

A black and white photograph of a young man with curly hair, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, playing an electric guitar. The image is slightly out of focus, with the man's face in the background and his hands on the guitar in the foreground. The guitar is a Fender Telecaster style.

Ricky Rowntree

A STORY OF GAY LOVE - SHARED

Michael Snell

This novel is a work of fiction. The characters and events in it exist only in its pages and in the imagination of the author.

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Preface

Ricky Rowntree, the stage name for the kid who at sixteen earned a small fortune with: ‘Take It Baby, Take It’, a song nowhere near as bad as its title might at first suggest, later became the lad’s legally adopted name. Ricky, a one-hit wonder, had never liked his given surname, and perhaps that was something to do with him not exactly being enchanted with his parents. An orphan, the child of an unmarried, homeless wayward girl who died giving birth to him in a London suburb, he was adopted at the tender age of eight by the Smyth’s, an exacting couple, after suffering all the trauma associated with being whisked between several foster homes.

At sixteen, as soon as the money from the record started to roll in, Ricky left the home he didn’t like, moving in with a very rich record producer come talent scout known to the musical world as Doc. The much older man, who was thirty-something he’d never reveal, owned a large and prestigious flat in Chelsea. Before moving in with him, Ricky was fully aware the guy was basically gay, but with occasional bisexual tendencies towards boyish-looking young females, and his insatiable yearning for talent did not always come with a musical ilk to it. However despite Ricky’s youthful, stunning good looks, the man had never made any improper advances towards him, and he guessed, quite simply, he wasn’t his type. So they easily came to an arrangement, one with never crossed boundaries, where by becoming his arm-furniture in public, Doc rewarded him financially.

The strange arrangement worked fine, and during the following six years of mad partying, where the lad met many influential people, shared more than a dozen fantastic foreign holidays, and sampled a few of the naughty things in life, his career as a personality progressed by leaps and bounds. Ricky became what every young person wanted to be: a celebrity.

For doing next to nothing, certainly not anything that by any stretch of the imagination anyone could construe as hard work, the money kept on rolling in. He appeared on countless magazine front

covers, and in a wide assortment of radio and television programmes. The requests for him seemed unending.

Ricky was twenty-two when his world came crashing down around him. It seemed Doc might have made an error with one of his pieces of talent. Arriving home following a television appearance in Scotland, a late one involving an overnight stay, the young man found his public partner bludgeoned to death in his blood-soaked bedroom. The police inquiries left no stone unturned, and the subsequent hounding he suffered from the press, a body of people who love nothing better than to knock people off their pedestals, saw a rapid end to the young man's public life.

However, it was not all bad news. At the reading of Doc's Last Will and Testament, though many of the expectant people gathered there were stunned, none were more so than Ricky. He inherited the man's entire fortune, everything, and related in monetary terms that ran away into the many millions. There was also a puzzling letter left to him. More of a note really, it simply said: *'Thank-you for such a wonderful time. I have always loved you. I always will. Please remember that, and try not to think too badly about me. Do with your inheritance what you will. I know I can count on you to do the right thing. Please forgive me, son. — Doc.'*

Chapter 1

People, places, and enlightenment.

Saying goodbye to the flat shared with Doc for the past six years greatly saddened Ricky. It was the one place in his twenty-two years he'd been able to call a real home, and the only one where he'd ever been truly happy. However, even so filled with memories, and most of them brilliantly good, he knew it would be stupid to hang on to the dwelling. It was expensive to run, and though he was now rich enough, he no longer led the kind of lifestyle to warrant such extravagance. His days in the fast lane were over. No longer a public favourite enjoying a free pass, he realised any attempt at staying in that kind of world would undoubtedly involve continuously spending great sums of money, and that would very quickly deplete his fortune, as handsome as it might be.

Ricky was a sensible young man who usually made sure his brain ruled his heart. So selling the flat had been an easy decision, albeit quite an emotional one. Helping him to make it was undoubtedly the old country cottage in Hampshire. He also inherited that as a part of Doc's estate, and though he'd never seen the property in those six hectic years, the man had always spoken fondly about both it and the area. In the hope the old place would provide a satisfactory home for a while, a base from which he could start on rebuilding his life, carrying just a few personal possessions, he set off for it early that hot Saturday morning in June.

Cruising slowly for the third time along the main road through Denton Common, a straggly kind of village extending for miles, and cursing his sat-nav that refused to find him Denton Cornville, through the open car windows Ricky heard a distant church clock chime for two. He could see a church only a couple of hundred yards ahead of him, and it sported a handsome clock, but the sound definitely hadn't come from that one, being far too close for the chimes he'd heard. There had to be another church clock nearby, and he hoped it would be in Denton Cornville. Seeing an old man bent over his garden gate, he sped the car towards him.

“Excuse me,” Ricky said, pulling up alongside the wrinkled old man with a leathery face, “Could you direct me to Denton Cornville, please? It is *somewhere* around here, isn’t it?”

“It is and I could,” the old man said, in a broad country yokel accent, “but what do you want to go there for? That’s a funny place, that is. No one goes there.”

“Eh?” Ricky was beginning to wonder if the old man wasn’t a little bit funny too.

“See those two young lads walking down the road?” the man asked, pointing at them in the distance. “They walk past ‘ere every Saturday afternoon.”

Ricky was finding the man a little tiresome. “So?” he said, about to drive off.

“They live in Cornville. I should follow them, if I was you.”

Thanking him, Ricky sped off up the road, soon catching up with the two boys. Stopping a few yards ahead of them, and praying they wouldn’t run off thinking he was some kind of predator, as they came alongside he leaned out the window and asked them for directions.

“Cor! It’s Ricky Rowntree!” the smallest boy said, totally ignoring the request so he could inform the other one.

“I know, don’t I?” the taller and older-looking kid replied. “Dad said he might come here, didn’t he?”

“Your father thought I might come here? Why should he think that?” Ricky asked. He was puzzled not only by the information, but also by the two boys, now obviously brothers who he guessed to be in their mid-teens, tightly holding hands. “Who is your father? Do I know him?”

“No, you don’t know him, but he knows you,” the older boy said. “You might have seen him, though. Most of Cornville was at the funeral last month.”

“They were? What, at Doc’s funeral?”

“Doc is well known around here, though he was never one of us,” the same boy told him.

“One of you?” Ricky asked, a puzzled look crossing his face. He was becoming more and more confused with every spoken word, and seeing the younger boy nudge his brother, as if he might have said too much, did nothing towards helping his state of mind.

“Get off!” the lad responded to his brother’s warning prod. “There’s nothing wrong in telling him. He’ll find out soon enough anyway.”

“Find out what?” Ricky fought hard to suppress the wish to leap out of the car and strangle the two kids, so intense was his frustration becoming.

“If you give us a lift, we can take you to the vicarage. Our father will explain everything,” the younger boy said.

Ricky leaned over and opened the Jaguar’s back door. “Do you often take rides in strangers’ cars?” he joked.

“No, of course not. But you’re not a stranger, are you? You’re Ricky Rowntree,” the lad replied.

“And you are?”

“I’m John, and this is my older brother, Leslie. Our old man is the vicar of All Angels, Cornville’s church.”

“Well, pleased to meet you,” Ricky said, slamming the car into gear. “Now, how do we get there?”

“You turn down the track between the garage and the bungalow on the right, just past the next bend, and keep on going. It’s well over a mile long, and it doesn’t go anywhere else, it’s a dead end since the bridge fell down,” Leslie explained.

Ricky followed the boy’s directions, slowing at the bend, until coming out of it he could see the small country garage with a red tin roof, lying back behind a dusty forecourt with four pumps. Turning into the narrow lane between the garage and the similarly tinned-roof bungalow, his mind began to question the lack of any kind of signpost pointing to the village. As he drove slowly down the stone-littered rough track embraced by tall trees on either side, the older boy’s words ‘dead end’ rattled through his brain. They were only teenagers, but they were sitting right behind him. He felt vulnerable, and perhaps more than a little foolish.

“Stop!” Leslie suddenly shouted, as they came out of another bend.

Applying the brakes hard, his heart in his mouth and a cold sweat breaking out, Ricky asked, “Stop? What for?”

“Through the gap in the hedge on the right, down that driveway there, that’s The Outings. That’s your house. Do you want to go and see it first?”

Ricky looked. He could see some way along the stony drive, but not the house hidden by trees. “No, not right now, but I just hope I

can find it again later, after I've met your old man. Why is everything so hidden around here?"

The two boys laughed. "Oh, you'll soon find out, nothing is hidden from anyone in Cornville," John said, grinning at him in the internal mirror. "It's only ever hidden from the others."

"The others?" Ricky questioned, driving off again.

"Anyone who is not one of us," Leslie explained.

"We can bring you back here later," John said. "We'd like to help you settle in. You don't really want to be on your own, do you? It's a big old house."

"It's a big house? I was under the impression I'd inherited a country cottage," Ricky said, frowning into the rear-view mirror.

John laughed again. "Doc told you it was a country cottage? What, chocolate box style? He liked his jokes, didn't he? An old farmhouse with four double bedrooms, two large reception rooms, and a huge kitchen-diner ain't exactly a cottage, is it?"

The boys were obviously enjoying the joke. Seeing them in the mirror, giggling and cuddling each other almost intimately on the back seat, they looked to Ricky more like young gay boyfriends than brothers, but he decided against quizzing them on the issue. Another minute more and he was parking outside of the vicarage. Strangely, he could see the road here was much better. It was properly macadamised, a whole lane wider to enable two-way traffic, and beyond a small school there was a pub and then a village shop, one with a sign for its dual purpose as a Post Office. Directly opposite the shop there was a junction, with many smart-looking houses along the road off it. The sign said: New Road.

Ricky's mind immediately began to question the boy's story that the lane he'd driven down was a dead end. This looked like a small but obviously fully functioning village, so how could it exist with just that single track leading to it? There must be other routes in and out, he reckoned. Sighing to himself as he got out of the car, he guessed not even being the son of a vicar could guarantee a kid would tell the truth. Plainly the boys had been winding him up. He aimed the key fob at the car to lock it, and the alarm beeped its recognition as they walked up the path to the front door.

"Oh, you don't need to lock your car around here," Leslie told him. "There hasn't been a crime committed in Denton Cornville for as long as anyone can remember."

"What, none at all?"

“No, not one, honestly. Nobody bothers to lock anything up around here. See.” The lad simply turned the door handle to gain access to his home. There was not even so much as a Yale lock fitted to the door, and inside it clearly possessed no sliding bolts or means of securing it. Calling out for his father, the older boy showed Ricky into the front room, seating him comfortably on a leather settee before going in search of him.

“Would you like a drink?” John asked. “It’s very hot today, isn’t it? We have all the spirits in here, or there’s cans of chilled lager in the kitchen fridge, if you prefer. I’m having a lager, do you want one?”

“You drink? Alcohol, I mean. Doesn’t your father mind you drinking? You don’t look old enough to me.”

John giggled. “I like you,” he said, winking. “Actually, I shall be sixteen next week. That’s plenty old enough, and no, he doesn’t mind. You see, we don’t live by the others’ rules here, we have our own. You’ll soon find out our ways are much better. Why, how old were you when you started drinking?”

Remembering the first can, the first of many he’d furtively downed one night while sitting with his mates on a trash bin, larking about in a filthy back alley when he was just thirteen, Ricky forced a guilty swallow. “I get your point,” he said, smiling his defeat. “But I’d better not have any alcohol now, had I? I’m driving, don’t forget.”

“How about a coffee, then? Or a coke?”

“No, honesty, I’m okay. You’re really obliging though, aren’t you? Model kids, I’d say!”

John gave him a cheeky smile, deliberately coupling it with a wink, before leaving to fetch his drink. “Oh, you’ll soon learn. Obliging is what it’s all about here.”

Ricky felt it was almost a come-on from the kid, it stunned him for a second, and he would have challenged it, asking for clarification, had the vicar not walked into the room at that very moment. He stood up to greet the man. Solidly built, somewhere in his mid-forties, with a full head of neatly groomed hair, and dressed casually, the stranger didn’t look anything like a vicar to him. There was no dog collar for a start.

“Hello,” the man welcomed him, warmly shaking his hand. “I guessed you might be paying us a visit before long. I’m the boys’

father, Jonathan, but please call me Jon. They're little angels, aren't they?"

"Er, yes, they are very polite and well behaved. I'm Ricky, but of course, it seems you know that, don't you?"

Jon laughed at the apparent nervousness. "Relax, and please, do sit down," he said, sitting himself in an overstuffed chair. Sipping cans of lager, his two boys came into the room and straightaway perched on either side of the man's chair, each throwing an arm around his shoulders. The vicar continued, "We're all friends here. I'm really surprised Doc never told you about us. I wish he had, and brought you here at least once. I wanted to talk to you at the funeral, you looked so distressed, but it was no time for a complete stranger to intrude, and you had others there comforting you."

"You were there?"

"Oh, yes. Many of us were, and some of them related to Doc. We easily filled a double-decker for the trip. Several cars too. Doc would have been pleased; it was a grand send-off, wasn't it? He always appreciated a good show. Shame about all those reporters, though."

"Yes, even after death they still wanted to turn the knife. It seems they'll do anything, and say anything, just to sell a few more newspapers. Some of the rubbish they've written is so untrue, and it really hurts, but to rebuke it would only mean them digging for dirt even longer. I mean, they've told the whole world I'm gay, that I was his lover, but I'm not gay, and though I did love him, it wasn't in that way." Ricky glanced at John, searching for a reaction, but there was no change to his happy, cheeky face. Perhaps he'd got that look he earlier interpreted as a come-on entirely wrong, he thought. Maybe he was just being friendly.

"We don't make any sexual distinctions here," Jon said. "So if you were gay it wouldn't matter. And we never judge. It's not our job. Love is love. Unlike the others, you'll find there are very few hard and fast rules here."

"The others? Here? Your boys talk like that too, and I'm awfully confused. Can I ask a few personal questions?"

"Anything you want," Jon told him.

"Is this some kind of cult you run? A commune? Are you really a vicar? I mean, you don't wear a dog collar, or have I just caught you without it on by accident?"

“A cult means an exclusive system of religious beliefs and practices, something extremist, a false religion, and we certainly possess none of those qualities. Everyone here believes in the conventional God, most of them the Christian one, but that’s not to say they are always happy with the direction their church chooses to take on everything. Here they *can* be happy. There are many different paths to Him, and here nobody minds which one you take.

“All Angels is a cross-denominational church, and I am the properly ordained priest for it. People may come and use the church as they will, whatever their beliefs. And as for a commune, well, in the true sense of the word I suppose we could be called that, but not in the sense many people have grown to see the word mean today. Nobody runs anything here. We all participate. Everyone we have is here of their own free choice. Apart from the everyday expected ones suffered everywhere, there are no rulers, no restrictions, no fees to pay, or any penalties imposed. Everyone is free to come and go as they wish, and whatever their wish may be, people here will try to help them realise it.

“Regarding the dog collar: that is only worn as a statement. One I don’t need to make here. Everybody knows everybody. They are fully aware of who and what I am, and everything I stand for, so I don’t need to ram it down their throats. I did wear it to London, though.”

“It sounds so ideal here,” Ricky said.

“We think so. You’ll find there are lots of communities like this one, they’re springing up everywhere. Yet there’s no official organisation involved. There’s not even a name for them. They are simply groups of like-minded people choosing to live together as a community.”

Ricky was going to say something, but he glanced at the boys and hesitated. He didn’t want to embarrass the kids, so he was fighting to think of something else to say.

“It’s perfectly okay, it doesn’t matter. You can ask him,” John said. Seemingly he had worked out Ricky’s dilemma.

“Your boys are both drinking alcohol,” Ricky said. “That’s okay with you? John is still fifteen, isn’t he?”

“He’s sixteen next week, and Leslie has been seventeen for a couple of months. They both drink. Like every other kid around here, they’ve been free to have a drink for as long as they’ve wanted to, but I’ve never seen either of them drunk or unruly, and

that goes for the rest of the kids here too. What would worry me is if they felt they needed to hide their drinking from me, or anything else they might wish to do.

“I hope it doesn’t shock you, but boys are boys, hormone explosive material, and here we realise that and cater for it. Any sexual escapades they undertake usually happen in their parent’s houses. They don’t have to hide them either. We all believe it’s far better than them secretly creeping about and doing it over a dirty dustbin up some back alley.

“Here their parents teach them the facts of life at a very young age, so they are fully aware of all the consequences, and well prepared to take the necessary precautions when those hormones start to raise their ugly heads. We are sensible enough to know that kids become sexually active at many different ages. There is nothing uniform you can fairly legislate for, and besides, have you ever heard of a hormone taking time off to read a law? It’s far too busy.

“Though it can’t in any way be a credit to my lads as they’re not into girls, this community has never seen an unwanted pregnancy. Not one. You see, we all understand each other’s feelings and needs here, and provide for them. Some people, the ones we refer to as the others, might find our ways a little strange. But one should never confuse what is strange with what is wrong. I’d say the morals of the Cornville people are equal only to the best you could find anywhere. We don’t suffer from any of the problems associated with alcohol and drugs like the others do. There is no vandalism, sexual or physical abuse, or even yobbish behaviour here — and we have achieved all that quite naturally, without the need for any draconian laws.”

“I can see now why Doc always spoke so fondly of this place. I wonder why he never brought me here.”

The vicar checked his watch. “You’ll have to forgive me,” he said, “but I’m running late for a prior engagement, so I need to leave you. The parish hall events committee expected me five minutes ago.” He turned to look at his two boys, saying, “Perhaps you two could give Ricky a hand opening up his house? There will be a lot to do, and anyway, I’m sure he has many questions you could answer.”

The boys both eagerly agreed.

“There, that’s settled, then,” Jon said, standing up and offering out his hand.

Ricky smiled, and stood up to shake the vicar’s hand. “Thanks,” he said. “I guess I’ll catch up with you again soon.”

“I’m sure you will. I hope you like it here enough to stay, and then we shall see a lot of each other. Oh, and don’t bother about sending the boys home for any certain bedtime. They don’t have one. Knowing them, they’ll probably want to stay overnight with you anyway, so really you only need to send them home at all if they start to get on your nerves.”

“Won’t you be worried about them?”

Jon laughed. “No, I know I don’t ever need to worry about my boys. Really, it’s you I’m rather worried about,” he said, still laughing as he rushed out of the door.

Chapter 2

A family of obliging young men.

The size of the property, as it came into sight through the tree-lined drive, surprised Ricky. The boys had been truthful; no one could ever call it a cottage. He wondered if their story about the lane being a dead-end might be equally as true, and guessed it could easily be. After all, they had nothing to gain by telling him a lie.

Carrying a cardboard box each, that was all Ricky had brought with him, they made their way to the front door. Out of habit, Ricky aimed the fob at the car, locking it. The car alarm beeped once, and the boys giggled, glancing at each other, before John simply turned the handle on the door of the unlocked house and they went inside. Walking straight through hallway, they placed the boxes on the large table in the kitchen-diner at the rear.

“Are you going to be staying here long?” Leslie asked.

“I don’t know,” Ricky told him. “Why?”

“The house needs a good airing. If you are going to use all the rooms, we might have to chop a few more logs for you. Even though it’s summer, there will be damp around with it being unoccupied for so long. There’s no central heating. You’ll need a few fires lit to get the damp fully out of the walls. The outside ones are nearly two foot thick. Your bedding will need to be aired anyway.”

“I can chop some logs,” Ricky said. “You don’t have to do it for me.”

Looking at each other, the boys burst out giggling again. Ricky gave them a not understanding look.

“You don’t have many log fires in London, do you? Have you ever chopped wood before?” John asked.

“No. Is it hard to use a chopper, then?”

“Only if you don’t want the axe to take your leg off, it is,” John said, laughing. “There’s enough wood for today. We’ll stay the night and chop some for you in the morning if you need more. I’ll go and light a fire in the living room, and then I’ll come back and do the Rayburn,” John said, before disappearing back up the hallway.

“I’ll see to the Rayburn,” Leslie shouted after him, walking over to tend to it.

Turning towards Leslie, Ricky said, “Your brother is really keen to stay over tonight, isn’t he?”

“Oh, that’s entirely your fault,” Leslie said. “If you hadn’t become a pop star, he might not have been so crazy about you. You’re his number one hero. He idolises you. Every inch of his bedroom wall is covered by your posters.”

“No! Really? But it’s been years since I was a pop star.”

“Yep, afraid so. He has walked up here every day since dad said you might visit the house, just to see if you’d arrived. Never mind he was only nine when you had that number one hit, he was positively drooling over you. He bought three copies of it, just in case they should wear out or become damaged. John’s your number one fan, Ricky. Don’t worry, I like you too.” He grinned.

“So *that’s* what your old man meant by being more worried about me! Oh, dear! John won’t try anything on, will he? You know? I’m straight and he’s gay. He won’t expect me to . . .”

“No, of course not. He’ll respect what you are. He might become a bit clingy though. If it’s too much, tell him. Though let him down gently, won’t you? He’ll be alright, I’ll have a word with him,” Leslie said.

“Oh, no. Please don’t hurt his feelings. I feel highly honoured. He’s probably the only fan I have now, anyway. I’ll think of something to say to him.”

John stood in the doorway. “Why don’t you tell him what’s on your wall, Leslie?” he asked.

“You were listening?” Leslie looked embarrassed.

“I wasn’t earwiggling, but I could hear you,” John said.

“Is it me?” Ricky asked.

“John knows I can’t lie, we never tell lies. It’s the way we are. Sorry. Of course it’s you.”

Ricky burst out laughing. The two lads looked at him blankly for a moment, and then the infectious laughter spread, encompassing all three of them. “Come here you daft apes. Give me a hug,” he managed to get out, the laughter tears rolling down his cheeks. “I love you two, really love you!”

“We can hug you? Really?” John asked, with his eyes wide open in disbelief.

“A family-type hug,” Ricky said, putting his arms out.

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They spent a busy afternoon cleaning and polishing through the large, old house, airing all the bedding, and washing down the food preparation areas. On such a hot day, with a fire lit as well as the Rayburn, itself usually enough to keep the house warm in all but the severest winters, they were sweating buckets by six o'clock when Ricky decided they had done enough.

"Phew! I don't know about you two, but I feel like a shower to cool off. Do you mind if I go first?" Ricky said.

"Are you a good swimmer?" John asked.

"Very good. Why?" The question puzzled him. He'd cleaned the shower himself, and nothing he'd seen about it involved swimming.

"We could go swimming. There's a river at the bottom of your garden, the Itchen. It's down the slope at the end of the orchard. I hope you don't mind, all the kids from the village swim there. Because of the lock-gate, it's the only place deep enough to dive."

"No, of course I don't mind. It sounds great. Let's go."

As soon as they'd located three towels, they eagerly piled out of the back door. Learning fast, Ricky made no attempt to lock it.

"Is all this land mine, then?" Ricky asked, pointing around him as they made their way along the grass-trodden path through the apple trees.

"Legally, it is yours. But if you ever become one of us, such a distinction doesn't exist. Everything either belongs to the others, or it's ours. No one goes without here because of what they don't personally own," Leslie told him.

"You certainly are some wonderful people. I really envy you!" Ricky said. The gentle slope became severe, and trying not to slip and slide down it, he could see the river for the first time. "Cripes! There's quite a few lads down there swimming, isn't there? Er, but they don't seem to have any cossies on."

"Oh, sorry! I didn't think. Perhaps we should have warned you, we don't wear them. But nobody will mind if you want to keep your skiddies on, I promise you," John said. "Honestly, they won't. You don't want to go back to the house, do you?"

"No, of course not. But I do have the feeling now there was an ulterior motive to you suggesting we go swimming," Ricky said, teasingly pretending to punch John on the nose.

“Would I do such a thing?” John laughed.

“Well, would you?” Ricky looked at him, enquiringly.

“No, actually I wouldn’t. It really was a genuine oversight. And don’t forget: we don’t lie.” The boy looked a little hurt.

“I believe you!” Ricky told him, laughingly, but far from convincingly.

John grabbed hold of Ricky’s arm, stopping him. He looked right into his eyes, serious. “I’ve just had a funny feeling that we’ve been at cross purposes. There might have been a terrible misunderstanding,” he said. “You know how much I love you, really love you, we both do, and you are our hero, we think so much of you, but you’re not under the impression either of us want to have sex with you, just because we’re gay, are you? I know I’m a bit clingy at times, as Leslie calls it, but it’s not for sex, I promise you. I mean, that wouldn’t be right, would it? Not with you being who you are. You do know who you are, don’t you? Doc did tell you, didn’t he?”

Ricky felt stunned. His face lost every bit of colour. Obviously he had been misinterpreting a great deal. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It looks like I may have got something very wrong. I did think you might be after something like that. But what do you mean about me knowing who I am? I’m Ricky Rowntree, an orphan from birth. What should Doc have told me?”

“Oh, crikey!” Leslie said. “You’d better tell him, quick!”

“Tell me what?”

“What was Doc’s real name? You must know it, surely?” John said.

“Of course I do! Doc was an acronym for David Oliver Cooper, though he rarely used his real name.”

John swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “Well, Ricky Rowntree, meet Leslie and John Cooper, Doc’s nephews. The Reverend Jonathan Cooper, our father, was Doc’s brother. As you are Doc’s son, that means we’re first cousins, doesn’t it? Doc spent years tracking you down. I can’t believe he never told you!”

“F . . .”

Like with the speed of lightning, John slammed his hand over Ricky’s mouth before he could shout it out. “You’ll frighten the natives,” he warned him. “Nobody here swears. You’ll have some of them running home to look in their dictionaries.”

“Cousins? You are my cousins? I’m family?” Ricky asked, pulling the lad’s hand away, but not daring let go of it in case the magic should disappear.

“Don’t you like us that much?” John asked.

“Like you? Of course I like you! I love you! I’ve got a family! I’ve really got a family, after all! Oh, Geronimo! Why didn’t Doc tell me? It’s gotta be time for a family hug again! I couldn’t want a better family!”

By the time all the excited hugging and jumping about had subsided, they were playing to quite an audience. Pausing to satisfy their curiosity, the whole group of swimmers were casually sitting and standing around, surreptitiously observing their antics.

Grabbing hold of Ricky’s arm, with Leslie trailing on his other arm, John ran forward, dragging them down the rest of the slope. “Hey, guys!” he shouted out. “Meet Ricky Rowntree! Can you believe he didn’t know we were cousins until just then?”

Unable to stop themselves on the steep incline, the three of them would have tumbled straight into the river fully clothed, had not the naked group of guys the presence to prevent it. Quickly surrounding them, they were all eagerly introducing themselves, with everyone talking at once. With so many wanting to talk to him, almost mobbing him, Ricky felt he had stepped back into his pop star days.

“I shall never be able to remember all your names correctly, not for a long time,” Ricky apologised. “I hope you’ll forgive me if I get them wrong.”

“Are you coming in?” one of the lads asked.

Easily remembering the mixed-race guy as eighteen year old Carlton, and wishing the rest of them were that effortless to recall, Ricky said, “I think we are.” Looking behind him, John and Leslie were already stripping off, so he joined them.

“It’ll be cold, not like your fancy heated pools back in London,” Leslie warned him, laughing. “Just do what I do!” He raced away, until halfway across the lock gate, he bombed into the water, with John only inches behind him.

Ricky took a deep breath, decided to lose his boxers so he wouldn’t look out of place, and raced after them. It was eight o’clock, and most of the others had left, by the time the three of them decided they’d had enough. Waving goodbye to their friends, they started back for the house. One of the guys shouted after them, “See you later!”

“That was fantastic! The best ever!” Ricky told his cousins. “And to think it’s only at the bottom of my garden!”

“You were pretty fantastic too,” John said. “It must have been hard joining in with a load of strangers.”

“Not with you two around, it wasn’t. Anyway, they’re not strangers now, are they? Though you might have to whisper me some of their names for a while, until I can remember them. Carlton was easy, but I can’t recall who’s who for the rest of them.”

“Did you like Carlton?” Leslie asked.

“I liked them all, but why did you ask about him especially?”

“We see a lot of him. John, Carlton and me, we’re like three sisters. You know what a sister is to us, don’t you?”

Ricky laughed. “Yes, I do. It’s a very close but platonic friend for a gay person. I thought that’s almost how Doc saw me, as his sister! I still can’t work out why he never told me the truth. It has solved a riddle though.”

“What’s that?” John asked.

“He left me a note in his will. He asked me to forgive him, but it didn’t say what for, though at the end he did call me ‘son’. I’d taken that just to be a fond expression, the sort of way he might have seen me. I never realised it was for real.”

“Sometimes, you know when the sap is rising a bit, we do go a bit further than the sister thing with Carlton. None of us are an item with anyone, but it does happen. I thought I’d better tell you that, in case you ever noticed something you didn’t understand,” Leslie said, rather quietly.

“It’s okay with me. Do you want to have him join us tonight? I don’t mind if he stays over with you. You can give him a shout if you want to, I’m sure he’ll hear you.”

Both the lads shouted. A strained: “What?” came in return.

“Come here!” Leslie shouted.

They waited. Moments later a half dressed, carrying the rest of his clothes, Carlton emerged, running towards them through the orchard. “What?” he asked.

“I think Leslie’s feeling horny. If you want to stay over tonight, you’d better phone your mum,” John said, grinning at him.

“You don’t mind?” Carlton looked at Ricky.

“I would only mind if it was something his old man didn’t want him to do. As it’s not, I’m happy for you. In fact, you could say I’m

blooming envious. It's been over six months since I had company like that."

"He's straight," John said quickly, seeing how fast Carlton's face had changed.

"That's a crying shame, isn't it?" Carlton laughed. "Thanks, I'll stay."

"I don't know about you lot, but I'm starving. There's nothing in the house. Shall we take a trip into Winchester and have a meal? Is everybody as hungry as me?" Ricky asked.

The three lads looked at each other, hesitating. "I shall have to run home and get some money first," Carlton said.

"Is that all? I thought for one awful moment your parents didn't allow you to leave the village. They do, don't they?"

"Yes, we're allowed to go anywhere," Leslie confirmed.

"Good, then it's my treat. We can also stop off somewhere and pick up a few bits for tomorrow so I don't go hungry."

"The shop here opens tomorrow, outside church hours. Sam and Sarah would really appreciate you buying at least some of what you need from them," John told him. "We go to church on Sunday morning, so if you give us a list we can pick up anything you need afterwards."

"If you can get me up in time, I'll come with you," Ricky said.

"You go to church?" John looked a little disbelieving.

"No, not normally, but I'm doing a lot of things here I wouldn't normally do. I'll give it a try."

"Oh, that's brilliant! You can sit by me. All the rest of them are in the choir, but my voice hasn't settled down enough yet since breaking, so I've been sitting on my own in the congregation."

"Well, you'd better make sure you get me up in time, then. It won't be easy, I'll tell you! Throw your towels indoors, and get in the car," Ricky said, arriving back at the house.

#

They returned from the meal after ten o'clock, having eaten well, and Ricky seeing some of the delights Winchester could boast in architecture, including the college his cousins attended, part of which had quite a history. Ricky flopped in an armchair, exhausted. The other three took the settee. Not unexpectedly, from their behaviour on the trip, within minutes Leslie made the excuse he

was very tired, and he asked if it was alright for him and Carlton to turn in.

“Of course it is,” Ricky told him. “Goodnight, lads. I hope you sleep well, that is eventually.” He giggled.

“Goodnight, cousin,” Leslie said, coming over to him, throwing an arm around his shoulder momentarily as he kissed him on the cheek. “You’re quite some guy, you really are!”

“You are certainly that!” Carlton said, giving him a quick peck too before Leslie grabbed his hand and led him out of the room.

“Aren’t you going up with them?” Ricky asked John. “I’m turning in myself now. I’m tired too. It’s been a long day for me.”

“No,” John said. “I won’t get any sleep with them performing all night, will I? I’ll curl up here. I’ll be alright.”

Ricky stood up. “You can’t sleep there, I’d feel guilty. As there are no more beds aired and made up, do you want to sleep with me in my bed? I mean: that settee isn’t the height of comfort, is it? You can sleep with me providing *you* don’t get horny too. I don’t mind.”

“Can I? Can we talk for a while?”

“If you want to. What about?” Ricky asked, with John following him out of the door.

“Things,” John said.

“Well, what did you want to talk about?” Ricky asked, once they were undressed and in bed. “What are these things?”

“There are things I don’t know if I should tell you or not. Leslie told them to me, I was too young to understand them at the time. He might get round to telling you himself one day, but Leslie always chews things over and over for ages before deciding what to do.”

“You know you can tell me anything. I’m your cousin, and I’m moulding to your ways. Lying here in bed with a fifteen year old boy would have me crucified in my world, they wouldn’t understand. One week away from sixteen wouldn’t mean anything to them, but I’m here, with you, and we both know it is okay. And as long as it is okay with both of us, that’s all that matters to me right now.”

“I love you, cousin, but I know this is going to hurt you. Do you want me to say it?” John grabbed Ricky’s hand in the bed and squeezed it.

“I think you’d better,” Ricky said, wondering what was forthcoming.

“You were never destined to be a one-hit wonder. Doc saw to it your second release went nowhere.”

Ricky sat bolt upright in the bed, switched on the bedside lamp, and looked at him, totally shocked. “Who told you that?” he asked.

“The last time Doc came here was when I was nine, a little too young to understand, but Leslie was eleven and he took it all in. It was just after you’d hit the number one spot, probably only a week or so before you moved in with him. Doc and my father were talking in front of us, probably thinking it was over both our heads. He told my old man it had taken him sixteen years to find you, and he wasn’t going to lose you now to the kind of world so many big pop stars descend into. Sorry, I thought you should know. You didn’t fail to have another hit because you were no good; it was because Doc didn’t give you a chance. The whole world thought you were brilliant, honestly they did.”

“If you weren’t there, I’d be swearing now! Really, really swearing.”

John squeezed his hand again. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m pleased to know. I often wondered why that second one bombed, I thought it was better than the first.”

“It is, and I’ve got it. Three copies again, but they were hard to get hold of.”

“I wonder how he made sure it would fail. I know it was unfortunate to come out at the same time as the Blah-Blah Boys’ release, and several other sure-fire hits around the same time, but he couldn’t have had anything to do with that, could he?”

“I checked it out on the internet. Doc also owned and promoted them, but under a different company name. He had a lot of influence in the music world. I reckon he stitched you up good and proper. Did you know he had no pre-releases made, hardly a reasonable amount pressed, nobody could get hold of one, and there was no publicity? You were probably too starry-eyed at the time to notice. I know I would have been.”

“Well, at least I feel a bit better about myself now. I’m really lucky to have you, aren’t I?” Ricky gave a laugh, turning off the light again and snuggling under the duvet.

“Once a month we have a disco in the parish hall. It’s next Saturday. Would you perform for us? Everybody has asked me to ask you, if you turned up. They were all expecting you; nothing is a

secret for long here,” John said, putting his arm across Ricky’s chest and looking up into his eyes pleadingly in the gloom.

“I don’t have an electric guitar. I let all that stuff go.”

“I’ve got one, top of the range. You can pick it up in the morning, after church, to practice with it.”

“How about amps and mixers?” Ricky asked.

“I’ve got a guitar amp, but there’s everything you could ever want in the parish hall. Dad won’t mind you using it to practice, if I ask him. I know he won’t.”

“Are you any good on the guitar?”

“Might be,” John laughed, modestly.

“How about Leslie? Does he play?” Ricky asked.

“Not the guitar. He never learned how to. He was too busy swatting for exams when we got them. He plays the church organ, though.”

“Can you meet me after college on Monday?”

“Of course! Why?”

“There must be a good music shop you know in Winchester, we’ll go and buy a load of equipment so we can practice together here.”

“Really?” It was John’s turn to sit bolt upright. “You mean it? I can play with you?”

Ricky giggled. “On the guitar you can,” he joked.

John thumped him teasingly. “Of course, you *know* I meant musically!”

“I was wondering about that again. There’s something in this bed you are not doing a very good job of hiding. You *do* love me that way, don’t you?”

“Sorry. You know I can’t lie to you. I can’t help it, but it won’t happen, I promise you. I didn’t hold back hoping you’d invite me into your bed for sex. I wasn’t expecting that to happen, especially as you say you’re straight; it’s just that I wanted to be with you. I’m sorry. Do you want me to go?”

“No, don’t be silly! It’s not that it couldn’t happen; it’s that it *mustn’t* happen. Though I’m accepting a lot of it, I don’t really live in your world, do I? In my world they’d lock me up and throw away the key.”

“I know. It’s a rotten world you live in, isn’t it? I promise not to try anything on, but you don’t mind me being a bit clingy at times, do you?”

“I like you being clingy, but for the sake of my neck, not you know where.”

“You said earlier you’d gone six months. Have you had a lot of girlfriends then? You probably had loads when you were a pop star, I bet. Do you miss them?”

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“Sorry. I was only interested.”

“No, it’s me who should be sorry. You are always so open and honest. I shouldn’t deceive you. I haven’t had any.”

John was back in his upright position again in a split second. “What none? Are you a virgin? At twenty-two?” he asked.

“Shh! I’d rather the whole world didn’t know about it, thank you very much,” he said.

“I could set you up with Pamela Punchmore, if you want. She’s twenty-eight, but that’s not too old for a bit of fun for you, is it? She’s right dishy, honest. All the single lads sniff there regularly. She loves it!”

“I don’t believe it! Are you pimping?” Ricky said, sitting up too, and looking at him in disbelief.

“No, don’t be silly. We don’t have that kind of thing here. It’s just that she’s very obliging. She likes all the lads, proper precautions taken, of course.”

“Well, thanks for the offer, but no thanks,” Ricky said, slumping back down again.

“You don’t have a problem, do you? It does work okay, doesn’t it?” John asked, sounding concerned.

“Yes, it works blooming fine, thanks! Don’t tell me you’d have a cure for that as well, if it didn’t!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. You know I always tell you the truth, don’t you? Will you be truthful with me? Please?”

“Of course I will. I might have deceived you a little by saying something earlier, the bit about the six months, but I would never knowingly lie to you. Not now. So what is it you want to know?”

“You are not really straight, are you?”

Ricky forced a swallow. “Is it that obvious?” he asked.

“It is to me. It is to Carlton too. He asked both of us earlier tonight, in the restaurant when you went for a pee, if we were absolutely *sure* you were straight. We had to tell him that you told us you were. He’s got the hots really bad for you. Really bad! How do you feel about him?”

“The truth? The honest truth?”

“Always, no matter what.”

“I’ve only seen him for a few hours, but I love him like crazy. Why do you think I asked him if he wanted to stay over with Leslie tonight? I wanted to see more of him. I didn’t want him to go. You won’t tell Leslie, will you?”

“Leslie won’t mind, so long as you don’t want to stop them being sisters. They really are just sisters, they’re not in love, I promise you. And me, I don’t mind. He’s only a sister to me too. We don’t get jealous here. I’m happy, so long as I can still be clingy with you. So long as you don’t shut me out, now I know you.”

“I would never shut either of you out. You are my family. I have one at last, and I love it! You don’t know what it’s like growing up and having no one; no one at all who really cares about you. I’m not even sure Doc cared that much; I reckon he just wanted to wear me, like arm-furniture.” Ricky sniffed, and wiped his eyes.

“Don’t cry. Oh, please don’t cry! You’ll never feel unloved ever again, just remember that.” John hugged him tightly.

“Are you guys alright?” Leslie asked from the doorway.

“Sorry, did we disturb you with our talking?” Ricky said, wiping his eyes.

John switched on his bedside lamp and looked across at his naked brother. “You haven’t yet, have you?” he asked.

“No, we’ve been talking as well. Why, have you two, then?”

“Don’t be silly! Ricky wouldn’t risk going with anyone underage.”

“So you *are* gay!” Leslie said, his face lighting up. “Carlton’s been bawling his eyes out in there over you! He’s legal in your world, by the way. Eighteen, nearly nineteen.”

“Can I swap places with Carlton? You wouldn’t mind, would you?” John asked Ricky. “You wouldn’t mind, would you, Leslie?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind. Of course, I wouldn’t. John can be a lot of fun too,” Leslie assured Ricky.

“You’d do that for me? You love me and desperately want me, and yet you’d still do that for me?” Ricky said, looking at John.

“You ought to know by now, I’d do anything for you,” John said. “I’d even give up my life for you.”

Ricky swallowed hard. Looking at Leslie, he said, “Tell Carlton I love him. I really and truly do love him, and tomorrow night I’ll

prove it. I hope he understands. I really hope he understands, but tonight I have to be with John. I owe him that much.”

“He’s stood here right behind me, and he’s just whispered it’s okay, he understands. But tomorrow night, you’re definitely his, and he can hardly wait.” Leslie turned round to look at Carlton. “Here, what am I, some kind of messenger service, or something? Get in here and tell him yourself,” he joked.

“It’s a date, then?” Carlton asked, edging into the room, his face beaming. “And you really do love me?”

“It’s set in stone, on both accounts, I promise you,” Ricky said, winking up happily at him.

Leslie pushed Carlton back out of the room. “See you in the morning, guys,” he said, smiling as he closed the door.

“Honestly, it really would have been okay for you to have had Carlton tonight, I wasn’t just saying it,” John said.

“I know, but it’s not Carlton I want tonight. I can wait for him. Hopefully we shall have countless nights together in the future, a lifetime would be good, but tonight it’s you I want. I really want. To hell with any rules about ages and us being cousins, I’m in your world now. Switch off the light. I’ll show you whether it works or not!”

“Oh, wow! Really?”

“Well, I don’t want to look a novice tomorrow night, do I? You’ll have to teach me everything you know.” Ricky chuckled, pulling him closer.

“Crikey! This is going to be some spectacular night if you want to learn everything *I* know!” John giggled. “But I’m up for it! Have you ever tried poppers? Carlton likes them a lot. You’ll probably need them with him, anyway. He’s massive!”

“I noticed. Who couldn’t? I have heard of poppers, but I’ve never tried them. Are you *really* that experienced? At nearly sixteen?”

“When you are allowed to eat the cake, you don’t go leaving the cherry and icing behind on the plate, do you? Of course I’m that experienced!”

“That’s good. I shan’t feel so guilty in the morning,” Ricky said, feeling ready to explode with every one of John’s touches.

“You won’t really feel guilty, will you?” John looked up at him, a little shocked. He pulled his hand away.

“No, not with you. I hope not, anyway. I was only joking.”

“Hang on a minute, while I go in the other room. I’ve got enough protection in my wallet, but we need some poppers too. Carlton always carries an extra bottle on him. Don’t go away!” John kissed him tenderly, tongues, before rushing out of the room.

A minute passed, and then Carlton crept into the darkened room and across to the bed. Opening the bottle of poppers, he wafted it under Ricky’s nose. “You’re going to need some really long sniffs of this,” he said, guiding Ricky’s hand to show it why. “I love you, Ricky. You’ve got me tonight, after all. Oh, man, you’re so beautiful! Sniff for all your worth.”

Ricky was already floating, he groaned in ecstasy feeling Carlton do something to him, applying something cool, and then he screamed out, starting to dance with the angels. Each of the angels wanted something more of him, and he gave it eagerly to every one of them for all he was worth, knowing every one of those angels was Carlton.

Chapter 3

Satisfaction and heaven-sent rainbows.

“Crikey! You two look a state this morning!” Shaking them both to wake them, John was giggling madly. “Did you enjoy your little surprise?” he asked Ricky, seeing an eye open.

“Oh, John, I did, I did, I did — and it wasn’t little! But then, you’d know that, wouldn’t you? Come here, kiss me, please.” John, grinning wildly, leaned over to oblige. “Thank you. One day soon, I will, with you, I promise it,” Ricky said, before kissing him.

“I know,” John told him. “And then it’ll be me looking in that state one morning! It’s only six more days to go before I’m legal. Whoopee!”

“It won’t be that long, I promise. I can remember agreeing it with Carlton during the night. I told him I felt guilty not being with you. He reckons he’s been so much a part of you two up to now, he felt guilty too. He asked me what I thought about anything goes between the four of us, until you and Leslie find partners. I said I’d go along with it, but only if you two agreed. Is it okay with you?”

“Of course it is, and I know Leslie will be happy with it too. But are you sure you won’t feel we’re a threat to your relationship with Carlton? I’ve an idea that is going to go a very long way. He’s a pretty steady guy is Carlton, he’s never gone overboard like that over anyone before, so you may easily get your wish for a lifetime.”

“Positive. We’re all family. You’ve got college during the week, so perhaps we shouldn’t on those days, but next Friday and Saturday night, it’s up to you. Are you still going to meet me tomorrow after college to buy the stuff?”

“Sure thing. I’m looking forward to it. But has Carlton got around to telling you what he does yet? And he does it really well, believe me!”

No, what?”

“He’s a drummer. He’s got some fantastic equipment too. Whoops! Perhaps I could have put that a bit better, but you know what I mean.” John laughed.

“Mmmm, is it morning already?” Carlton asked, stretching, and then pulling Ricky on top of him.

“We were just talking about your fantastic equipment,” Ricky told him.

Carlton giggled. “You wore it out last night,” he said. “I’ve never done it that many times before!” He winked up at John. “I hope you and Leslie are up for it next weekend, I reckon by then I’ll be flagging and really need a hand — this guy’s insatiable!”

“Oh, don’t go and turn me on now, me and Leslie’s got to go to church in a minute! Are you two coming with us? If you are, you’re going to have to get a shift on.”

“Have we got time for a coffee?” Ricky asked.

“I’ll go and make it, you two hurry up and get showered,” John said, leaving them.

“Can I scrub your back?” Carlton asked, pulling himself out of the bed.

“Only if I can scrub yours,” Ricky told him.

They hugged, kissed — no tongues, it was first thing in the morning for them, pre-toothpaste — and then they walked hand in hand to share the shower.

#

With the church service over, and everybody leaving, Carlton steered Ricky over to a middle-aged couple. John and Leslie said they’d catch up with them outside.

“Mum, Dad,” he said, “I’d like you to meet Ricky Rowntree, the guy everybody has been on about for weeks. Ricky, this is Geoffrey and Jean, my Mum and Dad, the best parents in the world.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Ricky greeted them, warmly shaking the offered hand from his father, and embracing his mother.

“So this is the one, then?” his father said. “You certainly looked good together from where we were standing. We could see you stealing touches of each other. But are you both sure? It’s only been one day, hasn’t it?”

“One wonderful evening, one fantastic night, and one stupendously great morning, and we’re very, very sure,” Carlton told him. “It’s not as if I’m leaving you, is it? I shall only be just up the road. We shall see each other probably nearly every other day. You know how much you both mean to me. Not even my real parents, whoever they were, could have been as good as you two. You really have been the best in the world.”

“You raised someone so perfectly, someone who makes me so incredibly happy, you really mean that much to both of us,” Ricky said. “I promise you I’ll look after him.”

“But how will you manage? You haven’t got a job,” his mother complained.

“Oh, yes he has. He’s looking after me. I need a drummer, and an honest critic. He’s hired.” Ricky grinned.

“You’re going back into the pop business?” she asked. “It’s not that easy to get back, is it? Especially to the top, where you were.”

“I wouldn’t rule it out entirely, but really we’re only looking to do it for fun, with perhaps the occasional gig, at least for now,” Ricky said.

“But how will you manage for money coming in?” Carlton’s father wanted to know.

“Dad! I won’t be sponging, I don’t see him as a goldmine, but he is a millionaire nearly ten times over! If you want me to wait until I can match that, I’ll die a sad and lonely old man! I love him! I love him as much as I do you two, but in a different way!”

“That’s all we wanted to hear you say, son,” his mother said. “You have our blessing, of course you do, but don’t take it to heart if I cry as you go out the door, will you? It’s a woman’s prerogative.” Already she was fumbling around in her handbag for her handkerchief. Her husband pulled her in close, to comfort her.

Ricky took the opportunity to hug Carlton, giving him a quick kiss. “I’ll see you all at two, then.”

“Don’t be late!” Carlton pleaded.

“What, and miss out on some time of my life with you? I shall be exactly on time, if not early.” He waved at them all as he went outside to meet John and Leslie.

“How did it go?” John asked, scrutinising Ricky’s face for clues.

“Brilliant! I only wish that couple who adopted me had been a quarter as nice as them. We’re going to pick up the drum kit and just a few of his essentials at two o’clock. It’s probably best that he moves his stuff out slowly, it won’t be such a shock for his parents that way. They think the world of him.”

“Well, that’s two more people you know since last night, only about a thousand or so more to go,” Leslie joked. “Now you’ve got to meet *our* mum. I hope you like her cooking!”

Though he couldn’t eat all of it, the portions were so huge, Ricky enjoyed the excellent Sunday roast dinner. He also adored their

mother, they hit it off really well, though he took some convincing her name was really Davinia. Until Leslie showed him the meaning on an internet baby names page, for some reason he had believed it was a made-up one coming from an old television comedy sketch. They all found that hilarious, falling about themselves.

As they went to leave, early to be at Carlton's home because Ricky was panicking he might be late, the vicar called out, "You boys won't be too late tonight, will you? It is college tomorrow, don't forget."

"No, dad, we won't be *too* late," John promised, grinning back at him.

"Good," his old man said, chuckling. "You're only young. I wouldn't want you to wear it out before its natural time."

"Dad! Come on! Ricky's only just got himself a partner! What do you think we're going to do, have a foursome or something?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"It's not planned for today, okay?"

"Love you, sons."

"Love you too, dad," they both shouted back.

As soon as they were far enough away, Ricky said, "I can't believe he said that!"

John laughed. "You'll soon find out, our old man knows everything. You cannot hide anything from him. Sometimes we think he can read people's minds. Don't worry, he didn't say no to anything, did he?"

"You reckon he already knew of our little arrangement?" Ricky asked.

"You can pretty much guarantee it," John said.

"Strewth!"

"Does it worry you?" Leslie asked.

"I don't know. I suppose it does, a bit. I mean, we're cousins. Why doesn't he object? He's a vicar, after all."

"Careful!" John said, jokingly. "You'll get Leslie going. If he starts, you won't stop him."

"Going?" Ricky questioned.

"He hasn't made up his mind yet, but one day he might become a priest. He studies theology, and I mean: he *really* studies it."

Leslie thumped John's arm. "I'll keep it short," he promised. "Do you remember dad telling you about people not always being happy of the direction their church took at times?"

“Yes,” Ricky replied.

“Over the centuries the church has been highly politicised. Often it has adopted the views of the day, or the views they would like of the day. It is not the true church of Jesus, or even of his day, merely a many times slanted interpretation. Today the church has adopted marriage as its own, but when and where Jesus walked the planet, nobody had heard of it. The church added marriage to the faith much later, like many other things, writing it in to earlier times. Now I’m not knocking marriage, far from it, but it doesn’t really belong to the faith, so in my mind other types of relationship should receive equal status by the church. Don’t forget, the closest link we have to Jesus comes from records made decades later, and they differ alarmingly. Much of what most people believe today comes from centuries later interpretations of these already dubious accounts, and then adjusted accordingly again for the current time.

“However, getting back to us, in the time and place of Jesus, well documented history tells us a regular type of man would have had a woman to look after the house and provide him with children, and then he’d have had many other sexual relationships. They frequently included men, and boys above puberty, and often these people were extended family members.

“Marriages and sexual relationships with cousins, even first cousins like we are, are not illegal in England. People do often frown on them, though, and that’s simply because of the risks that come with in-breeding, but that doesn’t affect us, does it? We can’t get pregnant.

“Dad knows all this, but unlike most vicars he doesn’t try to deny it. So he will have no problem with what we do as cousins.”

“That was short?” John joked.

“It was very interesting,” Ricky said. “You certainly know your stuff, don’t you?”

“He’s boringly educated at times,” John said, laughing and running a few steps away so Leslie couldn’t thump him. “He’s top in everything at college.”

“Good for him!” Ricky said, laughing when Leslie poked his tongue out at John.

Clouds had rolled over either while they were at church or eating, nobody had noticed exactly when, and the hot day had become close and sticky, suggesting a thunderstorm might be imminent. The drums were quite a problem moving. It took three trips in the

Jaguar to relocate them at The Outings, and then there were the tears from his mother to cope with as Carlton left on the third journey, but finally they completed the job, with no mishaps, at three-thirty. Then it was back to the vicarage to pick up John's guitar and amplifier. Leslie said his one should go too, he would never learn to play it well. The vicar watched them, a happy smile on his face.

"Go on, ask him." Carlton nudged Ricky.

"The answer is yes, of course it is okay by me, but you are not really ready to ask the question yet, are you? It will be an unusual request, I'll grant you that, but when you are ready, there'll be no problems, it'll be yes," the vicar said, beaming, before anything had been asked.

"How did you know what I was going to ask? You've got to be kidding me! You're winding us up, aren't you?" Ricky said, taken aback.

"You two I could do now. Right now, if you really wanted. But that's not what you want, is it? You both want more, and yet you haven't even discussed it properly, have you? Are you sure everybody wants the same?"

"You do know! No, we haven't discussed it. We just wanted to check out the feasibility of such a thing, before bringing the matter up."

"What matter?" John asked, hearing the conversation on passing. The vicar smiled, and raised an enquiring eyebrow at Ricky.

"I know we're going at it like an express train, but Carlton and I want our relationship blessed," Ricky told him. "It might appear faster than a whirlwind romance, but we know we are made for each other, and nothing will ever change that. However the way things are between the four of us, the closeness we enjoy that has a great meaning, we both felt that wasn't right. The blessing needs to include everyone, and we were checking out the possibility of such a thing before running it past you and Leslie."

"Oh, is that all," John said, snuggling between Carlton and Ricky, an arm around each of them, "I've already asked that! Leslie heard you talking about it earlier. It's at the end of July, after we've moved in during the college break. That's if you'll have two lodgers. Apparently all the lovebirds will have to live in the same nest."

Ricky looked across at the vicar, now helplessly curling up, almost in hysterics. “So *that’s* how you knew!” he said. Turning to John, he told him, “You and Leslie can move in anytime you are allowed to, but you certainly won’t be classed as lodgers.”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, the vicar said, “Oh, dear! Oh, my! I haven’t laughed so much since the day I dropped that Jilly White in the font!”

“You dropped a baby in the font?” Ricky laughed.

“Not really, she just sort of slid into it,” the vicar howled. “She certainly got baptised, that one!” He walked away, shaking his head, and still laughing.

“Your old man is quite a character, isn’t he?” Ricky said to John. “I really like him, but I never know what to call him. Uncle Jon just doesn’t want to trip off my tongue.”

From somewhere out of sight, the vicar called out, “You call me Uncle Jon and I’ll drop *you* in the font! It’s Jon. Just Jon.”

“Okay, Jon,” Ricky shouted back.

“Swim?” Carlton suggested, once they’d dropped their last load in the house, and put it away.

“It’s hot enough, but it’s going to rain,” Ricky told them.

“We could always swim in our raincoats,” Leslie suggested, forcing a serious face, before everyone burst into a fit of the giggles, not helped by seeing Ricky smack his head for thinking up such a stupid line.

The imminence of rain, probably a thunderstorm, dealt with and dismissed, they were all in agreement, and soon down at the river, bombing each other. It did rain, pelting down, and an orchestra of thunder and lightning soon accompanied it.

Lying back, taking a rest naked in the wet grass, the rain beating down hard on his golden-bronze, muscular body, Carlton waved for Ricky to join him. “This is kinky,” he told him, when he arrived to lie next to him. “Close your eyes.”

“Oh, wow. It is kinky, isn’t it? You never know where the next drop is going to hit. Oh, no,” Ricky said, quickly turning over onto his stomach, “it’s started to turn me on, and with all those lads from the village around!”

“I knew it would,” teased Carlton, grabbing his hand and half dragging, half scrambling him up the slope a way until some bushes hid them from the others. “Now do it. It’s even better when you’re turned on.”

Ricky lie down on his back and shut his eyes again. Soon he began breathing heavily. “Phew!” he said. “This is driving me wild. I shall have to do something about it if we stay here. I can’t help it. It’ll explode, if I don’t. Oh, wow, just look at you!”

“I bet you’ve never done it outside before!”

“No, I haven’t,” Ricky panted. “How could I? You were the first. What, you mean now? You want it here?”

“It’s a good place, isn’t it?”

“It’s fantastic, but we haven’t got any stuff with us. It won’t happen.”

“Oh, there are ways,” Carlton giggled.

“Really? How?”

“Trust me. You can reach my jeans from there. The poppers are in my back pocket. Sniff well, my gorgeous one.” Carlton moved down and started to explore him with his tongue.

“Oh, oh, oh. Oh, really? Oh my, oh my, oh crikey!” Ricky frantically reached for the jeans. Finding the bottle, he took two of the biggest sniffs ever, and then he groaned several times, pleading, “Oh, now. Please now! It’s gotta be now! Please! Please!”

Carlton obliged him. Pulling Ricky’s hand up towards him, he leant forward and sniffed several times from the bottle himself, and then they rode the orgasmic-laced heavenly road together, as one. They didn’t rush, enjoying every second of it, with so many long and thrusting tender moments, until it had to happen. Nothing on earth could ever stop it. Exploding in long and massive simultaneous orgasms, exhausted, both thoroughly satisfied and feeling dreamy, they lie there still coupled together for several minutes, panting heavily.

“How was it for you, my sexy one?” Carlton asked, finally rolling off him.

“Oh, the best ever!” Ricky panted, turning over to lean up on his elbow, looking shot to oblivion. Glancing down, he started giggling. “I hope that’s good for the grass,” he said, “and look at me, I’m all green down there now!”

Carlton pulled him over on top of him. “There, now we’re both green,” he said, grinning, and then kissing him long and hard. Sometime later, he said, “You really are the best ever! I love you more than you could ever know. I could stay here forever, just like this, but we’d better get ourselves cleaned up before the green dries on us.” Scrambling to their feet, they ran screaming and laughing

back down the slope to bomb into the river, coming up to hug and kiss once more as they washed each other with their hands, finding excitement again.

“Where did John and Leslie go?” Ricky asked, realising they weren’t around.

“They crept behind the other bushes, while we were at it. I think we turned them on.” Carlton crawled up the river bank, his hands cupped and full of water. “Come on,” he said.

The other lads there, guessing what they were about to do, stopped swimming to watch as, with Ricky filling his cupped hands too, they sneaked up, both pleadingly resurrected but not caring who saw, and threw the water over the bushes onto the writhing lads. Screaming, they jumped up, their erect dibbers wild in the wind, to cheers and rapturous applause. They both began laughing madly, but Ricky noticed a strained look and something false to John’s laugh. Unable to stop himself, he kept glancing down longingly at Ricky’s excited nakedness, and something was hurting him.

Checking over his shoulder, the lads had returned to their swimming, Ricky grabbed hold of Carlton’s hand, saying, “I think John’s finding the wait too much. Can we?”

“I think we’d better,” Carlton said, running forward and throwing Leslie to the ground behind the bush.

Realising what was coming, John’s face lit up. He put his arms out, invitingly, waiting as Ricky ran into them. Hugging tightly they tumbled to the ground, mouths locked together, their tongues rolling around each other, exploring and wanting to live like that forever. Both of the lads got everything they desired, as this too was a long and tender affair for each of them, nothing rushed, but drowning in unlimited love and meaning.

“Thank you,” John said afterwards, utterly breathless, and a little sheepishly, to Ricky, while holding his hands tightly and not wanting to let go, ever. “You were absolutely marvellous. Carlton is so lucky to have you.”

“And do you think you haven’t got me too? We all have each other. We are the luckiest people around. Three people love each one of us. I don’t ever want to see you with a look of feeling excluded again. Exclusion is something that will never happen to either of you two. Carlton and I agree on that one hundred percent. Why do you think we’re waiting for the blessing? We are a unit of

four for as long as you want. Forever, if you don't find someone who sweeps you off your feet one day. I promise you that, and like you, now I don't lie."

"Sorry,"

"Don't be sorry. Be happy."

"I am happy, honestly, I am. I've never been happier. I shall never find anybody else, though. It's always been you I've wanted, ever since I was nine and saw you on television."

"Well, now you've got me. And now you've had me. Am I learning everything okay?"

"You're a natural," he giggled.

Ricky laughed. "You told your old man it wasn't happening today. Do you think he'll guess it has?"

"Oh, he'll know. He knew at lunchtime we hadn't done it together yet."

"He did?"

"Yes, while you were talking with mum, and we were clearing the table, we had a bit of a heart to heart in the kitchen. That's when I told him about you wanting a blessing. He asked me: until we'd gone all the way, actually done it, how were we so sure it would be for four? He'll know by my eyes we've done it now, as soon as he sees me. He reads everybody through their eyes."

Carlton, with Leslie, sitting up and listening, said, "Those eyes sure look satisfied right now. They're real dreamy. I've never seen you look like that before."

"I know. I feel that way. Dreamy. It would be terrible if I was to wake up, and it was all just a dream. I wouldn't want to live."

"That's enough of that! It's not a dream. Now, it's stopped raining, and we're drying off, so are you going to let me throw you in the water, Romeo?" Carlton said.

John giggled, jumping up and running. "You've gotta catch me first, Juliet!"

Carlton caught him, easily. Carrying the giggling mass to the middle of the lock gate, he hurled him into the water, and then they all leapt in after him. Surfacing, treading water and cuddling as a group of four, they all gazed across the field in awe at the bright, seemingly heaven-sent, rainbow.

That night, at ten o'clock because they had college the next day, Carlton and Ricky walked the brothers home. They stood around for a long time outside the vicarage, not wanting to part, but they

did finally half an hour later, after lots of hugging and kissing, and promising to meet up outside the college at four the next day. Walking back, arms across each other's shoulders, both Carlton and Ricky felt a little sad, with an empty feeling that desperately missed all the fun and vitality of the brothers. The house seemed so empty too, when they went inside.

Chapter 4

Home truths and combinations.

Ricky put his arm across Carlton's chest, moving his head on to his shoulder to be close. "You smell wonderful," he said. "Fresh grass and river water, it's a fabulous smell; much better than all that expensive chemical rubbish half the world drowns itself in every day. Are you happy? You're not missing your parents, are you?"

"Oh, you have no idea how happy I am. I don't miss my parents, but it does feel strange knowing I've moved out. Do you know, at nearly nineteen, mum would still come into my bedroom and tuck me in before they went to bed?" He giggled.

"You were very lucky to have them for parents. Mine were terrible; I couldn't get away fast enough."

"How were they terrible?"

"They fought like a cat and dog for a start, each wanting me to take their side in an argument. Whichever side I took, I got a clip round the ear from the other one, and if I refused to take sides, they'd both hit me. They never trusted me with a key to the house until I was fourteen, so no matter what the weather, if they were out when I came home, so was I. That wasn't fun in mid-winter. There were loads of things like that."

"Blimey! I don't think I'd have hung around as long as you did, I'd have been off! It's a good job you did, though. If you hadn't, and things went the way they did, we might never have met. It's only been two days, but that don't bear thinking about!"

"You're really happy with me?"

"I can't imagine life without you already. How did I ever get by? You're pure magic. That rainbow is you!"

"You really don't mind about John being clingy, wanting his share of me?"

"No, I've told you I don't mind a bit. I love both those guys too. Don't forget, we go back a way." He laughed. "Until you turned up, we were the only gays in the village! We were always destined to share each other, I think, and now there's four of us it works even better. Nobody is left making the coffee!"

"I'm so pleased. You've got lovely golden skin, haven't you? It really is to die for. Do you know your origins?"

“No, mum said there was a test I could have to find out, if I wanted to know. DNA, I think, but it seemed pointless. Once upon a time I didn’t like my golden colour. Kids at school called me: golden balls. But I’m okay with it now.”

Ricky chuckled. “You’re beautiful, stunning in every way, and they’re the best golden balls in the world! They certainly know how to satisfy me.”

“Tell me: if you didn’t know Doc was your father, how did you come to shack up with him? He didn’t . . . I mean . . .”

“Go on, say it.”

“He didn’t have it away with you, did he? Not his own son?”

“No, don’t be silly. Why? Did he try it on with you when he was here?”

“He didn’t get anywhere. I told him where to go. I don’t think he liked me after that. I’ve only ever been with the brothers, first Leslie and a few years later John, and now you. You’re the best.”

“No! He tried it on with you! How about John and Leslie? Don’t tell me he had a go at them as well!”

“No, I don’t know the full story, but they told me he didn’t get anywhere with them either. As for me, I matured early, so what looks big on me now looked positively enormous when I was thirteen. I think he was a bit of a size queen. But tell me: how did he find you after sixteen years?”

“I don’t know. I guess through private detective agencies and things like that. Although I was only sixteen, I’d been doing karaoke in the local bars for more than a year. One night he was in there, and he came up to me, reckoning he could turn me into a star. It’s what every karaoke queen wants, isn’t it? The fast cars, the bright lights, the money, and all that fame. I was putty in his hands.

“Of course, I soon learned of his sexuality — he liked young men, the younger the better it seemed, and boyish-looking young girls, so I guess he was bisexual really, though mostly gay. Anyway, as I didn’t feel threatened by him, it was an easy choice moving into his luxury pad in Chelsea. For being what people in the trade know as arm-furniture, attractive guys and girls trotted out at public events, as well as the royalties from the record I was earning, which shot to number one, don’t forget, he was paying me a grand a week. What I didn’t know was that he’d put an end to my career as fast as he’d started it. It seems having given it all to me, just to get me into his life, he then wanted to take it all away to keep me there.

I really don't know how I feel about him now. I know I could never hate him, though."

"At least, by all that happening, it has thrown us together. Do you know anything about your mother?"

"Not a thing. I guess she was a boyish-looking girl. Probably a one night stand, but then that leaves the question: how would he have known she was pregnant, doesn't it?"

"Not even John would want to tell you this, so promise me you won't say anything to anybody, especially them and the vicar."

"I promise."

"Your mother *was* a boyish-looking girl; she was also a heroin addict. Apparently he brought her here once, and she may even have conceived in this room. They only kept in touch because she was blackmailing him. She was well under the age of consent, fourteen, and pregnant, she claimed, by him. Of course, he coughed up, and then once she'd got the money, she seemed to vanish off the face of the earth.

"He'd tracked you down by the time he came here six years ago. Really, he only came here that time to pick up some mail: the results of a DNA test on you, to make sure you really were his offspring. He had the results sent here so there was not even the remotest chance of you ever finding out, whichever way it had gone. He only stayed a few days."

"Crikey! How do you know all this? How could he have got a sample off me without me knowing about it?"

"John and Leslie, who don't forget were crazy over you, told me. They asked their father, who obviously knew everything about his brother's troubles. He told them, providing they never spoke about it again. The sample is easy. He only needed a hair off your comb, or even something like a bit of chewing gum you'd spat out, didn't he?"

"We're a right pair, aren't we? Both with unusual backgrounds, we're made for each other!" Ricky laughed.

"We sure are. Fitting, you could say. Now put your hand down here, and tell me where that's fitting." He giggled, guiding Ricky's hand under the duvet. "It's a fact: I can't get to sleep of a night unless I do something with it. At mum's it had to be a sock job."

"Oh, I think you can throw away all your socks now," Ricky said, kissing him.

John waited for Leslie, and then together they raced out of the college grounds to the waiting car. They all looked at each other, grinning, happily reunited, and wanting to hug and kiss, but knowing they daren't, not there.

"Had a good day, you two?" Ricky asked.

"Excellent!" John said.

"Middling," was Leslie's offering, but according to his brother that would only have been because he hadn't caught his teachers out on some fact they'd got wrong.

Trying out different pieces of equipment at the music shop, they soon attracted quite a crowd. Ricky hadn't heard John play before, and the way he could make a guitar talk astonished him. Then, Carlton treated everyone's ears to a right royal bashing on a drum kit. He was very good. Not wanting Leslie to feel out of it, a keyboard was quickly set up for him, and within minutes he was belting out a brilliant uptempo version of Ricky's hit.

"How did you do that?" Ricky asked, amazed.

"I don't know," Leslie said, "I just imagine what I want, and then my hands do it. They know which note on the keyboard matches what's in my head."

"Got a live mike?" Ricky asked the assistant, and he hurriedly rushed one out.

By now the whole of the shop's staff, including those from the backroom, was huddled together in a corner, whispering. One young lad, who probably drew the short straw, nervously came up to them, saying, "Please don't think me impertinent, but should we know you? Are you a professional group? We've never had anyone perform that well in here before."

"You might have known me once," Ricky said, winking to Carlton and the brothers. "One, two, three, four!" And then, with Ricky giving it everything into the mike, they belted out the uptempo version.

Before they'd finished, the crowd was several layers deep at the door and across the front of the shop. Someone from the second row in the doorway, recognising either him or the song, shouted out, "It's Ricky Rowntree! He's back! Come on, Ricky, give us another one!"

“Do you all know my second one good enough to play it?” Ricky asked.

“Of course we do,” Carlton said, “go for it.”

And they did, ending to rapturous applause, and people shouting out, asking if they were appearing locally. Ricky told them he’d retired, but he might make a comeback one day, this time as a group. With no more performances forthcoming, the disappointed crowd slowly dwindled away. Then after buying nearly everything they’d used in the store, and a few other pieces, arranging for delivery the next morning, they left for home, where it was hugs and kisses all round as soon as they were in the door. It was way past six o’clock, and those kisses had waited far too long.

“We’ve missed you guys today,” Ricky told them. “Do you have to do homework? I bet you do.”

“Yes, and it takes anything up to an hour and a half,” John complained. “Even if we rush home now, by the time we’ve eaten and done that, we’ll hardly have any time with you. I need a session. We’ve gotta have a romp, haven’t we?”

“Why don’t you ring home and see if it’s okay to stay here until nine. You can eat here, and then do your homework when you go home.”

John took out his mobile. Wandering out through the door, as if searching for a signal, he nodded his head for Ricky to follow him, saying, “Give me a hand. You can tell me what to say.”

Ricky followed him outside and waited while John made the call, without his help. “It’s okay, we can stay until nine, but I really got you out here to tell you something,” he said, softly. “If we have a romp in a minute, and I hope we do because I’m desperate, will you and Leslie do it?”

“What, you gone off me already, then?”

“No, don’t be silly! You know I’d never go off you! It’s just that dad knew last night, like I said he would. But he didn’t know whether it had happened between you and Leslie yet, and he asked. I had to tell him it hadn’t. I think he just wants to be a hundred percent sure everything is alright between everyone, all combinations, before saying we can move in. We might be able to move in earlier, if it’s okay with you.”

“Of course it’s okay. But does Leslie know you’ve arranged this?”

“Yes, he made me do it. He wanted to be sure I was happy with it, because he knows how much I love you. He was frightened he might hurt me if he grabbed you first tonight.”

“And will you be hurt?”

“No. Never again, not since yesterday. Not since you proved you really do care. I know you’re always there for me now, whenever I want you. One of those times will be tomorrow, for definite.” He giggled, teasingly rubbing his hand against Ricky. “We’d better go back inside.”

“Do you guys want to eat now, or afterwards?” Ricky asked, as they went inside. He winked at Carlton to assure him there was nothing wrong, in case he’d been wondering what they had to say in private.

Everyone suggested eating later, so Ricky updated Carlton on the conversation while they followed the lads upstairs. They didn’t come down until well after eight, having exhausted all the combinations possible between them, at times with nobody hardly knowing to whom a certain arm or leg belonged, as they writhed over each other in ecstasy. Everybody’s eyes were dreamy as they came down the stairs; the rest of them looked extremely shattered. It had been a heck of a session.

“Well, you didn’t miss out after all, did you?” Ricky joked, at the same time pretend-punching John on his nose.

“Oh, wow! That was utterly fantastic, guys,” he said. “Everyone, all in one go. It was an orgy! Can we do that every time?”

“What! You trying to kill us? Not every time, but quite often. It was really good, wasn’t it?”

“Things have sure improved a lot around here since you turned up,” Leslie said to Ricky, still holding on to his hand and happily grinning. “We’ve *got* to do that again tomorrow!”

“What about the equipment that’s coming? We shall have to practice at some time. We can’t just do the two songs on Saturday night. What happens if they want more?” Ricky said.

“We shall have a lot more time tomorrow,” Carlton reminded him. “If we pick them up from college every night, we should always be back here before four-thirty. That’ll give us plenty of time. I’m up for it!”

“So am I, then!” Ricky said, watching John as his face lit up. “Now, eats. Will cheese on toast do?”

As they said their goodbyes to the boys outside the vicarage that night, John said, “Just look at Leslie’s eyes. The old man won’t have to ask anything tonight, will he?”

“You haven’t seen yourself,” Leslie joked. “There’s a word for it, but I mustn’t say it!”

Walking back home, their arms around each other again, Ricky said, “Have you ever heard of the saying: the more you have, the more you want?”

“Yes, of course I have. Why?”

“I want more!”

Carlton laughed. “And you shall have more, my sweet,” he said, “as soon as I get you home! Lots more!”

It wasn’t lots more, but it was twice, and they paid for it the next morning. They were still in bed sleeping when the van-load of equipment arrived at ten-thirty. Giggling stupidly, racing down the stairs, they were only partly dressed, still pulling on their clothes, when they opened the door. The smirking deliverymen didn’t know what to say, or perhaps where to look with Carlton still fighting to get everything, up morning ready for it and protesting, inside his jeans, so they said nothing, hurriedly carrying the stuff inside, in order to quickly get away.

“Where we going to keep it all?” Carlton asked.

“I thought the back room down here. We don’t use it, do we? If we move everything else out, it’ll make a good little studio.”

“Do you want to do it now, or later?” Carlton asked, trying to adjust himself for comfort.

“Oh, I definitely want to do it now,” Ricky said, grabbing hold of what was troubling his partner. “In the shower?”

Carlton giggled. “I meant the equipment.”

“So did I,” Ricky said, leading him up the stairs.

Chapter 5

Silver linings, two teapots, and decision time.

At barely a minute past four, John and Leslie raced into sight, haring out of the college grounds to leap into the car. They were obviously excited about something.

“Quick, go!” John shouted, as soon as they were inside.

Ricky pulled away rapidly, and then looking into the internal mirror at the boys, he asked the need for their hasty departure.

“The whole school knows about us,” John said.

“Eh?” Ricky looked worried.

“No, not that! Us performing down the music shop, I mean. A couple of the girls were in the crowd last night. They’ve told everyone. We’ve had girls pestering us all day. If they’d seen you waiting, they’d have mobbed you.”

“Really?”

“It wasn’t that long ago you were a star,” Carlton reminded him.

“It isn’t only Ricky they’re after. You ought to hear how they’ve bummed you up! All the girls want to see your huge packet, and whether you really are as good-looking as they say you are! We weren’t too bad, they see us every day, but you two are targets now,” John said.

“Crumbs! Does that mean we can’t meet you anymore?” Carlton asked.

“No, of course not, but you’ll have to leave the engine running for a fast getaway in future,” John said. “And don’t park anywhere where you’re boxed in.”

“That’s not the best bit,” Leslie said. “They want us to do something for the end of term concert.”

Ricky laughed. “And we haven’t had one proper practice session yet!”

“Did all the equipment come?” John asked, excitedly.

“Oh, quite a lot came this morning,” Ricky said, winking at John in the mirror. Carlton thumped him.

“Have you set it up?” Leslie asked. “We could do that tonight.”

“It’s all done. We don’t stay in bed bonking all day, if that’s what you think. Everything is ready. Anyway, you haven’t told us if your father noticed anything, Leslie.”

“Oh, I nearly forgot. Yes, he noticed alright. You tell him, John.”

“You can tell him!”

“One of you tell me, please!” Ricky said.

“He had a long talk with us, especially me.” John laughed. “He said we looked like a couple of lost puppies when we were at home, only happy when we were coming to see you. There are a few things we’ve got to stick to, like going to college, doing our homework, and visiting regularly, but we can move in anytime you say.”

“That’s good,” Carlton said.

“When do you want to move in?” Ricky asked.

“We both want to move in straightaway, but talking it over, we reckon this coming Sunday, after church, would be a sensible time. We really want to be there, but rushing out the first night would make us feel guilty. We ought to stay for my birthday; it’s a big reminder, isn’t it? I expect they’ll miss us.”

“You *expect* they’ll miss you? I’m sure they will miss you! But Sunday it is, then. We can all look forward to it. Anyway, we’ve got little surprise waiting for you at home.”

“What?” they both asked.

“Not saying,” Ricky teased.

“It’s not really little,” Carlton said, giggling, to add to their torment.

“Well, we know that!” Leslie joked.

“*That’s* not the surprise, it’s something else.”

The two lads were out of the car and into the house almost before it had stopped. Racing around the downstairs, they soon found the set up equipment and were well impressed with the studio, but they couldn’t find the other surprise. Ricky promised he would show it to them later. Deciding on a light meal before trying out the musical gear, cheese on toast again, it seemed to be a favourite, they sat in front of the television to eat it.

“I’ve got a little surprise too,” Leslie said, pulling some paper out of his pocket and handing it to Ricky. “I’ve got loads more at home, if you want them.”

Ricky studied it for a minute, a look of astonishment growing on his face, and then he said, “Did *you* do this?”

“We had two free periods today. I did all my work first. Why, isn’t it any good?”

“It’s absolutely brilliant!” Ricky said, showing Carlton.

“Crikey! I knew he was good, but that’s really good,” he said.

“I didn’t know you could write music. The lyrics are simply brilliant too! Can we do this one on Saturday?” Ricky asked.

“Of course, why do you think I wrote it?”

“It’s better, much better, than our other two songs,” Ricky said.

Carlton and John laughed. “It should be. He’s seven years older now!” John said.

“Eh?”

“He was only ten when he wrote: ‘Take It Baby, Take It’, and the other one.”

“*You* wrote them? Doc told me they were by some Greek bloke called Pericles Oleo. It was really you?”

“Rearrange the letters, it’s an anagram,” Leslie told him, giggling.

Ricky studied the letters. “It is, isn’t it? You can make Pericles Oleo out of your name. But why didn’t you use your real name?”

“Doc didn’t want my real name, but I insisted on the anagram. I guess he didn’t want you to go looking for me.”

“You really are a brain, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a dweeb, am I?” Leslie asked, sitting up shocked, and then looking annoyed at John when he giggled.

“No, you’re definitely not one of them!” Ricky assured him.

“I’m only joking, bro. Honestly you really aren’t a dweeb! I’d tell you so every day if you were.”

Ricky took the paper and sauntered into the next room, strumming out the tune on his guitar. Abandoning their food too, the rest followed, joining in. The hours flew by. It was ten to nine when, with the song off to perfection, John screamed out.

“Oh, no! We haven’t got time! We’ve got to go home in a minute!” John took off his guitar and ran over to Ricky, throwing his arms around him. Everyone stopped playing.

“Sorry, none of us noticed. We’ll definitely find time tomorrow; we’ll set an alarm clock.”

“Oh, you know how much I wanted to,” John moaned.

“I know. We all did. Let me tell you a little secret instead,” Ricky suggested.

“What?”

“You can always survive missing sex, so long as the love is there. The love is still there, I promise you, and it always will be. We’ll christen your surprise tomorrow, for definite.”

“Oh, yes! The surprise. What is it?”

“After straining every muscle in our bodies trying not to fall out yesterday, Carlton and I went shopping and bought a Super UltraKing bed. It’s ten foot wide and nine foot long. We need something that size for the four of us, don’t we?”

“Really? That big?”

“Go and have a look, but don’t you go getting in it. Things are going so well, we don’t want to mess them up by you being late home, do we?”

John and Leslie raced off up the stairs, returning minutes later. “It’s brilliant! I shall dream about it tonight,” John said, “so long as Leslie doesn’t keep me awake half the night doing lah-lahs to the next song.”

“I thought you told me you had separate bedrooms,” Ricky said. “Both full of posters of me.”

“We have, but we’ve slept together in my room for over four years now. Leslie only keeps his clothes in his room,” John said. “Dad found us together so often in the mornings, he bought me a double bed.”

Ricky laughed. “He’s a remarkable bloke, your old man! Go on, get your coats, we’ll walk you home.”

During their hanging around outside the vicarage, the not wanting to part time, John turned to Ricky, saying, “Will you do something for me, please?”

“Of course, if I can.”

“You’re spending money on us as if there was no tomorrow. Please don’t buy me anything for my birthday. I know you; you’ll go over the top. If you have to get me something, make sure it’s something anybody could afford.”

“If that’s what you really want. But you don’t have to worry about the money I’m spending, honestly. Even in these bad times, I’m still not spending it as fast as the interest it’s accruing. I haven’t bought anything expensive for years.”

“I think he means: don’t buy him something his parents couldn’t afford,” Carlton said. “Same goes for me.”

“Why, when’s yours?”

“The following Saturday. But I wouldn’t want mum and dad to feel outdone.”

“Right. Okay. I’ll buy you both a teapot, then. I’ll order them from a catalogue! Even pay weekly for them, if it makes you happy! Sorry — that was wicked of me. I understand. I promise to buy you something sensible, nothing expensive, both of you.”

“You didn’t mind me saying, did you?” John asked, looking worried.

“No, of course not. It’s a good job you did, really. I would hate to hurt anyone’s feelings. When you’ve got a couple of bob in the bank, you don’t think of these things. Sorry.” Ricky put his arm around John to reassure him.

“We’d better go in now. Love you guys!” John said, groping Ricky affectionately.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow, guys. Don’t be late picking us up! Loves you!” Leslie said, dragging John away up the path.

Ricky sighed, looking longingly after them.

“What’s up?” Carlton asked.

“I really I hope I didn’t hurt him with what I said.”

Carlton put his arm over Ricky’s shoulder, guiding him away. “It didn’t hurt me, so I shouldn’t think you did. He’s sensible enough to know you didn’t mean to be sarky.”

“I hope so. He said it was okay, but by the way he was looking at me it didn’t seem okay. I didn’t get long enough to say sorry properly.”

They began to walk home slowly. Ricky had his head bowed in thought, watching the ground, and he didn’t cheer up on the way. As soon as they were indoors his eyes started to fill. Putting his head on Carlton’s shoulder, clinging on to him, he sobbed, “Hold me tight, please.”

“Oh, come on now, what’s up? Stop crying, he’ll be alright. I know he will.”

“I love you, Carlton. I really do. Please forgive me, crying over someone else.”

“Man, I’d forgive you anything, and John isn’t someone else. He’s a part of us. I understand how you’re feeling. Stop now, else you’ll get me at it.”

“But they made their excuses and went in straightaway afterwards. I felt it was like a last goodbye . . .” The sobbing took over completely.

“It was late, they *had* to go in. Oh, crikey, there’s only a car coming up the drive now. Who on earth can that be at this time of night? Go and hide yourself, and I’ll try to get rid of them,” Carlton said. Ricky bolted for the kitchen, as his partner went to the front door and opened it.

“Where’s Ricky?” John asked, with wet, red eyes. Leslie and his father stood behind him. “Where is he?”

“He’s in the kitchen, come on in.” John pushed past him, rushing madly through the hallway calling out for Ricky. The other two came in more politely and Carlton showed them into the front room.

“What’s up? What are you doing here?” Ricky asked, drying his eyes as John ran up to throw his arms around him.

“I saw you walking home from my bedroom window. You were so unhappy. I told you everything was okay. I didn’t tell you enough, did I?” he bawled. They hugged, crying together for a few moments, then John said, “Dad’s here. He wants to talk to you.”

“But I look a state!” Ricky complained, sniffing, and having another attempt at drying his eyes.

“Don’t I? Look at me! It doesn’t matter. Not in front of dad, it doesn’t. Come on.” John dragged him along the hall, into the front room. Quickly and untidily packed boxes containing some of the boys’ stuff sat in the middle of the room.

Swallowing hard, Ricky tried to force a smile at the vicar, but it didn’t really happen. He appreciated the attempt, though. Leslie sat next to him on the settee, not so bad, his eyes were red too. Carlton walked over, standing next to Ricky, putting a comforting arm around his waist.

“Cheer up, Ricky,” the vicar said. “Everything’s alright between you all, isn’t it?”

“It is now,” he said, the trace of a smile breaking through this time. John squeezed his hand.

“When I see how happy my boys are with you two, and how much they obviously mean to you, and then I catch them at home in their bedroom hugging each other and bawling their eyes out, there’s only one place they should be, isn’t there? They’ve grown up, and they have their own needs now, so I’ve brought them to their rightful home. This is where they want to be. Is it okay with you two if they move in tonight?”

“Oh, is it ever!” Ricky said, his eyes watering again. Leslie leapt up and ran over to hug him too.

“They’ve brought enough clothes for tomorrow. They’ll have to come back sometime and sort out what else they want to take. I’ll get off now, don’t you forget to visit us regularly, all of you,” the vicar said.

“We won’t forget. Thanks, Jon. Thanks for everything,” Ricky said, watching as the boys gave their father a goodbye hug and saw him out.

Coming back into the room, John said, “Dad said I’d got it completely wrong. Sorry.”

“Got what wrong?” Carlton asked.

“He said everybody knows families poorer than their own. If we only bought things for them we thought their own family could afford, it would be a very poor world. Is it better to give a starving kid a crust his poor mother might be able to afford, or a hearty meal? The meal feeds the kid far better, and it being produced also helps to employ and feed other people.”

“I can’t argue with that, so you can forget everything I said earlier too,” Carlton said, pulling Ricky in close and kissing the side of his face. “I’ll have *two* teapots please, and make them large!” It was enough to get them all laughing and giggling again.

Feeling better, everybody happy again, Ricky asked, “What about your homework?”

“We brought it with us, we’ll find somewhere quiet to do it,” John said, “it shouldn’t take long.”

“While you and Carlton take a gander at these and see if there are any we can use,” Leslie added, finding a wodge of paper in one of the boxes, and handing it over before following John upstairs with his college work, shouting back over his shoulder, “I did the top one last night, John helped me, it’s a solo for you, a ballad, still wants a bit of work, but it’s kinda special. For us, anyway.”

Carlton leaned over to look, and together they sang it in their minds. Entitled: ‘I’m Back Again and I’ll Tell You Why’, the song was highly charged, filled with deep meanings, and so emotional they both had tears in their eyes by the time they came to the end, which in the words was a brand new beginning.

“It’s so beautiful, but I could never sing it, especially in public. I could never get to the end of it before breaking down,” Ricky said. “I’d be bawling my head off, on stage.”

“Man! That is something real special! It could shoot to number one and stay there for weeks, I know it could. I can’t get the chorus out of my head now. There’s something in those words for everyone to cling on to, they’re like living magic.”

“But I’m not looking to have another hit, am I? I only want us all to have a lot of fun, as a group. I don’t mind if we do the occasional local gig, but for anything else: been there, done that, don’t want to do it again!” Ricky said.

“All for one, and one for all — you might have trouble running that by the brothers if they ever see a professional future for the group. Forgotten when you were star-struck yourself, craving to be up there with the best of them, have you?” Carlton said.

“No, of course not, but I know what it can do to people. I’ve seen it too many times. I’ve been there. There’s a price for fame, and I don’t want them to pay it. I couldn’t stand to lose any of you, and the odds in that kind of world of it happening are heavily stacked against me,” Ricky told him.

“You’ll never lose me; I’m like your shadow.”

Ricky laughed. “More my sunshine than a shadow, I’d say. Don’t tell me you had dreams of stardom too.”

“I love you. I only want what you want. But of course I did once. What kid doesn’t? Me and John didn’t get so good, and we are good, in the hope of playing parish halls. As for Leslie, the way he can write songs, he’s going to have to hide his talent really well if he’s not to make it to the top. He’s brilliant on that keyboard too; it’s like a part of his brain, natural emotions in music.”

“I feel like I’ve found my heaven, only to discover it’s precariously balanced, and liable to come crashing down at any moment. I feel gutted.” Ricky said.

“Don’t worry; any decisions will need at least three out four in agreement, and I’ll always side with you.”

“What, even if I’m wrong, because I am wrong, aren’t I? Very wrong. I grabbed my chance with both hands. To remove that opportunity for anyone else would be really wrong. If recognition comes, it comes, and we’ll deal with it at the time. And I reckon, if the brothers agree, you’ve picked a brilliant name for the group.”

“I have? What did I pick?” Carlton looked puzzled, trying to remember everything he’d said word for word.

“You said it: ‘Natural Emotions In Music’. If that isn’t us, I don’t know what is!”

“I like it!”

John and Leslie came downstairs thirty minutes later. Leslie had already completed much of his homework in his free periods, so he was able to help out his brother. Ricky and Carlton were still wading through the songs, not having found one they didn't like.

Seeing the brothers, Carlton said, “Hey guys, what do think of: ‘Natural Emotions In Music’ as a name for us?”

“Who thought of that? It's brilliant!” John said.

“I like it a lot,” Leslie added.

“I used the words in conversation, but it was Ricky who pounced on them.”

“Have you still got that board?” John asked.

“It's at mum's, do you want me to finish it now?” Carlton asked, and the brothers eagerly confirmed it.

“What board?” Ricky asked.

“We were going to make a sign for us once, years ago in those star-struck times we were talking about just now. The background is already done, musical bars, but we couldn't agree on a name, so it never got finished.”

“Can you finish it by Saturday?” Ricky asked.

“I can finish it tomorrow.”

“What the . . .?” Leslie grabbed the handset for the television, cancelling ‘mute’ and turning up the sound.

On the late regional news they were running a clip of the video to ‘Take It Baby, Take It’, with Ricky leaping around madly on top of a car, and then they watched, dumbstruck, as the reporter interviewed a group of girls: screaming girls, some obviously old fans, jumping about and hysterically waving banners: ‘We Still Love You, Ricky’. Then came something they couldn't have thought of: an interview with one of the guys from the music shop, revealing Ricky had a group, they shopped there, and they lived locally. Experience told Ricky, there would be no way some reporter wouldn't learn of their address now, and pretty darn soon. What would that do to the village?

“All that publicity, and it's free!” John exclaimed, as soon as the programme moved on and Leslie muted the sound again.

“Yes, but really it's for me and yesteryear, isn't it? We will still have to prove ourselves as a good group. The Ricky Rowntree those girls were screaming for is history, and that is for definite. It's all about us now, not me. And there's something else you avid fame

seekers seem to have forgotten. What is going to happen to this village, and its perfect way of life, if some reporter or mad fan discovers our address? Apart from snooping around the village, bothering everyone and discovering who knows what, can you imagine the paparazzi creeping through the bushes, long telephoto lenses at the ready, searching for a candid shot? The four of us swimming would look good, wouldn't it? Even better if they caught us up to our antics in the bushes. Discovering we all live together will fire more than enough speculation, I can assure you."

The room went quiet. "What are we going to do?" John asked, now white-faced. The thought of anything preventing them from doing what they loved doing, freely savouring each other, frightened him.

"Tomorrow we shall have to go on both the attack and the defensive. I'll buy a cheap property somewhere, not too far away, but not so near to be a threat to Cornville. We'll set it up as if we live there, and then I'll buy more gear from that shop, telling them we've moved and having it delivered to the new address. On the attack, we'll try and bargain for our privacy with that reporter in exchange for exclusive interviews. I think it's high time we showed Carlton's golden balls to the nation."

"You what!" Carlton span round to look at him, his eyes wide open in disbelief.

"Well, John reckons those schoolgirls were keen to see you and your packet. They won't be the only ones, we should capitalise on it. Packets go a long way in the music world. At least it might take the heat off me and what I'm doing. But that's all for tomorrow. Right now, to take our minds off such matters, I reckon we all ought to go straight upstairs and screw each other into the night!"

There was unanimous agreement, tempered slightly by the brothers saying they would need *some* sleep, they had college in the morning.

"Ah yes, college. I wonder if you'll be able to make it to the end of term."

"Eh?" both boys questioned.

"I was telling Carlton earlier, fame comes at a price. So far it's only some local media interest, but if it should spread, especially if the London lot want to have another go at me, who knows where it could go?"

"Shall we not go to college tomorrow?" Leslie asked.

“It’s up to you. I think we’re at a crossroads. We either try to hide ourselves away, hoping it will all blow over, or if you really want to see if we’re any good, and truly do want to try for fame, then you give up college straightaway and we go for it, utilising that media interest.”

“Dad’s definitely not going to be happyeee,” John sung out, sarcastically.

“The choice is for what will make *you* happy, not your dad. I think I can sort him out.”

“How?”

“I’ll open an account to cover the cost of you picking up your education later, should your dreams not materialise. He can hold it as a surety.”

“But it’s you spending your money on us again, isn’t it?” John complained.

“Let’s say I’m just making an investment. If you were to even crawl into the top ten with something, that account would seem like peanuts. Investments can go up or down, but I have more than enough faith in you that we’ll succeed; we already have some things every other group starting out would give an arm and a leg for: we have media interest from day one, and we already have a proven songwriter, but don’t let that influence your decision. Now, am I going to get screwed or not tonight?”

John laughed, grabbing his hand and dragging him towards the stairs. “At least three times over, I reckon!”

“Forget college tomorrow, I’m up for an all-nighter,” Leslie said.

“I hope there’s something left of my golden balls in the morning, there’s my public to consider now,” Carlton joked, so eager, he was taking his clothes off as he ran up the stairs.

Chapter 6

A terraced and a semi.

Ricky and Carlton were up early, taking a long time over their joint shower and preparations for meeting the day. It had been a hectic night, not entirely undue to the fears Ricky held for their future. Not wanting the uninhibited intimacy to ever end, his demands had proved taxing, even for Carlton, whose lack of a morning enagement for the first time he could remember, saw them giggling.

Leaving John and Leslie in bed, with the unenviable task of later updating their father on events, they set off to check out the estate agents in Winchester. They were in luck, one of them was holding an auction that morning, and that meant the completion came with the sale for anything he bought; it would be his straightaway. So armed with their catalogue they paid it a visit. Coming away little more than an hour later, Ricky having bought a terraced house in need of modernisation central to the town on the strength of the photograph, they walked the few streets to inspect it.

From the front, the property in Middle Brook Street looked quite respectable and convincingly occupied. However inside the described need for modernisation had obviously been the estate agent's way of saying the place was a total wreck. Nevertheless it would serve its purpose as a false address, and with the property market having bottomed, Ricky knew he should be able to sell it one day for a small profit, perhaps even a handsome one if he had some work carried out. Before they left the acquisition they removed the estate agent's board and tidied the hallway, throwing away many months of junk mail, so a delivery there later wouldn't raise any suspicions.

Collaring the assistant in the music shop, being friendly and playing up to his local television stardom, they were able to learn he had not in fact divulged their address, merely revealing they were living in a reasonably local village. They told him of their change of address, and ordered a pair of bass bins, with delivery required that morning. Ricky was pleased to see the shop sported a fully computerised customer base. The guy quickly updated their

address, so immediately deleting the old one. Feeling a lot safer now, Ricky and Carlton returned to the property to await the delivery and test out Carlton's acting skills, an unknown quantity.

The same two delivery guys soon turned up, and in a state of undress Carlton opened the door and greeted them. "Where do you want these speakers?" he called out over his shoulder, then turning back to the guys, he said, "Sorry, you caught us getting changed again. Seems you always manage to catch us, doesn't it?" He laughed.

Moments later Ricky ran down the stairs, equally half-naked, and rubbing his hair, he said, "Just dump them there for now. I'll sort them out later."

The guys obliged, and left happy they had delivered to the new home. Were any reporter to nail them later, they should be able to give quite a convincing account.

"What now?" Carlton asked.

"We wait. I phoned the news desk of the television company while I was upstairs. They're getting the reporter to call me back. He might want to see us now, turning up with a camera crew, or he might simply make arrangements for a future date. Of course, there's always the chance he's lost interest, isn't there?"

"If he hasn't, you can't let him in here; he'll rumble it's a set up straightaway," Carlton said.

"No, we'll meet him in town, somewhere like the cathedral grounds, and if we can: on air announce our first public performance as a group." Ricky said.

"What? You can't invite the media to our parish hall on Saturday! What have we done all this for, if you're going to do that?"

"Sorry, I didn't have time to run it by anybody, so I really hope it is okay with everyone. I wouldn't normally make the arrangements on my own, but desperate times called for desperate measures. I made another call upstairs. We shall be in Southampton this Friday night, appearing at Billingham's."

"What!"

"You don't want to do it?" Ricky looked concerned.

"Of course I do, but are we good enough? Billingham is enormous! They don't take prisoners there!"

Ricky laughed. "Believe me, nowhere takes prisoners! I've seen things happen to unworthy turns that would make your hair stand on end!"

“Oh, keep going! Cheer me up, why don’t you!” Carlton felt very insecure.

“Billingham’s will be okay, I promise you. Excellent stage and sound, I’ve performed there before. Honestly, any new group would give their eye teeth to have somewhere as large as that for a first gig. Most of them bum around pubs and working men’s clubs for years, working for peanuts. Anyway, if they like us and we’re value for money, we’re back again next month, as headliners. Blah-Blah has had to cancel.”

“We’re being paid?”

“Not a lot, we haven’t made a name for ourselves yet, but it’ll be profitable for us. Two hundred and fifty, but I had to let them use my name on the publicity. We agreed under the group name, in brackets, it would say the group includes me.”

“Who cares about that?”

“You might in the future.”

“I don’t think so, man! We haven’t known you a week yet, and already we’ve gone from annoying my parents by jangling a few tunes at home to maybe replacing the top boy band in the country. I can’t get my head round that!”

Ricky laughed. “I was going to say: get your head round this instead,” he grabbed his crotch, shaking it, “but we’d better not. We can’t look shattered if that reporter wants to see us.”

“I hope the brothers are okay. They haven’t called us, have they?” Carlton said.

“I asked them not to, not unless it was a dire emergency, in case they called at an inopportune moment. Look on the bright side, it probably means everything went okay with their old man.”

“You know this game backwards, don’t you?” Carlton said, grinning at him.

“I wouldn’t say that, look how I got ripped off by Doc, but I do know a few things. I know any interest the media might have in me at the moment is not to promote us, as you might be thinking. It’ll only be a carrot.”

“A carrot?”

“They would love me to spill the beans on Doc. They weren’t really giving me a bad time until I refused to do that, even declining a large sum from a Sunday rag. Once I’d turned them down, it was open season for them. What they didn’t know about me, they made up. However judging by what I’ve seen lately, I don’t think many

people believed them, they still like me. So it looks as if the media might be trying the sweet approach again. I hope so because that way we can use them to our own advantage.”

“You are quite something, aren’t you?” Carlton cuddled him. “And to think you’re mine!”

The cuddling turned to fondling, and it might easily have progressed a lot further, but for Ricky’s phone ringing. Saying they weren’t home, but they could meet for a short interview in town, they made arrangements for the cathedral grounds in fifteen minutes.

“Remember everything I said,” Ricky told his partner, hurrying up the street. “If we get the chance, sit with your legs open, well adjusted, and appear just a little shy. Head slightly bowed, look over your eyebrows into the camera lens occasionally and give it that cheeky sexy grin you have. Whatever you do, don’t appear in the slightest way cocky or too confident.”

“You’re making me feel awful nervous,” Carlton said.

“Good. You’ll perform even better. Stage fright usually does that, it makes you more likeable by the audience.”

Seeing the small crew setting up by one of the benches, just the way he hoped they would, Ricky switched off his phone to prevent one possible disaster occurring, getting Carlton to switch his off too. Striding up to the reporter, he greeted him and warmly shook his hand.

The interview went extremely well. Ricky announced the Friday event, cleverly referring back to it regularly throughout the conversation, so preventing anyone easily editing it out. Carlton, quite naturally, came across as someone to die for: a cute, good-looking young man, one who obviously needed someone to help him out with whatever that was prominent in his trouser department.

Having done countless similar interviews before, Ricky thought it best not to forewarn Carlton about something the reporter might have arranged. When the interview was over, and for the camera the hurriedly assembled gaggle of teenagers raced screaming at them, there was nothing in Carlton’s body language to suggest anything staged. He legged it out of there like a frightened rabbit.

“Did we do okay? Was I alright?” Carlton asked, gasping as they sat down on the buttercross to catch their breath.

“You were brilliant!” Ricky told him.

“I sat like you said, but I must have looked embarrassed, because I felt it. Thinking of what I was doing, showing it off like that, it gave me a semi. I was praying, actually praying, it wouldn’t get any worse!”

“I noticed,” Ricky laughed. “You aren’t half going to have some fans by Friday, drooling gay boys and ready to offer you anything girls, I hope you can cope.”

“Me and the brothers are so naïve, aren’t we? We’d never thought of any of these things. We just thought if we played well, we might make it one day.”

“Thousands of groups can play well, but it’s only if they are exceptionally likeable that they get anywhere. Once the public like you, they are ready to forgive quite a lot. A bad night won’t see the end of you, and everybody suffers one of them once in a while. It’s inevitable, and can be down to anything from a bad headache to a faulty sound system. Come on, one more job to do and then we’d better go home to see how John and Leslie fared. I hope they’re okay with Friday.”

“What’s the job?”

“Buying that teapot for John’s birthday, of course.”

Carlton laughed. “What are you getting him really?”

“What do you reckon to a personal computer and an internet connection? He’s been using his old man’s one, hasn’t he?”

“Brilliant! He’ll love it! But can we eat somewhere first? They’ll have eaten by now, and I’m absolutely starving. A burger would do.”

“Sorry, of course we can. There’s a McDonald’s near where we parked the car. Anything you want, nothing’s too good for my star performer!”

“Don’t!”

#

The boys weren’t at home, so they walked down to the vicarage. Taking a deep breath, Ricky knocked on the door.

“Family don’t have to stand on ceremony here,” the vicar said, opening the door. “Just come straight in and shout if you want someone.”

Ricky grinned. “That worries me,” he said. “Anyone doing that at our place might catch us doing anything!”

“Oh, I would never do that at your place,” Jon said, laughing over his shoulder, “but here you’re pretty safe, I can assure you.”

“Have John and Leslie been to see you?” Ricky asked.

“Yes, they’re upstairs getting the last of their stuff together. We’ve done a couple of trips already. It’s a good job that’s a big house you’ve got!”

“Did they tell you about what has happened, the media and all that?”

“Of course we did!” John said, running down the stairs, Leslie right behind him. They leapt on Ricky and Carlton, pulling them in for a group hug.

“And?” Ricky didn’t know who to look at for an answer, his eyes searching them all in turn.

“And I appreciate you giving them a chance to do something they’ve always wanted to do, despite yourself not being enamoured with the idea. They can always pick up their education later, should it all go wrong. Oh, and I really don’t need that account they were on about. As a family, I know we’ll all pull together to find any money if it’s needed one day,” Jon said.

“Thanks,” Ricky said, “Well, to update you all, Cornville is now safe from the prying media. That was my main concern.”

“And I’m on television tonight!” Carlton said, excitedly.

“Eh?” John wanted to know more.

“We did an interview. I hope no one had plans for Friday night. There’s a good group on at Billingshams worth seeing.” Carlton couldn’t keep a straight face, he was bubbling over.

“Who?” both the brothers asked.

“Natural Emotions In Music, who else?”

“We’re doing Billingshams? But we’re not ready yet,” John said, with a worried look.

“You will be by Friday,” Ricky promised. “I’ll see to that.”

“Yes, and if we’re any good, we might be replacing Blah-Blah at the top of the bill there next month!” Carlton said, still bubbling.

“Now I know you’re joking!” John said.

“No, he’s not,” Ricky sang out, to make even the vicar raise his eyebrows in not understanding. “Watch the local news, it should be on shortly.”

On the settee, Carlton hid behind his hands, peering through his fingers, howling uncontrollably and almost wetting himself, viewing his performance. John had to keep telling him to shut up.

Added to the uncut interview was a bit about Billingham, a good shot of the poster advertising them, and a few sentences from the manager. He had many good things to say about the last time Ricky performed there. If Ricky was in a group now, it could only be a very good group, he'd said, directly into camera as the closing shot.

"The place should be absolutely heaving on Friday night, after all that," Ricky said.

"Where did you learn to look like that? Sexy, or what?" Leslie asked Carlton. He grinned and pointed to Ricky.

"He is sexy, isn't he? You all are. You've just got to learn how to show it off best to an audience, and especially to any important cameras. There's a whole catalogue of poses and looks you'll need to practice before Friday, I'll teach you," Ricky said, quickly pulling a few examples.

"Can you curl your top lip?" John asked, trying it himself.

"I can," he showed them, "but please don't do it in public, it's so dated. Nobody does that now."

"Well you all seem excited, so I hope it goes well for you on Friday," Jon said.

"Do we have to look as excited on stage as Carlton did in that interview?" John asked. "He didn't leave anything to the imagination, did he? You could see everything!"

Ricky laughed. "Not in front of the vicar, please!" he joked. "No, you just need to show off your best points; it just so happens that is one of Carlton's best points. A long top, something to give a tantalising air of mystery to what it might be hiding is always good. Of course, sitting down, the drummer rarely has the option of leaving anything to the imagination, so we're fortunate ours is Carlton. He'll promote a lot of interest."

"Oh, thanks!" Carlton said.

"I never realised there was so much too it," Jon said.

"There isn't always," Ricky told him, "most wouldn't even bother with a quarter of that, but then most never make it to the very top, do they? And the top, the very top, is where we're heading, I'm determined!"

"There's going to be such a lot to remember, will we be able to remember it all?" John asked, worried.

"No, you won't, and that's where peas come into it," Ricky said.

"Peas?" everybody asked as if one, with John adding, and acting out the part, "or pees?"

“Doc taught me, if you are not sure of something, think of a packet of frozen peas. Every pea is a stage in your career, something you do, say, or insinuate in public. You are balancing them on top of one another, like a pyramid, hoping to get to just one pea at the very top. You will only get there, and stay there, providing none of the peas below you let you down. So from now on everything you do publicly is a pea. Before you do, say, or insinuate anything, consider its possibilities in that pile. Only if it cannot possibly *ever* harm the pile, will it be okay. So really, all you need to remember are those things that could harm that pyramid. We’ll talk them over later, and make a list.”

“Like the four of us sleeping together?” John asked.

“That definitely wouldn’t be a good pea to have in the pile,” Ricky warned him. “Kissing cousins might at a stretch be surmountable, but bedding brothers, I don’t think so. Anyway, it’s more than never saying it you have to consider, you will need to avoid anything alluding to it. I mean, as an example, to accidentally let it out in an interview that some of us talked something over in bed would have the dogs at our heels within seconds. The people who conduct these interviews are professionals; they’re very good at putting you at ease and prying things like that out of you while your guard is down. It’s what they do.”

“It’s not going to be easy, is it?” Carlton said. “We’re going to be terrified of saying anything.”

“Did anybody suggest it would be easy? It’s easy to fail, and not too hard to stay at the bottom, but other than that it is very hard work. Behind all the glitz and glamour of everyone who makes it to the top, lies hidden a huge mountain of blood, sweat, and tears. Does anybody want out? I don’t mind.”

Nobody wanted out.

Chapter 7

The making of kings, or should that be queens?

Carlton completed painting the sign that evening. Everyone was impressed; it was a professional-looking job. Ricky made several telephone calls, not exactly in secret, but nobody else knew, and then they easily ran through several numbers he'd picked out of the pile Leslie had written. John found the ease with which they were gelling together, becoming as one musical mind, quite astounding. He couldn't see how Ricky's idea that four would always appear to show a unity far better than two was entirely plausible, but he knew better than to doubt him. Then Ricky had a shock, something he'd never thought of until it happened. Carried away by one of the choruses, Leslie sang out. He knew John's voice was between stages and no good to them, but he'd never considered the other two. Both of them were good, with distinctly different styles, though they could still harmonise when required. Thankful, because he'd never wanted it to be him and a backing group, they rapidly made some changes to their now quite extensive repertoire.

"Eleven o'clock. Time for bed," Ricky told them.

"You must be gagging for it again," John joked. "Eleven o'clock is really early."

"I am, but it isn't going to happen. Already we are starting to pay the price. Tonight we can only afford to have a cuddle and quickie. We've a very early start in the morning."

"Where are we going?" Leslie asked, beginning to switch everything off.

"It'll be a busy day. We need to be at a shop behind Bond Street by nine to have our measurements taken for some group clothes, then a couple of other things to do before picking them up late afternoon. Then there's one more thing to do and we should be home by early evening. That good enough?"

"We're going to London?" Carlton asked.

"It'll be a laugh, won't it?" Ricky said. "The measuring of you lot will be, that's for sure!"

"Eh?" John didn't understand.

"You'll see!" Ricky laughed.

“I think I know,” Carlton said, grinning. “I read about it once. You pick out the clothes you want to the nearest size, and then they adjust them to fit you, really fit you, especially front and back trouser department.”

“Got it in one! Nothing looks worse than one saggy arse in a group of otherwise sexy ones. Same for the packet. We turn out immaculate every time, it’ll be a part of what we are.”

“That’ll be fun for Carlton when they get around to measuring him. Someone’s only got look there and it’s up like a rocket!” Leslie joked.

“Don’t remind me!” Carlton moaned.

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The measuring procedures did indeed turn out to be every bit as hilarious as Ricky predicted. There were squeals and giggles emanating every few minutes from the brothers, as the tailor struggled to chalk-mark the seven different outfits Ricky had bought each of them. Carlton was totally speechless, with a sweating brow, and he almost continuously felt the need to blow air up his face. Ricky guessed he’d be praying a bit too.

Outside, John said, “That was unbelievable! He even held on to it at one stage!”

“I thought it was quite funny,” Leslie said.

“Kinky!” Carlton said, grateful for the fresh air as they walked back into Bond Street. “What are we doing now?”

“You’ll see!” Ricky said, hailing a cab. It would only have been quite a short walk, and perhaps Carlton might have appreciated it, but the taxi added an element of style.

Pulling up outside of the Mega Music Store and getting out of the cab, as Ricky paid the fare, the other three stood gobsmacked on the pavement. “How?” they all said, or something very similar.

“Good aren’t they?” Ricky said, joining them. “They really look like you.”

“But how did they know what we look like?” John asked, still staring at the artwork.

“I sent the publicity company photos from my mobile, how do you think?”

“But how have you arranged all this, and in such a short time?” John asked, still blown away by his picture in the group that he wouldn’t take his eyes off.

“You’ll soon learn, mountains can be moved in this game, and sometimes they have to be, but it does cost, of course.”

“It’s spending your money again,” John complained. “How much has today cost you?”

“That’s a rotten question; you know I don’t lie anymore.”

“Well?”

“By the time we get home it’ll be about thirty grand,” Ricky said, as quietly as he could and get away with it.

“What!” their three voices shouted back at him.

“You all know roughly what I’m worth. How many thousands in a million?”

“A thousand, of course.” John said, almost offended he should be asked the simple question.

“And in ten million? The fifty grand I’m investing in us, and don’t forget I’m in the group too, is not really a lot, is it? The house I bought will make a profit one day, so that’s out of the equation. Anyway, there’s our record company on top of all that. I don’t know its worth, but it must be substantial.”

“Record company?” the three voices questioned.

“Yes, Doc owned the Mustaphit Record Label, and the production company. It’s mine now, and it all swings along happily without me, thank goodness!”

“Crikey! I wish I could swear. I really do!” John seemed flabbergasted; the other two still standing there gobsmacked.

“Shut your mouths, you don’t want to look idiots, do you? Come on, let’s go inside. We’re doing a pre-release demo, every fifteen minutes from midday until three, of: ‘Hurting Over You’. Sorry, I didn’t have time to run a few things past you first, but in future everything will be a joint decision, I promise.”

“If you can put all this together with just a few phone calls, I don’t think we need worry about joint decisions, do we guys?” Carlton asked. The brothers said no, but Ricky insisted that’s the way it would be.

The demo went well, attracting sizeable crowds, and before the last performance at three o’clock, two popular music magazines had their sleuths pushing through the crowds interested. Ricky did the

talking, and the guys went away extremely happy to be ahead of their competitors.

“Where we going now?” John asked when they were ready to leave.

“Into that taxi waiting for us outside,” Ricky told him, pushing them through the store and bundling them inside it.

“Today is a whirlwind,” Carlton said. “Nothing but a whirlwind.”

“There’ll be a lot of days like today,” Ricky promised him. “You’re still working, don’t forget. We’ve promised them a record, so now we’ve got to go and cut one. And first time I hope. I hate twenty goes at anything.”

“What format will it be released in? Vinyl is making a comeback, isn’t it?” John said. “I know the quality is not quite as good, but I really love vinyl. Can we have some in vinyl too?”

Ricky winked at him. “It’ll be released in every format out there, don’t you worry about that!”

It was on the second attempt that Ricky felt satisfied. Considering the number of times they’d performed the song that day, it wasn’t unsurprising. Like at the music store, they’d only needed the one go to feel at home with the foreign to them equipment, before getting it perfect. Rushing them outside and into yet another taxi, they set off for the shop off Bond Street again. Then after quickly trying everything on, and every inch of them being re-scrutinised by the tailor, exhausted, they returned to the Jaguar, packed the clothes in the boot, and set off on the journey home, or so three of them thought. Asleep by the time they hit junction two, they didn’t notice Ricky leave the M3 to head for a parking area housing literally hundreds of coaches and busses a mile or so outside Heathrow. He woke them after parking alongside a smart-looking almost new white coach, one with several of the side windows blocked out and covered by the pictures they liked of themselves, each with their name alongside. On a wavy musical bar running almost the full length of the vehicle, in large colourful, bold lettering, and perfectly set, was written: ‘Natural Emotions In Music’.

“Shit!” John said, forgetting himself. “Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” The other two replayed their now familiar frozen to the spot and gobsmacked roles.

“What do you think?” Ricky asked them. “I hope you like it, they are delivering it tomorrow.”

“Like it? It’s fantastic!” John said.

“It’s all about image,” Ricky told him. “The rusty old transit van of yesteryear, full of fake leopard-skin cushions and mattresses, doesn’t cut it anymore.”

“Where are we going to keep it?” Carlton wanted to know. “You’ll never turn something that size into the drive off our narrow lane.”

“We will soon, I’m having the entrance widened. Until then, we’re allowed to keep it at the back of the parish hall car park.”

“I hope you’re not going to drive us to the gigs yourself, perform, and then drive us home. You’ll knock yourself out,” Carlton said, concerned.

“No, of course I’m not. Someone from the village, a bus driver recently unemployed, will do all our driving, and come with us if we decide on a tour.”

Carlton and the others burst out laughing. “Do you mean Tom Dee, from New Road?”

“Yes, Tom Dee, that’s the name I couldn’t remember. Why, what’s wrong with him?”

Carlton laughed. “Den, his son, is the hunky black-haired one that swims with us. He should have been a bit of a clue for you. Nice family, but they’re all comedians, with a wicked sense of humour. Tom’s the kind of guy who would spend all day squeezing mustard into a tube of KY, just for a two minute laugh. Live dangerously, why don’t we?”

“Shall I get somebody else, then?”

“No, of course not! We like the Dee family.”

“That’s a relief. Den’s unemployed too, so he’s taken on the role of looking after us.”

“Do we need looking after?” John asked.

“You will if you’re getting mobbed running for the coach.”

“I name that coach: The Lovemobile,” John said.

“We won’t be able to do much of that with those two on board, will we?” Ricky asked.

“Den won’t mind, he’ll look the other way, that’s if he doesn’t stick a daffodil up someone’s bum for a laugh! And his old man is pretty free and easy too. Anyway, he’ll be driving, wont he? I can’t wait to christen it!” John said.

“There *are* thick curtains fitted to divide off different areas, so some can sleep while others stay up, so I suppose that might be

possible,” Ricky said, “and it comes with all mod cons, including facilities for a *quick* shower. Water is limited, of course.”

Is there anything you haven’t thought of?” John asked.

“Only how many times we’ll be able to do it tonight, with everybody so tired.”

John giggled. “I think we’ve earned quite a few,” he said.

“I’ll second that,” Carlton said, leaning across to hug and kiss Ricky.

“I’ve just had a thought,” Leslie said.

“That’s dangerous,” Ricky joked.

“On those nights when we can only have a quickie, the times when we are paying the price, two at once would save a heck of a lot of time,” Leslie giggled.

“Oh, don’t! That is such a turn on!” John said, adjusting himself for something stirring.

“Really? That turns you on?” Ricky asked, turning round to look at him.

John moved his hand away to reveal the evidence, and they all fell about in fits of laughter.

Chapter 8

Double trouble before Southampton.

They arrived home at eight-thirty, feeling tired and grubby from the long day. After falling back on their favourite again, cheese on toast, between checking over their repertoire, who sang what piece and when, they took it in turns to slide away, enjoy a shower, and freshen up. Ricky telling them they had another hard day tomorrow, if they didn't want to miss out they needed to turn in early, saw John almost dragging them up the stairs. He seemed to be gagging for it.

Having a lot of fun, joking around in between the ecstatic loving times, they had started on some real meaningful stuff again. Ricky was entertaining John, trussed chicken style, and he was moaning with the pleasure, when he opened his eyes and looked up into Ricky's eyes.

With his cheeky grin wildly expanding, giggling, John whispered up to Ricky, "Can we do two?"

"Really?"

John just kept staring up at him, pleadingly. Carlton and Leslie paused what they were doing, turning to look across, intrigued.

"Who else?" Ricky asked.

"John started giggling again, almost manically, but he didn't answer.

"Go on," Leslie whispered to Carlton, winking at him through a giggle. "Give my bro what he wants. He looks desperate for it. I'm okay, I'll watch."

Five minutes were spent adjusting positions and making attempts, John was turning into an oil slick, but despite all his sniffing of the poppers and screaming to keep going, it simply wouldn't happen. Admitting defeat, Carlton moved over and Leslie tried his luck. It happened at the second attempt, and John screamed the house down, constantly sniffing his bottle and writhing around in ecstasy. Cloud nine didn't come into it; he was on cloud one hundred and nine. When it came to the time, the three of them exploded simultaneously in massive orgasms, never mind it was the second one for John during the escapade. Exhausted, uncoupling, John lie

there looking up at them with dreamy loving eyes, still pleurably moaning, his body continuing to writhe around, and with the happiest of faces he could wear.

“It was that good?” Ricky asked him.

“Oh, it was, it was, it was,” John breathed. Then he rolled over to lie on his stomach, clenching the pillow, still happily gyrating and reliving the experience in his mind.

“Were you okay on your own?” Leslie asked Carlton.

“Was I ever! I shook off two just watching!” he said.

Before collapsing into sleep for the night, after a short rest they undertook one more session. Leslie had pleaded for Ricky to fill him in, so with them going at it, Carlton started on the lying there, looking asleep, John. He wasn’t asleep, far from it, he was eager for every position possible, even at one point upside down against the wall. Beginning to flag, Carlton was grateful when they finally returned, falling onto the bed, to finish in mighty orgasms. Both moaning pleurably, they drifted off into a deep sleep, still coupled as they were.

In the morning Ricky carefully moved Carlton’s and John’s arms from off him, sat up, and paused to gaze at his bed partners, before waking them. They all looked so happy and content. He knew *he* had never been happier in his life, and for a few moments he stopped to consider how fortunate he was. Then knowing they had to get up, they had a busy day, he began shaking them.

“Phew! That was some night, wasn’t it?” Carlton said, sitting up, hugging Ricky tightly and kissing his cheek. “I don’t half love you!” he told him. “I’m in heaven here.”

“And I love you too! Shower?” Ricky held out his hand.

Taking hold of Ricky’s hand and following him, Carlton said, grinning and looking down at himself, “Yes, I’ve got to do something with this, haven’t I?”

“No,” Ricky said, tugging him. “I will!”

Returning about fifteen minutes later from the entertaining shower, they found Leslie trying to make John get up. He wasn’t having it.

“Get off!” John told his brother. “I only want five minutes more!”

Ricky and Carlton dragged the duvet off the bed and pulled John up. He sat there, frowning, and then, unable to be like that for long, he burst out laughing.

“How you feeling this morning?” Ricky asked.

“A bit sore,” John said, grinning, “but it was worth it.”

“Really? Are you going to want more of that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one day. I just wanted to experience it, really. Since I found out it was possible, I’ve wondered what it would feel like. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. We don’t mind,” Ricky told him. “It’s all about whatever floats your boat, isn’t it?”

John giggled, and then burst out laughing. “I’ve only experienced receiving; I’ve still got to experience the double giving bit.”

“Well, I don’t know who you’re going to find to practice that on,” Ricky laughed.

“Oh, I do,” John said, winking at him.

“I don’t think so,” Ricky told him.

“I bet I can get you to do it,” John said.

Rapidly trying to change the subject, Ricky looked at John inquisitively. “Your voice sounds different to me this morning; does it sound different to you?”

“It does a bit. It’s not unpredictable any more. I guess it was all that screaming I was doing last night. I did make a lot of noise, didn’t I?”

“Not so as anyone would notice!” Ricky joked. “Give me some lah-lahs.”

“Eh?”

“Try some lah-lahs. Sing,” Ricky said.

John tried it. Encouraged by his lah-lahs, he let rip with the scales, and then he tried an octave lower, then higher. “I can sing again,” he said, his face lighting up. “Do you think it will stay?”

“I reckon so,” Ricky told him. “That was beau idéal. Absolutely pitch perfect. I don’t think that could in any way be something temporary. Oh, well! I guess that means we start reallocating who sings what again.”

“What?” John asked, looking past Ricky at the other two, who, whispering something to each other, had begun to curl up in mirth.

“Nothing really,” Leslie managed to splutter, wiping his eyes. “Carlton just thought it was funny how treating one end made the other end better!”

“Ha-ha! What we doing today, anyway?” John asked.

“Climbing Catherine’s Hill, wherever that is,” Ricky said.

“Why?” John thought it something strange to do, especially when they were supposed to be so busy.

“We’re meeting a camera crew at the top, at eleven o’clock, so you need to make a move soon.”

John got out of the bed and grabbed Leslie’s hand, to lead him to the shower. “Is it for the video?”

“Yes, they are filming the view of Winchester from the top as a backdrop to mix with some blue-screen shots of us, and they also need us running down the hill. Don’t laugh, but each of us has a thought bubble with our girlfriend in, with a blazing row, and a breaking up scene, etcetera. The end, whether or not we get back together, we leave open to interpretation, but we are seen racing happily down the hill to meet someone. Depending on how many times we have to climb back up and do it again, we could be very tired later on.”

“That’ll be fun! Catherine’s Hill is quite a climb!” Carlton said, having recovered from the laughing fit.

“Girlfriend? Ugh!” Leslie exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, you won’t even get to meet them this time,” Ricky laughed.

“If we’re really there, why do they want blue-screen shots? Why not use the real thing?” John asked.

“That’s only so if the video is well received there can be a sequel one day, should we want to make one, where we find out who we were really meeting without everyone doing it all again.”

“Oh, right. We’ll be down in ten minutes,” John said, dragging Leslie out of the room and heading for the shower.

It was half an hour before John and Leslie appeared downstairs. Ricky and Carlton were beginning to wonder what they could be doing to take so long. Asking them, Ricky was in for a surprise.

“We’ve been talking,” John revealed. “If it’s possible, if enough of us agree, can we change the video a bit?”

“I guess it’s possible, but why?” Ricky said.

“It’s a lie. It’s not us, and we don’t lie. We would never hurt over a girl,” Leslie explained. “It’s one thing keeping people guessing, never saying what we are or confirming anything, quite another to appear what we truly are not. Why don’t we have no row, there’s nothing about a row in the song, and in those bubbles have a couple, a good-looking guy and a pretty girl. We can look longingly at the bubbles, hurting for someone we want who is in the arms of someone else, but nobody would know if it was the guy or the girl we were hurting for.”

“That sounds a major improvement to me!” Carlton said, immediately backing him up.

“That’s four nil, then. I’m with you, it’ll be changed,” Ricky confirmed. “But tell me: are you still going to be able to wink at girls from the stage tonight, and flash that lonesome puppy dog come hither look? They have fantasies too, and they need to feel you like them.”

“Oh, yes. That’s no problem. We can like them and see them as fun without lying, and we can do that without letting the girls know we wouldn’t actually bed them. We’re not anti-girls, we just don’t want them on the end of our dicks, or make any videos that would suggest we do, because that would be blatantly lying,” Leslie said.

“Fair enough,” Ricky said.

They set off for Catherine’s Hill at ten-twenty, with everyone happy. Carlton reckoned it would only take about twenty minutes to get there. However when Leslie pointed out of the window at the hill as soon as it came into sight, Ricky’s happy mood immediately changed.

“*That’s* Catherine’s Hill, are you sure?” he asked.

“Well, unless they’ve renamed it overnight, it is,” Leslie said. “We all know it well. Why, what’s wrong with it?”

“If that production team really think we’re going to run down *that* madly, they’ve got another think coming! It’s far too steep, and too high. Once you’ve started running, you’d never stop yourself. We’ve got an important gig tonight. We can’t turn up with arms and legs in plaster casts. It’s ridiculous!”

“We’ve done it before, you can’t stop yourself, it’s impossible, and you often fall over and roll down some of the way. It’s good fun, but a little dangerous, I suppose,” Leslie said. “I’ve suffered bruises before, I think we all have.”

“It’s far too risky for us, we daren’t take the chance, we have nearly two thousand people to entertain tonight,” Ricky said, pulling into a layby. “Stay there.”

Ricky got out of the car to call someone from his mobile phone. Walking up and down a few yards in front of them, it was very obvious he was letting rip into somebody.

“Sorry about that,” he said, getting back into the Jaguar a minute or so later, laughing. “There’s nothing like a good swear at someone, but you wouldn’t know that, would you? There was no way I could let you hear what I called the idiots.”

“What about the video?” John asked.

“I never really liked the idea of that one, anyway. It was far too weak. We need to make a statement, something to make people sit up and think. They’re already filming tonight’s performance, so I reckon we ought to use some cleverly edited highlights. When we get to that number, and it’s the only non-fun number we’re doing tonight, we’re hurting over them — the audience, dissolving from them, happy people, to a battlefield, and then coffins coming off of planes. We’re hurting over the young ordinary people, and what happens to some of them today. What do you think?”

“Sounds brilliant to me, and a very good statement to make,” Carlton said. The brothers agreed.

“That’s settled then! Right! Dinner in Winchester, go home, sleep a few hours, and I do mean sleep, and then get ready. What does everyone want to eat?”

#

The coach arrived for them at eight-thirty, and they loaded all their equipment on. Ricky had a checklist to make sure they left nothing behind, and even then he searched around the house in case they’d forgotten anything important. The Dees were on form.

Pulling away, Den asked if they’d remembered to bring the net. John fell for it, asking what net in a panic, and felt a fool when told it was to catch his butterflies. Only Ricky laughed, the rest not appreciating the joke, they had plenty of butterflies on board.

The club opened at ten, and by then they’d set up and done all the sound and lighting tests. The dressing room they had to spend the next two hours in was basic, to say the least. Next to the manager’s office, they could hear every word he said to his staff, who frequently called in, and on the phone. Realising he would equally be able to hear them they didn’t say a lot, certainly none of the things they really wanted to say to each other.

“Isn’t it a dump?” John whispered at one point.

“This isn’t their best dressing room. Don’t forget, we’re only a fill-in tonight, we’re not the stars. Anyway, I’ve been in a lot worse,” Ricky whispered back. “It’s the public that sees the glitz and glamour in this game, not the performers.”

“I hate this waiting around,” Carlton said, half whispering too.

“We can turn up later for engagements, but that means sound and lighting checks are minimal if at all existent. It can make a performance look very amateur. Unlike some artists who go out for a while, often calling in a pub, we can’t do that, not dressed like this. We’d attract too much attention. You’ll get used to the waiting after a while, it’s a small price to pay,” Ricky said.

At eleven-thirty one of the security guys popped his head around the door. “Are you taking visitors?” he asked.

“Who is it?” Ricky asked.

The man thought for a moment, counting. “Five lots of press, with cameramen. We don’t normally get this kind of thing.”

Ricky looked at the clock on the wall. “Tell them one lot at a time, and we can only give them three minutes each as there’s not a lot of time before we go on.”

“Okay,” he said, and disappeared.

“Remember everything, be fun guys, smile, giggle and laugh, make them feel really good, but say as little as possible,” Ricky said. “And don’t forget those sexy poses.”

By explaining the reason for only being able to grant them three minutes each, and then actually allowing them four minutes, Ricky played a trick he’d often used before. It always scored points.

The interviews went extremely well, with no slip-ups. Trained to perfection, the novices didn’t appear to be novices, and they foresaw every trap. Ricky particularly liked John’s reply to a disguised question alluding to his sexuality. He’d laughed and questioned having one, saying perhaps he’d better go and look for it.

At five to twelve, Ricky and John with their guitars comfortable and only needing plugging in, they waited just offstage. Ricky cringed as the deejay did a short glowing piece on him, before shouting out for everyone to give a great big Southampton welcome to: Natural Emotions In Music!

The crowd roared, they all counted to five as Ricky had told them, and then they ran out, leaping and punching fists into the air, cheekily grinning at the crowd, and Ricky pointing into the audience as if he recognised somebody, as they made centre stage and plugged in their guitars. Carlton, making it to behind the drums, pulled his trousers up slightly at the knees for comfort, and best pose, before sitting down, picking up the drumsticks, and after a nifty drum roll bashing the cymbals.

“Hello Southampton!” Ricky shouted out, stepping front stage, leaning forward, and putting his hand to his ear to listen for the reply. The crowd roared back its greeting.

“That sounded more like Portsmouth to me,” Ricky complained, playing on their feud, “Hello Southampton!” he shouted again. Not wanting any likening to Portsmouth, this time the crowd went totally ballistic, and Carlton hit the drums and started the intro to their first number.

At twelve thirty, sweaty chests bared open and looking slightly unkempt now in their initially pristine attire, they left the stage to rapturous, but tumultuous, applause. The crowd was screaming for more, and in no uncertain terms demanding it. The deejay made three attempts to restart the dance music. But no matter how loud he played it, the crowd remained crushed to the stage, shouting for more.

Bouncing back on to the stage a few minutes later, grinning madly, they set themselves up again, and let it rip with four more numbers, all of them like the first: brand new, unheard, and brilliant. At the close of these, Ricky managed to quieten the crowd long enough to tell them they really, really, really had to go after just one more number, but he promised they would be back next month. The roof nearly lifted.

As they left the stage this time, to the same kind of applause, Den and some guys from the club ran on to gather up their equipment, quickly taking it away to leave no doubt the group couldn’t do another number. Packing it all into the coach, with Ricky only pausing long enough to pick up their fee, unprecedentedly enhanced by the manager, they jumped aboard and hastily departed.

“Phew! That was nearly as good as sex, wasn’t it?” John said, laughing, and looking exhausted, as if he’d actually had sex.

“We did alright, didn’t we?” Carlton said, happily grinning.

“We did absolutely brilliant! You just don’t know how proud I am of you!” Ricky told them. “I was expecting it to go well, but that was unbelievable! Leslie, you’re the nearest, open that fridge. There’s champagne on ice in there. I think we should celebrate!”

“Guess what?” John said.

“What?”

“We get to do it all again tonight!”

Chapter 9

A realisation and the best gig ever.

Being so late to bed the previous night, it was eleven o'clock by the time they woke up Saturday morning, and past midday by the time they'd all finished giving John a few of his birthday treats and actually got up. He was thrilled with the computer, saying it wasn't too much over the top and it was something they could all use, and he looked forward to the guy coming that afternoon to deliver it and set up the internet connection. Giving him his birthday cards, Leslie and Carlton told him he'd receive their presents later, at the parish hall do, when no doubt there would be several other presents for him.

Carlton and the brothers were still elated about their debut performance, if disregarding the much smaller demo at the Mega Music Store, reliving special moments of it time after time. Remembering back fondly to the first time an audience had wowed him, Ricky knew exactly how great they were feeling, and he tried to feel that way again himself.

Having completely exhausted reliving the wonderful performance, and with them now flopped around in various seats, not wanting to do anything in a state of come down, John looked up and said, "We've got tonight, which doesn't really count does it? And we've got that one booking back in Southampton next month, but that's all, isn't it?"

"Don't tell me you want more? Who do you think you are, Oliver Twist?" Ricky joked.

"It was great fun, wasn't it? Of course we want more."

"That's good, because once those reporters have done their stuff, I don't think your feet will hit the ground for months!"

"Really?"

"Really. Make the most of the leisure time we have now. Next week we might be wondering how to get from X to Y and on to Z, all opposite ends of the country, and still manage to do a performance without falling asleep on stage. You've just slept for eight hours, but don't you feel a little bit lethargic right now?"

Imagine how you'd feel had you slept those eight hours on the coach hurtling up a motorway. A lot worse, I can tell you!"

"Yeah, why do I feel like that?"

"I think we all do," Carlton said.

"Over the top strenuous performances, the kind of thing we do, are a bit like taking drugs. They can give you a heck of a high for a while, but just as with drugs there's frequently a payback time."

"Yes, it is a bit like the feeling you get the morning after popping an E, or taking some speed, isn't it?" John said.

"Exactly the same, I think," Leslie said, yawning.

"You've taken drugs?" Ricky asked.

"We've all tried them, why, haven't you?" Carlton asked.

"Sorry, silly question. Most people do try them at some time or another, don't they? You don't use them now though, do you? Drugs and what we do is not a good combination. When did you last have some?" Ricky appeared a little worried.

"Don't panic, we're not stupid, I promise you. It was over a year ago since we had any," John said. "Why, when did you last have some?"

Ricky hadn't seen that one coming, and he knew it would be wrong to lie to them. "Less than a month ago," he said, looking away from them, guiltily. "But I wasn't a performer then, was I? I had turned into a drugged-up idiot, someone lost in the fast lane and not having a clue what to do about it," he added, as if in mitigation.

John went over and sat on the side of Ricky's chair to hug him. "Sorry," he said. "That was really thoughtless of me. We only ever took them the once, just to see what they did, but you've taken a lot haven't you? We read the newspaper reports, and saw the pictures. You got done for it once, didn't you? I guess for a while you needed to replace something missing in your life, but it's not missing now, is it?"

"No, it's not. Honestly, it's not. Now I have everything I could ever want. Family hug time, please. Jump on me, I need it!" Ricky said, just before they all leapt on him.

The hugging over, Carlton and Leslie each sat on an arm of Ricky's chair, and John took to sitting on his lap. "Can you remember the exact time when you first met us?" John asked, gently stroking the side of Ricky's face with a finger, and then moving round to tease his lips, nose and eyebrows with it.

“It seems like it was a lifetime ago, but really it was only last Saturday wasn’t it? A week ago, a minute or so after two o’clock. I can distinctly remember the church clock striking. Why do you ask?” Ricky said.

“Because it will be around that two o’clock time again very shortly. When it is, that will precisely complete us being together for seven days. Exactly to the moment. From that instant, technically we are into our eighth day together, and that has a great significance.”

“Really? Why?” Ricky asked, squeezing him affectionately, and laughing. “I don’t go past my sell-by date, do I? None of you are going to go off me, I hope.”

“We’ll never go off you,” Carlton whispered in his ear.

“You have a lot of money,” Leslie said, “but money can’t buy you everything. If you could have just one thing in the world, anything at all you really wanted, and no matter how impossible it might seem, what would it be?”

Ricky laughed, snuggling his head into each of them in turn. “That’s easy,” he said. “That one thing would be to live here with you three, forever and ever exactly like we are now. This to me is heaven, and my biggest fear is that one day it might all end.”

The three of them smiled at Ricky, with love pouring from their eyes. Then a noise out the front of the house disturbed them.

“What’s that?” Ricky asked. “Oh, I know. It must be the guy with your computer, let me up and I’ll see to him.”

“No, it isn’t him,” John said. “It’s not the computer man. It’s simply the eighth day arriving.”

Ricky frowned a not understanding.

Holding a piece of paper up in front of him, Leslie asked, “What have I written on this piece of paper?”

Ricky wondered where the conversation was going, but he answered, “It’s the figure eight, what else?” he said.

“This else,” John said, taking the paper off his brother, holding it in front of Ricky, and then turning it on its side. “What does the eight become?”

“Infinity? An eight on its side is the infinity sign, isn’t it?”

“And on the eighth day, after resting on the seventh, God created infinity,” Leslie said.

“And you really want everything you have now forever? Me, John, Leslie, and what we have here?” Carlton asked.

“Yes, more than anything, but what is all this?” Ricky was becoming more and more confused.

“Then, Ricky Rowntree, so be it,” the love-wrapped golden voice coming from across the room said. “Now, what colour wings would you prefer, eh? How about white?”

“Den?” Ricky questioned, quickly looking up at the smiling young man. Was it the light from the window behind the guy that gave him an aura? Was this all a wind up, something to do with the man’s peculiar sense of humour?

“It’s Den, if you want,” John said, with the three of them leaning over to kiss Ricky, “for he has many names. He also has a terrific sense of humour: we don’t wear wings.”

Ricky swallowed heavily. Slowly, a realisation began to dawn on him. “Are you telling me I’m dead? That I died?” he asked.

“You have become one of us now, but are you happy?” John asked, with his radiating love spreading calmness in Ricky. “Everything you said you wanted, you have been given. You passed your assessment with flying colours, and we are so pleased about that, because we really do love you, and just like we have shown you over this past week, in every way.

“You poured on us your love unlimited, you gave us hope to realise our dreams, and you were charitable, and you did it despite not wanting to return to that kind of life again yourself. You sacrificed your own dreams for our dreams. Now you have your dreams back, for they are really our dreams too. We love this kind of existence, and we will remain like this, the four of us together, for as long as you wish, swimming, playing, loving, having fun, and never growing old or infirm. From this eighth day you will forever be one of us. So, are you really and truly happy? Is there anything more you would like?”

“Oh, I’m so happy! I’m really so happy! There’s nothing more I want if I’ve got you forever. What more could I want? Absolutely nothing. But please explain to me, what happened?”

“What you saw was *you* bludgeoned to death in that bed, not Doc, as you left your mortal state,” John said. “From your untimely death then, until you met us a week ago and we had to play a part in your assessment, everything you thought you were experiencing never actually occurred.”

“What happened to Doc, then?”

“Oh, Doc is still alive, but he will never come here.”

“Why?”

“He is not a worthy man. He tried to take Leslie and me, to have his wicked way with us, and when we refused him he murdered us. He killed our father too, and he also killed you, doing that rather than lose you. Doc can never come here.”

The handsome young guy Ricky formerly knew as Den, smiled. Walking over to them, he held out his hand invitingly. “Shall we all go for a swim?” he asked, winking at them. “I have a beautiful day waiting for us out there.”

“Yes, come on, my flower,” Carlton said, pulling Ricky up out of his chair. “Eternity may not be long enough for me to show you how much I love you, and to do everything I want to do with you, so we’d better get cracking on it straightaway. Let’s go and have some fun!

“We’ve a little show to put on later, John’s birthday party to enjoy, and your welcoming celebration for becoming one of us. I just know we’ll all want to have a romp before we do any of that, and we will again afterwards. It won’t be too much for you, I promise. You see, here everything is possible, even what John says he wants to do to you.” He laughed, hugging him tightly.

Ricky giggled, blushing. “Don’t!” he said. “You must all know that was really *my* fantasy!”

“Of course we do, and we can hardly wait to fulfil that fantasy for you, because we will, all of us — later on today!”

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Without end.

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