A strange and unexpected shuffling sound was coming from outside the front door. Alistair left his laundry on the bed and stuck his head out into the hall to better listen. A key scraped in the lock—but it was past nine, he thought. Liam should be sat at his desk, drinking coffee, hating his job and everyone he worked with. The door to the flat creaked open; a muffled noise of rage came through the widening gap, along with the slam of a fist on the doorframe. It was Liam: suit dirtied, his collar torn. There was a bruise beginning to flourish on his cheek and his lip was bleeding.

“What the fu—” was as far as Alistair got, before Liam swore again, this time kicking wildly at the door.

“Bastard got my *fucking* phone! And my wallet! Nearly had enough stamps for a free coffee, too.” He stumbled into the kitchen and slammed his keys down on the table; Alistair hurried after him. “Thank god I didn’t have my laptop. Work would’ve killed me—I’m sure it’s worth more to them than I am.”

Liam was trying to shrug off his jacket but one of his arms didn’t seem to want to work properly. Cautiously, Alistair helped him out of it. Liam kept pacing, up and down, which was difficult to do in their tiny kitchen. He looked like a wild animal in a cage. Alistair slotted himself in beside the fridge and took care not to startle him.

Liam whipped round suddenly. “Can I borrow your phone? I need to let work know I’m gonna be late.”

“You’re already late,” Alistair pointed out. “And I don’t think you’re going in at all today—that arm needs looking at for a start.”

Liam’s face took on a stubborn set. It was a long, fine-boned kind of face and the expression made him look like a horse refusing a jump.

Alistair rolled his eyes. “Come on, mate,” he said. “That’s the shoulder you injured at football, isn’t it? Do you need me to *make* you go to a doctor?”

Liam sagged a little; some of his jumpy bravado drained away. He shook his head. “No, it’s just sore, I think,” he said. “I fell on it funny. Must’ve pulled something.”

“You fell?” Alistair said. “Tell me what happened—everything. Start from the beginning. Then we can call the police and report it, cancel your cards, and *you* can go have a lie down.”

Liam had stopped his pacing. “Is this what you’re like with your clients?” he said. He was fidgeting with cutlery drawer, sliding it open and closed in a manner which, under different circumstances, Alistair would’ve found extremely annoying. “Bet you love bossing them around.”

“Sometimes,” Alistair said. “Some of them need to be told what to do, though they think they’re paying for the opposite. A few even realise that that’s why they want me—to make life easier for them.”

“Dunno how you do it,” Liam said, shaking his head. “It would drive me mad, being at someone’s beck and call. It’s like when Sarah thinks that just because she’s a pay grade more senior than me that— Shit, it’s past half nine. Gimme your phone, man, I need to call in.”

“It’s not really like that,” Alistair said. His phone was snug in his back pocket—he unlocked it and gave it to Liam. “With the right client, it’s satisfying work. And very well paid.”

Liam jabbed a couple of times at the screen, frowning. Then he laughed, which made him wince—he’d forgotten his split lip. “Just like a boy scout,” he said. “You love being prepared. You’ve got my work number stored in here, just in case you needed it.”

“And I did need it,” Alistair said. “So shut up and call work—and you’d better call the bank too, cancel your cards. I’m going to run you a bath.”

Liam’s brows knitted together in alarm—but the phone was already ringing so his protest was cut short. “I’m fine, I really don’t need any fuss—” he started, before having to switch to a less angry tone. “Oh, hi Jamie, it’s Liam. Is Harpreet there? I need to talk to her urgently…”

Alistair left him to explain what had happened and went to start the taps running. He threw in a handful of magnesium salts and a few choice drops of fragranced oil. Liam, in common with all of his friends, didn’t quite understand his vocation. Not that that was their fault—it was a complicated subject and it suited Alistair to keep his explanations simple. ‘Personal assistant but for private individuals only’ was what he usually told people. All the usual stuff, just with longer hours and a few extra duties on top. No big deal.

He’d discovered his aptitude early, while dithering about what to study at university, and had taken a job in a hotel to buy himself some time. There he’d realised he liked being of service to people—there was something extremely powerful about knowing things which were of use to others. Working the reception desk had been his favourite—guests had brought with them all kinds of needs and he’d made it his business to fulfil them with understated efficiency. To anticipate their questions, he’d studied numerous *What’s On* guides, kept up to date with new restaurant openings, memorised walking routes to anywhere a guest could reasonably want to go. He’d made it his business to know everything about the running of the hotel so that he knew whom to ask for favours and when. The job had ended; next an agency had sent him to temp on reception at a big corporate office. That hadn’t been so different, if quite a lot less fun—but there he’d managed to bag a pay rise and a permanent position as assistant to the finance director. He could still be there now, hustling his way through the corporate world, if Ben hadn’t tempted him away and shown him the truth about himself.

“What are you doing in here?” Liam pushed stiffly into the bathroom, waving Alistair’s phone. “I don’t need a bath! I’m fine, really! Why is everyone making such a fuss? And what’s that smell?”

“Lavender, frankincense and arnica, for bruising and inflammation,” Alistair said. “So Harpeet told you to stay at home today? Good, at least she’s showing sense, even if you aren’t.” He switched off the water and checked the temperature: warm, not too hot. A rich, soothing scent rose from the ripples in the clear water—shame the bath wasn’t cleaner, though. Alistair sighed—his standards must be slipping. It had been too long since his last client.

Liam was still hovering in the doorway, aghast that Alistair should lace a bath with essential oils.

Alistair shrugged. “I picked up a few bits of aromatherapy when I worked for Lady Forsyth,” he said. “I use it after rugby. Do you want to tell me what happened to you now?”

Liam shrugged as best as he could with an injured shoulder. “Got mugged,” he said. “Who the fuck gets mugged during the morning rush hour? Happened behind the train station, in that little alley with the blind corner.”

Alistair nodded. He knew it: long, narrow, badly-lit. A short-cut which led directly to the platform towards town, but which was best avoided at night. Though, after today, maybe it was best avoided full stop.

“Well, there was a guy coming along it the other way,” Liam said. “He looked totally normal, not suspicious or anything—I barely paid him any attention. I had my phone out and he just, I dunno, *lunged* for it. Came out of nowhere. I was so taken aback I didn’t let go—think that was when I wrenched my shoulder, actually.”

“I thought you said you fell on it?”

“I did that as well,” Liam said. “He pulled out a pocket knife—I let go in a hurry. Then he asked for my wallet, so I gave it to him. Then he shoved me really hard and ran. I ended up on the floor. In a puddle.”

Alistair pulled a face. “A puddle in that alley can’t contain anything that anybody wants to lie in.”

“It didn’t,” Liam said. “Talk about humiliating. And all before nine on a Tuesday morning.”

“Better humiliated than stabbed,” Alistair said. “Listen, I want to take a look at your shoulder. And at the rest of you as well—to check you’re not too badly damaged. Are you going to let me or are you going to put up a fight?”

Liam sighed. “Fuck,” he said. He closed the toilet seat and sat down on it. His hands were beginning to tremble—something he hadn’t yet noticed. Alistair had, though, and was already mentally preparing a number of remedies to lessen the approaching adrenaline crash. “Are you going to make me go to A&E?”

“Only if you’ve broken something,” Alistair said. “But you’ll be thanking me if so—doctors have much better drugs than I do.”

“Ha ha,” Liam said, as grumpily as he could manage. “Fine.” He began to fumble with his shirt buttons; he looked pale now, and more than a little exhausted. “I always thought I’d be able to handle myself if something like that happened, you know?” he said. “Guess I was wrong.”

“You were taken by surprise,” Alistair said. “He had a knife, you hadn’t had any coffee. It happens. Don’t read too much into it.”

“He was only a little guy as well,” Liam said. He opened his shirt, revealing an impressive bloom of bruises down one side of his torso. “Huh,” he said. “Ouch.”

“Don’t poke it.” Alistair batted his hand away and knelt down to have a better look. “How’s your breathing? Does it feel normal?” Liam nodded while Alistair felt the skin over his ribs. “It’s not swollen. Does that hurt?”

“No,” Liam said. “Well, yes, but not in the way you mean. Not in the broken way.”

“Right,” Alistair said. He sat back on his heels, thinking. “Stand up and take your shirt off. And trousers.”

Liam hesitated, just briefly. Alistair watched the doubt flicker across his face.

“It’s not that—” Liam started. “I didn’t mean—”

But Alistair ignored him—he knew he didn’t mean that. Liam was afraid of doctors, and occasionally intimacy, but not of his gay flatmate seeing him with his clothes off.

“I need to see the damage,” Alistair explained. “All of it. That bruising looks like it goes round the back.”

Liam complied, a little shamefaced. There were bruises forming on his hip and a bit of a scrape, but that was all. Nothing for them to worry about.

Alistair stood and inspected his arm and shoulder. “You might have torn a muscle,” he said. “And there’s a chance you’ve cracked a rib but I don’t think it’s likely. That bruise on your cheek, though—did you hit your head? Pass out?”

“No,” Liam said. He let Alistair tilt his head this way and that under the light. “He sort of got me in the face when he shoved me. It doesn’t feel too bad.”

Alistair felt the fine bones underneath the skin, just to make sure, and then sighed. “On the whole, I think you’re okay. Just take it easy. And if your ribs or shoulder don’t start to feel better in a couple of days, for god’s sake, go see a doctor.”

“Thanks mate,” Liam said. His voice was quiet; he was still feeling bad about what he hadn’t meant. Together, they managed to get his feet out of his trousers—Liam had to hold onto Alistair for balance. “Okay,” he said. “Starting to feel a bit weird now. And to understand why someone might pay to have you around at a time like this.”

“Well, I’m not a carer,” Alistair said. “Or a nurse. So don’t expect a bedbath.”

Liam snickered. It could have been an awkward moment—he was in his underwear and still hanging onto Alistair—but both of them ended up laughing more than the joke warranted.

“Just get in the bath,” Alistair said. “I’m going to get you some toast and to check the other casualty.”

“Other casualty?”

“Your suit.” Alistair scooped up the pile of discarded fabric from the floor. “God knows what you fell in. And there’s at least one torn seam.”

Liam let out a moan of distress. “Shit, no! I just paid the final installment.”

“Yep,” Alistair said. “I know. You told me. But don’t worry, I’ll do what I can.”

Alistair had spent months persuading Liam to invest in a decent suit. Back in the kitchen, he folded Liam’s trousers and hung them over the back of a chair where the jacket was still draped. Then he inspected the shirt—there was a small tear in one of the shoulder seams which he should be able to repair himself. But it was splashed with mud which, judging by the smell, seemed to be mixed with motor oil—something which didn’t bode well for the rest of the suit. The jacket collar was torn—there must’ve been more of a struggle than Liam had admitted, or even remembered—but the trousers were okay. After some careful thought, Alistair rejected the idea of trying to spot clean them. A professional was definitely needed—he’d take it down to Valentino’s later.

He threw the shirt into the washing machine and left it to soak, then put the kettle on and found some bread for the toaster. Liam was okay, mainly shaken up; it had been the right thing to do to check his injuries and put him in the bath. The next thing was for Alistair to help him get a crime number from the police and then cancel his phone—but he couldn’t help wondering if he was milking the situation, just a tiny bit. He was between clients and bored at home, deprived of something he needed—and had been since Rupert had left for Chicago. He’d been almost on his way out in search of work when Liam had come back, all battered and bruised. But someone like Rupert wasn’t easily replaceable; it was highly unlikely an agency could provide what he was looking for.

Alistair amused himself with placing an imaginary ad while the kettle boiled. *Very personal assistant: professional, discreet, experienced (male, mid-20s, fit and healthy), seeking the employ of single gentleman, 35-55. Capable, reliable, well-presented. As well as usual PA duties, holds clean international driving licence, experienced with valuable clothing and furnishings, and adept at managing other members of staff. Can take on light gardening and cooking duties, and happy to provide bespoke opportunities for mutual sexual gratification. Extremely flexible, always endeavours to exceed expectations—your satisfaction is my deepest pleasure. Live-out position preferred. Available now for long- or short-term appointments. No children.*

Alistair sighed. Few clients really understood what he had to offer—there had only been Rupert and Ben.

Unintentionally, Ben had been the one who’d introduced him to the idea. He’d met Ben through his old corporate job and obviously must have impressed, as Ben had offered him a position at nearly double his salary. Ben was someone of high net worth and myriad business interests—when there was something he wanted he had no qualms about paying for it. In Alistair he’d seen the right kind of assistant, one who found pride in how well a task was done and who cared little what the task itself consisted of. Arranging VIP dinners, organising international conferences, making coffee—it didn’t matter to Alistair. But if Ben had seen anything else in him, he’d never let on—compared to working for Rupert, very little had happened between them. But at the time it had been an enormous eye-opener for Alistair—he prided himself on being quick on the uptake, but it had taken him a few months to understand all of Ben’s needs.

Secrecy had played a major part in it. And later, once Alistair had become an enthusiastic accomplice, that had transformed into a pretence that there was nothing at all going on. It had been very simple: Ben had liked to masturbate while Alistair was present. Not visibly—though Alistair had put in many happy hours at home imagining what his cock looked like, he’d never been able to verify his assumptions. And there had never been any contact between them—really, when all things were considered, it had almost been a flirtation. Rather than being an object of desire, Alistair’s primary role was bystander and facilitator, and through Ben he’d discovered that he loved it.

The first few times had happened during Alistair’s morning briefings, which always took place at Ben’s bedside. He would wake very early, but rarely, if ever, left the house before noon. As he ate breakfast (provided by Alistair) and fielded calls, the demands of the day would be discussed and Alistair would add and subtract things from his substantial to-do list. Once he’d noticed the slight flexion in Ben’s left bicep, and then linked it to a hand moving under the covers, Alistair had risen to the occasion magnificently (and in more than one sense). He’d played along beautifully, understanding that Ben waited until Alistair had left the room before progressing things further. And once Ben knew he’d been discovered, and realised that Alistair remained on duty to listen at the door, he would make his stifled moans louder, and even more obviously stifled—particularly so once Alistair had had the rug in the hall removed to ensure his departing footsteps were crisply audible. He’d then taken to inventing other scenarios for Ben to indulge in his predilection: urgent conversations during Ben’s after-gym shower, with a barrier of steamed-up glass between them, extended periods of unnecessary dusting while Ben pretended to watch TV half-concealed by a brand new blanket. Indeed, while working for Ben, Alistair had learned a simply astonishing amount about himself.

A small splash from the bathroom reminded Alistair of where he was and why: not a client, but a friend in need, one who’d had a very, very bad day. Though he couldn’t help being his own particular flavour of pervert, at least he was one with useful skills and good intentions.

The toaster popped. Alistair buttered it and delivered it hot to the casualty, along with a scalding mug of tea and a Mars bar gifted from his own stash.

Liam reacted extremely well to the Mars bar. He yanked off the wrapper and wolfed it down, barely looking at the toast. “Oh god, yes,” he said, through a mouthful of chocolate. “How did you know?”

Alistair smiled. “It’s what I’m good at. Make sure you eat the toast as well.” He produced a couple of medium-strength co-codamol from his pocket, also from his own stash—wherever he worked, he always kept a well-stocked first-aid kit. “Take these after you’ve finished,” he said. “They’re not that strong but they might make you feel sleepy.”

“Yes, boss,” Liam said. He looked brighter after the Mars bar, maybe a little too bright. He’d sunk down low in the bath, almost up to his chin in water, and his eyes had the kind of overtired glitter that someone with flu might have. Definitely a nap needed this afternoon, Alistair thought.

“It’s still weird seeing you like this,” Liam said. His voice had a contemplative tone, unusual for him. He waved a vague hand at Alistair but there was no need for any explanation—Alistair knew what he meant. Until recently, he’d rarely worn clothing as casual as he did now—jeans, t-shirts, sweatshirts. His wardrobe was full of high-quality tailoring—most of it paid for by Rupert’s generous wages—but none of it had seen the light of day in weeks.

“Weird seeing you like this, too,” Alistair said. He sat on the floor beside the bath and watched him slowly crunch toast. “There’s not much point me getting dressed up without a client, and I haven’t had a client since Rupert left.”

“Where did he go again?” Liam asked.

“Chicago,” Alistair said. “But he’ll probably be in California somewhere now. He likes it there, goes to see friends often.”

“Shame you couldn’t have gone with him,” Liam said. “Sounds great.”

“He asked me to,” Alistair said. “But I turned him down.”

Liam’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “Really? I didn’t know that. Wow, why didn’t you go? I would’ve, sounds more fun than Tooting.”

Alistair shrugged. “I just got the sense it wasn’t going anywhere,” he said. “It’s hard to explain.” He felt like a fuller answer was expected of him—Liam was obviously waiting for one—but Alistair couldn’t give it. Rupert was… a complicated situation, much more so than Ben had been. They’d seen eye-to-eye almost immediately, and had a very good time, but it couldn’t have lasted. What Alistair needed now was something new, something more sustainable.

He watched Liam swallow the painkillers with a mouthful of tea. “How are you feeling?” Alistair asked.

“Stiff, still,” Liam said. “Tired, too. But better after the food.”

Alistair considered him sternly—steam and warm, scented water had softened him into something else. He was pale, with high colour in his cheeks, looking almost elfin.

“You should rest after your bath,” he said. “We’ll need to call the police later for a crime number and then get your phone sorted out, but I can help with all that. Just take it easy today, okay? No more attempts to shrug it off—you can go back to pretending it wasn’t a big deal tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Liam said. “Thanks for doing all this—can’t be how you imagined spending the day. I owe you one, big time.”

“Come off it,” Alistair said. “What are friends for?”

Liam smiled and nodded. Neither of them needed to say anything else.

“Before I leave you in peace, can I check your shoulder again?” Alistair said. “I want to see if there’s been any change, in case the hot water’s inflamed it.”

Liam sighed in a put-upon manner. “If you must.” He levered himself up to sit, displaying a stretch of pinkened skin gently scattered with freckles. There were bruises forming on the side of his arm but his shoulder seemed free of discolouration or swelling.

Alistair placed both hands on his back and felt along the ridge of each shoulder blade, comparing uninjured to injured. He did the same with muscles surrounding the bones, exploring the planes and dips of Liam’s back, feeling for any differences between them. But they both seemed the same, and with no unusual swelling, though the injured one had a large knot developing under the scapula. Without thinking, Alistair slipped from examination to massage—it was another one of his many skills, picked up to enhance an already broad CV. Liam made a tiny, deep sound when he kneaded the affected spot; his head tipped further back.

“Better?” Alistair asked.

Liam nodded. His breathing was deep, even; Alistair applied a little less pressure and spread out his efforts across the whole of his upper back. Liam would sleep better relaxed; his body, still braced for a fight, had been hanging onto plenty of tension. But that was starting to change now. The water lapped at his stomach, his eyes were dreamily closed. Alistair was finishing up, about to stand and leave him to it, when his eyes were drawn down to the water. Between Liam’s thighs, a pale, heavy shape bobbed softly to the surface; his pubic hair waved around it like dark fronds of kelp. Alistair looked his fill without meaning to, thinking guiltily of Rupert—one of the most innocent of his pleasures had been a little bathtime relaxation, not so dissimilar to this. The memory, and his own awakening arousal, reminded him where he was. He pulled his gaze away, but in doing so accidentally caught Liam’s eye.

Liam didn’t withdraw; in fact, he didn’t seem to notice his arousal, and only blinked sleepily at Alistair. For a second, Alistair was relieved—he could get up and walk out, just as he’d planned. But then something changed in him, something reminiscent of when he’d first noticed Ben’s hand moving under the covers—the part of him which loved risk had woken. It told him to push, to hold Liam’s eyes. To give him a chance to say yes.

“Feel good?” he asked, smiling, and raised an eyebrow.

Liam frowned, but looked down and noticed his mostly-hard dick gently thrusting itself out of the water. He flushed, immediately, and would’ve pulled away had not Alistair got there first.

“You know when you said it’s not ‘like that’?” Alistair said. “Well, this isn’t like that either. I don’t think it’s like that for either of us. It’s just that you need something, and I can give you something. Doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

Alistair paused; Liam eyes were cast down and to the side, but he hadn’t moved. Alistair’s hands still rested on his shoulders; Liam’s dick was still hard. Growing harder, in fact.

Alistair waited then, very slowly, reached into the water between Liam’s legs and took hold what he found there. “Want me to give it to you?” he said. “You don’t have to do anything, except say yes.”

Liam didn’t speak, and his eyes were now closed—but he opened his legs wider and let Alistair’s hand work more fully.

Alistair followed his lead, keeping his movements light but precise, and being careful not to touch Liam anywhere else. He used his fingertips at first, in long and teasing strokes, then reached further down and rolled his balls in his palm. Liam’s cock reacted with enthusiasm, nudging more of itself out of the water and into the dampened air. Alistair soaped his hand and tugged on it gently; it forced a moan out of Liam, one he’d been holding onto.

Alistair smiled to himself. “No need to thank me—what are friends for?”

A little self-conscious laugh burst out of Liam; he covered his mouth with one hand, smothering his mirth and hiding behind it. It also covered the other sounds he wanted to make—Alistair’s attentions became efficient, a fast and thorough rhythm designed to get him off fast. His cock was a lovely handful, sliding easily through Alistair’s tight fist. Liam struggled manfully: a series of soft gasps swelled into groans; the fingers of his other hand gripped the edges of the bath. By the end, he was lifting his hips out of the water so Alistair could stroke him to the root—if he’d had more energy, he might even have been fucking Alistair’s hand. When he came, he was biting his knuckles; his groans echoed off the tiles as he spurted freely over Alistair’s hand.

Alistair rinsed his fingers in the bathwater, quietly pleased with his own performance, and respectfully prepared to withdraw. They shared a look as he left: Liam was still gasping, eyes half-closed, with a shocked kind of grin on his face.

“Try not to drown,” Alistair said. “Shout if you need anything else.”

Liam settled back down into the cooling water, boneless. A little trail of semen floated in the water beside him. “But you draw a line at bed baths,” he said. “Got it.”

Alistair was still laughing to himself as he closed the door behind him. He adjusted himself—his dick was pressing uncomfortably against his zipper—but allowed himself nothing more than that. He hadn’t done it to get off, and doing so over Liam would feel weird, anyway, especially after what he’d just promised him. *It wasn’t like that,* he’d said, and it wasn’t. He didn’t want or need anything more from Liam. No big deal.

What he did want was a new client, the *right kind* of client. Surely Rupert wasn’t be the only person he could have fun with. Perhaps, if he couldn’t find the perfect one readymade, he could *create* one? If Liam could be made amenable, even just the once, there must be hope. He’d start looking again straight away, and would begin by placing a revised version of that ad…