



Summer Rain

By Amy Blythe



KATE SHIPLEY HAD EVERYTHING she needed: naughty knickers and no expectations.

Well, she definitely had the knickers. And probably far too many clothes for a long weekend, but she wasn't entirely sure what she'd be needing so she'd brought a little of everything.

She wheeled it all toward the station exit, feeling nervous excitement froth somewhere under her ribs. She should have done this months ago.

The bright Amsterdam sky was dotted with cotton-ball clouds, and high above those, far far away, jet trails criss-crossed the blue: people going places much further away. She'd come only from London, no great distance at all, but it felt a long way away now. People all around her spoke a language she couldn't begin to understand.

She couldn't see Johannes. It had been months since they'd met—perhaps she'd forgotten what he looked like. She stopped walking, far enough back from the road that no cars would stop to let her cross, and propped her suitcase on her leg.

He was probably just running late. She twisted the ring on her thumb and told the fluttering pixies in her belly to calm the fuck down. Deep breaths. Eyes open. Appreciate the scenery. If this turned quickly into a dirty weekend, well, this might be her only chance to take in the view.

Mid-rise buildings snaked in wide curves around the canals in both directions, every shade of brown and tan and orange, rooflines disjointed, and yet still somehow uniform.

There were bikes, lots of bikes, and boats too. Touristy shops spilled their wares out onto the footpaths: red, white and blue flags, clogs decorated with windmills, all-things-orange.

She pulled her phone from her jacket pocket. No messages. She turned on the ringer, checked she had service. She did—hadn't missed anything. Why was she so nervous?

Her sunglasses were still on her head from when she'd left London. That's how short a trip it was. She nudged them down toward her nose, but they caught in a disobedient curl. Her hair hadn't quite decided what colour it was: blonde in summer, brown in winter, and all shades of auburn in sunlight. Perhaps it was a fair warning to strangers: she was a chameleon, liable to switch to suit her environment. What would Johannes want her to be?

What did she want him to be? was the question she must remind herself to ask.

"Kate!" He crossed the road, barely looking at the oncoming traffic, and took hold of both her arms. A kiss for each cheek, and then he pulled back suddenly. "Sorry, force of habit. How was your trip?"

"Fast."

"Good, isn't it?" He was tall and broad-shouldered, built like a lumberjack, minus the plaid. He wore a brown leather jacket over a dark grey tee-shirt, torn jeans, and bed-hair. Just the kind of dishevelled that made her think of dishevelled him even more. He was, in every way, opposite to Lucinda, the immaculate set-painter Kate had fallen head over heels for during rehearsals for *The Winter's Tale*. Christmas had indeed been merry and bright, and January unseasonably warm in Kate's apartment, but the end had been inevitable—or so it seemed now, looking back.

"It's meant to rain later, believe it or not." Johannes looked up at the clear sky. "So, I thought we could go to the cat boat. Jean said you liked cats."

He pointed the way they'd walk, and Kate kept in step. "What is a cat boat?"

"An animal sanctuary."

"On a boat?"

"Welcome to Amsterdam." He gave a wicked grin. "But it's open for a couple of hours, if you want to eat first."

"No, let's beat the rain. I'm intrigued." She dragged her case along behind her and off they went.

Johannes nodded to the case. "I can do that."

"Nah, all good. I got it. What else did Jean tell you about me?" Jean was a good friend, but they'd been close since puberty; Jean knew too much.

"She said I shouldn't take you to the theatre."

"What?" The wheel of Kate's bag caught on a cobblestone. "No, actually, that's fair. I'm the worst."

"In what way?"

"I can't switch off work-brain. I'm—yeah, no. Wise woman."

They walked half a block in silence, Kate vaguely regretting not letting him take her case, Johannes occasionally catching her eye, smiling and warm, eager-to-please.

"I should have got a locker at the station." Kate resisted the urge to ask what else Jean had said.

"The apartment isn't far."

"I thought it was *your* apartment."

"It is. I just haven't lived there for so long, it feels..." he trailed off.

"Like home's somewhere else?"

"Like it's someone else's home. I've been renting it out and people leave behind things they don't want any more - a couch, a book shelf, a big ugly floor cushion which is just too comfortable to give up."

Kate rather liked the idea of sinking into the embrace of an enormous cushion. On her own, or with company. She was sorely in need of this holiday. Tired, truth be told. And not overflowing with enthusiasm for sightseeing, but a boat of cats was something else. Something rather closer to floor-cushion-comfort than tourist-trippy-trappy. "My landlord won't let me have a cat."

"Jean said. How is Jean?"

"Loved-up. Unbearable." Okay, so perhaps the unbearable bit was less to do with Jean's happiness, and more to do with Kate's bittersweet memories. At Christmas they'd both been single-but-starting-something. Now, they seemed a world apart. Jean wasn't smug. Wasn't doing anything really wrong at all. But she was in love and bliss was written all over her face. "She's good."

"Good. And you, how have you been?" Johannes said.

"Busy with shows. No, it's been good. Good busy." No time to think, to over-analyse and deconstruct and relive what went wrong with Lucinda. "But I definitely need a break."

"Here we are." Johannes pointed to a barge below them on the canal, and then to the stairs leading down to it. "Ladies first." He lifted her bag, so she was luggage free and suddenly, strangely, lighter. She could hear a faint meowing already. This was the perfect start to her holiday: an abundance of felines.

"Can we just..." Kate found her footing on the boat.

"Go right in, that's what it says."

"I did try to learn a bit of Dutch on the train."

"I bet you have an amazing memory—learning all those scripts, and in old English too."

"I think that bit of my brain might be on holiday." She pushed open the door.

A woman, seated behind a desk, said something cheery and guttural.

Johannes answered in Dutch then switched, with enviable ease, to English. "Is it busy today?"

"Not very."

"Go ahead." Johannes nodded to Kate to lead the way.

She nudged her way through another door, careful in case a cat was nearby. Johannes stayed close behind her, a gentle, solid presence.

There were cats everywhere—up on carpeted towers, curled in baskets, climbing ramps and perched on ledges. A tiny mottled mystery-kitty curled around Kate's ankle and she crouched to stroke its silky fur. "Aren't you the sweetest thing?"

"I like to think so," Johannes answered, then chuckled.

"Oh, this is perfect. If you'd asked me what I wanted to do, I never would have even thought..."

"It's a badly kept secret, but still a kind of secret."

"It's brilliant." She stood up as her first feline friend-of-the-day wandered away. Her gaze fell on a midnight black beast, all fur and shiny eyes like puddles in the dark. "That is the pooffiest cat I have ever seen."

"Pooffiest?"

"Poofy, like a pouf."

"A foot-rest."

"More puff than pouf, perhaps."

"Puff, like smoke? Pouffiest?" he seemed to be trying out the word.

Kate scratched the fluffy creature behind the ears then smoothed out the thick coat. "You are the most pouffy pouffiness in the known universe."

"Pouffiness." The cat nosed Johannes' hand.

"He likes you."

"I'm a regular customer."

"He's the pouffiest poof."

"Poof—is that different again?"

"Perhaps this lad likes the lads."

"How can you tell he's a he?"

"Aye, that's the question. What are your preferred pronouns, Sir Pouffiness?"

Johannes laughed, breathy and close enough that she felt the breeze of it in her hair.

The cat stretched out towards him.

"He's a terrible flirt. A definite poof."

Johannes gave the eager cat a gentle stroke. Kate watched his hands, gentle and strong, dark and calloused in places. He fixed and sold bikes for a living—definitely a man who was good with his hands.



JOHANNES WATCHED HER from the far side of the room. He wasn't in any hurry. Timing seemed to be his nemesis in relationships, so he hung back. She was contentedly curling the backs of her fingers against the neck of a silvery queen of a cat.

He had a happy tabby to pat and, to tell the truth, was waiting for Kate's signal. A moment later, she turned, caught him staring, and cocked her head to the side. "Best thing ever."

He took a mock-bow. "Take as long as you want."

"I think I'm cat-sated."

"Poofed out?"

That earned a laugh. "In more ways than one," she said, but didn't explain. "Shall we?" She nodded to the door.

Outside, up on the side of the canal, the day had grown warmer, more humid. Kate rolled up her coat and stuffed it into the outside pocket of her suitcase.

"Cold drink?" Johannes shrugged out of his own jacket.

"Can I ditch my bag first?"

"Of course."

They were only a couple of blocks from his place. *His*. No, still not feeling it. He'd been back for weeks but some part of his psyche was still convinced this was an extended visit.

The entrance wasn't very grand, but there was something about this apartment he'd always liked. It seemed so humble, but then, when you

stepped into the main room, it stretched wide and made itself open and light.

Bringing Kate here cast a kind of spell on the place, made it feel more like it was truly his. The collection of odd furnishings seemed like an intentional aesthetic as soon as Kate, in all her mismatched brilliance stepped inside. She was colourful and fluid like one of Van Gogh's trees, a yellow sky inviting him into her warmth.

"It's not what I was expecting." She walked ahead, past the kitchenette, toward the balcony doors, then turned back to face him. "What a great space?"

"Only one bedroom, but," he shrugged, "plenty of room to..." What was he doing? Why—why would he bring up sleeping arrangements this early in the day?

"I see what you mean."

He followed her gaze to the floor cushion, grey green and amorphous like a giant booger in the middle of the floor.

She touched the back of it. "Soft though."

"Every time I think I'll get rid of it, the thing wins me over with its comfort."

"I dated a guy like that once," Kate smirked, then sat herself down in the middle of the cushion. "Yep, just like this. Am I stuck now?"

"Probably."

"You'll have to haul me out." Kate offered up her hand.

Johannes strode over, ever-so-slightly tempted to kneel and, rather than pulling her out, let her pull him in. Going out for a drink wasn't really necessary. There were drinks here. Food too, though nothing spectacular. He'd stocked up in case she surprised him, tore his clothes off and didn't want to leave the house all weekend. Best to be prepared, either way, he'd thought.

Either way. He didn't mind, or so he kept telling himself. She was a friend of a friend, they got on well, why not spend a long weekend holi-

day-making? The possibility of sex was there, ever present between them, but that was just chemistry. A prospect, but certainly not a promise.

She gripped his hand and leapt up, her knees grazing his. It was a jolt of awareness. Proximity. Heat. She kept hold of his hand between them, though he loosened his grasp. He'd been aware of this before. It shouldn't come as a surprise. The first time they'd met, sharing a pub table with Jean, bumping knees and elbows. On the train home she'd sat opposite him in the almost empty carriage and lifted her feet to meet his, sole to sole. But that was it. Nothing had happened.

"Thanks for having me," Kate said. "It's really... it's just great."

He held an answer in his mouth, but it didn't come to anything. Maybe this was his problem—this was why nothing had happened before—because he froze at the key moment.

"Shall we?" she lifted their hands. "My shout."

"Well, in that case let's find some place nice." He had flawless timing so long as he was clowning around, apparently.

"Hah!" Her laugh, the way it lit up her face, the curve of her open lips, bright and full and expressive. He wanted to see her taste a really hoppy pilsner, see her reaction. He wanted to watch her face flicker with surprise, with awe, with hunger, desire. He wanted to see how that mystical mouth moved when she was excited. He wanted to tease her, see her eyes light with frustration and need, see her face slack in bliss, contorted with pleasure.

"You coming?" She was waiting by the door.



KATE RESISTED THE URGE to jump him, then and there. He was a gentleman, after all. He seemed to be, anyway. She wasn't entirely familiar with the species, to be fair. She spent most of her time with actors and all that faked intimacy, all the quick changes backstage, tapped away at the shyness one might otherwise feel with someone new. And with it, gentleness, in her experience.

But Johannes wasn't used to changing in and out of corsets and tights with four other people in the room. He hadn't seen her naked, or anywhere near it. She watched him cross the room to meet her, let her gaze drift, noticed his easy gait. He wasn't shy; there was a confidence there. This was a man who had lived and travelled and loved and lost, and she was nothing but a long weekend, at best a fling. Hopefully a happy memory to look back on for them both.

She would endeavour to be gentle with him, and hopefully he wouldn't be entirely gentle with her. It'd be so much easier to face Lucinda, on set next week, if she had viscerally fresh memories of a solid shaft of man between her thighs.

Outside, on the street, the sky had greyed over, but the temperature seemed to be ramping up. She was glad she left her coat up in Johannes' apartment.

"It's just a couple of blocks, the place I want to show you." He'd planned this—thought about what they'd do and see while she was visiting. She reached out for his hand, a silent thanks, not thought-through. Not planned. But now she was holding his hand. It was like being fourteen again, awkward and sweet and nervous-making.

And then it wasn't. His hand brushed against her thigh, and her skin seemed to wake up. It reminded her of those hot towels they give out on long-haul flights, of pressing them to her face, the shock of heat, tingling bright, then pores open, hyper-sensitive to every slip of air, every touch.

"It's the oldest pub in Amsterdam, or so they say," Johannes said, as if he couldn't feel the charge between their hands, the spike of every accidental touch. "The Dutch are a little obsessed with having the oldest of everything and anything."

She looked up to see him pointing out a red brick building on the corner, covered in grids of tiny square windows, their black frames surrounded by white lines of woodwork like the pencil guidelines still visible on a finished drawing. The facade peaked like a crown, the roof dark

and angular behind. And lights glowed inside—it was mid-afternoon, but the clouds were closing in, darkening the city.

He hung back so she could go in first, keeping close behind her as she went.

Despite the size of the place, it was snug inside, cosy. Wooden stairs snaked up to a mezzanine. An ancient, black stove squatted against a wall of blue and white tiles, the chimney pointing straight to the roof, high above.

Johannes brushed against her as they stopped to scout seats. There were two rather large tables, family dining size. A corner table, out of the way, less well-lit, would really be more to Kate's taste.

"You like an IPA, if I remember correctly." Johannes was perusing the bar's offerings.

"Good remembering."

He grinned at her. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

"We can sit upstairs."

She found a snug corner. The wooden seats were ancient, worn away by hundreds of years, perhaps, of thirsty customers so that now there were bum-sized indents. Johannes slid in beside her, plonking two frothy beers on the table.

"Proost," he said.

"Proost?"

He looked her in the eye and knocked his glass to hers. It was bright and bitter at once, cool but warming, and took the edge off her hunger.

"So, did you miss these places," she lifted her beer to the surrounds, "when you lived in Paris?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Paris has its own gems. I don't know about *missed*. It's strange, showing you around makes Amsterdam feel more like home."

"Happy to be of help."

He smiled, the creases around his mouth dark in the low light there. She wanted to trace them with her fingertips. He put his beer down, toying with a cardboard beer mat so that the glass exactly covered the Amstel logo. "I wasn't in any particular hurry to move back, to be honest. But things were ending—one thing and then another. It was time."

"Jean?" Kate had heard Jean's account of what had happened with Johannes: one misguided kiss, and plenty of opportunity for more, but nothing happened. Still, there was always more than one side to a story.

"She moved back to London, yeah, but you know she and I were never..."

"Yeah."

"It seemed like it might, but there was something missing. Well, she was falling for someone else."

"That'll be it."

"I was on the end of a relationship, so the timing was pretty bad all around."

"Something serious?"

He nodded and drank. "It was on life-support, no chance of revival really, but I wasn't ready to let it go. The relationship, I mean."

"Been there," Kate said.

"Yeah?"

"Only thirty or forty times?"

His eyebrows leapt up his forehead.

"Well, maybe five. I'm hopeless really."

"That's kind of impressive—that you don't get cynical and hold people at arm's length."

"Or, it's that definition of insanity where you do the same thing and expect a different result."

The waiter appeared at the top of the stairs and delivered their food, a bowl of meat-ball sized balls, that did not appear to be meat, and a small bowl of grainy mustard.

"Stuffed mushrooms?" Kate said, remembering her hunger, hopes high.

"Bitterballen." Johannes thanked the waiter and he left them.

"Bitter?"

"Salty."

"These are one of the things you missed, aren't they?" She prodded the nearest crispy globe with one finger, not hiding her scepticism one bit. "Salty balls."

"Yum." He almost—but not quite—cracked a smile.

She held his gaze, like a kind of staring contest, which she didn't like her chances of winning—the beer was stronger than she'd thought. "I'll try anything once." She shrugged and dipped one in mustard.

"I might take you up on that," he said, watching her mouth with lazy, indulgent eyes. Oh, so it was gonna be like that, was it? She bit in. The taste was a strange mix of spices and meat, almost creamy. "Is it—it's a meatball isn't it?"

"More or less."

She laughed. "I though it was some weird, exotic... I was expecting a pickle in the middle or some shit."

He slouched back in his chair, his gaze still fixed on her. His legs shifted as he leaned back, brushing against hers. He stopped suddenly, as if realising, then slid his shin behind her ankle. "Disappointed?" he said, no hint on his face of what was going on beneath the table.

She took a drink. "No. Happy to save the risky adventures for other, non-culinary, aspects of my holiday."

"This might be the most risky thing I have planned." He picked up a bitterball.

"Well, then." She wasn't sure what she was saying, exactly, but she'd said it as if she were. Was it a challenge to ditch the plan, or an invitation to risky behaviour? All of the above, perhaps. His foot flexed against the tender inside of her ankle.

He grinned, bit into his ball, then tried to speak. "There's Anne Frank's house and along from that the homomonument. Less a plan, more a general direction we might walk in."

"Wait, what's a homomonument?"

"A big triangle, and stairs down to the canal; a memorial to persecuted gays and lesbians."

"Oh." She finished her beer. "Well, I'm up for that."



HE TOOK A PHOTO OF her by the sign, on her phone, then sat on the stairs, trying not to stare at her, to study this baffling beauty, while she filtered and posted the picture. His gaze fell to the dark grey water, the ripple and flow breaking the reflection of the darkening sky. While they'd been drinking, the clouds had encroached.

"I can't decide if I'm disappointed or relieved to miss it." Kate slipped her phone into her pocket. "I want to see it, I do, but I don't want to be sad—not today."

"Anne Frankhuis?"

She nodded, sitting down beside him, not quite close enough to touch, but he could feel the warmth of her against his arm. She traced an inscription in the cement. "There's two versions of her diary—did you know that?—the one her father published, and the one with all the bisexual bits."

"I did not know that."

"Bi-erasure."

"Oui. I mean, yes. Habit. Sorry."

"Are you?" She leaned her knee momentarily against his thigh.

The question surprised him—and, damn it, she would see that written all over his face.

"What?" she said, as if it were a perfectly obvious thing to ask.

"No, it's just, no one ever asked me that before. No, I'm straight."

"I'm not," she said.

"I know."

"Jean said?"

He nodded. This felt like dangerous territory—what their mutual had said about Kate. It felt like almost disloyal, like gossip, like the murky waters between helping a friend and interfering.

A fat raindrop fell onto his trouser leg, turning the grey dark.

"It's about to piss down," Kate said.

"Maybe." He rubbed at the watermark.

And then it did.

Kate's laugh burst out, a bright musical crescendo, breaking through the roar of the rain. She leapt up and looked around for shelter.

Johannes mounted the stairs and searched for a cafe, a shop, where they might shelter, but it was all closed doors and private apartments along here, no convenient spot to duck for cover. "This way." She took his offered hand and they half-walked, half-ran in the general direction of his apartment.

Two blocks along, the awnings of a restaurant dripped on the empty tables below. Johannes was soaked, his shirt sticking to his back, tacky against his stomach. Kate's clothes clung, revealing the dark shadow of her bra. He tried not to look.

"We can't go in there." She ran her hand, through her hair, then shook it out. "I'm saturated." Her hair was a riot of dripping curls. He pushed a strand of hair back off her cheek. She only laughed, rain sluicing down her face, beading on her lips. He wanted to lick it off, to follow its path. She planted her hand on his chest, right in the middle.

"Completely drenched." She looked down at his body.

He felt exposed. He stepped in as she looked up, her mouth open. It took everything he had not to charge in and kiss her. His nose nudged against hers, restraint bright and bitter on his tongue.

A cold pilsner on a hot day.

The fresh rain; the heat between them.

She ran her hand down from his chest, to his stomach, and then gripped his hips like it cost her something not to rush this. Like she was wanting and waiting just as much as he was. Wary of making things awkward, of missing a clue, of messing the other around. He swelled with anticipation, not just there, between her teasing hands, but everywhere. His lungs ached for breath, his mouth for touch, his hands for more of her.

She lifted her chin, the tip of her nose tracing a line up his cheek. Her breath tickled against his lips and the rain poured down on them in sheets, blocking out the rest of the world.



KATE HAD FELT HIS HEART pounding in his chest, had seen his nipples sharpen beneath his sodden shirt, had watched his eyes darken. His lips looked so damn kissable. His tongue touched his teeth as if testing their sharpness. She wanted his mouth on her, the graze of those teeth, the firm pressure of tongue, the breathy tug of a kiss. Soft and hard. She curled her thumbs, hooking around the hard edge of his hip bones, and felt the vibration of his groan, his mouth so tauntingly close.

The rain seemed to drive harder, the sound of it roaring against the road, the canal. And then he kissed her, a glancing pressure, a breath, a shock. Another. He tasted like beer and bitterballen, like something substantial and intoxicating and mysterious. She leaned into it, inhaled his heat, the hum of hunger and surprise and delight.

A shiver went through her, whether from the sensation, or the chill, or some wicked combination of the two.

Johannes pried himself away, just barely. "We should probably..."

"Don't you dare say 'get out of these wet clothes.'"

He laughed and kissed her again, tonguing her there but making her imagine the same wet pressure, slick on her breasts, her stomach, lower. Lower. His hands slipped down to the waistband of her jeans, and no further. Infuriating. "Happy to work around the wet clothes, if you'd prefer."

She groaned aloud, pressing her body into his, desperate for touch.

If she shivered again, she didn't notice for the rush of sensation, but Johannes apparently did. "Don't want you to catch a cold." He kissed her again. "Send you home from your holiday sick, that wouldn't be good." Peeling himself away, he kept his hand on the small of her back, deliciously low, nudging her to walk.

The rain kept on, relentless, not especially cold, but by comparison to the heat of her body, of his hand on the top of her arse—definitely not her back now—there was a chill. Exhilarating and fresh.

They crossed roads and bridges, without pause, the pace almost keeping up with the thrum of her pulse.

He grabbed her hand suddenly. "Watch—"

She'd been about to walk into traffic. Her breath caught. Desire, like the rain, veiled the world, muting sounds and fogging her vision.

Johannes pulled her close against his hip, his fingers sinking into the soft flesh of her arse. "It's not far." He pressed his face into the brilliant tangles of her hair.

She pressed her chest to him. "That's our cue."

"Huh?"

"Our light."

"Oh."

Holding hands, they jogged across before the traffic started again. Johannes didn't slow down once they gained the path again. The apartments along this stretch all looked the same, and she'd seen similar architecture on every other block. Perhaps this was his block; impossible to say. "I'm going to get so lost if I go anywhere by myself," she said.

"It's like the city is playing a trick, setting a trap."

"Did you ever waltz up to the wrong apartment?"

"Oh, definitely. But there was a German liqueur involved, and various other..."

"Legal substances?"

"Exactly."

"This is me." He grabbed hold of a wrought iron railing and swung himself up the stairs. She followed like the tip of a whip, flung up and into his arms at the top, pressing him back into the banister. She reached up for his kiss, warm and familiar now, smooth as caramel and salty too.

He was trapped there, and she took full advantage, her hips firm to his, her abdomen soft against his hardness. She eased out of the kiss to look him in the eye, rolling her hips against his.

His breath caught. He kept eye contact and reached for the keypad blind. The door buzzed unlocked. "Ladies come first."

"Good policy."

Inside he kept close behind her, and every time she slowed on the stairs he was there, his hands dancing around her hips. Two flights of stairs seemed endless. She spun at the top and let him collide with her.

He pressed her into the wall, his thigh between hers. She pulled him closer, wanting the hard plane of his leg, needing that pressure. But he didn't push—not there. He kissed her—a deep, thorough exploration that made other parts of her body envy the attention of his mouth.

"You'll leave a watermark," he said, his hands on her shirt, squeezing the water from it.

"I'm pretty wet."

"I hope so." His fingers traced the waistband of her jeans.

She sucked in a breath and he delved inside the sodden material. His hands had felt so hot a moment before, but not now, not compared to the blaze between her legs. Soft, cool fingers found the crease, traced her lips, swollen and slick.

"Definitely gonna leave a mark," he said.

"Please do." She pressed forward into his touch.

He pressed his nose into her hair, pushing it back, then kissed her neck. A trail of torture across her pulse point and behind her ear, tonguing her lobe. She shivered again.

"Cold?" his voice vibrated against her skin.

"Hot." She arched again, turning out her knee.

"No fucking kidding." His mouth crashed down on hers as his fingers stroked deep.



HE FELT IT BEFORE HE heard it, the shock in his fingertips, jolting up his arm and into his spine, a spark of light and heat in both directions at once. She went limp against him. If it weren't for the wall behind her, he might have dropped her. He pressed closer, to keep his grip, and his cock found the soft plane of her stomach. Close, so close, to where he wanted to be.

The pulsing slowed, but his hand was trapped there between them, inside her wet heat. Exactly where he wanted to be.

"Turns out you were right," she said.

"Was I?" He couldn't think straight—had no idea what she was talking about.

"Wet clothes on... works."

"Like to think of myself as a creative guy."

"Surprised you can think at all." She pressed the palm of her hand to the ridge of his erection. "Any blood left up there?"

"Not a lot, no."

"Shall we, ah, go inside." Her eyebrows did a thing—giving *inside* all kinds of other meaning.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"You were waiting for permission?"

"Thought I'd see if I could make you beg."

Somehow—had they flown?—they mounted the last flight of stairs. Pulling the key from his pocket involved tightening the fabric, almost crushing him. Kate pushed into the space in front of him, opening the door—but she didn't move, just stood there and let him walk into her. The moan leapt from somewhere deep in his solar plexus, tearing up his throat, his rock-hard erection nestled in the cleft of her fine arse.

"Fuck me," he muttered, without thinking.

She strode into the apartment, looking back over her shoulder. "Say please." She peeled her shirt up, dropping it on the floor beside the ugly floor cushion.

He tore his own off, kicked off his shoes and caught up to her doing the same. Her kiss was bold, breath and tongue and taunt. Her hands were on his belt, fumbling and teasing.

The cold air curled around him, then her warm fingers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated." She pushed him, just barely, and he found the armrest of the sofa. Perching there, her breasts were at his eye-level, heaving with her breathing. He'd made her breathe like that, pant and pulse. "Tell me," she said, "is this over when you finish?"

"Not the first time."

"Twice?"

He nodded, throat dry. "Why?"

"Just wondering how far to push you."

"All the way over the edge is fine by me."

"But will you have anything left for me?"

"Definitely."

"Is that a promise?" She unhooked her bra.

He tugged it off her arms and ran his tongue up between her breasts. "How many times can you come in an afternoon?" He caught her nipple between his lips.

"Easy there." Goosebumps spread up to her collar bones. "That's super sensitive."

"Good to know."

"Speaking with your mouthful—where are your manners?" Her words disappeared into a moan.

"Must have dropped them," he kissed a trail up to her throat, "on the stairs."

She leaned in to meet his mouth.

He lost his balance, falling back onto the sofa.

She stood, looking down at him, her eyes dark and heavy, taking in every inch.

"What are you planning?"

"That would be telling." She planted a knee between his thighs, frighteningly close to his balls. She was still wearing her jeans, though he'd managed to open the fly and reveal a flash of purple lingerie, rich and dark.

She straddled his thigh, the heat of her radiating into his rain-damp and cool skin. He reached up to kiss her as she leaned forward, but she shook her head and moved down, down. The soft underside of her breast glanced off his tip.

"Fuck," the word fell from his lips.

Slow, so slowly, she grazed her tits all the way down his erection. "May I?" She cupped his balls.

"Please."

"Look who found their manners." Her thumb circled, straying up his shaft when he least expected it. "Hot as bitterballen."

His laugh was stolen by ecstasy, her breasts surrounding him, pressed together, riding up to the tip. "So soft," he said.

"So hard." She slid down, fast, then captured his head in her hot, wet mouth.

He reached for something to hold onto, hips bucking, beyond his control. She used her breasts again, saving her mouth for the occasional bonus, stretching it out like this could go on forever. He was brilliantly present in his body, aware of where they were, when, who, how, what had led up to this. Taking the time, aware of every detail, the colour of her hair, the way it fell around her shoulders, framing her face, her swollen lips, her dark eyes.

"Condoms?" he said, during a brief moment of clarity.

"Next time." She ran her tongue around his head then sucked hard. And again. No more teasing. Her breasts clamped about him, her sternum catching against his tip, solid and soft. She went all the way down

and up till he popped free. He'd lose his shot untouched in a moment, but she wasn't slowing down, capturing him again, her chest, then her mouth, then her hands. He braced himself against the far armrest, stretched out, totally exposed and driving into her touch, beyond reason and rhythm.

Thunder rumbled outside and ripped right through him, no distance away. Right here, in the absence of space between them.

As he came down, she ran her soft flesh up and over him, one more time, then kissed his abdomen, trailed up his stomach. She licked one nipple, then met his mouth, a slow, bitter kiss. His taste on her tongue; now that was something.

He ran his hands down to her hips and, easily, inside her open jeans. "I don't know what to say."

"Tell me you're gonna give me every inch of that enormous fucking cock."

He sat up, taking her around the waist, and reaching with his feet for the ugly cushion. "I'm gonna give you..." He went down on his knees, laying her back over it so she arched, hips high. "Every fucking inch."

"You don't want to take a minute to recover?"

He shook his wallet free from his jeans, where they lay pooled on the floor. In seconds, he was sheathed.

But so was she—he ran one finger down the seam of her jeans. Her breasts rose with a sharp inhale. "I plan on taking my time."

Her jeans were wet through and when he removed them, her freshly exposed skin was shockingly cool. He ran his hands, spread wide, up her thighs, deliciously warm. His erection kissed against her legs, but not where she pulsed for it, welled and wanted.

He held her hips tight, then loosened his grip, covering her stomach, her breasts, then trailed his hands down her arms, to twine his fingers with hers. "You go right ahead and ruin this ugly cushion," he said, moving her hand, with his, to the dripping curls between her legs.

Her hand, he held there, so that she felt what was about to happen—the ridge of his head before it met her honeyed lips, the slick shaft. She felt herself open, yielding—felt it within her, and without. Felt her syrupy desire. Felt him deep and deeper, one slow, endless stroke. She let her head fall back, arching, begging for it with every pore, every nerve.

His body pressed against her clit, her thighs. She splayed her legs wide. "Yes."

He held it there, lifting his head to look her in the eye. "What was that?"

"Please." She ran her hands down his back, held on tight. "Please."



HER THROAT ACHED. AND her legs. But between her legs there was only a happy hum. She felt like liquid, like a human-shaped thing defying physics to keep her form at all. Sprawled on the sofa, in an enormous hoodie (his') and clean underwear (hers). she listened to him clink something in the kitchen.

He appeared with small red coffee cups, steaming.

"That was unexpected," she said.

"Really?" He sat beside her. "Wait, do you mean the coffee?"

"No, the awesomeness."

He laughed. "I'll take it."

"I mean, I'll be honest, I didn't come to Amsterdam to spend the weekend with you and *not* expect to get naked. But I didn't expect to enjoy it quite that much."

He touched his cup to hers. "Don't burn your mouth."

"I won't." She cradled the cup in her hands. The apartment was still warm, despite the storm, though that seemed to be easing now. "You had such expectations?"

He shrugged. "You struck me, from the first moment, as someone... surprising. More than. Generous."

"Happy not to disappoint." She dared sip the coffee—black and smoother than it looked.

"You're tolerant to heat," he said.

"And completely intolerant of tepidity."

"Is this a metaphor?"

"Oh, probably." She thought about it, drinking coffee which was almost too hot, in fact—just the way she liked it. "Yeah, that's fair. I always joke that I'm going to become someone's muse, because I'm so enamoured of talent and artistry. Any brilliant painter, musician, actor, writer—they can have me."

"Ah, well you're safe from me then."

"What?"

"I just mean, I'm no artist, so we can," his eyebrows leapt to signify every different way he could make her come, "and there's no danger you'll fall for me."

"You make a very good cup of coffee, so..." She gave a grimace to end the sentence. This felt like dangerous territory the conversation was heading into.

"I can't do the cappuccino art—although I have tried. Quite like watching the videos though."

"The colours freak me out. Who wants pink milk? It just ain't right."

He smiled, looking up, out the window. "Hey, it stopped raining."

"Don't you fix bikes for a living?"

He nodded. "Well, I manage a store now, but fixing bikes is, yeah, my magic power."

"Ah, well, then I probably am in danger—any magic powers count as art." She was being an idiot, but she couldn't seem to stop her mouth. It was the endorphins or the oxytocin, the weather or the surreality of being in a whole 'nother country after such a short journey.

Johannes went to the window. "I was going to suggest staying in, ordering in..."

"No pants."

"Exactly. Perks. But that's clear sky over there."

She got up and joined him at the window. "What do you have in mind?"

"Do you cycle?"

"It's like riding a bike, isn't it?"



SHE LOOKED SO DAMN sexy in his hoodie. She was probably ruining his favourite hoodie, to be fair—imprinting this image on his memory, forever more to be associated with her and this glorious weekend, the best sex of his life, but not the start of something. This was never intended to be more than a few days of fun.

And then she lifted it up over her head.

And then she stretched, almost naked, twisting, reaching for her bag. Right, because she was getting dressed to go out for dinner—at his suggestion. "Do you like spicy food?"

"Love it. London has a talent for it."

"There's an Indonesian place I like—far enough away it's worth biking."

She pulled on a pair of black jeans. "How fancy?" She held up two tops, one silky, catching the light, the other a bright pink, clearly sleeveless.

"Either is fine. It's nice, but not exclusive."

She pushed the pink one back into her bag and lifted the other up above her head, letting it slide down her arms like liquid. The neckline draped in folds and when she leaned forward to slip on sandals it fell outwards, hinting rather than showing, a glorious tease.

"I can bike in these. I think." She got to her feet, running her fingers through her hair.

"You'll be fine. Dutch bikes are made for normal clothes."

She was unnerved by the absence of a helmet, but took to it soon enough, keeping close behind him as he led the way across bridges and away from the canals.

"Is it out of the city?" she said, coming to ride beside him on a quiet section of the road.

"Not really. It's near the art museums, but it's a little less for tourists—not like the red-light district. Did you want to see it?"

"The red light district? I don't know. I'm a little curious, but if it's all tourists."

"It is."

"I'm happy with this mystery expedition into the 'burbs of Amsterdam."

They came to busy roads and one intersection after another, bike lanes as busy as the car lanes beside them. "Okay?" Johannes called out, letting others pass so they could get to each other again.

"It's the right-hand side of the road thing that gets me." She was smiling wide though.

Soon enough they reached Vondelpark and could ride side-by-side. It was light still, though the afternoon had given way to evening. The storm had passed, leaving the sky clear and blue, the low sun casting endless shadows of the trees.

"I feel like I'm playing the part of a Dutch woman," Kate said.

She looked the part, certainly. "Call it research."

"My next part is an angry virgin."

"Challenging?"

"I can pull off the anger, sure. She doesn't want to be under the thumb of whichever old man her father thinks she should marry."

"And the virginal bit?"

Kate shrugged. "Just a state of being—we've all been there."

Johannes thought back to his first time. She'd been a few years older and recently divorced. He'd been drunk, not that it took much at that age, and sloppy, but she'd seemed to enjoy it. They'd met up again a cou-

ple of days later. She'd learned something about assertiveness from the marriage counsellor, the one who had failed to save the marriage, and she set about teaching Johannes how to satisfy her. There'd been a transactional nature to the whole thing, looking back, but he could hardly regret it.

"Mine was in the back of a car," Kate said, "She was a year older, had her licence, gave me a lift home from rehearsals for weeks and weeks before anything happened."

"Mine was in a bed—until I fell off."

"What?"

"She laughed and got on top, didn't seem to mind. Or maybe that's just how I want to remember it."

"I have definitely rose-tinted my memories of Abby's Honda. Parked up at school, too." Kate shuddered. "Better than outside my parent's garage, but not by a lot."



A DOZEN BOAT-SHAPED plates filled the table between them. Ginger and citrus and chilli filled the air, and fast conversation, all in Dutch, soft and warm and not as guttural as she'd expected.

"So you were *out* at high school?" Johannes dropped something that looked like a spring roll onto this plate, then sucked on one finger as if it were burnt.

"No. I went to the school ball with a guy, and Abby was—justifiably—pissed. She went off to university in another city a few months later. Not that I was very good about it. Sent some sappy letters—like, real pen-and-paper letters. I was probably still on the rebound, to be honest, the first time I was with a guy."

"Disappointing?"

"Definitely."

"I bet he didn't fall off the bed though."

"Kinda wish he had." She bit into the satay chicken. "Damn, that's good," she said, mouth full.

He laughed. His whole face lit up, eyes bright, smile lines like curving canals around his broad lips. Later, when her mouth wasn't full of this amazing food, she'd kiss that mouth, and those lines too. She'd run her hands through his floppy wind-swept hair, press her body to his.

They ate in silence for a while. It was strangely easy: the silence, as much as the conversation. He hadn't asked any stupid or invasive or gratefully ignorant questions, hadn't been anything but open and self-deprecating. A minefield of a conversation and, so far, no detonations.

"I love these." He picked up a carrot carved into the shape of a flower. "One day, I will learn how to make them."

"I thought you said you weren't an artist."

"I'm not... yet." He bit into it with a crunch.



JOHANNES HEARD HIS phone go off, from the other room. Usually, it wasn't that far away. Usually, he wasn't quite so pleasantly engaged: beating Kate at a high-stakes game of Five Hundred. She was naked from the waist up, and from the waist down had only socks and a short skirt left, but nothing underneath it. She'd draped her underwear shamelessly over the back of her chair so that he couldn't help see them. She was trying to distract him—and she was succeeding.

"Go on, answer it." She nodded in the direction of the bedroom. "You need a moment to cool off, anyway."

She was not wrong there.

He had a message from his uncle, about a delivery he needed to meet at the shop. The timing was terrible—only an hour before Kate was due at the station.

"Your turn," Kate said as he came back into the main room.

"Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Good news."

"If I fold, I have to make you glad to have taken off so many clothes."

"Does that mean I win?" She turned to face him.

"In more than one way, would be the idea."

"I'll take it." She lay her cards face down.

"Do you want the bad news?"

"Maybe later." She let her knees fall open.

He put his phone face down beside her cards and pulled her up out of the chair. He'd relinquished his shirt, losing nine diamonds. And thank goodness—her breasts were soft and cool against his chest. Her bare back was smooth and supple as he ran his hands down, pressing her close from shoulder to thigh. The skirt was sturdy denim and not sliding off easily. There was nothing else for it. He dropped to his knees.

She laughed.

He ran his hands up her legs, cupping her butt and kissing a trail up the inside of her thigh.

Her laughter faded to quivering breaths and delighted sighs. "Can I sit?" she said, her voice a little shaky.

He nodded, his nose nudging into her.

She gave a squeak and grabbed at the chair and table. When she found the seat he started again, teasing kisses and huffing heat into her core. When he finally tasted her, she gasped, lifting her feet off the ground.



KATE LOOKED DOWN, SAW how his hair fell in waves from beneath her skirt. His tongue caught on her clit again, the jolt going through her. Her eyes fell shut.

His hands were around her hips, tugging her forward. The pressure of his mouth was unrelenting. She was on the edge, willing herself to wait a little longer. As if he could read her mind, he lengthened his strokes, down and away from that hungry point of pleasure.

He blew a little cool air on her, then licked pure heat. Her whole body arched toward the touch. She grabbed onto the chair. She must have lifted her feet off the floor—her legs were looped over his shoulders like a scarf.

He tongued short fierce strokes, ever closer to her screaming clit. She was writhing now, beyond control, braced to the chair—which must be in some danger of collapse.

His hands slipped under her arse, pulling her open to meet a sudden, direct pressure. Dizzying circles, tight and tighter, and then slipping away. She dug her heels into his back. He took the hint, returned to the mark.

She swore. Loud.

Then came.

A tumbling rush. Quaking. Bright. Blinding. Bounding.

Beat.

Beat.

Breath.

Beat.

He came up, red lipped, flushed, smiling.

She put her feet on his shoulders, pushing him back to lie on the floor. He was tent-poling and there was at least one more condom in the box. She was on top of him within moments, riding hard. Her body was primed, ready to come again and as he shook, deep and desperate within her, she crested again.

Sated and semi-clothed, they lay on the floor, half-under the table, a few stray cards littered around them. "I had such a bad hand," he said.

"I had three aces and three bowers."

"What?"

"Priorities, Johannes," she said. And there was something about saying his name. She felt the shift in the air—the tiny slip of it that lay between them.

"Kate." He tilted his head toward, but not quite facing her.

She didn't want to hear whatever he'd been about to say. This was a holiday from real life, not the start of anything real. But damn, he felt real right now. "What's the bad news?"

"I have to go in to work."

"That doesn't sound so serious."

"At two."

"It's okay. I know my way to the station."

"Good thing we biked back through the red-light district."

"The condom museum was a real highlight."

He smiled his brilliant smile. She touched the tip of her nose to the line in his cheek. "I'm going to get in the shower."

He didn't join her, and that was probably a good thing. She had a train to catch, and he had a job to do, and they both better get used to *not* satisfying every whim and desire.



THE BIKE SHOP WAS, well, full of bikes. It was in an old building, beautiful on the outside, cosy on the inside. The walls were slung with accessories and advertisements from old magazines, a pleasing mix of function and beauty, old and new.

"It's just a delivery. Shouldn't be long—but I get it if you want to head off."

"No hurry; the station's only ten minutes away. So, this is your shop?"

"I still haven't quite come to terms with that, but yeah."

"You haven't rearranged the furniture, made it your own?"

"I changed the coffee brand." He pointed to a door behind the cash register.

She walked around behind the counter, poking her nose through to the back: a workshop space and kitchenette all in one. "There's something a bit out-of-bounds, being back here. Like I'm skipping school or sneaking into a concert."

The bell rang. The delivery had come: a bike and an assortment of parts.

When the delivery guy left, Johannes carried what he could through to the workshop. Kate grabbed the last box and followed him.

He was remarkably focussed on the bike. All weekend, she realised, he'd reserved that intensity of attention for her: the way he listened when she spoke, the way he watched her, gently but with such interest, the way he'd been so totally present; it had inspired the same from her. She wasn't generally good at that—at being entirely in the moment—not unless she was in character. As herself, and only Kate, she was rarely so *in* the here-and-now.

"Oh, sorry." He looked up sharply.

"Is it something special?" She crouched down to see what held his attention.

"A rare one. Needs some care, though." He rubbed a rust spot, then another. "I might be able to save these gears."

And he said he wasn't an artist. She was fucked.



THE STATION WAS BUSY—NO surprises there. Johannes held Kate's bag while she went to check the platform. By the moment, this seemed a more and more terrible idea. Seeing someone off at the station was what couples did. Or it was what friends did. It was not what casual hook-ups did.

She returned announcing her platform. He spun away from her—from wild hair and wild eyes, from shoulders that danced questions and suggestions, from open hands and curving hips and his hands itched to touch her. He forcibly turned himself away and quickly found the sign pointing where to go.

She didn't reach for her bag. She took a couple of steps, then paused, waiting for him to follow. "So, I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking?" He walked on.

"I'm thinking you'll probably have to come to London buying bikes, or selling, or just for a holiday, at some point."

"Probably."

"So, it'd just be silly to rule out a..."

"We'd be lying to ourselves," he said, matching her tone but betraying every instinct for self-preservation.

"Exactly. So."

"So?"

"I'll work on my Five Hundred game."

"We can even play on-line, if you're keen."

"Not quite the same if I can't witness the... the fruits of my success." Her shoulders did a dip and swish.

"You'd just have to use your imagination."

"Send you slutty text messages."

"There's a chat in the game."

"Well, then." They slowed to a stop, nearing the gate. "We might have to... play soon." It was her eyebrows, rather than her shoulders, doing the suggestion and seduction now.

He rocked forward on his feet, wanting to kiss her, but it didn't seem right. He was falling into a role that wasn't his to play.

She had one hand on the suitcase but placed the other high on his chest. "Thank you for a great weekend."

"Thank you for coming."

She grinned. "It was, definitely, my pleasure."

"I'm glad."

She pressed her lips together, as if trying to repress a smile and failing. Well, that was something. For a little while they'd made each other happy. That was more than many could say. No one had set any unfair expectations, no one had been disappointed or misunderstood. They'd both held up their end of the deal.

And now, for the last part of the deal, an easy goodbye.

She reached up and pressed a kiss to his lips. Her hand on his chest wove up around his neck and into his hair. She stopped kissing him, but stayed close, sighed. "Okay," she said, almost as if she were talking to herself.

He lifted his hands to her face, wishing his palms could learn the shape of it, could memorise this, save it for later. He touched the tip of his thumb to her lip then gave in and kissed her.

She pulled away. "I should go."

He nodded.

She backed toward the gate.

"Safe trip."

"Enjoy your rare bike."

"I will." Thank goodness for weird and wonderful old bikes to work on. The timing, as it turned out, couldn't be better. "Hope rehearsals go well."

"I just have to think virginal thoughts." With a bright grin, she turned away, went through the ticket gate and disappeared into the crowds.

He went back to the shop, rather than home where the evidence of her absence would be everywhere. He cleaned bike parts and made a few easy fixes. He took photos and catalogued. He fell into the work he knew well. Bikes were brilliant machines, logical and functional and beautiful too. When everything fit together right, the thing was a marvel. It just worked.

He hadn't sent her the link for playing cards online. He didn't want to send it when she was out of range—didn't want to put himself through waiting indefinitely for a reply. But when he looked at his phone to check the time, there was a message from Kate waiting.

'Virginal thoughts are dirtier than you'd think.'

And a link.

A train ticket, London to Amsterdam, for next month.

