

THE BOOK & THE ROSE



Douglas Glen

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE BOOK & THE ROSE

By Douglas Glen

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Gif 1: Two men in their early 20s begin kissing at night in a floodlit area with one pinned up against a post or pylon. The man with his back to the surface begins with his hands on his lover's face and ends with his hands cupped around the other's ass pulling him into the kiss.

Gif 2: Continuation of first Gif showing a close up of the kiss. The lovers pull apart briefly and make eye contact.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See those gifs? That was us, the night it happened. The night it all changed, and our precious time together turned into a trickle of "secret" texts and emails and God-I-wish-you-were-heres...

The memory of that last time together, of feeling his touch, and his strength and heat up against me, has kept me going through some hard times. And I know it hasn't been easy for him either, and we've both done the best we can to be strong. But... I need that man. So much.

I'm trying to figure out how to make things right so we can be together again. I think I've finally worked out just what needs to be done; it isn't going to be easy and could possibly be dangerous and pull me farther away from him. That's all right though; I know the best things in life are worth making it over and around every obstacle on the way there. Worth taking risks and giving it all you've got. And that man? There's no doubt in my heart that he's the best thing in my life.

Sincerely,

Rissa~(an M/M kinda girl)

P.S. Thanks to Kaje for helping me with the prompt!

Restrictions:

**Historical, Sci-Fi/Fantasy, Steampunk & Paranormal*

**Little to No Sexual Activity*

Please Include

**Dry Humping or Frottage Scene (I would prefer this scene to happen either "the night it all happened" or even before then and maybe shown thru a flashback but it can be negotiated)*

**Angsty*

**HEA or Strong HFN*

Major Bonus Points if you include any or all of the following!

I'd prefer not to have a "no sex" story so getting sexin' stuff to happen in other ways with them apart may prove challenging

**Self-Pleasuring Scene with some anal play*

**Sexting/Phone Sex*

**Gruff, Gritty & Raw (So the loving/tender moments are more 'AWWW')*

**A Surprise Ending could be fun!*

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: masturbation, businessmen/lawyers, grief, homophobia, in the closet, men with children, reunited

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 14,183

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Chapter 1

Diada de Sant Jordi, 23rd April 2014

It was not only receiving the out-of-print book, *The Mirror in the Mirror*, a labyrinth by his favorite author Michael Ende, that made Liam ecstatically happy, but also the inscription inside the front cover.

Dearest Liam,

With all my love. You have filled a space in my life that I didn't even know existed until I met you. Every day I am with you only serves to increase my feelings. I want to be with you forever and make you happy. Please, will you marry me?

Yours,

Sergey

The huge square was filled with hordes of locals and tourists who were jostling around the bookstalls and rose sellers. St. George's Day in Catalonia is the day of lovers. Traditionally, men give women roses and women give men books, although in these days of equality, women generally get the best of both worlds by getting both a book and a rose.

Liam had just arrived by train from one of his teaching gigs just outside the city. After emerging from the subterranean train station, his pale skin glistened with sweat, and the April breeze was still cool enough to provide some relief after the hellish conditions below ground. Liam stood by the police station adjacent to the central entrance to the metro and train station.

He was exactly six feet tall with short brown hair that could become curly if he allowed it to grow more. He had a handsome, oval-shaped face sporting the designer stubble that he did not particularly like, but kept because Sergey liked it so much. His green eyes were his best feature, and were appropriate to his heritage, as he hailed from the Emerald Isle. Although he was clearly not Catalan, the jersey wrapped around his waist identified him as not being a tourist, who in Barcelona generally wear the lightest clothing even on the coldest evenings.

He glanced at his watch and looked around trying to spot Sergey in the crowd. Failing, he pulled out his mobile phone and opened a chat application.

Liam: *Hey guapo! I'm beside the police station. Where r u?*

Sergey: *I'm walking up there now. I'm on Las Ramblas fighting my way through the people.*

Liam: *Ok. See you soon :-**

He put the phone in his pocket and admired the Mossos d'Esquadra—the Catalan police force—talking outside the police station, perhaps about to enter for a new shift. Uniforms always seem to make people more attractive, and the Mossos were no exception. The pale blue shirt with epaulets and navy trousers with a red stripe up the side always seemed to be very well-fitting, and the boots served to transform any policeman from ordinary to extraordinary.

Liam had no criminal tendencies, but he thought to himself (not for the first time), *If you had to be arrested, at least in Catalonia you would have some eye candy to make it better.* He snapped out of his daydream and spotted Sergey, for whom he would refuse any Mosso's offer, walking towards him.

Sergey arrived wearing jeans and a Lacoste polo. Like Liam, he had a jersey wrapped around his waist. He was slightly taller than Liam, and had black hair and brown eyes with light brown skin that led people to mistake him for being Catalan or Spanish. He was very expressive, and when his smile lit up his face, you couldn't help but smile in return.

He smiled, put his hand on Liam's face, and kissed him, saying, "I hope that you haven't been waiting long. I had to go to a shop in the Gothic area."

Liam smiled back. "No, don't worry! I arrived just a few minutes ago and anyway, the view is easy on the eyes," he replied as he looked towards the Mossos. "Let's go and get a drink. Then we can go for a walk down Las Ramblas."

They made their way to the pavement terrace of Cafe Zurich. It was a little expensive, being firmly on the tourist trail, but like the Catalans, Liam and Sergey never worried about the occasional extravagance to celebrate fiestas.

Liam ordered a coffee and Sergey ordered a Cacaolat, which is a type of chocolate milkshake. Once the rather snooty waiter had brought them their drinks, Sergey reached into his backpack and extracted a silver gift bag. He handed it over the table to Liam who carefully took it out of the bag. He looked at the book, which was in mint condition and could almost be mistaken for being new.

Looking at Sergey in surprise he blurted out, "How did you find it?"

"I have my means," said Sergey with a twinkle in his eye.

Liam opened the book and was about to begin flicking through the pages when he noticed the inscription at the beginning in neat, blue handwriting. He looked at Sergey wide-eyed and silent, his awestruck expression not giving away whether he was happy or sad.

"Well?" asked Sergey smiling at him.

"Yes! Of course!" exclaimed Liam as he stood up, pulling Sergey up and kissing him, provoking a temporary silence from the tables surrounding them and looks from the throng of people walking along the pavement.

They sat down again, and Sergey pulled a smaller silver bag from his rucksack. He opened it and removed a small jewelry box, which he flicked open to reveal a silver ring. The ring had two parallel circular lines and a small diamond on one side. He grabbed Liam's hand, and pulled it towards him, carefully putting the engagement ring on Liam's finger.

"I'm so glad it fits. I had a lot of problems trying to measure your finger. Every time I put the measurement paper around your finger I thought you were going to wake up!" He grinned at Liam, who smiled and leaned towards him to kiss him.

"You sneaky devil! But I like it." Liam took off the ring and examined it. On the inner part of the ring he realized that there was a picture of two roses engraved in the silver. "You thought of everything! Thank you Sergey! You've made me happier than I ever thought I could be."

Liam then remembered it was his turn to give Sergey a book. He removed a package tied up with brown paper and string. Looking slightly nervous and entirely excited, he said, "I can't quite top your book and rose, but I hope that you like it."

Sergey carefully untied the string and opened the package. Inside was a boxed set of *The Sound of Music* with a book and Blu-ray disk. Sergey laughed at the brown paper and string, a reference from the song "My Favorite Things", and sang a little of the song.

Liam pulled another package out of his rucksack under the table and when he sat up, Sergey met him with a kiss. The second package was again wrapped in brown paper tied up with string. Sergey unwrapped it, and inside, there was a

box of roses and chocolates. Sergey had a very sweet tooth. He said thank you and kissed Liam again.

Liam paid the waiter for the drinks, and they decided to take a walk down Les Rambles towards the port and the Maremagnum center with its shops and restaurants. As they made slow progress through the crowds, walking down the pedestrianized boulevard past the human statues, florists, bird sellers and artists, they discussed their plans together.

Sergey had never told anyone in his family that he was gay, with the exception of his now thirteen-year-old sister. His family was very conservative, as were many people in Russia, and if he were to say anything, he risked being disowned. He did not wish to lose contact with his sister, so he'd decided not to say anything to his family until Veronika had left home, and his family would have less opportunity to interfere in their relationship. He still loved his family, but was conflicted knowing that his mother and father would not understand the way he was. This meant that Sergey's side of the wedding guest list would be limited to friends.

Liam, on the other hand, had a very supportive family, and he was sure that many would make the effort to attend. They also excitedly discussed location and a possible date for the wedding. "I would love to have a wedding with an Elvis impersonator in Las Vegas," suggested Liam with a mischievous half smile.

Sergey hit him playfully on the arm. "Over my dead body," he laughed.

"Maybe Ireland will legalize gay marriage soon. I think they're going to hold a referendum," mentioned Liam hopefully.

As they reached the bottom of Les Rambles, Liam took Sergey by the hand and pulled him towards a jewelry shop. "I can't have you without a ring on. I want people to know that you have been claimed," he said gently.

In the store, a jolly, middle-aged woman with short black hair and glasses showed them pads of rings. Sergey's preference was for a thumb ring, which Liam agreed with, because he didn't want there to be anything traditional about his marriage to Sergey. They picked out a silver ring, and Liam asked the jeweler if it would be possible to engrave a rose on to the inner part of the ring, showing her his own. She agreed that this would be possible, but that they were quite busy at the time around the Sant Jordi festivities, and it would be a few days before it was ready.

They continued on to the Maremagnum center where they went to an Italian restaurant overlooking the port. They shared a warm salad with eggplant and parmesan, then had a pizza, each accompanied with a fine white wine. They talked about who they would tell first about their engagement, and whether Facebook status updates would be in order at some point. They also texted their closest friend in common, Francesc, who immediately called Liam's phone and congratulated them, making them promise to come to his apartment for a barbecue at the weekend. After some tiramisu, they decided to take a walk along the seafront to the Olympic Marina before heading home. Sergey would have to get up early the next day for his job as a Spanish/Russian interpreter.

As they walked down towards the sea in a quiet area, Liam grabbed and pushed Sergey against a lamppost, kissing him softly at first and then, after pulling away to look at him, he kissed him more passionately, exploring Sergey's mouth with his tongue. Liam put his arms around Sergey and cupped the curve of his ass, pulling Liam up to him hungrily. Sergey then took control, and in a smooth movement, flipped Liam around against the lamppost. They were completely oblivious to their surroundings, lost in each other, until a passerby on a bicycle gave a wolf whistle. They stopped and looked around and then at each other, smiling. They were almost breathless from the intensity of the moment.

They continued on their walk, eager to get home to their apartment in La Barceloneta, the small peninsula jutting out from the coast, and the fishermen's neighborhood of Barcelona. When they reached the apartment building, they got into the elevator and, as soon as the doors closed, kissed again. When they reached their floor, they practically fell out the door. Liam struggled to get his keys out of his pocket while Sergey continued to kiss him. Eventually, they got into the apartment.

They both rapidly helped each other to undress, and although the evening was now cool by Barcelona standards, the sweat on their skin attested to the feverish heat in their bodies. They stayed in the small living room, and continued to kiss as Sergey pinned Liam against the wall. They were both completely aroused, and as they kissed, they ground against each other trying to achieve friction.

Liam moved his hand down between them and wrapped it around both of their cocks, moving it at a slow pace along their lengths and squeezing to create more friction between them. As they continued to kiss, Liam's hand moved faster. Sergey gave a soft sob and breathed harder.

Sergey put his hands on Liam's face and angled his head, kissing him deeply, only stopping occasionally to breathe. Liam increased the rhythm of his movement against their cocks and felt Sergey's balls tighten. A moment later, Liam felt a hot stickiness on his hand. Sergey had wrapped his arms around Liam's body, squeezing him tightly and kissing him with even more fervor, as Liam felt his own seed join together with Sergey's.

Their kiss slowly turned into an intimate embrace as they luxuriated in the afterglow of sex. As always during sex between them, no words were spoken. The intimacy and intensity of their physical union expressed more than words could ever say. After a calming shower together, they went to bed, and Sergey lay curled against Liam.

Chapter 2

Ring ring. Sergey picked up his phone, which was vibrating and ringing on the bedside cabinet, answering, “Hola, dígame.”

Liam stirred and saw that Sergey was sitting up with his back leaning against the headboard. He had a worried look on his face and was speaking in Russian. He continued speaking for a few minutes, his voice changing from loud and almost harsh to soft and gentle.

He pushed the end call button and turned to Liam. “It’s my parents. They’ve had a car accident. That was my sister, Veronika. She’s gone to the hospital with my uncle Viktor. I have to get back.”

“Sergey, I’m so sorry. Let’s book a flight for you,” Liam gently kissed Sergey on the cheek, leaving the bed and returning with his laptop. Together, they found a flight leaving at 9:30 with a connection in Moscow five hours later. They booked it and printed the tickets.

As Liam made them some coffee, Sergey made several calls to his uncle at the hospital to get news, but there was little forthcoming. Liam packed a suitcase for Sergey and called a taxi company to book a car to take them to the airport at 7:00am. Liam listened and did his best to reassure Sergey as he was pacing the small apartment. He thought of all the practicalities, and planned to call Sergey’s boss to inform him of what had happened, charged Sergey’s spare mobile battery, and prepared his documents and tickets in a pouch.

Finally 7:00 a.m. arrived, and they went in the taxi to the airport. Liam waited in the queue with Sergey to check in, and walked with him to security. He held Sergey in a tight embrace, softly uttering soothing words, and finally saying, “I love you”. Sergey went through the security and looked back at Liam once and waved.

Liam boarded the train back to Barcelona and used the time to call Sergey’s manager to advise him of the situation. He then called the agency that provided him with his English classes to tell them he would not be working that day, asking them to find a substitute teacher for his classes in the various companies he visited to teach English to employees. He then got off the train and took the metro to the station in Barceloneta and walked back to the apartment. When he got to the apartment, he undressed and went to bed.

Liam awoke with a dry mouth a few hours later. It was lunchtime and although he did not feel like eating, he had not had any breakfast and realized that he should eat something. He scavenged the contents of the fridge and produced a supermarket-bought couscous salad and some cottage cheese.

Picking up his phone and looking at the time, he guessed that Sergey's flight would be landing in Moscow anytime now. Perhaps he would get some news during his wait for the flight to St. Petersburg. He called their friend Francesc and explained what had happened.

"How awful! Especially after last night and the proposal. Let me bring over something to eat when I finish work," cooed Francesc in unusually subdued Spanish compared to his normal animated tones.

Liam made a short show of refusing the consolation, but knew that his efforts would be futile and eventually he gave in, agreeing to Francesc's visit at seven.

Liam had met Francesc when he first came to Barcelona four years before. Liam had just finished his degree in English and thought that it would be nice to teach the language abroad for a year. He was considering going to China—a popular choice among those wishing to travel—but an online advertisement had caught his eye and lured him to Barcelona.

Francesc had worked as the receptionist at the language school he taught in, and had become a great friend, taking the time to show him around Barcelona (as well as its gay bars), and integrate him into life there. He had even suggested that Liam start working as a freelancer, as he would earn more money, which he quickly found to be true.

It was through his freelance classes that he met Sergey, who'd wanted to brush up on his English to take the Cambridge Proficiency exam. Liam hadn't realized Sergey was gay at first until he saw him standing alone at the bar in the *Museum*, a popular Barcelona gay nightspot. Liam had initiated one of those awkward conversations that happen when you meet someone outside the context you normally do. Liam plucked up the courage to ask him on a date, and a few weeks later crossed the line from professional to personal.

Snapping out of his trip down memory lane, Liam received a text from Sergey about an hour after having lunch.

Sergey: Landed ok. No news. Waiting for my next flight. Thanks for helping with everything. I love you. I'm going to try and sleep before the next fight.

Liam: *Ok. Hope the news is good when you arrive in St. Petersburg. No problem for the help. Love you and thinking of you always.*

Sergey: :-*

Liam: :-*

Liam spent the afternoon cleaning the apartment and worrying about Sergey and his parents. He was barely thinking about the proposal from the night before, which now seemed to have been a hundred years ago. Arriving a little later than 7:00 p.m.— as was customary for Francesc— he rang the doorbell, and Liam let him in. He put two bags of takeaway Chinese food on the table in the living room, kissing Liam on both cheeks and hugging him tightly. He was a little shorter than Liam, with black hair, a squared face, and glasses. He was slim and seemed to stay that way no matter how much junk he ate.

“I’m so sorry about what’s happened to Sergey,” Francesc’s concern was evident through his tone. “Especially at what should have been a happy time for you both. You’ll have to tell me everything.” His voice trailed off as he went into the kitchen as if it were his own. He returned with plates, glasses, and cutlery. He served the food and pulled out a bottle of wine. “If today’s not a day to drown your sorrows a little, I don’t know what day is.”

He sat down and asked Liam to tell him everything. Liam told him about the phone call the night before, and about making the arrangements for Sergey to go back home. Francesc listened and tried to reassure Liam that everything would be all right. They watched TV for a while, and Liam fell asleep on the sofa. Francesc cleared away everything from their meal earlier, found a blanket to cover Liam with, and quietly left.

Chapter 3

In St. Petersburg, Sergey arrived at the hospital in a rental car, and immediately called his Uncle Viktor who was there with Veronika. Viktor directed him to the right area of the hospital. They were sitting in a waiting room, and as soon as he entered, Veronika got up and ran over to hug him.

She started to talk, but Viktor barked at her harshly, "That's enough Veronika! We talked about this." Viktor then took Sergey by the arm and said, "Let's go and talk and have a coffee."

He led the way to a canteen in another part of the hospital and ordered two coffees. They sat down at a table. "I'm afraid the news isn't good, Sergey. Your father died this afternoon while you were in the air. Your mother is in a coma, and the doctors say that it is unlikely that she will wake up. At some point soon, we will likely have to make the decision to switch the machines off. I'm sorry. There's really no nice way to say it. I thought it best to tell you things as they are."

Sergey sat there for a moment, numbed by the news. He didn't feel sorrow, happiness, or any emotion at all... just emptiness.

"The crash was caused by someone running a red light. The driver in the other car died, too," Viktor continued.

After a long silence, Sergey finally spoke, "Does Veronika know?"

"Yes, she knows everything. She's taken it quite well up to now. She cried at first, but she seems to be okay now. Of course, in time we will need to make arrangements to ensure that she continues to be brought up in a suitable environment."

Sergey frowned for a moment, not understanding what the last sentence meant, but decided to let it pass.

"Can I see my mother?" Sergey asked with a blank expression in his eyes.

"Yes, let's go and see her now. I'll ask the doctor to come and speak to us."

Viktor led the way back to the waiting room.

Sergey sat down with Veronika and said, "I'm so sorry that you had to be here without me when this happened. I can't promise you that things are going to be all right because I don't know what all right is anymore. But I can promise that I'll do all I can to look after you."

Veronika started to cry a little, and Sergey hugged her, which seemed to be met with a disapproving look from Viktor. He had just appeared at the door alongside a doctor with a severe face who appeared to be in her fifties. Sergey left Veronika and promised to be back soon.

The doctor introduced herself as Dr Raykova. "Let's go and see your mother. Only one person can come into the intensive care unit at a time, so it's just you. Your uncle and sister can wait here."

She led Sergey into a room with various machines whirring and beeping, and a bed with the form of somebody under the covers. As Sergey drew closer, he saw that his mother had her head bandaged up and the only visible parts of her face had been severely bruised. He sat down on the bed and took her hand for a moment, saying "Mum" softly. In the movies, this always seemed to induce a flicker of the eyelids or some response that gave hope, but there was nothing. She was expressionless.

Dr Raykova put her hand on his shoulder and said to him, "I'm afraid that there's no chance of her waking up. We've done a lot of tests as well as a brain scan, and there is no brain activity. Normally in these cases, we switch the machines off after everyone has had the chance to say good-bye. If we can agree on when everyone can come to say their farewell, we can set a time."

Sergey turned to her, and at that moment, it seemed to hit him that his parents were dead. He started to speak, but all that came out was a choking sound. Dr Raykova sat down beside him and took his hand without saying anything as he started to cry.

After a few minutes, he said to her, "Let's do it tomorrow. We're not a big family. There's just me, my sister, and my Uncle Viktor. For the sake of my sister, I don't want this nightmare to go on any longer than it has to."

"I think that's best," she responded. She let go of his hand and quietly left the room.

Sergey kissed his mother and then headed back to the waiting room. Viktor and Veronika stood up as he arrived. He took Viktor aside and said to him, "I'm going to take Veronika home. I'm really tired after everything. I've told the doctor we'll say good-bye to my mother in the morning, and then they are going to switch the machines off."

"Are you sure that you don't want me to take Veronika?" his uncle asked with a tinge of concern in his voice.

Sergey shook his head, “No, it’s fine. She’s thirteen anyway. It’s not as if she’s a young child.”

Viktor nodded. “Okay. Unless something happens before, I’ll meet you here in the morning at 9:00. We’ll need to start making arrangements for the funerals as well.”

Sergey took Veronika by the hand, and they said good-bye to their uncle and left.

On the way back home, Sergey listened to Veronika’s account of what had happened. She had been at home doing her homework while their mother and father had gone shopping at the supermarket. She had been out to visit a friend’s apartment across the street and was worried when she got home three hours after they had left to find that they still weren’t home. Uncle Viktor called her shortly thereafter, telling her that he had received a call from the police. He went over and collected her to take her to the hospital.

She started to cry at the point when she explained what had happened at the hospital. Sergey reached over to his sister and squeezed her arm. A short time later, they arrived at the apartment building in the darkness, as it was late in the evening. They stayed in the car until Veronika had stopped crying.

Sergey asked Veronika to call the elevator while he removed his luggage from the car. Once they were inside, Sergey asked Veronika if she had eaten.

“Not since lunchtime,” she replied.

Sergey looked in the freezer and found Kotlety (meatballs)— his mother’s specialty and a real comfort food. He put it in the microwave and laid the table, which was at the end of a huge dining room. While they were waiting for the food to heat, Veronika asked Sergey about life in Barcelona and with Liam.

Sergey had told Veronika about being gay before he left to work in Spain as an interpreter three years prior. Nobody else, including their parents, knew he was gay. It would likely not have been well-received, especially by Uncle Viktor. He worked as a member of the city administration for the United Russia party of Vladimir Putin, who had signed into law an “Anti-Propaganda” legislation just the year before. They had always had a close relationship, and Veronika had never told anyone of Sergey’s secret. They were always in touch over Skype and often sent each other e-mails, so Sergey recounted things about his life in Spain that he had not yet discussed with her. The microwave beeped and Sergey served the last meal cooked by their mother that they would ever have.

After eating, their conversation continued for a while and Veronika told Sergey of the things that had been happening in her life. She also expressed concern at the antigay sentiment in Russia. She told Sergey that one of her classmates who was slightly feminine had ended up in hospital after being ambushed by a group of students on the way home from school. Sergey listened in dismay. Russia had never been gay-friendly, but the new propaganda law had made things take a turn for the worse.

For the moment, he decided not to tell Veronika of his proposal to Liam. Veronika went to bed and Sergey switched on the computer in his father's study. His father worked as a translator and interpreter on a freelance basis for several multinational corporations and had taught him and his brother to speak English, Spanish, and French.

When he opened the computer, he had to guess the password his father used. After four attempts, he was successful, using the name of the village his father had been brought up in. He switched on Skype and looked for Liam in the online users list. He found him and clicked on his name, hearing the familiar Skype ringtone and seeing the pop-up box in the corner of the screen. Liam answered and switched on the camera. He looked very tired, as if he had just woken up. Sergey explained what had happened, and Liam listened silently.

"I'm so sorry Sergey," Liam said gently. "Do you want me to come to be with you?"

"I would love you to come here, but it just isn't possible. Life in Russia is difficult and dangerous for those who are open. I wouldn't care, and if it wasn't for my sister I would take the risk. But if you came, I don't think I would be able to hide it."

Liam huffed, and although he tried not to show it, Sergey perceived he was a little hurt. "I just wish that I could be there, if only to give you a hug," said Liam.

"I know, I wish you were here too. It's late and I need to get to bed. I have a very long day ahead tomorrow. I love you."

"I love you, too, and I'm thinking of you every moment that you are away. Call me anytime if you need to talk."

The next morning, Sergey realized he needed to tell Veronika that today would be the final good-bye to her mother. He told her after they had finished a

breakfast of cold cuts, cheese, and bread. She took it calmly, already knowing what would happen from the conversations she'd had with Uncle Viktor, and from seeing her mother's motionless and vacant body on the life support machines in the hospital.

They dressed and made their way to the hospital in the rental car. The day was bright with a crisp coolness compared to the spring temperatures in Barcelona. The journey was taken largely in silence. When they arrived at the hospital, they had coffee in the canteen with Viktor before Sergey went to see the doctor.

They agreed that Viktor could go in first to say good-bye to his sister-in-law, and then they would make an exception to the one-person rule and allow both Sergey and Veronika to be there when the machines were switched off. The doctor told him everything would be stopped so that there would be no beeping or other noises coming from the machines.

They went to the waiting room and Viktor went in to say good-bye, followed by Sergey and Veronika. Nothing had changed since the night before; his mother was still a shell of her past self, artificially maintained by machines. Veronika went to the head of the bed and put her hand on her mother's face. She began to cry, and Sergey put his arm across her shoulders.

After a few minutes, she turned to Sergey and said, "I can't be here when it happens. I'm sorry," and she started to cry again. Sergey walked with Veronika to the door, nodding to the nurse who was waiting outside. The nurse came in and switched the machines off one by one. Sergey held his mother's hand and sat on the bed. Finally, the nurse placed the stethoscope on his mother's neck and nodded to him to indicate she was gone. He got up from the bed and said good-bye, kissing her on the forehead.

Chapter 4

Liam called Sergey's manager once again to explain what had happened. He assumed Sergey would need to take his vacation time and asked if it would be OK for him to take two weeks off. His manager was very understanding, saying his father had died the year before and he understood that he would need some time to sort things out.

Liam thought to himself that speaking to his boss was at least one thing he could do for Sergey. He felt so helpless with everything else being so far away. He understood that it was very difficult in Russia to be open, but that didn't make him happy with the situation.

He also felt very grateful for the support of his family. He had decided not to tell them of the proposal at such a difficult time, but he was sure that they would treat Sergey like another one of the family. They had already met him several times in the capacity of being Liam's boyfriend, and they liked him very much, although he had been given the third degree in just about everything to make sure that he was good enough for Liam.

Back in Russia, after spending some time at the hospital, Viktor and Sergey went to visit the undertaker to make arrangements for the funerals, burial plots, and the 1,001 other things that funeral directors want to sell you when someone dies. Viktor agreed to pay for the funeral upfront, deciding to recover the costs later from the estate.

Normally in Russia, the bodies of the deceased lie in state in the family's house during the three days between their death and burial. In this case, they decided that— given they had been in an accident— this wouldn't be the best idea. They agreed to have just a church service and a reception. Although his parents weren't really that religious, as in most countries, everyone is religious in death whether they like it or not.

Over the next two days, Sergey busied himself calling his parents' friends to tell them the tragic news. His family was very small. His only surviving relatives were his sister and Uncle Viktor. He grew tired of going through the same conversations again and again, and felt sapped of energy and emotions at the end of each day. Veronika tried to help by luring him away from the phone every now and again to play a video game, or to go out and buy snacks and chocolate.

On the night before the funeral, he called Liam and told him what was happening. It was a strained phone call for both. Sergey was distressed to hear Liam's voice so full of worry, and Liam was beside himself with concern about Sergey's emotional state and how he was holding up. He ended the call promising to call back the next evening after the funeral.

The funeral was well attended. There was a mix of personal friends, many of whom Sergey knew, and professional friends from his father's work as a translator and his mother's work as a research chemist, most of whom he did not know. He sat at the front, with Veronika in between him and Viktor.

The church service was mostly religious. Not religious himself, Sergey objected to the ceremony being hijacked to be used as just another sermon rather than honoring the dead. After the ceremony, they went to the grave in a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. The coffins were lowered into the ground as each of the mourners took a handful of soil and threw it on top. It was at this moment that the enormity of what had happened really hit Sergey, and as they walked back to the car, he wondered what the future would be like from this point forward.

At the reception which followed, many people shared stories about his parents. A man who was a good work-friend of his mother's gave, the appearance of being gay to Sergey. He didn't know for sure, but it made him wonder how his parents might have taken the news had he come out.

Before leaving to drive home, Viktor said that they had an appointment with his parent's lawyer the next morning at 10:00am. At home, Sergey prepared hot chocolate for himself and Veronika, who broached the subject of what would be happening to her, for the first time.

"What's going to happen to me?" Veronika croaked, stirring her hot chocolate.

"I don't know," Sergey replied softly, "I'm going to have to think about it. I love you and whatever happens, I'm not leaving you alone."

Before going to bed, Sergey called Liam and told him how the funeral had gone. Although during the funeral he had not been particularly emotional, on the phone with his lover, he broke down in tears and it broke Liam's heart. Liam listened to Sergey tell him of the love that he had for his parents, the experiences that they had shared, how his father's patient language tutoring had given him the opportunity to work abroad, and all the ways in which he appreciated his parents but had told them too little.

Liam listened and wished he could be there with Sergey to hug him, hold him, and make it better. Sergey, exhausted after his emotional outpouring, decided to finish the call. He thanked Liam for being there and wished that words could express a hug or a kiss, but found them sadly lacking.

The next day, Sergey prepared breakfast and told Veronika she would have to stay home while he and Viktor went to the lawyer's. He also said they would need to discuss her return to school, perhaps the next day. "It won't do you any good to be at home thinking about what has happened. Getting back to normal will help you to get over it faster."

Viktor called to say he was outside, and Sergey put his coat on and headed out to meet him. The day was overcast and threatened rain. He got into the car and said hello. As he began to talk, Viktor hushed him. "Shh! I want to listen to the news," he spurted out, proceeding to turn up the volume of the radio.

Sergey sat back and played a video game on his phone to distract himself. He rarely listened to the news, neither on the radio nor on TV, and read a weekly digest online once a week. He was of the opinion that it is rare that one is able to influence the news directly, so why spend so much of your life listening to every detail?

They arrived fifteen minutes later at the lawyer's office, which was housed in a sixties, prefabricated tower block. They went into a subterranean car park and took a creaking elevator to the fourteenth floor. The secretary, whose desk was just inside the office door, informed them that the lawyer, Mr Valuev, would be a few minutes, and offered them a coffee while they waited. Liam accepted and Viktor declined.

They sat in the room and Viktor read a magazine about the economy while Sergey continued to play *Sweet Switch* on his phone. A few minutes later, a large man who appeared to be as tall as he was wide appeared at one of the doors leading off the waiting room and introduced himself as Nikolai Valuev. He ushered them into the office, expressed his condolences, and told Sergey he had dealt with his father for many years and regarded him not only as a client, but a friend. He had gone to the funeral, but was sorry he didn't have time to go to the reception.

Mr Valuev sat down behind his desk and indicated that Sergey and Viktor should sit in the chairs in front. He switched on his green banker's lamp and took a manila folder from one of the paper trays on the side of the desk. He opened the file and said, "Of course, the most important provision is what will

happen to Veronika. Unfortunately, your parents did not anticipate dying young, so there is no provision in the will for her custody. In the eyes of the law, any suitable relative may assume the role of guardian for a minor. Have the two of you discussed this?"

Viktor quickly spoke up. "No, but I think that I would be best placed to take care of Veronika."

Sergey looked at Viktor and said, "I think that she would be best with me."

Viktor frowned. "Well, you're not here in Russia. You're off gallivanting around Europe and you have only been in Spain for a few years. You can't offer her the stability that she deserves. In any case, I don't think that any court in Russia would allow a homosexual man to take custody of a minor. I mean, who knows what sort of filthy perversions would go on in your house. I wouldn't want Veronika to be involved in that."

Sergey felt red heat rising to his face, but forced himself to remain calm. He knew he had to be careful if he were to save this situation. "What makes you think that I am a homosexual?" Sergey couldn't help but spurt it out. "I was on your parents' computer. Veronika's e-mail account was saved in the browser and I saw that you had been talking about living with someone called Liam," Viktor responded, raising an eyebrow.

Sergey frantically thought back to his most recent e-mails to his sister. He hoped that Viktor had not gone any further back into the history. "Liam is my flatmate, and yes, he is a friend. That hardly makes me a homosexual— not that there is anything wrong with being gay."

Viktor leant forward in his chair, looked Sergey in the eye, and said, "The fact that you say there is nothing wrong with it alone questions your suitability as Veronika's guardian. Anyway, you have a Visa to live in Spain, but she doesn't. You can't take her with you, Sergey."

Sergey ignored Viktor, turning his attention back to the lawyer. "Mr Valuev, please. I would like you to make arrangements for me to take custody of Veronika." Viktor cut in sharply, "If that's the case, I will instruct my lawyer to contest the proceedings."

Mr Valuev was silent for a moment, digesting the situation. "Well, evidently this matter will have to go to court. For the moment, Sergey is my client, so I will do as he has instructed."

He continued to read the will. They learned that a life insurance policy and the estate would be split equally between Sergey and Veronika, with her part

going into a trust fund as per the law. A reasonable amount would be released to pay for Veronika's upkeep until she was old enough to control the trust herself.

When Mr Valuev had finished, Sergey told Viktor that he would take a taxi home, staying behind to speak to the lawyer in private.

Mr Valuev told him that unless Viktor attempted to get emergency custody of Veronika, pending a court case, she could stay home for now. Sergey signed some papers and asked the receptionist to call him a taxi.

Chapter 5

On his journey home, Sergey wondered how his life could change from such happiness to sadness and frustration in such a short time. He had to be fair to Liam and tell him that he would not likely be able to marry, or even be with him anytime soon, and although it would break his heart, release Liam from any obligation to him.

When he arrived, he found Veronika in the living room reading a novel in English. He explained what had happened with Uncle Viktor. Veronika was livid with anger. "How could he look at my e-mails? He didn't say anything to me!" Sergey made them lunch, and after they had eaten, went to his father's office and called his manager in Spain. He explained what had happened and that he would be resigning from his post. He apologized and offered to do a transfer of his work over the phone with whoever was taking over his position. He then spent the rest of the afternoon going through bills and other documents and calling companies to arrange the necessary changes.

When he knew that Liam would be getting home from work, he started writing an e-mail. He thought writing would be the best way to tell Liam what had happened. Emotional conversations had a way of going wrong over the phone, and you can't reread a phone call.

Dear Liam,

I can't believe that our happiness could change to sadness so quickly.

As you will know, my sister Veronika is 13. There is nobody from my family other than my uncle who can take care of her. I want the best for my sister, and I know that she will only get that if she is with me.

My uncle will challenge my application for guardianship of Veronika in court, and that process could last up to 2 years. I know that we have talked about the anti-gay propaganda laws and other laws here in Russia. Suffice it to say that anything that could give the court reason to believe that I am gay could prejudice my application.

There are many types of love, and love for your family is important. My sister is the only family that I have, and I am all

she has. My love for you is as strong as ever, and because I love you, I can't ask you to put your life on hold and wait for me.

You would be best to forget about me and move on with your life.

Love,

Sergey

He pushed the send button and slumped back in the chair.

Liam got home from his final class at around seven and switched his laptop on as soon as he got in. He read the message from Sergey and pushed the computer away from him. "Fuck!" he shouted at nobody.

A few minutes later, the jeweler from Las Ramblas called him and told him that Sergey's ring was ready for collection. He wanted to throw the phone at the wall, but restrained himself. He knew that Sergey was only thinking of his family, but how could he want Liam to "forget about him"? He thought about the feeling of Sergey against his body, of his kisses and the warm feeling that he had whenever he was in his presence. He sadly thought of how empty his life would be without him.

A few days later, Sergey hadn't heard anything from Liam. He hadn't seen him on Skype and hadn't tried to initiate a conversation by phone or text, knowing that he needed to allow him time. He assumed the worst—that Liam had taken him at his word and accepted the break up. He knew it was unreasonable to ask him to wait, but that didn't make it any easier. He decided that if he didn't hear from him in a few weeks, he would phone him to make arrangements for the collection of his belongings by a courier company, as well as arrange for the payment of his rent and other obligations.

In the meantime, he had found a job similar to the one that he had in Barcelona working for an American outsourcing company. He cut off any relations with Viktor and made it clear that he no longer wanted to have anything to do with him while he was contesting his right to be Veronika's guardian. For the sake of his sister, he did his best to remain cheerful and create a routine.

Two weeks after he sent the e-mail to Liam, a package arrived at Sergey's house with postage from Spain. He hardly dared open it. Inside was a book, *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, and the ring that Liam had bought him on Las Ramblas. Inside the cover of the book was a message.

Dear Sergey,

I loved your proposal in the book which I will always treasure. I decided to get you another book. I hope it will be special for you.

I want the love that we have to be like the title of this book. When you proposed to me, I thought that I would burst with happiness. Although we aren't married, what sort of husband would I be if I ran at the first sign of trouble? If I have to wait 2 years, then so be it. As Kalyn Hemphill said in the film that we both like so much, Steel Magnolias, "I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special." And you, my love, are most definitely wonderful.

Loving you always,

Liam

Sergey read the message and smiled with relief. He would call Liam later.

That afternoon, while Sergey walked along the street, his phone was stolen. The thief was brazen and grabbed the phone from his pocket, pushing him off balance before running down the street. Sergey shouted after him to no avail. He would not be able to catch up with the thief.

As soon as he arrived home, he went onto the Cerberus anti-theft app's website. He was relieved to find the app's report that the phone was still switched on. He deleted all of the personal data remotely. He was able to switch on the GPS tracking feature, and also asked the app to take photos every time someone unlocked the screen.

A few minutes later, he was shocked at what he saw when the app returned the location of the phone. It appeared to be Uncle Viktor's apartment. When the app returned a photo a few minutes later showing Viktor's steely eyes looking down at the phone, Sergey was shocked that his uncle would stoop to such deplorable tactics, presumably looking for evidence that he was gay. He instructed the app to lock the phone permanently.

If his uncle was prepared to stoop so low, he would need to take more precautions. At home, he wiped his parent's computer and installed an open source operating system. He encrypted the installation using a random password, and created accounts for himself and his sister. If the computer was stolen, it would yield little information, and even a virus would be unlikely

given that few hackers wrote viruses for an operating system so infrequently used.

In the evening, once his sister had gone to bed, Sergey switched on his Skype and checked the contact list for Liam, hoping to get ahold of him, as it was midnight in Barcelona. He was online, so Sergey clicked the phone button to initiate the call. It rang with the customary ringtone, and a moment or two later, Liam's voice came through the computer followed by his image shortly after as he switched the camera share on.

Sergey said to him, "I love you more than ever," with an almost tearful waver in his voice.

Liam grinned and replied, "You got the package then?"

"Yes," said Sergey, smiling.

They talked about what had happened since they had last spoken. Sergey told him about the lawyer's meeting, Uncle Viktor, and the theft of his phone. They agreed they should be careful, and Liam suggested that they begin to use a more anonymous messaging service that would delete all chats if the conversation were to be found.

Their conversation rapidly turned to sex. Liam took his shirt off, revealing his milky white skin. Sergey did the same and told Liam how sexy he thought he looked. He talked about their first night together. They had gone to a comedy show in a theatre and had walked to Sergey's place together for a "nightcap". Once Sergey had served them both drinks, he sat down beside Liam on the sofa. He had taken a moment of silence in the conversation as an opportunity to move in for a kiss. Liam let Sergey move his tongue delicately into his mouth as they kissed more deeply and caressed each other.

After a few minutes, Sergey pulled Liam up by the hand and unbuttoned his shirt, still trying to kiss him in between buttons. He pulled his own T-shirt over his head and tugged Liam into the bedroom. He pushed him onto the bed and tore off his jeans. He then finally removed Liam's boxer briefs and got to work on his cock.

Liam moaned as Sergey expertly moved his tongue up and down, and in combination with his hand, created friction against his cock. Sergey turned him over and buried his face in his ass, licking and probing against his opening. Liam squirmed at the welcome intrusion, breathing rapidly.

Sergey finally whispered in his ear, "Please, can I make love to you?"

Liam breathed, “Yes, please!” with an almost desperate note in his voice.

Sergey described the experience of that night from his point of view, and as he did, Liam inserted a vibrating P-spot stimulator from their toy box slowly into his ass after coating it with a squeeze of lubricant. As Sergey went on telling him how good it felt to be inside, both he and Liam were running their hands up and down their cocks.

Liam told Sergey how intense the feeling of him inside him was, and the electric current that ran through his body every time his cock rubbed against his prostate. The P-spot stimulator combined with his masturbation was doing its job, and Liam felt his ass clench around the toy as he came with a grunt. A moment later, Sergey came, and his seed actually hit the webcam he was using. They both laughed as a white blob moved down the image of Sergey on the screen, and he found some tissues to clean it up with before it reached the bottom. They said goodnight and both of them moved towards the camera in a kissing motion with their lips puckered.

Chapter 6

After a month, Liam moved apartments from Barceloneta to move in with Francesc. Without having Sergey to live with, the rent was too much. Francesc was fun to live with and would ensure that he didn't mope for not having Sergey there with him. Every time he received a message from Sergey or had a call on Skype, it made him almost as sad as it did happy. The connection both reminded him that he had a fiancé who loved him, and of his absence. Francesc knew of everything that had happened and even sometimes joined Liam briefly on their occasional Skype calls.

Sergey kept Liam informed of the proceedings with the courts, although it seemed that the judicial system moved slowly in Russia. The first hearing for the temporary custody of Veronika took place four months after his parents died. The hearing was short, and Viktor brought up his allegations of Sergey being gay, which were flatly denied by Sergey. The court asked if there was any evidence of this, and Viktor was unable to produce any. The court ruled that until the definitive hearing, Veronika would stay in Sergey's custody.

Viktor did not speak to Sergey as he passed him in the lobby of the court speaking to his lawyer. Sergey allowed himself the luxury of a smirk, which seemed to have the desired effect on Viktor, as his face reddened in fury.

Sergey and Veronika celebrated by getting takeaway pizza and enjoying a movie marathon. Once Veronika had gone to bed, Sergey texted Liam to tell him the good news. Liam was delighted that this first step had been overcome, but with the definitive court date not yet set and likely to be a long way down the line, he still lived in the day-to-day, as thinking about the future gave rise to dangerous hopes.

The Skype calls and text conversations served to keep their relationship alive across the miles. Liam and Sergey would text each other often, if only to say good morning or goodnight. They became experts at turning each other on using Skype or over the phone. At night, once Veronika had gone to bed, Sergey would lock himself in his father's study and connect to the Internet.

Sometimes Liam would already be naked when they connected, and sometimes he would be clothed, putting on a strip show by seductively removing his clothing piece by piece. Liam would take out the toy box that they had in Barcelona and use the toys on himself. Sergey found it more difficult to behave in the same way as Liam on camera, but became an expert in talking

dirty as Liam used the toys. His vivid descriptions of how he felt when he was inside Liam and pushing against him with his firm, strong body, helped to bring them both to the edge and push them over it.

A few months after the first court date, Sergey received a message from an old school friend on a social network that is more popular than Facebook in Russia. Aleksandr said he had noticed that Sergey was back living in St. Petersburg and suggested that they meet for a coffee. Sergey was lonely, and having left Russia straight after university, he had few friends in St. Petersburg; many of those he'd had in school had moved away to other cities or abroad. Although he definitely couldn't afford to come out to anyone given the stakes at play, he could certainly be social.

He agreed to meet with Aleksandr in a bar close to his house. When he got to the bar, he received a message from Aleksandr apologizing for being late. His son's mother hadn't yet returned from her job and was running a bit behind. He asked if Sergey could go to his house to meet him. Sergey replied saying yes, and made his way to Aleksandr's apartment. He walked into the building and climbed the dingy stairwell up to the second floor, but as soon as the door opened, he realized that this was a trap.

A woman in her twenties with brown hair tied back in a ponytail opened the door, and from behind him, what seemed to be two large men pushed him forwards. One grasped his arm and pulled it behind his back, causing Sergey to wince in pain. One of the men hit him across the back of his head, causing a sharp pain so intense that he thought he would pass out. He was pushed into the main room of the apartment and saw that there were many people around laughing and watching the spectacle. They shoved him to the floor in the middle of the room.

The woman who had answered the door spat on him and said, "Your uncle tells us that you are a filthy faggot. I don't know why people like you don't just overdose and cleanse the earth of their filth. If it's not enough to be a faggot, you want to corrupt a child and make her participate in your feculent, abhorrent lifestyle. Right now you are going to give us the passwords to your e-mail accounts, Skype, or whatever it is you use to communicate with your so-called 'boyfriend'. Maybe we can give him a special show on Skype."

Sergey remained silent and the woman slapped him across the face. "Talk, you animal, or by God we will make you talk."

One of the men kicked him in the face. He felt a tooth breaking in his mouth and a trickle of blood run down his chin. From behind him, the thug who was

holding his arm behind his back pulled back on his finger, and he felt a snap that caused such intense pain he screamed out in agony. He knew he would not be able to take much more, so he gave in and gave the thugs the information they wanted.

After they had entered into his e-mail and found messages to Liam, they mocked him more and read out the messages. They also downloaded the text to the laptop they were using. Thankfully, Liam was not online. Once the woman deemed that they'd had enough, several of the men gathered around him and urinated on him while the thug behind him forced his head forward into their streams. Another beating followed, and he was dragged out into a car and, after a few minutes, dumped in the center of the city.

People stared at him as he walked home, knowing that a taxi or public transport would not let him on in his shape. He wouldn't go to the police, knowing that they would do nothing. Being gay automatically excluded you from the protection of the law and only left you open to harassment from the same.

Once he got home, Veronika met him, shocked at his injuries. She helped him to wash and get changed, then called a taxi to take him to the hospital. At the hospital, they put his finger into a splint and stitched and bandaged his other injuries. He would visit the dentist the next day.

When he got home, he changed all of the passwords on his e-mail accounts and Skype, and called Liam, who gasped at his appearance with a bandage around the top of his head. Sergey explained what had happened and broke down in tears. At that moment, Veronika came into the study and hugged him, sitting with him for the remainder of the conversation. Liam was horrified that something so terrible could happen to Sergey, and felt helpless being so far away.

In the following days, Sergey found it difficult to sleep and suffered nightmares of the ordeal that he had been through. He would wake up covered in sweat after reliving his bashing. Worse still, he had lost all hope for the future. He imagined that the court would take Veronika away from his care. The "evidence" gleaned from his personal e-mails would no doubt turn up in court. If that happened, he dared not think about what the future would hold for him. Up to two years of waiting would already be a long time for Liam. Nobody could be expected to wait the five years until Veronika turned eighteen and would no longer be under control of Viktor.

He would never meet somebody like Liam again. Would he be confined to loveless hookups via mobile apps or in the dark rooms of underground clubs? Every time he'd worry that it could be another trap laid by the gangs who considered hunting gay men a legitimate pastime. Although he tried to keep a brave face for the sake of Veronika, inside he was tearing himself apart. In his darkest moments, he even wondered whether being gay was really a selfish choice as the politicians and religious zealots on the TV said. Maybe it would be better for Veronika to be with Viktor after all.

Liam noticed Sergey's decline on their Skype calls and even in the text conversations they had. The Sergey he knew was being worn down slowly by the assault, and he was worried he would give up hope. He knew that he needed to take action.

Liam wasn't sure how he could help Sergey, but he wanted to learn all that he could about the situation for gay people in Russia. He looked through human rights websites and those of gay organizations, and what he read wasn't good. There were horrific attacks occurring throughout Russia every day, with the attackers acting with apparent impunity. Leading politicians were talking about taking children away from gay parents, and there were even calls for those with HIV to have their fingerprints taken and kept on a national database. He did find some hope with some important figures speaking out, and found an interview in English with a lawyer who had some success in helping gay clients.

Liam called the offices of Olga Tsvetkova, and asked if it would be possible to arrange an appointment to speak to her on the phone. He was told by the receptionist that appointments did not normally take place over the phone. Liam explained that he was calling from abroad, and that he would be willing to pay for a consultation. It was agreed that he could have an hour-long consultation with Olga, so he arranged for the transfer of funds to a bank account provided to him in an e-mail after the call was finished.

A few days later, he had the call with Olga Tsvetkova and explained the situation that Sergey was in. She said there was little she could do as a lawyer. If Viktor established in court that Sergey was gay, it was very unlikely he would become Veronika's guardian.

"However," she said, "corruption is a way of life in Russia. If you were able to dig some dirt up on him, maybe you could use it. Being a member of the city administration, Viktor is a politician, and they are normally both more sensitive to public opinion and more likely to be involved in corruption. I can

recommend a private investigation agency that is run by a dear friend of mine. He's a friend of Dorothy like you and I. I think that's how you say it in English, isn't it? However, I must warn you that the risks of getting involved with politicians are high. At the moment, Viktor only wants custody of Veronika. If he pushes further, Sergey could be fined a considerable amount for pushing propaganda on his own sister."

Liam thanked Olga for her time and advice, and proceeded to make more calls. He spoke to the detective, Daniil, whom Olga had recommended. He was a pleasant man whom Liam judged to be in his fifties. He readily agreed to set forth the investigations for Liam. The cost was considerable, but if today wasn't a rainy day, Liam didn't know what was.

Liam did not tell Sergey of his actions. He didn't want to give Sergey any false hope or have him implicated in any way as a result of his actions. He knew that in his present state, building up his hopes fruitlessly could be devastating. He read the reports that came in from the detective and received a call once a month to discuss them.

In the months that followed, Liam was on the verge of flying to be with Sergey even though he knew of the risk. With the assistance of Veronika, he persuaded Sergey to visit a psychologist whom he had found through the website of an LGBT organization. Although he was reluctant and cautious at first, he eventually began to have regular appointments. Gradually, the nightmares faded, and although he was more subdued than before, his mood did seem to pick up a bit. Though pessimistic about the hearing for Veronika, he felt better. Liam understood his worries, and assured him every time they spoke that however long they had to wait to be together, he would be there for him.

Chapter 7

The hearing for Veronika's guardianship was processed more quickly than expected. A little over a year after the death of Sergey's parents, the trial was about to take place. Sergey was sad and certain that he would lose Veronika. He had no doubts his uncle would produce evidence from his e-mails and other communications, which would sway the court in his favor. The source would be unimportant and denied vigorously; after all, he hadn't filed a police report about the assault, they would say.

On the day of the hearing, Sergey dressed in a nice shirt, tie and suit jacket. Veronika had to go to school, and he hugged her before she left the house, knowing it might be the last time he would see her for a very long time.

As she started to cry, he told her, "Whatever happens I'll be there for you, even if I have to wait until you're eighteen. We've set up the e-mail for your 'friend' from school, 'Julia', so you can send me messages any time as long as you're careful." Veronika appeared to have recovered and tried to put on a brave face.

At the courthouse, a formidable-looking woman with short gray hair and steel-rimmed glasses approached Sergey and his lawyer, Mr Valuev. She first addressed Mr Valuev in Russian. "My name is Olga Tcvetkova and I have been retained to represent Sergey at this hearing by someone acting on his behalf. Sergey will no longer require your services, but you will be paid in full for your efforts to date."

She turned to Sergey and said to him in English, "I'm a friend of Dorothy and I've been hired by a mutual friend of all of us."

Sergey was unsure what to say and was about to respond when a reporter from a local newspaper approached Olga and said, "You told me there would be a story this morning?"

"Yes, I'll hold a press conference after the hearing," Olga responded.

In court, Olga started speaking on behalf of Sergey. "Sergey feels that the immorality his uncle engages in renders him unsuitable to be Veronika's guardian." She withdrew an envelope from her briefcase and removed some A4-sized color photos. She presented copies to the judge and to Viktor's lawyer. "You will see in these photos that Viktor has been procuring the services of prostitutes, or perhaps better put, rent boys. It is doubtful that a

minor would be safe in his custody, not to mention the immorality that Veronika might be exposed to.”

Viktor started to speak but was silenced by his lawyer and the judge. The lawyer acting on behalf of Viktor stood and said, “My client is an honorable man with a spotless reputation. I am sure that there is an explanation for these photos.”

Olga stood up and interrupted, “If it pleases the court, I have the other party in the photos available to testify to their veracity.”

Viktor’s lawyer sat down and briefly spoke to his client who was red in the face. He stood up and said, “My client does not wish to add any testimony to the hearing other than to say that that he is an upstanding, respected citizen, evidently victim of a hoax.”

After a short recess, the judge returned from her chambers. She summed up a statement that was heavily critical of Viktor. “More than anything to do with homosexuality, the use of sex workers is of particular concern. I cannot be satisfied that a minor would receive a good upbringing in the care of someone who would contribute to human exploitation and degradation.” She finally ruled that Sergey would become Veronika’s sole guardian.

Sergey breathed a sigh of relief and he suddenly understood what people meant when they said that a weight had been lifted from them. Once the hearing was over, Olga walked out with him and gave a short speech to the waiting press that she had invited. She handed each journalist the photos and assured them that they would be all over the internet before the end of the day, so she doubted that any meaningful attempt at censorship would be made. The journalists then pursued Viktor, who was by this time walking down the courthouse steps. He was bombarded with questions and fought his way to his car.

Olga took Sergey by the arm and said, “Come with me.” She brought him to her car and drove to the offices of the private investigators whom Liam had hired at her suggestion. On the journey, she refused to answer any questions. She whisked them through the reception area.

Inside, Liam and Francesc were having coffee with a thin man with gray hair and a small mustache. Liam got up out of the chair and Sergey stood there for a moment unable to say anything or even move. The events of the day had left him in a state of shock, and seeing Liam and Francesc left him speechless. Liam moved towards him and gave him a huge hug. He took him by the hand

and they went outside for a moment to get some fresh air. There was a small square with trees, benches, and a small pond, and they sat down on one of the benches beside the pond.

Sergey eventually regained the power of speech, and with a wavering voice told Liam how much he loved him. After looking around to check that nobody was in the vicinity, he gave Liam a quick kiss and for a few minutes they sat in silence watching fish swimming around in the pond. Liam then stood up and said softly "Let's go back inside."

When they returned, Liam introduced Sergey to Daniil. Francesc approached them and hugged them both together. They sat down and Liam explained what had happened. The fishing expedition on Viktor had yielded more than they could have ever hoped for. Liam had decided not to say anything to Sergey to avoid any chance that Viktor could find out about the plan.

The second stage of the plan had yet to be put into effect. Olga produced a ream of documents and got Sergey to sign them all. She sent an assistant to take the documents everywhere necessary. She then told Sergey to pick up Veronika from school with Daniil, and she, Liam, and Francesc would meet them at Sergey's house.

Once Sergey and Veronika arrived at the house, Francesc and Liam helped them to pack as much luggage as allowances would permit, and to mark any items they would like to keep. Olga explained to Sergey that the best solution was to get out of Russia while the press was swarming around Viktor. She would arrange for the sale of the apartment, and had already made arrangements for the transfer of all funds possible to a bank in Spain.

She drove them to the airport and hugged them all. She gave Sergey a certificate confirming that he was the legal guardian of Veronika, and counseled him to take care of it. He would need it later at passport control, and in the future for immigration. She said good-bye with a tear in her eye as she saw them to the security area. They boarded a flight to Frankfurt and stayed there in an airport hotel for the night.

In Frankfurt the next day, they got a connecting flight to Spain. When they touched down in Barcelona, coming down the steps of the plane Sergey felt like kissing the ground. It was strange how a foreign land could so quickly become home. Liam had arranged a short-term rental while they got settled back into life in Barcelona together, and they got a taxi there.

They spent the first few days back in Barcelona simply relaxing and doing nothing. Francesc took Veronika out to see the sights of the city when he wasn't at work, and gave Liam and Sergey time alone.

During their first nights together they simply lay in bed, Liam spooning himself against Sergey. Liam wanted Sergey to initiate sex only when he was ready, and after all that he had been through, he realized that it might take time.

After a week, Francesc suggested to Veronika a night at his house with movies, popcorn and other treats. Liam wasn't hoping for anything so soon, but arranged a reservation at a restaurant to try and make it a romantic evening. During the meal, for the first time they contemplated the future together and managed to make some rough plans to make their new life work. When they got home they had a camomile tea before going to bed.

In bed, Sergey kissed Liam, everything moving at a slower and less demanding pace than their most lustful nights together. Eventually, Sergey reached his hand down to Liam's cock and felt the burgeoning erection. He whispered to Liam and asked him to make love to him.

Liam applied lubricant and entered Sergey, who was lying face down on the bed. He moved slowly while he kissed Sergey tenderly on the back of the neck. Sergey gave a soft moan as Liam finally increased his rhythm and then with a grunt he collapsed on top of Sergey. They lay there for a moment with Liam still inside Sergey before he gently pulled out. Liam then turned Sergey over. He took him entirely in his mouth, starting with a slow movement and gradually increasing the intensity. He felt Sergey's balls tighten before feeling a spurt of heat at the back of his throat. Afterwards, they lay together, and although their lovemaking had not been physically demanding, the emotional significance of their first sex in more than a year left them spent, and they quickly melted into sleep in each other's arms.

Two weeks later, they all boarded a flight to Dublin with Francesc. Liam's father collected them at the airport and greeted everybody with hugs. He was a talkative and jovial man, and asked many questions about the journey. Francesc was not used to speaking much English, let alone hearing such a strong accent, so Sergey and Liam translated parts of the conversation.

When they came through the front door of the house, they were greeted by a crowd of people spilling out through every open doorway. A banner was hung saying "Welcome Sergey and Liam". Several of Sergey and Liam's friends from Spain were there.

The next day, they were married by an officiant in the garden of Liam's parents' house. In 2015, gay marriage had been approved by a landslide, allowing them to take advantage of at least marrying in one of their birth countries. Veronika served as a flower girl and Francesc was best man for them, presenting them with the rose rings they had bought for their engagement, which would also serve as wedding rings. There were roses everywhere, and the wedding cake was shaped like a pile of books to remind them that everything had started on St. George's Day.

One of the most important benefits for citizens of member countries and their families under EU law is the right to live and work in any other EU country. The marriage allowed them to get new immigration papers under the free movement laws for spouses, and supported children of EU citizens, for both Sergey and Veronika in Spain. Sergey was quickly able to get a job working both as a translator and interpreter for an agency. They had put their lives back together and had managed to set Veronika up in an international school that was heavy on their finances, but allowed her to continue with a multilingual education to follow in the footsteps of her father and brother.

On their first anniversary, Sergey and Liam went on a late honeymoon, leaving Veronika with Francesc who was pleased to take her shopping, to the cinema, and to treat her in many other ways. They went to Tel Aviv, which is famous for welcoming gay tourists, and enjoyed its many gay-friendly nightspots and day trips to the religious sights of the country and Dead Sea. Every night there was a romantic meal followed by more romance in the bedroom. On the last day of their honeymoon, they visited the City of Lod and the Church of Saint George where his tomb lies. Although the couple was not religious, they lit a candle to commemorate the good and the bad of a single St. George's Day.

The End

Author Bio

Douglas Glen is originally from Northern Ireland but has lived in Spain for the last ten years. He currently resides in the city of Barcelona where he works in a job too boring to mention. He spends his free time reading mm romance, volunteering for a mental health charity, traveling, and enjoying the beach.

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