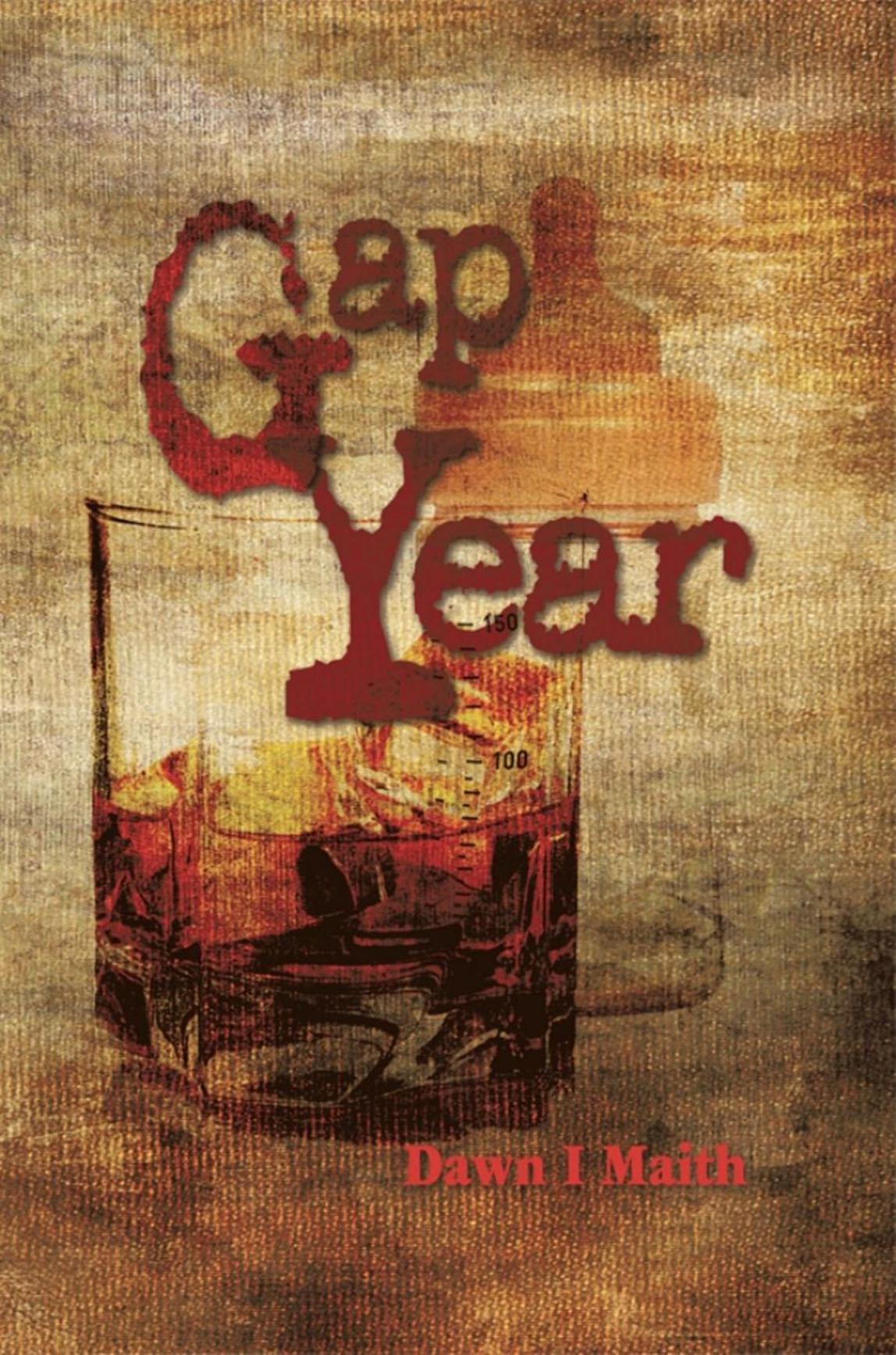


Gap Year



Dawn I Maith

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by
Dawn I Maith



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*For David, my inspiration and for Joy and Sian.
For their encouragement, their faith and their help.*

Thank you.

She held the plastic wand in her hand. It was wet and she tilted it so as to avoid spilling urine on her fingers. No matter how long she looked at it the message was still the same. One word not two. Just one. Pregnant. Slowly she started to cry.

PART 1
WINTER

CHAPTER 1

He opened the door and called her name "Soph... you home?"

The lack of response didn't necessarily mean she was out, but he knew it was significant. He walked into the kitchen and saw straight away why she hadn't answered. She was sitting at the kitchen table and as he took in the tear-stained mascara-streaked face and the vodka bottle in front of her he knew this had been a bad day.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and went to kiss her cheek but she pre-empted him and turned away. She was totally wrecked; how long had she been sitting there drinking? He was home at the usual time and by rights she should only have been home about twenty minutes but this was the aftermath of several hours drinking. Sitting down next to her he took her hand and tried to make eye contact, when she refused he took her chin and drew her head up so they could look at each other. In response she closed her eyes to avoid his gaze.

Giving up he rose, moved the vodka bottle away from her onto the worktop and filled the kettle. "Coffee?... Tell you what I'll make it and you drink it if you want ok?"

"I need sobering up then do I? I'd rather stay pissed if it's all the same to you thanks."

"I don't care if you're pissed or not I want a coffee and you can suit yourself but I'd like to know why you're pissed at six fifteen on a Tuesday evening."

"Would you really?"

"Soph, whatever it is of course I want to know. You're clearly really upset and I want to help," his voice softened as he knelt in front of her.

"Is it what I think? Did you come on?" She laughed bitterly.

"I'm so fucking predictable aren't I? I'm crying so it must be my period. Actually you're right; I'm not pregnant this month, same as last month, same as every other month before. Well done Sherlock Holmes. That would have been bad enough but that little slag at work..."

"Kirsty?"

"Yes, that little tart is pregnant. She told us today." He sighed and took her hands in his. Kirsty worked in Sophie's office, he knew nothing about her except for the fact that her skirts were too short, her heels were too high, her perfume too strong and the male staff loved her, which meant Sophie hated her.

"Sweetheart, I am so, so, sorry, it's not our time that's all, it'll be us soon, I know it, come here." He attempted to put his arms round her but she resisted and he slowly began to realize there was more to this than just the crushing disappointment. He gave her a second and finally, between gut wrenching sobs she told him the rest.

"She only told us because she needs some time off, not because she's unwell, oh no, it's 'cause she's having an abortion. She isn't even ashamed she was so cold, so clinical and of course, no mention of the father. Bitch! That baby should have been ours not hers, what gives her the right to kill a baby when we want one so badly? It's just not fair. Why us? Why isn't it our turn?" She was sobbing so much she could hardly speak and she collapsed into his arms on the floor. He held her until the sobs abated and she lifted her head slowly to look at him.

"I'm sorry, Tom it's just so hard, she dropped the bombshell this morning and I came on at lunchtime. I had to come home, told them I was ill."

He stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. "It's ok, I feel as disappointed as you, that cow should keep her sodding mouth shut. Makes me so angry, people like that, tactless and thoughtless."

Sophie suddenly pushed away from him, her eyes blazing with fury. "What do you mean by that? You're only angry 'cause she told me not because she's killing a baby that should have been ours."

"That's not what I meant at all, I just thought she was tactless which added to your pain. Of course I'm furious that she's getting rid of a baby when you want one so badly..."

"I want one. Not *we* want one? It's just me then? You bastard you have no idea how I feel, you don't give a shit whether we have kids or not do you? Get away from me," she pushed him and he fell backwards.

"Sweetheart, it's not like that at all, I'm sorry I upset you," but she was already halfway up the stairs and within a matter of seconds he heard the bedroom door slam.

He stood up.

"Bollocks." Reaching for the vodka he took a hearty swig. He knew it was the alcohol and the hormones talking but this emotional roller-coaster was killing him. Every month it was the same; ovulation predictors, thermometers, charts, only certain positions were allowed, abstinence the rest of the month, when was the last time they'd made love without an agenda, come to think of it when was the last time they'd

just fucked 'cause they felt horny. Jesus, it was months ago. Maybe he could just wank into a Tupperware box and stick it in the freezer with a note and a turkey-baster, she could help herself then. If she knew he had even the occasional wank she'd go mad. Another shot of vodka and he was feeling seriously pissed himself.

"Need to eat something, mate," he muttered. He settled for a ham sandwich, packet of crisps and some Jaffa Cakes. He knew Sophie wouldn't eat anything tonight; she never did when she was feeling like this, and hopefully she would sleep it off.

Before her biological alarm had gone off they would always have great sex after a row, rough, dirty and animalistic, now, sex was for having kids and not to be squandered on making their relationship better. 'Trying for a baby what a ridiculous phrase' he thought bitterly, 'trying's ok but failing is really hard work.'

* * *

Sophie slammed the bedroom door behind her and crumpled onto the floor. Huge sobs erupted from her as she held her head in her hands. The pain of this latest disappointment was so acute, so physical it felt truly unbearable. There was no answer, no solution, and no remedy. The GP had told them it was too soon for a referral and that they should relax and just try for another year and see what happened. Eight months in and nothing. Regular cycle, regular sex, the most favorable positions, etc, etc, etc. It was all shit. Sometimes she felt as if she was in this thing alone. Tom didn't care if they had kids; he said he would be happy either way, what did that mean for

Christ's sake? You want kids or you don't there's no middle ground. She stood up and made her way to the bathroom, turning on the shower she caught sight of herself in the mirror and was truly shocked. Her face was ghostly white, her eyes dark rimmed and bloodshot, her hair was a mess and her clothes were wrinkled and grubby. How could this be happening to her? She was always so much in control, well groomed, happy at work, lovely husband, nice home, good lifestyle. The only piece missing from the puzzle was a baby. Maybe this was the price for her great life? Maybe she'd had it too good for too long? Maybe God didn't want her to be a mum?

"Oh dear God, please no...not that," another small sob escaped her.

She shed her clothes and stepped into the hot water, instantly she felt better. They could try again next month. It was only a few weeks to wait. Her spirits began to rise until she saw the trickle of blood running down the inside of her thigh and the thought of Kirsty's abortion felled her to her knees.

* * *

When Tom heard the shower go off, he waited ten minutes and headed upstairs. He saw her in the half-light, her back to him feigning sleep. Silently he undressed and slid in next to her. Snuggling up to her he found himself strangely aroused. He'd noticed this had happening more and more recently, he figured it was just knowing he wasn't allowed to shag anytime made him want to. Rebelliously he pushed his erection against her, knowing sex was off the menu always made him worse.

"Back off, Tom" she growled.

"Sorry, thought you were asleep," he lied.

"Do you usually rub your hard-on all over my arse when I'm asleep then?"

"Gotta take what I can get these days, hun." She started to smile. This was always how they'd made up after rowing before all the fertility stuff started.

"We can't, you know that. I'm on for one and we have to abstain..."

"For Christ's sake why can't we just touch or kiss or mess around when we want? I love you and yet I can't touch you unless a bloody plastic stick smiles and says so. What's going on, don't you want to even touch me now?"

Rolling over Sophie's tone softened.

"Of course I do." She reached for him, "I would love to fool around with you right now but this is too important. What if we didn't get pregnant this month because of one blow-job?"

He groaned and began to move his hips so that his penis was moving in her hand. "Oy you, stop it." She let go.

"Shit, Soph can we please just act like a normal couple, just once, 'cause I don't think I can carry on like this without you and me getting back to basics now and again, I want to make love to my wife, is that too much to ask?"

She sighed, she wanted to say 'no' and take him in her hand and shut all the pressures of the world out but she just couldn't, she was so focused on her goal even his feelings didn't matter.

"Sophie....I want you," his hand went to her breast.

"No, Tom, no...I don't feel like it," she snapped. They were both angry now.

"Well I don't feel like it every time you're ovulating but I have to perform so why can't we just make an exception?" He took her nipple in his mouth and as she tried to pull away he pushed her on to her back.

"Tom, stop."

"Not this time, it's my turn to be a man not a fucking sperm donor." His hand pushed towards her pants and hooking them with his fingers he pulled them down.

"Tom, get off me."

"I told you no!" He was on top of her now and was forcing her thighs apart.

"Tom, for God's sake you're scaring me. Stop it." She was starting to cry but he had passed the point of no return.

Pushing his hand between her legs he fumbled for the tampon cord and pulled.

"Ow! No please stop it please." Sophie was scared and really crying now, the reality of how they had gone from an unwanted erection to this was unbelievable. Within seconds she felt him push into her and any illusion of arousal or escape evaporated. He came quickly and rolled off her immediately.

"Soph, I'm so sorry...I don't know what happened. I didn't mean to hurt you." He held her but she lay staring at the ceiling with tears falling from her eyes onto the pillow.

"Soph...Soph."

For the second time that night Sophie showered and Tom reached for the vodka.

* * *

Tom's phone alarm went off and he woke on the sofa, lights still blazing from the night before, fully clothed and still drunk.

"Shit!" he stumbled off the sofa and slowly started to pull himself together. Coffee, shower, clothes, he moved as if on autopilot and it wasn't until he entered the bedroom and saw Sophie curled up with her back to him that the horrific reality of the previous night hit him.

"Sweetheart, I'm so, so, sorry if I frightened you last night, I didn't mean to." He slowly approached the bed and sat on his empty side, she didn't move. He noticed she had changed the bed linen, then he realized why she'd had to.

"Soph," he reached for her and she shrugged him off.

"Don't touch me."

"Please hun, I'm really sorry."

"You raped me do you understand? You raped me, sorry doesn't really cut it this time."

"That's a bit harsh, I got carried away and was a bit enthusiastic but I'm not a rapist. Is that what you really think?... Holy shit, you do don't you?"

She spun round and sat up glaring at him.

"What's happened to you? I don't even know you anymore, you raped me you bastard, and you know it."

He stood and in exasperation he wiped his hand over his face, his head was thumping, "I'm going now, we'll talk later. I love you."

"Piss off."

He felt a cold shiver and began to realize how bad things had become between them, how much damage one rash act had caused. Leaving the house and getting into his demo, ironically he was one of the salesmen issued with a 'family car', he acknowledged that he was blatantly over the limit and would have to be especially careful driving to work. Fortunately

the dealership was only about fifteen minutes away, although at this time of day that could easily take forty-five minutes. He reached for two pieces of chewing-gum to try and alleviate the vile after-taste left by the night before. It didn't work physically or emotionally.

* * *

It was not even properly light and was grey, drizzly and depressing, typical January. Business was slow, post Christmas lack of funds, people couldn't afford the essentials let alone a new car. It occurred to him with blinding resonance that he was failing to fulfill his commitments at home and at work. He just couldn't perform as expected.

"Shit," he muttered, shaking his head.

"How did I get to this?" In an effort to lift his dreary mood and sober up he cranked up the radio and cracked open the window for the remainder of his crawl through the traffic.

"Hi mate, Christ you look like shit, what's that all about? Don't let his lordship see you or he'll have your balls, he's on one already." Tom's colleague Andy looked up from his desk as Tom walked past. "Fuck off."

"Oy, no need for that. Coffee's on your desk."

Tom continued the walk to his desk at the end of the showroom. Andy was his mate in and out of work and whoever got in first always got the coffees. As he sat down he noticed Andy had followed him and was now perched on his desk.

"Seriously, you ok?"

"No, I'm hung-over. Just some probs at home. Had a big barney last night and slept on the sofa."

"You'll sort it though right? You two will be ok, bunch of flowers, some chocs, works a treat."

He laughed bitterly. "Gonna take more than that to get me out of the dog house this time but hey, I'll sort it. Look out shit-head's coming."

"Tom, a word." The Dealer Principal, known as SJ, a short Scot with a ferocious temper walked past Tom's desk barely pausing to look in Tom's direction. Tom rose and followed him to his small office at the end of the showroom.

By the time Tom had caught up with him he was seated behind his enormous oak desk. Tom stood sheepishly.

"Quite frankly I don't know what the fuck you do with your time. Your figures are shite. Pull your fucking finger out or you'll be out on your fucking ear. Understand?"

"Yes Sir."

"Don't attempt any pathetic excuses, A I don't give a shit and B I'm not fucking listening. Piss off and sell something."

Tom left the office feeling worse than ever. He hadn't been selling anything for far too long. Sophie had been muttering about IVF and the way things were going he wouldn't be able to afford that in the foreseeable future.

Andy was with a middle-aged couple apparently interested in one of the cheaper models. Typical, the first punters of the day and he was with his lordship getting a bollocking. Andy glanced up as he passed giving him a brief quizzical smile. He'd want to hear all the gory details over lunch.

* * *

As soon as she heard the front door close Sophie buried her face in the pillow, she fully expected to cry, she wanted to, she felt like it but she was just too exhausted to manage anything bar a small anguished sob.

She felt hurt, shocked and numb. If someone had told her that Tom would ever have forced himself on her in any way she would have bet her life that it would never happen. Disappointed and disillusioned she made her way to the bathroom and discovered there were bruises on her inner thighs, actual bruises, she had really fought him and yet the man she loved more than anything had physically and sexually assaulted her.

For the briefest of milliseconds she considered phoning the police but it passed just as quickly. If she were to contemplate splitting up then who would father her baby? She'd be single again and that would be a disaster. Resignedly she realized despite last night Tom was a good man and more importantly, her best chance of conception. Second husbands were often vasectomised or didn't want more kids so better to stick with him, and after all she did love him.

With a huge sigh she pondered her plan, she could manipulate him more easily now he was on a major guilt trip, maybe this was for the best, a few bruises were a small price to pay to become a mum.

Feeling her mood lift slightly she began to believe everything that had happened the previous night had happened for a reason and this was just another step towards becoming a family.

The ringing phone woke her. She was exhausted. She knew she had shocked him but she didn't care, he needed to know how bad things really were and what he'd done to her. The emotional strain was draining her but she kept telling herself she had to focus on her goal. Things would settle down between them once they conceived and if not then so be it, she'd be fine on her own.

"Hello?"

"Sophie, hi, it's Samantha from work, sorry to ring you but I wondered if you were coming back this week? I wouldn't ring but with Kirsty off sick we really need to know where we're at with staffing."

"Kirsty's not ill, she's having an abortion."

"Sophie! That's none of our business is it? She's signed off by a doctor, that's all I need to know. Unfortunately, you're not. What exactly is wrong with you?"

She squirmed with indignation, that cow was murdering a baby in some high priced clinic and *she* was being made to feel guilty. Unbelievable. Tears sprang to her eyes, she fought to hide the emotion in her voice.

"I have sickness and diarrhoea and I won't be back until Monday. Sorry." With that she put the phone down. Within minutes it rang again and, ignoring it, she ran to the bathroom crying.

"Shit, shit, shit," losing her job would mean no chance of IVF; they might even lose the house.

"Calm down, it's ok, calm down." Taking deep breaths she got her breathing and her tears under control.

1471 told her the head of department Samantha had phoned her back; taking a deep breath she pressed three.

"Hi, it's Sophie. I'm so sorry I hung up I had to rush to the loo. Still being sick I'm afraid."

"I did wonder what had happened I must say, I was more than a little surprised at your behavior. Not like you at all, Sophie."

"I know, I've been up all night, I'd just dropped off when you rang, didn't mean to be a bitch, I just feel like crap."

"Don't worry; I'm sorry I woke you. Take care of yourself, see you Monday."

She let out a huge sigh, had she done enough arse-licking to make up for her comments? Probably. She hoped so.

CHAPTER 2

A grim, tedious Wednesday ended with only the nose-to-tail crawl through the rush hour traffic to look forward to. It was sleeting and bitterly cold. He stopped at the traffic-lights by the bus-stop outside the car showroom, its huge glass windows, floor to ceiling mirrors and fantastic state of the art lighting blazing through the winter evening. The cars looked amazing, highly polished, dazzling and unfortunately the last thing anyone wanted to buy, especially from him at the moment. As he stared into the showroom his eyes swept pass the crowd at the bus-stop and he suddenly recognized the girl in the queue. She worked in one of the offices, in the accounts, he only knew her to say hello to but, Jesus it was a vile night and he was going her way. Quickly before the lights changed he opened the passenger window and called out. "Hello, hi, do you want a lift?"

Freezing air flooded in as she bent to look in the window, curious, not recognizing either driver or car. Suddenly she smiled as she realized she did know this man.

"That would be great, thanks."

As she climbed in he attempted to help her with her umbrella and bag acutely aware of the imminent light change, but only succeeded in hitting himself in the face with the wet brolley and touching her thigh.

"Oh shit, sorry, oh bloody hell the lights have changed, hold on, you ok with the seat-belt? I've got to go."

She laughed and it was so relaxed and natural he found himself laughing too.

"No worries, it's really kind of you to pick me up, thanks. Where are you headed?"

"I live in Norden, what about you?"

"Me too, that's spooky! I live just behind the bus station, Summerton Road."

"That's handy; I live just past there in Downton Avenue."

"Lucky me, thanks again. I'm Lucy by the way. I've seen you around but don't think we've been introduced."

"I'm Tom, Tom Wilkes. Nice to meet you, you work upstairs right?"

"Yes. I do the purchase ledger, it's ok, pays the bills I guess. My mum used to give me a lift up until last week but she's changed her job so it's the bus for me which is ok in the summer but a bit pants in this crappy weather."

He laughed, suddenly aware of how relaxed he felt in her company, without hesitation he voiced an idea.

"Why don't we car share? I go past your road twice a day and the company pays for the fuel so why not use it to get both of us to work? Give 'em their money's worth as it were?"

"Erm, that would be great. Are you sure?"

"Course, no point in you bussing it when we'll probably be sat in the same traffic jams twice a day."

"Ok then, thanks. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at ten past eight at the end of your road. Ok?"

"Ok."

They sat in a comfortable silence with just the hum of the traffic and the constant swish of the wipers to accompany their slow progress through the London rush hour.

She smelt really amazing, a perfume he hadn't come across before, it was a bit strong

but really nice. Up close he became aware of the length of her skirt, or rather the shortness of it, he remembered how his hand had brushed her thigh and found himself blushing, thank God it was dark. He cursed himself. It was ok to look at pretty girls, to admire them, to fancy them; he was married and had no intention of being unfaithful in anything other than fantasy and imagination. This girl was way too young for him, probably only late teens or early twenties, but he liked her straight away and felt relaxed in her company, friends would be a good thing, company for the journey too. No harm no foul.

"Here you go." He pulled over, "see you in the morning."

"Thanks, Tom have a nice evening, see you."

He watched her walk to her door and told himself he was just seeing her in, just taking care, waiting for a break in the traffic to pull out, but he knew he was enjoying watching her walk away, watching her legs, her arse. He berated himself, "shit man, pack it in. You got some serious talking to do at home tonight. Pack it in. Behave yourself." But he was grinning all the way home.

* * *

She heard his key in the lock and a wave of nausea broke over her. She realized she was scared.

"Soph?"

"In here," she called from the kitchen, at least she was home and even better she was talking to him.

He bent to kiss her and she let him find her cheek. He was overwhelmed with relief.

They stood in the kitchen both too nervous to speak, avoiding each other's gaze. The kettle clicked off and Sophie moved to make the coffee.

"I'm really sorry, you know, I just wanted you so much I couldn't wait. It's a compliment I guess," he muttered sheepishly.

He hung his head and ran his hand along the edge of the worktop. He reminded her of a naughty schoolboy and for a moment her heart started to melt and she wanted nothing more than to hold him and be held by him. She started towards him and instantly felt the tender bruising on her thighs and knew that moment of understanding had passed.

"I don't want to talk about it. It was horrid, you hurt me, it's over. I can't forget but I can move on. I have more important things to think about. You let your cock rule your head, typical man, no surprise there but don't ever tell me or yourself what you did was a compliment, that's an insult to me and a cop out for you....coffee?"

"What?... Oh, yes please. I didn't mean it like that I just can't cope with screwing to order, I want to make love to my wife when I, sorry we, feel like it. I'm not a bloody machine. I love you, Sophie."

"And if *I* didn't love *you* I'd have rung the police by now, think of that."

"The police? What the fuck?"

"Look you bastard." She lifted her skirt and exposed her purple, mottled, swollen, bruised thighs.

"Oh shit...oh God...hun, I am so, so, sorry. Shit, Soph I really didn't think I'd hurt you." He collapsed into a kitchen chair, head in hands.

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