'In this scenario, can I afford to repay it?'

'Yes. Not all at once though.'

Ryan stroked his chin, rubbing his big fingers through the neatly trimmed hair.

Graham wondered if the hair elsewhere on Ryan was as neatly trimmed. He had a hunch it would be. Man like that, taking care of his appearance. Didn't mean he was necessarily gay, but a man in possession of a regular grooming routine, usually applied it from head to toe – in Graham's experience. And those who were unkempt and didn't consider that as important, tended to be consistently messy from head to toe.

Ryan's lips were moving, as he said something.

Graham could think of only one thing and it was kissing them. Which was about six kinds of wrong, his little brother's best friend, of indeterminate sexuality. Never mind tick, tick and tick. This was wrong, wrong and wrong. 'Sorry, I drifted off then,' Graham said, having imagined drifting off in a large swimming pool, being towed around by Ryan's impressive arms.

'Not that it's any of my business, and I'm grateful you don't mind me tagging along, but the morally correct thing to do is repay the debt. If you weren't the guarantor, then that's very different. But you signed up to be guarantor in the eventually this happened. And, well, it has.' Ryan shrugged, put his large palms facing upwards, rested them on the table.

Large palms, large hands, long fingers which could mean...

Graham brought that train of thought to a screeching halt. He'd not dated for a while, ever since the messy breakup. He'd stopped even considering sex, never mind wanting it. It was funny how when it was out of his mind, he didn't miss it. But now, faced with, well, Ryan, he felt his urges return.

'I agree,' Graham brought his thoughts back to the task in hand, and said to Sam. 'Morally, it is the right thing to do.' Even if financially, it was all going to fall on his shoulders. Sam had offered to contribute, but between his London rent, his not as high as he thought graduate salary, and living costs, repaying his student loan and tuition fees, he didn't have much left at the end of each month, as he'd shown Graham earlier.

'Wish I could do more. Hope you don't think this has been pointless,' Sam said.

It had been far from pointless. Discussing it had confirmed the right decision.

Besides, he'd met Ryan, which even if he was only ever material for his wank bank, or the jolt Graham needed to get back in the dating game, that was far from pointless.

'So, your mum's getting married,' Graham said to Ryan, leaning forwards, staring into his eyes, 'Why's that a problem?'

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan sat back, admiring Graham. Fitted shirt, designer jeans, shiny black leather shoes. Razor sharp haircut, fade at the sides and back, longer on top in a sort of quiff. Very short trimmed beard. He was as tall as Ryan; he'd noticed when standing to shake hands. Maybe a bit taller. Ryan liked that. Confident, a big bloke, visited the gym, probably as much as Ryan did.

Straight obviously.

Not that Sam had said, he'd had no reason to. Here's my brother, who's gay. No. People didn't introduce their siblings in that way.

'It's not a philosophical problem,' Graham was saying now.

He'd been talking, but Ryan hadn't listened, instead he'd sat back and admired him, from afar, from a purely aesthetic perspective.

Having watched Graham and Sam discuss their mum's debt, knowing what had happened before that, Ryan felt stupid coming here to talk about his problem. He was a whinger. Stupid problem – my mum's getting married to some bloke who's a bit older than her. What sort of an idiot thinks that's bad news?

'Are you all right?' Sam asked. 'Graham's asked you three times about your mum getting married.'

Had he? Ryan shook his head, blushed with embarrassment. 'It's a nice problem to have, isn't it? Divorced parent being happy.'

‘Depends,’ Sam said.

‘With Dad, it happened so fast I didn’t have time to object or worry. And it was all wrapped up with the fact that he’d come out. That was the biggest thing about him getting with Matt. I know it was soon after their divorce, but I didn’t worry about Dad being taken for a ride as much as Mum.’

‘Why?’ Graham asked. His eyes glinted. Shone in fact. Widened in something Ryan hoped was interest.

Couldn’t be desire in Graham’s eyes. Ryan was clearly reading things into stuff that wasn’t there. Refocussing his thoughts, Ryan said, ‘Because, well, she’s a woman and he’s a man. Dad’s big enough and old enough and ugly enough to look after himself.’

‘Don’t you think your mum’s all those things too?’ Sam asked.

‘For the record,’ Graham said, ‘your dad is definitely not ugly. Nor your mum. They’re both very attractive. Ageing well. I often cite them with clients when we’re talking about approaching fifty. He’s nearly fifty, isn’t he, your dad?’

‘Forty-eight.’ Ryan swallowed. ‘Matt’s twenty-eight. Same age as me.’ That still felt odd sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Ryan wondered if it would ever not feel odd. And Graham had just complimented his dad and mum on their good looks, which unhelpfully didn’t give Ryan any more clues as to which way Graham liked his bread buttered. To use his mum’s polite phrase when she’d tried to tell him she didn’t mind if he was gay, straight, or anything in between as long as he was happy. A very awkward conversation Ryan had shut down by saying nothing.

‘The bigger issue,’ Sam said, ‘is why you think you need to protect your mum from herself, when you didn’t for your dad.’

That was indeed the bigger issue. If Ryan put to one side for a moment, the other big thing in his eyeline, which was Graham. Whispers of that night with in the car on the family holiday flashed through his mind. Would Graham need to get stoned and drunk before he wanted to...?

‘Maybe I’ll wait until I’ve met Dave,’ Ryan said. ‘I’ll know as soon as I meet him if I trust him or not.’

‘Don’t you think your reaction is a bit over-protective?’ Sam asked.

‘I’m just being practical. If she marries him and they divorce, she’ll lose half the house, half everything she got from Dad in the settlement. Half of what she worked for while they were married. Gone to this man, who I don’t even know.’ He wasn’t being emotional at all. He wasn’t that. As much as possible he avoided messy feelings.

‘Well, that’s settled,’ Graham said. ‘You’ll wait until you’ve met your mum’s new beau and perhaps suggest some practical solutions to protect her, should things go...awry.’

Sam nodded. ‘Right. And we’ll repay Mum’s debt, knowing we have the moral high ground.’

‘Easy for you to say, if you’re only paying a little bit and it’s me left paying a big chunk plus monthly amounts my hard-earned cash.’ Graham stood. ‘Now that’s cleared up, who wants another?’

He was taller than Ryan. Good. Why had he thought that? ‘Talking of hard-earned money, what do you do?’

‘Hasn’t he told you?’ Graham looked at Sam.



Sam shook his head. 'Nobody cares. It's boring. So, what if my brother's bought a red-carpet dress for Cameron Diaz. Who gives a shit?'

'Don't forget the suit for George Clooney's appearance at the Oscars, a few years ago.' Graham puffed out his chest a little.

It was impressive, Ryan noticed, Graham's chest more than the George Clooney suit. The shirt was tight across the front, two clearly delineated pectoral muscles. The sleeves were rolled up, thick biceps, dark hair, tanned skin. Very nice. Ryan coughed, spluttering, stopped staring at Graham's skin. 'So, you do costumes for films and TV?'

'Tried that. Wasn't for me. Lots of it is retro. Eighties, Nineties, Regency, all that. I'm more interested in fashion at the cutting edge. Helping people to apply what's in fashion now to their body shape, lifestyle and make themselves the best version they can be.'

'Nice. You should write that down,' Ryan said, invertedly flirting a little, then stopping himself, because he didn't know anything and besides Sam was there and it was his brother, so...

Graham grinned. Straight white teeth. Twinkly green eyes. 'It's on my website. My mission statement.'

Ryan's unconscious had a few ideas about an alternative mission he wouldn't mind Graham embarking on...

'Same again,' Graham asked, once confirmed, he left. He strode back to the bar, head held high, arms not wide at the sides, but enough to give him more presence. The shirt fitted as if it had been made for him; showing off a perfect V shaped back.

Confident Graham was out of earshot, Ryan turned to Sam. 'Does he have a wife?' He nodded towards where Graham had walked.

Sam laughed. Continued laughing for a while longer. 'Are you serious?' He narrowed his eyes. 'Why?'

'Nothing. He's...' Fascinating, impressive, mesmerising. 'I think I could learn a lot from him. Confidence-wise. I'm too...' Reserved. 'Maybe I should face up to things more. Rather than shrugging them off.' A pause, and then: 'Is he married or not?'

'I can't believe I've not told you before. Why would it come up?' Sam shrugged. 'He's single, never married. And he's as gay as a box of birds. Gay gym, gay holidays, donates to gay charities, used to have gay hobbies, but he's too busy now, used to have lots of gay friends, but he doesn't talk about them much now. But he doesn't shout about it; it's not everything about who he is, but it's part of him. Never has time for boyfriends. The last one was enough to put him off for life.'

Ryan found this absolutely fascinating. Needed to know more, but couldn't ask Graham.

Graham returned with their drinks. 'Put who off for life?' He looked from one man to the other.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham returned from the bar with their drinks. Something had changed.

Ryan was looking at him differently. Not with disapproval, or disgust, but with an interest Graham hadn't noticed before. Okay, so he saw Ryan was checking out his arms, but guys who did the gym often did that. It was a sort of, nice one, well done, I understand how much work that takes, and I like what you did there, kind of compliment. Nothing more.

But now, Graham saw, as he sat, slid the drinks in front of Ryan and Sam, there was something else. Almost imperceptible. 'What's happening?' Graham asked them, hoping it would become clearer.

'Nothing,' Sam said, 'we were just talking about you, not to you!' He winked.

If Graham pursued this it would show he thought something was wrong, so he decided against it. 'Your mum getting married, assuming you like the guy, would you still be a hard no for it?' This ought to loosen him up, maybe work out what had changed in the time that he'd been at the bar.

Ryan rotated his glass of lager, staring at it. 'When Mum and Dad divorced, I sort of lost faith in it.'

Graham narrowed his eyes, staring at Ryan, trying to work out what he was thinking, why something had shifted so recently. 'It? Everything?'

'Marriage. Weddings. Forever. Happily, ever after. All that. Getting tied down. Compromising who you are. Sacrificing it all. It's not for me. It's...' He looked up.

Sam said, 'Go on, tell him what you always tell me.'

Yeah, tell us, Graham thought.

'It's sappy and it's for suckers. You spend your life with someone, trying to make them happy, promising to be together forever, and then one day they wake up and they don't want to be with you. Boom. All those years wasted. Empty promises. Pointless. Only a sucker would sign up for that.'

Graham sighed, raised his eyebrows. It was a lot to take in. Somebody had really done a number on Ryan. 'What about before the divorce?'

Ryan shrugged, looked away, sipped his lager. 'When they were married, I believed in it all. But after they divorced, I thought Mum was over all that sappy stuff. She realised it wasn't real and was going to be happily independent for the rest of her life.'

'And never have sex again?'

Ryan blushed, shook his head. 'Don't want to think about that. Hadn't.' He looked up. 'I don't see why everyone puts themselves out there only to be knocked back. It's a pointless exercise.'

Graham thought for a moment. He needed to know what had shifted. 'What's the longest relationship you've had?'

Ryan chuckled, nodded towards Sam. 'Him.' He coughed. 'You mean relationship, not friendship?'

Graham nodded.

‘Two months. I dumped her when it got too serious.’

Sam said, ‘I thought she dumped you.’

‘No. I dumped her.’

Sam frowned. ‘I definitely remember you saying she’d dumped you, but you’d had enough anyway.’

‘See. Too serious.’ Ryan shrugged. ‘What difference does it make? Years ago, anyway.’

Something occurred to Graham and he thought he’d give it a go. ‘If you were going to start dating again, or whatever, casual, just to, you know scratch an itch. If you were, what’s your type?’

‘I don’t have one.’

Graham didn’t believe that. In his experience, even if it was a type to sleep with, or a type to date, or a type to marry, most people had a type. And if Ryan couldn’t describe his perfect woman, it might possibly mean only one thing. Probably.

Graham turned to Sam. ‘What about you?’

‘My last three girlfriends have all been blonde. Slim, shorter than me. Not into breasts too much, more than a handful is a waste. But bums, yeah. A nice shapely behind.’

‘More than enough about my brother’s type.’

‘You did ask,’ Sam replied. ‘You go,’ he asked Graham.

Graham thought for a moment. His ex and the two guys before, less serious, but lasting a while, had all been pretty similar. 'My height or thereabouts. Same build as me. Don't mind hair colour. Not a fan of too much manscaping. If it's hairy, leave it that way, but trim a little. Someone who's into their appearance. Takes care of it. Grooming, but not overly self-conscious about it. Stubby chests are not sexy. And I've tried it.' He made a face.

Ryan's face had gone bright red, he couldn't look at Graham.

'Aren't you going to tell us your type, Ryan?' Graham was enjoying this.

'I did. I don't have one. Doesn't matter anyway, I'm not interested in a relationship, long term or whatever. I'm not a sucker.'

Or is it, Graham wondered, having decided pretty conclusively that Ryan was gay and not out, not even to himself, that Ryan didn't trust, couldn't trust, after it had been broken by watching his parents' forever relationship dissolve? Graham nodded.

'Anyway,' Ryan said, looking from Graham to Sam with a slight look of desperation, 'Mum reckons this boyfriend needs a total restyle. He's got good raw material, but it needs refining. Which basically means he's been living under a rock for the last few years.' Ryan shook his head. 'Why Mum couldn't at least fall for someone who looked half decent is beyond me. She's top tier UK TV actress. Not far off becoming a national treasure. Front cover of magazines. Celebrity endorsements. And all she can find is this driver who's not shaved or washed in years. It would be funny if it wasn't true.' Ryan rolled his eyes.

Although they'd just met, and he was Sam's friend, Graham couldn't let that slide without saying something. 'Now, more and more people hire stylists, personal shoppers. Some high street stores have them. They spend time to find out your lifestyle, your preferences, measure your body shape, then recommend outfits to

make you look your best. A man who's not consciously constructed his look, isn't a new thing. I have men coming to me for help, all the time.'

'Of their own accord?'

'Sometimes. Post breakup, or they've been dating and can't attract the right woman. They might be the kindest most caring man alive, but if they're not presenting that in a way to show off what they have, no woman is going to look past the appearance. Women, in general, are more used to creating what they look like, in a self-conscious way. Men, some men, are used to just being themselves, wearing whatever. Not consciously creating a look. And when you're young and attractive, most of the time that's fine. But when you're pushing forty, fifty, sixty and beyond, Mother Nature needs a little help. And that's where I come in.'

'Right,' Ryan said. 'Well, that's me told.'

'Sorry. I didn't mean to lecture you. I'm not your dad. I'm not his dad and sometimes I end up behaving like one. I think you should judge your mum's partner after you've met him, not before.'

Ryan shrugged. 'What about you?'

Sam said, 'Don't be rude.'

'It's all right,' Graham said, 'I can handle myself.' Turning to Ryan he said, 'What about me?'

'If you're so love and relationships, and all that, why are you single?'

Sam gently punched Ryan's arm.

‘Ow!’ Ryan said.

Sam widened his eyes, shook his head at Ryan. ‘I said it was rude.’ To his brother, Sam said, ‘Ignore him. He doesn’t know what happened.’

‘Ignore me. Sorry,’ Ryan said.

Graham sat back, put his hands behind his head, relaxed into the pose. ‘I feel like we’re pretty close. We’ve shared a lot of serious shit this evening. A lot has gone down. So, I don’t mind telling you why I’m single and plan to remain so for the foreseeable: I spent most of my life looking after other people. And I seem to attract men who need that. I didn’t used to see it. Until Sam pointed it out. The last few months of Mum’s life nearly finished me off. I’d just split up from a guy who relied on me too much. He lost his job, so he moved in. He needed money so I lent it to him. He was going to get a job, so he stayed at my place searching. Eating food, I bought. I asked him how the job hunting was going and he said he was taking a break from it. A break, from being looked after by me, and all he had to do was apply for jobs. But I didn’t split up with him then. Oh no. I waited until he’d emptied my business bank account, buying himself whatever he needed, at first to get a job, but then it was whatever.’

Sam put his hand on Graham’s arm to stop him. ‘All right.’

It still hurt, talking about it. ‘Only when I packed his things, put him in a taxi, and arranged a few nights in a hostel did he actually leave. Asked me for some cash to tide him over.’ Graham blinked; a tear rolled down his cheek. Anger, regret, guilt mixed and washed through him. ‘And do you know what, I only gave it to him, didn’t I?’

There was silence.



‘It’s only thanks to Katy Perry that I survived,’ Graham said.

‘What?’ Ryan asked.

‘Well, “Roar” more precisely...’ He looked at Sam.

Sam went on, ‘It was his breakup anthem. Every morning he played it.’ He shrugged.  
‘Whatever you need to get you through, right?’

Ryan nodded.

Another silence, and Graham wondered if he’d made himself look stupid by sharing that. But it was part of his past, it was who he was, so why be embarrassed about it?

Sam said, ‘We’d better go. Work tomorrow. Thanks bro.’ He hugged Graham.  
‘We’ve got this.’

Ryan stood, awkwardly stepping from foot to foot. ‘I didn’t mean to...Sorry. Shouldn’t have asked.’

Graham shrugged. ‘You weren’t to know.’

‘Yeah, but Sam did and he should have stopped me. Sounds hard.’

‘You could say that, yeah.’

Ryan shook his hand, stared into his eyes, and there was that changed look again, that stare of something different. Couldn’t be desire, interest, attraction since Ryan had been so clear he didn’t do relationships, didn’t believe in all that slushy stuff. And yet, Graham realised, as he looked at the slight smile Ryan was giving him, Graham knew people, Graham worked with people all day every day, it was his business to

understand unspoken signals, to help them open up and tell him what they really wanted, what they really worried about, okay so it was mainly about how they looked, but it was still important. And after all that, Graham was absolutely sure Ryan was interested in him, in some way more complex than being his best friend's brother.

Quite what that was, what it would mean, especially given Graham wasn't dating, he didn't know. But in that look they'd shared, Graham knew there was a world of possibilities. And part of it scared him, part of it excited him. But mostly it made him wonder if he had no time for a boyfriend, if he didn't want to repeat the mistakes he'd made with all of his exes, maybe this – whatever it was, nothing at the moment – with Ryan, could be, possibly, exactly what he needed right now.

Ryan left the pub, an attractively broad gate, arms at either side as if to balance his wide shoulders.

Or given they were unlikely to see each other again, Graham decided, maybe not.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

It was a few days later, on Saturday, and Ryan was at home when a knock on the door disturbed him from wondering if he'd upset Graham. If he'd asked something too personal. Particularly since he himself hadn't said what his type was. It was impossible really. He'd not thought about women enough to have a type. Men, on the other hand, he thought, after that lifeguard, and now Graham, maybe he might be interested in a certain man's body shape. If he was even going there. Calling it something. Looking at his reflection in the mirror and saying, 'I am gay. I am a gay man. I am attracted to men.' He'd tried that last night and hadn't managed it. The word stuck in his throat. It was all wrapped up with what had happened in that car. How, when he'd gone home after meeting Graham, he'd tried to put that evening from years ago, out of his mind. But hadn't been able to.

The doorbell rang again. Three times.

Ryan strode to answer it.

His mum stood there, next to a man who looked old enough to be Ryan's grandad. He wore a brown hoodie made from some weird artificial fibre he'd only seen in internet lists about Nineties fashion. His trousers had pockets up the sides and zips so they could possibly be changed to shorts. Not that anyone would want two uses for a pair of trousers so ugly.

'This is Dave,' his mum said, kissing Ryan's cheek, then indicating they should shake hands.

Ryan did so. Didn't want to look this man in the eye and the man evidently felt similar.

There was a silence that Ryan reckoned he could have driven an articulated lorry through.

Dave put his arm around Julia's shoulder.

She did the same. 'Can we come in please? Unless you want us to stand on the doorstep all day.'

He stepped aside, and his mum led them into the kitchen.

'Is it just you and Sam here?' she asked, looking about, she put her handbag on the table. 'Aren't you going to make us drinks?'

'You could have rung, Mum,' Ryan said, turning the kettle on, asking what they wanted to drink.

'I don't need an invitation to come and see my own son, do I? After all, we did put you through university. I wanted to see what you're doing with your life. Finally getting into the workplace.' She leaned her elbows on the worksurface. 'How is that?'

Ryan shrugged.

'Well, between you and him, we're going to have a great chat.' She shook her head. 'Dave's not too chatty either, are you, darling?'

She had used to call his dad that. Darling. And now she was using it for this man. All the confusing emotions swirled around inside his gut, and Ryan took a deep breath and ignored them.

Dave looked nervously at Julia and raised his eyebrows.

There was a long awkward silence.

‘I thought,’ Julia said finally, ‘we could get to know each other. I feel like the go-between for you two. I talk to you about Dave, then I tell Dave about you. I thought we’d just sit down and talk it all out.’ She looked from one man to the other. ‘At this rate, we’ll be done by dinner time. If it’s just me talking.’

‘There’s a nice pub round the corner.’ Ryan shrugged. It would save him cooking.

Julia made a face. ‘I’ve been papped twice this week already. They’re trying to get anything on the engagement and wedding. Hiya! Magazine offered to pay for the wedding if we gave them exclusive on the photographs.’

‘I said go for it,’ Dave said quietly. ‘She said not.’

‘Could they give you the money and you do what you like with it?’ Ryan asked, his mind whirring away with possibilities.

‘Why?’ Julia asked.

‘Nothing. Just Sam’s got money problems. Well, his brother has. If there was any spare, I mean.’ He shrugged. ‘Stupid idea.’

‘Stupid idea indeed, the contract would be very specific about what the magazine wanted for the money,’ Julia said. She nodded at her fiancé. ‘He doesn’t know what it’s like. Being in the public eye. Not being able to put your bins out without someone taking a photo. I said he’s got all this to come once we’re married.’

‘You must be reasonably familiar, since you’ve been driving Mum to work for years.’

‘And other actors and actresses,’ Dave said, not looking Ryan in the eye.

‘I would have thought, having worked for a TV studio you’d be used to how celebrities live in the public eye. You must have dropped a few off at red carpet events. Maybe even been papped yourself.’

‘I wouldn’t know anything about that sort of thing. I didn’t do the posh limo driving. I was just bog-standard home to studio, me.’

Brilliant. He seemed even more ordinary and dull than Ryan had anticipated. What on earth did his mum see in him?

A long silence.

‘Look, let’s get some wine in and have a nice chat,’ Julia said.

It sounded more like a threat than an evening’s entertainment.

‘Where’s Sam tonight? He can join us if he wants.’

‘He’s with friends, playing sport.’

‘He can have a little drink when he gets back.’

‘Yeah. I’m sure he will.’ Although his mum was famous, Sam had taken it in his stride when he first met her. Was very laid back and normal. She was, after all, still a mum and not some alien from outer space. He liked that about Sam. Wished he was there now actually, take away some of the monumentally awkward silences between them since Dave seemed to be the quietest man on earth.

‘I’ll get some booze, shall I?’ Dave asked.

Julia took cash from her purse, handed it to him.

He waved it away. 'Red wine for you,' he said to Julia. Turning to Ryan he said, 'How about you?'

'Alcohol free lager please.'

Julia looked very disappointed. Clearly them all getting drunk was a key part of tonight's plan. 'Why?'

'Watching my units.' He rubbed his stomach.

'You work it all off at the gym. What's really going on?' She turned to Dave. 'That and normal lager.'

Dave nodded, then left.

'I know he could do with a bit of a spruce up, but he's all right, isn't he?' She stared at him with pleading in her eyes.

Ryan couldn't shift the view that his mum could do so much better. So. Much. Better.

'Little drink, break the ice and get to know each other. Shall I order food later? Or do you have something in?'

'I can cook,' Ryan said. It would distract him from thinking about Dave.

'You? Cook? Since when?'

'Since realising living on takeaways wasn't sustainable. Both for my wallet and my waistline. Me and Sam take it in turns.' He pointed to a noticeboard with a rota for the week.

Julia walked closer, read it with interest. 'Are you sure you two aren't secretly a couple?' She laughed. 'I wouldn't mind. I'd like to see you settled down with someone. Man or woman, or whatever floats your boat. I don't mind. Everyone needs someone they can love.'

'Until they don't,' Ryan said under his breath, as he looked in the fridge for ingredients for dinner.

'What did you say?'

He'd make meatballs with tomato sauce and pasta. He told her. 'All right?'

'This I've got to see.'

'You have such little faith in me,' he said.

'Actually, it's because I have so much faith in you that I'm here. With Dave.' She sat at the kitchen table.

The message was clear. She wanted him to get on with Dave, and be happy for her. Was now the right time to mention the prenup, or too soon? He couldn't once Dave was back. Ryan was preparing the meat balls. 'Can I just ask one thing, before he gets back?'

'Course you can. I've got some good news about him too. But you go first.'

Good news about Dave, would the excitement never end, he wondered. 'It's just something to think about,' Ryan said, 'I know plenty of celebrities do it, people with assets from before. It's all very modern. Have you considered a prenup?'

'Have I considered us splitting up before we've even got married?' She shook her



head. 'No. I haven't. He doesn't want my money. He's got plenty of his own. Saved, bought a little place in Spain. Owns his own home. Kept it in the divorce, his wife wanted other things. Big lump sum. Or something. Anyway, we don't talk about stuff like that.'

'But you have to, Mum. You're not eighteen and starting out with nothing.'

'You don't have to tell me that.' She turned away, folded her arms. 'No. I'm not doing it.'

Well, that went well. 'What was your good news about Dave?'

'I've managed to secure one of the best personal shoppers and stylists for Dave. He's starting next week and wants to discuss outfits for me too.'

Ryan felt something in his gut but he didn't want to voice it. The likelihood was surely pretty small. There must be loads of these personal shoppers and stylists working in London. Wasn't there? 'Why?'

'Why what?'

'All of it. Why have a personal shopper? I imagine it wasn't Dave's idea.' Basing this on Dave's appearance felt so obvious Ryan didn't say it. Plus, he knew, even though Dave wasn't his favourite person, it was rude.

'Dave knows, when we're married, he's going to accompany me to celebrity events, and he will inevitably be photographed and he wants to look his best. And, he admits, since the divorce he's...' Quietly now, she went on, 'Let himself go a little. His ex-wife used to choose his clothes for him, update his wardrobe regularly. Since he's been on his own, he, well, he hasn't bothered. And he admits he let his self-care slip a bit since the divorce.'

You could see that very plainly. ‘Right,’ Ryan said.

‘So, this is good news, isn’t it?’

It would depend. On who this stylist person was. ‘When does she start, the stylist?’

‘He. Quite unusual in this field apparently. Next week. I said, didn’t I?’

A man. Right. ‘What’s his name?’ Ryan asked with an inevitability he had no choice to avoid.

Julia removed a card from her purse, put on her reading glasses. ‘Oh, yes, and he said he thought, as part of David’s styling will be for the wedding, he wanted to know what I was wearing, and the bridesmaids and page boys...so I told him. And do you know what he did?’

‘What did he do?’ Ryan asked, with a sense of inevitability he felt uncomfortable about.

‘He said he’d like to discuss outfits for me too, since they would have to go with Dave’s wedding one, and our going away outfits, for the honeymoon, so he’s offering a sort of two for the price of one, well, not quite. But a discount anyway. He’s all about doing a good job for the client, so he always goes the extra mile. All the testimonials on his website, and everyone who’s been his client say so.’ She stared at the card. ‘Graham Bartley.’ Looking up, she said, ‘Have you heard of him?’

Fuck. My. Life. ‘You could say that.’

‘Great,’ she said, ‘because as I’d like you to walk me down the aisle, I didn’t tell you that one, did I? Yes, if you’re okay with that. Can’t ask your father, as that’s more than a bit strange. Obviously, my father isn’t around, so I thought of you. My

favourite son.'

'What does Sophie say about it?' he asked.

'She's my maid of honour, and she's in charge of flowers and bridesmaids. Oh, and of course, she's joining us for the wedding outfits sessions, with Graham the stylist. Diaries permitting. I know she's so busy with work.'

Ryan was lost for words. The only saving grace was that he hadn't actively disliked Graham. They had got on all right. But what he wasn't sure of, or prepared for, was having to see Graham again, and how he'd handle the fact that deep down, beneath his subconscious, where his libido seemed to reside, he really wanted to know Graham in a much more intimate way.

'So, what do you say?' Julia asked.

'Great,' he said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster, then plastered on a big fake smile. 'Really great.' For. Fuck's. Sake.

There was a knock on the door.

Ryan answered it.

Dave was carrying bags of booze.

Ryan grabbed the lager. 'Thanks.'

'That's not the alcohol-free one,' Dave said, following him to the kitchen.

'I know.' As far as Ryan was concerned, this was just getting worse and worse. It had turned from a minor irritation, concern about his mum's financial and social welfare,

to a full-on awkward situation where he was going to find himself in the presence of a man who he...he...what would he say...how would he describe it? Who he was fascinated by, yet also knew he couldn't have, be with, because the last thing Ryan wanted was a relationship, especially one with a man. Because he was definitely not gay, or bisexual.

He finished the bottle of lager. 'I think I'll have another one,' he said, opening it and taking a large swig.

'Isn't this good,' Julia said, pouring herself wine, and making sure Dave had a drink.

Brilliant. Ryan toasted, with whatever his mum was saying, he wasn't listening, all he was thinking about was if he was more afraid of a relationship with Graham going well, and enjoying it, proving he was that way inclined, and capable of a loving relationship, or going as badly as with that girl from university, and therefore proving romance and love weren't for him.

And by that evening, after all the booze was drunk and they had eaten a curry his mum had ordered, and they lay down on the sofa and chairs in the sitting room, their stomachs full and feeling more than a little drunk, he still didn't have an answer to that question.

Fuck my actual life, was his last thought, before he fell asleep.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham was at home in his new, luxurious, one bedroom apartment overlooking the Thames, eating a breakfast of coffee, fruit and wholemeal toasted bread.

A boat passed on the Thames, probably full of tourists. On the opposite bank there were people gathering in Greenwich, around the Cutty Sark for photos, queuing to go into the ship.

The sun was in the blue sky, Graham had decided he was going to pay off his mum's debt in one big chunk, he didn't need that new car anyway, he barely needed a car, living in London. Then he would arrange monthly payments for the rest, he'd get it cleared within a year.

He'd had a wonderfully useful, friendly call with Julia, the fiancée of his new client, Dave, and thought he'd persuaded her to take him up on the offer of styling her and the immediate wedding party so it went together well. They weren't having a formal wedding planner, which since Julia was a celebrity, had surprised Graham, but she'd explained because it was the second time round, for both her and her groom, she didn't want it to be a big splashy do, and they'd turned down an offer from a celebrity magazine for exclusive photo rights. She wasn't going for the enormous meringue of a white dress, huge long train, like Charles and Diana's wedding in 1981 and as she'd had for her first wedding. This, Julia explained, was to be minimalist, sophisticated, confident. Graham knew he could make her vision a reality, and had told her.

Graham felt everything was finally getting itself onto an even keel. He felt guilty that the biggest reason for this was their mum's passing. Of course, he loved her, always had, always would. It was just the having to parent the parent that had become exhausting, tiresome, and had taken over his life somewhat. He'd not only brought up

Sam as if he were his son, but he'd also looked after their mum, from when he was a teenager. And she hadn't needed less care as she became older. Trips to the doctor, spells in hospital when she fell over drunk, attempts at rehab, each time failing. He'd been there for all of it, coordinating her care, being her advocate, driving her here and there.

Now, it was all over.

His phone rang, it was Sam.

Graham answered it with a smile. 'I was just thinking about you. Well, Mum actually.'

'Thing is,' Sam said, sounding frantic. 'I wouldn't ask if it wasn't really important.'

'What's wrong? What's happened?' His throat tightened; his stomach constricted as worry flooded him.

'Can you ask another personal shopper friend; I assume you have those?'

'Yes.' Graham was uncertain where this was going.

'Can you ask a mate to take on the Julia Lopez and Dave Hilsea clients?'

'Why?' He very rarely did this. Only in exceptional circumstances when they couldn't get on. He told his brother.

'The thing is; Julia is Ryan's mum.'

'Is she? He's never mentioned in any of the articles or seen in photos with her.'

‘He and his sister, Sophie never wanted the limelight. Their dad’s fabulous too. Big TV presenter, broadcaster, used to present Strictly Dancing. Loads of chat shows. Grant Wilson.’

‘Married to a man, who’s younger than I am?’

‘That’s right. He’s Ryan’s age actually.’

‘Takes all sorts, right?’ Graham asked.

‘Right. Which is why I’m asking you this. I wouldn’t. I said to Ryan, that I’d ask you. So here I am. Asking you.’

Graham frowned, watched another boat sailing down the Thames, pinched the bridge of his nose, and shut his eyes in thought. ‘I don’t understand why he’s so anti-me.’

‘It’s complicated.’

Graham rolled his eyes. ‘Isn’t it always?’

‘I think it’s all to do with his mum and how he doesn’t really want her to re-marry. There’s a lot to unpack about that.’

‘I see. And this has to do with me, why?’ The more Sam asked, the less Graham was inclined to acquiesce. He’d already put quite a lot of time into this client relationship, as he always did, and if he passed them over, he’d receive nothing.

‘He didn’t say. They were at our place recently. All got totally pissed. I came home and they were practically dead on the sofa.’

‘Dead?’

‘Drunk. Full of curry. Stroking their stomachs cos, they were so full. You know.’

Graham nodded. ‘And what did he say?’

‘He said could I ask you to please not do the job with his mum and that Dave bloke?’

‘You said. What you didn’t say is why.’ If he was going to drop this job, abandon these clients, Graham needed to understand the reasons behind it, why it was so pressingly important to Ryan.

There was silence.

Graham said, ‘If Ryan really doesn’t want me working with his mum and Dave, he should talk to me himself. I, for one, thought we got on well, and am really excited to get to know one of your friends better.’

‘So that’s a hard no, then?’

‘It is. Unless you can explain why.’

Another silence. Long and awkward.

‘Did he not tell you?’ Graham asked.

‘He said it was because he didn’t want his mum marrying that guy.’

It felt like a very childish and selfish reason. ‘And me not styling him is going to resolve that?’ Graham shook his head in disbelief. ‘Doesn’t make sense. Not to me anyway. It might in Ryan’s head, but to me, not so much. Tell him to call me.’

‘Why?’



‘I want him to explain why. I want to hear it straight from his mouth, rather than second-hand, related via you. To be clear, I don’t want him to call me, because I’d prefer, we didn’t have that conversation and he let me get on with my job. Why? What did you mean?’ There seemed to be something else behind Sam’s question.

Silence for a beat, then Sam said, ‘He’s not interested in you in that way. He’s not interested in anyone in that way. He’s just Ryan.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Nothing.’ There was definitely something behind that tone in Sam’s voice.

‘Bullshit,’ Graham said.

‘I thought I saw some looks, that’s all.’

‘There were no looks. Not from my side. I can assure you, very firmly indeed. If there were any looks, they were coming from your friend’s direction. Besides, even if he was interested, which he isn’t, I’m not interested in another fixer-upper boyfriend, someone I need to look after. I’m all done with that. I’m putting myself first. I’m focussing on being more selfish. Because it’s not always selfish to think of yourself first.’ It was just that Graham had spent his life, from twelve, looking after others’ interests before his own. And now his mum had passed, and he was single, he wasn’t falling back into that way of being with others.

‘I’ll tell him,’ Sam said.

‘No need. Besides, he’s not interested. He doesn’t date. He’s not even gay, apparently, he’s Ryan.’ Graham rolled his eyes, whatever that bullshit meant. A pause and Graham decided he was done with this subject. ‘I’m going to pay half of Mum’s debt in a lump sum. Then the rest monthly.’

‘Where are you getting the money from?’

‘Rainy day fund.’

‘Weren’t you saving for a new car?’

‘No.’ Yes. ‘It was a just in case fund.’

‘Let me contribute too. Even if it’s a little bit each month, it’ll help, won’t it?’

‘It will.’

‘Thanks,’ Sam said.

‘What for?’

‘Everything.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Being you. Looking after me when Mum couldn’t. I appreciate it.’

A lump formed in Graham’s throat. They didn’t often discuss stuff like this. Sam was pretty understated. They both knew they’d had a difficult childhood and didn’t reminisce about it much. It had been something they’d got through, difficult day at a time, rather than a memory to be cherished. ‘Yeah well, I did my best.’ Out of a shit situation.

A pause, and then Sam said, ‘Cheers. Best get on.’ He ended the call.

What a strange thing to ask your friend to ask someone, Graham reflected. If Ryan

really disliked him, he'd masked it well. Ryan seemed to like him. So, what was it making Ryan so keen to not see Graham again? Getting on with his best friend's brother would surely be good, wouldn't it? It was hardly like they were a big family; it was just Graham and Sam. No dad, and their mum now gone. Mum didn't have any siblings, or if she did, they never saw them. Graham wondered if he had some long-lost aunties and uncles scattered around the country. It would have been typical for their mum to not tell them. Perhaps she'd fallen out with them too, and thought it best not to mention it.

Maybe.

He finished his breakfast then jumped in the shower, ready for the day where he was meeting a client in Bond Street for a luxury, high-end, designer makeover. No budget, high fashion. His favourite sort of client.

Brilliant.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan had arranged to meet Graham in central London at a shop to tell him why he would like Graham not to style Dave and Julia. Ryan was surprised that Graham had agreed to meet, as he'd expected him to flat out refuse. When Graham had asked why Ryan was so hung up on this, Ryan said he needed to tell him face to face. In reality it was because he knew he couldn't say – because I think I want to see you naked and touch your body parts. So, Graham had agreed.

Graham said he may still be with his client, so if Ryan could please let him know he'd arrived, then sort of fade into the background, that would be great. Ryan wasn't sure how he was going to do that, but he thought he'd pretend to be shopping a few metres away.

Ryan arrived at the shopping centre on Oxford Street. It had a first floor full of places to eat, and the ground floor had high street shops selling clothes, shoes, perfume and gadgets. A quick look told Ryan there was nothing for him there, he already owned all the latest Apple gadgets, and didn't really shop high street for clothes.

Slipping into the mid-range department store, he checked where Graham had said they were: womenswear, second floor.

The problem about blending into the background was about to get harder because Ryan wasn't sure how he'd fake buy a dress for someone when he knew less than nothing about women's clothes.

Graham was standing near a woman in her mid to late forties, dark hair with grey streaks, shoulder length. She wore a baggy hoodie and loose fitted leggings. She did, Ryan admitted, need some help with her look.

Ryan leaned against a wall a short distance away, pretending to look at a blouse.

Graham was saying, 'If you want to really get out there, back into the dating game, rebuild your life, I think a new wardrobe and a new look will give you the confidence you need.'

'This was a present from my girlfriends. They said I needed it. I think I'm better off doing what I did before.'

'We talked about that,' Graham said carefully. 'I'd like you to try on the dress I picked for you, please?'

'I told the girls this wouldn't work. Don't get me wrong, I know you're trying to help. It's your job. But I'm not putting that dress on.'

'Why not?'

She sniffed. 'Because my legs aren't for dresses or skirts. They're not fit for public viewing.' She shook herself briefly, like a shiver ran down her spine.

Graham stepped closer, looking into her eyes. 'Is that something somebody told you?'

'Yeah. But it's true. Doesn't matter who said it.'

'Was it your ex-husband who said it?'

'What if it was? He was right.' She squeezed her thighs. 'Thunder thighs. Noone wants to see these.'

'You seem to have your ex-husband still in your head. I'm not a counsellor, but if you

haven't, I would suggest you might want to talk to someone about that. But here, now, I want to tell you I can help you. Not with him being in your head, but with you dressing in ways to make the most of your assets.'

She laughed. 'What are they?'

'Your hair, your well-shaped face, beautiful blue eyes, you're well blessed up top, and your bottom is proportioned perfectly for your height. You have, what we call, a pear-shaped figure. Many women do. And there's so many clothes designed specifically for that.'

'Blessed up top,' she said, giggling slightly, 'you mean my tits?'

Graham nodded. 'I don't use words like that about clients' bodies.'

'Well, I have, so now you can.' She rolled her eyes. 'He said he was a breast man, used to like them. But three kids and fifteen years later, they're not what they were.'

'Fifteen years later, and nothing's what it was. Not clothes, a car, a computer, or anything. And if you consider you created three actual humans and carried them in your body, before giving birth to them, how can anyone expect you to look the same as fifteen years earlier?' Graham shook his head and pursed his lips, some men, really did have a lot to answer for. He turned to the client. 'Which is why you need to be properly measured for a bra. This shop has a service and I always come here to use it. I should be on commission. I'm not by the way.' He held a cream dress with bright floral prints in the air. 'Trust me, you'll look amazing in this.'

She took it, then left for the changing room.

He followed her. 'I want you to see you have so much good about yourself. You shouldn't be hiding yourself away in baggy shapeless clothes. Maybe when you're

slouching around at home, but not when you're out. And definitely not when you're out out.'

Shouting from the changing room, she said, 'Did the girls tell you?'

'Your friends told me a great deal. What specifically?'

'They took me to a health spa as a birthday present, weekend with us four. They had day wear, swimwear, eveningwear, stuff to wear if we went for a walk in the grounds.' She left the changing room. 'I packed three pairs of leggings, three hoodies and some vest tops for underneath.'

She looked as if she should be standing on the red carpet next to Ryan's mum. The dress wrapped across her breasts, crossing over, it was fitted on top, and baggier below, with a skirt that widened, with scalloped edges.

She walked to a mirror, put her hands over her mouth. 'I can't believe it. What has it done to me?'

'Didn't you look at the mirror in the cubicle?' Graham asked.

'Not since twenty-ten, no.'

Ryan's heart squeezed for her.

She twirled; the skirt floated outwards. 'How does it do it?' she asked Graham.

'It's the cut. Do you want to try some casual stuff too?'

'No. I'm going to live in this day and night.' She skipped back to the changing room. Shouting, 'Maybe I'll try some casual stuff too.'

Graham exchanged a look with Ryan, then retrieved hangers of clothes he'd hidden behind a rail nearby. 'As if by magic!' he said to Ryan quietly. 'Meet you in the café, seventh floor, is that okay? I don't want her to know you've been watching, all right?'

'Take your time.' Ryan left. And he didn't mind waiting, because he'd arrived early and had wanted to see Graham doing his thing. And, begrudgingly as it felt, he admitted to himself, Graham was very good at what he did. Not that Julia would need that level of confidence boosting, rebuilding after a shitty man had knocked everything out of her. But she would need to adjust to being seen with someone who wasn't Ryan's dad on her arm. To helping the man, she supposedly loved, get used to being photographed all the time, simply because he was married to Julia Lopez.

Ryan had been in the café for a short while when Graham arrived.

'Sorry to make you wait. She arrived late, then rejected everything I suggested. Then refused to go in the changing rooms. Said she hated seeing herself in the mirror, particularly with the lights. That ex of hers has really done a number on her. Shouldn't be allowed. Knocking someone's confidence like that.'

'Was she happy in the end?'

'Armfuls of new clothes. Plus, I showed her how to shop for her shape. I have one more session with her, but she's going to buy some stuff herself first. I told her, she's not plus sized at all. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But she isn't. She's a fourteen to sixteen. Average sized British woman. And her ex made her hate herself. Her body. They saw a play of Moby Dick, one of their kids was in it. Guess what the husband said? This was while they were married.'

Ryan shrugged.



‘Didn’t realise the play was about you.’ Graham stared at Ryan. ‘Deadpan.’

‘What did she do?’

‘This was the worst part of the story: nothing. She did nothing. I told her any man who treats her like that doesn’t deserve her. He divorced her. Not the other way round.’

‘People, eh?’ Ryan said, rolling his eyes.

‘Sorry. Enough about me, how are you?’

Ryan could see his mum and Dave would benefit from Graham’s expertise. Ryan shrugged. He wasn’t here to talk about himself, he was here to discuss his mum and Dave.

‘Sam said you asked him to ask me if I could not do the personal shopper job for your mum’s boyfriend. Is that about right?’

It sounded convoluted when he put it like that. ‘Yes.’

‘I never refuse a client, unless we can’t get on, which is very rare. Your mum is delightful. So personable, charming. And Dave is very easy, I think he’ll go along with whatever I suggest. He seems to want to make your mum happy. Which is adorable.’

‘It’s all very fast. Dave and Mum. And I don’t think he’s right for her,’ he blurted it out. If he didn’t say it, he knew he’d back out and let Graham get his way. Which he mustn’t do.

‘I thought they’d been dating for a year.’

‘I mean, relatively fast. For someone of their age.’

‘Isn’t that ageist? Are you telling me your mum doesn’t know what she wants after keeping this relationship secret for a year, deciding to come clean with her family, because she wants to marry the guy? Doesn’t sound rushed to me.’

Ryan, unfortunately, agreed, so he changed tack. ‘This Dave, he’s not right for her.’

‘Have you met him? He dotes on her. Held doors open, carried her bags, bought the drinks, she didn’t lift a finger the whole time I was with them.’

‘He’s used to that. Comes with the job.’

‘What?’ Graham frowned.

‘He used to be Mum’s driver. Took her to the TV studios.’

‘And?’

‘He’s used to scraping and bowing around her. He doesn’t know any different.’

‘I think you’re searching for reasons to dislike him. Excuse me for prying, but can I ask, what’s this really about?’ Graham narrowed his eyes.

Money. And Marriage. Or the pointlessness of it, and any long-term relationships. Ryan sighed, rolled his eyes. ‘Can’t you just walk away and let someone else do the job?’ Ryan stared at him with as much pleading as he could manage without giving himself away.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham knew there was something behind Ryan's obstinate request. And it was more than disliking Dave. He'd rowed back from his assertion that his mum was rushing it, since a year, in anyone's estimation wasn't particularly fast. Ryan's mum was a woman of the world. She would know if someone was taking her for a ride or not. And Dave, if there was a more placid, laid-back man who wanted to please the woman he loved, then Graham hadn't met him.

'I told you. Unless you give me the real reason, I'm afraid I won't walk away.' If Graham started ditching clients for no good reason, his good reputation would soon be in tatters. The whole point of this job was wanting to work with people, understand them, get to know what made them tick, their weaknesses, shine a light on their strengths. And Graham, if he said so himself, thought he was pretty bloody good at it. And he was buggered if he was going to let Ryan mess that up.

'I don't trust him,' Ryan said, with a tone of desperation.

'I'm really sorry, but you don't know him. How on earth can you make a judgement about trusting him, his motives, without knowing him. You've met him what, once, twice, and he's been, what, kind, generous, caring towards your mum? And so that means he's untrustworthy.' Graham shook his head. 'I don't understand it. Or you.'

Ryan's phone rang, he checked it. 'Sorry. I...' He stepped away, facing his back to Graham. 'It's not a great time...' A pause. 'Okay, if I can sort it quickly. Tell me what's wrong with it?' Pause. 'Have you tried switching it off and on again? Okay, okay, I thought I'd ask. Right, go to the home screen. Hover over the app with your finger. Right. Then click on uninstall. An option. Right, yes. Do it.' A long pause. 'So, it's stopped doing it now? Great. Amazing.' Pause. 'Look, I can't talk. How's

Matt? Away, right. I thought as much, why else would you call me for tech support. Joking!’ He laughed. ‘Right. Must go. Love you. And love to Matt too.’ A pause. ‘Mum’s told you, has she? Right.’ Very quietly he went on, ‘And? Right. Live and let live. Happy for her, are you? You and Matt too. Nice. Well, that’s very magnanimous of you. Must go.’ He ended the call then put the phone in his pocket, turned back. ‘Sorry. Technical emergency from Dad. Matt’s away with a friend, so Dad was stuck with a phone that didn’t work and no way to fix it.’ Ryan rolled his eyes. ‘I should have got a job with Apple; I’ve owned practically all their products.’ Ryan laughed nervously.

Graham laughed, hoping it would break the ice somewhat and encourage Ryan to open up about his reasons behind this request. ‘Android for me.’ He shrugged, hoping phones, or something could be a shared conversation, some way to get back to the friendly, relaxedness it had felt when they met last time with Sam. ‘Have they met Dave?’

‘Love him. Mum brought him round to meet Dad and Matt. Which is so Mum to a tee. She’s like the best ex-wife anyone could wish for. It’s a bit creepy in fact, how cool she is with Dad. Him coming out, marrying Matt. She just took it all in her stride. Told me she still loves Dad, couldn’t stop that, they spent twenty years together, raised two children. That doesn’t just go away. It was just that...’ He looked away. ‘What did she say? Something about people growing together or growing apart, and her and Dad had grown apart, but that was fine with her, if it meant they could live a better life separately.’ Ryan huffed loudly. ‘Like that’s a thing.’

‘Sounds very sensible to me.’ Julia was clearly a very emotionally intelligent woman, and there was no way she’d miss any nefarious motives Dave might have.

‘Marriage is forever. Till death us do part. It doesn’t say, until you grow apart, then wish each other well and move onto the next person, does it?’ Ryan folded his arms and frowned.

‘No. But just because some marriages end, doesn’t mean all marriages will. A few years ago, a few of my friends who’d married in their twenties, were now having problems, and some got divorced.’

‘See!’ Ryan said triumphantly.

‘I’ve not finished yet.’

‘Sorry, go on.’

‘The ones who were having problems were able to see theirs more clearly. The couples who were fine, whether they were married or in a long-term relationship and as good as married, it showed them how lucky they were, how right they had things. Divorce isn’t contagious, you know.’

Ryan huffed, shook his head.

‘You obviously love your parents. And you’re happy for your dad and Matt.’

Ryan nodded.

‘So why can’t you just be happy for your mum and Dave?’

Ryan said nothing.

‘If the money side worries you, speak to your mum about it. If they stay together it doesn’t matter. If they split up, she’s protected.’

‘I tried that. She wasn’t listening.’

‘How did you try it? When did you suggest it? What did you say?’

‘I said had she thought of a prenup.’

‘When?’

‘When she and Dave arrived at my place. Dave was out getting drinks.’

Graham shook his head, could Ryan have done it any worse? ‘Timing is everything. She’s brought her new partner to meet you for the first time, having kept him secret for a year. And the first thing you ask is has she thought about what happens if they divorce?’

Ryan’s face fell.

‘Has the penny dropped?’ Graham asked.

Ryan was staring at him, eyes wide and a look of sadness on his face.

‘Leave them be. Your mum isn’t stupid. In fact, I’d say she probably has more emotional intelligence than you or your dad, but we won’t go there today.’

‘It’s a good job I’m not your client, otherwise I’d have fired you for rudeness.’ Ryan narrowed his eyes, as they bored into Graham.

Graham sighed; this was water off a duck’s back. He shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t want you as a client anyway.’

‘Why not?’ Ryan asked with something approaching anxiety in his tone.

Because you already look well put together, handsome and very well dressed. Modern, up to date, yet not a fashion victim, following all the latest trends regardless of whether they suit you or not. ‘You don’t need my help.’

‘Thanks,’ Ryan said, ‘I think.’

‘Oh, it’s definitely a compliment. Hopefully it makes up for my earlier impertinence.’ Graham smirked, giving Ryan the side-eye.

A look crossed Ryan’s face that Graham couldn’t quite read. Pleasure, surprise, embarrassment. He wasn’t sure.

‘If,’ Graham said, ‘while I’m working with Dave, I pick up anything, anything at all that I think you should know – what he says to your mum, how he treats her, anything about her paying for stuff, anything, I’ll tell you immediately. But I’m confident I won’t. Dave is kind, uncomplicated, and has positive intent towards your mum and their marriage. He is what he seems to be. Dave works on face value. However, people who have nefarious motives, can’t hide who they really are, what they’re after, all the time. There are always signs of emotional leakage they can’t control.’

‘That sounds messy,’ Ryan said.

‘It’s when someone’s body language, or jokes they make, tell you what they’re really thinking.’

Ryan nodded. ‘So that’s still a no to not working with Dave and Mum?’

‘I’m afraid I will continue working with them. But we’ll carry on talking if I pick anything up.’

‘I really want her to look into a prenup. That big house, Dad gave it to her in the divorce, he got his pensions, or something. He’s coming to the marriage with nothing: Dave.’

‘You know that’s untrue. You said he had a house, or half a house and a place in

Spain.'

Ryan shrugged. 'Not a patch in comparison to Mum's house.'

'It's not nothing, though is it?' Graham paused, then: 'Next time you speak to her, or not the next time, when you get her alone, and you're just chatting, quietly suggest protecting her financial assets. You can do something to separate anything acquired before the marriage. Or specific things. Mention the house, how you love it and you and your sister, what's she called?'

'Sophie.'

'Right, you and Sophie love that house, family home and...you know. She'll understand that more than just charging in and going straight to prenup, talking about money.'

Ryan sighed. 'You kinda know your stuff, don't you?'

'I know people. And relationships. And basically, anything boils down to those two things. Most things. My work does anyway.' Money too, played a part, but Graham reckoned Ryan understood that well.

'Right.'

Graham shook Ryan's hand. 'Agreed.' A solid, business decision, agreed with a handshake. Good, Graham knew where he stood with this relationship now.

They finished their coffees in the café then went their separate ways.

On his way home, Graham understood a bit more about why Ryan was so protective. It was because he genuinely loved his mum. Thought he had her best interests at



heart. He was, at heart, kind, when he wanted to be. This was obvious by how he was caring for his dad, and wanting to look after his mum, save her from being taken as a mug by anyone.

Remembering what Ryan had said about his dad, and his relationship with Matt, Graham wondered if his own mum had come out as lesbian, and married a woman, how would he feel?

He hoped he'd be happy, would welcome whichever imaginary person his mum wanted in her life in this imaginary scenario. Really, Graham just wished his mum had been more like Ryan's mum. So, he could have worried about her marrying a kind man, rather than her being cut off for not paying her gas and electricity bills. Or having complaints from neighbours about a smell coming from her flat, only to find she had been living with blocked drains for months, swilling the water out the window rather than having it fixed.

The shard of those memories pierced his heart. Even years later, he still remembered those phone calls, those trips to his mum's flat. He would probably remember it all for the rest of his life. Ryan didn't really know how lucky he was to have a mum like Julia, and to have the concerns he had for her.

Sometimes Graham wished he'd had a different mum, but it wasn't that simple. He loved her. Despite everything she'd done, and everything she hadn't done, over the years. He was from her, and so was Sam. They'd been part of her. He definitely loved his mum, but it didn't mean he liked her very much on some occasions.

He was home now, alone, and the sadness threatened to swallow him. After a day of putting a brave face on things, giving the client, and Ryan the impression he was confident, in charge, and had everything sorted, he relaxed. Let go. The sadness of his childhood, of the difficult last six months of his mum's life, when he thought he couldn't cope with anything she threw at him, of the debt he was repaying for her

from the grave, all swirled around and left Graham almost breathless.

He texted Claire: Why is life so shit?

Claire: want to talk?

Graham: no, just feeling sorry for myself :(

Claire: That's allowed. Why?

Graham: did you ever wish you had different parents?

Claire: sometimes. Why?

Graham: I feel jealous of someone else's mum. Does that make me a terrible person?

Claire: it makes you human. Fancy coming round my place?

He was too tired and didn't feel he'd be good company.

Graham: not tonight, but thanks xxx

Claire: xxx

He lay down on the sofa, in a ball, on his side, and let it all out in a silent, gasping for breath, cry, as tears rolled down his cheek and he wondered if he'd ever find someone who he'd allow to see this side of himself. If he'd one day, find someone who would look after him, rather than Graham always being the one doing the looking after.

Fat chance of that.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

One Friday afternoon, Ryan had agreed to meet his mum and Dave and the marvellous Graham. Graham had said it was mainly to style and shop for Dave, since he was the main client, but that he knew Julia would come along since she said Dave was shy and Graham wondered if Ryan wanted to join them, get a head start on the wedding clothes outfits. Not to buy them, just to knock about some ideas.

It sounded, Ryan decided, as boring as anything he'd ever been bored by in the history of boring things he'd been forced to do in his life.

Sam, at first wanting to keep out of it, since both he and Ryan had failed in stopping Graham from his mission, told Ryan, 'It's a couple of hours. Do it for your mum, even if you can't yet give a shit about Dave.'

Ryan wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to truly give much of a shit about Dave. But he easily gave plenty of shits about his mum, and wanted her to be happy, so, mustering all the shits he could manage today, along he came to meet them.

They were meeting in a high-end department store, in the menswear department.

Ryan recognised a few of his favourite brands, and was letting his fingers feel the fabric of a particularly nice white hoodie from one of his most preferred designer labels, when he heard Graham's voice in the distance.

'I don't know where you got this,' Graham was saying, 'but the only place I can think of is 1996, but if you wanted to update your style, you might consider a hoodie such as this.'

Ryan followed the voice.

Graham held a baby blue hoodie against Dave's chest.

'I don't know. It's a bit...bright,' Dave said with uncertainty.

Graham looked from Dave to Julia, raised an eyebrow. 'That's because it's not twenty-five years old.'

'He's right, you know,' Julia said. 'Try the jeans on too.'

'I don't see what's wrong with these,' Dave said, pinching the fabric of his baggy, faded, zipped leg, brown outdoor man trousers.

'There's not much that's right about them, unless you're on a foraging and camping wild man weekend in the woods,' Graham said gently, taking Dave by the shoulders and leading him into the men's changing room.

'Sorry if he's hard work,' Julia said to Graham once Dave gone, then noticing Ryan, she hugged him. 'How long have you been here?'

'Long enough to see someone's got their work cut out.' He nodded at Graham.

Graham dismissed it with a wave. 'He'll be fine. It's the wedding gear I'm most worried about. Anyone can get used to a new pair of jeans and a few T-shirts and hoodies. Getting him in a suit, that's going to be a whole different story.'

'What's the plan for styling for the wedding?' Ryan asked, wanting to join in, but a little wary Graham was going to prescribe him to be clean shaven with blue hair extensions.

‘Later. All in good time,’ Graham said. ‘Julia thinks he won’t want his hair cut.’

‘Took him years to grow it,’ Julia said. ‘And the beard. Apparently,’ in a whisper, ‘his ex, didn’t like beards or long hair, so when they split up, he sort of went a bit caveman.’

‘What do you think, Mum?’ Ryan asked.

‘I like a beard on a man. Your father had one of late. Makes a man look distinguished. Hair down to the ears, I’m less keen on men. But apparently it does suit the shape of Dave’s head.’ She looked at Graham.

Graham nodded. ‘My hairdresser friend, Ali, gave Dave a consultation. I’m not in favour, but...’ He made a face.

Dave reappeared from the changing room wearing the blue hoodie and dark blue jeans. He stood awkwardly. ‘They feel stiff. Is the top too tight?’

It was far from tight, it was just not like a voluminous tent, as his other clothes always seemed to be.

Ryan sat next to his mum outside the changing room, while Graham disappeared to retrieve more clothes for Dave to try on.

‘Aren’t you trying anything?’ Julia asked Ryan.

He’d curbed his designer clothes addiction since leaving uni. The real world seemed to be a lot more expensive than he’d realised. Especially now his parents’ allowance had stopped. He agreed with his dad that receiving an allowance that was meant to see him through university, now he had graduated and was working, felt like a bit of a piss take, so had agreed to it being stopped. He was a grown man, making his way in

the world, and that didn't include living off Daddy's allowance.

Dave appeared from the changing room in navy blue chinos and a pink shirt. He looked very uncomfortable.

'What's wrong?' Graham said, rolling the sleeves back, tidying the collar up. 'Tuck it in. I'm not rooting around in your trousers, you're practically a married man.' He laughed.

Julia chuckled.

Dave did not, as he tucked his shirt into the chinos.

'What's not to like?' Graham asked.

'Pink. It's very pink. Too pink. I'm not a pink sort of man.' He shook his head, turned round and returned to the changing room.

'No pink,' Graham said standing and returning to retrieve more clothes, 'noted for next time.'

Julia said quietly to Ryan, 'He's good, isn't he?'

'One of the best in London, apparently,' Ryan replied with a smile. How could he have denied his mum this, when it would make their wedding day perfect, and eventually, once Graham found clothes that Dave liked, would transform him into someone worthy of holding the arm of a famous British actress of twenty years plus.

Dave had reappeared, and Graham took him further into the shop.

'I like the way he takes no shit.' Julia said. 'Takes charge, but does it kindly. I

thought Dave wasn't going to agree to this. But when we spoke to Graham on the phone Dave was instantly relaxed. I mean, of course that was before trying on a pink shirt!' She laughed.

Ryan did too. Watching Graham – pick clothes, construct outfits, explain to Dave how to dress, how to make the most of his body shape, explaining how at forty-plus, his body wasn't as it had been in his twenties, and he should dress to reflect that – impressed Ryan. He'd not considered it would be an actual job. But he understood it now. He knew his mum had stylists for big events, but they tended to be paid by the TV studios, or came with a dress if she wore it. But the way Graham was selecting items from all the brands in the department, high street, diffusion, and designer, with the aim of finding the best look for Dave, at a price he could afford, took skill. Definitely lots of skill. That Graham had bucketloads of.

'I might see if my interior decorator, Fabrizio wants his number,' Julia said after a comfortable silence.

'Why?' Ryan asked very defensively, without thinking why.

'Can you believe, he's single? I said, any man would be lucky to have Graham. Look at him.' She indicated with her gaze, as Graham stood by a rack of clothes, picking out shirts.

Graham wore black jeans, black boots, a white shirt open, over the top of a blue T-shirt, both fitted to accentuate his build. His legs were long and muscular, thick thighs. His back wide at the top, narrowing to his slim waist. The shirt sleeves were rolled back, revealing forearms slightly tanned in contrast with the white cotton. The way he stood, was confident, in charge, and he strode back to the changing room, carrying an armful of shirts as if they weighed nothing.

They wouldn't weigh much, in comparison to the weights he must lift to get arms like

that, Ryan reflected.

‘...Graham told me he’s not interested, but I said, never say never,’ Julia was saying.

Ryan had missed what she’d said, as he’d been fixated on admiring Graham’s movement, posture, physique.

‘What do you think?’ Julia asked. ‘Little call to Fabrizio, see if they can have a coffee.’

For some reason, Ryan found himself feeling a touch defensive and slightly possessive over Graham. ‘I don’t think so.’ He shook his head resolutely.

‘Oh.’ Julia looked surprised. ‘I think they’d go well together. Both like a pair of horses, strutting around and looking beautiful and handsome together.’

Ryan had never met this Fabrizio, but felt sure Graham wouldn’t be interested. ‘You can’t expect them to get on, just because they’re both gay. It’s actually quite offensive.’

‘Oh.’ She was mortified. ‘I didn’t mean...’

‘No harm done. It’s not like you’ve actually suggested it to him, have you?’ Ryan asked.

Julia shook her head. ‘Why are you so knowledgeable about gay people all of a sudden?’

He realised he had been skating on thin ice as he usually didn’t comment on people’s sexuality, since he preferred not to talk about his either, sticking to his line that he was just Ryan, not gay, straight, or bi, but just Ryan. ‘I know you mean well. It’s just



that you don't know what sort of men Graham finds attractive, do you?'

'No. Well, gay ones.' Her eyes widened.

'Did you actually just say that?'

'I mean, ones who find him attractive. I'm not implying all gay men are the same. Or that all of them find all men attractive. I know what I meant. Look, I've worked in TV for decades, I've worked with, been friends with, plenty of gay men. All I was trying to say was it seems a shame that someone as handsome and confident and charming and creative and easy-going, and efficient as Graham should be single. That's all.'

'Well,' Ryan said, nodding, 'it's good we've had this talk, rather than you thrusting Fabrizio onto Graham.' He smirked.

'I wasn't about to thrust anyone onto anyone,' Julia said, red-faced.

'Thrust?' Graham said, standing next to Dave. 'What on earth are you two talking about?'

Julia looked him up and down, blushing profusely.

'Mum was just saying how her interior decorator has recently split up with his boyfriend and I said he'd probably want to lick his wounds for a while before she set him up with anyone.' Ryan coughed. 'Thrust anyone onto him.'

Graham nodded. 'Right. And honestly please, God, heavens above, and all that's good and holy, can you save me from people who think their best friend's gay brother is perfect for me, just on the basis we're both gay and single.' He shook his head. 'If I had a pound for every time someone's tried to do that to me...' He gestured at Dave.

‘What do we think?’

Dave wore a T-shirt that was baggy around the waste, tighter across the chest, and had sleeves that ended halfway up his pretty decent biceps. The jeans were fitted, but not spray on tight. His legs looked surprisingly toned, muscular even.

‘Have you been working out?’ Ryan asked, genuinely surprised.

Dave shook his head. ‘It’s the clothes.’

‘Is it?’ Ryan asked, peering but trying not to be rude.

Dave nodded. ‘Same body underneath.’

Ryan was impressed.

‘Next, grooming,’ Graham said, assembling the clothes for Dave into two piles. ‘These are yes, and these are no.’ He indicated the two piles.

Dave nodded. ‘It’s a lot.’ He looked at the yes pile.

‘When did you last go clothes shopping?’ Graham asked.

‘About 2002, I think,’ Julia said.

Dave shrugged.

‘Grooming,’ Graham said. ‘I can call Ali? She should be able to fit you in today. Or would you prefer to leave it for another day?’

Julia looked at Dave, then Graham. ‘Can we schedule it nearer the wedding, then

he'll look fresh and tidy?'

'Of course. Although I think it's worth having a few days' grace in case Dave isn't comfortable with anything about his new style.'

Dave said, 'I am standing here. You can talk to me, not across me. What are you thinking for my hair?'

'Would you like to keep the beard?' Graham asked.

Dave nodded.

'I suggest a more trimmed and sculpted beard, so that's not much of a change. It's your hair I'm afraid that's going to need the biggest change.' Graham paused. 'If you're happy with it?'

'What do you want it to look like?' Dave asked.

Graham brought up a picture on his phone. He showed it to Julia, Ryan and then Dave. The man had very short back and sides, with a little length on top, styled into a neat, short side parting, longer at the front than the back.

'One of my boys has his hair like that,' Dave said. 'You don't think it's too young for me? A bit try-hard – poor old man, look he's trying to look young?'

Graham shook his head. 'I don't. As I always say to my clients who are over forty, forty, fifty and sixty plus are not what they were twenty or thirty years ago. My grandma at forty looked about seventy, how she dressed and had her hair. Fashion isn't just the privilege of the young, you know.'

Dave nodded, then left for the changing room.

Graham scheduled the next session, then found out if Ali's salon could fit Dave in, she could, and confirmed it all in a text to Julia and Dave.

Dave walked out in the clothes he'd arrived in, looking about twenty years older and much less well kempt. He checked his phone. 'From you?' He looked at Graham.

Julia explained, then checked her watch. 'We must go.' She hugged Graham, kissed his cheeks. 'Thank you so much. I can't wait for the wedding session. As I said, I'm not doing a big white meringue of a dress. Second marriage.' She made a face. 'Subtle. Understated. That's what I'm going for.'

Graham nodded, then shook Dave's hand.

Julia kissed Ryan goodbye and as he watched them leave, holding hands, disappearing into the department store, he felt calmer, less worried about what might go wrong with their marriage. He allowed himself to admit that the big objection he had to Graham working with them wasn't anything to do with his second thoughts about Dave marrying his mum, and everything to do with Ryan not wanting to see someone as handsome as Graham who made him question so much and who, given the right circumstances might tempt him...

Graham clasped his hands together and turned to Ryan. 'Happy?'

Ryan nodded. He was. Very. It was obvious how much joy this brought to his mum, and by extension Dave. How she loved him but wanted to help him return to the dapper, handsome man she'd known as he drove her to work. That still felt a little uncomfortable, a niggling doubt that something may have happened then, when they'd both been married, but he must ignore that and trust his mum that nothing inappropriate had happened then.

He frowned in thought.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

‘Something wrong?’ Graham asked, sensing there was something behind Ryan’s frown. He thought Ryan being there had been helpful and clearly what his mum had wanted.

‘Nothing. Just thinking.’ A pause and then: ‘You’re good, aren’t you?’

Graham blushed. ‘I don’t like blowing my own trumpet.’ Although years ago, he’d had a boyfriend who could do just that, and Graham, in his twenties, had tried, but failed. He wasn’t going to tell Ryan that though. He blushed more.

‘But you are. Be proud. Mum was very clear you are one of the best. And you definitely are.’ He stared at Graham for a moment.

There was something behind that look too, but Graham didn’t want to extrapolate where there was nothing materially there. Nothing that Graham hoped it might mean anyway.

‘So,’ Ryan said, ‘the wedding day, what’s that going to be like, you’re choosing outfits for, what everyone?’

‘You, your mum, Dave and your sister, Sophie.’ He frowned, had he got her name right?

‘Correct.’

‘Very doable. I’ve done it before. And I’ve done it for much bigger wedding parties; one included all guests, as it was a themed wedding.’ They were standing in the shop

and weren't shopping. 'I don't have to be anywhere. Would you like to...?' Have a drink? Kiss me? Touch me? Sleep with me? These thoughts and many more whispered through Graham's mind in anticipation.

'There's a café down a side street, independent, does the best coffee and cakes in central London.'

Quite a claim to make. Graham raised his eyebrows. 'You lead and I'll follow.'

As Ryan strode ahead, Graham couldn't help but notice his confident gait and the way his designer hoodie clung to his back and accentuated his muscles, his designer jeans too, were cut perfectly to accentuate his pert, muscular behind, and impressively thick thighs. They combined to do things to Graham he'd not felt in a long time. You lead and I'll follow – just the thought of Ryan doing that somewhere more intimate, more private, more undressed, had lust and desire rushing south, tightening Graham's underwear as he stiffened.

Ryan turned a few times, checking Graham was keeping up.

He was, he didn't want to deprive himself of that vision walking ahead.

At the café, a small place, on a side street off Oxford Street, Graham sat at a table and Ryan ordered.

Leaning to one side, so he could see him, Graham watched Ryan standing in the queue. Arms folded confidently. Legs wide apart. He held himself like a man who knew what he was doing. Who didn't apologise for who he was. Knew what he stood for. Which Graham found confusing, since if Ryan was attracted to men, why wasn't he out?

Sexuality was complex, fluid and very personal, and not everyone was as confident

and sure as Graham had been when he came out as gay at sixteen.

Ryan sat, handed Graham his coffee. 'Your grandma bit, I thought that was interesting. Mum's always on about not looking like mutton dressed as lamb. I think Dave must have picked up on that too.'

'It's common. People see what young people are wearing, as they themselves reach forty, fifty, and the shops don't seem to cater for them. But they do. It's a matter of choosing which bits you can and can't wear.'

'Like what?'

'Like you have to worry about that!' Graham sat back in his chair, briefly looking Ryan up and down.

'I'm twenty-eight, and anyway, you're hardly old.'

'I'm not eighteen.' Thirty-three, and cantering his way towards forty, the five years between him and Ryan seemed to make all the difference. Although when they were both in their forties, he reckoned it would be less noticeable. Why had he thought that?

'Good,' Ryan said, looked away, wiped his lip from the foam off his coffee. That had obviously made him feel awkward.

'Good, why?' Graham asked, resting his elbows on the table, leaning forwards. If this was a thing, Graham was going to lean into it, physically and emotionally. Really see what made Ryan tick.

Ryan shook his head. 'Nothing.' He blew out air, looked away.

‘You don’t know what I looked like at eighteen.’

‘I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t look like you do now. And all I was saying is, now, you look...well, I think you look good, and I can’t imagine eighteen-year-old you looked better. As confident. Sure, of what you do.’

‘True.’ There was definitely something going on here, Graham knew.

‘How long did you know your grandma?’ Ryan asked, clearly wanting to change the subject.

Never. She had died by the time Graham was three. No grandad either. Nan and his mum had fallen out over something, he never got the details from his mum. So, she wasn’t in his life much. Not that he could remember. Nearest he’d got was finding a photo of a white-haired woman in a matching twinset and pearls, tightly permed hair, big glasses, asking his mum who it was, and her replying it was his nan, when she was about forty-five.

Graham made an awkward face. He sometimes embellished to make a point to clients. He didn’t see it as lying. ‘It’s a long time ago. I just remember her wearing clothes that made her look decades older. By forty, she looked like a little old lady.’

Ryan nodded. ‘Like you said, fifty isn’t what fifty was. Mum’ll be that soon.’

Grateful for the change of subject, Graham asked, ‘How old is she? I researched online and there’s loads of pieces about if she’s had work done or not, and a few different years of birth. But nothing definitive.’

‘I could tell you, but I’d have to kill you afterwards,’ Ryan said with a smile, finishing his coffee. ‘Another?’



‘My round. Same again?’ Graham stood.

Ryan nodded.

As he ordered their drinks, Graham realised Ryan was very protective, caring, of his mum, which was why he’d been so resistant of her not so new relationship. But anyone could see Dave was harmless, kind, and clearly doted on Julia. As Graham returned with their drinks, he told Ryan this.

Ryan nodded, resting his large forearms on the table, sleeves rolled up.

Graham wanted to touch them, but couldn’t. Didn’t. Mustn’t. He was waiting for a sign from Ryan, who he hoped would take charge, lead the way, and then Graham would follow gladly, eagerly, hungrily perhaps...

Ryan was saying, ‘He is. Dave, I mean. But she’s not been with anyone else since Dad. I can’t help but wonder if she’s settled too quickly. If you put Dad and Dave side by side...’ He shook his head. ‘There’s no comparison.’

‘Maybe that’s the point. Dave is entirely benign. I can tell.’

‘Yeah. I just don’t want her getting divorced again. I don’t think she’d cope with it.’

‘I know she would.’

Ryan sat up. ‘So, you think she’s heading that way?’

Graham shook his head. ‘No. But I know your mum well enough to be sure she’s strong enough to cope with whatever life throws at her. You must see that. You know her better than I do.’

‘She is very strong. Seemed to sail through the divorce. Seemed to. She said it was a relief actually.’

‘So, divorce isn’t always bad. And your dad, he’s happy now, with Matt?’

‘He is. Matt’s twenty-eight.’

‘Is it the age thing or the fact that Matt’s a man, that bothers you most?’ Graham asked. He’d noticed, every time Ryan mentioned his dad and his husband an expression of awkwardness crossed his face.

Ryan looked out of the window, checked the time. ‘It’s late. Another day when I’ve skipped the gym. Haven’t been since Monday. I should definitely go today.’

‘I’m a member of one that has a branch nearby. I did it deliberately for when I’m working in the West End, so I can do my gym session before getting home. Because I knew once I was home, I wouldn’t bother going out again to the gym, no way.’ He smiled.

‘How near?’

‘Literally around the corner. Five minutes’ walk.’

Ryan smiled, obviously warming to the idea. ‘I’ve not got anything to wear.’

‘They sell shorts and T-shirts.’

‘Sounds like a lot of hassle.’ Ryan made a face.

‘If you don’t want their overpriced stuff, we can go back to the department store, buy it there, then go.’

‘When do they shut?’

‘Eleven.’

‘At night?’

‘Central London.’ Graham shrugged. ‘I’ve got my swimming shorts in my bag. If you want to swim, buy trunks too.’

‘Trunks?’ Ryan stared at him. ‘You think I wear tiny Speedos?’

Graham didn’t think that. But he was sure as hell imagining it now, as a smile crept across his face. ‘Whatever. Yes, or no?’ He sensed if he pushed it any further, Ryan would go home. He left the silence.

‘Do they sell swimming stuff at the gym? I haven’t been swimming in ages either. What with work and stuff.’

‘Only itsy bitsy teeny tiny Speedos,’ Graham said, wishing Ryan would buy and wear a pair.

Ryan stood. ‘Department store it is then.’ He led them back, where Ryan bought what he needed, and soon they were at the gym.

Graham showed his membership card to the receptionist. ‘I’d like to sign in a guest please.’ He nodded at Ryan who stood to his side, carrying the bag of new clothes.

She pushed a form towards Graham, handed him a pen.

Graham completed the form, then handed it back with the pen.

The receptionist handed them each a towel. ‘The sauna and steam room closes at ten, but everything else is open until eleven. Enjoy.’

Graham led the way as he knew the layout. The changing room had individual booths, with two doors, one to enter from outside and the other side leading to the lockers, pool, steam room and gym.

They discussed which to do first, an assumption they’d follow each other, and agreed some light cardio on the running and rowing machines, then some weights, not too heavy, a swim, then finishing off in the sauna and steam room.

Wearing loose T-shirts and shorts, they went on the running and rowing machines first. Alternating. Graham couldn’t keep his eyes to himself, as he watched dark sweat forming around the neck of Ryan’s T-shirt, in two arcs delineating his pectoral muscles.

Oh shit, maybe this is a bad idea!

The weights were even worse, with Ryan lying on the bench, his T-shirt riding up, revealing a sliver of stomach, and the shorts showing lumps and bumps that Graham couldn’t stop looking at. Graham stood above him, handing him the weights. Ryan’s grunting, breathing, noises as he bench-pressed more than Graham thought he should, were doing things to Graham that had him adjusting himself in his shorts and leaning forwards with the baggy T-shirt covering his groin.

It was Graham’s turn to lay down and bench press the weights. He got himself water from the drinking fountain, grateful of the time away from Ryan for his body to cool down. Content he was okay, he returned, offering Ryan a cup of water.

Graham lay down on his back, looking up, Ryan stood above him, upside down. It reminded Graham of the kiss in that Spiderman film, when the superhero hangs

upside down, and the woman he fancies kisses him. He longed for Ryan's lips against his own.

No.

He concentrated on lifting the weights, until his arms ached.

They changed in individual booths, then showered in their swimming shorts, before swimming in the pool.

Graham couldn't keep his eyes off Ryan's body. He was spectacular. Broad-shouldered, well-defined pecs, covered in trimmed hair, it continued over his abs too. His thighs were as thick as Graham had hoped, seeing them in jeans. Although Ryan didn't wear tiny Speedos, his shorts were slightly too small, tight around the back, showing off a muscular behind, two globes, one for each butt cheek. The front of the shorts too, Graham saw, in snatched peeks as they walked to the pool, then later when they moved between the sauna and steam room, the cold plunge pool and back to the swimming pool, was a little too tight. The lumps and bumps showed that Ryan was a large man all over.

Graham kept returning to the cold showers and freezing plunge pool more than normal to get rid of the semi he found himself walking around with.

They talked about TV, music, clothes, where they lived, casual small talk and Graham found it easy. The silences weren't awkward and after what felt like twenty minutes, they were dressed and thanking the receptionist.

Somehow it was nine o'clock. Graham's stomach rumbled. 'Are you hungry? I am.' And horny. The gym always seemed to do that to him, Graham found. It was something to do with feel good hormones, and often when he arrived home he'd relieve the tension, alone on his bed, otherwise he'd have blue balls or a semi, all

evening.

‘My treat,’ Ryan said, relaxed, and as if there was no other option.

Whatever had been making Ryan uptight before had shifted. Maybe it was just hanging out together. Maybe it was that Graham had deliberately not flirted, after all Ryan hadn’t indicated he was interested. Maybe it was simply being two friends chilling out together. But Graham had been on this earth long enough to sense when there was something else going on, underneath. But he dare not push it, for fear of scaring Ryan off, or ruining what could be a good friendship if Ryan wasn’t interested.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan held the menu, glancing over the top at Graham, working out what he fancied. Him. I fancy him. No, I don't.

Graham was staring intensely at his own menu.

'Carbs, or no carbs?' Ryan asked, firmly switching off that earlier unwanted thought.

The waiter arrived. 'Do you want to order drinks?'

Normally Ryan would have water, but he felt buoyant, elated that his mum was happy, that he was spending unplanned leisure time with Graham, so he asked, with a touch of unsureness, 'Wine?'

Graham lowered his menu. 'With food. Why not? Let's push the boat, right out.' Graham looked at the waiter. 'We've just been to the gym. Don't want to undo all our good work.'

'It's Friday night, treat yourselves,' he said and exchanged a look with Graham. An almost wink.

Something felt odd in Ryan's stomach. An itchy uncomfortableness. He didn't want the cute waiter exchanging almost winks with Graham. He wanted to...no he absolutely bloody well didn't. That was stupid to even consider.

'You choose,' Graham said.

Ryan picked a mid-priced white. 'Is white, okay?'

‘Very okay.’

The waiter left.

Very okay? What did he mean by that, Ryan wondered. They sat in silence for a few moments, then Ryan decided to dive in with, ‘I’m going carbs. What about you?’

‘Do you know what, I think I’ll go carbs too.’ Graham paused. ‘Continue to push the boat, all the way out. What were you thinking?’

‘Steak and chips with fried mushroom.’ Ryan thought if he was having carbs, he’d have the best carbs ever.

‘I’ll have the same,’ Graham said.

The waiter arrived with their wine, opened it, let Ryan sample.

It tasted like chilled, nice, white wine. ‘Great.’

He poured, then asked if they were ready to order.

Ryan took a big swig of wine, to steady his nerves that had appeared from nowhere, for some reason, then gave their order, realised he probably shouldn’t have spoken for Graham. A big confident man like Graham was perfectly capable of ordering for himself. Ryan blushed at the mistake, sipped wine to distract himself.

‘How would you like it done?’ the waiter asked.

There was an awkward moment when they both said the other should go first, finally Ryan insisted that Graham say his.



‘Medium rare,’ Graham said.

‘Well done,’ Ryan said, his eyes widening as the wine relaxed him, and he looked forward to biting into the juicy steak and crisp chips.

The waiter left.

‘What got you into your line of work?’ Ryan asked, pouring them a second glass of wine each. Wow, well that had gone down quickly!

Graham talked about working in a shop, how he liked to help customers, how he used to spend too long with one customer, until finally he did it with a woman, to ensure she had the perfect outfit for her son’s graduation. Then he’d been asked to leave, because he spent too long chatting to customers. So, he left to work somewhere that had a personal shopper service, which he volunteered for, when others didn’t want it. A few years of that and then after some C and D grade celebs, he had their quotes and pictures, he set up his own business. Graham’s eyes shone when he talked about his work.

It was addictive, compelling, to hear Graham talk so enthusiastically about his profession. Ryan wondered if he’d ever be so joyful about his work. He doubted it.

They had finished the wine. Funny that.

The waiter arrived with their food and took an order for another bottle.

Why not, it was Friday night. ‘You don’t have work tomorrow, do you?’ Ryan asked, soon pouring them another glass each.

Graham shook his head. ‘Client asked to reschedule.’ He lifted his glass full of wine. ‘Friday night!’

Ryan joined in, maybe they were talking a bit loudly, as someone on another table seemed to scrunch up their face, but whatever. Ryan was having a great time. It was exhilarating, the evening so far. He was really enjoying himself, relaxing and the feel-good hormones from the gym were mixing nicely with the light-headedness from the alcohol, giving him the confidence Ryan so often lacked in social situations.

The rest of the meal seemed to pass in a bit of a blur, to Ryan. They might have ordered another bottle of wine, but then again, they might not have. They definitely shared a pudding, both laughing at how they were watching the sugar intake, having had all that wine. There could have been dessert wine, but later, Ryan couldn't remember. They had two spoons and shared one bowl of tiramisu, creamy coffee-soaked sponge that they ate so quickly it was almost like it hadn't been there.

The thing Ryan knew was definitely there was his leg resting against Graham's under the table. Their thighs were touching. Had been since dessert was served. Tentatively, Ryan put his hand under the table, placed it on Graham's thigh. Lightly.

They made eye contact, didn't say anything, just stared at each other. Ryan really wanted this. He thought, so anyway. Ryan's hand moved, until it found Graham's, and he stroked Graham's long finger, using his thumb and index finger to stroke it on both sides, imagining what it would feel like if that wasn't Graham's finger but his...

Then things seemed to blend from one scene, and location, gradually into another, as the evening continued. They were in the restaurant, then they were standing outside in the street, waiting for something. A car arrived. Must have been a taxi.

Graham got in. 'Thanks for a great evening,' he was saying. The door shut.

For the first time since his mum had left, Ryan didn't feel the elation, excitement, feeling of anything being possible, he'd had since it was only him and Graham. It was because Graham was leaving. And Ryan didn't want that to happen. Ryan banged on

the window to stop the car driving off. The window opened, and Ryan climbed in, couldn't manage to fasten up his seatbelt, but it went tight, so someone must have done it. He smiled. Sat next to Graham. He held Graham's hand in the taxi. It felt right, it felt exciting, it felt comforting. They were at a building overlooking water, and the taxi was gone, and then they were in the lift, and there were kisses, and hands on faces, and bodies pressed against the lift, and then they were in Graham's flat. In the hallway, there were more kisses, and slightly biting at faces, and desperate, needy, wanting, nothing else mattered in the world, scrabbling at clothes, until there were none, there was only bare skin, the clothes strewn on the floor. And Ryan was lying on his back, on the hallway floor, and Graham was on top of him, he was kissing Ryan's chest, his nipples, his stomach, and lower, and Ryan's head was swimming, as the drunkenness mixed with the need for this, and he felt a stiffness against his chest, a long hard stiffness, between his pecs, and then Graham was kissing him, wat, warm, hard, needful, and Ryan responded in the same way, but more, then Ryan's stiffness was making him thrust upwards, into nothing, into the air, or was it something, then it was wet and warm, up and down his shaft, around the base, the top, and then Graham gazed up from lower down Ryan's body, smiling, and Ryan let his head roll backwards, and the warm, slickness continued until he thought he was going to go, and he didn't stop, why would he stop such pleasure, and he ran towards the climbing sensation, until the only thing he felt was his hardness, his whole body didn't exist except that part of him, and he emptied himself, with a gasp and a held breath and he and panted, and was sweating and his heart beat faster, and he caught his breath. Then they were in a warmer room, reclining on something softer than the floor, and Graham was on his side, lying down in front of Ryan, there was a coldness, a slickness, a something Ryan didn't know and Graham was nuzzling backwards, pushing himself against Ryan, but he wasn't hard now, he was soft and warm and sleepy, but as his body awoke, his burgeoning hardness wanted to find somewhere warm and slick like it had before, but it couldn't. It was sleeping. Ryan was on his back, with Graham astride, his legs either side of Ryan's torso. Graham's body was moving up and down, and his stiffness was banging on Ryan. On Ryan's stomach, between Ryan's pecs again, Ryan liked that, and he heard a cry and a gasp and then

there was stickiness on Ryan's chest, and neck and face, and Graham was pushing down, so they were chest to chest and there was no more stiffness, only happiness and comfortableness, and then Ryan wanted to sleep, and then there was nothing except darkness.

The next morning, Ryan woke, in a room he didn't recognise, in a bed he had no memory of, with a gap on the bed where not long before, someone had been. The sheets were warm, an indent in the pillows. He sniffed the sheets, warm, woody, musky, man-scent.

What happened last night? He remembered dinner with Graham, and the gym, and the sauna and having a hard-on for most of the meal. Of wanting, of needing to do something about it, and the taxi, he felt sad at the taxi....why was that, he wondered...

He rolled over and fell asleep, his head pounding and his eyes itchy with sleep.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham was in the kitchen, making coffee for them both. He couldn't quite believe what had happened last night.

Ryan was like an animal once they'd got home. He'd grabbed at Graham's clothes, practically stripped him in the lift. The desperation in his eyes, when they were in Graham's hallway. This was a man who wanted this, but hadn't had it for a long time.

Graham had pressed Ryan to lie flat, and he'd made love with his mouth, and surprisingly Ryan came, but he seemed to want more, to go again, but he'd drunk a lot of wine, so hoping time would help, Graham led them to the bedroom.

Ryan then seemed to want one thing, if his positioning and hands on Graham were anything to go by. So, Graham had laid in front of him, trying his best to rub Ryan up, and slicking them, as best he could. Ryan was thrusting about, but the wine had taken over, the condom didn't stay on, and there was no way that was going to work, Graham thought, as he reached behind himself, hoping to find a big hard cock, but instead finding only softness, slick and felt Ryan's hips thrusting about uselessly.

So, Graham had straddled him, just seeing Ryan beneath him, his big hairy chest and muscular arms laid out for Graham to admire, kept Graham hard and soon he spurted all over Ryan's chest, neck and face, before collapsing on top of him, not quite believing what had just happened.

That was when Graham had got them water, made Ryan drink two pints, put him on his side, checked he didn't feel sick – he didn't. By the time Graham was returning from a shower to wash off the sweat and stickiness, Ryan was asleep, on his side, snoring quietly.

Graham had snuggled up, inhaling the scent of sandalwood, deodorant and man, simply bathing in the moment of having a glorious man like Ryan in his bed. After what had been a glorious evening together.

Now, he carried their coffee to his bedroom.

Ryan lay down on his side, face buried in the pillow, half the covers removed, revealing his large, muscular behind, thighs, and a wide back with ripples of muscles across the top.

Graham couldn't quite believe this actual man, was in his actual bed. That they'd had the perfect evening, which would only have been bettered if they had managed to have the sex that had been on Graham's mind since going to the gym together. Not that he was complaining about the sex they did have last night. Oh no. It was very sexy and fun, thank you very much.

Graham sat up in bed, sipping his coffee, bathing in the anticipation of what the morning together could bring.

A loud groan, and Ryan moved, rolled over, taking the duvet with him, revealing Graham's naked body.

'I wouldn't mind some covers, thank you!' Graham said.

Ryan rolled again, removing all of the duvet, then slowly sat upright, against the headboard. He opened his eyes, yawned, shook his head, and looked about. His hair stuck up, and he moved slowly.

He looked adorably cute and just as handsome as ever. And, Graham thought, he's bloody well in my bloody bed! 'Morning,' Graham said.

Ryan said nothing, his eyes widened.

‘Coffee?’ Graham handed the mug to him.

Ryan sipped it slowly, making himself comfortable against the headboard with a pillow. After a few slow sips of coffee, he turned to Graham. ‘What happened?’

‘What do you remember?’

‘The gym. The restaurant.’

Graham told him what had happened.

Ryan looked mortified when Graham politely described how they’d tried but not succeeded to fuck last night.

Graham laughed. ‘Worst things have happened at sea!’

Ryan’s face didn’t seem to agree.

Graham couldn’t resist. Ryan looked adorable. A bit lost, confused, and as if the world was about to end. Graham knew none of that was true, none of that mattered, so he kissed Ryan. Mouth open, lips pressed together, his tongue tasting Ryan, experiencing the wet and warmth of his mouth, just as Ryan had experience Graham’s last night. He pulled back from the kiss.

Ryan was smiling, a little grin crept across his face.

Graham returned for another, this time deeper, kissing Ryan’s neck, cheeks, chest, moving down to his pecs, taking a nipple in his mouth, each in turn, biting slightly, licking it.

The groans of pleasure from Ryan told Graham he was doing the right thing. No sense having post-match analysis about what hadn't happened last night. Now, Ryan wanted it and so did Graham. Best to finish what they started. Only now, sober, more conscious of what was happening.

Graham's tongue was in Ryan's navel, he moved down, licking the base of Ryan's hard-on. It rose from the dark wiry hairs at the base, curving forwards, like a banana. It was thick and long and Graham knew it would feel wonderful deep inside him.

But not yet. Not now. He wanted to look at this beautiful man in his bed, make love to him, slowly, languidly, taking their time, unlike the frantic, chaotic, messy desperation of last night.

Graham licked the tip of Ryan's cock, then down the shaft, to the base, and back up again. He sucked Ryan's balls, shaved ball sac, taking one in his mouth at a time, then returning to make love to the shaft, the tip. Taking it all in his mouth.

Ryan cried out.

Graham stopped; afraid he'd hurt him.

'Don't stop,' Ryan said, the word strangled in his throat.

Graham obeyed, made love to Ryan with his mouth and hand, and only stopped when sometime later, Ryan cried out in pleasure, thrusting his hips upwards into Graham's mouth, as he reached his climax.

Graham lay down on his side, the only noise their breathing, deep, ragged, slowly returning to normal. He stayed still.

Ryan reached forwards, held Graham's cock. 'What about you?'



Graham made a long mmmmm sound, he couldn't string a sentence together; he was spent, soft, satiated, his stickiness over his leg.

They moved around in the bed, Ryan settling as the small spoon to Graham's large one, and fell languidly to sleep, under the covers.

They showered together, washing each other's bodies, although their minds were willing, their bodies weren't yet able for a repeat. Then they had breakfast at the bar in Graham's kitchen.

They wore underwear, due to the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the Thames in the apartment's lounge, kitchen and dining room.

'What will you tell Sam?' Graham asked, crunching on buttered toast.

Ryan shook his head, shrugged.

'He'll be fine.' Graham looked up, staring at Ryan. 'You really love him, don't you? Like proper best friends forever. I was always a bit envious of him for having that. I didn't think people had best friends anymore. Men anyway. But you two, definitely. I've never had that.'

Ryan shrugged, looked away. He seemed to be embarrassed about it.

'Did I say something wrong?' Graham asked.

Ryan shook his head. 'People used to think we were a couple.'

'I never thought that,' Graham said, trying to rescue things, 'Whatever Sam said it was just good old-fashioned friendship. Plenty of people never have that sort of strong bond with someone. Not even people they marry, or have children with.' His

mum certainly hadn't with his absent dad.

'Thanks,' Ryan said.

'Your mum's really lucky to have someone who cares about her like you do.'

'From what Sam said, you did the same for your mum.' Ryan was looking at Graham, he seemed a bit more relaxed, as he brushed crumbs off his short underwear trunks.

Ryan shrugged. He looked magnificent, leaning forwards slightly, his hairy stomach without a six pack, but an attractive softness that folded forward, his pecs less obvious than when he'd been standing upright, but still, Graham decided, absolutely hunky and sexy and relaxed too. This was the last thing Graham expected to be doing today, after seeing his brother's best friend in a professional capacity.

Absolutely the last thing. Graham briefly smirked.

'What?' Ryan asked.

Graham shook his head. 'Nothing.' He wasn't about to tell Ryan that. Made him sound desperate. Didn't want to go into the whole, I didn't know you were gay, conversation. However, Ryan wanted to describe himself, Ryansexual, just Ryan, whatever, but he'd certainly been pretty splendidly gay last night, and first thing this morning. Sucking Ryan off was, without doubt, the best sex Graham had enjoyed in a very long time. Yes, he'd gone further with other guys, but there was something so masculine, so big, and strong about Ryan that had Graham, even now, stiffening.

Graham said, 'I used to look after Mum, yeah, but it's different from how you care about yours. Totally different.'

'Why?' Ryan asked. 'By the way, do you have to be anywhere, or can we have

another coffee?’

Graham didn’t have to be anywhere. And he certainly hoped they’d be able to have more than coffee before Ryan left. He made a cafetiere of less strong coffee, filled a jug with milk, collected brown sugar, and they took it to the sofa, placing the drink on the low table.

Ryan sat at one end of the sofa, spreading himself out, seeming to take up more space than he needed. And he was so damned attractive, that Graham, without even thinking it might be too much, that he could get the brush off, sat in front of him, facing the same direction, snuggling his back against Ryan’s chest.

Feeling comfortable, safe, and relaxed, Graham found himself telling Ryan about his mum, her alcohol addiction, how he was parenting her and Sam from his twelfth birthday. ‘It’s a different sort of caring for than you do for your mum. Yours is adult to adult. Mine was always adult to child.’ Graham took a breath, as he thought how to best describe it. ‘I was always the adult. She never became an adult. Right up to the end. I’ve spent most of my life being an adult, from eleven years old, when I should have been a child. Sam was too young to notice. I think he had a good childhood.’

‘Thanks to you?’

Graham shrugged.

‘He never complains about it. He’s always made it sound like the perfect childhood. Enjoying school. Looked up to you like a father figure. Never mentioned you were gay. You were just Graham, there when he needed you. He makes my life seem like a picnic. Sam worked when we were at uni. I had an allowance. We started together at the grad scheme, doing a proper job, and I didn’t know what had hit me. Monday to Friday, nine to five, and more. But Sam, he didn’t even mention it. Because he’d really had to work for it, part time job while studying. I’ve sort of had it all handed to

me on a plate.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself. Your privileged upbringing didn't mean Sam and I had our difficult one. Life doesn't work like that.'

'I know, but.' Ryan stopped, then kissed Graham's neck gently.

Shivers ran down Graham's spine. He backed himself up, closer towards Ryan. Felt a stiffness that had been missing last night, so late, all that wine they'd drunk.

Ryan moaned as Graham put his hand behind Ryan's neck, gently pulling him forwards, encouraging another of Ryan's delicious neck kisses.

They would have done it doggy style on the sofa, if Graham hadn't stopped, and led them into his bedroom. But once there, Graham was struck by how hungry, forceful, passionate, Ryan was. It was as if he'd never fucked before. He was both gentle, and masterful, checking Graham was okay, comfortable, wasn't in pain. And when they were one, Ryan took him, possessed him, thrusting deep into Graham's body, pressing against that needful button inside his body. They moved around the bed, changing position, Ryan indicated he wanted to see Graham's face, while they had sex, needing to feel that connection.

Graham lay down on his back, his legs over Ryan's shoulders, as they were joined, moving forwards to meet each other in glorious uninhibited sex.

Ryan seemed to want to make Graham come himself, holding Graham's hands away from his cock as he crept closer to his climax. It was as if Ryan wanted to prove his masculinity, his virility by making love to Graham so well, so passionately, so completely, that Graham would reach his white-hot peak from only Ryan's power inside him.

Graham wasn't about to go into all the complexities of how that might or might not happen, he just wanted to come, and he wanted to come now. He pulled Ryan deeper inside him, wrapping his legs around Ryan's torso, as Ryan thrust deep, cried out, and he came. Another thrust, and another, and they stayed still, Ryan kneeling on the bed, Graham on his back, legs wrapped around Ryan.

Ryan fell forwards, his massive bulk on top of Graham, as he tried to catch his breath.

And that, still feeling Ryan's stiffness inside him, pressing against his needful button deep within his body, meant that Graham, with a few flicks of his hand, was climbing the final part and joyfully, splendidly reaching his climax too, with a cry of joy, sticky whiteness covering his stomach and Ryan's chest.

'Did.' Ryan panted. 'I.' Panting. 'Do that?'

Graham nodded, kissing Ryan's cheek, pulling him back, so he could look into his eyes. 'Yeah.'

It was mid-afternoon by the time Ryan finally left. Not because Graham had wanted him to leave, but it was just that despite wanting to, they couldn't take and give of each other's bodies any more. After the last time, they showered, then again in the bathroom, then finally, sitting at the breakfast bar, Ryan's hunger returned to his eyes, and he put his hands inside Graham's trousers, desperate, needful, hungry. Again.

Graham said, 'Not again, sorry,' and he kissed Ryan.

Ryan finally left, giving him a kiss at Graham's front door.

Graham hugged him and took a deep inhalation of Ryan's scent, feeling his bulk in Graham's arms, remembering his weight on top of Graham before.

Then Ryan turned, and left.

Graham wasn't going to sound desperate, ask when they could see each other again. He'd done all that as a teenager and in his twenties. At thirty-three, he decided if Ryan wanted to see him again, he would. But Graham really wanted to see Ryan again.

He sat on the sofa; the room didn't seem any different. The bedroom door was ajar, the covers twisted and rumpled from their last love-making in the bed. There were pieces of toast, crumbs on the kitchen floor, from where they'd knocked them off the breakfast bar, the first time this morning. The first kiss of today that had led to...

He wondered if they'd have a first kiss tomorrow. Allowed himself to hope. But didn't promise anything. Ryan hadn't said anything about that. They would see. Take it slowly. Now they knew how compatible they were in bed; a relationship could, might, easily spring from there.

Or not.

Or so, Graham hoped briefly.

Graham rang the one person who he trusted for sensible advice, knowing her husband would still be away, feeling guilty for never arranging that evening together, and hoping she wasn't at work.

'You won't believe what's just happened?' he asked.

'You're styling George Clooney?' Claire asked with more than a touch of sarcasm.

'No.'

‘Brad Pitt? Ryan Gosling? Ryan Reynolds?’

‘Better.’

‘Fuck off is it better?’ She went quiet. ‘You’ve just got your leg over, haven’t you?’

Graham laughed.

‘Who? Do I know him?’

‘He’s Sam’s best friend.’

‘Fuck off. Fuck all the way off! Is he young? How young are we talking? Have you got a toyboy? I thought you liked them older and bigger than you.’

Graham told her, leaving out the sex details.

‘I am so jealous! And pleased for you, it’s been ages since you got a bit of action. George was back last week, so I’m all sorted. He’s gone now. Out to sea. Two months.’ She coughed, a sucking noise.

‘Are you still smoking those things?’

‘They keep my cough in check.’

‘I told you, why that is. If you stopped smoking—’

‘Not what we’re talking about. So, are you seeing him again? Well, you must be, the wedding styling bit. Awkward? Will you tell Sam?’

‘Might be a bit awkward. Probably leave it for him to tell Sam. Unless you think it’s

better coming from me?’

‘Look, this is uncharted territory is this. Brother’s best friend. That’s like...a thing, it’s a something, isn’t it?’

Graham nodded. It certainly was...something.

‘You’re not going to call him, are you?’ she asked.

‘Tonight?’ Graham asked. ‘What, am I fourteen? No, I’ll leave it a few days.’ Cool as a cucumber. Maybe leave it until he couldn’t still feel as if Ryan was still inside him, in an aching, pleasurable, needful way.

‘So, he’s handsome, lowkey, well groomed, has a famous mum and dad. What’s the catch?’ Claire asked.

As far as Graham could see, there wasn’t one. He thought for a moment. ‘He’s a bit younger, so maybe a bit immature. But he doesn’t seem it. Just starting out, first proper job. Sharing a house.’

‘Who with?’

‘Sam, who else?’

‘Obviously.’

No catch at all. Fucks like a machine. Handsome. Built like a brick shithouse. What could possibly go wrong?



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan arrived home, went straight into the bathroom, to wash off the now less attractive smell of sex and come and dick and arse and Graham. Somehow, now he was in the same house as Graham's brother it felt less sexy.

Ryan scrubbed his body with soap until it was red. If he could have done so inside, he would have. He washed his hair, standing under the shower for longer than necessary. He brushed his teeth, thinking what his mouth and tongue had been doing hours before, he rinsed with generous amounts of mouthwash three times, staring at his reflection in the mirror between rinses, inspecting his face closely to see if guilt was visible.

It wasn't, although despite having a thorough wash, an air of repulsion and regret remained.

Dressing in his bedroom, there was a bang on the front door.

'Are you home?' Sam shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

Usually, Ryan would be keen to greet him, catch up since they'd last seen each other, which had been a few days at least. But now, Ryan knew he couldn't say the one thing he needed to. Couldn't tell Sam that last night, and this morning he'd been with Sam's brother, and at the time, it was great. Better than he'd imagined.

There was a knock on his bedroom door. 'Can I come in?' Sam asked.

'I'm getting dressed. Meet you in the sitting room. Beers are in the fridge.' He said it quickly and couldn't hide the anxious tone.

‘Are you okay?’ Sam asked. ‘You sound different.’

Was it because hours ago he was in Sam’s brother’s arms, in Sam’s brother, now he thought of it. It was both really sexy, and very strange, both at the same time. He bit his bottom lip. ‘Be there in a minute.’

The clomping of feet down the corridor showed that Sam had left him alone. For now.

Ryan dressed, and wondered how he was going to explain to the person he told everything to, well, almost everything, why he seemed different. Because he couldn’t say he’d met someone and had feelings for them, because he didn’t do that. And if he did, Sam would want to know who, how, when and much more. The only thing he could do was to lie, lie and lie some more. To the face of his best friend. Ryan swallowed the lump of fear that had formed in his throat.

In the kitchen, Sam was leaning against the worksurface, holding a bottle of beer. He handed one to Ryan. ‘What happened to you? I left loads of messages, texts, nothing.’

‘Battery died.’ First lie.

‘Where were you? Did the thing with Graham go okay? He said that boyfriend of your mum’s was massively improved, completely changed. Like that TV show, where half a dozen gay guys do a total transformation. Only Graham was all six of them. Modest, eh?’

‘He’s very good.’ That was true at least.

‘Is he?’ Sam sounded surprised.

‘Very. When I saw, I knew I couldn’t let her miss out.’

‘I’m glad. It was super awkward, asking him. He doesn’t turn down clients. Did he explain?’ Sam asked.

‘Yeah. I thought, I’ve got to give Dave a chance. Mum is. And she’s not stupid, so...’

‘Exactly. What happened after? Didn’t hear you come in last night.’

Ryan blushed, looked away to hide it as he remembered last night again. ‘When did you go to bed?’ He tried to keep his tone nonchalant.

‘Eleven-ish. Boring Friday night. Wondered what fun you were getting up to. So, when did you get in?’

If he lied, it was easily disprovable. If he told the partial truth, there would be questions. ‘Never mind that, it’s boring, what about you, what have you been up to this weekend?’

‘Told you. Nothing. Bed by eleven. Went to visit Mum earlier, up the crematorium. Was a bit lost on my own to be honest. Expected you to want to do something together. We’ve hardly seen each other all week.’

‘We’re not joined at the hip.’ That came out harsher than he intended. Ryan pressed his lips together, stopping himself speaking before he’d thought it through.

‘I know. But I thought living together, we’d see more of each other. I’m just settling into the routine of full-time work, that’s what Graham said. He’s very sensible.’

‘I didn’t know you visited your mum’s grave.’

‘I don’t. Well, I haven’t, not before. Not regularly anyway. But after everything, me and Graham decided we’d like somewhere we could go, to remember her. I know she

wasn't perfect, but she's the only mum I've got.' He looked at Ryan, his eyes wide, almost as if he was about to cry.

'How was it?'

'Sad. Quiet. It rained.'

There was silence. Ryan didn't know what to say. He felt he should apologise for snapping. He squeezed Sam's shoulder. 'You're all right now, though?'

Sam sniffed loudly, wiped his cheek. 'Yeah. Course I am. It's just a plaque. She was cremated. We didn't want an actual grave to look after. Graham said he'd looked after Mum enough while she was alive, he didn't want to have to do it when she was dead.' Sam laughed briefly.

Ryan's heart squeezed. This was his best friend. He should be able to tell him everything. Shouldn't he? Silence for a beat. Not awkward, but it felt long to Ryan. Then he said, 'Then you came home?'

Sam nodded. 'Tried calling Graham, to tell him where I'd been. Not to guilt trip him, just let him know. No answer. Came back here, online videos, listened to some music, made lunch, then went out. Must have been gone when you got home.' He looked up, his eyes narrowing at Ryan. 'You had sex, didn't you? You, who hardly ever has sex, who doesn't say which way he swings, who insists he's just Ryan-sexual, you had sex. I can see it on your face.' He peered at Ryan, staring at him closely. 'It's not guilt, but fun, cos it was a bit dirty. Am I right?'

He totally was. It was dirty and sexy and all sorts of fun, half of which Ryan didn't even know were possible. His cock was sore from all the action it had seen. Was it possible to damage your knob from too much shagging? He might have got near that as a frustrated and horny teenager, furiously masturbating multiple times every day.

As he'd aged, he'd sort of forgotten that side of things. Doing it occasionally on his own, and hardly ever with others. Instead, he'd kept himself busy with other stuff – work, family, friends. Sam mainly. But Graham, somehow, had ignited something in Ryan he'd forgotten existed.

Ryan looked away, reached for a beer in the fridge, then gave Sam one.

'That's a yes,' Sam said, clinking bottles with Ryan. 'And?'

'And nothing.' Ryan shook his head.

'You stayed out all night, got lucky and don't want to talk about it?'

'About right, yeah. Can we talk about something else, please?'

Sam frowned, shook his head. 'Second term of the first year, I was grabbed by that girl drama student, she tried to wank me off around the back of the student union bar. Dragged me home to her big house, wherever it was, and we were undressed on the sofa, with me fumbling with a johnnie, when her housemate walked in, switched the light on, switched it off, then left. The girl said, "Come on, get it on!" And she pushed me onto my back and rode me on the sofa until she'd had enough, and I'd just gone, then she climbed off, lit a cigarette, while I dressed, before she chucked me out, without even a cup of tea, and wouldn't make eye contact when I saw her in the corridors afterwards. I told you all of that. You wanted it blow by blow.'

Ryan felt a bit grubby at being reminded of that. Wished he hadn't been so interested in what was really private between Sam, the girl, and the housemate. But for some reason he'd always been a bit obsessed by Sam dating, who he fancied, who he didn't, when he slept with a girl. It was as if Ryan was trying to have a sex life vicariously through Sam. And that didn't sound right either, so he wasn't going to tell Sam. 'I shouldn't have asked. Dunno why I did. Can you not ask me now, please?'

‘Okay. We’ll talk about something else. But I don’t see what’s so bad you can’t tell me. I’m not wanting blow by blow, I mean, I agree, you shouldn’t have asked me, and I shouldn’t have told you. But we were at uni, we were younger. Besides, that girl’s housemate didn’t seem bothered, nor did she so...’ Sam shrugged.

‘Hungry? I’m starving. Builds an appetite does...all that.’ He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

‘See, you can’t do that, give me a hint, then clam up. Are you seeing her again?’

Her. Sam assumed he’d slept with a woman. Statistically it was more likely in the general populace that a man would sleep with a woman than another man. Statistically. It was just that Ryan, in this regard, seemed to be in the minority; both of men who didn’t seem too interested in sex, and men who, when the occasion arose, wanted to sleep with men, not women. And that was just the statistical side of things, not to mention the emotional side, which Ryan hadn’t even begun to consider. Did this mean he’d develop emotions, feelings, an attachment for another man? More than just the physical act. Would he want an actual relationship with Graham, he wondered. It was, a lot, he admitted to himself. Really, a lot. ‘I’m starving. Shall we get some Thai? Nice and spicy. My treat.’

Sam pulled a takeaway menu from the noticeboard. They stuffed them through the door all the time. ‘Or Chinese?’

‘Don’t mind,’ Ryan said. He was just grateful they weren’t talking about last night.

‘Pizza? I could eat a pizza to be honest. Massive meat feast, spicy sausage, peperoni, all the cheese, peppers. Yeah?’

‘You order it.’ He gave Sam the money, then left for his room. He lay down on his bed, trying to work out what this all meant. What he felt. What he was going to do

next.

Did this mean he was gay? Did it mean he had to come out now? Sam, his parents, he didn't think they'd mind. But it was still a bit weird, like father like son. That wasn't a thing, was it? And he'd always been so clear he definitely didn't find Matt attractive. Not at all. He loved him, like a brother almost, like Sam – who he also didn't find attractive. The two of them were just men. Matt was slim and quite camp, but not false with it, just himself, naturally flamboyant, a bit over the top, he had some effeminate mannerisms. And Sam was kind of boy, man, next door, ordinary, not too blokey, not effeminate, quite understated, quieter, studious, considerate, more than anything he was like Ryan's younger brother. They were both men, but not the same as Graham. Ryan knew all men weren't the same. Knew all gay men didn't fancy all men.

The lifeguard and Graham, now he considered them, they were similar – build, size, hairiness.

Since the evening on the family holiday, and dating at uni, Ryan had rarely slept with anyone else. Only when it was demanded of him. He'd thought he had to find someone's personality attractive, as well as their body. And he didn't go out of his way to find that. He'd become used to being single, being non-sexual, being Ryan-sexual.

Except Graham had sort of landed in his lap. Was that a thing – only finding people sexy if they had a sexy personality? Ryan googled it – it was a thing – so that was good. That was at least something to hold onto, if people asked questions. He wasn't sure if this meant he was actually gay, or bi, or pan, or what, or whether he was only attracted to Graham because of the personality thing first, and the physical side next. Everyone would have questions, and Ryan couldn't get anything straight in his own head first. So, it was best to keep it to himself, he decided. Although he wasn't really clear what it was, he was keeping secret...

‘Food’s here!’ Sam shouted from the lounge.

‘Coming!’ Ryan replied, forcing as much enthusiasm and normality into his tone as he could, but mostly failing. This, these confused emotions, this longing for Graham, the need to see him again, this and a thousand other reasons, were why Ryan thought relationships were for suckers. But he wasn’t sure if he was one of those suckers, or if Graham would make all that worthwhile, or if he was better retreating to his shell. That morning, Ryan had felt as if he was on top of the world, it was the highest high he’d ever experienced. Far better than the night with the girl at uni, or in the car with the lifeguard, because with Graham, they had an emotional, personality connection as well as a physical one.

‘Plates or cartons?’ Sam shouted, sounding impatient.

Well, Ryan decided finally, all of that, all the thoughts and feelings that were a lot, and swirling around his mind, would have to wait for another day. He left his room, joined Sam in the sitting room on the sofa.

The smell of the pizza filled the air: cheese, tomato and spicy meats.

Sam lifted a slice, handing it to Ryan. ‘It’s well tasty.’

But Ryan’s appetite had gone. As much as his sense of self, his identity, his beliefs he held about relationships. Everything was on sand, shifting and uncertain. He hoped what he’d done wouldn’t ruin one of the few solid, constants in his life: his friendship with Sam.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

It was a few days later, and Graham wanted to see Ryan again. He'd not called straight away – he wasn't some desperate mopey teenager – that part of his life was well behind him. But he did want to see Ryan again. After that night and morning together, they had a connection and he wanted to experience it again.

'I wondered if I could maybe come round your place?' Graham said, on the phone to Ryan, trying to keep his tone casual, as he looked out of his window at the Thames below. Water sparkled, light streamed through the floor to ceiling windows, and Graham felt optimistic that hopefully, this could work. Finally, he'd found someone he could have an interesting, easy conversation with, and have scorching hot sex. What more was there, really?

Ryan was silent.

'What?' Graham asked, sensing there was something else going on. 'Kill two birds with one stone?' he added.

'Which two birds and which stone? I never liked that expression. What if you don't want to kill the birds?'

'See you, of course, and Sam.'

'He went to your mum's plaque at the crematorium. I didn't know what to say. When he said that.'

Change of subject, but okay. 'Listening's good. When did he go?' Graham asked.

‘Few days ago. That Saturday morning when we were at your place.’

Getting hot and sweaty in his bedsheets. Graham grinned at the memory. He wanted it again. A few days after seemed like a reasonable time to wait for this call. ‘Is that a yes? Or we could do something else? I can always catch Sam another time. I thought you’d like to see us both together, kill...Make the most of your time.’

There was silence.

Clearly Ryan was not on board with this suggestion. ‘Unless you want to come round mine again?’ He looked about his apartment. It was roomy, plenty of space for him. Probably a touch small for two people, if he and—He stopped that thought. He was definitely getting ahead of himself.

‘Probably better,’ Ryan said, ‘if we go to yours.’

‘Okay.’ That was something at least. ‘Is there something wrong? Don’t you want to meet?’

‘It’s not that.’ There was uncertainty in Ryan’s tone.

What is it then? ‘Right.’ This was like getting blood out of a stone. ‘I thought we could go to a club maybe?’

‘Could do.’

‘If I text you the details, we can talk when we see each other.’ Graham realised he wasn’t going to get much more out of Ryan today. For whatever reason.

‘When? I can’t do tonight. I’m working tomorrow.’

So was Graham, but he didn't want to labour the point. 'Saturday?' It would be a week since they'd last seen each other.

'Could do.'

Again, with that phrase. There was something wrong with Ryan, and in this mood, he was unlikely to explain why. He'd probably just say it was nothing. Even so, Graham's patience was wearing thin. 'If you don't want to meet, just say.' And I'll do something else with my time. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

'I'd like you to come to mine. It's just...I need to do a few things first.'

That was better, Graham grinned in relief. 'Don't worry if it's not tidy, or clean. I'm coming to see you. And Sam of course.'

'Can I call you later? I need to go.' There was an urgency in his tone, an undercurrent of worry too.

'Of course.' Graham said, and before he could say goodbye the call ended. Ryan had really wanted to end the conversation. Graham stared at the phone. There was definitely something a bit off with Ryan, but he didn't know what or why, and felt pretty sure even if he'd asked, Ryan wouldn't have told him.

Graham checked his calendar, then spent the day shopping online for a few clients, sending them links with suggestions of how to mix and match the clothes to create their new looks, then at lunchtime, Graham ate healthily; a vegetable smoothie and some body bulking mix made into a sort of milkshake, making up for the steak and chips at the weekend. Then, deciding he hadn't been for far too long, he spent the afternoon in the gym.

While running on the treadmill, and rowing frantically, he sweated, became short of

breath and tried to work out what might be wrong with Ryan. If he definitely didn't want to see Graham again, he wouldn't have answered, or would have said no to meeting. So it wasn't that. Was it something to do with meeting at Ryan's place? Could it be to do with Sam maybe? He wanted to call his brother, tell him what had happened, except so far, it wasn't a thing. They'd spent a night together, and unless it became something, it was probably better to keep Sam out of it. Simpler. Maybe that was Ryan's issue, Graham decided, as he returned home, had a shower, prepared rice, chicken breast and steamed vegetables for dinner.

Call you back soon, ended up, in Ryan-speak meaning two days. Graham was arriving home from the gym, breathless and giving up hope of ever hearing from Ryan again.

'We could meet at your place?' Ryan said on the phone.

He'd clearly been thinking about it for a while, and seemed to need to blurt it out, without any preamble, hello, pleasantries. Graham walked up the stairs, the phone signal would dip out of he went in the lift, and he could do with more light cardio. He listened.

'Unless you want to go out properly?' Ryan asked. 'I really don't mind. Your place, a bar, or a club, as you said. Or dinner?'

So basically, anywhere but his place, Graham thought, wondering why. At his front door, Graham unlocked it, then walked in. 'Is there something you're not telling me about your place? You're not keeping a secret boyfriend there, are you?' He chuckled.

Silence.

Oh, interesting, maybe that was the truth. 'Look, if you're not into this then we don't

have to see each other again. It can just be what it was.’ Two men having scorching hot sex, who won’t see each other again. Or, given they had Sam in common, who’ll pretend it never happened if they meet in polite company. It wasn’t as if Graham hadn’t done a variation on those two options dozens of times before.

‘I want to meet. Just not at my place.’ A long pause, then: ‘I’ve not told Sam yet. Wasn’t sure...’

If it was worth telling him if we aren’t going to become anything? ‘Understood. Let’s have drinks in town, then go to a club.’

‘Great,’ finally he sounded as if he meant it.

Which made Graham smile. ‘How’s your week been?’

‘Good. Yeah. Busy. Good.’

Graham wanted to make the most of the slightly loosened up Ryan, but also didn’t want to run the risk of running out of things to say when they met. ‘Saturday night then. Anything else planned for the weekend?’ Deliberately added the else, implying Ryan’s other plans didn’t necessarily need to involve Graham.

‘Sam and I are going out Friday night. Hang out together on Saturday, PlayStation probably. He wants to test drive a car, in the name of research for work. I’m not convinced. I think he just wants to try it out. That is, if he’s not dragged away by whichever woman he’s knocking about with at the moment.’ Ryan chuckled nervously.

‘Is he? He’s not told me,’ Graham said.

‘Could be. Always is. Off and on. Nothing serious.’

‘Right.’ Clearly Sam didn’t tell him everything either. Which, although they were close, Graham had always believed to be true; it was hearing about Sam’s casual knocking about with women that had Graham curious.

‘Anyway, I’d better let you go. See you Saturday in town.’ A long pause, and Ryan didn’t end the call. ‘Looking forward to it.’ Then he hung up.

That felt a bit better, Graham decided. He hadn’t realised his little brother was such a ladies’ man. He supposed they didn’t talk about that side of things to each other. Not because Sam was homophobic, or he didn’t want to hear about the men in Graham’s life, whether for one night, or one year, or Graham wasn’t interested in the women in Sam’s life, however serious. It was just that they talked about other stuff. Mostly their mum, until recently. Briefly, Graham wondered what he and Sam would have to discuss, now their mum was gone.

Stupid thought. They had plenty of other things in common.

On Saturday, Graham was standing in a bar in Soho, smart jeans and shirt, best box-fresh white trainers, his body sprayed liberally with his favourite eau de toilette, face smoothly shaved. He’d started the runup to getting ready at just after lunchtime. Stupid really. After going to the gym, he wanted to get that in for the weekend, as he didn’t know how much time he’d have tomorrow for gym-going. He then tried the new shirt he’d bought, he hadn’t bought it just for tonight, he told himself, but simply because he wanted a new one, deserved a treat, for working so hard of late.

Graham checked the time, and Ryan was due soon. He expected Ryan to be late, or to not turn up maybe. That would really tell Graham what he meant. It would give him the signal this was pointless. It was what it was and that was all it would ever be.

Graham, running his own business, acting as the CEO of his own life, didn’t need a man, his happiness was definitely not dependent on someone else. Especially not a

man. Definitely not one specific man. Absolutely not Ryan. Definitely not him, above all the other men he'd known. Graham was spinning out of control with these unhelpful thoughts.

Get a grip! He swallowed, debated getting another drink. He'd had one premium gin and slimline tonic, just ice and a slice of lime remained in the glass. Might as well get another, it would be something to do with his hands. Leaving his jacket on the chair, he went to the bar, ordered another drink, knowing he was surely destined to finish it alone, then go home. Alone.

'All right?' The voice was behind him. Deep, quiet, confident, meaningful.

Ryan.

A smile spread across Graham's face as he turned. Ryan was early. Not only was he there, but he was there early. 'I didn't think—' Graham said, but was stopped.

Stopped by Ryan's kiss, pressing against his own lips, Ryan pushed his bulky body against Graham's, his fingers were in Graham's waistband, pulling them closer, chests touching, hips grinding, groins rubbing. It was a hungry, open-mouthed, needful kiss.

It seemed to take Graham's breath away, as the worries from before dissolved, instantly forgotten.

Ryan pulled back, his eyes wide and a big grin on his face. 'Didn't think what?'

Graham shook his head, looked away, tried to compose himself. 'You're here. I've...' Not missed you, that sounded a bit desperate. Glad you're here...what should he say that showed he was pleased to see Ryan but didn't seem too teenaged-crush-like?

‘I’ve missed you,’ Ryan said, pulling Graham in for a hug, big strong arms encircled Graham’s waist, as he pulled him closer.

Could have fooled me, was on the tip of Graham’s tongue, but he decided not to voice it. Wanted to lean into the now instead. ‘How was Sam and the test drive?’

Ryan ordered the same drink as Graham, putting his arm around Graham’s shoulder. ‘Where are you sitting?’

Graham nodded to the chair in the corner.

With their drinks, they sat at Graham’s table.

Ryan talked about his day with Sam and he came alive with enthusiasm. He described the car, electric and very expensive, and how they’d both driven it. Sam, pretending he wanted to buy it, when he couldn’t have afforded it. Ryan added, ‘Dad’s got one. So, I know what it’s like. Not to drive though.’

‘Did you learn lots of stuff you can apply to your work?’

Ryan nodded. ‘More questions to ask. We hung around in the showroom afterwards, listening to what customers were talking about. It was like a focus group, on the down low.’ Ryan laughed, clearly more relaxed now they’d had a few rounds of drinks.

‘What?’ Graham asked, enjoying himself, relaxing into the evening, the worries of earlier in the week were long gone.

‘The salesman asked if we had children, and did we want to try the SUV version.’ Ryan laughed again.



‘SUV?’ Graham asked, feeling slightly out of his depth subject-wise, him not knowing much about cars at all, but knowing this was important to Ryan. Enjoying seeing the enthusiasm on Ryan’s face. Hearing how he and Sam spent their time together.

‘Sports utility vehicle. One of the big ones that’s high up.’

‘Like a four by four?’

‘Kinda.’ Ryan showed him a picture on his phone.

‘They thought you two had children? Together?’ Graham asked.

‘I know, funny, right?’ Ryan laughed; a little bit too hard actually. ‘I told him we weren’t. It’s because we gave the same address. He assumed...’

Seemed fair enough. ‘And you put him straight?’

Ryan became very serious. Nodded. ‘I explained we were friends. Sam said his girlfriend wasn’t interested in the car thing, so he’d come with me.’

Girlfriend, this was news to Graham. Then he remembered that a girlfriend may constitute anything from a very relaxed brief acquaintance, to someone he’d been dating for some time, for his brother. ‘You told him you were gay, though, right?’

Ryan shook his head, sipped the last of his drink through a straw. ‘Another one, or are we going?’ He stood, looking about the bar.

Graham frowned. Not only had Ryan not told Sam he was seeing Graham, he’d not even told Sam that he was gay, or bi. ‘You’ve not told Sam, have you?’

‘Nothing to tell.’

‘Not about me.’ Graham didn’t want to say, ‘us’ since it was too early for an ‘us’ so he stuck to Ryan himself. ‘About you.’

‘What about me?’

‘Are you going to tell anyone?’

‘Don’t see what it has to do with them.’ Ryan nodded towards the door. ‘Shall we do one? How far’s this club?’

Graham finished his drink, followed Ryan outside. He couldn’t believe this. What was Ryan afraid of? In the club, in Kings Cross, in a converted warehouse around the back of the station, Graham was trying to work out how to ask Ryan the same question, but in a cleverly different way, in the hope he’d actually answer. He handed their jackets into the cloakroom, while Ryan was buying drinks.

They met by the bar. ‘He won’t give a shit, you know,’ Graham said.

‘Who?’ Ryan asked.

‘Sam. He loves you whatever.’

‘I know.’ Ryan looked straight ahead, trying to catch the barman’s attention.

‘He’s never cared about me being gay. Didn’t even discuss it. I was out at sixteen and he was six.’

‘I see. Yeah, he mentioned it.’ Ryan nodded.

‘He’s never known me to be not out. Can’t remember it.’

Ryan nodded.

They held their drinks, then were soon dancing on the edge of one of the dancefloors. Ryan seemed distracted, looking from side to side, sipping his drink nervously. He left for the toilets.

Graham continued dancing, unable to shift an unanswered question from his mind. It was irritating him like a shop display with a poorly folded T-shirt on a table surrounded by others that were perfectly arranged.

Ryan returned, still looking from side to side. He checked the time. ‘When does this place shut?’

‘Five am. Why? Have you had enough?’

‘Five seems late though, right?’ He put his arms around Graham, kissed his cheek. Into his ear, Ryan whispered, ‘I’ve had enough of other people. Do you want to continue the party at your place? Just us two.’

It was a cheesy line, but it made Graham smile. It worked, because he nodded. ‘Coats?’

“Roar” by Katy Perry began to play. The dancefloor filled.

Ryan nodded. ‘It’s your song!’

Graham had reclaimed it, from being a sad breakup story, to being a strong, moving on up and shipping on out anthem. ‘It’s a joyful romp of a pop song, and I. Love. It,’ he said.

Ryan nodded. 'Whatever you say!'

They danced, singing along together. Graham hadn't felt this happy in ages. Years possibly. Dancing with Ryan, enjoying themselves, and everything seemed almost perfect. He brushed away the slight niggling thought that kept returning.

They finished their drinks, collected coats, and were soon in a taxi, on their way to Graham's place.

Ryan was very clear what he wanted, once they were in the taxi, kissing Graham, squeezing the lump in his jeans, licking his ear, kissing his neck, whispering how horny he was, and couldn't wait to get home.

Not wanting to ruin the vibe, and undeniably Graham felt the same, he went along with it. At his place, they left the taxi, the lift taking them up not quickly enough for Ryan, who put his hands down Graham's trousers, desperately grabbing and holding and squeezing him.

'There's CCTV,' Graham stepped backwards. 'I live here. I've got to look the security guy in the eye when I see him on Monday.'

Ryan's eyes went from desire to pleading and he held his hands up in surrender, stepping back and leaning against the lift's far wall.

Once in Graham's place, Ryan asked for music, and they danced, undressing each other, Graham paused to lower the blinds. Obviously too keen to wait until they went to the bedroom, Ryan sat on the sofa, with Graham straddling him, facing each other, as Ryan pulled on their stiff cocks, slicking them with his spit, making eye contact with Graham, until, too soon, at the same time, they came, white spurts erupting up their chests.

Ryan fell backwards, catching his breath and Graham climbed off, lying on his back, wiping them with his underpants from the floor.

Now that Ryan was de-spunked, Graham hoped he'd be able to get more of a coherent conversation out of him. He stood. 'Water, coffee, beer? Or bed?'

Ryan yawned, lay down on his back on the sofa, looking every bit as magnificent as the first time Graham had seen him naked.

Graham brought water back from the kitchen, took Ryan's hand, and led him to the bedroom.

Before Graham could formulate what to ask, Ryan was sleeping next to him.

Part of Graham didn't want to pick at this worry. Thought he ought not pull at that loose thread that was niggling him. They'd had a great evening, and tomorrow morning too would be wonderful. But the barrier Ryan seemed to put around Sam, and by extension, his own heart, about who he was, bothered Graham. He thought they lived in a time when people could be themselves, live their lives how they wanted, without worry. Didn't they?

The next morning, Graham awoke and Ryan wasn't next to him. He hoped Ryan hadn't left. 'Hello!'

No answer.

Graham slipped on his dressing gown, walked to the lounge, dining room, kitchen.

Ryan wore only his bright yellow designer underpants and was resting his elbows on the worksurface, fiddling with the toaster. He turned, looking every bit as handsome as a professional underwear model. 'I wanted to make toast. But this toaster is

actually more complicated than the car I drove yesterday.' He smiled.

Graham's heart melted and he approached. Was he really going to spoil all of this to ask Ryan why he hadn't come out to Sam, or anyone else? Graham held Ryan's hands then kissed him. 'Morning.'

'You look like you're about to say something,' Ryan said, staring at him and stepping away from the toaster.

Graham shook his head. 'Nothing.' He sorted out the toast, then made them coffee in the machine. Why should he ruin what was shaping up to being a perfect morning by asking that?

He shouldn't. So, he didn't.

After a lazy breakfast, they showered, which of course, led to more sex, all the sex Graham could ever want: Graham stood with his hands pressed on the wall, Ryan behind him, joined, as one, kissing his back, reaching around with one hand, grabbing, stroking, while he powerfully thrust deep inside Graham, fast, then slow, nearly separating their bodies, then returning, deeper, teasing with his tip, then more, until he was all the way in, while Ryan was kissing his neck, Graham turning, so their lips met, and they climbed, higher and higher, faster and faster, until together they reached the peak.

Afterwards, they dozed in bed, clean and dry, Ryan on his back, with Graham curled up, resting his head on Ryan's chest, stroking the hair on his stomach. Soft contentment and satisfaction flooding Graham's body, wondering what he'd done to deserve this, wishing they could remain like this, forever. Contained in their own world, of only Ryan and Graham in his apartment, where nothing outside existed or mattered.

Pure bliss...

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

The next week, Ryan was meeting Sam for their lunchbreak. He'd told Sam it was to ask about the woman he was supposedly seeing, which Sam hadn't mentioned before. But really Ryan wanted to have a go at actually, properly telling Sam, explaining what was happening between him and Graham, and...well, in doing so, come out to Sam too.

They sat on a bench in a park. Other office workers sat on the grass, reading, staring at their phones, eating, chatting in small groups.

They ate their stuffed baguettes in silence for a while, sitting close to each other. They got the usual 'all right?' questions out of the way, both confirming they were fine.

'How's work?' Ryan asked, it seemed like a safe topic to start with.

'I told my boss what the people said in the showroom that weekend.'

'What did he say?'

'They're testing something similar, so he's asked me to work with the person in charge on questions to ask potential customers. I hope they don't want me to actually ask them.'

'You could watch, though, right?'

'Perching in the corner, I don't think so.'



‘One way glass. You sit in a room with the rest of the team. Watch the focus group guy doing his thing through the glass.’

‘Woman. She’s called Sally. Has been running their focus groups for years. Decades.’

‘Nice.’ Ryan nodded. Talking of women... ‘Is she pretty?’ It felt as good a way as any of introducing the topic.

‘In a sort of MILF way, you mean?’

Ryan shrugged.

‘Not bad. Why? You want to be the other side of the one-way glass too?’

Ryan shook his head. ‘What’s happening with that girl you’re seeing?’

‘She’s all right. Why? Do you fancy her?’ Sam chuckled.

‘I’ve not met her.’

‘Right. Why then?’

‘Interested. Something to talk about.’ Ryan shrugged.

‘She’s older than me. I think I like that. Kinda knows what she wants. Even if I don’t. So that’s at least fifty percent sorted.’

‘What does she want?’ Ryan asked, thinking this ought to be interesting.

‘She’s not said, but she shows me by what she wants to do together. We saw some performance art; wasn’t as bad as I thought. Went to an art gallery; some of it was

kinda cool. Stuff like that. She definitely wants kids; talks about spending time with her nieces and nephews and invites me to join her next time.'

'And you, do you want children?'

'Eventually, yeah. Not yet though. Plenty of time for that.'

They nodded.

'Do you want kids?' Sam asked. 'Being a bit older than me, I wondered...'

'Hadn't thought of it. Eventually yeah. Maybe when I turn thirty, I'll start taking stuff a bit more seriously. Proper grown up. Mum and Dad had me and Sophie by the time Dad was my age. Can't imagine being a dad now.' It wasn't just that he wasn't sure who he'd want to make a family with, it was also that Ryan didn't know if he even wanted a family. Or if he'd focus on work instead. Or dogs and cats. Whatever, he wasn't sure he'd follow the well-trodden path of his parents.

'How was your night at the club? Where did you go, you didn't say?'

Ryan hadn't said because if it was a gay club, it would raise questions he didn't want to answer. Graham hadn't told him beforehand, which was better to avoid needing to lie to Sam. 'Good. Plenty of room to dance.' And lots of men dancing on tables with their tops off. It was nice to be able to kiss Graham there, relaxed, not thinking about who might see. But it had been pretty full on. Men sucking face with other men on the dancefloor. Lots of blokes looking them up and down. One had stared at his chest, when Ryan had removed his T-shirt, as it was so hot. The toilets had a lot of activity in the cubicles that Ryan had tried his best to ignore. It was very...gay.

'It was a group, you went with, wasn't it?'

That was the first big lie he'd told Sam. Inventing a group of colleagues who'd convinced Ryan to go clubbing. Both of those were almost as unlikely as Ryan giving up Apple and moving to Android. But Sam had seemed to accepted it. Guilt lodged itself in Ryah's throat. He nodded.

'If you go again, do you reckon I could come? I used to go clubbing all the time at uni. We both did. But it's harder only being able to do it at weekends, now we've got work. Don't know where is good. If I'm only going once or twice a month, I don't want to go somewhere that's shit.'

'Yeah. I reckon we can arrange that.'

'Unless it was shit.'

'It wasn't.' It really wasn't. Once he'd become used to the very gay vibe, he'd started to enjoy it. Being surrounded by men similar to himself, being able to blend in, do whatever he wanted, was liberating, freeing. Kissing and dirty dancing with Graham had been pretty good fun too...

'Where did you stay?'

This was the harder part, the morning after, Ryan had been vague, said the friends wanted to do something together on Sunday, so he'd stayed at their place. Which made it sound like they all lived together, like in a student house. The problem with making up a group of colleagues was Ryan couldn't keep track of who they were, where they lived, or what they did. Which made telling Sam about it even more difficult.

'Somewhere by the river. High up. Amazing views across the water.'

'Where?'

‘Don’t know. Got a cab. But there was this big old ship on the other side of the Thames.’

‘Cutty Sark? That’s near where Graham lives.’

‘Could be.’

There was silence. Ryan almost said, ‘I was with your brother,’ but didn’t. Instead, he said, ‘Do you think it’s serious, with this girl?’

‘Could be.’ Sam shrugged.

‘Do you want it to be?’

Another shrug. ‘I don’t know when I’ll want it to be.’

‘I think you’ll just know. If you don’t know, that’s probably a soft no.’

‘She’s definitely not a hard no. Could be a hard yes. Early days.’ Sam shrugged. ‘Says you, who’s never dated anyone.’

‘Except at uni.’

‘Was she a hard no, or a soft no?’

‘She decided before it mattered what I thought,’ Ryan said, with a touch of sadness in his tone.

‘Regrets?’

Ryan shook his head. ‘Like a blunt pencil.’

‘What?’

‘Pointless.’ Just like regretting what had happened in the lifeguard’s car. You move on. Carry on with your life. Always moving forwards, like a car on a motorway. Leaving stuff like that behind. In the past.

‘Next time she comes round, I’ll tell you so you can meet her. Never know, you might end up being my best man if we get married.’

‘Could that be on the cards?’

Sam shrugged. ‘Like I said, unsure. See how it goes. Theoretically, would you be my best man?’

‘Obviously.’ Ryan would think it an honour and a privilege.

There was a long silence.

‘You know you can tell me anything, don’t you?’ Sam asked.

Ryan nodded. ‘Same for you.’

Another silence. They had finished their baguettes. Sam offered Ryan some of his crisps.

Ryan took them, crunching away in thought. Tell him, tell him, tell him.

‘Have you done the big wedding outfit thing for your mum, with Graham, I mean?’ Sam asked. ‘He’s looking forward to it.’

‘Is he? How do you know?’

‘He told me. We talk. Not as much as when Mum was alive. It was daily then. Kinda miss it. Although most was about her. But we’d slip in other stuff too.’ A long silence and then: ‘Funny how we get used to one thing, and then it changes and then there’s something else to get used to.’

Ryan agreed. ‘Right.’ Tell him, tell him, tell him.

Another silence.

Sam checked the time on his phone. ‘I’d better get back.’ He stood.

Ryan stood. They hugged.

Sam patted his back as always. ‘See you tonight. Unless you’re out with your new friends?’

‘See you later.’ Ryan waved, knowing it was too late to tell him now.

Sam walked to the edge of the small park, through the gates, crossed the road, towards his office.

Shit, shit, shit! Why had he totally failed to tell Sam? The conversation about the girl Sam was seeing, relationships, serious or otherwise would have been perfect. But Ryan couldn’t. His throat had stuck. He couldn’t say the words. He knew Sam wouldn’t care, but Ryan would. It wasn’t just admitting to himself what he was, what he might be. But that it was with Sam’s brother.

Awkward. Like they might end up as brothers-in-law. Or something.

Ryan returned to his desk, started some research on competitors to Soleil, but couldn’t focus. He tried to think if a message was a better way to tell Sam that he was

sort of seeing Graham. He started writing an email, off and on, for most of the afternoon. He wrote and rewrote it, should he use the word gay, or curious, or leave it out altogether? Should he simply say he had been with Graham at the weekend. That he hoped to be with Graham again that weekend. He could let it speak for itself, without needing to say the actual words dating, or gay.

At six, he finished the desk research report, then reviewed his draft email to Sam: Hi Sam,

With a groan, he deleted it.

Ryan was at his dad and Matt's place, a roomy house in a nice London suburb. It had off street parking, a large bay window, an enormous back garden.

Matt had let him in, hugged him, kissed his cheek. He'd always done this. Said it was what he always did to people he cared about. It used to make Ryan feel at ease, at Matt's expression of kindness. But today it felt awkward, scratchy, a little annoying, perhaps a touch too much.

Ryan had never found Matt attractive. Quite apart from the fact he was married to his dad, he was the wrong build for Ryan to find attractive, and his mannerisms, his confidence about being very obviously gay, had Ryan envious, rather than lustful.

Matt perched on the stool by the kitchen island. 'Your dad's doing a phone interview about something. He'll be here soon. What's new with you? What's it like being in the big scary world of work?'

Very easy, compared to the life Matt had experienced before meeting Grant. 'I was telling Sam I want to go clubbing again, but when it's only weekends, all the nights we used to go to aren't an option. Going out mid-week is a hard no.'

‘Sure? Soft drinks all night, leave at 2am, in bed by three, still get six hours’ sleep. I used to do it all the time.’

‘Were you working in an office?’ Ryan was pretty sure he knew the answer.

‘Strictly speaking, no.’ Matt smiled. ‘I’m sure you’ll get into a new routine once you’re settled in the job.’

Ryan hoped so too. ‘It’s a lot, you know? The job and the scheme, and getting our own place. It’s not like being at university.’

‘Isn’t that the main point, though?’ Matt asked.

Ryan’s dad arrived in the kitchen, looked from one man to the other. ‘What is the point?’

Matt explained.

Ryan felt he should justify himself, not sound like too much of an ungrateful spoilt child. Since he hoped he was neither now. He admitted he had been before. ‘I’m not complaining. I’m glad not to be at uni. It’s just...’ How would he explain it?

‘Why do we have the fortune of you gracing us with your presence?’ his dad asked. ‘If it’s about your mum’s wedding, I’m very happy for her.’ He looked at Matt. ‘Aren’t we?’

Matt nodded. ‘Very. Deliriously so. I’m sure Dave will scrub up nicely.’

Grant shot him a look. ‘Careful.’

Matt made a zipping motion across his lips. ‘Sorry.’



‘It’s about that actually,’ Ryan began, ‘the person who Mum’s hiring to style her fiancé...’ He looked at the floor.

‘How did Julia get him? I want him to be honest. Can we have him do us a joint session?’ Matt asked Grant.

Grant said nothing. Turned to Ryan. ‘He’s doing a session for the wedding party, isn’t he? Julia said. Sort of a buy-one-get-one-free.’

‘Except he is charging,’ Matt corrected.

Grant shrugged, nodded at Ryan. ‘Go on.’

He’s the reason I’m here. He’s the reason I need to tell you something about myself I didn’t know until I met him. It sounded ridiculous in his head. Which was why Ryan didn’t say it. ‘Yeah, I’m thinking of having a session with him.’ On his kitchen floor. In his bed. Up against the wall in the shower.

‘Is that wise?’ Grant asked, ‘I thought you weren’t awash with money.’

Ryan’s mouth fell open. His last-minute bailing on the reason he was here had left him somewhat adrift explanation-wise. ‘I’m fine thanks very much,’ he snapped a little unkindly, he immediately realised.

‘I suppose he’s giving you a discount,’ Matt added. ‘Since you’re friends with his brother.’

Grant frowned. ‘Rewind. What?’

‘Graham’s brother is Sam,’ Grant said. ‘My friend Sam.’

‘I liked him,’ Grant said. ‘Nice lad. Very polite. Grateful. No bother.’

‘You make him sound like a puppy,’ Matt said with a laugh.

‘Don’t be rude about my friend,’ Ryan snapped.

‘Only joking.’

Grant said, ‘He had a difficult family situation. Spending it with us was a break.’

‘With you, Julia, Ryan and Sophie?’ Matt asked. ‘You’re hardly ordinary.’

‘We were a bit more ordinary then,’ Grant added.

‘Fair enough,’ Matt said with a shrug. ‘Can you see if he’d do us a friends and family discount?’

Ryan nodded; glad they’d moved off the topic slightly.

Matt went on, ‘He’s very hunky, isn’t he? Graham whathisname. If I wasn’t very happily married, I would want him to restyle me in all sorts of directions. Very hard indeed.’ He smirked.

Matt talking about Graham like that made a strange feeling surge in Ryan’s stomach. Was it jealousy? Or anger maybe? Or something about how he didn’t think Matt would be Graham’s type. Why did that matter anyway? As Ryan tried to make sense of it, he said nothing.

‘So, you came here,’ Grant said, ‘to tell us you’re using Mum’s personal shopper yourself?’ He frowned. ‘Couldn’t you have sent a message?’

‘You said you wanted to see more of me.’

Grant hugged him. ‘I did. Sorry.’

But suddenly, Ryan felt very stupid. Really foolish and childish. Why did he think he could do this? Tell them just like that? When he wasn’t sure himself what he thought or felt. It was weird enough with Matt being here, since this felt very personal, and something, now Ryan thought about it, he’d want to tell his dad first. Never mind the fact that, similar to his dad, he hadn’t realised before now that he was gay. If he was saying he was gay, that was. No. Abort, delete, retreat, rethink the strategy.

Ryan stood. ‘I’m going. Thanks.’ He walked to the door.

There was some talking in the kitchen. Then his dad joined him by the door, concern on his face. ‘Why did you really come? Tell me. Please.’

Ryan shook his head. ‘I said.’ He bit his bottom lip. He really wanted to say something, but didn’t want to hurt his dad’s feelings.

‘Just say it,’ Grant said.

Quietly, he said, ‘Why does he always have to make everything about how much he fancies someone? You can’t talk about any men without him passing comment.’

Grant frowned. ‘It doesn’t bother me. I know it’s all for fun. It’s only Matt being himself. It never used to bother you.’

Because before, Matt hadn’t been talking about someone Ryan had feelings for, who he’d been with. Someone who made Ryan question who he was. The confidence with which Matt discussed men he found attractive was enviable. He’d always done it, only now it upset Ryan; he envied it of Matt. He wasn’t going to say that it had worn

thin, that he found Matt a bit much, because that wasn't fair. Or the whole truth. 'It's better if I go.' Ryan opened the door.

'Don't go in the middle of an argument. Stay. Let's talk it out.' Grant pleaded with him.

Ryan shook his head, left. There was nothing to discuss. Not that Ryan could put into words anyway.

On his way home, his mum called.

He answered using hands free.

'I'm worried about you,' she said.

'What's Dad said?'

'You visited today, and didn't seem yourself. Stormed out. Something about Matt and Graham. He doesn't understand.'

Neither did Ryan now he thought about it. 'I wanted to tell Dad something positive. Not always turn up asking for money.'

'Tell me instead. What's good in your life at the moment?'

'You know when you meet someone and they make you see things differently? Make you want to be a better person?'

'Yes. Are you dating?'

'Not quite yet.'

‘So, there’s a someone?’

He nodded. The word yes formed but caught in his throat.

‘Is that a yes?’ she asked.

He mumbled in the affirmative.

‘I’m so happy!’

‘I don’t know if it’s anything. It probably isn’t. But for the first time in forever, it might be. They want to see me again. I want to see them. We connected.’

There was a long silence, then Julia asked, ‘Is it Graham?’

Another interminably long silence, as Ryan’s mouth fell open. Where had she got that from?

‘Aha!’ she said. ‘That’s not a no, which means it’s probably a yes. I knew something had happened.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s been so happy when we spoke. Like he’s walking on sunlight. The happiness shines out of him. I asked if he had someone special. He said it was the relief at his mum’s death, then felt guilty for saying it. I told him grief was complex. Same as love.’

Ryan swallowed.

‘Is this what you wanted to tell your dad?’ Julia asked.

‘I don’t want to put a label on it. Us. Me. But since we’re all so open about this sort of stuff, in our family, I thought I ought to be too.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘Relationships, our love lives, feelings, emotions, all that. You with Dave, Dad and Matt, Sophie and that bloke she’s seeing.’

‘I kept Dave quiet for twelve months. So don’t feel you have to go public with you and Graham just yet. It can put a lot of pressure on a relationship.’ She paused. ‘I would ask if I could meet him, but I know him. Which makes this perfect. All kinds of perfect.’

‘Can you not tell Dad please?’

‘Have you told Sam? Surely, he knows you’re dating his brother?’

‘I’ve not told him.’

‘But he’ll know soon though, won’t he?’

‘Not from me he won’t.’

‘Come on. There comes a point when it’s impossible to keep a secret. I think you’re very close to that point. Given you live with Sam.’

‘I tried to tell him but couldn’t.’

‘Why?’ she asked. ‘Isn’t he your best friend?’

‘He is. But Sam and Graham are really close. Now they don’t have a mum, even

more so. I don't want Sam to think I'm encroaching on their relationship.'

'Would you like me to ask Graham to tell Sam?'

'Why would you get involved?'

'To help. Or not. What do you want me to do?'

Nothing. To not know. But that was impossible. That was the problem with secrets. Once you told someone, even if you swore them to secrecy, they still knew it. You couldn't unknow something. Even if you really wanted to.

'Nothing,' Ryan said, 'nothing. Please.'

'If you're sure,' Julia said, 'whatever you think best.'

Ryan nodded, swallowed. 'Yeah. Please.'

'I'll keep it to myself. But just to reassure you, I think everyone will be fine.'

'You think.' But you can't know.

'I'm pretty sure. Almost definite. Your dad will be happy for you. I'm over the moon. Sophie will be too. And Sam loves you, why wouldn't he be happy you're dating his brother, assuming Graham is happy to be your boyfriend?'

They hadn't described each other like that, hadn't given their relationship a status, other than 'it's complicated.' He told her.

'It will all be well in the end, trust me.' A pause, and then: 'I wish I could hug you, tell you to your face how you're making a mountain out of a molehill.'

‘Thanks.’ That molehill was his life; his identity, how others saw him, how he saw himself. It might feel like a molehill to others, but to Ryan it was his own personal mountain, and he didn’t know how he would climb it.

‘Love you,’ Julia said.

‘Love you too.’ Ryan ended the call. He needed to make another one now. Terror gripped him, his palms were sweaty and his throat dry, as his breathing went shallow. He felt as if he was about to climb Mount Everest, alone, without the right equipment. Ridiculous.

He rang the number. It went to voicemail. He left a message, then ended the call.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham was with a male client, shopping for business attire. He waited for the man to leave for the changing room, to try on another suit.

Graham checked the voicemail from Ryan: 'I'm really sorry, I can't come to the wedding clothes session. You'll have to do it without me.'

No explanation. After the last time they'd seen each other, it seemed to come out of the blue.

The client approached, wearing a navy-blue suit, he held his hands out, pulled the jacket around his stomach. 'I don't think it works right for me.'

Graham had to focus on what he was doing now, so he put his phone in his pocket. 'Turn around, could you please? I'd like to see you from the back.'

The man did as asked.

'The legs are a bit long,' Graham said, 'but the jacket works.'

'Does it?' The client didn't sound convinced, but it was Graham's job to help him see that for himself.

They spent the afternoon together; Graham showed the client how much slimmer he looked in shirts and specially fitted and properly designed T-shirts instead of the baggy atrocities he'd been wearing. He convinced the client that it was unlikely he'd lose a third of his body weight since he was over forty and body metabolisms changed and he would be better off accepting it and buying clothes more appropriate

to his body shape and life.

Satisfied, and carrying bags of new clothes, the client thanked Graham, then left.

Relieved to be alone finally, Graham rang Ryan.

Surprisingly, Ryan answered: 'All right?'

'That's what I was just about to ask you,' Graham said.

There was a long pause, and finally Ryan said, 'You don't really need me there, do you? I'm not getting married. Surely, as long as you have Mum and Dave wearing something nice, plus Sophie, I can turn up in clothes that are safe and inoffensive. A grey suit, maybe?'

It was hardly the point. Graham bit his bottom lip. 'No big deal.' It wasn't, but it was more the signal it sent to Graham. That Ryan couldn't tell Sam and everyone else who he really was. That he wanted to keep Graham a dirty secret.

Quietly, Ryan said, 'Mum guessed.'

'Perceptive woman.' That was at least something.

'I asked her not to tell Dad.'

Not so good. 'Why?'

A long sigh from Ryan.

Graham went on, 'Years ago, I used to live with this guy; he had his own place and I was between homes, so moved in very quickly, it made sense. Perfect boyfriend.'

Mum was being very difficult and sad and he was fun. It was exactly what I needed to help me cope. Just us two. We did everything together, didn't bother meeting each other's friends, relatives nothing like that. Which sounds great, but when you get down to it, it's not. Because, eventually you've got to be a couple, you've got to be yourself with others. You can't stick in the stage when you're in bed all day, cutting the world out. Because it doesn't last and it's not real.'

'Right,' Ryan said, sounding unsure.

'I never met his parents, he said they were really old and had lost it, in a nursing home.'

'Sad,' Ryan said.

'So, I thought. Until one day they were coming to stay.'

'They got better?'

'He asked me to move out, stay with a friend. Took down all our photos of us together.'

'Oh.'

'He wasn't out. Never planned to tell them. So, our whole life was a secret.'

'I see.'

'I did, eventually. I moved out one time when his parents were visiting, and just never moved back. I decided if he really loved me, he'd introduce me to his parents. Tell them who I was, and therefore show them who he was too.'

‘Did he?’

‘Last I heard, he was doing the same thing with another boyfriend. He worried the shock would kill his parents.’

There was another long silence.

‘Think about it,’ Graham said, already feeling sure this was the beginning of the end of their relationship.

‘I understand, but I don’t think I can do what I need to do.’ Ryan ended the call.

Graham had thought it would be nice for someone to look after him for a change. Maybe it could be Ryan. That Ryan’s strong, together, confident persona had seemed too attractive; too good to be true, and only after knowing him longer did Graham see there was a scared man inside Ryan’s confident exterior. And now Graham saw that he shouldn’t have told Ryan about his mum, or tried to push him into telling Sam about their relationship. All those complications, emotions, messy human relationships, he knew now, were too much for the man whose parents had divorced and who’d struggled to admit to himself who he was, and ultimately, they must have scared Ryan away. Forever.

A few days later, Graham was at the wedding dress shop with Julia, Dave and Sophie.

‘I’m really sorry,’ Julia said, taking him to one side, and looking into his eyes with sadness, ‘but Ryan can’t be here today.’ She looked away, bit her lip. ‘He wanted to. But for some reason, he simply couldn’t.’

Graham shrugged. ‘He must be really busy with work and the gym and living independently.’

‘With Sam,’ she said, with emphasis.

‘I’m sure he’s keeping Ryan on the straight and narrow,’ Graham said, before he’d considered what that might imply.

Julia’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. She clearly wanted to say something, but had promised Ryan otherwise. Looking away, she said, ‘He’s not good with feelings, emotions. Likes to keep them shut away inside. I’m surprised he’s not had another crash.’

‘What?’ Graham asked.

‘The car was his seventeenth birthday present and he wrote it off near his eighteenth. We’d had a perfect family break, in one of those wonderful holiday villages, a little lodge hidden in the forest. He seemed to enjoy it. Then one day his behaviour changed; he seemed really uncomfortable with himself, with the holiday, with everything. I asked what was the matter and of course he said nothing. Shortly afterwards he had an accident, crashed the car. Seemed really angry or upset, or frustrated about something or other. He hadn’t been drinking, wasn’t speeding, it was as if he’d forgotten to turn the corner and the car ended up off the road.’ She made a face. ‘His quietness and moods, they all sort of blend into one over the years; I suppose it’s because we’re used to him. We never did get to the bottom of what happened.’

Graham let that sink in for a moment. If Ryan had a choice between fight or flight, he clearly preferred fight. But for some reason he hadn’t wanted to fight Graham, perhaps that was because of what had happened between them, so it had been flight instead.

‘Shall we see what dresses they have?’ Graham asked.

She had a faraway look in her eyes. 'Yes. That is why we're here after all.' She led the way back to the main shop floor.

There an assistant greeted them, checked their appointment details, then said, 'Are we doing suits too?' She looked at Dave.

Dave grimaced and shrugged, looking to Graham.

'I hoped you could,' Graham said to the shop assistant, focussing on the task in hand, and putting to one side why Ryan hadn't turned up. 'But if you're unable, then we can source them elsewhere. It's an overall coordinated look that we're aiming for with the wedding. All members of the bride and groom's close family should be in complimentary colours. If possible.'

She took Dave to one side, measuring his arms, chest, neck, waist and legs.

'He looks as if she's measuring him for a coffin,' Julia said, elbowing Graham gently.

'I think he'd be happier,' Graham replied then found another assistant to talk through Julia's wedding dress requirements.

Sophie had disappeared to try on tiaras, despite Julia saying she wasn't permitted one for the wedding.

'Just because, for me,' Sophie had said, then walked to an adjoining room filled with costume jewellery.

As they waited, Julia and Ryan were sitting next to each other, Julia said, 'If it puts your mind at rest, I don't think he'll have an accident this time.'

'No?'

She shook her head. 'Less angry and more scared, this time. As far as I can make out.' She looked him up and down, raising her eyebrows.

Does she know about us?

'I'm happy for you. Both of you,' she said, touching Graham's forearm and making eye contact.

She definitely knows. 'Right.' Graham raised his eyebrows.

'He didn't say anything; he didn't need to, I worked it out for myself. He must think I came down with the last shower. I told him, a mother knows.'

There was a long silence and Graham processed what this meant. Being out in the open felt better than keeping their relationship a secret. Finally, he said, 'Have you told anyone else?' He nodded towards where Sophie had disappeared to the changing room. 'Or Grant?'

She shook her head. Julia sighed, looking to the ceiling. 'First time.' She nodded.

'First time?' Graham asked.

'Feeling like this. So, he's running away.' She shrugged. 'Standard man, really.' She looked at him. 'Not all men, of course. But Ryan is pretty standard when it comes to feelings. Particularly when they're new. Firsts. Important. Life-changing perhaps...'

What was she trying to hint to him? That Ryan feeling this way about someone was a first? That he'd not felt this emotional about a man before? Surely not.

Sophie arrived, wearing one sapphire and diamond encrusted tiara, holding two others. 'What's life-changing?'

‘Nothing,’ Julia said, sharing another look with Graham, then turning to the rack of wedding dresses to the side.

That evening – once he’d chosen a wedding dress that definitely didn’t make Julia look like mutton dressed as lamb, in ivory, strapless, shapely around her hips, flaring into a fish tail and short train, with pearls shimmering in the light, then he helped Sophie with a head bridesmaid’s dress she liked, and sorted Dave out with a single breasted suit in light brown, accompanying light blue shirt and brown leather shoes – that somehow, much to Dave’s surprise seemed to make him look as if he’d lost a good stone or so – at home, Graham poured himself a drink and finally relaxed.

Should he call Ryan, tell him it wasn’t such a big deal, that his family were surely going to be happy for him? His mum was clearly okay, his dad too, Graham felt sure, would be supportive too, and Sophie, why on earth would she have a problem with it?

Or was it bigger than coming Ryan out to them? From what Ryan had said, he had never been in a serious relationship. Maybe watching his parents’ divorce had put him off all the romantic stuff like: forever, until death us do part, and big splashy romances with a capital R.

Sad.

Graham wasn’t sure he was that much of a romance with a capital R man himself, but he at least wouldn’t have minded giving it a try with Ryan. For the first time in his life, Graham had met someone he fancied, and who wasn’t mad, or weird, or creepy, or all three. Of course, Ryan had his quirks, everyone did, but he was, when it all came down to it, an ordinary, kind, interesting, handsome, charmingly awkward man, and now Graham considered that it was probably all over for them, he saw that was precisely what he’d needed in his life, all along.

Was it really too much to ask for someone to look after Graham, after all these years



of caring for others? And was it, maybe optimistic, naïve of him to wonder if big, handsome, manly, charmingly reserved and shy, man-mountain Ryan was the right man to do that?

Graham shook his head in confusion, poured more wine, the bottle was empty, strange that. He supposed it explained why he felt himself descending into melancholy as he twirled the glass between his fingers.

Yes, he decided, it was stupidly naïve to think Ryan and he had a future together. But it didn't stop him wondering it.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan had been waiting outside Graham's flat for some time. He knew it was a bit creepy, but he didn't want to have this chat over the phone. He wanted to, no, he needed to see Graham. Tell him in person. Look him in the eyes when he spoke.

Graham walked outside the building, pulled his key from his pocket and put it in the door.

Ryan jumped out of his car and ran towards him.

'How long have you been there?' Graham asked gently.

Long enough to read dozens, of reviews about all the new improved features of the new iPhone and decide he needed to buy one tomorrow. 'Not long,' Ryan said, looking at the ground.

'If you're dumping me, you needn't have bothered coming here,' Graham said with a carelessness to his tone.

This wasn't what Ryan had expected. Hurt, regret and pain mixed and flooded through him. 'I'm sorry—'

'Save your breath.' Graham held his hand up in a stop gesture. 'If you're not ready to come out, you're not ready. I'm not going to force you to do it. But I won't be a secret. Not again.' Graham shook his head.

'Did you get the outfits?'

‘I’m sure your mum’s told you. You’ve not come here to discuss wedding dresses and Dave’s suit.’

He wasn’t wrong. Ryan looked at the ground, shuffling from one foot to the other uncomfortably. ‘Can I come in, please?’ Part of him wanted to get this over and done with as quickly as possible. The other part wanted to be back in Graham’s apartment, on his bed, in his shower, on the kitchen floor...

Graham shrugged. ‘If you want.’

Ryan held his forearm, looked into his eyes. ‘I do want.’ He wanted to do this properly, no matter how wrong it sounded, he at least owed Graham an explanation.

Graham opened the door, led them into the entrance hall, then into the lift. They stood in silence, people got in and out on the way up. It felt like time itself had stopped.

Graham opened his door, then stood in the kitchen, leaning on the worksurface, bending forwards slightly. The straightness of his back, the roundness of his buttocks, and the breadth of his shoulders, were all undeniably attractive to Ryan.

Was he doing this deliberately, Ryan wondered. Making Ryan see what he was missing, what he was throwing away? Or was Graham simply being at ease in his own home?

‘Drink?’ Graham asked, making himself a gin and tonic with a slice of lime.

‘Driving.’

‘Alcohol free gin?’ Graham stood by the open fridge.

‘Thanks.’

Graham made the second drink, then handed it to Ryan. They were standing in the kitchen, an enormous and obvious silence stretching between them. Evidently Graham wasn't going to talk as he had before. Now he was going to listen; make Ryan explain himself.

Ryan tried to get clear in his head all the reasons why he couldn't continue seeing Graham. He sipped his drink. 'Tastes like real gin.'

Graham nodded. 'That's the point, I believe.' He gave a brittle and brief smile.

Ryan swallowed, bracing himself. 'It's not about me coming out. It's because I can't give you what you want.' He stared at Graham.

'How do you know what I want? You've never even asked me.'

'What you went through with your mum, it must have been really hard. Bringing up Sam, like you were his dad. I'm really sorry but can't fix that for you.'

Graham shrugged. 'How do you know that's what I want from you?'

'Isn't it?' Ryan frowned in confusion.

Graham looked away, shook his head. 'I thought we were just having some fun. That's all I ever wanted from you.'

'Okay. But to be clear, when you say fun, you mean dating, relationship, moving in together, all that?'

Graham nodded. 'Maybe. Eventually. Probably. Why?'

Ryan shook his head. 'That's not for me. I can't.'

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘Same difference.’

‘One implies choice, the other doesn’t.’

Ryan sighed. ‘Their divorce nearly killed Mum and Dad. I can’t go through that myself, so I won’t. So, it’s won’t and can’t. Both. Same.’

Graham shrugged. ‘I can’t promise you I’ll never hurt you. I can’t promise you nothing will change in our lives. I can’t promise you we won’t change. But I can promise you I’ve never felt this way about someone. The hope. The caring. The lust. I want you.’ He coughed. ‘Wanted.’ Then staring at Ryan, Graham said, ‘Still do. Want you.’ He looked away. ‘But if I can’t make you feel the same way about me, then that’s it, I suppose.’

Ryan sighed; it seemed foolish of him, hearing it like that.

‘I had no marriage to aim for,’ Graham said, ‘I only knew Mum, alone, looking after us. Badly. Do you know the main reason for divorce?’

Ryan shook his head.

‘Marriage.’

Ryan frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I help brides and grooms find their perfect wedding outfit all the time. Sometimes it lasts, and sometimes it doesn’t. But if you don’t give it a chance, how can you know. People who aren’t married don’t divorce. But you’ve got to believe, in love, in forever, in hope, in romance. And unfortunately, you clearly don’t. I understand why.’

And that's fine.'

'Sorry,' Ryan said, and really meaning it.

'Don't apologise. It's not fine, it's shitty, that the first man I've wanted to do more than have sex with in, well, forever, doesn't believe in love. So, I'm stuck back with men who don't want love, and just want sex, and I can't be bothered with all that. I'd rather have a wank or a cold shower.'

'I wouldn't.'

Graham's eyes lit up. 'So don't.' His eyes seemed to say, pick me, choose me, love me.

But Ryan was frozen. His heart couldn't stand breaking up with Graham if they carried on dating. When they inevitably split up. So, he decided, it was simpler, safer, easier, to bail on the relationship now. Although his mother had been okay about him dating Graham, he still wasn't sure how he felt about saying he was gay, talking about it, with others. He was Ryan and that was all. And Ryan didn't date, because serious relationships always ended, if his parents' marriage couldn't last, what hope did he have? 'We can still be friends.'

Graham shook his head, had tears in his eyes. 'I don't need more friends. I've got friends coming out of my ears. I've got gym friends, work friends, gay friends, family friends, neighbour friends, straight friends. All kinds of friends. Some of them are only friends for one purpose, most of them I wouldn't tell my inner most worries to. A lot of them, I'm sure will drift away over the years, from changes in circumstances, location, life stage, and that's fine. I've got some friends I've known longer than you've known Sam. Some friends, I've had since before Sam was born. Nearly. First year of secondary school. Don't talk to me about friends. Everyone either wants to fuck me and leave, or never fuck me and stay around, until we drift apart. Well, I'm

sick and tired of it. I want—’

Ryan kissed him. There was a sadness to it, as they both knew it would their last kiss. A hunger, as Ryan opened his mouth, tasting Graham, dipping his tongue into the warmth of Graham’s mouth, pressing himself against Graham’s hard muscular body. Longing for them to be skin to skin, tasting more.

With a desperation Ryan hadn’t appreciated before, the fire Graham had lit in him reappeared instantly. He undid Graham’s trousers, pulled them and his underwear down, reaching down for Graham’s hard-on. Ryan needed this. He might not describe himself as homosexual, gay, but he was Graham-sexual, or man-dick-arse-sexual maybe...Whatever.

He’d missed this, all of his life until now. And now, after a lifetime of nothing much, of avoiding getting serious with women, or running from his feelings about men, he’d found a man who he needed like a starving man needed food, yet he couldn’t allow himself to take the next step, towards where could eventually mean forever, because he didn’t believe in that, and because marriage and relationships were for suckers.

Ryan unbuttoned Graham’s shirt, kissing his nipples, tracing a trail down his chest with his own tongue, the saltiness of Graham’s skin, the muskiness of his cock, were sending Ryan wild, as he knelt. Ryan’s erection was rock hard, straining for escape from his underwear.

He licked the tip of Graham’s hard-on, then, inhaling the musky scent, licking his lips at the shininess of Graham’s cockhead, he closed his eyes, opened his mouth and was about to take it inside his mouth.

He lunged forwards, expecting his mouth to be full, but met nothing.

Graham had stepped backwards, dressed, then ran into the bathroom, shaking his

head.

‘What?’ Ryan asked, banging on the bathroom door.

‘What do you think?’ Graham shouted from the bathroom.

The dull feeling of sadness mixed with knowing he’d made the right decision. It was the right decision to walk away, before they became too serious, before he developed feelings for Graham that were more than physical. The right decision wasn’t always the easy option, his dad had said. ‘Sorry. Can we talk?’ Ryan asked.

‘I’m all talked out. Can you just leave?’ There was a quiet sobbing from the other side of the door.

Ryan’s protective nature had him wanting to burst in, hold Graham tightly, kiss him and tell him everything would be all right. Just as Julia had done to Ryan, during the long, painful divorce. Except now, Ryan realised, with a dull sadness, as he left the apartment, stepped into the lift and then stood outside on the pavement, the great irony was that he was the one causing Graham all the pain, so he himself offering to comfort Graham would only make things worse.

Like he said, the right decision was to walk away, because he wasn’t gay, or bisexual, he was Ryan and Ryan didn’t do relationships with men, or women, or whoever. Because Ryan didn’t need co-dependency, smothering, or relationships, since he was perfectly happy on his own.

Perfectly, absolutely, wonderfully happy alone.

Wasn’t he?



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

A few months later, and Graham was at Claire's house, her little girl, Anna, had wanted to stay up late since Uncle Graham was there and he didn't come over nearly often enough, so it was all very exciting and quite a novelty.

They were eating what Claire had called a kid's supper, because it was comforting and nostalgic and she reckoned Graham needed both of those at the moment. 'And it's easy,' she'd said earlier.

To which he'd replied, 'That, I now realise, was my first mistake with R.' He'd taken to not using Ryan's name, instead preferring the initial, since it seemed less painful than hearing the name on his or others' lips, because inevitably he'd then remember their good times, their fight, and then their ending. Graham was resilient, but his heart couldn't have taken that much pain, so he'd done his best to forget he'd ever known R.

Just after the breakup, Sam had asked Graham what was wrong, and having noticed Ryan didn't seem to be himself, put two and two together and asked if the man who'd broken Graham's heart happened to be Ryan.

'Yeah,' Graham had said. 'It was R.'

'Wanna talk about it?' Sam asked.

Graham shook his head, there didn't seem any point, besides he didn't want to put Sam in-between family and friendship. 'Probably best for everyone if keep you out of it.' A pause and then: 'I'll get over it.'

At the time he'd thought he would, but months later, Graham still hurt and Sam had never mentioned it again, probably grateful for not being caught in the middle.

'You can stay up an hour later,' Claire said to her daughter now, 'but then you're going to bed. I need to talk to Uncle Graham about some things.'

'What things?'

'Adult things.'

'Have you got a boyfriend?' Anna asked him.

Graham blushed. 'I've got three.'

Anna's eyes widened. 'Three?'

To Claire, he said, 'And it's exhausting!' He threw his hands in the air in emphasis.

Claire said, flashing a look that implied no more while small ears are listening, 'Like I said, adult things.'

They finished their tea of fishfingers, chips, baked beans and potato waffles, and Graham looked at the empty bottle of wine. How had they finished all that so quickly?

Claire cleared the table, Anna sitting and talking to Graham, trying to find out about his three boyfriends. He didn't want to talk about them. Because if he told Anna he then wouldn't want to tell Claire and it was Claire who he needed to tell most. Instead, he said, 'They're all very different.'

'Show me a picture?' Anna asked.

Claire reappeared, carrying a Walls Viennetta on a plate, with a silver knife.

‘I used to love that as a kid. Mum never cooked, so it was a real treat.’

‘I think that’s the one thing your mum did right. Not cooking. It’s just an endless rotation of buying food, deciding what to eat, making food, clearing up the mess. Every. Single. Day.’ Claire shook her head. ‘Sit back in your place,’ she told Anna.

Anna stuck her bottom lip out, pouted briefly, then resumed her seat.

The slices were served, followed by seconds, and then, seeing there was only a tiny bit left, Claire said, ‘Might as well finish it off. Seems stupid to wrap that up.’

Graham flashed to the memory of a conversation he’d had with one of the men he was seeing last month, who’d said it wasn’t worth him wrapping it up by putting a condom on, since he’d run out, and besides he was taking medication to prevent certain infections. Graham had insisted, since whatever tablets they were, he was pretty sure they wouldn’t protect him against all infections, then after more discussion, he’d decided, upon second thoughts, he didn’t really fancy this bloke and he was going to stick with the original plan: celibacy. And he’d dressed and left the man’s place, once again, deleted the hookup apps on his phone, feeling old, unattractive, and hopeless.

‘Miles away,’ Claire said to him, tapping his nose with the silver serving knife.

He came to, shook his head, wiping the ice-cream off his nose. ‘I thought celibacy would be easier, you know. Simpler. That was the whole point of doing it.’

‘And isn’t it?’ Claire asked, licking the knife gleefully.

Graham shook his head. ‘Unfortunately, not.’

There was silence as Graham thought about the three men he was seeing and how he'd really gone all in with the dating side of things, and yet...

'What's a cellibit?' Anna asked.

'Time for you to go to bed,' Claire replied, leading her daughter away to her room.

There was some minor protests and shouting, mainly from Claire, as Graham cleared the table, tidied the kitchen, stacked the dishwasher and wiped down.

Finally, Claire arrived, red-faced, looking exhausted. 'Right, wine and boyfriends and celibacy.'

It had sounded more interesting earlier when they'd agreed Graham should come round. But now, full of food, and wine and feeling tired, he wasn't sure if he could be bothered. He told her. 'Besides, I'm fine. I'm really happy. Never happier. Relieved I'm not stuck with someone who's a new gay, doing all the stuff I did at sixteen. Who wants to go through all that again? Not me.' He shook his head in emphasis, mainly to convince himself he believed this.

Claire put her hands on her hips. 'I've just put Anna to bed, I'm looking forward to some juicy gossip and you're telling me you're wilting?' She shook her head. 'Disappointing. And no.' She led him from the kitchen into the lounge, opened more wine, poured it. 'Now, tell me.'

The wine was doing its thing, two or three more glasses over general chitchat and he felt his inhibitions about telling her his love life woes very much lowering. He started with a heart-felt apology for taking so long to arrange this evening. Texts and phone calls were definitely no substitute for this.

She agreed.

Then he ventured into why he was so down at the moment, the apps – some for hook ups, others for dating, the weirdos, the near misses, the putting yourself out there, the disappointments, the endless carousel of men. Not that she could be shocked. She'd heard pretty much everything to do with Graham's love life since becoming friends a decade ago. She was ten years older than him, and in some ways felt like a strange mix of a substitute mum, and an older sister. She was very happy with this.

She looked at him, eyeing up the full glass of wine. 'Stay. I said, stay. Sofa bed's yours.'

'I don't like to impose. You've got mum things to do tomorrow. I'm fine. I can look after myself.'

'I know you can. But sometimes, I think you could do with a bit of looking after yourself. And if I'm going to put my foot down about anything, it's going to be now, and about this. Stay.'

'I've not got my pyjamas, toothpaste, all that.' He realised it was clutching at straws, mostly to prevent himself getting more drunk and uninhibited and telling her what he knew had to be told.

Claire disappeared, then returned, holding a bag full of airline and hotel travel toiletries kits. 'I grab them when I'm travelling, if we go out to sea, visiting George.' She stared at him, lifted her glass. 'Tell me all.'

And so, with more reluctance at the start than by the end of the story, he did.

'Before R, I was happily celibate. I broke my self-imposed celibacy rule for R.' He coughed. 'But since him...well, I realised how much I missed sex. It's like my body woke up from a long sex-less sleep. So, the dating has been partly to slake that thirst, because, my god, was I thirsty.'

‘Understood. When George goes away, I get used to going without, but when he’s back...well, I remember how much I love it, him.’ She blushed.

Graham nodded. ‘That, pretty much. So, there’s the twinky student, who’s about twenty. He’s really cute. But we have no common reference points. I mentioned Erasure and he thought I meant deleting something.’

‘Picture?’

Graham showed her on his phone.

‘Cute.’

Graham shrugged. He knew he was supposed to say the twinky guy was cute, but he wasn’t handsome. Didn’t get his pulse rushing like he wanted. ‘He’s not very pleased about the celibacy side of things. Keeps nipping off to the loo for a quick wank. Takes ages in the shower if he stays over.’

Claire stared at him. ‘You’ve had him stay over your place and you’ve still not shagged him?’

Graham nodded. ‘Never wanted to.’ It made staying celibate easier, he admitted.

‘So why are you seeing him?’

‘Trying a few things out.’

‘Like?’

‘Whether I like being the older daddy of the relationship, by dating this younger twink. And so far, pretty much nope. Although he fancies me, and definitely sees me

as a daddy-type, I'm not into that whole scene; no judgement for others, but it just doesn't give me a kick, instead I feel as old as the hills and out of touch with young people.' Graham shrugged.

Claire rolled her eyes. 'Who's next?'

'There's the older guy, who's sort of big, like me, silvery grey hair, beard, well looked after. We talked about the gym. His running routine. He swims too. Looks very impressive in a pair of swimming shorts.'

'Picture please?'

'None of him are SFW, so I'd rather not.' Graham blushed.

'Come off it, I've seen everything before.'

Thinking back through his online dating, online hookups, and now this, he reckoned she probably had seen it all. Cautiously he showed her a picture of the older guy, posted to his dating profile – he stood in a pair of shorts – very tight, big thighs, and topless, silvery grey hair on his muscular chest.

'He shaves all that now,' Graham indicated his chest.

'How's he about the celibacy thing?'

'Very supportive. Said he'd rather save things up for the real thing, a proper big performance, balls-deep shag, rather than some quick flick of the wrist and then sleep. He'd aim for one or two of those a month, he reckoned.'

'And you'd be happy with that, would you?'

‘With him, or generally?’

Claire thought for a moment. ‘Either.’

Now it was Graham’s time to consider things. He shrugged. ‘I think we’re better off as gym friends. We don’t have much else to talk about really. We did go quite deeply into celibacy and he said he’d done it without really knowing when his last boyfriend had passed away and he’d just not wanted to...’

‘Passed away, as in died?’

Graham nodded. ‘So that was a bit of a conversation ender really. I was happy to listen to him telling me about his late boyfriend. Sad, but good that he felt able to open up and share that with me. Nice guy though. We said we’d have a drink together soon, but I don’t think we’ll ever date.’

‘You said three guys, what about the third one? And you’re not sleeping with any of them?’

Graham shook his head. ‘That’s kind of the point of being celibate.’ He’d decided to give all of that a rest. Having done just sex no relationship, then trying relationship with sex, he thought he’d go for the latter, without the sex, since he reckoned that was the bit making things complicated.

‘Is number three the one you really like?’

He wished. A long sigh. ‘He’s my age, so lots of cultural references shared. He’s a children’s entertainer in a holiday park. Loves kids. Loves animals. Plays well. Gets on great with everyone. He’s interested in people, a great listener, and also a great conversationalist, he’s led an interesting life. We watch movies together, stay in with a bottle of wine and chill out. He cooks for me; I cook for him. We go for walks



together, chatting the whole time. He's really really nice.'

'So, what's wrong with him? Sounds promising.' She looked at him in anticipation.

He's not Ryan. Graham couldn't, absolutely wouldn't, say it. But he thought it. Had thought it ever since that night with Ryan on his knees, when he'd walked away from what he felt sure would have been some of the best sex he'd ever had. Graham shook his head. 'He's nice, but a bit...he's inoffensive like magnolia paint, has a tendency to blend into the background in crowds. Never has strong opinions on anything. He doesn't follow current affairs, doesn't seem to have long term life plans, is happy living from day to day. He's perfectly happy with his life as it is. There's no drive, he has nothing he's passionately interested about; no hobbies.'

'Why don't you sleep with him, or all of them, then see which one's best in bed?'

Because he didn't want that. Didn't want sex at all. Had no desire for anything nearing that level of intimacy with anyone he knew he didn't feel a connection with as he had with Ryan. 'He's nice, the kids' entertainer. Although he doesn't have much about him. I think we'd be better as friends. He's sort of my type – rugby build, bit hairy, not too plucked and moisturised. A good dose of caveman.'

'But?'

'There is no but.'

Claire nodded, held Graham's hand. 'There is. Because if there wasn't, you'd have shagged him by now. Or you'd be dating him properly, at least. Instead of this faffing around seeing him and not sleeping with anyone. What sort of plan is that? Were you drunk when you came up with it?'

He had been actually. Irretrievably drunk. Inordinately sad. Painfully missing Ryan.

Not admitting to it, because he was the one who'd walked away, not wanting to be played with, after Ryan had said he couldn't give Graham what he wanted. So, in part, Graham felt responsible. Maybe if he hadn't walked away, Ryan would have stayed that night and reconsidered in the morning. The mess of his life, his broken heart, his resolve not to be played around with by Ryan, had all seemed too much. Which was when he'd come up with plan for celibacy.

Now, Graham, feeling maudlin, thanks to the wine, and not looking forward to returning to his empty apartment, said, 'Am I stupid to not want to date someone because they're inoffensive, but there's no spark? Should I date and hope the spark follows? The kids' entertainer is a lovely guy. Really nice. But he's not...'

Claire smiled. 'I get it. I really do.'

Graham, feeling overwhelmed with emotion, slightly melancholy from the wine, and hopelessly stuck in a relationship rut of his own creation, asked, 'Can I have a hug, please?'

Claire nodded, and put her arms around him and held him tightly.

'Thanks for making me stay,' he said, sniffing, wiping tears from his cheeks.

She hugged him tighter. 'Sometimes you've got to allow others look after you. You just need to let go. Every now and then. Let others worry about you for once.'

They sat on the sofa in silence. Finally, Claire made up the sofa bed, tucked him up with a duvet, kissed his forehead, wished him good night, then left.

Because he's not Ryan. Those words danced through Graham's consciousness as the only explanation for why he hadn't taken things further with a guy his age who he found attractive, who was wonderful with children, animals, other people, but who,

despite trying to see past it, Graham couldn't help escape the fact was not Ryan. And, no matter how much he told his heart to the contrary, it was Ryan who he missed above anything and anyone else.

Ryan.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Ryan was at work, staring at his computer screen, having read the same paragraph four times and still not understood it. He hoped to feel relieved, pleased at the decision to walk away from Graham. It was after all, the right decision. The decision he needed to take to protect himself from becoming too involved, too seriously into a relationship, because they always ended, and someone always got hurt.

And yet, here he was, some months later, still waiting to be more relieved that he'd avoided anything becoming serious with Graham, than the dull, lingering regret he'd experienced ever since; regret at not feeling terrified and leaping into the great unknown of a relationship with Graham; regret at not listening to his heart rather than his head. Regret.

'Do you want a tea or coffee?' a voice interrupted his thoughts. It was his colleague.

'I was miles away,' Ryan said. 'Is it better to keep things simple?'

'Tea or coffee, is that what you mean?'

'In life.'

'Bit deep for a Thursday afternoon, isn't it?' His colleague left.

He hadn't been able to talk to Sam about his relationship with Graham, since anything they discussed would surely get back to Graham. And Ryan couldn't shake the feeling Sam wouldn't be happy with what had happened between Ryan and his brother. He was sure that somehow all of this mess would have made Sam feel divided about his loyalties, having to choose between his brother or his best friend.

So, Ryan hadn't even mentioned it to Sam; he'd kept it all to himself.

Sitting at his desk, wondering what Sam was doing, Ryan decided there was a particular sort of irony in this situation where the person he would have normally asked for help, discussed it with, was the same person he couldn't mention it to, since Sam himself was entangled and would be giving support to Graham, as a good brother should, that he couldn't have possibly given an unbiased opinion to Ryan.

Ryan checked his phone, and seeing there was a message from Sam, smiled. Sam was a good friend and he was lucky to have retained their friendship.

Sam: how are you today?

Lately, Sam had commented that Ryan didn't seem his usual self, said he'd appeared more withdrawn, noticed that he wasn't going out much, was taking less care with his appearance, and commented that Ryan appeared flat most of the time. Sam had asked what was the matter, and Ryan had said it was concerns about his mum's marriage to Dave.

In truth, that wasn't too much of a lie, he certainly had worries, and was yet to be convinced his mum was marrying for the right reasons, and not because she was lonely and had seen his dad happily married to Matt and worried as she reached her late forties, she would be left on the shelf. Obviously, Julia hadn't told Ryan any of that, he didn't expect her to be so open to her own son, but Ryan knew that was how this sort of thing worked; in short, why marriages often ended.

Feeling as if work was pretty pointless, wondering if he ought to have ironed his shirt today, and admitting that his hair could do with a wash and was well-due a cut, Ryan replied to Sam's message.

Ryan: tired, fine. You?

Ryan visited his mum that evening, trying his best to appear happier and more positive than he felt.

‘Cheer up,’ she said as she hugged him.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Well, you don’t look it.’ She sighed, looking at his crumpled shirt and ruffling his greasy hair with her hand. ‘Ready for the big day?’ It was her and Dave’s wedding next week.

Ryan hadn’t paid much attention to it, just agreeing to do whatever she asked. Having missed out on the outfit shopping day with Graham, he felt he couldn’t be more of a nuisance. He nodded.

‘It was so much easier when you fell over and I rubbed it better,’ she said. ‘Or someone had taken your toys at playgroup. I’d tell you it was about sharing and you needed to learn to play nicely with others.’

Ryan shrugged. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘Once, I collected you from school and you’d been crying. I asked what was wrong.’

‘And?’ he asked, grateful for something to distract his circular thoughts about the last thing he’d said to Graham.

‘You were playing dressing up and there was a ballerina outfit you wanted to wear, but one of the boys told you it was for girls, so you couldn’t wear it.’

‘What did I wear?’ Ryan asked.

‘King’s costume – golden crown, cape, beard.’

Ryan didn’t remember this, but he still felt it unfair the girls could wear anything and for some reason the boys could only wear certain things.

‘It’s no big deal, you know,’ Julia said, touching his forearm as it rested on the kitchen table.

‘I know. We split up. Happens all the time.’ He shrugged.

She shook her head. ‘I mean you.’ A pause and then: ‘And as for dumping Graham, I think you’re a fool.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Me, what do you mean, me?’

She sat next to him at the table. ‘I told your dad and Sophie. Neither of them was surprised. Just happy for you. As I knew they would be.’

‘You told them?’ He frowned in anger and confusion. ‘What did you tell them?’

‘That you’re gay. No big deal. Sophie had guessed, and your dad, well he made some joke about it running in the family. Matt, of course, was delighted. Said something about welcoming you to that family as well as him being your stepdad. Seemed to find it very amusing.’

Ryan felt as if his worst secret had been shared on national news. He felt ashamed, anxious and angry. Bunching his hand into a fist, he said, ‘Why? You had no right to do that.’

She held his forearms, stared into his eyes. ‘After keeping Dave, a secret, and your dad working stuff out in his head for years, until he finally came out in his fifties, I

just couldn't face another family secret.'

'It's my secret. My secret to keep. Or at least it was my secret. And you've...'

'Set you free from it.'

'Set me free?' he asked. 'What new age bollocks is that? It wasn't yours to set free. Don't you understand that?'

'What I do understand, is you've never been more miserable than since you stopped seeing Graham. Me, your dad, Julia, none of us care about who you love, just as long as you're happy.'

Ryan shook his head, bit his bottom lip in anger. He wanted to punch something. Hard.

'Are you happy?' she asked.

'I was. How come no-one's mentioned it?' He'd spoken to his dad and Sophie since his mum had evidently told them he was gay, and neither of them had mentioned anything.

'I said you were very private. Not to say anything unless you said first. Presumably you didn't?'

Ryan shook his head. 'Nothing to say. I wasn't with Graham, so why bother coming out to anyone?'

'Because,' she said, 'it's part of who you are. It's nothing to be ashamed of, or something not tell those who love you.'



He couldn't really disagree with that, so he said nothing.

After a long silence, Julia said, 'I know you said not to tell anyone, but I was being asked by Sophie what was wrong with you. Your dad too, he was worried. Matt joked if you were gay. I said nothing, but they read it on my face, and then it all came out. Excuse the pun.'

Frustration fizzed through his veins. 'I'm not gay. I was dating Graham. I'm Ryan.'

His mother nodded. 'Whatever you say. It makes no difference to us, we all love you, whether you're dating a man, a woman, or no one. You're Ryan and we love you for who you are.' She kissed his forehead. 'Understood?'

He nodded. The anger, the frustration, all melted away. Ryan felt a sense of anticlimax that his coming out had been of such little note. That his family had shrugged it off and simply got on with their lives. He knew his mum had his best interests at heart. Maybe he was a bit gay, after all? Just because he didn't seem to fit the popular image of what many people expected a gay man to look like, to enjoy, how to behave, it didn't mean he wasn't gay.

'Sorry,' she said, 'I hope you can forgive me.'

He looked at her, his face hot with emotion, flushed with sadness, relief and happiness that finally, he could just be himself and not worry about how others saw him. 'Of course, I can forgive you.' Because he loved her. His whole family too.

'I'm so glad to hear it.' She smiled.

'Why do you think I'm a fool?'

She held his hands and stared into his eyes. 'Dave makes me happy. And so did your

dad. For most of our time together. Before we married and during. It was only the last year or so when things became difficult. But I know now that was less about me and more about him. He worked and drank hard to escape what he felt deep inside, and only when he stopped could he really accept who he was, what he wanted.’ She nodded in thought. ‘I think that’s why we’re still good friends. We split up because I couldn’t give him what he, only then, realised he wanted. And Matt could. Does.’

‘What does this have to do with me being a fool?’ Ryan asked.

‘Love is wonderful. It’s the best thing in the world. I love Dave and Dave loves me. Same with your dad and Matt. Graham and you had something special. You don’t find that with everyone you meet. Some people you just want to sleep with. Others make good friends. But finding someone who you understand and enjoy spending time with you, like a best friend, and who you find attractive too, well that’s pretty rare and special, and that’s wonderful. So, running away from it, and I say this with love, as I’m sure you know, but breaking up with Graham, after the way he made you feel, it was beaming out of you, makes you an absolute fool.’

Ryan thought for a moment. Was it really that simple? Love, was wonderful; the best thing in the world. And he’d walked away from it, or the potential for it to be in his life. He hadn’t said I love you to anyone, but if there was someone who he felt deserved it, the only person he could think of was Graham. He let that thought settle for a moment, wondering what he needed to do, to show Graham he’d been so wrong. Then, feeling positive, finally understanding what he’d missed for so long, he asked, ‘All set for the wedding of the century?’ He winked at her.

She talked about the flowers, and the church and the reception and how she and Dave hadn’t wanted something too ostentatious since it was, for both of them, second time around. ‘Graham said, love is optimistic and we should enter into our marriage without apology for what went before.’

‘Which means?’

‘It’s a touch splashier than we thought it would be. But it’s only money, so...’ She shrugged. ‘What do you look like in your suit?’

The suit Graham had chosen. And the day Ryan had bailed on. Missing the fitting and measuring and instead Graham had to do it all remotely, because Ryan, sticking to his pig-headed decision had said he wasn’t free for any other fitting dates, so had sent his measurements instead. Regret at his stubbornness and stupidity at that decision settled in his gut. ‘Good.’

‘Good? Is that it? Don’t you have a pic I can see?’

He’d taken some, staring in the mirror, impressed by how well it fitted and how well it went with his mum’s wedding dress, Sophie’s bridesmaid’s dress and Dave’s suit. Muted ivory, off white and light grey with pink flowers to provide an accent of colour – that was the description his mum had shared – from Graham obviously.

Finding the pictures on his phone, he handed it to his mum.

‘Good?! You look spectacular. The cut is perfect. The colour goes with my dress, and Dave’s suit. Not too similar to his though. The shirt, he chose that too, didn’t he? Graham, I mean.’

Ryan nodded. Graham had chosen it all, and now Ryan understood, his biggest mistake had been choosing not to choose Graham himself. Not to choose love, not to choose the opportunity for happiness, rather than choosing safety and the life he’d known before of being single. Maybe he’d got himself a little bit tied up in knots about how he described himself, about how others described him...gay, bi, straight, but when it all came down to it, what did it really matter, as long as he was happy? As long as he was loved...

‘You know, did I tell you I’ve invited Graham to the evening reception?’ Julia asked. ‘I insisted. He said he didn’t normally attend weddings, not for clients, but he’s been a bit of a fan of my TV dramas since he was younger. I told him I would be mortally offended if he didn’t attend. Emotional blackmail I know, but...’ She shrugged. ‘I thought you might like to know he was going to be there. I know you’re adults and everything, but I didn’t want you to be surprised.’ She stared at him for a long moment, widened her eyes. ‘Okay?’

‘Of course,’ Ryan said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, while a plan slowly formed in his mind. If only there was an Apple gadget that could fix all the many and various mistakes he’d made with Graham. An iTwat, or an iApology, an iSorry, or perhaps an iLove maybe?

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:00 pm*

Graham was at the evening reception of Julia and Dave's wedding. It was on a medium-sized boat making its way along the Thames. It had started at one end of London, after the ceremony that took place in Richmond, then slowly wended its way through central London, where the evening reception guests including Graham, had boarded, and it would finish its journey in Tower Hill, near the Tower of London.

Apparently, Dave was quite boaty and had always fancied the idea of a party on a boat, so Graham had persuaded him if there was ever a time for this, it was now, for his wedding. Julia had loved the idea, insisting on white fairy lights festooned everywhere, and a band playing pop songs in the style of the old nineteen thirties musicals starring Astaire and Rogers that she so loved.

The boat was filled with guests, drinking fizzy wine or soft drinks, and eating nibbles from the buffet. Below deck was a dancefloor, which Graham had yet to see, instead preferring to watch London's twinkling buildings slowly move past in the darkness of the night.

He'd been invited to the ceremony, but declined. The whole churchy, aisles, bridesmaids, flower girls, page boys and vicar spectacle didn't hold as much interest to him, as the evening's party, when things were always less formal.

It was probably because he did so many marriage party outfit jobs that he preferred the evening; it was the stage of the wedding when men removed their ties and suit jackets, when bridesmaids tucked their dresses up, when older relatives would dance like they'd done in their younger days, and when everyone let their hair down at least a little, and had a go at talking to people they didn't know, most of the social awkwardness of earlier, long gone thanks to the free alcohol most had enjoyed since

lunchtime.

Graham finished the Prosecco – cheaper than Champagne, and apparently Julia's favourite – putting the glass down, feeling slightly light headed and allowing a small curl of melancholy to unfurl within him.

'I wondered where you'd be,' Sam's voice was behind him.

Graham turned. 'How's it going downstairs on the dancefloor?'

'A few people went a bit hard too early, on the free fizz, and are regretting it. Some are throwing up over the side of the boat. The gentle rocking is too much for them if they're below deck.' Sam smiled.

'It's all about seeing the horizon, apparently.'

'What is?'

'Seasickness. If you can see the horizon, you're unlikely to feel sick. So below deck is...' He made a face.

'Ryan's here,' Sam said.

'As the son of the bride, I assumed he would be.' At the time, Sam had tried to discuss Ryan and Graham splitting up, but Graham had said it wasn't fair on Sam, as he was friends with both of them, and besides, Graham didn't think there was anything to discuss.

'Have you seen him?' Sam asked, with a tone of optimism.

From afar. And he looked absolutely magnificent, if Graham did say so himself. In

the suit Graham had chosen, in the size and fit he'd recommended. Broad shouldered, narrow waisted, tight fitted suit sleeves and trousers, accentuating his muscles. A pink shirt to match the pink flowers at the wedding. Ryan suited pink, it went with his confident masculinity, Graham reckoned. It was perfectly Ryan. Celebrating everything about how he looked. Which was how Graham always intended for everything he advised clients to wear.

Graham shrugged. 'He was busy.' Standing in the corner, looking devastatingly handsome, briefly making eye contact with me. 'I needed some air.'

'Right,' Sam said, sounding far from convinced.

'Anything else to say on that?' Graham sounded impatient, keen for Sam not to start that conversation again.

Sam shook his head. 'I'm glad you came. Even if...' He looked out across the water, to the twinkling buildings passing by. 'Aren't we going to pass your place?'

Graham nodded. Remembering that first time he'd taken Ryan there. And the subsequent times too. It had all felt so wonderful. Optimistic. Joyful. Romantic. Reeking of such possibility. And then, not. 'I wonder if I could jump off, go home.' Save the awkwardness of bumping into Ryan and pretending he was fine about them splitting up and wasn't really hurt and frustrated and mourning what could have been.

'You don't mean that,' Sam said.

'Don't I?'

Sam shook his head. 'Not when they're playing your song.'

The opening bars of "Roar" by Katy Perry floated up from the bowels of the boat.

People shouted and screamed and the music became louder.

Sam grabbed his hand, tried to pull him towards the music.

Graham shook his head, pulled his hand back.

Sam turned. 'You're not going to dance at all?'

'Not in the mood.'

'That's the best thing about dancing, you see, once you start, you'll be in the mood for lots more.' Sam stared at him with a pleading expression. 'Come on. I've been having a rest, saving my energy to dance with my brilliant, older brother, who means much more to me than that.'

Graham blushed, waved away the compliment. As if he'd had any other choice at the time.

'One dance, then I'll leave you alone, so you can sulk in the cool air until the boat stops.' Sam smiled.

Graham thought it very miserable not to even agree to one dance, so followed Sam to the dancefloor.

It was dark, with multi coloured disco lights flashing from the DJ booth at one end, the music was loud, the dancefloor full of guests gyrating to the noise. Graham admitted it did look like fun. And he'd been avoiding that for a while ever since...

At the chorus of "Roar" Sam and Graham were in the middle of the crowd. Beneath their feet, shiny squares of the dancefloor flashed in red, green, yellow and blue. They were facing one another, holding hands, gyrating. Sam was miming being a tiger and



roaring in time with the lyrics. Graham, at first felt self-conscious but then saw nobody was watching, and joined in with his brother.

The song ended, and everyone clapped.

The next song was “A Little Respect” by Erasure, which Graham and Sam remained on the dancefloor for. Briefly, Graham remembered the twink who’d never heard of them, and raised his eyebrows in amusement. After a few more songs, Graham left to sit near the bar, where he watched the others dancing.

Sam continued gyrating and moving in time with the music, and was soon joined by Ryan. Ryan, looking, now he was closer than before, very handsome in the suit, tie undone, pink shirt unbuttoned to reveal a delicious vee of hairy chest, his jacket long since discarded, the shirt untucked on one side.

Sam and Ryan were talking, laughing, dancing together.

Graham couldn’t help but smile, it was good that Sam had a friend like Ryan.

The song finished and Ryan spoke to the DJ, possibly making a request.

Graham needed some air, so he took his drink, walked to the stairs, about to return to the deck to see if they’d passed his apartment.

‘Sorry everyone,’ Ryan was saying loudly through the microphone.

Silence fell.

‘I need to pause for a moment, what I’m sure you can all agree, is a brilliant wedding. You see I made a massive mistake. And I need to apologise. To that man,’ he said, ‘standing on the stairs.’

Graham turned, surely, he couldn't mean him, could he?

'Yes, you, Graham,' Ryan said.

Graham's face heated and flushed bright red. What was Ryan going to do now?

'Graham, will you please forgive me? I should never have bailed on that wedding dress fitting session. It was stupid of me, worse because it wasn't even about me, because it was for Mum's dress. And, I should never have bailed on us.' Ryan swallowed, shut his eyes briefly, wiped sweat from his forehead. 'I'm sorry. I was an idiot. An immature, short-sighted, cynical knob head.' He smiled awkwardly.

How could Graham resist that? A smile crept across his face.

'Will you forgive me?' Sam asked, pleading and contrition in his eyes.

There was silence.

Graham nodded, of course he could forgive Ryan. He was standing still with terror and excitement, halfway up the stairs, relief and joy mixed in his stomach. He didn't think Ryan was an idiot. He thought Ryan was clever, handsome, charming, protective, loyal, and pretty bloody splendid in fact.

'Love is amazing,' Ryan said. 'Mum and Dad have both found it. And I realised, that I can't, or won't, live without it. Without you.' He stared at Graham. 'Can I hug you an apology too?'

Graham grinned as happiness bubbled in his stomach. If Graham had his way, he'd like Ryan to do much more than hug him an apology. Graham walked down the steps, across the dancefloor, up to the DJ booth, where he hugged Ryan, his hands comfortably resting on Ryan's behind.

Ryan hugged him, held him tight, his draped around Graham's neck and then Graham's face, and they kissed.

Graham closed his eyes and only felt, only experienced, only now mattered, as they kissed. Their bodies touched from chest to waist and Graham knew he'd come home; this felt right.

The crowd clapped.

Julia's voice, on the microphone said, 'And back to my wedding, please!' She looked at the two men. 'I'm very happy for them. Love is amazing and when you find it, you must hold it tight.' She blew a kiss to her new husband, then left the stage.

The music started, people danced, and Graham was taken to a quiet corner of the boat.

Ryan had such deep apology in his eyes, as they sat on a sofa, next to a window, London's lights twinkling outside, the boat gently bobbing up and down.

'When you were gone, I was miserable, nothing could change that. I realised all I wanted was to be with you. To wake up with you. To take care of you. As you have done with others your whole life. Would you let me do that?' Ryan asked, as his voice slightly cracked.

'Yes,' Graham said, overcome with emotion, with the surprise, the joy, the love of the day, the evening, and of the man he sat next to.

Ryan knelt on two knees, putting his hands on Graham's thighs, looking up to him. He shook his head. 'I've been so stupid. Mum and Dad's marriage has nothing to do with me. Us. And I let it. Their divorce isn't contagious. Why was I allowing that to cloud my judgement about you?'

Graham understood now. 'Are you sure?'

Ryan nodded, smiled. 'As sure as I've ever been about anything. Mum said, when she knew she felt that way about Dave, she just knew. And in here.' Ryan formed a fist and hit his chest. 'In here, I know how I feel about you.' He looked away, blinked away a tear as it rolled down his cheek. 'I worry.'

'About what?'

'I still won't be able to give you what you want.'

'You've still not asked me what I want,' Graham said with care.

'Marriage. Forever.'

Graham blinked away a tear. 'You can have forever without marriage. Anyway, it's a bit of a busman's holiday for me, is marriage.'

'What?' Ryan frowned.

'Mum wasn't married. And even if she had been, I doubt it would have changed her, or our childhood. Spending time with brides and grooms, day in day out, I see it's for some people, it's the most important thing for some, but it's not for everyone. Some people focus everything on the wedding and forget about the marriage. Big mistake! I knew I was gay since I was young. Civil partnerships always felt a bit second best, a separate way around the law and some religious objections, something a little bit different, just for the gays. One of the things that's always appealed to me about growing up gay is that we don't have to follow what so many straight people see as a traditional path, the only way their life can be viewed as a success, often without even thinking about it. Living together, marriage, kids. I think some people make those choices without even choosing them, without understanding they are choices they can

make; they feel they have to continue on that path, taking the next step, doing the same things as their parents, unconsciously. But being gay can be about whatever we want to give our lives meaning; it doesn't have to mean children, marriage, living together. I've always known I could do whatever I wanted with my life. Some people say it's selfish not to have children; I think it's more selfish to have kids when you don't really want them, simply because it's what's expected of you. Besides, gay marriage has only been possible since I was about Sam's age and by then I'd decided it wasn't the be all and end all for me. I knew I wouldn't need a piece of paper to tell the world I was someone's partner. Loving someone, creating a life together, are more important than the marriage bit. I don't need that to feel secure.'

'You don't?' Ryan asked.

Graham shook his head. 'Not for one moment.'

'Well then, let's not get married. And be each other's boyfriend forever.'

'Sounds gay, and fabulous, I'm in!' Graham winked.

They kissed and Graham felt elated, light, as if he was flying through the sky on wings of joy.

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Ryan pulled back from the kiss, wanting more, but also elated, scared, a little embarrassed at what he'd just done. At least they were away from the gawping crowds around the dancefloor. At least he'd got it over and done with, said it and thankfully, Graham had forgiven him.

Graham rested his hands on Ryan's thighs, looked at him, with a glint in his eye, smiled cheekily. 'When does this boat stop?'

'Do you want to go home?'

'I've missed you, and,' Graham said, looking either side to see if anyone was in earshot, 'I think you might have some more making up to do.' He waggled his eyebrows up and down. 'After all, I gave up being celibate for you.' His eyes widened.

With a grin, Ryan asked, 'Was it worthwhile?'

Graham smiled, nodded. 'I didn't used to miss sex, and then...well...you came along.'

'And you came along too.' Finally showing Ryan how sex could be so much more than that time in the car with the lifeguard. Anticipation, lust and want pooled in Ryan's lap, his well-fitted suit trousers almost giving away how much he wanted Graham, needed Graham. 'Shall I find out?'

'What, how much you need to make up to me?' Graham asked, with a wink.

‘No, silly, when and where the boat stops. FYI, I have a hotel room in town tonight.’ Then something occurred to him: ‘Does Sam know?’ Ryan asked. ‘About us.’

Graham nodded. ‘He put two and two together and made exactly four; almost straight away.’

Good. Ryan was done with pretending, lying, having to remember who he’d told what to. He might not fully accept the labels of gay or bi, but he did accept he was in a relationship with Graham, and didn’t want to hide that. ‘You didn’t tell him?’

Graham shook his head. ‘Didn’t need to. He’s not stupid. He asked me why I was so miserable. Didn’t he ever mention it to you?’

Ryan shook his head.

‘Probably best, in the long run.’

Sam would have been caught in the middle, torn between the loyalties of a friendship and a sibling, so Ryan was grateful they’d never discussed it.

‘We don’t tell each other everything,’ Graham said. ‘He didn’t exactly ask about our sex life.’

Ryan understood. ‘Is Sam dating?’

Graham shrugged.

‘Wouldn’t he tell you?’

‘Might do. Might not. If he was seeing someone for a while, he’d probably mention it. We never really talked about that, not in much detail, definitely not when Mum

was alive. I always had enough to worry about with keeping her functioning. We both did. Sam used to help, when he was old enough. We're close, me and Sam, but not in each other's faces, sharing the gory details of our sex lives, if that makes sense.'

Ryan reckoned it made sense. He never told Sophie about his love life, and she kept hers pretty private too – well, from the family anyway – she was always posting about her latest beau on the socials. 'Sophie talks about the gifts they've given her, but not the men. The men are less long lasting than the gifts they give her. But they all seem to have good taste in presents.'

There was a silence as Ryan considered what to do next. 'Let's find Sam and tell him we've kissed and made up.' Then he wanted to get off that boat as quickly as possible so he could make up with Graham, more than once, and preferably slippery, naked and horizontal.

'Now?'

'Now,' Ryan said decisively.

Sam was sitting at the bar, nursing a half pint of beer. His eyes lit up as Ryan and Graham approached, holding hands. 'Two of my favourite people!' Sam hugged Graham, then Ryan. Turning to Graham, he said, 'Are you two back together?'

Graham nodded, putting his arm around Sam's shoulders.

'Well, I'm pleased for you. Both of you. I love you both so much, I'm so happy you've found a way to be together again. It's about time you,' he turned to Graham, 'thought about yourself for once, rather than others. I adore you both.' Sam pulled them into a hug, holding them tightly, squeezing their shoulders.

'Thanks, little brother,' Graham said.



‘Cheers, mate,’ Ryan added. ‘I’m going to look after him, so don’t you worry.’

Sam nodded. ‘I know, and if you don’t, I know where you live, so will be having stern words and more, right?’ He winked at Ryan. ‘Do you know when this finishes? Only, I wouldn’t mind being on dry land again. It’s a bit shit or bust, isn’t it, this wedding? Everyone’s stuck here until the cruise ends. Do you think your mum and Dave did that deliberately?’

Ryan said, ‘Mum isn’t boaty, but apparently Dave is. She’ll have done it so he has something of his own about the day. Not wanting to take over. She’s good, like that – thinking of others.’

Sam looked from one man to the other. He shook their hands, patted their backs forcefully. ‘I’ll leave you to...whatever you two are going to do...’ He looked at Ryan. ‘See you at our place?’

‘Definitely. But not tonight, I’m in a hotel. Mum insisted. Wants to have a big hangover breakfast with some of the wedding party tomorrow morning.’ Ryan waved Sam goodbye.

Sam copied. ‘Enjoy.’ He turned, and walked upstairs.

‘A hotel room, when you live in London?’ Graham asked. ‘When you said it earlier, I thought I’d misheard.’

Ryan rolled his eyes. ‘I know, but you’ve met my mum, she’s quite forceful when she wants to be. Not everyone has a room, it’s just a handful of her and Dave’s closest friends and family.’

‘Where is it?’ Graham asked.

Ryan shrugged, he hadn't paid much attention, had left the organising to his mum, but now he was very glad as it meant he could be alone with Graham sooner.

A while later, they were assembled with the other guests on the main deck. Julia and Dave stood on a raised platform, thanking everyone for coming, for remaining with them the whole night. The crowd laughed at that, since they'd had no choice.

'Thank you for making today one of the best days of my life,' Julia said, turning to Dave.

Dave kissed her, pulling her close. Then, looking about, slightly blushing, he said, 'It's been amazing. Cheers everyone!'

The boat gently came to a halt near the Tower of London.

Julia and Dave thanked people again as they disembarked, leaving a small group on the boat, that Ryan assumed were going to the hotel.

Julia gave directions for the hotel. 'We'll be in the bar if anyone would like a nightcap. Otherwise, we'll see you tomorrow for brunch at eleven.' She turned to Ryan and Graham. 'Nightcap?' She looked at how they were holding hands. Raising an eyebrow, she said, 'All kissed and made up?'

Ryan nodded, smiled, yawned in an exaggerated way, hoping she wouldn't demand more details of why and how they were back together, and feeling slightly embarrassed that she still might ask.

There was an awkward silence as she looked from one to the other, raising her eyebrows, clearly waiting for someone to speak.

'Congratulations.' Ryan kissed her cheek and hugged her. Then he pulled Dave in for

a hug. 'Welcome to the family.' He shook Dave's hand.

Julia gave Graham a hug. 'My son has a habit of confusing what some of his emotions mean. But eventually he usually works it out.' She nodded at Ryan.

Graham smiled, nodded. 'See you for brunch.'

Ryan took Graham's hand, squeezed it, then led them off the boat into a large boxy concrete hotel that looked as if it had been built to look as ugly as possible.

Ryan checked in, his leg shivering with anticipation of finally being alone, with Graham, after all this time. All these months apart. Ryan didn't think he'd wanted anything this much in his whole life.

They held hands in the lift as it climbed the seven floors at a glacial pace. Other hotel guests boarded and left as it moved upwards. Ryan removed the key card from his pocket as the lift doors opened, he stepped out, strode towards the sign for his room number, almost ran along the corridor, then swiped the key against the door, and with relief it opened, first time.

They were on the bed within seconds, Ryan tumbling on top of Graham, hungry for his kiss, for his taste, to feel Graham beneath him again. Ryan knelt on the bed, admiring Graham's rumpled appearance, his shirt was unbuttoned, his jacket discarded, his hair messed up from where Ryan had run his fingers through it.

Ryan wanted to make up to Graham all through the night. He kissed Graham, very hard and long, hungry and lustful. Then he unbuttoned his own shirt, slid his underwear and trousers off, shuffled off the bed so he was standing naked, his arousal jutting forth, as the twinkling lights of high-rise buildings along the Thames in the window behind him.

Graham's eyes widened, looking at Ryan's naked body, lingering on his hard-on, licking his lips in clear anticipation while he removed his clothes as quickly as possible. Finally, on the bed, Graham crouched on all fours, offering his behind to Ryan.

Ryan retrieved what he needed from his wallet, stepped forwards, pulling Graham backwards near the edge of the bed. He slid the rubber on, slicked himself, and using his finger, rubbed lube around Graham's hole.

Graham whimpered, edging himself back onto Ryan's finger.

Ryan leaned forwards, kissing Graham's back, neck, using one hand to position his stiffness in the right place, against Graham.

Graham relaxed, hummed, exhaled.

It had Ryan as hard as steel. He pushed himself against Graham, then felt a little resistance, kissed Graham's neck, whispering, 'Okay?'

Graham nodded, pushed himself backwards, relaxed and exhaled more.

Ryan was slowly thrusting upwards into Graham's welcoming body; he was warm and tight and slick and perfect. If Ryan didn't pace himself, he'd finish too soon.

They fell into a slow rhythm, with Ryan's slow, deep thrusts, in time with Graham's whimpers of pleasure. Then Graham held Ryan's thighs, indicating him to stop.

It took all of Ryan's willpower, because every atom of his body was telling him to thrust, harder, deeper, faster, but he didn't. Ryan knelt still, appreciating the warmth and tightness of Graham gripping around him.

Deep inside, Graham tensed, and gripped onto Ryan, pulling his stiffness deeper into his own body.

Ryan saw stars, held still, resisted thrusting, because he'd finish if Graham carried on like this. 'I'm...' the words caught in his throat, his brain had checked out, his body wasn't there, all that existed was his stiffness being gripped tightly by Graham's warm body.

They stopped, both catching their breath. Sweat was pouring down Ryan's forehead, leaving a sheen on his chest.

Graham pushed backwards, taking Ryan all the way in, then crouched forwards, releasing Ryan, sliding almost all the way out. He repeated it, hungrily using Ryan, taking charge, fucking Ryan back, deep, hard, in control.

Graham's pace grew, the thrusts of his behind onto Ryan were longer, harder, deeper, until with a cry, Graham stopped, gasping for breath, crouching forwards, his body went limp.

Ryan leaned forwards, pressing his chest against Graham's back, reaching round to feel Graham's stiff desire. Stickiness confirmed what Ryan thought.

Graham pulled away, separating their bodies, then reclining on his back, his skin flushed red and a sexy grin on his face.

Ryan moved up the bed, lay down on his back, beside Graham, taking his own hard-on and feasting on the spent, satisfied sight of Graham.

Graham, having obviously put himself back together, took Ryan's hand, gently removing it, then with his own hand, slicked and forming an O with his fingers, he stroked Ryan's stiff shaft, rubbing his finger and thumb over the ridge of Ryan's cock

head, slowly, so gently and then again, down to the base, up the shaft, and down again.

Ryan wanted to, needed to empty himself, but this felt so fucking good, he didn't want it to stop. He opened his legs wide, thrusting up in time with Graham's wonderful, slicked fingers. He was close, indicated to Graham with a nod.

Graham used his other hand to pull down on Ryan's balls, simultaneously he pulled up Ryan's shaft with his other hand, and when his fingers rubbed over Ryan's cockhead, that did it, took Ryan over the crest, towards the white light, he saw stars again, as he climbed towards his climax, and he cried out, a spurt of stickiness up his chest, into his eye, and another and another. Ryan couldn't breathe, it was as if his body had disappeared and become only his cock. He shivered as he slowly came down from the crest, the peak wave that Graham had taken him to.

They cleaned up with their underwear, then spooned beneath the covers. Ryan hadn't known sex could be that good. He wanted more, but not just yet. He needed to use his hands on Graham as perfectly as Graham had on him. He desperately wanted to learn to give as much pleasure to Graham as he'd taken. But now, he needed sleep.

The next morning Ryan woke slowly, the curtains were open, light was streaming in. Graham was sleeping next to him, a satisfied look on his face. He smelt so good, the woodsy citrus scent, and a muskiness with a slightly sweet edge, that was Graham's own body scent.

It was six o'clock; still hours until the brunch.

Ryan couldn't believe Graham was here with him. After Ryan had been such a monumental idiot. After pushing Graham away. Graham had forgiven him. He was the luckiest man alive. He snuggled closer, resting his head on Graham's chest, kissing his chest, his cheek, gently cupping Graham's balls, his cock, seeing if they

could wake as much as his own.

Graham yawned, stretched, opened his legs, giving Ryan better access to his growing stiffness.

They moved around the bed, settling into a position where Ryan was lying down on his back, they were head to toe, Graham was on top, and they feasted on each other, making love with their mouths. This time it was slower, gentler, less hungry and needful than last night. Last night they had fucked. But now, they were loving each other, slowly showing each other how they felt.

The scent of Graham, his stiffness filling Ryan's mouth, the tickling of his wiry hairs against Ryan's nose, and lips, were making Ryan rock hard. He almost stopped as Graham did something with his tongue that had Ryan gasping for breath, nearly seeing stars, then he resumed.

There was no rush. Time did not exist. The satisfied noises of them slurping, feasting, moaning, groaning in harmony, allow them to focus on only the pleasure they gave and received now, nothing else existed.

With relief, his balls tightened and Ryan cried out in joy as he emptied himself over Graham's face, and moments later, Graham glazed Ryan's neck and chest as they laughed, rolling onto their backs, admiring each other's sticky faces.

Ryan closed the curtains, then more sleep. Why had he resisted this for so long? What had made him hold off admitting this was what he found sexy? Maybe, he mused, as they showered together later, it was because before, it had felt mechanical, because they hadn't connected emotionally. Ryan could have sex, but not uninhibited, deep, all-encompassing like this, not unless he loved them. As he did for Graham. Which was why he hadn't bothered with sex.

Dressed in jeans and T-shirt, Ryan looked at Graham, who wore the hotel's white towelling dressing gown. He hadn't brought spare clothes.

'I'll buy you clothes,' Ryan said. 'You can't have brunch with my family like that!'

'Can't I?' Graham asked coquettishly, fluttering his eyelashes.

'You look like you've had enough sex to last you a lifetime and still want more. It's making me blush, thinking about it.' He grinned.

They had just about enough time for Ryan to buy clothes from the nearest shop, while Graham rested.

'Don't worry, I'll wear my suit again,' Graham said. 'I can nip out and buy a shirt and underwear. Or go home, leave you to it with your family.'

'I've got this. I want you with me. You are.' He stopped himself, unable to go on, then said, 'You are my family and I want you with me. You're not going anywhere, lie back and let me take care of you.'

Graham sat up in bed, folded his arms. 'If you insist?' He shrugged.

Ryan did indeed, kissed him, then left.

A while later, Ryan returned with new clothes for Graham, who was sleeping. Ryan kissed him, nibbling his ear, kissing his neck, inhaling his sleepy, musky scent.

Graham rolled over, waking slowly, yawning, grinning and sitting up in bed. He looked at the bag Ryan had placed next to him. 'For me?'

Ryan nodded. 'I think they'll suit you.' Buying clothes for someone whose job it was



to buy clothes for others, had been a challenge, but Ryan had gone with his gut. 'I guessed your sizes, so they might be a bit tight, or a bit baggy.'

Graham took the bag to the bathroom, returning shortly, with damp hair, smelling of soap and looking very handsome. The indigo blue jeans fitted perfectly on his legs, the waist too, when Graham lifted his T-shirt. This too, sky blue, V neck, seemed the right size, accentuating Graham's muscular torso and wide shoulders. A white shirt completed the look, which Graham had left unbuttoned, flowing loosely around him, the sleeves rolled back halfway, revealing muscular forearms.

'The shirt was the last one they had, otherwise I'd have to change the whole outfit, because the others didn't go with—'

Graham put his fingers on Ryan's lips to stop him talking. 'Thank you.'

Ryan shrugged, looked away briefly. 'It's nothing, it's only high street; there was nowhere else nearby.'

'Not that, I meant last night. I mean it's nice having my own personal shopper, but more than that, it was...' Graham looked towards the window, blinking fast. He turned back and there were tears in his eyes. 'I've just never had anyone do something like that for me.' He bit his bottom lip.

'And?'

'It's nice. Like I said, thank you.'

'I've got you.'

Graham nodded, looked away again, then stared into Ryan's eyes. 'And I've got you.'

Ryan kissed him, because that sounded pretty bloody perfect.

Later that morning, they sat at the large table for Julia and Dave's wedding guests, enjoying a leisurely brunch of pastries, sausages, eggs, bacon, fruit, toast and enough tea and coffee to float a boat like last night's.

As the others left, Julia approached them, smiling as she looked from Ryan and to Graham. 'I'm so glad you both made it.' She stared at them, the glint in her eyes and raised eyebrows, showing she clearly understood what they'd been up to last night. 'You must both come round. Dinner. I feel as if you know me, what designers I wear, my lifestyle, my favourite colour.' She looked at Graham. 'But I don't know nearly enough about you.'

'I'd love that,' Graham said, squeezing Ryan's hand on the table, turning to him. 'Wouldn't we?'

Ryan smiled. 'Definitely.'

'Well, that's that,' she said, kissing them both, then moving on to chat with other guests.

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And, as Graham discovered as the weeks became months, the months became a year, and then that became nearly two years, that really was that.

They didn't spend a night apart after that evening. Ryan secured a promotion at a company making and designing aeroplane parts. It was engineering, but not as he'd imagined when he was at university. Graham said sometimes life was like that and Ryan agreed.

Whenever Ryan travelled for work, Graham went too, they explored Europe together.

Sam wasn't too happy when Ryan announced he was moving out, but soon cheered up when he added he was buying a larger apartment with Graham. In London's docklands, a new development near the Thames, it was large enough for Sam and his live-in girlfriend to stay whenever they wanted, plus there was enough space for a cat room for their three rescue moggies to climb the indoor tree, perch on shelves, scratch and play when they'd grown tired of the enclosed balcony or the rest of the apartment.

Graham kept his smaller apartment, letting it out, not in case anything happened between him and Ryan, but because he had no pension, having been self-employed most of his life, and he needed something for when they grew old and grey together.

Now, Graham stood on their balcony, holding the large ginger boy cat, looking through the wire to the Thames below, as a boat went past generously festooned with fairy lights, the passengers singing 'Happy Birthday' to someone. Even now, Graham smiled remembering Julia and Dave's wedding and what Ryan had done there. He never believed he'd find a man who'd care for him, love him, as he had done others

for so long. But Ryan was that man. He fitted into that role perfectly, loving being the protector, the organiser, the one who shielded Graham from life's misfortunes. Finally, Graham knew, he could set down his shield and allow Ryan look after him. Graham too, took great pleasure in caring for Ryan, when he needed it; allowing him to experience the uncomfortableness of his emotions, working through what they meant, until Ryan came out the other side, knowing what to do.

Of course, Graham wouldn't stop caring for Sam, that was in his nature and something he couldn't change. But Sam was nearly twenty-five, settled with a girlfriend, creating his own life, he didn't need Graham's help in the same way as before. And Graham was fine with that.

The door clicked, signalling Ryan was home.

Graham carried the cat into the sitting room, where he greeted Ryan with a kiss, then Ryan stroked the cat.

'Are you ready?' Ryan asked.

'Packed for us both. Your mum is buzzing with excitement.'

Ryan's parents had suggested a family holiday in a forest holiday village, staying in a treehouse, secluded from the other lodges, and away from the prying eyes of the media. It was to be a weekend with no devices, no screens, only family time together.

Graham had thought it a little odd that Julia and Grant wanted to holiday together with their new spouses, but Ryan explained they were nauseatingly adult about it all, and both wanted to spend time with Ryan and Sophie, plus their partners.

'Is it a little bit weird?' Ryan asked, sitting on the sofa.

'Which part? Your parents still being friends, everyone holidaying together like you

and your sister are teenagers, or that it's the same place as your last family holiday in the UK?'

Ryan shrugged. 'All of the above.'

When it was suggested by his parents, Ryan had explained to Graham why he was worried about returning to that particular holiday village and Graham had said he would do whatever Ryan felt comfortable with, meaning that eventually Ryan had decided the past was the past and he would accept his parents' invitation.

'You were just eighteen,' Graham said now, 'no one who's just eighteen has much of a clue what they're doing. About anything. That's the point of being a teenager. Like I said, it's all ancient history now. Besides,' Graham went on, 'if I ever met him, I'd thank that lifeguard.'

'Why?' Ryan frowned.

'Because if he hadn't lit that little pink, rainbow, glittery spark within you, all those years ago, you might never have recognised it when you met me.'

Ryan nodded. 'Suppose. He's probably married to a woman now, with three children. Never even thinks about it.'

'Or he could be as gay as a box of birds, performing cabaret, going to the London gay clubs, shagging a different bloke every night, being as gay as his little gay heart could be.' Graham laughed. 'He might just be the gayest gay who ever gayed.'

Ryan smiled to himself, looked out of the window for a moment, he stroked the black cat as he slinked past the sofa, his tail straight up. 'Maybe.'

'If you're having second thoughts, I'll call your mum, tell her you have a headache, and we can stay in all weekend, just us and the cats.'

Ryan bobbed his head from side to side in thought. 'She'll be heartbroken.'

'She will be.'

'Dad'll be pissed off.'

'True,' Graham said.

'Sophie wouldn't forgive me, for leaving her on her own with Mum and Dad.' He shook his head.

'Isn't she going with her boyfriend?'

'Which one?' Ryan smirked.

'How many has she got?'

'Endless, it seems. No doubt she'll prefer their presents to the men. But she always seems to bounce back.'

'We don't have to go,' Graham said and meant it; if it was all too much for Ryan, he'd be supportive.

'I know, but I think I ought to go. Lay ghosts to rest. And, the more I consider it, I think I actually want to go. Matt's always good fun. Dave surprises me every time I see him; he's led an interesting life.'

'Right...And?' Graham asked with uncertainty, feeling this could still go either way.

'And we are packed.'

'Yes, we are, as you say, packed.' Ryan paused. 'And, running away from things never really works.'

‘True. So, we’ll run towards it instead?’ He narrowed his eyes in thought.

‘Together.’ Ryan paused, and then said: ‘Although it’s the same place, it’s more than ten years later and everything’s different. So, I’m not really returning, because we’re all changed from who we were back then. Mum and Dad aren’t together. Dave and Matt will be coming. Sophie’s not my annoying kid sister. I’m not just about an adult, and confused and angry.’

‘Everything changes, and if you go where love is, it’s usually a good place to start,’ Graham said, remembering something Claire had told him when he felt sure he’d forever remain single.

‘I like that. You should put it on a pillow or something.’ Ryan smirked.

Graham playfully slapped Ryan’s arm. There was so much love in Ryan’s family, and Graham felt they were his family too. He was so lucky. ‘Ready to go?’

Ryan nodded. ‘Whenever and wherever, as long as you’re with me, the answer will always be yes.’ He kissed Graham, opening his mouth, allowing Graham to relax, submit, to let Ryan take charge again.

Ryan’s arms encircled Graham’s waist, pulling him closer, the lump in Ryan’s trousers wasn’t his phone, because Ryan really was pleased to see him. And Graham too, was pleased to see Ryan.

THE END