



When duty becomes mixed up  
with desire, can a battle-scarred  
soldier leave behind the  
horrors of war?

ELIZABETH  
COLDWELL

AN ACT OF  
**DUTY**

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# A Totally Bound Publication



An Act of Duty

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**Warning:**

This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has a heat rating of Totally Sizzling and a Sexometer of 2.

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# **AN ACT OF DUTY**

**Elizabeth Coldwell**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

*When duty becomes mixed up with desire, can a battle-scarred soldier leave behind the horrors of war and enter a world of fantasy and fulfilment?*

For Corporal Mark Stockdale, a trip to Amsterdam won't just provide some much-needed R and R away from the horrors of the Afghanistan battlefield—it's also a way of keeping a promise to a fallen comrade. But violence has a way of seeking Mark out, even in the most peaceful of locations, and when he stops for a drink in a quiet bar, he finds himself stepping in to help its owner, Robin Sneijder, fight off a group of opportunist thieves. Robin shows his gratitude, stunning Mark with the depth of the passion between them. When Mark wakes in the night from a vivid nightmare of the attack that killed his best friend, Ozzy, Robin is there to comfort him.

Robin seems like the perfect partner, and what started as an act of duty turns into an unforgettably erotic encounter. But when Robin confesses he has an overwhelming urge to submit to a hunk in army uniform, Mark is not sure whether he can put aside the realities of war to fulfil his new lover's most cherished desires. Can he separate fact and fantasy, and give Robin the domination he craves?

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# *Dedication*

For the two Johns

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Sky Sports: BSkyB

Heineken: Heineken N.V.

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## Chapter One

Mark watched a man in a tiger onesie cycle past him on a rickety, black-framed bike, and knew Ozzy would have really loved Amsterdam. He'd barely been in the city for half an hour, yet already he was falling in with its relaxed vibe. This was a place to chill, to leave your worries behind for a while. As he looked at the tourists strolling along the cobbled pavements in the September sunshine, it was almost possible to forget that halfway across the world, good, honest men were dying in their efforts to bring stability to the basket case that was Afghanistan. Good, honest men like Ozzy.

He paused to consult the foldout map in the back of the tourist guide he'd bought at the airport. If he took the next left, it should bring him out right in the heart of the red-light district. Whenever they'd talked about visiting the city, that had always been the area Ozzy had wanted to tour more than any other. Forget the canals and the historic gabled houses, some so old they leaned at odd angles and appeared in danger of toppling into the water at any moment. Ignore the Rijksmuseum, where you could admire paintings from every Old Master Holland had ever produced. No, Ozzy had simply wanted to have a few beers and get his end away.

On one of their monotonous desert patrols, he and Ozzy had made a pact to come to Amsterdam on their next spell of leave. They'd never discussed what would happen if one of them wasn't around by then, even though the fear of death was never far from either of their minds. Making this trip had seemed to Mark like the right thing to do—a way of honouring the memory of the man who'd been the best friend he'd ever had. No, they'd been closer than that. Gary Osmond, known to everyone in the regiment as Ozzy, had been like the brother Mark had never had, and he couldn't help wishing the guy were here with him right now. He felt a tear

threatening to spill down his cheek and blinked it away, glad his eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

Turning a corner, he found himself confronted with the sight Ozzy had always hoped to see. In almost every ground floor window of the buildings that lined this stretch of canal stood a woman in her underwear, smiling and beckoning to the small groups of men who passed by. Here and there, thick burgundy drapes were pulled across one of the windows, indicating that its occupant had company. The sight of so much exposed female flesh didn't rouse Mark's desires, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate beauty when he saw it. He wondered which of the girls would have caught Ozzy's eye. The peroxide blonde in the bright yellow bra and panties, maybe, or the brown-skinned, almond-eyed sylph in a PVC corset and thigh boots?

Watching the girls as they tried to entice a customer to enter their domain, he didn't see any signs that they were unhappy, or being forced to do this against their will. They seemed relaxed and confident, sure in their own worth and ability to make decisions for themselves. If anything, they appeared to have more power than the men who paid for their services. How different from Afghanistan, where the Taliban had sought to prevent women from having access to basic rights like education and healthcare, and female freedom came at a heavy price. He shook his head.

*What a fucked-up world we live in.*

He carried on walking, until he was halted in his tracks by the lurid display in the window of a sex shop aimed squarely at gay men. Tiny leather posing pouches, dildos the length and thickness of his forearm, and a selection of clamps and devices whose purpose he could only guess. Looking at the toys, he was reminded of how long it had been since his last relationship. He'd broken up with Richard shortly before he'd been posted to Helmand, but his impending departure hadn't been the cause. They had

been drifting apart for a while, ever since they'd realised they had little to keep them together besides sex.

Though that had been good enough to make up for any number of incompatibilities. No one sucked cock quite the way Richard did, using just the right combination of tongue, lips and teeth, or was so willing to go down on him, even in the most reckless of circumstances. He could still remember the night, only a week or so after they'd met, when Richard had been giving him a lift back to barracks after they'd been to a bar in town. Overcome with lust, Richard had pulled the car into a lay-by, killed the engine, and reached over to undo Mark's jeans. He'd given him a swift, sloppy blowjob there in the front seat of the car, not caring who might drive past and spot them. That danger had added an extra, illicit thrill to the experience. It still caused desire to shiver down Mark's spine when he thought of it.

Richard was history, he reminded himself, and staring blankly at the sex shop window wasn't going to bring those fantastic early days of their relationship back. Briefly, Mark wondered why no men plied their trade in these windows. No doubt any number of gay men—and some women too—would be willing to pay for the services of a well-muscled hunk in tight-fitting underwear, if such a thing were on offer. It was an enticing prospect, but somehow he couldn't see himself going for it. He'd never been one for casual sex. Though he'd had the odd one-night stand over the years, he needed more of a commitment. Perhaps it was because a soldier's life was so precarious, so temporary, and he needed a stable footing. Or perhaps, like Ozzy had suggested whenever they'd been discussing their respective love lives, he was just an old-fashioned romantic.

Behind him, someone made a filthy remark about the dildos on display, his Geordie accent so similar to Ozzy's that Mark turned

instinctively. He saw half a dozen lads, all dressed in matching yellow T-shirts apart from one, who had a gauzy white veil on his head and carried a bouquet of artificial roses. The stag party didn't notice him, too busy laughing at the toys and comparing them in unflattering terms to the size of the groom's cock.

That was his cue to start walking again. He was in sudden need of a drink, but the bars he'd already passed seemed too much like tourist traps, with chalkboards outside advertising English breakfasts, Irish stout and live football on Sky Sports. If he wanted any of that, he could get it back home in Aldershot. He fancied sampling something a little more authentically Dutch.

Leafing through the guidebook, he'd seen reference to the 'brown cafés', so-called because years of nicotine smoke had stained their walls brown. The book's author had raved about the cosy, intimate atmosphere of these cafés, and how they were the ideal place to linger over a beer and watch the world pass by. That sounded just what Mark needed, and he had the feeling that if he headed away from the red-light area he would find what he was looking for. He cut through a narrow alleyway, past a couple more girls in windows—one of whom was sitting on a stool, knitting—and a shop advertising 'the best falafel in town'. On the corner opposite stood a narrow café with tall, white-framed windows. Outside were a couple of tables, one of which was occupied by two women sipping from tiny espresso cups. He didn't see any signs advertising special tourist menus or live sport, and made the decision to go inside.

The interior was dark with huge globe lights hanging from the ceiling to brighten the gloom. But it felt welcoming, and Mark took off his glasses as he approached the bar. An old man sat at a corner table, a beer at his elbow and a newspaper spread out in front of him. Apart from that, the

place was deserted. Mark couldn't believe how quiet it was in comparison to the bustle he'd left behind him only a street away, but this was just what he'd been looking for.

"*Hei!*" the young barman greeted him cheerily.

"Hello," Mark replied, hoping the man wouldn't launch into a spiel in Dutch, as he wouldn't be able to understand a word. His fears were ungrounded.

"What can I get you?" the barman asked in English, only the distinct guttural tone to his accent marking him as a local.

Mark studied the beer taps, not recognising any familiar brands. He spotted one with 'blond' in its name, and pointed to it. "That one, please."

"Good choice." The barman took what appeared to Mark to be a perfectly clean glass from the shelf, and dipped it the sink. He rinsed the suds from it, then poured the beer, judging the measure by eye and snapping off the tap when he decided it was full enough. As he worked, Mark studied him, taking in not only the ease with which he performed this ritual, but the way his dark hair curled against the nape of his neck, the slight growth of stubble on his dimpled chin, and his long, slender fingers. The barman had capable hands, Mark decided, something he'd always found strangely attractive in a man.

"There you go. Shall I start you a tab?"

He glanced round the bar. This seemed like a pleasant enough place to kill an hour or so, even if the music oozing from the transistor radio behind the bar was treacly easy listening, an old Neil Diamond number segueing into something by Michael Bubl . He took a sip of his beer, relishing its light, hoppy taste, and made a silent toast to Ozzy. Then he realised the barman was still waiting for his answer, and nodded. The barman scribbled something on a notepad, tore the sheet from the pad, and set it by the till.

He thought about taking a seat at one of the tables, then changed his mind and settled himself on one of the bar stools.

“So, is this your first time in Amsterdam?” the barman asked.

Mark was about to ask what made him say that, then realised the guy was looking at his guidebook, which he’d set down on the bar when he’d ordered. “Yes. Yes, it is. I’d planned to come here with a friend, but”—he paused, took another drink—he couldn’t make it. And he would have really loved this place.” Aware that his thoughts were in danger of becoming maudlin again, he indicated the guidebook. “So, is this one of the brown cafés I’ve been reading about?”

“Yes, and it’s one of the oldest in the area.” The pride in the barman’s voice was obvious. “The Café de Tulpen has been on this site since 1645, and the building is even older than that.” He grinned. “And now I am starting to sound like a guidebook.” He held out a hand for Mark to shake. “I’m Robin, by the way. Robin Sneijder.”

“Mark.” When he took hold of Robin’s hand, he wasn’t at all surprised by the strength of the other man’s grip. But he hadn’t been prepared for the electricity that surged through him in response to Robin’s touch. Sparks buzzed, centring on his groin, and he sucked in a breath. When he glanced up, Robin’s eyes were hooded, the pupils huge and dark, and Mark wondered whether the other man had felt the same intense physical reaction.

If he had, he kept his reaction in check. “So, what do you have planned for your stay here, Mark?”

Mark shrugged. “I hadn’t really decided. I just want to chill out, get away from it all, you know?”

“Your job is stressful, then?”

“You could say that.” Mark hesitated. Telling people what he did for a living wasn’t always the wisest move. For everyone who hailed him as a hero and appreciated what he did to keep the world safe, there was always someone who wanted to harangue him about foreign policy and imperialism, blaming him for decisions that had been made by someone else. Yet instinctively he felt he would get a sympathetic response from Robin. “I’m a soldier.”

Robin’s eyes widened. Until that moment, Mark hadn’t realised quite how blue they were, like the sky at the height of summer. “Really?”

“Yeah, I’m a corporal in the British Army, and I’m on leave from duty in Afghanistan.”

“In that case, the beer is on me.”

Mark shook his head, unable to shake the impression that Robin was flirting with him. “Thanks, but there’s no need...”

“I insist, Mark. Soldiers, to me, they’re—”

He was distracted from whatever he was about to say by the door being pushed open. Three men wandered in, and Mark’s hackles went up. Trained to spot trouble wherever it arose, instinctively he knew these were not good people. They spoke among themselves in a language he didn’t recognise, but suspected might originate somewhere in Eastern Europe, and all three had badly drawn tattoos on their forearms and the skin of their necks. A smell of stale cannabis smoke clung to their clothes, and they looked as though they hadn’t slept in a while.

At that moment, the man who’d been filling in the crossword rose from his table, put his newspaper under his arm and threw some coins down to pay for his drink. It might just be coincidence that he’d chosen to leave now, but Mark wondered whether he, too, had detected the undertone of menace emanating from the newcomers.

“Three Heinekens,” demanded the biggest and meanest-looking of the trio.

“I’m sorry,” Robin replied politely, “but I don’t sell it. I have a very nice pilsner that is brewed—”

The man cut him off. “What kind of shithole is this? No Heineken? No wonder there’s no fucker in here...”

“Well, if I have nothing you want, maybe you could leave?” Robin was clearly trying to keep his tone level, but Mark picked up the slight note of fear in his voice. As a barman, he probably had to deal with difficult customers on a regular basis, but the behaviour of these three was more than merely unpleasant.

“Oh, we’ll leave all right,” another of the men sneered, “but only when we’re good and ready.”

Mark saw the subtle movement of Robin’s hand as he reached towards the phone, no doubt to call the police. The ringleader of the three must have noticed it, too, for he launched himself in Robin’s direction, darting behind the bar to wrestle the phone out of his hand. When Robin tried to fight the man off, he got a punch in the face for his pains, followed by another to his gut.

Mark leapt from his stool, unable to stand by while Robin received a beating. He ran over and grabbed the assailant from behind, dragging him off Robin. The man roared something to his companions, and Mark waited for them to wade into the fight. Three against one was hardly fair odds, but he was battle trained. He knew all of a man’s weak spots, and he wasn’t afraid to inflict damage of any of the trio. Indeed, if he had to drop all three of them, he would.

However, while Mark continued to struggle with the ringleader, the other two turned their attention to the till. Robin was trying his best to stop



them, but he was clearly dazed from the blows he'd received, and they pushed him to one side without too much effort. He staggered backwards, clutching on to the bar counter. Already they had opened the cash drawer and were scooping out its contents into their pockets.

The ringleader swung a fist at Mark, who ducked it and took a pace back before landing an uppercut on the other man's jaw. He reeled and let out a groan, but the blow didn't stop him, and Mark wondered whether he might be on something stronger than cannabis. The big man turned his head at the sound of laughter, and Mark followed his gaze to see one of his companions snatching up a couple of almost-full bottles of spirits from the bar. The two thieves seemed quite happy with their plunder, but the ringleader wasn't finished yet. With a glance of pure hatred at Mark, he picked up the nearest wooden-backed chair he could find and heaved it at one of the windows. The glass shattered with a noise that seemed appallingly loud in the small bar. Mark hoped it wasn't showering on the couple he'd seen drinking coffee outside, but maybe they'd had the sense to leave as soon as they'd heard the commotion coming from within. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, they'd succeeded where Robin had failed, and called the police.

The three men dashed out of the bar. Mark followed them on to the pavement, but he only took a few paces before concern for Robin's welfare overtook him. The ringleader turned and laughing, made an obscene gesture with his middle finger. Then he and his friends disappeared round the corner, into the bustling heart of the red light district.

Mark returned inside, to find Robin standing in the middle of the floor, looking round at the damage to his café.

"Sorry, Robin. I lost them." Mark spread his hands in apology.

“It’s okay. I lost a couple of hundred Euros, if that, and some bourbon and vodka. That’s nothing, really.” He glanced over at the broken window. “The most important thing is getting that fixed. I must ring for a…” He shrugged, clearly at a loss for the English word.

“Glazier,” Mark supplied. “And you’re going to call the police, too?”

“Sure. For all the good it will do.”

“Hey, maybe we can give them some information that will stop this happening again.” When Robin didn’t reply immediately, Mark took a pace closer. “But what about you, are you okay?”

Robin nodded, but when he brushed a stray curl away from his forehead, Mark couldn’t help noticing that he winced slightly.

“Stand still, and let me take a look at that.”

Mark made a brief examination of the Dutchman’s face, aware as he pressed his fingers to Robin’s cheek of the warmth of his skin and the potent scent of sweat mixed with something more primal and male.

“Well,” he said, noting the beginning of a bruise forming, “it looks like you’re going to get a nice shiner—”

“Sorry?” Robin replied, failing to recognise the term.

Mark chuckled. “A black eye. But that’s all. There’ll be no permanent scarring.”

“That’s good to know. Not that there’s anything wrong with scars. They can be very sexy.” As Robin spoke, he traced his fingertips over the jagged white scar that ran the length of Mark’s face from cheek to chin, close to his hairline. Mark shivered, partly from the thrill of Robin’s touch and partly in remembrance of the circumstances in which he’d gained that wound.

His heart thumped wildly, his senses rousing in response to Robin’s sensual caress. A second finger had been added to the first, and now Robin

trailed them over Mark's lips, exploring their contours. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Very sexy."

Almost before Mark knew what was happening, Robin had kissed him. The lightest of pecks, it still left Mark's lips tingling. His cock stirred in his underwear, and realised that for the first time since Ozzy had died, he was getting properly turned on. Grief and guilt at not being able to do anything to save his friend's life had destroyed his sex drive but now, it was reawakening, rising like a phoenix. He cupped Robin's face in his palms and returned the kiss. His mouth pressed hard against Robin's, and his tongue flickered along the seam between the lips till they parted and he was able to slip inside.

They ground their bodies together, their passion mounting. Mark ran his fingers through Robin's dark curls, such a contrast to his own hair, which he kept cropped close to his skull, for ease of maintenance. They felt like silk to his touch.

Robin was stroking his chest through his plain white T-shirt, feeling muscles honed by the physical exertions of Mark's life in theatre. "Mmm, so hard," he murmured. "But then I knew you'd have a good body. "

"Yours isn't too shabby, either," Mark responded. The Dutchman had a long, lean physique, even if he didn't possess Mark's washboard abs or impressive biceps. Mark suspected Robin kept fit by hauling barrels of beer around, maybe cycling around the streets as all the locals here seemed to do. But now wasn't the time to speculate on the man's exercise regime. All he wanted to do was become better acquainted with that body in a sexual sense.

It didn't surprise him that he—or Robin—was suddenly so keen to get physical. They'd been in a situation where they'd been placed in sudden danger, forced to fight to protect themselves and the bar. Adrenaline still

coursed through his veins. Fucking Robin would confirm that he'd beaten that danger. He was alive. And Robin had to be feeling something similar. Though the Dutchman's next words proved he was working to a slightly different agenda.

"God, you were brave just then," he murmured, his tongue flicking over Mark's earlobe, the wet caress oddly arousing. "Those guys could have had knives, or guns—"

"Hey, they were just opportunists." Mark pressed his crotch against Robin's, feeling a bulge there as big and hard as his own. "If the bar had been full of customers, they'd never have tried anything."

"Then I was lucky you were around to help me. If I'd been on my own —"

"Forget about it, Robin. It's over. Well, apart from calling the police, and getting that broken window seen to."

"That can wait just a little longer," Robin assured. "First, I need to thank you properly for saving me from a real beating."

Almost without his being aware of it, Robin had been slowly marching him backwards as they spoke, till his back rested against the wooden wall. He glanced round as Robin slithered down to the bare wooden floorboards, taking in the brown ceramic bottles of gin on a shelf above the bar, the piano in one corner, the brass fittings that gleamed warmly in the artificial light. He wasn't sure why he was so keen to imprint the details of the bar on his memory. Maybe because it was so long since he'd had sex anywhere so far from his usual comfort zone, so...public. Even as Robin wrestled with his belt, quickly unbuckling it, a small voice in the back of Mark's head reminded him that anyone could walk in here. Robin had taken no steps to close the café, though maybe the broken window and the glass lying on the pavement outside would give people enough of an indication they should go

somewhere else. *God*, he thought, as Robin wrenched down his jeans and underwear, and wrapped his fingers around the almost fully erect shaft of his cock, *what if the police are on their way? What if they come through the door right now and see me...*

Then Robin took the head of his dick in his mouth, before swallowing as much of his length as he could manage, and Mark could do nothing but give in to the soft, insistent suction. The entire Amsterdam police force could be standing in this room, watching him getting a blowjob, and he wouldn't care. It just felt too good.

Just like Richard, Robin seemed to know instinctively how much pressure to apply with his lips. He'd found the sweet spot, just below Mark's cockhead, that triggered feelings of intense pleasure when a tongue was played over it. But Robin had a trick up his sleeve that Richard had never thought of. As Mark thrust his hips upward, practically fucking Robin's hot, wet mouth, the Dutchman pressed his fingertip into the dimple of Mark's asshole. The intrusion was unexpected, startling—and delicious. Robin had timed it just right, the extra stimulation setting off Mark's orgasm. He grunted as his cum spurted out. Robin swallowed it all, looking up at Mark with eyes that twinkled with lust and amusement, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Rearranging his clothing, Mark struggled to remember the last time he'd come so fast, or so hard. He couldn't deny he'd needed it, but where did this leave him and Robin? He felt bound to return the favour, thoughts of Robin's hard, denim-covered cock at the front of his mind, but somehow it felt like the moment had passed. As if to confirm that, he heard the sound of footsteps crunching on glass, then two tall, broad men in police uniforms strode into the bar.

One spoke rapidly in Dutch, and Robin replied, pointing to the ransacked till, whose cash drawer still gaped open, at Mark, and then at the shattered windowpane. Mark stood with his back pressed to the wall, unable to follow the conversation and wondering how Robin was describing his part in the events that had taken place.

At last, the police officers seemed satisfied that Robin had told them everything he could. They shook hands with him, and acknowledged Mark with a curt nod of the head, before leaving.

“So what did they have to say?” Mark asked.

“Oh, I gave them a description, and it sounds like they’re aware of these guys. Apparently, they robbed a place over on the Eglantiersgracht about three weeks ago. The police said they’re going to tour the bars, warning the owners to be vigilant, but I don’t know how much else they can do.” Robin sighed.

“Did they ask about me?” Mark remembered how Robin had gestured towards him as he’d been talking.

“Yeah. I told them that you could identify these guys, but that you’re here on holiday, and that it might not be too easy to get in touch with you once you leave.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do, I promise I’ll try.”

“Thanks, Mark, I appreciate it. And I still need to get in touch with the —what did you call him? Glazier?”

“Yeah.” Mark nodded. “But maybe I can give you a hand with a temporary repair till he gets here. Do you have any wood in the cellar?”

It felt good to take charge, Mark thought as he told Robin to find a suitable piece of planking, a hammer and nails. He’d been pretty much helpless as Robin and the police had discussed the robbery, though he could understand why the bar owner didn’t want to involve him. If the case ever

came to trial, it wasn't as though he could fly over from Afghanistan on a moment's notice to give evidence. And that assumed nothing happened to him in the meantime...

He shook away the unwelcome notion. Robin had returned with some boards he reckoned were big enough to cover the window. While he searched in the phone book he kept beneath the bar for the number of a local glazier, Mark set to hammering the pieces of wood in place over the window.

"Okay," Robin said, setting down the phone after making a couple of phone calls. "I've found a guy who can come out on Monday morning to fix this." He looked at the job Mark had done, and nodded appreciatively. The window was already half-covered. "That's looking great. Thanks, Mark."

Mark removed the nails he'd been holding in his mouth. "It's no problem, honestly."

"And I rang Jos. He's the assistant barman here. He's going to cover for me tonight." Robin glanced at his watch. "He'll be here in about fifteen minutes. Then all we have to do is persuade people we're still open for business..."

At that moment, a middle-aged man with a camera slung around his neck popped his head round the door of the bar. He looked round at Mark's impromptu DIY and seemed about to leave again. Robin greeted him cheerily.

"You're open?" the man asked in an American accent.

"Of course," Robin replied. "We just had a little accident, but everything's fine. Come in, sit down. What can I get you?"

The tourist wandered in, followed by two women and another man. The couples took seats at a table near the piano. As Robin walked past to

take their orders, he whispered to Mark, “When Jos gets here, I’m going to take you to dinner, show you my gratitude for everything you’ve done.”

Mark returned to his repairs, thinking Robin had already done a pretty good job of that. But the sense of something unfinished hung between them and he couldn’t help speculating on what the rest of the night might bring.

*Just don’t get too attached to him. You’re only here for a couple of days, that’s all. And he may be cute—very cute—but this isn’t anything serious.*

Mark wondered why a small, long-buried part of him was hoping that this might turn into something serious after all. Then he squashed the feeling, and set about hammering away once more.

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## Chapter Two

*The lightweight Land Rover was heading back to base, jolting and rattling on the rutted desert road. At Mark's side, Dan Warwick drove with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the open window frame, as casual as if he was cruising the high street back home. In the back, Ozzy and Jaybo Green were arguing about football again. Mark did his best to tune them out. It had been a long patrol, and the strain of being constantly alert to any threat had left him dog-tired and in desperate need of a hot shower.*

*When he felt the bump, for the briefest instant Mark thought they'd just hit another pothole. Then the world as he knew it disappeared, literally blown apart by the force of the blast. Pain and fire engulfed him, and as the vehicle pitched and spun, he was flung out on to the hard-packed sand. Shards of metal from the destroyed Land Rover, mixed with nails and bolts from the improvised explosive device, rained down on him, and he curled his body into a ball, doing his best to protect his hands and face from being cut to shreds. Already, blood poured from a cut where a piece of shrapnel had sliced into the side of his face.*

*An eerie silence fell, only to be punctuated by the terrible screams of someone in agony. He needed to see where the noise was coming from. He rolled on to his side, a sharp pain in his side telling him he had broken at least one rib, and found himself staring into what was left of Ozzy's face. The whole right side had been crushed into a mass of pulpy tissue and bone fragments, and Ozzy's remaining eye stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.*

*Now the only screams Mark heard were his own, crying out for someone, anyone to come and help the best friend he knew was already dead...*

\* \* \* \*

He was still screaming, tears streaking down his face, but there was someone close by, hushing him and running a hand over his bare shoulder, soothing him.

“Hey, hey, Mark. It’s all right. Take it easy...”

Mark struggled to full consciousness, staring at the ceiling of a room he didn’t recognise. The soft caresses continued, and he turned his head to see the most gorgeous man looking at him. A man with dark curls, stunningly blue eyes, and an expression of complete concern on his face. Robin.

Memory flooded back, warm and seductive. An unexpected blowjob in the bar, then, when Jos had relieved Robin of his barman duties, dinner and a bottle of good wine in Robin’s apartment. They’d sat and talked, and though Mark had fully intended to go back to his hotel, he’d ended up dozing off on Robin’s sofa instead. They’d found their way up to the bedroom, too tired to do anything but fall asleep in each other’s arms.

On the bedside table, a lamp burned, and Mark checked his watch by its light. Three a.m.

“You were having a nightmare, I think,” Robin said. “You were calling for help. I—” He halted, but Mark suspected his screaming and thrashing had really frightened Robin.

He eased himself into a sitting position, propping a pillow in the small of his back. This was going to be an awkward conversation, but he felt an overwhelming need to be honest with Robin.

“I’m sorry if I alarmed you,” he said. “I didn’t mean to. I thought I was over the night terrors, but obviously I’m not. You know I told you I was supposed to come here with a friend?”

Robin nodded. “You sounded coy about it, so I just assumed it was some guy you’d broken up with.”

“I wish that was the case. Things would be so much simpler.” Mark sighed. “No, I was talking about my best friend, Ozzy. He was in the same regiment as me. We were coming back from patrol in Helmand and our Land Rover hit an improvised explosive device. Whoever planted it there packed it with nails, so it would cause the maximum damage. One of the guys in the vehicle lost an eye. The driver had most of his right arm blown off. Me, I was the lucky one. A couple of broken ribs, some cuts and bruises...” He ran a finger absently down the scar on his cheek, the scar Robin had traced his fingers along in the bar. “Nothing life-changing.” *As long as we don’t talk about the scars you can’t see.* “But Ozzy... Ozzy was killed outright.”

“I’m so sorry, Mark. Were you and he...?” He didn’t need to elaborate.

“No. Ozzy was as straight as they come. But I loved the guy like a brother, and I miss him so much, and I thought it would get easier, but it hasn’t yet, not really. This trip—it’s as much for him as it is for me. So I can start the process of saying goodbye to him properly.” Until the words were out, he hadn’t realised he would be admitting quite so much, but something about the kind, patient way Robin was listening to him made it easy to admit what was in his heart.

“Sounds like he was really lucky to have a friend like you.” Robin put his arms round Mark, embracing him. “And I’m sure he knew that, even at the end.”

Mark had heard all the platitudes before, about how Ozzy had died doing what he loved, and how he would always be regarded as a hero. Words that more often than not simply had the effect of shutting down a conversation that had become too uncomfortable. But the Dutchman wasn’t trying to diminish his feelings, or brush away unwelcome thoughts of his

own death, as well-meaning people so often did. He was offering genuine sympathy, and Mark couldn't help but feel safe in his arms.

Kissing Robin seemed like the only natural response at that moment. Mark felt as though he was pouring his soul into that kiss, his breath fusing with Robin's and their hearts beating in time. When they broke apart, they stared at each other, Robin's blue eyes meeting Mark's soft hazel ones. The nightmares had been chased away, and any tension remaining in the room contained only the anticipation of sex.

"I want you so much," Robin murmured. Pushing the bedcovers fully off both of them, he sprawled his body over Mark's and began to kiss and lick his way down Mark's naked, hard-muscled chest. Finding a puckered scar on the smooth skin, close to Mark's heart—another reminder of his brush with death in that roadside explosion—he kissed that too.

Mark would have been more than happy to lie back and let his lover do all the work—it felt so good to have that warm, wet mouth lazily moving towards his stiffening cock—but after what had taken place in the bar, he didn't want Robin to think he wasn't capable of giving pleasure as well as receiving it.

"Let me fuck you," he begged, in the moment before Robin settled his mouth on the soft inside of his thigh and began to nibble at the sensitive skin there.

Robin paused in what he was doing, and raised his head. "Sure, but you need to use a condom."

Mark snorted. "Mate, I might take risks on the battlefield, but I don't take them in bed." He tried to remember whether he had any rubbers in his wallet, and if so, whether or not they had expired. It had been so long since he'd had a need for any, and he hadn't exactly had sex uppermost in his thoughts when he'd been packing for this trip.

“OK, let me just go get what we need from the bathroom.”

Robin climbed off the bed. Mark admired the flexing of his taut arse cheeks as he walked, naked, into the bathroom. He came back a few moments later with a packet that he tossed on to the bed. Even with Mark’s lack of Dutch, he couldn’t fail to realise what ‘condooms’ might mean.

“You might need this, too,” Robin advised, throwing him something else.

Mark studied the tube. *Glijmiddel*. He assumed that to be lubricant, and when he popped open the top of the tube and squeezed a little of its contents on to his fingers, he was proved right. He wiped his fingers clean on his thigh, and set about opening one of the condoms. Robin watched him without speaking. He gripped his cock in his fist, and was slowly tugging it as Mark sheathed himself. Only when he’d returned from the bathroom had Mark taken a look at Robin’s upstanding length and realised he was circumcised. He’d never had a lover who was cut before, and playing with that sleeveless dick would be a novelty for him.

“Come here.” Mark beckoned to Robin to join him on the bed.

They hugged, sharing sloppy kisses, and then Mark rolled the two of them over, so that he was on top and Robin’s arse was presented to him, the creamy moons raised and enticing. He ran a hand over the soft skin, and felt Robin shiver in response.

“You like that?” he asked, voice low and husky. “You want me to play with your arse?”

“You know you can do what you want to me,” Robin whimpered, and Mark wondered again if there was a streak of submission buried deep within his lover.

“Okay, just relax...” Mark went to pick up the lube, but changed his mind. There were things he’d always wanted to try with Richard, but they’d

split up before it could happen. Now, with Robin offering himself so willingly to his every whim, he crawled down the bed till his head was level with the other man's backside.

"You have such a cute little—what's the Dutch for arse?"

"It's almost exactly the same, *aars*." Somehow, a subtle emphasis made the word sound different to Mark's ears. "But I didn't think this was going to turn into a language lesson."

"It's not, although I am intending to practise my oral skills."

With that, Mark dropped a line of kisses on Robin's buttock, gradually moving closer to the crease that divided it from its twin. A gentle sigh let him know his lover was enjoying the sensation. He blew on the wet trail he'd left, and Robin shuddered, little goose bumps springing up on his skin.

"Relax, Robin, that's only the start." Mark gently pried open Robin's cheeks with his fingers. Now the kisses were on the dark furl of his lover's arsehole, and Robin was enjoying them, if the way he squirmed his hips on the bedsheet was any reliable indication.

Once he'd got the entrance to Robin's arse slippery-wet, Mark pushed the point of his tongue into the tight ring, feeling the muscle yield. Robin humped himself against the mattress, clearly needing something more substantial inside him.

Mark stopped licking him long enough to ask, "Are you ready for me?"

"Oh, yes," Robin groaned.

It was all he needed to hear. Raising himself up, he got into position, lining up his sheathed cock with Robin's wet, open hole. He gave his lover a moment to prepare himself as his cockhead butted at his entrance, then he pushed home. Mark felt only a momentary resistance, then he was sliding into Robin's arse.

The friction on his shaft was delightful as Mark began to thrust. It seemed as though Robin's passage clutched him possessively, welcoming this invasion and not wanting to let him go. Mark lost himself in the moment, all his fears, all his nightmarish memories forgotten as he fucked the gorgeous Dutchman. Not even with Richard had it felt so good, so right.

Robin bucked back at him, trying to take every last inch of Mark's length inside him. It took a few moments to find a rhythm that suited them, but soon they were moving as one, Robin crying out for more as Mark ploughed into him time and again. Sweat gleamed on the angular planes of Robin's back, and Mark paused to lick at it, tasting the unique saltiness of his lover's skin.

"More, please," Robin begged. "Don't stop now."

With that, Mark picked up the pace, confident that Robin could take whatever he had to give. His own orgasm was building, driving all rational thought from his mind. He fought to control himself, to string out the pleasure just a little longer, but it was too late. With a groan, he shot his cum into the condom, feeling his cock pulse madly in the tight confines of Robin's backside. Robin muttered something he didn't understand, clutching at the pillow. When they rolled apart, Robin manoeuvred himself carefully, and Mark realised he was doing his best to avoid lying in the wet patch he'd made.

Mark went into Robin's small, spotless bathroom to dispose of the condom and relieve himself. He stared at his reflection in the mirror over the sink, noting how his eyes seemed to shine brighter and his skin had the flushed glow that came from good sex.

He washed his hands, splashed cold water on his face, and returned to the bed. Once he'd slipped beneath the covers, Robin switched out the light, then rested his head on Mark's chest.

“That was amazing,” Robin whispered. “Mark, do you—?” He paused, as if he’d changed his mind about what he was going to say.

“Go on,” Mark murmured.

“No, you’ll think I’m stupid, or weird.”

“Robin, you know I’d never think that of you.”

“OK.” Robin cleared his throat. “Do you have your uniform with you?”

He’d been strolling the city’s streets in his civvies, enjoying the break from being on duty, but his fatigues were rolled up in the bottom of his backpack. He hadn’t bothered unpacking them when he’d checked in to the hotel. “Yeah, sure. Why?”

“Well, I’ve always had this fantasy about men in uniform. I get really hot when I think about some big soldier ordering me to do all kinds of things. Dominating me, you know?”

Mark knew exactly where this conversation was heading. “And you want me to be that soldier, right?”

“You don’t have to. Not if you don’t want to. But I’ve never been with anyone who I’ve really wanted to play out that fantasy with, until now. And the fact that you really are a soldier, that you’d be in your real uniform, and not something we’d borrowed from a costume store... You don’t know what that does to me.”

He had a pretty good idea. If he hadn’t been so tired, he’d have reached down to discover whether Robin’s cock was stiffening as he discussed his fantasy, maybe even wanked it as they talked about this in more detail. But the day’s highs and lows had left him drained, and now all he wanted to do was sleep.

“Robin, what you’re asking me—I need to think about it, okay?”

“Sure, of course. I won’t put any pressure on you.”



Mark appreciated what it must have cost Robin to confess to his desires. He turned his head and kissed Robin's cheek.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow, I promise."

They settled down to sleep, but while Robin's breathing quickly turned to snores, Mark remained awake, despite his weariness. What was being asked of him wasn't so desperately unusual, he told himself, yet being a soldier wasn't something you played at. Not for him, anyway. It was his way of life, and had helped to define him as a man from the moment he'd first enlisted. The nightmare about the terrible day when Ozzy had been killed, and Dan and Jaybo had received life-changing injuries, had brought the grim realities of a soldier's life flooding back to him.

He stared up at the ceiling, aware that he still carried so much guilt about being the only one who'd escaped from that explosion relatively unscathed. Somehow he had to let all that go and move on. Fortune had been on his side that day, just as fortune had put him in the bar at the very time Robin needed someone to protect him from the robbers. In the end, maybe life was just a series of random coincidences, and you had to pick your way through them as best you could. After all, if he'd come here with Ozzy, as he'd originally been meant to, he would probably never have met Robin...

He sighed, aware of his lover shifting in his sleep beside him. It was all too confusing. Maybe tomorrow things would begin to make sense.

At last, worn out and still no nearer to finding an answer to his conundrum, he slept.

## Chapter Three

Mark stood in front of a display case featuring objects that had been retrieved from Amsterdam's canals over the centuries and listened to the commentary in his headset recounting the history of the city. This was the last full day of his holiday and he'd decided to spend it on the typical tourist route.

His decision had been aided by the fact Robin already had plans. "I'm having lunch with my family," he'd announced as they sat having breakfast at the café across the road from his apartment. "They live over in the west of the city, towards Sloterdijk. Why don't you come with me? I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

Mark shook his head. Tempting as it sounded, he didn't want anyone getting the wrong impression and thinking he and Robin were officially a couple, much as he'd like that to be the case. He was still mulling over his lover's bizarre request from yesterday, to be allowed to submit to the dominant, uniformed soldier of his fantasies. He needed time to be away from Robin, to think through all the consequences of acting out such a scene. But he didn't mention any of that, replying, "Thanks, but I'd like to see something of the city before I leave. Get some culture, you know? It'll give me something to talk about when I'm back at base."

"So you won't be telling them about us?" Robin pouted in mock disappointment, and took another sip of his coffee. But he hadn't been hurt by Mark's refusal to accompany him, and when he'd boarded the tram that would take him out to his family home, he'd waved a cheery goodbye.

They'd agreed to meet at the Café de Tulpen at six o'clock, and left their plans vague after that. Mark had strolled off in the sunshine to take one of the canal boat tours that would show him the best of the city's sights. He'd marvelled at the vast houses that ringed the canals, built by wealthy

merchants in the Seventeenth century, when Amsterdam had controlled most of the world's trade. The tour had also taken him past the house where Anne Frank and her family had hidden from the Nazis, now a museum, and the impressive façade of the recently renovated Rijksmuseum. Again, he found himself wishing Ozzy could have been there, sharing the tour and waving at the people trying to navigate the canal in small, flat-bottomed boats and two-person pedalos.

He'd had lunch in a big, bustling canalside pancake house. The place was mostly filled with families, but the waitress found him a small table at the back of the room without too much trouble. He ordered a pancake with ham, cheese and mushrooms and a glass of apple juice. He leafed through his guidebook as he ate, looking for a suitable place to spend the afternoon.

He'd settled on the historical museum, and now he stood in front of one of its many exhibits, learning about the efforts that had been made to construct a city in an area well below sea level. Much of Amsterdam had been built on wooden piles. At the commentary's instruction, he moved on to look at one of those original piles, excavated during some recent building work.

This was the part of the afternoon where he and Ozzy would have gone their separate ways. For Ozzy, culture was best sampled in small doses, and he'd have left Mark to tour the museum alone while he went off to buy some souvenirs to take back. That reminded him, he really ought to pick up some tulip bulbs and one of those little Delft pottery windmills for his mum. But he'd be able to do that in the airport tomorrow morning.

His phone buzzed against his thigh. He'd set it to silent, not wanting to disturb anyone in the hushed surroundings of the museum, and much as he thought he should ignore it, he grabbed for it anyway.

The message was from Robin, who'd suggested they take each other's number in case either of them was running late. It read simply: *Having fun without me?*

*Learning so much about Amsterdam. Test me on it later,* Mark replied, and shoved his phone back in his jeans pocket again.

Even getting a text from Robin had brought a grin to his face. He'd forgotten how good the first, heady days of a relationship could be... He drew himself up sharply. This wasn't a relationship and he couldn't allow him to think of it as one. It was just a wonderful, passionate fling that he'd remember for the rest of his life. Never mind that it had the potential to be so much more.

He wandered on, into the next room, where he could admire a selection of portraits of the great and good of Amsterdam, trying to forget that this time tomorrow, he'd be in England, where Robin would be just a wonderful memory.

\* \* \* \*

When Mark walked into the Café de Tulpen, a few minutes before six o'clock, Robin was already there. Standing behind the bar, he was in conversation with Jos. He switched to English as he saw Mark approaching.

"Hey, there. Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah, I took a trip on the canal, and then I went wandering. I feel like I've walked miles. I'm ready for some dinner now."

"Okay, there's a great little Indonesian place over a couple of streets away, if you'd like to try a *rijsttafel*. You like spicy food?"

"I love it. And anything's a change from army cooking."

"Then let's go." Robin picked his keys up from the counter by the till. "See you later, Jos."

"Yeah, have a good time, both of you," Jos replied.

As they left the bar, Mark asked, “Does Jos mind having to work the whole weekend?”

“Oh, he’ll be fine. If anything, he likes having the run of the place. I come back, and he’s turned the radio to some soft rock station...” Robin laughed. “But I’ll give him the next couple of weekends off to make up. After all, it’s not like I’m going to want to spend the time with anyone.”

They walked in companionable silence, navigating their way through knots of people on the narrow pavements. A couple of times, Mark stepped on to the road and heard the furious ringing of a bell from someone coming up behind him on a bike. He managed to avoid any collisions, but however long he spent in the city, he doubted he’d get used to the constant stream of bicycles.

“Ah, here we are.” Robin halted in front of the restaurant. He opened the door, and a waft of steam drifted out to meet them. The spicy scent it held made Mark’s stomach growl with hunger.

A waiter showed them to a table, and Robin ordered them each a beer. He made a token show of looking at the menu, but when the waiter returned with their drinks, he said, “We’ll have the *rijsttafel*, please.”

The waiter nodded and took the menus away.

“So what is this *rijsttafel*, exactly?” Mark enquired.

“It’s a mixture of dishes. You get rice, noodles, chicken, beef—a bit of everything. It’s the best way to try Indonesian food if you’ve never had it before.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They chatted companionably as they waited for their food to arrive, and when the waiter came back with a tray bearing around a dozen little plates, each containing a different dish, Robin encouraged Mark to dig in.

“My favourite is the chicken in peanut sauce,” Robin said, “but the spicy cabbage is very good, too.”

Sitting in the restaurant’s dimly lit, fragrant interior, listening to the chatter of diners on other tables, it was easy for Mark to imagine a life where he and Robin ate out together on a regular basis, just another couple enjoying their evening. But that kind of life was a long way off for him. He still had a job to do in Afghanistan, and when the British troops were withdrawn from that country, he’d be deployed wherever else he was needed. This was just a pleasant interlude from the harshness of his daily existence. An interlude that wasn’t quite over, admittedly, but he needed to make the most of the time he had with Robin. More importantly, he needed to stop dwelling on the past and start looking to the future.

He slurped up a little of the coconut broth in which the cabbage had been cooked.

“You’re enjoying that?” Robin grinned at him.

“It’s very tasty. But I was thinking, after we’ve eaten, would you like to come back to my hotel? I’ve been thinking about what you said—about your soldier fantasy—all day, and I’m willing to act it out, if that’s what you want.”

Robin put his hand on top of Mark’s where it rested on the table, and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you. God, you don’t know how much I wanted to hear you say that.”

They didn’t linger over their meal after that. When the waiter returned to enquire whether everything was all right, Robin asked for the bill. A few minutes later, he and Mark were heading for the hotel where Mark was staying, close to the railway station.

Mark’s room was on the third floor. He’d hardly spent a moment in it since he’d first arrived, and there were almost no signs of his occupation.

The air smelt only of whatever cleaning products the chambermaid used, with no trace of Mark's cologne or shower gel. His rucksack was stowed away in the bottom of the wardrobe. He retrieved it while Robin used the bathroom, and fished his army fatigues out of its depths.

When Robin emerged from the bathroom, Mark told him, "I'm going to change. When I come back into this room, I want you to be kneeling on the floor, naked. And once I'm in uniform, you may no longer address me as Mark. I will be Corporal Stockdale, or sir. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Robin replied. The dazed but exhilarated expression on his face revealed just how much he liked the suddenly dominant tone in Mark's voice.

*Wow, where did that come from?* Mark asked, leaning against the door of the tiny bathroom after he'd closed it behind him. The answer was that he'd found himself channelling everyone who'd ordered him around during the early days of his training. Everyone who'd barked out a threat or warned him of the consequences if he hadn't done as he was told. That was all part of the long, arduous process of making him think and behave like a military man. This was just a sex game. But, somehow, they had their roots in the same earth, and the moment Mark grasped that fact was the moment he realised his fears were groundless. He could do this. He could adopt the role of the dominant soldier Robin longed to worship, and it wouldn't be a mockery of his real-life duties.

Quickly, he shucked out of his T-shirt and jeans, and donned his army uniform of khaki shirt and camouflage pattern trousers. He set his cap on his head, took one last look at his reflection, then returned to see whether Robin had obeyed his instructions.

He was delighted to see his lover had stripped off completely and was kneeling on the floor. Robin's hands were on his head—not something he'd

been asked to do, but a nice touch nonetheless—and his cock rose straight up from the soft, dark bush at his crotch.

“Well, I’m glad to see you can follow orders,” Mark said, “but let’s see just how obedient you are. I want you to play with your dick, and don’t stop until I tell you.”

“Yes, sir.” Without hesitation, Robin gripped his shaft and began to stroke it up and down, the pre-cum that had already spilled from its tip aiding him in his task. He looked so delightfully submissive, his eyes half-closed and his lips parted as his breath escaped in soft little gasps.

Mark strode back and forth, as if he was a parade ground sergeant major inspecting his troops. He had a certain swagger in his step, enjoying the sensation of having this beautiful young man at his command.

“That’s it,” he urged. “Keep wanking that dick of yours.” As Robin continued, the speed of his strokes increasing a little, he asked, “Does that feel good?”

“Yes, it does, sir.”

“Do you wish that was my hand on your cock?”

“Yes. Oh, yes, sir.”

“Well, there’s no chance of that. Not unless I decide to be especially lenient. You see, boy, you’ve done some things tonight that are more worthy of punishment than pleasure.”

“Really, sir?” Robin’s hand stilled in its relentless movement, just for a moment.

“Indeed. You took total charge in the restaurant tonight. You presumed to order me a beer without asking if that was what I wanted, and I caught you sneaking a look at the waiter’s arse.”

Both those things were true. Neither was a problem. That backside had been so tight in the waiter’s black slacks that Mark had admired it too. But



he had to find some reason, however spurious, for dishing out the spanking he'd decided Robin was entitled to.

"I'm sorry, sir. I promise I won't let it happen again." Robin's voice sounded strained, and Mark reckoned he must be getting close to orgasm. Just a few more strokes, and pearly cum would be spilling out onto Robin's fingers. He wasn't going to be allowed that pleasure just yet.

"Stop wanking, boy," Mark ordered.

With visible reluctance, Robin let his hand drop to his thigh and waited for Mark's next instruction.

"Stand up," Mark said. "I don't believe you're truly sorry for your earlier misbehaviour, and I want to make sure you know just what will happen if you displease me." He cast his gaze round the room, looking for something that he might be able to use for the next part of the game. Robin was just as much a novice in these games as he was, and he didn't want to do anything that might go beyond the Dutchman's limits.

He spotted the small, plastic folder containing the room service menu and picked it up. Swishing it through the air, he assessed its weight and heft. It would do nicely.

"Now, boy. I want you to bend over the end of the bed, and stick your arse well out."

Robin scurried to get into the correct position, even though he had to know there was only one reason Mark would want him to present himself like that. Mark licked his lips at the sight of Robin's firm, upraised buttocks.

"Spread your legs wider." When Robin had shuffled his feet a little further apart, Mark continued, "Before we go any further, I need to know if you have a safeword." He didn't think anything he was about to do would prompt Robin to use such a word, but he wanted to follow all the correct

procedures. Rules were there for a reason. If nothing else, army life had taught him that.

“I don’t, sir. Would you care to choose one for me?”

“Very well. If you want me to slow down, say ‘amber’. If you want me to stop altogether, say ‘red’. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, I’m going to give you half a dozen strokes by way of punishment. Do you know the English term, ‘six of the best’?”

“I do now, sir.”

There was a touch of cheekiness in Robin’s reply, and Mark felt his cock twitch in response.

“Don’t tempt me to make it more than six, boy. Now, prepare yourself.”

Mark came to stand to Robin’s left, and stroked Robin’s bare arse cheek with the backs of his fingers. “Such a nice, smooth bottom. It’s never been punished, has it?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything...”

Not giving the Dutchman any time to respond, he brought the menu folder sharply down. It slapped against Robin’s left cheek. Robin let out a little gasp, more of shock than pain, and Mark repeated the action on the other side.

Without giving Robin time to recover, he quickly delivered the remaining four strokes. By the time he’d finished, there was a distinct red flush on Robin’s pale moons, and when he ran his fingers over the marks he’d left, the skin felt hot to the touch.

“Th-thank you, sir,” Robin managed to stammer. He didn’t sound in too much pain, and when Mark glanced down at his cock, it stood up even

harder than before.

“If you want to thank me properly, you’ll get down and kiss my boots.”

Robin didn’t hesitate. He dropped to his knees and planted kisses first on Mark’s right boot, then the left. Mark gave his own dick a surreptitious stroke through his trousers, itching to plant himself deep in Robin’s arse once more. Luckily, he’d passed a supermarket on his way to meet Robin at the café, and he’d been able to stock up on condoms, knowing what the night would have in store.

“Strip me,” he demanded, “and then you can worship my cock the way you’ve been worshipping my boots...”

\* \* \* \*

Much later, they lay together on the bed. Mark’s body ached, but there was a sweetness to the pain. He’d fucked Robin slow and tenderly, and been rewarded by hearing Robin cry out his name at the moment he came.

“I was going to suggest we take a shower,” he said, “but I doubt there’s room for both of us to squeeze into that little cubicle together.”

“I don’t know. It might be fun to try,” Robin replied with a grin.

“So,” Mark asked carefully, “being with a soldier, was it everything you’d hoped?”

“I loved it. Being told what to do, getting my arse smacked—and you were the perfect man to do it to me.”

“I was glad to be of service. It’s only a shame it won’t happen again.” The words were out before Mark could stop them.

“I don’t see why it can’t. Why you and I can’t see each other again.”

“Robin, how can we? Tomorrow morning, I go to England to see my mum and my friends over there. By the end of the week, I’ll be back in Afghanistan. It’s not as though we can visit each other at weekends.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” Robin asserted. “When are you next on leave?”

“Not until the New Year.”

“That’s what? A little over three months? I can wait if you can.” Robin rolled on to his side, gazing into Robin’s eyes. “Mark, I’ve never met anyone like you. There’s something special between us. I can feel it, and I’m damn sure you can, too. We’d be foolish not to give it a chance.”

He was right, loath as Mark was to admit it. Given time, their attraction to each other could very easily deepen into love. But that wasn’t what scared him. He knew all too well how fragile life could be, and how easily someone could be snatched away from you.

He’d lost his best friend before his time. But that didn’t mean he was destined to lose Robin, too. Why throw something away because you were scared of something that might never come to pass? He could almost hear Ozzy’s voice in his ear, the words he’d used whenever Mark was dithering about a decision. *Go on, mate. You know you want to.*

And he did want to. Very much. He took hold of Robin’s hand. “You’re right. Christmas isn’t that far away. And we can send emails, letters...”

Maybe the waiting would make it all the sweeter. As Robin rained kisses on his cheeks and lips, he closed his eyes and silently blessed Ozzy for bringing him to this moment.

## Epilogue

The letter had been waiting for Mark all day. Knowing it was from Robin, he'd been saving it till he had some time to himself. They kept in touch with regular emails, but a handwritten note was something special, something private to be savoured and enjoyed.

He stretched out on his bunk and tore the envelope open. Two sheets of thin paper fluttered out. Mark picked up the first one and began to read.

The first few lines were general chit-chat, Robin letting him know how busy the bar had been with preparations for Christmas. Father Christmas came early in Holland, in the guise of Saint Nicholas, handing out presents to children on December 6th. There would be a big parade on the streets of Amsterdam...

Mark skimmed those details, and went to the meat of Robin's letter.

*But what I'm really looking forward to is finally getting to spend time with you again. It's always nice to get your emails, but I long to be in your arms once more. I'm so excited about the thought of coming over to England. I know you tell me that you live in a small town, but I don't care about shopping and sightseeing—I just want to spend time with you.*

*Mark, I get so horny when I think about that night in your hotel room, and all the wonderful, dirty things you made me do. I'm yearning for Corporal Stockdale to discipline me for being bad, and I will accept whatever punishments he chooses to give me. I am particularly hoping that he will require me to suck his big, hard—*

"Hey, Mark!" The voice interrupted his reading. So much for having a moment to himself. Though maybe it was just as well. Even the thought of disciplining Robin again was getting him almost painfully hard.

But Robin was right. Not too much longer till they'd finally get to meet up on UK soil. He'd managed to wangle some leave for the New Year,

and Robin would be leaving Jos in charge of the bar for a week. A whole week, to do whatever they wanted. Maybe he'd take Robin up to London, show him the sights. The rest of the time they'd more than likely spend in bed, getting to know more about each other's needs and desires.

The very fact Robin had kept emailing, kept writing, made the most of the limited contact Mark's profession allowed them, had led Mark to think they really might have some kind of future together. It wouldn't be easy—long-distance relationships never were—but if they were both prepared to work at it, who knew?

“Mark!” the voice called again.

“Yeah, coming!” He slipped the letter back into its envelope to read later and went to find out who needed him.

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**Down to Earth**

**Elizabeth Coldwell**

*Excerpt*

## **Chapter One**

The ground was coming towards him far too fast.

Remembering the words of his instructor, drilled into him when he'd first started taking skydiving lessons, he did his best to relax. His main parachute might have failed—the problem caused by more than a simple twist in the lines that could quickly be untangled—but he still had a reserve. He could see the white expanse of Craig's chute fluttering below him, and tried to judge his own altitude from that. Less than a thousand feet, he reckoned. It left him no time to cut the main chute away. But that's why he had a back-up. The chances of that failing, too, were so small as to be negligible.

Pulling at the deployment handle of the reserve chute with all the strength he had, he counted down the seconds, waiting for the reassuring feeling as the furled bundle of nylon cloth opened and the wind tugged him upward.

It didn't come.

*Oh, fuck, this is bad...really bad.*

Fighting against the panic that threatened to overwhelm him, he tugged at the handle a second time. Still nothing. Despite the odds, the second chute had turned out to be as faulty as the first.

Below him, Craig's parachute was a white blanket spread across the springy grass. It appeared he had landed safely. For him, this had been nothing but a routine jump. Praying that once Craig had gathered up his chute, he'd look up and notice what was wrong, Ryan closed his eyes,

wanting his lover to be the last thing on his mind. Hitting the ground was going to hurt more than anything he'd ever known, and he needed a pleasant memory to distract him from thoughts of the pain to come.

Thinking of something pleasant where Craig was involved wouldn't exactly be hard. Until then, today had been pretty much the best day of his life...

*The smell of freshly brewed coffee awoke him. What was happening? Why hadn't his alarm gone off? He couldn't be late for work again, not with Mel in New York. Someone had to be around to take delivery of the artwork for the gallery's latest exhibition, and he couldn't screw up, not when Mel had been muttering darkly that, with the economy the way it was, and the gallery's takings significantly down, there might have to be job cuts...*

*"Hey, Ryan. Happy anniversary, babe." Craig's voice cut into his confused thoughts. Hauling himself up into a sitting position, he watched his boyfriend walk into the room, carrying a tray that he set down on the bedside table. "Thought I'd treat you to breakfast in bed, seeing as it's our special day."*

*This was a first. In the year they'd been together, Craig had never been up and functioning before Ryan—or, if he had been, he'd be hogging the bathroom, showering, applying his anti-ageing moisturiser and eye cream and tweaking his honey-streaked hair into a style that gave the impression he'd just tumbled out of bed.*

*Ryan's immediate anxiety eased—if today was their anniversary that made it Sunday, which meant the gallery was closed. No delivery till tomorrow—no need to panic. Instead, he could enjoy a leisurely breakfast with Craig.*

*Alongside a cafetière—the source of the appetising coffee aroma—the tray contained that morning's newspaper and a plate of Danish pastries,*



*bought from the bakery down the road. Ryan couldn't have expected anything more ambitious from Craig, given that the limit of the man's culinary skills was programming the microwave, but the gesture was much appreciated. He felt spoiled, wanted.*

*Craig stripped off his T-shirt and jeans, making sure to put them on hangers so they wouldn't crease, then climbed into bed beside Ryan.*

*"Has it really been a year?" Ryan asked. Their first date, in a cocktail lounge in the city centre, seemed only moments ago. He'd been smitten with the vivacious blond hair salon owner from the instant they'd met, but he'd never expected them to form a lasting relationship. Craig was everything Ryan wasn't—a night owl, obsessed with celebrity gossip and the latest fashions—but they had clicked. They'd had their rocky spells, but they were still together twelve months later, and Craig was obviously determined to mark their anniversary with this unexpected show of affection.*

*"Hasn't the time flown?" Craig grinned. "Speaking of which, I've got something special planned for us later on. We're going skydiving."*

*"You've arranged that? Wow, thanks, Craig."*

*Skydiving had become their shared passion. Ryan had already been a veteran of close to a dozen solo jumps when he'd met Craig, and he'd never believed his boyfriend—happiest holding court in a darkened club with a fresh mojito in his hand—would have warmed to the concept of throwing himself out of a moving plane. But Craig, who had a passion for campy old spy films, had enthusiastically embraced his inner James Bond, and learnt to skydive—first in tandem with an instructor, then on his own. Ryan privately thought that freefalling through the air was the only time his lover really let himself go. Even when they had sex, he never seemed so daring, so unconcerned about everything. Not that Ryan had any intention of sharing that impression with Craig.*

*In gratitude, he gave Craig a soft peck on the lips, half expecting him to recoil at the stale taste of his breath. Instead, he returned the kiss with surprising enthusiasm, rolling over so that he was on top of Ryan, pinning him to the mattress. His tongue flickered into Ryan's mouth, and he ground his crotch against Ryan's through the bedcovers.*

*"Hey, what about breakfast?" Ryan asked when they finally broke the kiss. The strength of Craig's reaction had made his cock, already sporting the beginnings of a healthy morning erection, stiffen further, and his groin ached pleurably.*

*"It can wait. Suddenly, I'm hungry for something else." Craig reached down under the sheet, cupping Ryan's cock. Ryan always slept in the nude, and his breath caught in his throat at the feeling of Craig's fingers closing around his shaft. With slow, steady movements, Craig wanked him till he humped his arse against the mattress, wanting to have his cock buried in his lover's mouth or, better yet, his tight rear passage.*

*As if he'd read his mind, Craig pushed aside the sheets, and slithered down till his mouth was on a level with Ryan's cock. Looking up at Ryan with clear adoration in his grey-blue eyes, he grasped the thick shaft by its base, pausing for a teasing moment before forming his lips into a circle and closing them around Ryan's helmet. Plunged into the wet furnace of Craig's mouth, Ryan could only moan in wordless pleasure, lost in the sensation of being so expertly sucked.*

*In his ideal world, every morning would start like this, with his cock lodged in Craig's throat, and a finger straying down, down between his balls to find the hidden pucker of his arse, stroking over its rim and promising to push deep inside...*

*"You love that, don't you?" Craig stopped mouthing him long enough to pose the question, his expression pure wickedness.*

Ryan could only grunt in reply. Every fibre of his body seemed to scream for Craig to go back to what he'd been doing, to keep on licking and caressing, bringing him to the point where he could only arch his back and shoot his spunk deep in his lover's throat. Craig got the message, increasing the wet suction on Ryan's cockhead till all Ryan could do was let out a tormented cry. "I'm coming!"

The warning gave Craig just enough time to pull his mouth off Ryan's cock, using his fist instead to coax out Ryan's cum in long, rhythmic squirts. The milky fluid puddled on Ryan's belly, and Craig reached for a tissue to wipe it away. Maybe one day, Ryan hoped, Craig would allow him to come in his mouth, but not today.

They cuddled together, Ryan reaching for Craig's hard, neglected cock so he could return the compliment. In that moment, he felt closer to Craig than ever, and was prompted to ask a question that had hovered in his mind for a while. "Craig, I've been thinking about this, waiting for the right time to ask you, and today feels like the right time. Will you...will you be my husband? I don't have a ring or anything, but—"

Craig said nothing at first, and Ryan was sure the answer would be in the negative. Then, at last, he said, "Honey, I'd love to." They kissed, long and deep, then Craig continued, "Had you thought of a venue, because I know that Wolfenden Hall caters to civil partnership ceremonies, and I've always fancied holding my reception in a stately home. And they have bedroom suites available, and there's supposed to be a really nice B and B in Wolfenden village, too, so that solves the accommodation problem. Though, God knows what my mother is going to say. She always told me I should hold out for a man who earns more than I do...joking, lover, joking..."

*Ryan silenced him with another kiss, before licking his way down Craig's body, over his chest and abs, heading for his waiting cock. Their coffee would be cold by now, but he didn't care. Craig had just made him the happiest man in the world, and the best way to show that happiness was by making him come till he saw stars...*

Concentrating on the way Craig had felt in his arms, the taste of his warm, salty skin, Ryan braced himself for impact. Less than twenty feet to fall, the wind whistling in his ears and nausea rising in his belly. Muttering a fevered prayer that someone, anyone would help him, he landed in the twisted branches of a gorse bush with a blow that seemed to shatter his world into a thousand pieces, and darkness claimed him.

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## About the Author

Elizabeth Coldwell is the author of numerous short stories and two full-length novels, 'Calendar Girl' and 'Playing the Field'. Her stories have appeared in the best-selling 'Best Women's Erotica' series and Black Lace's popular 'Wicked Words' collections. Formerly the editor of the UK edition of *Forum* magazine, she also contributed a spicy monthly column, 'The Cougar Chronicles', to its pages. When she is not busy writing, she is an avid supporter of Rotherham United Football Club and can be regularly found on the terraces at weekends, cheering her boys to victory (hopefully!).

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