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“Hey, Joe, could you just zip me up? I don’t know what’s taking Eddie so long.” Abbie’s blasé attitude disguised, she hoped, her desire to feel him so close. She knew she was teasing him, but she didn’t know what else to do; it had been nine years since she’d seen him walk out of the bathroom, towel around his waist, skin still damp, water-droplets accentuating his lashes. She’d hoped her involuntary gasp had gone unnoticed, but no... Eddie, thankfully, had been desperate for the loo so had missed her reaction, but not Joe; he’d turned round, smiled knowingly and sauntered in to his room. *Shit!*

She’d been struck by his beauty the first time she’d met him, but he was just a boy then. At fourteen, when many of her neighbours had benefitted from his burgeoning talent, Abbie had drawn a line (although he’d opened her eyes to the splendour of young men and they’d suddenly become more appealing, albeit, those of a more suitable age...) but had practically counted the days until he was eighteen. Now, five years later and, aside from an occasional suggestion, nothing! Maybe he simply wasn’t interested...

Joe did as he was asked; he welcomed any chance to get close to Abbie, but they were, unfortunately, a little too infrequent. God, she smelled good! It was one of the things he’d noticed about her when they first met, waiting with Eddie outside the school gates. He’d spotted them from a way off but could see, even from that distance, that she was... well, just lovely, and when he got close, he could smell that sweet, warm scent that, no matter what perfume she wore,

remained her. He resisted the urge to kiss her neck... this time. How, was a complete mystery; it had been long enough and he'd take her right now if they were alone, but he knew Eddie would be down within the next couple of minutes and that might prove a little awkward. If the wedding went well, though, he'd have her tonight – women love a good wedding! He wanted her so badly... and he wasn't used to waiting, but somehow she'd managed to elude him for so long. Sharing her with Eddie was bad enough, but at least he would never touch her like Joe wanted to, would never be inside her... like Joe wanted to. Whether Eddie was aware of how he felt was irrelevant – he wasn't about to let that stop him. With any luck, Eddie would be so wasted tonight he'd go straight to bed. Conscious of that familiar sensation in his crotch, Joe stepped away from Abbie.

“Come on, Eddie, we're going to be late!”

“OK, Mum, calm down; I'm ready. It's only a wedding, and it's not like it's yours!”

“I asked Joe to be ready at one o'clock so we could leave soon after, and he was; I asked the same of you, but you can't manage it – why?! AND, it's not just a wedding, it's Frankie's wedding, and if we're late...”

“Well, I'm sorry, Mum, but it's clear Joe didn't make an effort. I didn't want to let you down.” Eddie smiled like a choirboy, waiting for the inevitable retort.

Joe laughed in response and winked at him. “Some of us don't need to make an effort, my friend...” An irrefutable statement, but a fact that had benefitted them both countless times. “But, don't worry, Abbie, we won't be late, I'm driving.”

“There you go, Mum, so what's all the fuss about?” Abbie smiled and gave her son a gentle tap on the back of the head. “Hey, mind the hair!”

She opted to sit in the back of the car. She knew her son would want to sit in the front and chat to his friend and she didn't mind, it would give her a chance to watch them as

she had for many years. Joe had become a permanent figure in their lives over the past twelve years and he and Eddie were like brothers, despite their obvious differences, but having been shaped by their early start in life, it gave them a bond that was clear to everyone. Eddie's father had been a user and had regularly beat his mother, though thankfully, he'd never witnessed it, and when he was eight, the man died from an overdose and left them penniless; Abbie had brought them back from the brink of homelessness with a determination she'd never previously felt, but Eddie would never know how close they were, and he still missed his father immensely. Joe's mother had died when he was just seven, protecting him from a drunk-driver and his father had blamed him ever since; he never spoke about her, but Abbie knew they'd been close. Finding Joe had been the best thing for Eddie – Abbie had no complaints either – and the boys had become inseparable. Before long, Joe was living with them, though nothing was ever formalised, and once he was old enough to support himself, he turned his back on his father for good, but in the years in between Abbie had brought him up and shuddered to think what would have happened if the two boys hadn't met. She hadn't just provided a safe-haven for Joe, she'd been a mother to him; she'd discussed his grades at school, she'd fed and clothed him and cried at his graduation as she did for Eddie. Countless nights she'd sobbed when, checking him before she went to bed, she'd found him clutching the only photo he had of his mother. But he'd been happy living with them and she'd given him a small chance to be a child again, though it didn't last long. As they grew up and their group of friends expanded, they would meet at her house for barbecues and occasional parties, many of which were impromptu, and they had treated her like royalty, full of respect and good manners. Luckily, most of the group was male and there had even been the odd moment with one or two of them when Eddie wasn't around, but Abbie was

effortlessly discreet and they were too scared of her son, and quite possibly Joe, to brag.

“This is it, Mum, isn’t it?”

“Yep, but don’t turn in here, just drive down a bit further and the car park’s on the left.”

“I do believe we’re early – happy now?”

“I’ll be happy when you stop your cheek!”

Hayward Manor was a stunning, medieval manor house with beautiful grounds that sprawled in all directions; there were seven separate gardens, all themed and individual, that lead to the woods and paddocks that bordered the perimeter; two huge lakes were home to at least a dozen different varieties of birds and horses and donkeys – used mainly to aid rehabilitation and therapy for several charities nationwide – roamed freely. Still owned by the Hayward-Smythes, it had been in the family for at least six generations and had served as a hospital during World War Two and now, as then, they were passionately patriotic and community-spirited. Aside from the annual festival, which was free to the locals, they held a party for every season for the wider community, again, with no charge, and the current occupants, Mr and Mrs John Hayward-Smythe IV, not only funded these events but were involved in every aspect of the organisation and clean-up, often seen assisting in the dismantling of marquees and props and wandering around with black sacks, picking up rubbish before hosting a lavish buffet for all staff who had given their own time voluntarily. They were well respected and loved by all who knew them and they treated their staff as family. Less than a half-hour drive from her home, it meant a great deal to Abbie; many an hour had been spent playing hide-and-seek and rolling down banks with the boys, climbing trees and running races. There had been picnics and parties in the summer months and it was where she’d met Rose, her closest friend. Rose’s daughter, Francesca, had been running around, as had the

boys, when she and Eddie had bumped heads. There were tears and apologies all round as both mothers blamed their own child for not paying attention, and despite being three years older than Eddie, Frankie was almost half his size and had come off a lot worse, fracturing her arm as she fell. Abbie was concerned for her and, amidst protests from Rose, she'd driven them to the hospital and waited with them whilst Frankie was treated. The two mums swapped numbers and Abbie demanded she be kept abreast of Frankie's progress; Rose kept her promise and they soon became inseparable.

A few years later, when the boys were older and she had more time on her hands, Abbie had worked at the Manor – occasionally still did – organising and running events and had finally found her niche. It was there she had 'discovered' Jesse, who had begged her to let him perform for free at the annual festival when he was just nineteen. She'd let him, and what a performance he gave! Despite the big names she'd attracted, it was he who'd stood out and within a year he was a household name... and he'd never let Abbie forget, only too pleased to show his gratitude whenever they met. He had agreed to come back to perform at Frankie's and Danny's wedding... and Abbie was rather excited...

She thought about their first... encounter: after an exhausting three performances at the festival, Jesse had stayed at the Manor with his family, courtesy of Abbie, and on the morning he left, he'd gone in search of her to thank her for her support. Finding her in her office, he'd wandered in, beaming in the aftermath of his success and Abbie had hugged him tight... a little too tight. "Oh my God, Jesse, you were amazing! Did you hear that crowd?!"

He laughed bashfully. "Yeah, it was amazing!"

"But they kept calling your name in between sets! I've had tons of emails about you, and have you seen Facebook? Have a look..." As Jesse analysed every comment, standing just a little too close, Abbie could feel the heat from his body

and wondered if she should offer to cool him down... and God, did he smell good!

“Abbie?”

“Er... sorry, Jesse, miles away... Sorry, what did you say?” She boxed the image of him half-naked for now.

He smiled, oblivious to her reverie. “I don’t know if I can ever thank you enough...” There was an innocence to him and his words were delivered with total sincerity, but as Abbie bit her lip and dropped her eyes, it became clear it would be easier than he thought. His smile grew... *that* smile. A dangerous combination, coupled with the face of an angel, the smile that would open bedroom doors for him once he realised its power. To some, it was sweet and warm, sincere and friendly; to others, however, and, in particular, Abbie, it was full of mischief, full of dissolute promise and open to suggestion, but then he was, if nothing else, somewhat paradoxical. Looking like a boy scout who’d lived in the wild a little too long, when he sang, his voice was sweet enough to melt your Granny’s heart, but it would change without warning and he suddenly became a banshee, his voice coarse and loud, exuding passion and his face contorted as if feeling the pain of his lyrics; unnerving for the faint-hearted... but exciting for the more reckless, and sex was just the same; he pulled you in with a soft touch and gentle manner, but once he’d succeeded, he became primal, intense, almost aggressive... and Abbie found that an irresistible mix.

Heeding her silent suggestion, Jesse kissed her gently, moving her back towards her desk, looking deep into her eyes, smiling all the time, and pulling him close Abbie tried, unsuccessfully, to slow her hands as they reached for his belt, unbuttoned his jeans and felt the hardness of her reward. Enjoying her touch and her tongue, Jesse let her guide his cock out of his jeans and then took control, pushing inside her, playing with her, sensing how badly she wanted him. He was, however, a little surprised; he hadn’t

anticipated her payment methods but was happy to be indebted to her. Abbie had hoped he would feel a little gratitude.

“Is this how everyone thanks you, Abbie?” His soft tone increased her longing. “If I’d known this was the arrangement, I would have approached you sooner...” He smiled, knowing she needed his mouth as much as his dick and leaned in close to tease her, whispering gruffly, “Do I have to pay for each performance? I wouldn’t want you to feel short-changed.” Whilst she very much enjoyed his jesting, Abbie was concerned they’d be heard, but her attempts to encourage taciturnity were failing. Silencing Jesse’s words with her mouth, the inevitable rapid breathing and groaning would be a little more difficult to disguise. As he thrust brutally, his hands were painfully gentle on her skin and he continued to tease her with his tongue and his lips, arousing her more, but when she begged for his mouth, there was a knock at the door, and feeling audacious, Jesse whispered again, “Let them in.”

Composing herself, Abbie prayed she could prevent an intrusion. “I’m in the middle of something. I’ll come and find you in a minute...”

Jesse couldn’t resist: “I’m the one in the middle of some—” Abbie’s hand flew to his mouth as his smile spread across his face and, pushing deeper inside her, he watched her struggle to keep quiet.

Stifling her cries, Abbie waited until it was safe. “You want another audience?” She was a little surprised but not displeased.

“I give a pretty good performance...”

Their child-like giggles soon stopped as, finished with the games, Jesse was determined to make the most of this woman. With her breathing heavier, her contentment was evident and he enjoyed the unexpected impact he was having. This was a first for him: his skills had been practised

on his peers, and they'd been pretty few, but now he wondered why when, without inhibition, Abbie had made it perfectly clear what she wanted and when... and he liked that. The smile disappeared as he kissed her hard. God, he wanted to make her come, and as he rammed her hard, he awaited admonishment, but it seemed rough was what she wanted and he was happy to indulge her. Feeling the pain of her nails digging deep, forcing him further inside her, Jesse, like Abbie, wanted more wanted those nails piercing his skin and, pushing down on her hands, she responded well, delighting him as he watched her climax, clutching him tight. He found her mouth, needing to taste her breath as she came and, increasing momentum, he watched her squirm as her pussy throbbed, knowing he was responsible for her exhilaration and desire. Marvelling at the events of the past few days and today's culmination being the highlight of what had already been an incredible experience, Jesse welcomed his orgasm... and boy was it sweet! Relishing every second, he closed his eyes to heighten his buzzing senses and as he slowly opened them, he kissed Abbie passionately before the smile reappeared and his ego swelled.

As she controlled her breathing, Abbie stroked his chest, desperate for more and disappointed he would have to leave. "Your debt is partially satisfied, Jesse, but we can work something out for the rest." She laughed; she would obviously need to add interest.

"Well, I'll agree to whatever terms you have, but I'm sorry, I've got to go. My family are waiting outside..." Jesse dressed himself as Abbie realised what he'd said.

She gasped. "What? Why didn't you say anything?"

"You didn't give me a chance... or a choice, but don't worry, they'll understand! I'll see you soon. And thank you... for everything." He kissed her again, but she stopped him.

"Christ, you can't tell them..."

Kissing her hand, Jesse smiled as he left the office.

Abbie closed her eyes and chewed her lip, unsure if he would, indeed, confess. She straightened her clothing as Grace, the mystery intruder, walked in. "Is that what you were in the middle of? Honey, you owe me. Next time, you let me in, OK?!"

Back from her reminiscence, Abbie was keen to find her friend and, having greeted several familiar faces, she hugged Rose tight. "How are you, my darling?"

"So glad you're here; it's bad enough being polite to my family, but for some reason Michael's are here too. Hi, boys, you OK? Looking good, Eddie; Joe..." She sighed – what could she say?

"You look divine, Rosie, but I'll try to restrain myself." Joe knew she adored him but equally adored her husband; maybe one day...

"Come on, Rose, just think of Francesca; she's paid a lot of money for this wedding. I'm sure you can be civilised for one day."

"Well, if she hadn't invited the whole bloody family it would have cost a hell of a lot less!"

Rose was straight-talking, honest and open, but it met with disapproval by a lot of people. Clashing frequently with her own family, she hadn't spoken to most of her husband, Michael's, for years and making small-talk was not her forte at the best of times, but to keep the peace, it was an intolerable ask, and seeing her in action was a source of constant amusement for Abbie. She could never quite understand people's perception of her friend. She had a heart of gold but spoke her mind, where's the problem? Rose, however, was indifferent to the various opinions of her: "If you don't like what I have to say then don't ask me". Good point.

“I’ll get you a drink, darling, but just the one for now; we’ll have a few more later, I promise, but you need to take it easy for now; I’ll be watching you...”

“What happened to you, Abbie? You used to be fun. Hi, darling, mwah.” As another tedious relative engaged Rose in another tedious conversation, Abbie laughed and headed to the bar.

Back with a small glass of something mildly alcoholic, she interrupted politely, ignored the disapproval from her friend and left her with her inadequate drink and, along with the boys, went to find Danny in the orangery.

They embraced him, shook his hand and engaged in pleasantries. He was his usual calm and charming self, but it was clear he was extremely happy; Frankie was his world and he wasn’t afraid to show it. He’d had a promising political career when they met but had given it up to help her, with no regrets, choosing instead to support her as her online catering business became hugely successful, making her very rich, very young. She had, however, handled her wealth well and once the business was thriving, she’d set up workshops locally to teach people to cook, but only those with a real need – single parents, low-earners and troubled teenagers – and they were free, funded by her ever-expanding business and various fund-raising events, including an annual cake-baking competition that was taken very seriously by the locals. Danny co-ordinated these workshops and was just starting to move them further afield; he and Frankie promoted them, unashamedly, at every chance, including today at their wedding, with a post-box for donations instead of gifts.

Having set the budget for her wedding, Frankie had booked the Manor, asked Abbie to book Jesse, happy with whatever fee he demanded (luckily for her, the only payment he wanted was Abbie), and set about finding the right designer for her dress, but less than a week later, whilst

discussing wedding plans on the phone, she'd literally stumbled across a young man on the street, breaking two of his fingers and badly bruising his arm. She discovered he was homeless as she drove him to the hospital and the expense of the day suddenly hit her as hard as she'd hit poor Brad. Paying for him to be treated privately, she decided to rent him a flat and, as Fate waved her mysterious hand, discovered he was a very natural and talented cook. A local restaurateur owed her a favour and took Brad under his wing, whilst Frankie used her wedding budget to fund his evening tuition. After eighteen months of sheer bloody hard work, Brad was able to branch out on his own, and it was his company, not Frankie's, that was providing the catering today, and she insisted on paying. Her generosity amazed Danny, but he totally got her; he understood exactly what she stood for and was proud of all she had achieved. Abbie couldn't think of a couple more suited or more in sync. Frankie, as straight-talking as her mother, had her father's softer edge and was passionate about her local community, and Danny was awed by her.

Abbie watched him chatting and smiling with the guests and wondered how it must feel to find 'the one'; she and Pete had just kind of happened and only because he was the first opportunity she'd had to get away from her father. With rumours about her dad always familiar, she'd ignored them until he turned his attention to her. He'd never touched her, but he didn't need to; making her strip to her underwear and dance provocatively while he wanked was enough to make her scrub herself with bleach night after night in a desperate bid to remove the filth that, although not visible, could be felt on every inch of her body. With no mother or sibling to trust and too scared to confide in her friends, the shame Abbie felt ruled her existence and she'd kept her dirty secret until she met Pete, and when she'd finally scrapped together enough courage to uncover that festering wound,

she knew instantly she'd misplaced her trust. Once he knew, he beat her daily, blaming her, not only for what he was doing but for what her father had done, delighting, seemingly, in prolonging her suffering. Abbie thought she'd loved him once, despite the punches, and assumed he must have loved her, but seeing Danny and Frankie, she laughed at her naivety. Rose and Michael had been together for twenty-nine years, but they, too, would admit they didn't quite have what the happy couple had. What the hell was their secret? Abbie wasn't the jealous type, but she had to concede to a tiny bit of envy. She'd had many partners since Pete but nothing serious; the older guys were too serious and thankfully, very few, expecting her to be responsible and demure; the younger ones... well, they were just too young, though somewhat more exciting. She wondered what could have happened if she'd found Danny before Frankie...

"Who are you smiling at?" Eddie startled her. "I've just seen Rose trying to be polite; she can't do it. She made me swear you'd find her after the ceremony. Don't show me up again, Mum!" He knew they were a lethal combination, but he found their behaviour amusing, though he would never tell his mother. Besides, he was hardly saintly himself and, although she was party to only a fraction of his antics, she accepted him as he was, with no reproach.

"Loud and clear, Ed! Do I embarrass you as much as my beloved son, Joe?"

"Nope. You do what you like, Abbie. In fact, if it's going to humiliate Eddie, you have my total backing; I could fill you in on a few of our evenings out recently, if you like. What happened at The Well last week, mate...?"

Joe loved having a hold over his friend. He could understand Eddie's need for extremes – his own behaviour was somewhat egregious but always controlled; his partner in crime, however, less so, but... well, he was just Eddie, love him or hate him. It made for some very interesting evenings;

girls – lots of girls – usually drunk or high, different positions, locations and occasionally the odd toy or two; it gave Joe a lot of ammunition. He, unlike his friend, was generally a little more discreet... though there would always be the odd moment...

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! How’s the poker going, Joe?!” Eddie knew his friend would never reveal his secrets, nor he Joe’s, and he was eternally grateful. He wasn’t ashamed, but there were some things his mother didn’t need to know; he would hate to disappoint her.

As the room suddenly hushed, the music began and Frankie and Michael walked in to a room full of standing smiles. She would command the room quite naturally at any time, with no effort on her part, but today, no one else stood a chance. And a single, collective thought emanated from the men in the room: *Lucky bastard!*