

HARDER TIMES

BY

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Chapter One

Goldie Williams sat on the deck of his narrowboat in the May sunshine and exhaled. The smoke from his cigarette danced in the sunlight for a second before disappearing. He loved waking up slowly like this.

A man in a suit on a pushbike sped past on the towpath, destroying the silence. He looked stressed already and it wasn't even eight in the morning. Goldie could remember those days. He smiled as he poured himself another coffee.

"You can look too smug, you know."

There stood Moon Saunders, neighbour and best friend all rolled into one.

"I don't know what you mean," he said with mock innocence.

"I saw you laughing at the office boy," she said with a wry smile.

"Coffee?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Why not."

Moon hopped onto the deck and perched in her usual spot on the bench. Handing her a steaming cup of coffee, Goldie sat back and enjoyed the almost stillness. The sound of London traffic could always be heard in the distance but in the last couple of years, he'd learnt to block it out.

"And what has got you so smug this fine morning? Anything in particular or just another day in paradise?" Moon asked.

With bright red curls framing her face and ever-present slick of dark lipstick, she always made an impression. Her porcelain white skin looked as though it would shrivel in an instant if the sun got to it. The flip side of the coin to Goldie who had inherited his father's Jamaican skin and mother's Swedish blue eyes.

"Oh just the prospect of another day in paradise," he said. "That poor lad on the bike looked as though the world would end if he didn't get to where he's going on time. What a waste of energy."

Moon clinked her cup with his. "You won't hear any argument from me."

"What does your day have in store?" Goldie asked.

Taking another sip of her coffee, Moon seemed to be pondering the question. One of the things Goldie loved best about her was she never rushed to speak. She was always one hundred percent committed to whatever she said.

"Ten eager mummies are incoming with their knitting needles at the ready."

Goldie groaned. Moon held needlecraft classes for the post-school-run mums in the area. They loved coming to the barge to pay through the nose for the lessons. The problem was they were always so loud.

"I'll go and do my shopping then," he laughed.

"Sorry, a girl's got to earn a crust. We can't all be as lucky as you."

Draining his cup, Goldie winked. "I worked hard for my money. I was in the right place at the right time."

It was true. He had been one of the first people to ride the internet wave. He had created a solid web design agency in London at the turn of the century and then ten years ago sold it at a decent profit.

Just as he was preparing himself for another ribbing from Moon, he saw two men in hi-vis jackets wandering along the towpath. Frowning he nodded to Moon who spun round and clocked them

"What are they up?" Goldie said.

"Hi-vis is never a good sign," Moon replied.

Goldie got up and leapt off the boat to shore. As he approached them, the two men were taking pictures of the gardens the narrowboat residents had created across from the moorings. It had been scrub ground but over the years the residents of the narrowboats had tamed it.

The big birch tree still stood proudly in the centre, but they had cleared most of the rubbish to build seating areas, a fire pit and even a little stage for people to play guitar or whatever instrument they chose.

"All right, fellas," Goldie said. "What's happening?"

The men didn't even look up,

"You'll get a letter," the man with the tablet said.

"A letter about what?" Goldie replied.

The man sighed and looked at him. "Don't shoot the messenger, all right? The moorings are up for redevelopment. There's plenty of room here for cafes and such like."

Goldie looked at the collection of boats lining the towpath. Some had been here longer than him and that had been seven years.

"What about us?" he asked.

The workman shrugged his shoulders. "I think there was some talk about increasing the moorings up in Hammersmith."

He could barely take in what he was hearing. "But that's bloody miles away."

"Like I said, don't shoot the messenger."

The workmen resumed what they were doing. Goldie trudged back to his boat. Today had taken on a different twist altogether.

Chapter Two

Aled Jenkins was struggling to keep his eyes open. Barnaby Cook, the senior partner of the law firm Aled worked for, was outlining the board's plans for the firm over the next two years.

Problem was, Barnaby had the most monotone voice in London. It didn't help that Aled had been working until the early hours, finishing off his case for court that week. A particularly thrilling dispute about whether a supermarket had stolen a foot of land from the council for their new car park.

Sometimes he wondered why he had studied for all those years.

"And with that investment, we will be able to run employee incentives."

Aled's ears pricked up. Incentives was a new word that hadn't been bandied around Cook and Bishop Solicitors.

"Incentives, sir?" he piped up.

Barnaby frowned at him as if seeing him for the first time ever.

"That's right, Jones," he said. Aled ignored the titters from colleagues at their boss not getting his name right. "All wins will go into the bonus pot which will get shared out at Christmas. We've put three million in there."

Everyone started whispering at once, sending a ripple of noise through the room.

"That's very generous, sir," Aled said.

"We need more wins, Jensen. It was suggested you would all respond better to more incentive than the fact you have a job."

The way he said this suggested Barnaby had been dead against incentives. Aled glanced over at Polly Bishop. She had joined the practice five years ago with the express mission of bringing it into the twenty-first century. She smiled back at him. No prizes for guessing where this came from.

He was going to really go for it. Aled's landlord had announced a couple of weeks back that he was selling the flat. Something about going to find himself in Vietnam or something. He had given Aled first dibs on buying but prices in London were crazy.

Adding an almost adult daughter who seemed to spend money like water and this couldn't have come at a better time.

The meeting broke up and Aled set off back to his desk.

"That's a turn up for the books, isn't it?"

It was Jimmy Goldsmith, Aled's desk neighbour and the ladies' man of the office.

"Too bloody right it is," Aled said, sitting down. Already his mind was racing as to whether he was likely to win the car park case.

He wasn't sure if he was imagining it but there was a decided hush over the office. Everyone was staring at their screens, assessing how many cases on their current workload would be potential incentive winners.

"Problem is, we won't work as hard on the tough ones," Taskeen Fatima said. She sat across from Aled at the next quad.

"Some of us will," Aled said. "I want as many as possible in there. I'm well on the road to a deposit. This is perfect timing."

"You're obsessed," Jimmy said, throwing a paperclip at him. "You never come out, never buy anything. There's more to life, you know."

Aled knew he was a disappointment to Jimmy, who had dreamt of a pack of lawyer friends, tearing up the bars of Soho at night and making huge deals in the day.

"Why don't you ask your dad if he's got a basement flat for me in his fancy-pants house as well then?" Aled said, with a bitter laugh. "Then I can spend all my money on going out like you."

"It's not my fault you're nearly fifty and still renting," Jimmy muttered.

"Forty-eight, thank you," Aled replied, scowling.

He got on with reading through the notes he had made last night. He would be in court this week and now, more than ever, he wanted to be on his A game.

After about an hour, Caroline Burton, the wonderful executive assistant for their team, came over to his desk.

"Sorry to disturb you, love, but we have a gentleman in reception. He wants to speak to someone. They tried to get him to make an appointment but he's saying he needs help now. Something about canal moorings. I wondered if you could..."

Aled took his glasses off and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Can't someone else take it? Jimmy over there looks like he could do with some stimulation."

Jimmy was spinning on his chair and trying to catch cashew nuts in his mouth.

"I know but you did such a good job on saving that knackered old mill last year," Christine said, frowning at Jimmy.

"You mean the building of extreme historical significance?" Aled said with a grin.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Christine said. "You've got two cases up this week, so you'll be quiet next. Go on. He's quite dishy."

Aled sighed. "Fine. Seeing as it's you."

He got up from his desk and followed Caroline through to their reception. The man who sat in the window, thumbing through a dogeared copy of *The Lawyer*, was more than dishy. He was drop-dead gorgeous.

Sitting on the sofa in faded jeans and a green T-shirt, he should have been like a fish out of water, but his lack of concern was infectious. Aled couldn't take his eyes from him.

“What’s his name?” he whispered to Caroline.

“Mr Goldie Williams,” she replied, after checking her notes.

“A good strong Welsh name,” Aled said with a smile. “Maybe we will get on.”

He strode over to Goldie. “Mr Williams?”

His golden-brown skin must surely be where he got his nickname from. As for his blue eyes and wide smile, if the perfect man existed, he’d just walked into Cook and Bishop. Goldie looked up and flashed Aled a kilowatt smile. A smile that made Aled need to sit down.

“That’s right, but please, call me Goldie.”

Goldie stood, towering over Aled. At five foot eight, Aled was used to being the smallest guy in a group, but Goldie must have been six foot three.

“Shall we go through?” Aled asked, pointing towards one of the meeting rooms off reception.

As he followed the potential new client, Caroline and Elaine, the receptionist, were giggling. Caroline winked at Aled, who stuck his tongue out.

“Can I get you a drink of anything?” Aled asked.

“Coffee would be amazing. Black, please,” Goldie replied.

Aled stuck his head out of the door. “Any chance one of you two comedians could sort us two coffees?”

“Sure thing,” Caroline said. “Is that all you be requiring?”

“From you, yes,” Aled replied.

He shut the door to the meeting room and settled himself down across the table from Goldie. “And what can I do for you, Mr W...Goldie.”

Goldie sat back in his chair. He dominated the room and not just because of his size. Aled would guess that Goldie would command attention wherever he was.

“I live at Paddington Moorings,” he began.

Aled thought hard. He had walked past them a few times when he and Jimmy had decided to get fit at lunch times. That had lasted all of a week.

“And what seems to be the problem?” he asked.

“Turns out some developers are after kicking us out. They want to build cafes or something,” Goldie said with a scowl.

Aled instantly thought how nice it would be to hold client lunches down there on a summer’s day. He regretted it when he saw Goldie staring at him.

“This is quite devastating for us, you know,” Goldie said.

“Isn’t that the point of living on a boat though?” Aled asked. “You can move on at a moment’s notice.”

That was a bad move. Goldie looked ready to explode but thankfully Caroline came in with two cups of coffee. Clearly sensing the tension in the air, she put them down on the table and beat a hasty retreat.

“We are a community, Mr Jenkins,” Goldie said through gritted teeth. “Some of us have lived there for over ten years. It’s not just as simple as upping and moving on. I realise you probably don’t know your neighbours in your high-rise apartment but it’s not the same for the rest of us.”

Aled felt suitably chastised. “I’m sorry, you are right. It’s a tough call if they have bought the land. We could argue that the moorings can’t just be removed but I have no doubt the developers will have that covered.”

He had lost enough cases against developers in his time. They usually had the best legal representation money could buy and had explored every avenue before signing on the dotted line.

“I will be honest with you, Goldie. It is unlikely we will win this, and it could be a very expensive exercise.”

Raising an eyebrow, Goldie smiled. “Don’t worry about money. We have that sorted.”

Aled could just imagine how much they would think they would need. He didn’t relish being the one to tell them to double it and add a nought or two.

“I know you think it is special,” Aled continued. He wanted to let this man down gently. “Everyone thinks where they live is special but honestly, my advice to you would be to find a new place for all of you.”

Goldie shook his head. “You’re missing the point. Or in actual fact I’m doing a crap job at making my point. Hey, I know...” Goldie’s face lit up. “Why don’t you come and spend the weekend with us? You can crash at mine. It will be the perfect way for us to teach you.”

“Oh no, I don’t know about that. It would be highly irregular,” Aled said. He suddenly felt hot in the windowless room.

“Fuck regular. Sometimes we all have to live outside the box. Go on. I dare you.”

Chapter Three

Goldie stared at himself in the mirror. He looked every one of his forty-two years. Last night had been an impromptu party at Moon's. Even though he'd known Aled was coming today, he'd still not made it to bed until the birds had been cheeping.

Still, Aled had to be knocking on fifty. Plus, he was straighter than the pinstripe on his suit. It really didn't matter how Goldie looked.

Last night Moon had been teasing him that he fancied this lawyer, which was why he'd invited him. He didn't think that was the case although it couldn't be denied that Aled was easy on the eye.

Goldie had always liked men a little bit older than him and Aled definitely ticked a lot of his boxes. Nice salt-and-pepper hair, just a hint of stubble, a decent-looking body underneath that very expensive shirt and not cocky. Yes, he was a decent chap who more than likely had a wife and twenty kids at home.

But his motivation for inviting Aled onto the barge hadn't been to jump straight into his pants. He wanted him to understand this special place.

"Knock, knock."

It was Moon. She stood at the top of the staircase that led up to the back of the boat where Goldie would perch and steer the craft when they were out on the water. It was a fifty-foot narrowboat with a ton of modern touches. When he'd invested a lot of his lump sum into it, he'd been amazed what he could get with a bit of clever planning.

"Come in," Goldie said. "Rough today?"

"A bit," Moon said, sitting on the end of the bed. "Why can I never wait until Friday?"

"Don't do the crime if you can't do the time," Goldie laughed.

Moon stuck her tongue out. "I suppose you've been lazing around all afternoon in bed while I've been slaving away."

Spraying himself with a dash of cologne, Goldie turned round. "I've been cleaning actually."

The boat was sparkling. It had been ages since he'd deep cleaned it. It had been quite enjoyable, and he'd found loads of things that had been thought lost forever.

"Yeah, it's looking good. Is this to impress Mr Legal?"

"Don't start that again. I bet he doesn't even show up."

They went up onto the deck. A beautiful summer's evening greeted them with the pink shards of sunlight bursting around the high rises that dominated the skyline.

The moorings lay empty tonight. The big birch tree in the centre stood guard over them like it did every night.

"We've had some good times, haven't we?" Moon said as if reading his thoughts.

"There are more to come," he replied resolutely. "I'm going to charm this man so he will fight for us as though it was his own house."

Moon kissed him on the cheek. "You're a good man, Goldie. Hey, how about a barbeque tomorrow night? I'll round up the troops and make sure they're all on their best behaviour."

It was a good idea. They needed to show the place in all its glory.

"Brilliant. Will you do the shopping too? I've got plans for tomorrow."

The knowing smile crept back onto Moon's face. "I'm sure you have." She jumped onto the towpath. "I'd better get speaking to people then. Try not to get into his undies on the first night and scare the living daylights out of him."

"Anything for the moorings. You know that."

She groaned and set off toward Mrs Wilkinson's boat.

"Ask Mrs Wilkinson if she'll make her punch," Goldie shouted after her. "That will get things going."

"Aye aye, captain," Moon replied.

He perched on his stool and looked out over the still water. Sometimes the towpath could be crammed with dogwalkers and families, but early evening was a mercifully quiet time. Everyone had got to where they were going to, and things were calm.

A family of ducks swam past. Picking up the packet of biscuits he'd been munching on that afternoon, he broke a piece off and threw it to them. They fell on it as though they hadn't eaten in a year. Always a soft touch, Goldie broke the rest of it up and threw it in the canal.

When he had first bought the boat, he had wanted to travel the length and breadth of the country and he'd done a fair amount of it. He still took her out sometimes. He had named her *The Lusty Traveller* so it seemed a bit mean to keep her tied up. Then again...

"They'll get fat."

He knew the voice. With a smile, he turned to face him.

"Mr Jenkins. I half expected you to be a no-show."

Aled stood on the bank, looking effortlessly handsome. Goldie noticed he had taken the trouble of going home to change. Dressed in jeans that clung in all the right places and a crisp ice blue shirt, he screamed *city boy*, but Goldie quite liked it.

"You ready to come aboard then, land lubber?"

"I certainly am. How do I do that? Do you have a gangplank or something?"

Goldie laughed. "No, sorry. Put your foot on there and pull yourself over."

"But my case." Aled pointed to a bright white Samsonite suitcase.

Goldie jumped onto the bank. "I'll give you a shove and bring it over. Come on."

Lining himself up behind him, Goldie couldn't help but breathe in the expensive cologne that radiated from Aled. He placed his hands in the square of Aled's back and was pleasantly surprised by him tensing at the touch.

As he got a decent grip, he could feel muscle under Aled's shirt. He kept himself in shape. But he had to stop thinking like this.

"Ready?" Goldie said.

Aled nodded and Goldie gave him an almighty shove. Getting his foot on the ridge of the boat, Aled easily pulled himself up and onto the deck. Goldie grabbed his case and effortlessly boarded.

Aled took the case from Goldie.

"Where is my room? I'll dump this."

Goldie shook his head. It was going to be a rude awakening for this guy. "I'm sorry but the bridal suite is fully booked, so your room is down there."

He pointed to the little anteroom that served as wardrobe, pantry and lounge. Aled looked at the two little sofas in shock.

"Oh, I see."

"Don't worry," Goldie said as reassuringly as he could muster. "The sofas convert into a bed. You'll be perfectly comfortable."

"Where shall I put this?" Aled said, gesturing to his case.

Goldie rubbed the stubble on his chin. "It will have to go on my bed for now. There's nowhere else for it."

"Sorry," Aled said with a sheepish grin. "I should have brought a rucksack really. Shouldn't I?"

Clapping him on the shoulder, Goldie winked. "No bother, city boy. Come on, I'll show you the rest."

They squeezed through, past the shower and toilet.

"No solids unless you can't help it," Goldie said, enjoying the blush that instantly appeared on Aled's face. "We'll go to the pub for lunch tomorrow, so use your time wisely. They don't have to empty it."

Next, they were in his little bedroom area. He had done his best to make this as luxurious as possible, painting the walls a deep purple and covering the bed with warm throws. Moon had crocheted him a blanket of all his favourite colours, and it covered half the bed.

"Last but not least is the galley or kitchen," Goldie said over his shoulder.

"I know what a galley is," Aled laughed. "My granddad was in the navy."

"Oh well, we'll take her out and you can steer."

"I said my granddad, not me. You've got such a lovely home, I wouldn't dare."

They galley had a two-seater table and a fully fitted kitchen. Goldie found himself perking up at the compliment from Aled. Was he really this needy?

“Take a seat.”

Aled sat down at the table and smiled at Goldie. It felt like the boat had shrunk, having two people in it. He often had gentlemen callers, but they usually confined themselves to the bedroom.

Goldie opened the doors at the front that opened onto another little seating area.

“It’s a hot one today,” Goldie said.

“Sure is. The minute I came out of the office, I was sweating.”

Goldie reached outside and pulled up a bag on a string. Inside were beers he had been chilling. He retrieved two and lowered the bag back down.

When he turned, he saw Aled’s wide eyes watching him.

“I don’t have space in the fridge,” he explained as he cleaned the bottles.

“Ingenious,” Aled said, watching him pour two glasses.

“You have to be,” Goldie replied.

He handed a glass to Aled and sat down opposite him. “Cheers. Here’s to a nice time.”

They clinked glasses. The beer was needed. Goldie felt ridiculously nervous. Aled appeared to have grown far more attractive since they were in the meeting room.

“I didn’t think you’d turn up,” Goldie confided.

Aled looked taken aback. His eyes creased at the corners when he was thinking about something. “Once I say I’ll do something, I do it. Although why I said I would do this is a bit crazy.”

A boat glided past and Aled stared out of the window with a childlike awe. Goldie took the opportunity to take in his looks. He seemed tired and worry lines were etched across his forehead.

He turned back and caught Goldie staring.

“So what are the plans then? For the weekend, I mean.”

* * * *

That night, Goldie cooked a simple meal and they sank some more beers. Once Aled had relaxed, he was great company. He had Goldie in fits of laughter with tales from the office. Goldie didn’t miss all that forced proximity to strangers who usually turned out to be arseholes.

Aled lived in Ealing, which was quite the journey to work, but like most other Londoners, he seemed to accept that fact with good grace.

“Don’t you miss it?” Aled said.

“What? Work?” Goldie replied.

"Yeah. Don't get me wrong, I work to live, not the other way around, but I think I'd lose purpose in life if I didn't have it."

Goldie considered it. His family had been aghast when he had decided to give up a thriving web design agency to reduce his life down to this boat.

"Not at all," Goldie said. "Of course, everyone thought I was mad, but I don't have any stress. What's not to love about that?"

Aled looked at him as though he were an alien species.

"What does your wife think about you spending the weekend with a stranger?" Goldie asked, partly to change the conversation and partly to find out what he had been wondering since he'd first walked into Aled's offices.

Aled held up his hand. There was no wedding ring.

"Girlfriend?" Goldie persisted.

"You're a nosy sod, aren't you?" Aled laughed.

"I am, yes."

"Okay. I did have a husband, but we split up about four years ago. Just one of those things."

So, he was gay then. Interesting.

"How about you?" Aled asked.

Goldie drained his glass. "Nobody special, I'm afraid. Tried men, tried women, tried men again but still couldn't find anyone. I think I'm a lost cause."

"Don't say that," Aled groaned. "I'm older than you and I'm still optimistic."

Shrugging, Goldie picked up their glasses and placed them in the sink. "We will have to see what fate decides. Right, we should hit the hay. It's getting late."

He helped Aled set up his bed. It was quite nice to get to use it like that. He hadn't had a visitor since his sister and her husband had stayed the previous summer.

"It's great," Aled said when Goldie stood back, admiring his handiwork.

The two panels of the bench seats came out to form a double bed and the cushions turned it into a comfy nest. Goldie gave him the duvet which he generally kept under his mattress for more comfort.

"You're all set," Goldie said with a smile.

"Thank you," Aled said. "It's been a lovely evening. I'm really looking forward to finding out about the moorings."

"And I'm looking forward to showing you."

Goldie went to go into his own quarters.

"Goldie," Aled said.

He turned to see Aled looking nervous.

“What’s up?”

“I want to say this before the weekend properly starts. You know my fees are very high. We are some of the best in the land. I just wanted to make you aware. My secretary is preparing a quote for you, of course, but I want to avoid any disappointment.”

Goldie smiled. “We’ll be fine.”

He went into his bedroom and stripped down to his underwear. It had been a nice evening and he had very much enjoyed Aled’s company. It was sweet that he didn’t realise how funny he was.

He padded through to the kitchen and got himself a glass of water. When he turned around, Aled was standing in the bedroom area.

Goldie almost let out a laugh as Aled was resplendent in bright blue checked pyjamas. He could see Aled taking in his outfit of skimpy black briefs, too.

“You okay?” Goldie asked.

“Just thought I’d get myself a glass of water too.”

“Be my guest.”

He could have got it for him but to see a slightly flustered Aled squeeze past him was too good an opportunity to pass up. When his cock grazed Aled’s thigh, Goldie feared it would burst into life. There would be no hiding that in his CKs.

This weekend could have serious potential.

Chapter Four

Aled woke to the sound of water slopping against the wall which his head lay against. The curtains were drawn so he was in pitch dark. He lay there for a second trying to think where on earth he was, when he remembered he was aboard Goldie's boat.

His seventeen-year-old daughter, Tara, had thought he was crazy coming to spend the weekend with a perfect stranger, but Aled had argued that Goldie would hardly murder him for fun. Besides, it would be nigh on impossible to get his blood out of the wooden floor of a boat.

When Tara had realised that she would have the flat to herself, she had changed her tune and waved him off quite merrily. Teenagers could be so cutthroat.

Lying on the pillow, he stared at the tiny chink of light coming in. He wondered to himself why he was doing this. Under normal circumstances he wouldn't ever dream of going to a client's house and he certainly hadn't mentioned it to anyone in the office. He was probably breaking a hundred rules.

But something about Goldie intrigued him. He thought back to him wandering around in his briefs the night before. He was a handsome man, that was for sure. It wasn't just that though. Aled was drawn to his freedom. Goldie didn't answer to anyone. That must feel intoxicating. No wonder they were prepared to fight hard to save their way of life.

Another boat passed and Goldie's craft wobbled. Aled had never woken up on a boat before and he scrambled to the foot of the bed to peer through the curtains. The sun wasn't yet high in the sky but it was going to be a decent day.

Some ducks followed in the slipstream, quacking to each other, and not sparing him a moment's consideration. Aled grinned.

"Noisy neighbours, I'm afraid."

Goldie stood in the doorway. Thankfully he had slung on a pair of shorts over the briefs that Aled knew were under there. He looked effortlessly fresh with his short dreadlocks hanging perfectly and that ever-present twinkle in his eyes.

"Good morning. What time is it?"

"Just gone nine."

"Nine?"

Aled rubbed his eyes. Normally he would have been up and out to the gym by now. Then he liked to have a leisurely stroll around the supermarket. That had been his routine for nearly twenty years. Tara usually went to her other dad's house on a weekend, but she had found an excuse to flat sit for him this one. He tried not to be offended. His ex, Fred, lived on the coast so weekends were way more fun down there. He also suspected she had a boyfriend but had decided Fred could have that conversation.

The smell of freshly brewing coffee permeated through the whole boat. If anything could get him out of bed, it was that.

As he made his way in search of the lifegiving liquid, he noticed Goldie's bed had been made pristinely. There didn't seem to be anything out of place.

The man himself was sitting on the front of the boat.

"Help yourself," he shouted through the charming little doors that lay open.

Aled found a cup and poured from the steaming cafetiere.

"Milk is in the fridge," Goldie shouted.

"I'm good," Aled said.

He came out and sat on the opposite side to Goldie. Even though it was fairly early in the morning, the heat was rising. Summer in the city was hot wherever you hid from it.

That first sip of coffee hit him between the eyes. Goldie had made it strong, exactly how Aled liked it.

"Wow, that's good," Aled exclaimed.

"I had you down as a flat white kind of a guy," Goldie said.

"Don't get me wrong, I love a fancy coffee. But the first of the day has to be a direct hit."

A few of the other boats had smoke coming from their little chimneys. Aled wondered who lived in all of them. He had no doubt that Goldie would be on first-name terms with everyone round here.

"What's the plan for today then?" Aled asked.

"I thought I'd show you the moorings then take a walk up the towpath," Goldie replied.

"That sounds nice. I'd love to meet some of your neighbours too."

Goldie laughed. "Try stopping them. They know why you're here. You could be a hero in these parts if you play your cards right."

"It's your cards I'll be playing with," Aled replied.

It looked like Goldie was about to say something in response but thought better of it. Aled could be mistaken but there seemed to be tension coming from Goldie. He hoped he hadn't regretted inviting Aled aboard.

Draining his cup, he stood. "I'd best get changed then. Can't quite see me getting the neighbourhood behind me in my pyjamas."

This time Goldie did smirk. "They're very fine pyjamas."

Aled set off back to his sleeping quarters. He turned to catch Goldie watching him.

"If you want a pair, they're from Harrods," he said with a wink.

"I'll bear that in mind," Goldie said, licking his lips.

* * * *

After a sink wash, Aled felt vaguely human. He most certainly missed his power shower at home but as water was a premium, he knew better than to demand one.

Once he had emerged, Goldie had produced another pot of coffee and bacon sandwiches. This man certainly knew how to fill the boat with tempting smells.

Fortified, they jumped off the boat and onto the towpath. The place that they called The Gardens was old scrap land on the other side of the path.

"It's taken us years to get it how we want it," Goldie said, leading him into the communal garden. "We grow potatoes, carrots, spring onions, parsnips and green beans."

Aled was charmed by the raised beds filled with shoots. What it must be like to be able to go and pull up whatever you needed. His eye was drawn to a huge birch tree in the middle that had a bench against it. It reached up to the sky and the huge trunk told him it had been here for a very long time.

"This is a beauty," he said, staring up to the top.

Goldie stood next to him. Once again, his scent filled Aled's nostrils and he had to fight from breathing in deeply.

"She's got a past as well. The story is Charles Dickens used to come here to make notes and sketches when he was writing *Hard Times*."

Aled frowned. He had written an extended essay on Dickens for his A Level English Literature. "*Hard Times* wasn't set in London."

"Well spotted. No one really knows where it was set. Coketown is fictional. Some people say Manchester and others say Preston, but he still took some inspiration from the factories that lined this canal at the time. There are even rumours of a picture somewhere of him sketching right here but I've never seen it."

Aled had loved Dickens all his life. He couldn't resist and pointed to the bench. "Can I?"

"Of course," Goldie replied, smiling at him.

Gingerly, Aled sat down and looked out over the canal. There was nothing left from Dickens' day except for the tree behind him but it felt special to be sitting where the creative genius' mind had been whirring overtime all those years ago.

"This is incredible," Aled said.

"Come on," Goldie said. "I have some people who want to meet you."

Reluctantly, Aled got up from the bench and followed Goldie back onto the towpath. It really did feel like a special place.

Goldie banged on the roof of the boat that was next to his. A stunning-looking woman stuck her head out of the doorway. "Sod off. We're knitting." She glanced at Aled. "My apologies, fine sir. I'm running a class. I will have to make your acquaintance a little later."

She disappeared back inside.

"That's Moon," Goldie said.

They walked farther, on to another boat that wasn't as smart as some of the others. This time, Goldie gently knocked on the window.

"Coming," came a stern voice from inside.

"Mr MacArthur. He's a scream. Ex-schoolteacher."

An older man came out onto his deck. Aled could tell he had been a teacher, and found himself standing up that bit straighter.

"Ah, Williams, and who do we have here?"

"Mr MacArthur, I'd like to introduce you to Aled Jenkins. He's a hotshot legal person who's going to help us save the moorings."

Mr MacArthur frowned at Aled. "Is that so? You tell those cheeky buggers from me, they won't get me to move. No matter what and that is final."

He didn't wait for a reply.

"Did he think you said I was going to destroy the moorings?" Aled asked.

Goldie shook his head. "Friend or foe get the same response from Mr M. He's okay though. Deep down."

"I'll take your word for it."

The last boat was resplendent in rainbows flags.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Goldie shouted.

"But they're behind you."

Aled and Goldie turned around. An incredibly stunning person looked back.

"Flute," Goldie said with a smile.

They shared a very warm embrace and Aled found himself feeling irrationally jealous.

"Aled," Goldie said. "I'd like you to meet Flute. They are in charge of the barbecue tonight."

"Barbecue?"

Flute put their hand on Aled's shoulder. "We're doing the full charm offensive. Don't worry, I run my own little café down the path. I won't poison you."

"In fact, we're going there for some lunch in a bit," Goldie said.

"Try the lamb burger. It's amazing. I should know," Flute laughed.

"Modest, eh?" Goldie said.

The lingering looks they shared suggested some attraction and Aled found it uncomfortable. He wanted Goldie back to himself.

Come on, Jenkins. You're way too old for a pathetic crush. Get a grip

"I just nipped back to change my clothes. I've been cleaning the windows ready for the *Save Our Moorings* posters you'll be making," Flute said, jumping onto their boat.

"It's still at the planning stage," Aled said.

"That's what I like to hear. I'm all about plans," Flute said with a wink.

Aled found himself warming to them. He liked everyone in this little part of London, and they'd only done half of the boats.

"Come on," Goldie said. "Let's go for a wander and work up an appetite for lunch."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Flute shouted after them.

Chapter Five

"Wow, it's beautiful."

Aled stood next to Goldie and his face was one of childlike wonder. Dusk was coming and the light was fading but Moon and the others had decorated the moorings with hundreds of fairy lights. They covered the birch tree's trunk and snaked up into its branches.

From those branches, bigger lightbulbs were strung on pretty lines which stretched out to other trees. The firepit was roaring and Mr MacArthur was setting up the barbecue.

"We will eat like kings tonight," he said to Goldie and Aled as he saw them staring at everything.

Moon saw them and came over. She cuddled into Goldie's side.

"Sorry about earlier. My knitting class get very tetchy if someone disturbs us. Moon. I'm pleased to meet you."

Goldie watched as they shook hands. Aled had really relaxed since being there. When he'd arrived, he had still been uptight from the office. So much so that Goldie had wondered if he had made a huge mistake.

"And what have you two been up to today?" she asked.

"Goldie has been a perfect host," Aled said, beaming at him. Why did it make his legs go to jelly? "He introduced me to some people and then we went for a long lunch up the canal."

"Flute's place?" Moon asked.

Aled's face lit up. "So delicious."

"Come and find a drink. Goldie, you want a beer?"

Goldie nodded and watched Moon lead Aled into the Gardens. He enjoyed seeing Aled chatting amiably with the people who filled his life. On the way back from lunch, he had introduced him to his other neighbours, Gill and Pete, Neil and his gorgeous dog, Chutney who had charmed Aled and it had been perfect timing when Helen and Barry returned to their spot after four weeks touring.

"It's a busy night. I love it when everyone's here," Flute said as they joined him.

"Well, it can't be said we aren't giving him the full experience."

"And is he getting the full full experience?" Flute asked with a glint in their eye.

"This is strictly business. He's one of the best and I want us to have every chance of saving this place."

Flute patted him on the shoulder. "Sure. You maybe want to tell your face that."

Goldie frowned. "And what do you mean by that?"

"You're a big boy, Goldie. I'm sure you can work it out."

Before Goldie could press them, Aled and Moon returned, holding bottles of beer.

"I saw you'd arrived. Here you go," Aled said to Flute, handing a bottle over.

"Thanks. What shall we drink to?" they replied.

"The Gardens, of course," Moon said.

"And Aled, who is going to do his best for us," Goldie added.

Aled shifted uncomfortably and Goldie panicked that he was about to turn them down after all this work.

"I will absolutely do my best for you all. You have my word on that. It will be an expensive case though. These developers will drag it out. They have a lot of cash behind them."

"I told you, don't worry about the money," Goldie replied.

"But..." Aled protested.

"Haven't you told him?" Moon asked Goldie. Her face was a picture of amusement.

"Told me what?"

Goldie sighed. "I'm going to see if Mr MacArthur needs any help."

He left Moon to fill Aled in. He didn't want to seem like he was bragging about his financial situation. Mr MacArthur was busy tending to his legendary marinated halloumi, lamb and courgette kebabs.

"Oh, Mr M, you're going all out."

Mr MacArthur pulled a face. "I thought I'd better. You're putting him up, after all. How is it going?"

Goldie stared back to an open-mouthed Aled listening to Moon giving all his secrets away.

"He's a decent guy. I hope he can do us some good."

"Us or you?"

Goldie turned to Mr MacArthur, who had a super-rare smile on his face. "Not you as well? I've just had that from Flute."

Mr MacArthur shrugged and carried on tending to the food. "It's a lonely life on a boat if you do it for too long. I should know."

"Yes well, let's just focus on saving our moorings first, yeah? Anything else can wait."

"Is he still in denial, Mr M?" Flute asked, wandering up.

"I'm afraid he is, Flute," Mr MacArthur said, shaking his head. "And it's as plain as the nose on his face."

"Ah, shut up," Goldie replied but with a smile.

It had been a while since he'd really fancied someone and staring across at the earnest way that Aled was listening to Moon told him he definitely fancied Aled. Talk about complicating things.

As the night wore on, Goldie found himself slightly avoiding Aled. He told himself that he wanted to let him get to know the other residents but really, he felt awkward knowing he had been rumbled. Aled hadn't shown the slightest sign that he felt the same way, so Goldie had no intention of ruining a perfectly good working relationship by thinking with his cock.

Mr MacArthur's food was an absolute success, especially paired with Neil's incredible couscous dish and Gill's homemade bread.

Once they had cleared things away, Flute brought out their guitar and started a singsong around the firepit.

"What an amazing evening," Aled said. He sat on the bench next to Goldie with a beer.

"Oh, it's like that every night here," Goldie joked.

Aled frowned at him. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course, why wouldn't it be?"

It came out harsher than he'd intended, and he instantly regretted it when he saw hurt flash across Aled's face.

"Are you regretting inviting me?" Aled asked.

"No. Not at all. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just worried that we could lose all this. I don't know what I'd do," Goldie said. "I am very glad I invited you. You fit in quite well for a city boy."

Aled shoved him gently. "You were one of those once, or so Moon tells me."

"Not quite a city boy but yes, I was a slave to a desk just like you."

Just as Aled was about to say something, Moon came over with a Tupperware box. "Moon's special brownies for dessert. Can I tempt you boys?"

Aled perked right up. "Brownies? Amazing. I love them."

Just as he reached out to grab one, Goldie held his arm. "They are special ones. You sure about that, city boy?"

Confusion gave way to realisation on Aled's face. "Ah spacey brownies? Then I'm definitely in."

He pulled his arm free and took one of the largest ones. Goldie couldn't hide his surprise. The wicked glint in Aled's eyes as he munched away told Goldie there were hidden depths to this man.

Goldie took a slab of brownie too. He wasn't about to be outdone by Aled Jenkins.

The night wore on and more beer was drunk. To Goldie's amazement, Aled finished off another two portions of brownies and joined Flute for a rendition of *Islands in The Stream*.

Once back on the boat, Aled sat on the little sofas at the back.

"I've had a wonderful evening, Goldie. Thank you."

Goldie pulled his boots off and sat opposite Aled on the other sofa. "You're more than welcome. I think we succeeded in showing you the charm of this place."

Aled nodded enthusiastically. "I can see why you are so determined to save it. I am confused about one thing though."

"What's that?"

"Why didn't you tell me about your circumstances?"

"Ah you mean why didn't I tell you I'm rich? Because it's none of your business, to put it bluntly."

Aled sat back. Goldie couldn't tell if he was hurt by his harsh words or not.

"That's fair enough. I wasn't prying, honestly. But if I don't have to cut lots of corners, it will make this easier."

Goldie stretched. "I'm not saying you have to spend all my reserves, but we have to give this everything. Like you say, the developers will have a lot of cash behind them."

"I will do my best for you, Goldie."

The moonlight was streaming through the window and illuminated Aled's face. Goldie could imagine exactly what he looked like a child. Aled would be a useless poker player. His emotions played quite freely across his face.

"I suppose we should go to bed," Aled said. "Will you give me a hand setting it up?"

It was the way he said it, like a dare or something. He also stared at Goldie with the faintest of smiles.

Goldie leant forward. "I could help you with that or we could just not bother."

Aled also leant forward, so their faces were nearly touching. Goldie could smell the bonfire on him and feel his breath on his face. Goldie's heart was pounding. This man had a powerful effect on him.

"Where would I sleep if we don't bother?" Aled asked slowly.

"Why bother sleeping?" Goldie replied.

They kissed and it felt so right. Aled's lips were soft. Goldie tentatively pressed his tongue to Aled's mouth, and he returned the favour. It was then that the passion Goldie had been burying deep took over and the kiss became more urgent.

Goldie wanted this man more than he'd wanted anyone in a long time.

But something felt wrong.

He pulled back. "Hang on," he said. Aled looked shocked at the interruption. "We've had a lot to drink, and Moon's brownies are strong. We shouldn't do this."

Aled rested his hand on Goldie's shoulder. "Are you telling me you hadn't thought about it before tonight?"

“No...”

“Are you expecting me to believe that your strutting around in briefs last night was just accidental?”

Goldie smiled. “Guilty as charged, your honour.”

“Then kiss me again, you fool.”

Goldie obliged. Aled could certainly kiss, and Goldie wanted to know what other tricks he had up his sleeve.

“Come on,” he said.

He led Aled through into his bedroom. He went to turn the lamp on, but Aled stayed his hand.

“The moonlight is enough,” he whispered.

It was true. The moonlight was streaming through here. It was also partly to do with the big streetlamps on the road that ran behind the moorings but Goldie wasn’t about to ruin the moment by pointing that out.

Aled slowly unbuttoned his shirt and let it drop to the floor. Goldie knew there was a decent body under there, but he was surprised. So much so that he reached out to run his hands through the hair that dominated Aled’s muscular chest. It was dark brown, flecked with the grey that was on his head. He stopped at a nipple and ran it through his fingers. Aled closed his eyes as Goldie squeezed gently.

“Fuck,” Aled murmured.

They kissed again. Goldie ran his hand up Aled’s back and pulled him closer. Aled’s hard cock was straining inside his chinos, and it pushed against Goldie’s own hard-on. He couldn’t wait until it was flesh on flesh.

He flicked the button on Aled’s trousers and pulled down the zip. Standing back, he pulled at the waist of Aled’s trousers until they fell to the floor. Underneath he had on a pair of bright pink boxer shorts.

Goldie raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Aled laughed.

“I think they belong on the bedroom floor.”

“I think it all does. Let’s not bother with the seductive undressing. I want to see you naked, now,” Aled said.

Goldie was absolutely game for this. Goldie pulled the T-shirt over his head and added it to the growing pile of items on the floor. Once he’d thrown his jeans, socks and boxers on there too, they both stood in front of each other totally naked.

Taking in the rest of Aled’s body was a joy. He had a fat cock that stood proudly to attention. Reaching out, Goldie wrapped his fingers around it. Aled held onto the wall behind him, as if the mere touch of Goldie made him weak at the knees.

Goldie started to massage slowly. Aled exhaled.

“Oh, that feels so good.”

With his free hand, he lifted Aled’s and placed it on his solid cock that was aching for attention. They stood there for a second, staring into each other’s eyes and running their hands over each other’s dicks.

It was the simplest of moves, but he felt so connected to Aled that Goldie felt nervous about taking it further. But there was no way he could stop that now. He wanted everything from this handsome man who stood before him.

Dropping to his knees, Goldie was face to face with Aled’s cock. He glanced up. Aled stared down at him. He licked the end slowly. The salty taste of precum set his tongue alight.

“Don’t tease me,” Aled said. “I need it.”

Goldie also couldn’t wait. He needed his mouth filled with Aled. He slid his lips down the shaft so that the fat head of Aled’s cock invaded his mouth. He didn’t stop until he took the full-length in.

Aled moaned.

Goldie ran his lips up and down in fluid motion. He ran his tongue around the head as it came in and out of his mouth. Just as Aled was getting used to his moves, he switched it up and sucked as hard as he could. Aled let out another moan.

He stopped and sucked just the tip. Staring up again at Aled, he caught his eye. They were heavy with lust. Goldie knew exactly how he felt.

Standing back up, he pushed Aled onto the bed. He lay on his back with his legs spread wide. Just how Goldie liked his men.

He crawled up his body and kissed him again, luxuriating in their hard cocks nudging together. Aled wrapped his legs around Goldie’s waist as they ground into each other.

Aled had hold of Goldie’s shoulders and Goldie was running his hands through Aled’s soft hair. Then Aled spun them over, so he was straddling Goldie. His cock brushed against Aled’s hole and he dragged his fingernails down Aled’s chest to his cock, which he pulled at.

But Aled had other ideas and squirmed out of his reach. Crouching, he took Goldie’s dick in his mouth. It was warm and Goldie lay back, giving into the feeling as Aled sucked hard at him. Aled let his cock almost drop out of his lips before plunging it back in again, each time sending Goldie into a world of tingles.

“Oh God, Aled,” he murmured.

Aled groaned and the vibrations played along the length of Goldie’s cock, making him arch his back in response. This man had him on fire.

As Aled started to suck faster, Goldie put his hands on Aled’s head and raised him up so he could kiss him.

“If you carry on like that, I’ll come in record time,” he said.

Aled smiled. "I thought you said we had all night. I want to taste you."

Goldie kissed him again. "Be my guest."

He lay back on the pillow as Aled resumed sucking his dick. Goldie spread his legs and Aled tugged at his balls that were desperate for release.

"Oh fuck, I'm going to come," Goldie gasped when the familiar build-up started to flood his body. Aled went faster. Fuck, this guy was greedy for it.

Goldie soon gave him what he clearly wanted. He came with a force, his body convulsing as he filled Aled's mouth. Swallowing it down, Aled let Goldie's cock drop and he wiped his lips.

"Fuck, that's amazing," he said.

"Come here," Goldie instructed.

Aled straddled Goldie's spent cock and Goldie reached out, taking his full cock in his hand. He tugged feverishly and cupped Aled's muscular arse cheek.

Aled's cheek tensed in, and he reached down, taking hold of Goldie's hand.

"Oh yeah, Goldie. Make me come, please."

They locked eyes and the vulnerability on Aled's face made Goldie's heart dance. But he couldn't dwell on it as Aled let out a moan and came hard, his hot sticky orgasm covering Goldie's chest. Aled gripped his waist with his thighs.

"Oh fuck, I needed that." Aled leant down and kissed Goldie, long and hard. "I think I've probably broken about twenty rules, but it was worth it."

As Aled climbed off him and went in search of a towel, Goldie watched him. He would have to be bloody careful with his feelings. This man could hurt him.

Chapter Six

Aled woke with Goldie's arm stretched across his body. His soft breath tickled Aled's neck as Goldie slept soundly. It had been a long while since he'd woken up with someone else in the bed and he'd forgotten how much he'd missed it.

The sheets lay twisted around their bodies. Last night had been incredible but the cold light of day was pressing at the little curtains.

Sleeping with a client was a huge no-no and the anxiety crept over his body like a wraith. He could get sacked for this and then what would he do? He needed this job badly. Tara was going to university next year. The adrenalin meant he needed to move. Carefully he slipped out from under Goldie's arm and wrapped a towel around himself.

Last night the boat had felt like their own private world but today it felt claustrophobic. As quietly as he could manage, he opened the front doors and gulped in the fresh air. The clock on the cooker said it was only eight in the morning. Most people would be sleeping off their hectic Saturday nights. He couldn't even think how little sleep they had had.

Another wave of panic washed over him. If he was disciplined for having sex with Goldie, he would never get another job in the legal profession. Aled controlled his breathing and let his body calm.

"Everything all right?"

He glanced up. Goldie was standing in the doorway in all his naked glory. God, he looked good.

"I'm freaking out a bit," Aled said.

This confession seemed to open the floodgates and before he knew it a big tear escaped his eye, ran down his cheek and plopped into his lap.

"Hey now," Goldie said, his face a picture of concern. He raced across the kitchen and put his arms around Aled. "What's this all about?"

The musky scent of Goldie, his dreadlocks still smelling of the bonfire last night, seemed to ground Aled. He let Goldie squeeze him tight. They crouched on the steps up to the front of the boat like that for a minute. Once Aled felt that he could continue, he wriggled free and looked Goldie in the face.

"I made a massive fuck-up last night," he began.

Goldie leapt back as though scalded. "What?"

Aled reached out and took his hands. "Not like that. You're my client, Goldie. I could get sacked if anyone found out we'd spent the night together."

To Aled's astonishment, Goldie's face relaxed. "Is that all it is?"

Goldie got up, wincing as he stretched his legs. The fact that his delicious cock was inches from Aled's face was not helping him see clearly.

"It's a pretty big deal to me," Aled said, averting his eyes.

Goldie pulled a dining chair out and sat on it.

"Who is going to tell anyone?" Goldie asked. "I certainly won't."

"Not even Moon?" Aled asked, his heart leaping a little.

"Not even Moon," Goldie said. "Although I do have a condition."

Here it came. Aled couldn't believe he had put himself in a position to be blackmailed. What could Goldie want?

"Go on," Aled said nervously.

"I'm going for a run, and I'll call in at the shop to get supplies. I want you to get back into bed and be waiting for me when I return. No more worrying."

Aled smiled. "I think I can manage that."

"You'll need your energy, Aled Jenkins," Goldie continued. "You know exactly what I'm buying."

Last night during their second moment of passion it turned out neither of them had condoms. It had curbed their intentions, but Goldie had vowed he would fix this as soon as possible. Aled was desperate for this too.

"I suppose we've done it now. Even if it did get out, I might as well enjoy it."

Goldie leant forward and kissed him. "That's the spirit. But you need to relax. You can trust me you know."

Aled stared into Goldie's hazel-brown eyes. "I know."

* * * *

Once he'd made and downed a cup of his rocket-fuel coffee, Goldie had pulled on some trackie bottoms and a hoodie before setting off for a run. Aled had watched him disappear down the towpath.

It felt strange to have Goldie's boat to himself. He worried that he'd hurt Goldie by assuming he would tell all and sundry that they'd ended up in bed. Goldie clearly trusted him enough to leave his entire home at his disposal.

Throwing the towel off, Aled got back into bed. It smelt of the two of them and he grinned when he thought about what they had got up to last night. His body tingled in anticipation of what would happen when Goldie got back.

He must have dozed off, because he woke to the sound of Goldie laughing. Frowning, he got out of bed and padded through to his abandoned bedroom. Goldie was standing on the steps, half in and half out of the boat. In fact, Aled could only see his bottom half in mud-splattered joggers.

Peering out of the window, he could see that Goldie was chatting to Mr MacArthur.

"It was a wonderful night," Goldie said. "Nobody puts on a party like us, eh? Did you sleep?"

The reply was muffled but Aled didn't care. He had an idea to show Goldie he wasn't some stick-in-the-mud who panicked far too easily. He crept over to Goldie's legs and reached up for his waistband. Goldie's body tensed when he made contact.

"Yes, we were out like lights," Goldie continued. "Must have been those brownies."

In one fluid motion, Aled pulled down Goldie's tracksuits and boxers, revealing the long thick cock that had provided him with so much entertainment last night. He wanted more. It lay dormant at the moment, but Aled would soon fix that.

He took the soft flesh into his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Mr M. What was that?" Goldie stammered.

Aled smiled to himself as the cock started to harden. He loved the feeling of a man coming to life in his mouth. He sucked hard and Goldie almost lost his footing on the middle step.

Burying his nose in Goldie's pubic hair, Aled slid his lips back and forth. Goldie's cock was solid now.

"Yes, you're probably right, Mr M," Goldie said. "Listen, I've got to go. Can't leave my guest empty, I mean lonely. Might see you later."

Aled stood back, licking his lips as Goldie negotiated the last steps with his tracksuit trousers around his ankles and his cock standing proudly. He launched at Aled and kissed him hard.

Pulling back, Goldie stroked his hair. "You're a man of mystery. One minute you're shitting it that people will find out, the next you're sucking me off while I talk to our resident teacher."

Aled laughed. "Must be the anticipation of what I'm going to get. It's made me reckless."

Goldie took Aled's hand and placed it on his throbbing dick. "You want this?"

"I certainly do."

"Then get your arse onto that bed. I can't wait much longer."

Aled did as he was told and by the time Goldie followed him, he'd lost the rest of his clothes and held up a packet of condoms as though he'd won a prize.

Lying on his back, Aled spread his legs wide. His own cock was hard too, and he lazily stroked it.

"Just fuck me," Aled said. "I need it so badly."

Goldie knelt at the foot of the bed and let Aled rest his feet on his shoulder. Goldie's breath tickled his hole. Then he grabbed a pillow to cover his face as Goldie licked across him with one long, powerful stroke. His ability at rimming was second only to his amazing kissing technique.

The worries about the real world disappeared in a hazy cloud as he gave in to the sensation of Goldie lapping at his arse. Panting, Goldie pulled back and ran his finger around the spot.

"So tight," he murmured. "You think you can take my dick, city boy?"

"Try me," Aled dared.

He groaned as Goldie slid a finger inside him. He twisted it around and stretched his hole. Goldie went to suck Aled's dick, but he gently pushed his head away.

"Better not," he said.

Goldie nodded and licked down the inside of Aled's thigh.

"Fuck, I want you, Aled," Goldie murmured.

He lathered lube onto his fingers and expertly slipped two inside Aled. God this felt incredible. If Goldie wanted him to beg for his cock, he was going the right way about it.

"Put a condom on, Goldie," Aled whined. "Fucking fuck me."

Goldie looked up. "Fucking fuck you? Now that sounds like an emergency situation."

Aled was in no mood for jokes. "It is an emergency."

Standing up, Goldie ripped a condom wrapper open. He slid the condom over his engorged cock. As he liberally spread lube over himself, he glanced at Aled.

"Get on your hands and knees, city boy. Show me what you want."

Aled was happy to comply. He spun onto his hands and knees, spreading his legs so Goldie could see everything. In response, Goldie tapped the head of his cock against Aled's hole.

The anticipation was almost too much to bear.

"Please, Goldie."

Goldie pushed harder. His cock was breaching Aled now. The burn as it fought its way inside made him moan.

"Okay?" Goldie asked, stroking Aled's hip with his free hand.

"Give me more."

More pressure, Aled relaxed, and Goldie slid all the way inside him. Aled buried his face in the pillow and let out another moan.

"Wait a second," Aled said. "Let me get used to it."

Goldie held still as his cock seemed to fill Aled's entire body. It was seconds before Aled wanted it all though. He started to tentatively move up and down Goldie's hard dick.

"God, you feel so good," Goldie murmured.

Feeling ready, Aled arched his back, so his arse stood prominently for Goldie. "Fuck me, Goldie."

With both hands gripping Aled's waist, Goldie did as he was asked. He ran his cock almost to the point where it would fall out then ran it all the way in. It was like he'd plugged Aled into the power generator. Every stroke sent waves of electricity all over him.

The more Goldie fucked him, the more he wanted.

“Oh, fuck yeah. Give me more.”

“You’re a greedy bitch,” Goldie replied, slapping his arse cheek.

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Goldie pulled out. With his muscular arms, he guided Aled, so he was lying on his back, his legs in the air.

“I want to see your face while I destroy your hole,” Goldie said.

He climbed onto the bed and guided his cock back inside Aled. This time he didn’t edge his way in. He went all the way. Aled reached up and twisted Goldie’s nipple.

This lit the touchpaper and Goldie fucked him hard. Aled lost himself in the strokes. Every time he ploughed into him, his body responded with heat. Aled held his legs up. He wanted Goldie to have as much access as he needed.

Sweat beaded on Goldie’s forehead as he worked hard.

Aled’s cock was aching for attention. As if reading his mind, Goldie reached down and wrapped his lubed-up fingers around it.

“Oh, fuck I’m going to come,” Goldie stammered.

Aled batted Goldie’s hand from his cock and started to tug himself. He wanted to come while Goldie was inside him.

He was so turned on it didn’t take him long and he felt completely out of control as the orgasm overpowered him. Just as he came, Goldie’s fingers dug into his thighs and heard him cry out.

Aled was covered in cum as Goldie collapsed on top of him, kissing him furiously. Aled ran his hands down Goldie’s sweaty back. Everything about this man turned him on.

Goldie carefully withdrew and dealt with the condom before throwing a towel to Aled who cleaned himself up.

He reached across for his boxer shorts.

“What are you up to?” Goldie said as he leant against the wall, watching Aled.

“I was going to get dressed.”

“Oh no,” Goldie laughed. “Today is Sunday and we have all the supplies we need. Clothes are not an option today.”

Aled laughed and sat back on the pillow. “Are you saying I’m captive?”

Flopping down on the bed next to him, Goldie lay on his front and kissed Aled’s thigh.

“Absolutely. You got a problem with that?”

Aled shook his head. “Not me. I’m sure I have that freshly fucked look anyway. If I go out there, the game will be up.”

Goldie crawled up the bed and took Aled in his arms.

“Will you relax?” he said, kissing the top of his head. “No one cares less what we’re up to.”

Try as he might, Aled couldn’t get rid of the unease inside him.

“That’s easy for you to say,” he said. “You’re answerable to no one. I have bills to pay and a very demanding seventeen-year-old daughter.”

He ran his hands across Goldie’s hips.

“Must be nice to have commitments though,” Goldie said. “Drifting can get boring.”

This was the first time Goldie had said anything negative about his life. Aled felt honoured that he was starting to confide in him.

“You could work,” he replied. “I mean on your own terms. The world has changed. People run massive businesses from their back bedrooms.”

“Work, work, work. I bet this is the first weekend you haven’t opened your laptop in ages,” Goldie laughed.

He was bang to rights. It had felt like leaving his favourite pet when he’d decided not to bring it with him.

“What a pair we are,” Goldie laughed.

A pair? Why did that fill Aled with hope and dread in equal measures?

Chapter Seven

Goldie woke with a start. In the darkened cabin he reached out for Aled but found he was alone in the bed. Scrambling up, he pulled the curtains open, squinting as the summer morning flooded in.

“Aled?”

No answer.

Goldie padded through into the kitchen. His heart sank when he saw a note propped up against the kettle. Grabbing it, he sat down at the table and read.

Dear Goldie

It sounds cold of me to thank you for a wonderful weekend, but I truly mean it. I couldn't stop worrying about today though. I cannot start something with a client. It is unforgivable and would be disastrous to me if it ever leaked.

I will continue to represent you, but I ask that you only communicate with me by email.

I know you will respect my wishes about this.

Yours

Aled

Goldie scrunched the note up. He knew that Aled absolutely had a point, but it didn't stop it from hurting like crazy.

Pulling a pair of shorts and a T-shirt on, he set off towards Moon's boat. He could hear her humming away to herself inside. She was an early riser. In fact, most of the residents of the moorings were.

He knocked on the side of the barge. Moon stuck her head out of the hatch.

“An early morning visitor? How intriguing,” she laughed. The laugh fell from her face when she looked at Goldie. “Uh-oh. I can read that face like a book. You'd better come in.”

Goldie climbed aboard and followed her down into the barge. Where his was all dark colours and vibrant fabrics, Moon's was a mish-mash of styles. Ethnic prints sat next to floral ones but somehow it all worked perfectly.

Instead of a dining table, Moon had opted for squishy chairs and beanbags. It suited her business and her personality better. Goldie sank down in one of them while Moon arranged herself opposite him.

“Go on then,” she said.

“Okay...something happened between me and Aled,” Goldie announced.

Moon rolled her eyes. “No shit.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Let me see. You were on the missing list yesterday and that boat of yours was rocking like you were about to capsize,” Moon laughed.

So much for them keeping it quiet. Perhaps Aled had been right. Secrets often found a way to escape.

“What went wrong?” Moon continued.

“He freaked out. Apparently, he could lose his job if he’s found to be sleeping with a client.”

Moon thought about it for a second. “What did he say when he left?”

Goldie shook his head and handed her the note, still balled up in his hand. She quickly read it and exhaled, handing it back to him.

“You’re going to have to respect his wishes, babe. Put it down to a lost weekend.”

“Fuck,” Goldie exclaimed. “I really liked him.”

Moon leant across and put her hand on his knee. “It’s always the way. The ones we don’t like, can’t get enough of us. The ones we do, we can’t have. Fate’s little joke on us.”

“So that’s it then?”

Moon nodded.

* * * *

The week stretched on, and Goldie tried to put Aled out of his mind. It was difficult though. Every time he got into bed, he thought about the incredible sex they’d had. Every time he got off the boat, he thought about the barbeque and every time he saw Moon, she would ask him.

About three days in and he got an email from Aled. When Goldie saw the name in his inbox his heart soared, but it soon sank to the ground when he started reading. It was all business. Aled wanted some photographs of the plot.

Cryptically, at the bottom of the email he said that they might be getting some visitors and to be nice to them. Goldie had had enough of the whole thing now. He decided he was going to take the boat up the country for a few weeks. He needed to lift his spirits a bit.

Attached to the email was the first invoice. Goldie opened the file and winced when he got to the total. Aled hadn’t been wrong when he’d said he was expensive. This case would put a serious dent in Goldie’s contingency fund. But he’d come this far now. He couldn’t let everyone down.

He decided he would hit the supermarket for some supplies and then cast off that morning. The beauty of living on the water meant freedom. That was what Aled had said to him.

Walking back from the shops, laden with groceries, he saw a small group of people peering into their clearing by the moorings.

Anger swept up inside him. The case hadn’t even been heard yet and here were the developers measuring things up. He dumped his shopping onto the deck of his boat and marched towards the little group who were taking photos and writing things down.

“Can’t you wait until we’ve had a ruling before you start picking the bones from our carcass?”

The apparent leader of the pack was an elderly man in a tweed jacket. He turned to Goldie with a kindly smile on his face.

“Ah, you must be Goldie Williams,” the man said.

Goldie was a little taken aback that he would know him by name, but he stood his ground. “And what of it?”

The man chuckled and held out his hand. “I’m Professor Philip Higgs. Aled said you might be a bit frosty.”

Warily, Goldie shook it. What the hell was going on?

“I’m the head of the London Society for the Preservation of Dickens,” Professor Higgs explained. “We’re here to have a look at your tree.”

Now Goldie was taken aback. Professor Higgs turned to the three other people with him. One was a middle-aged woman, another a young man who was furiously writing someone on a clipboard, and the third a man of a similar age to Professor Higgs. Now Goldie thought about it, they didn’t look like they were about to book the bulldozers.

Professor Higgs pulled an A4 page protected in a plastic wallet. He handed it to Goldie who peered at it. It was a sketch of a canal bank in industrial London.

“What is this?”

“Look closer,” Professor Higgs smiled.

Goldie examined the sketch and there was a young man sat against a tree. “Is this...?”

“We’re not sure but we think so. The sketch is by George Cruikshank, a long-known collaborator of Dickens. I firmly believe that that tree is the one in the sketch and the young man is his friend, Mr Dickens himself.”

His heart soared that the bit of casual gossip they had all shared over the years could in fact be true.

“This is incredible. Thank you,” Goldie said.

“Don’t thank me,” Professor Higgs replied. “You need to thank your solicitor, Mr Jenkins. He got in touch with me earlier in the week. We had a long chat. What a lovely chap he is.”

Aled must have contacted him as soon as he got back to the office. Goldie had half expected him to defend them for the fee but not to put any real effort in. He felt ashamed that he had thought so little of Aled.

“Yes, he is.”

“Would it be permissible for us to have a closer look?” Professor Higgs asked.

“Of course. Be my guest. If anyone asks you, tell them I said it was all right.”

The professor nodded and excitedly led his little band into the moorings garden. Goldie watched them examining the tree for a second. Sadness overcame him. Aled was obviously doing his absolute best for them. His first instinct was to use this as an excuse to telephone him, just to hear his voice. But he had to respect his wishes.

Back on the boat, he fired up his laptop and replied to Aled's email. He simply said *Met your friend today. Thank you x*

But the empty hole that Aled had left in his heart needed some TLC to fill it again and without even telling Moon, he cast off from his spot and drifted up the canal.

He needed some time.

Chapter Eight

One month later

The rain was pelting down as Aled dashed up the Strand towards the Royal Courts of Justice. The gothic architecture of this fantastic building never failed to take his breath away. He had visited here countless times over his career. It made him remember why he had made this choice all those years ago.

He had mixed feelings about the day ahead. They had Judge Spruce this morning. If that wasn't a good omen for a case centred around a tree, he didn't know what was.

When he got in the building, Moon was waiting for him in reception. His stomach dropped when he saw only Mr MacArthur seemed to be accompanying her. He had thought Goldie would attend.

"Aled," Moon said, hugging him. "So good to see you."

"And you too," he replied, beaming. "And Mr MacArthur. I hope you're keeping well."

Mr MacArthur nodded to him.

"No Goldie?" Aled asked.

Moon glanced at Mr MacArthur before turning back to him. "Goldie has been gone for a bit. He needed to clear his head."

She smiled weakly. Aled had been exchanging emails with Goldie. Admittedly they didn't discuss anything personal, but he felt strange that he hadn't mentioned leaving.

"I guess you're representing him then," he said. He knew he hadn't kept the crack out of his voice and Moon's pitying look didn't help matters at all.

"I guess we all are," she said, squeezing his arm.

The good thing about Judge Spruce was he wasn't one for dragging things out unnecessarily. After Professor Higgs gave his testimony that he firmly believed the tree to be of important cultural significance to the city of London and that it was being perfectly cared for, he retired to consider his verdict.

Aled turned to Moon and Mr MacArthur. "I don't think he'll keep us waiting too long."

"It's looking good, isn't it?" Mr MacArthur said.

Aled didn't like to count his chickens, but it had gone better than he expected.

"What a shame Goldie isn't here," he said. "Do you have any clue where he is?"

Moon shook her head. "He said he had been wanting to take the boat out for a bit and now was the perfect time."

"Because of me?" Aled ventured.

"Well yes, I suppose. It hurt him that you just cut him like that," Moon replied.

"I didn't mean to..."

"You should have thought about that before jumping into bed with him then," Mr MacArthur interrupted him. Aled felt as though he'd been slapped. "Goldie is a decent chap who invited you to his boat. You came, had your fun and then ran back to your cosy little life. Despicable behaviour."

Aled's mouth was opening and closing like a demented catfish. Even Moon looked shocked by this outburst.

Just as Aled formulated a response, a hush came over the courtroom and he turned back to face the judge.

"The heritage of this country is something that we must protect at all costs," he said.

Aled glanced across at Moon who was focusing on the judge so intently.

Less than ten minutes later, the mood was one of celebration. Judge Spruce had ruled in their favour. The developers and their million-pound defence sloped out of the room and Moon clapped Aled on the back.

"Well done. Getting the society involved was a genius stroke," she gushed.

Aled turned to Mr MacArthur whose words from earlier still hung in between them like barbed wire.

"Thank you for your work," Mr MacArthur managed.

Aled really wanted to make peace with him, but he couldn't think what to say so he simply said, "Thanks."

Mr MacArthur got up and left the courtroom.

"Don't worry about him," Moon said. "He's got the exterior of a porcupine, but he cares really. He's just protecting his friend."

Tears welled in Aled's eyes much to his annoyance. "He doesn't need it, not from me."

Moon didn't look convinced. She got up, smoothing her billowing dress, and facing him.

"We'll be having a little soiree tonight to celebrate. You're more than welcome. I know the others will want to thank you."

Aled nodded and watched her sweep out of the courtroom.

That was it then. It was over.

* * * *

Butterflies swept through his body like a hurricane as he wandered down the towpath. It was mid-June, and the nights were hot.

He smiled as he heard Flute's guitar and voices singing Queen's *We Are the Champions*.

Once he got to the garden, the hazy summer's night was illuminated by a roaring fire in the pit. It should have been a victorious feeling but seeing the gap between Moon and Mr MacArthur's boats where Goldie's should be hurt.

"Aled," Moon screeched and dashed over to him. She flung her arms around him. "I'm so glad you came. After the dressing down Mr M gave you this afternoon, I wasn't sure."

Aled held up a bag that clinked. He'd called into an off-licence and bought three bottles of Taittinger Brut Champagne. Never let it be said he didn't know how to toast victory. Moon looked inside.

"Nice," she said. "Come."

Grabbing him by the hand, she led him to the rest of the group. They all greeted him like a homecoming king, and he thought his back would become sore from all the pats and claps. Once Moon had poured the champagne into mugs and they held them aloft.

"To the moorings," Moon said.

"And to Dickens," Aled added.

"And to you."

They all turned to see Goldie standing there. Aled thought his heart would soar out of his mouth and land plop in his cracked mug of the finest champagne.

The group all ran to him. Moon got their first and gave him one of her vice-like cuddles. Only Aled and Mr MacArthur remained by the pit.

Mr MacArthur looked at Aled. "Don't mess it up this time."

Before Aled could reply, Mr MacArthur joined the others and shook Goldie's hand. Eventually the little group disbanded and resumed the party. Aled took a deep breath before walking over to Goldie.

"Hello, stranger," he said, knowing it sounded totally ridiculous.

"I thought that's how you wanted it," Goldie replied.

"Can we talk?" Aled asked.

Goldie sighed. "I feel a bit ambushed. Mr M told me they were having a party. He didn't tell me about a guest of bloody honour."

Moon sidled up to him and slipped her arm around his waist. In her other hand she had one of the bottles of champagne, which she handed to Aled. "I think you two can make use of this somewhere a little quieter. Go on, bugger off." She pushed Goldie towards his boat which was once again nestled in its rightful place.

"Please, Goldie," Aled said.

"Fine, but if Mr M starts cooking anything, your time is up," he grumbled.

Goldie set off towards his boat. Aled smiled to Moon who winked back at him.

"Thank you, Moon," he said.

"It's the least I can do," she replied before skipping off.

Aled had pleaded for many cases in his life but never to excuse his own behaviour. This was a totally different ballgame.

They boarded Goldie's boat. It felt strange to be back here. He felt terrible about the way he had crept out in the early hours the last time he'd stayed.

"Are you sure you should be seen on here?" Goldie asked. "Spies are everywhere, you know."

Aled hated the sarcastic tone.

"Well, you paid the final invoice this afternoon," Aled said. "I guess that means you're no longer my client."

Goldie slammed the bottle down on the kitchen work surface, making Aled jump. "And you thought you'd pay a visit to see if you get a fuck, did you?"

Aled was prepared to eat a small slice of humble pie, but the amount Goldie was serving almost made him choke.

"Actually, I had no idea you would be attending," Aled said. "Moon said you'd run off. How was I to know you'd choose tonight as your grand entrance?"

They stood looking at each other for a second. Aled was the first to break the glare. He glanced at the table which had Goldie's laptop and tons of papers out on it.

"Looks like you've been busy," he said.

"I took your advice," Goldie replied. "I ran into an old friend of mine who's running a local Pride event in Bedford. Their website was a disaster, so I've said I'll revamp it."

Aled raised an eyebrow. "You're strapping yourself back onto the capitalist wheel? Gosh, a lot can happen in four weeks."

Goldie smiled. "Not quite strapped. More loosely tied."

The atmosphere was starting to warm. Aled could hear the others singing in the background.

"I'm glad to see you've come home," Aled said eventually.

"I wouldn't have a home if it weren't for you. I'm sorry what happened between us, but I want you to know that I'm grateful."

"All in a day's work," Aled said. He hated himself for sounding so glib, but he couldn't help it. Goldie had hurt him with his attitude.

"I know that's not true. You could have failed, and I'd have still paid you."

Aled ran his hand along the kitchen counter. "That's not how it works. I hate to lose."

"We should probably open this," Goldie said.

He struggled with the bottle of champagne until Aled approached him. The smell of Goldie filled his nostrils once more, that musky scent of bergamot and engine oil sending his heart racing. He put his hands over Goldie's and together they prised the cork out with a pop.

Goldie poured them two glasses and handed one to Aled.

“To not losing” Aled said.

They clinked glasses and took a sip. The fizzy dry champagne exploded on his tongue. This was his moment, and he would take it. If it failed, he would never walk down a canal again as long as he lived.

“Goldie, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for leaving when I did and for cutting you. I freaked out, I realise that. I’ve spent the last few weeks thinking of nothing but you and a bloody birch tree. Now the tree is fixed, I’m only thinking about you.”

Tears welled in Goldie’s eyes. Aled didn’t know if this were a good thing or a bad thing.

“And what do you think?” Goldie said quietly.

“That you are stubborn, dynamic, handsome, sexy, talented and a man I’d like to get to know properly.”

So, it was done. He had laid all his cards out on the table. What Goldie would do with them was up to him.

“You didn’t mention an incredible fuck,” Goldie said with the trace of a smile.

Aled sniffed. “That takes two. I gave you a bit of help in that department.”

Before he knew it, Goldie wrapped his arms around his waist.

“You certainly did. I’m not going to say you running out on me didn’t hurt but I realise you don’t owe me your career. I did a lot of thinking while I was pootling about. Truth be told my grand entrance was going to be in the court room today, but I had engine trouble.”

Aled smiled. “You were coming back then?”

Goldie nodded. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you either. I thought you couldn’t ban me from the Royal Courts, so I’d see how the land lay.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying let’s see how this goes. I think we could be good for each other. But I’ve one rule.”

Aled knew he was in no position to negotiate but old habits die hard. “State your proposal.”

“No laptops when you’re here. If I’m starting a little work, you can start a little leisure. Then we can see where this adventure takes us.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Goldie Williams.”

The kiss that followed was the best kiss ever. Aled felt his whole body relax in the arms of a man he very much looked forward to discovering. For once in his life he was going to see where the road, or in this case the canal, would lead him.

The End

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