

SIGHS, SCISSORS + SLATER



BY

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A BRIGLEY PRIOR TASTER STORY.



FOR LORRAINE AND ANNE, WITH AFFECTION!

Lorraine stared at the counter, at the tin of dolphin-friendly tuna, or what had been a tin of dolphin-friendly tuna, that she had left half-opened just moments earlier. The nail file she was holding fell from her hand as everything in her went slack with disbelief.

The ring-pull lid she had broken a nail trying to open was lazily discarded inches from the can, a dirty fork sprinkled with fishy evidence another few inches further away.

The microwave pinged, signalling the baked potatoes she had dashed home from the salon to cook were ready for turning.

'Bastard,' she thought viciously. Complete and utter bastard. She had been gone for a couple of minutes; a quick nip to the loo, having to drip dry of course because Dave managed to never replenish the toilet roll, followed by a brief, very swear-y hunt for the nearest nail file.

The annoying dampness in her knickers gave wings to the throbbing ire that was rising up her gullet and threatening to spray out in a tsunami composed entirely of battery acid.

"Dave," she yelled. She felt sure her voice was thundering across the miles and all the way to the minister in Gretna Green that had had the nerve to marry them.

"David Hopper, get the fuck in here and explain what the hell happened to my bloody tuna." She was met with almost complete silence, just the annoying white noise of whatever game he was filling his lunch hour with on the Xbox.

As much as she knew that whatever she was likely to do next would not give her any satisfaction or revise the situation in any way, shape, or form, her legs carried her to the inevitable confrontation. Laine could just not contemplate letting him get away with even one more marital misdemeanour. Because, she justified, she wouldn't treat a lodger with as little respect as Dave showed her on a daily basis, let alone the supposed love of her life.

IT WAS TUNA, but it was so unbelievably fucking hurtful. Even the occasional bottle of easily procured Gucci Bloom couldn't compensate for such thoughtlessness.

She reached the lounge door, the top of his follically-challenged head shining temptingly over the back of his gaming chair.

When and why did she ever allow a piece of furniture designed for a pointless waste of time into her living room? If she had a dart in her hand right now, she couldn't help thinking. An intrusive memory slid in, of the days when Dave carried and held himself with all the pride of a man of a hundred and eighty-three centimetres. Not so long ago, she would have found him sat up straight, not crumpled in his leatherette geek seat, like a turtle with irritable bowel syndrome.

Irritable bowel... Yes, from scarfing down her fucking tuna while she was stuck shaking her wasted on him, pristinely maintained feminine flower over the toilet bowl.

"Dave," she bellowed again.

"What," he barked, jumping out of his skin to find his wife stood close enough to the chair arm to smell the scent of guilty fish on his breath.

"If I get tuna out of the cupboard and start to open it, in what universe do you function where your first thought seems to be, 'how nice, look how someone has taken the hard work out of opening this so I can eat it?'"

"I thought you left it out for me."

"No, you bloody didn't, Dave. You thought, 'man, hungry, tuna, eat now'." She thumped her chest and dropped her voice a couple of octaves - so he didn't mistake the caveman reference.

“Not a single thought of, ‘Laine must have a plan in mind for that tuna. My wife’s worked all morning and come home hungry. But despite being ravenous, she still puts two potatoes on to cook and regardless of wanting the whole tin of tuna to herself, she will split it with me because she’s so thoughtful and caring and she won’t let me go without.’ No Dave, you didn’t think past your own stomach and your own needs. What am I supposed to eat now? A plain, microwaved potato with the smear of toast-crumble margarine you left for me? Oh, it’s got a bit of jam in it too, but jam and jacket spud will make a lovely fusion-style combo.”

“Laine, you know I don’t get long before I have to head back in. I didn’t know you were putting a potato on for me. I just grabbed the first thing I saw.”

“Yes, Dave. Because you’re going to make sure you’re alright; always. Your stomach, your needs, you, you, you, and your bastardry. I was in the middle of opening it, for Christ’s sake. How much more of a red warning light do you need?” The crime was gaining traction in her mind with every moment he failed to apologise.

“I mean...” she couldn’t even form the words. “Who does that? It was obvious that tuna was spoken for; it had plans.” Laine was aware the tuna was becoming an equally abused character in this scenario. “I just can’t get my head around it. You must have known it was mine, that I was making lunch. Like I almost always do. When do I ever leave you out? And this is how you treat me?”

“This is bloody stupid. I’m not rowing about tuna; it didn’t even taste that nice.” He picked up his controller and resumed the game. Laine snatched it out of his hand and hurled it across the living room, where it bounced off one of his bug-ugly speakers.

Lorraine’s ample chest heaved, her fair English skin flaring with rosettes of pink rage, right to the roots of her fine, silky, strawberry-blonde hair. “No, Dave, it’s not stupid. It’s me, at the end of my tether and sick of always being last. Of not mattering. Of *you* not caring that there’s nothing else in the cupboard, of only seeing how hard *you* work, how tired *you* are, never seeing me and what I need, or what I had planned, or how nice I try to keep things, for both of us. Not just me, me, me.”

Dave was still busy gawping at his handset, lying sadly on the carpet. There was a chip out of the plastic casing on the abused speaker.

“What is it, Dave? What do I need to do to get through to you that we are in a relationship? You don’t just do what you want. We may have been together years, but that doesn’t mean I’m owed less respect with every day that passes. God, being with you makes me feel worthless.”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times. Lorraine had always been better than him at finding the right words to win an argument. Dave didn’t look for confrontation and had never been able to figure out why she did.

“That’s right. Sit there in your over-priced suck-bucket and say nothing. It’s always the same, I’m just talking to myself. Do you know how hurtful it is to know that you would rather spend time looking at a screen and engaging with virtual strangers than to see me or what I’m struggling with? My business is about to go down the drain, Dave, and as long as you have your knob substitute to fiddle with, because god knows the actual one isn’t much cop anymore, your food, and the cigs you don’t think I know you’re smoking, then you can pretend life is A-okay. Well, I wish I could. Instead, I’ve got a husband who perverts on Lara Croft because he can’t hack a real woman, and who can’t spare me half a can of tuna because he has no respect for me.”

She waited, feeling an overwhelming sense of futility, and anger at herself for not just swallowing it down, because none of this ever helped. It just made her feel like a nagging fishwife; a nagging *tuna-fish* wife.

She needed a divorce. She knew it. So why did she still love him? What had he shown her there was left of him to love?



Fifteen minutes later, Lorraine stepped inside the salon that she had painstakingly envisioned from the ground up. Her insides were wrung out, not an iota of joy left in her, but knowing she had to slap on a smile and bury all of this shit deep where nobody knew about it. Nobody wasn't quite true, of course, Anne knew, her friend and part-time receptionist; a receptionist she would soon have to let go, and knowing that for Anne, that would likely mean retirement with her lovely husband John, and time for her to spend with her family and grandchildren, and even the bloody damn chickens that she kept.

She would never have chickens, because she couldn't trust Dave not to snap their necks when he got a little peckish.

"I'm back."

"That was quick, lovely? You didn't need to rush." Lorraine didn't need Anne's off-the-cuff response as a reminder. The appointment book was empty for another hour and a half. Too many people now turning to Simple Cuts in Newmarket, and their two for one deals.

"It doesn't matter. There was nothing I fancied eating in the end."

Anne was too savvy to let that slide, and Lorraine's skin was still flushed, the anger undulating in waves.

"What did he do?" The hazel eyes and youthful platinum pixie cut of Laine's receptionist masked the fire of a barely contained Tinker Bell souped up on pixie dust. She was genetically designed for action and took nobody's shit laying down. It could be said that when it came to spitting justified fire, Anne was loyal and loving and sometimes... quite petrifying.

"He couldn't wait ten minutes for me to cook something for both of us. Basically, he ate my lunch before I could get to it."

"Arsehole."

"Don't expect me to correct you," Lorraine sighed. "I know there are people out there that might say it was nothing. It was just tuna. But it says a lot about where we're at. I don't know where Dave's gone, Annie. And it doesn't seem to matter whether I try to be nice or give in and accept being nasty; the outcome is usually pretty much the same. I feel sick at the thought of going home. I do not want to look at him with his shiny bald head and his tuna breath, and I used to love his little chrome dome. Do you know what I see now? His big old head laid on the green baize and a snooker cue in my hand, ready to pot him right up the hairy nostril."

Anne did her best not to laugh. "I can't imagine you two not being together. What will you do? You've got Elsie to think about."

Lorraine hardly needed a reminder; the girl was the pride of her existence. "I do, but she's fifteen now, and there's a world of difference between thirteen and fifteen. Whatever happens has been two years in the making, and I am not taking all the blame for it. She's had to listen to too many arguments about absolute bullshit, and that is not the model for relationships that I want her

to have. I don't want my daughter to settle, and that's what I will be telling her unless I do something."

The ping in the back indicated that the towels were dry and before Anne could move from her desk, Lorraine held her hand up. "I'll go. I need a mundane chore to occupy me."

She plodded into the back with her whole body. There was probably only a dozen more times she would ever need to make this walk to check the dryer. Time was running out for Laine's Manes - and her marriage.

The bell on the door jangled as she was still folding. The scent of fabric softener was soothing, and Laine was tempted to lie back on the bench and just sniff them. Lenor Land was comforting. No-one ever ended up bankrupt and divorced in fabric softener ads. That wasn't particularly marketable. And Lorraine had never felt less like a valuable commodity.

She recognised a smooth, lyrical Scottish brogue and had to smile just a little. She would always be able to identify Evan McElroy. He didn't even live in the village at the moment, but he always made sure to stop by for a cut when he was in the neighbourhood. It was quite a treat to play with his thick, red-gold hair and steal a squeeze of his rather nice shoulders.

Anne's voice had adopted the kittenish, flirty tone she used on every man that was worthy of it. "Mr McElroy, how lovely to see you again, and Sergeant Preston too. I was so sorry to hear about what happened to Fiona. How is she doing? I've got a box of chocs I was going to run over to the hospital later."

Bobby Preston was notorious for speaking with a surly kind of abruptness, like he couldn't really be bothered speaking to anyone. "She's good, Anne. Due out of hospital the day after tomorrow."

Funny, Lorraine thought, was that almost glee in his voice? He and Fiona had been dating for years, but he had never seemed particularly happy about the relationship.

"Erm,"

Was that Bobby Preston on the verge of stuttering? *Remarkable.*

"Erm." *Wow*, he was two for two. Once might have been an aberration, twice was unthinkable.

"Is Laine in, Anne? There's something I wanted to ask you both."

"She's here, Sergeant Preston. Probably eavesdropping in the back right now. We can hear clear as day through there."

For a split second, Lorraine was ecstatic about the prospect of firing Anne. No late-afternoon muffin for her later. She would be lucky if she didn't get spit in her cup-a-soup.

"You can call me Bobby, Anne. I'm not on duty."

Lorraine's jaw dropped. Bloody hell's bells, it must be both Groundhog Day and Christmas, because Bobby never told anyone to call him Bobby; it might have implied he wanted to establish a personal connection. Which he never did.

She pushed aside the curtain blocking the view of the main salon and carried through the armful of towels as if she hadn't heard any of the preceding conversation. Two large men were taking up floor space. McElroy, built like Owen from her favourite show, Grey's Anatomy, all rugged and butch in a Scottish way, and Bobby, Sergeant Preston, habitually annoyed in his body language, a bit bristly, but leanly delicious in his musculature.

She pictured Dave. He still had very nice, square shoulders, but too much work and not enough exercise had given him the beginnings of a paunch. And he didn't try anymore, and he did not mind in the least that his nose hair was getting out of hand.

If he would even cut his toenails once in a blue moon, it might help a little. Both Evan and Bobby smelled good too; there was a strong chance Dave would always smell like tuna fish to her now. She would put on a good show, though; be what she was expected to be.

"Well, well, well, what have I done to deserve this lovely visit? Hopefully, you're here for a haircut and not on official business?" Her attractively round body, something she had no appreciation of, swerved lithely between the chairs and dropped the towels into one of the wicker baskets.

She almost took a step backwards when she looked into Bobby's dark amber eyes and found the high cheekbones beneath them blushing. If he were aware of his condition, she very much doubted Bobby would have remained standing there. Stoicism was everything to Brigley Prior's prickly sergeant.

"There's a party..."

"Proposal." McElroy coughed out behind his closed fist.

Bobby scowled at Evan with the wrath of seven global-warming afflicted suns. "Party mainly," he growled, "being held for Fee when she comes out. I'm sure she'd appreciate you and Anne, and your partners, of course, to be there."

Despite Lorraine's current misery, the idea of being present to watch Bobby Preston get down on one knee to Fiona Nilsson was quite a distraction. Anne's look of disbelief, she felt sure, was something like mirroring her own.

Anne was nodding even before Laine started to answer. "I'm sure we'd love to be there. Can we bring anything?"

"No, thank you. It's at my place on Rose Walk, the day after tomorrow. Come over any time after seven."

Evan settled himself into Laine's chair; the cheeky devil had helped himself to a gown without her even noticing.

"Well, let's get to it. No point not looking my best for yon ceilidh." His dip deeper inside the ebb and flow of his rapidly disappearing Scottishness was a deliberate piss-take.

"Bastard," Preston muttered, clearly feeling the strain of an impending proposal.

"He says with affection to his future best man," Evan laughed.

"Who said you were? I'm thinking I might ask Sl..."

Outside, the late summer light seemed to dim as a shadow passed across Lorraine's glass frontage. The door shook as it opened; the bell pealing a shade more vigorously than usual.

Anne took a step back, one hand going to her chest, as the other reached up to check that her hair was on point.

Lorraine's skin buzzed. She had heard about him. The whole ruddy village had heard about him, but seeing Drew Slater in the flesh was something different altogether.

Evan leaned further back in his chair, his smile wryly amused. Bobby rolled his eyes upward and kept them there. "Slater," he acknowledged. "Wearing trousers, I see."

"I don't wear trousers, I wear pants."

Lorraine felt her legs threatening to buckle. Apart from the sheer size of the man in front of her, he radiated sex, annoyance, and the ability to dazzle.

"You don't wear pants often either, from what I can tell." Bobby continued to gripe.

Slater ignored him with evident good humour. "Good afternoon. Siobhan tells me you ladies are the ones to look after me." His voice was delicious, resonant of his home state of Texas, and effortlessly powerful. He kept the volume soft, but Lorraine's toes still felt the impact, the vibration. He smiled, and the stern, resting butch face disappeared, leaving behind sparkling turquoise eyes under a hooded brow; his teeth gleamed naturally white inside a swathe of crisp black beard.

She wasn't aware she was doing it, but Lorraine sucked in her breath and pushed out her chest. The response was akin to Pavlov's dog, completely irresistible under the circumstances.

He stepped closer and Anne gripped her elbow, making her squeak. Lorraine wasn't sure if she was steadying herself or whether it was because she could see Laine was wobbling.

"Do you have time to fit me in after McElroy?"

Fit him in, Lorraine wondered? It was highly doubtful the guy fitted in anywhere, although there were one or two places she'd like to try.

"Laine?" Bobby gave a vocal nudge.

She shook her head, noticing if she craned her neck upward, that Mr Slater, the living god who tamed Siobhan Brinsworth, was indeed in need of a trim. His long, raven layers were almost brushing his shoulders, his fringe drooping into his eyelashes. Assessing him professionally helped, and she finally found her voice.

"Of course. I can do that if you don't mind waiting?" She did not fancy the state she was going to make of Evan's hair with the pressure of tackling Mr Slater next. Slater had million-dollar hair, and it was probably insured.

Evan seemed to anticipate the jeopardy to his hairline. "No, no, no. Who am I to keep the big man waiting?" Lorraine didn't know whether to throttle him, because now she had no time to build up a measure of courage.

Anne grabbed a gown and tried to throw it over Drew's shoulders. It missed and landed on one of his taut, heavily veined forearms.

"Let me get that for you, darlin'," he murmured, casually slipping it on, his movements as buttery smooth as a strippergram's.

"You feel like tying me up there, sweetheart?" He gestured to the back of his neck and ducked down. Lorraine would not have been surprised if Anne had jumped on for a piggyback or indeed broke out a length of bondage cord. It was such a delicious back, the kind you would need to be blessed with long legs to wrap around.

She glanced down at her own perfectly serviceable but short ones, never feeling more frumpy, and just plain old. No matter that at forty-three, she was the right kind of age for Slater.

"Take a seat at the basin, if you don't mind?"

"Sure thing," he agreed, perfectly relaxed as he followed instructions.

"Annie, my love, why don't you make our guests some drinks?" *And stop slaving.*

Anne gave her a sly wink and moved toward the kitchenette in the back, leaving her alone with three men; on a day when she didn't have much patience with one man.

Bobby made himself comfortable in one of the other chairs.

Lorraine took a breath, moving behind the sinks and grabbing a towel. "Ok, just lean forward while I drape this around you." The hand-size terry cloth looked like a flannel tickling his strong neck.

"That's perfect." The reassurance was more for her than for him. "Now, lean back and make yourself comfortable." The chair groaned beneath him and Lorraine winced. Opting for the budget model might have been a mistake.

Slater leaned the weight of his head in her palms and Lorraine gulped. His eyes rolled upward, surveying her with mild amusement. "You gonna turn the water on there, Lorraine?"

"Water?"

"You know, to wash my hair."

Lorraine blushed, aware of her fingers stroking the lush tresses behind his ears - and not in a professional sense.

She reached for the shower head and turned on the flow, something that had never seemed more erotic. "Watch your water," Anne yelled from off to one side. The age-old warning to check the temperature, from that one time that she singed Reverend Mason's ever-increasing bald spot.

It was a long time since Laine had needed a reminder, but she was glad of one today.

She moved gingerly, wincing when she splashed Drew's forehead with the first drops. He closed his eyes and moaned softly. "Feels good, honey."

Oh, my god. This was soooo... wrong. Lorraine tried to make her moves mechanical, but he had so much hair she needed to finger him. *Shut up*, she thought. Not finger him, *move his hair with her fingers*.

She rubbed the indentation at the base of his skull, and his chest, a miracle of human evolution if she had ever seen one, heaved as he took a deep, satisfied breath. Shampoo? Where in blazes had Anne moved the shampoo? Laine grabbed it from where it always was, wincing when the glob that fired out missed her hand and trickled down Slater's neck.

"Sorry," she stuttered. "I'm... I think I'm having a bad day." Trying to pull herself together, she scooped the shampoo off his neck and into his hair. Laine's fingers finally fell into the massaging rhythm they could perform by rote.

"Anything I can handle for you, Lozzy?" The z's rolled off his tongue like they were curling around something naughty.

Lorraine experienced a corresponding twinge that some would class infidelity. Bobby just grunted for some reason she couldn't fathom, but then Bobby was often disgruntled.

"You don't mind me calling you Lozzy, do you? Pet names tend to spring right out of my mouth, but I use them respectfully."

"For fuck's sake."

Lorraine blinked; Bobby really did seem like he was having a bad case of the miffs.

"Ignore Preston, he's just jealous." One of Slater's thick eyebrows quirked in humour and Lorraine wondered if it would be ok if she slithered into a puddle at his feet. She was relevant enough for a man like him to give her a nickname.

What did Dave tend to use? Hun, if she was lucky. Yes, that was it, hun, hun, hun, like her first name was Attila.

She found her voice right as Anne plopped a coffee on her trolley. "Jammy bitch," her employee muttered.

"Lozzy is fine." It came out quite loudly. "I've been called a lot worse."

Slater rolled his eyes up. *Pretty, pretty, jewel-coloured eyes.* “Baby, why do I sense there’s a man somewhere giving you shit?”

She caught Evan looking at her thoughtfully. She better be careful with whatever she said next. Evan wrote romance novels, and she didn’t aspire toward immortalisation.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just the usual, everyday tiff.” Liar, liar, pants on fire. And the fact her eyes filled with tears was a giveaway.

Anne took this as an opportunity to spill the goods. “No, it’s not. Bloody Dave ate the tuna she was having for lunch. And last week he washed his machine parts with her Olaplex.”

Great, how pathetic did she sound now? But it *was* one of the major crimes you could commit against a woman, let alone a hairdresser. That stuff was expensive, even wholesale.

“I have no idea what that is, but it sounds like the guy needs a whooping. Let me tell you the truth about women. Number 1: give your girl even small moments of joy and she will give you the ocean. Number 2: Give her more and she will sail through anything with you. Win, win, whatever. If he never learned that, he’s an idiot. What’s this dickwad’s name?” Slater’s jaw clenched, visible even under his thick beard, and Lorraine’s hands stopped moving; there was a chance if she didn’t choose her next words carefully, Dave could end up fish bait.

“Keep washing, darlin’, I’m enjoying it. McElroy, you know this guy? What’s your take on him?”

Evan sighed. “Sound guy but clueless, good with an engine, but in need of enlightenment.”

“How do you know that?” Lorraine had little to do with Evan outside of the salon, though of course she knew he was famous. What could he have gleaned about David?

“Because of the look on your face, Lorraine, and the droop in your walk. I’ve learned a lot in four years about making a woman happy. And that is not happy.” He pointed at her, up and down, increasing her self-consciousness. “You need someone to swoop you into the air and make you giggle.”

Drew nodded. “When a man gets complacent with a woman as fine as you are, then it’s time he had a reminder.” Those eyes of Slater’s bored into her and blushing was inevitable. Lucky, lucky Siobhan. He probably got her pregnant just by breathing on her.

Laine turned off the water and squeezed the excess moisture out of his locks; trying not to enjoy the process of rubbing him with the towel.

“Over next to Mr McElroy, please.” She had to find a way to put this back inside the professional box. Slater was far too comfortable discussing her intimate business.

Drew took the towel around his neck in two fists, causing his biceps to bunch under his t-shirt.

“Can you stop doing that?” Bobby snorted.

“Doing what?” Slater asked, a wry grin making him look boyish for a moment.

“Flexing. I know you know what you’re doing.”

“Just giving the crowd a little sugar.”

“If I have to swallow any more of your fucking sugar, I’ll be a type two diabetic. Holster your ruddy guns already.”

Drew rested his hand on the back of Laine’s waist, guiding her to the station in a way that was both respectful and comforting. “Now, tell me the rest, because I’m guessing there’s more to this. Why is the place so damn quiet?”

He took a seat, and Lorraine retrieved a comb and a pair of scissors. If he didn't keep his mouth shut, then there was a chance he would go out looking like a cocker spaniel. Smoothing his hair back from his hairline, it kinked and revealed the natural parting. "What are we having?"

Drew's gaze in the mirror was steady and relentless. "The truth and a little off all over."

When Lorraine paused, clearly reluctant to find words, Drew said, "You may as well tell me. This is where my girl likes to get her hair done. Anything going down here just became my business."

Bobby appeared behind her in the reflection. There was something new that she had never seen before in the depths of his cola-coloured irises. "You may as well tell him. When it comes to Siobhan, the man is unyielding."

Anne appeared next to Bobby's elbow, making Lorraine feel completely ganged up on. Her eyes were sharp and unforgiving, practically saying, 'Lorraine, this is your one chance to change something.' "It's mainly Dave," she piped, ignoring Laine's answering scowl.

"Which we'll get to in a moment," Slater replied calmly. "I'm waiting Lozzy Loz."

Lorraine gulped. "But you are right, the other thing is this place. I can't afford the rent next month. With the books and the movies, Brigley Prior landlords just decided they could pick a new number. But not all businesses have thrived from the sightseers. Most visitors have their hair cut at home, not when they are out buying ice cream."

Drew nodded thoughtfully, causing Lorraine to make a snip that was slightly too short.

"Careful there, Lorraine. My head's not designed for a crew cut."

"God, I would give my sodding pension to see that," Bobby muttered.

Lorraine smiled anxiously. "That's it. That is all my secrets. My husband turned into a wanker and I'll have to go back to working mobile. Not the end of the world, really. But there's Anne too."

The receptionist in question waved her hand. "No, you know I'll be fine. The last couple of years have been a nice bonus, money for hols. But, if there is a way we can stay open, of course, I'd love it. Brigley Prior needs Laine's Manes. We were doing great until the rent hike, then the villagers couldn't afford what we needed to charge."

"Give me the landlord's name and I'll deal with it." Tone firm, brooking no argument, Evan stood up and pulled his phone out from the pocket of the leather jacket slung next to him. "When I set the books here, the last thing I had in mind was to cause anyone a hardship. What kind of romance is there in putting someone out of business?"

"What are you going to do?" Lorraine felt excited, but reluctant. This was her mess, but the concept of someone else taking the weight of the problem would be a godsend. The ability to take a much-needed deep breath would feel wonderful.

"I'm going to change his mind, or I'm going to pay the excess."

Slater winked at Laine in the mirror. "Or I'll just buy up the whole mother-loving street."

"Smug dipshit," Bobby muttered.

"Watch it, short stuff," Slater replied. Which at six feet tall, Bobby was - in comparison to Drew. "Or you'll need more than a taser."

"What are you going to say?" Laine was a bit panicked. In case Evan, known for being a little flippant, somehow made anything worse.

He just smiled, his icy blue eyes crinkling, brimming with mischief, and walked out of the door without responding.

"Lozzy, hand me your cell, and keep utilising your talent."

“But...”

Slater’s brow was resolute. “Don’t complicate matters, baby. You don’t need me to change your life; I know you got this yourself, but please permit me to expedite. Cell phone and hair, babe, cell phone and hair.”

Anne slapped it in his hand and Lorraine gave her a stare carrying the weight of eleven apostles versus Judas. Presumably seeing his wife’s name on the screen and trying not to fall deeper into hot water, Dave must have picked up immediately.

“I’m not your hun, Dave, and neither is Lozzy. Try coming up with something less bullshit.”

There was squawking on the other end and Drew circled his finger in the air, indicating Lorraine should keep cutting.

“Who am I? This is Drew Slater. Yes, that Drew Slater, I’m not surprised you’ve heard of me. What?” Drew fluttered his eyelashes in irritation. “Yes, it’s true, but I didn’t call you to talk about my penis.”

Lorraine covered her eyes with her hands, nearly stabbing herself with the scissors. Jesus, Dave, fancy asking him that when the whole village had heard it was true. Drew Slater had legendary equipment. On witnessing it for herself, Fiona had told everyone that she was tempted to create it a Facebook Page. Apparently, it was quite something.

“What’s this about the tuna? Well, maybe you didn’t mean it, but you didn’t care about it either. Not cool, man, not cool at all; maybe you need your eyes opening for you.” Drew wrinkled his mouth, stifling a smile that might be heard in his voice. “I don’t appreciate a man that can’t recognise treasure when he’s blessed with it. You want to hold on to what you have, you take your head out of your ass and worship her. Are we gonna need to speak about this again? Good, because I’m making this salon a regular stop, and if I hear you’re not treating this woman like a star, I’m going to find someone who will, and then I’ll be calling on you, and I don’t mean on the phone. We clear, Dave? Fan-fucking-tastic. Have a good day.”

Drew met her eyes in the mirror, a vein ticking at the side of his temple. “That was a blast. I think I’m going to love being the new sheriff in town.” Bobby looked like he might vomit and Anne couldn’t risk breaking out a ‘whoop whoop,’ and clapping her hands delightedly, clamping onto Lorraine’s wrist and shaking it in celebration.

In her tired little heart, Lorraine felt a small beat of hope. If Dave had not learned anything from that, she might just let Drew find her a man who would.



Laine studied her toes as her foot crossed the threshold. The next few moments would be pivotal to the rest of her life. Within these familiar, honeysuckle painted walls, she would be saying ‘hi’ and starting over or ‘bye’ and begin the process of separation.

The house was almost peaceful - sleeping; no beeping, screeching, explosions. It was perfect. Elsie was at a friend’s and if Dave wasn’t home yet, she had a few moments to get her head around things.

She turned the corner into the lounge and was met with a space, a gaming chair-sized space. On the coffee table were two things. A basket piled high with tinned tuna and a vase of multicoloured chrysanthemums. Ok, so maybe they weren’t roses, but they were actually her favourites.

“Lorraine.”

She was primed to burst into tears without even looking in Dave’s direction.

“I’m sorry, Loz.”

Loz? Was he going to adopt Drew Slater’s endearment? And then she did start crying.

She was in Dave’s arms without even seeing it coming. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t realise what I was doing. I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon and it just struck me that I resented you. When you were a full-time mum, we might not have had much money, but I felt like the man, like I was the provider. And then you got on your feet with the salon and you were doing so well, and it felt like I wasn’t. I couldn’t stand hearing about your great days because my days were complete shit.”

Lorraine made a noise of frustration in her throat, burying her nose in his shoulder. “Then find something else, Dave. I have said it to you a thousand times. You need to find something you love. We can cope for money until you do.”

“And what if I don’t find what that is?”

Lorraine wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “You will. I know you can.”

Dave’s own eyes filled; the red rims indicating it wasn’t for the first time. “When we met, I was always worried about you; because I’d catch you looking at me like you didn’t deserve me, that you couldn’t believe how lucky you were. And the truth was, I didn’t feel worthy of you, and I was scared when you started to prove me right. I stuck my head in the sand because it felt like I could beat anyone at Grand Theft Auto, but I couldn’t seem to be what you needed.”

“Or in your shell, like a turtle with irritable bowel syndrome.”

Dave looked puzzled. “I guess, if you like; that’s as good a description as any.”

“And what now?”

Dave stroked her face, his hand brushing the points of the bob that highlighted her jawline. “Now, I admit that I’m proud of you. And if you can put up with me for a bit longer, I won’t stop until I make you proud of me.”

Elsie poked her head around the door. “Hiya. I had to come home. Paula’s mum had a bakery-related emergency. Ugh, we’re not having tuna for tea, are we?”

Dave looked at Lorraine and really saw her, looked at his daughter and whispered. “Look what we create when we work on things together. Stick with me, Loz? Please... Just a bit longer?”

Lorraine pulled away from his arms and sat down, looked at the basket of tuna and thought about it. This wasn’t a brand obtained locally, this was a brand obtained from the supermarket in Newmarket; the basket, not something she owned, and the flowers in a vase she had never seen before.

“You started buying all this before Mr Slater talked to you?”

He nodded. “Though I might have expanded on things as a result of it,” he admitted.

She sighed. “We’ll give it another whirl then, provided you never stop noticing me.”

Dave dropped to his knees in front of her. “I promise you’ll never need Drew Slater in your life whenever you’ve got me.”

Laine kissed his still slightly tufty, but much-beloved nose. “Believe me, a girl always needs a little Drew Slater in her life.”

Because Dave wasn’t going to get off that easily...

THE END



THANK YOU FOR READING.

WITH MUCH APPRECIATION

ANNE-MARIE XOX

P.S. THE REAL DAVE IS A TREASURE.



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EVAN?**

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