

THE CARRICK BROTHERS

Bonus Story • EWAN

A close-up photograph of a person's open palm facing the viewer. The palm is covered in a vibrant rainbow-colored paint or tattoo, with a black outline of a heart in the center. The person is wearing several wristbands, including a rainbow-colored one and a black beaded one. The background is a deep, textured red.

COROLLARY

A Proof by Contradiction Story

ALEX W. WELLS

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This story contains explicit sexual content between adults and is intended for readers aged 18 and over.

Written by a human being. Every sentence in this book was chosen by the author.

Cover design by A. Dini. Edited by the author.

The Carrick Brothers, a *Proof by Contradiction* bonus story

First published 2026.

Content Note

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This story contains explicit sex on the page between consenting adults. It also contains references to historical homophobia (the prosecution of Alan Turing), a candlelit vigil for people lost to HIV and AIDS, and alcohol.

corollary, n.: a proposition that follows, with little or no additional proof, from one already proven.

A Note on Reading Order

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Corollary takes place a year after the end of *Proof by Contradiction*, and it gives away how the novel ends. If you haven't read it yet, start there:

mybook.to/ProofByContradiction

Corollary

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LAURENCE IS IRONING. Shirtless.

I've been watching from the doorway for two minutes, toothbrush parked in my cheek, because some things deserve an audience. The board creaks under his hand. He runs the iron down a sleeve like he's marking it, bare chest entirely unnecessary to the task and therefore of obvious academic interest.

'That's the linen one,' I say.

'I'm aware.'

'You're ironing a shirt. For Pride.'

'I'm ironing it because it creases.' He doesn't look up. It's linen; creasing is the fabric's entire personality; pressing it for a day in a crowd is like polishing shoes for a swamp. He does the collar twice anyway.

I moved in here a year ago July: my entire life in eleven boxes, into a flat where one small bookcase was doing the work of six.

He cleared me two shelves, half a wardrobe and two hooks by the door, and the books that lost their places went into labelled towers in the hall.

Analysis. Topology. Misc, which I opened expecting scandal and found more topology. He called the towers a queueing system.

The queue moved in March: a bookcase we bought together, floor to ceiling, flat-packed, sworn over, the first thing in the flat we've ever

owned jointly. His books, mine, my course texts in with his topology. No customs check. And the second bedroom's a study now: two desks.

He finishes the shirt. Holds it up. Inspects the collar the way he inspects submitted work, and then he puts it on over bare skin. I have to put the toothbrush down.

White, soft from age, the kind of linen that remembers skin: open at the throat, loose at the wrists, doing very little to disguise the shoulders underneath. He rolls the sleeves in two folds, forearm by forearm, and he has no idea what that does to the room. He's never had any idea. It's one of the great wasted resources of the North West.

Stubble, two days of it, dark coming in darker. It photographs as a decision. It isn't one; he just didn't shave yesterday.

'You're staring,' he says, not looking up.

'I'm invigilating.'

'Brush your teeth.'

I go and brush my teeth. Micro-victory for him. The mirror's ours, no crack in it, and I still look for the crack every morning; a year of halls, doing my eyeliner around a fault line, trains the hand for life.

I do it the same way as always, only heavier: index finger, kohl, then more kohl, smudge until the eyes go from *student* to *problem* to *problem with a record*.

Chain out. Rings on, all three. Then the colour: beaded necklaces over the chain, two of them, festival tat, every shade the outfit refuses; bracelets stacked up one wrist until I rattle.

The top is black mesh, completely see-through, which is the point of it. It arrived in a packet the size of an envelope, and I tried it on in the kitchen while Laurence stood in the doorway holding his tea like a witness to a crime he had decided not to report.

Shorts. The little black ones.

'Ewan, please,' he says from the bedroom, before he's even seen me.

'You don't know what I'm wearing.'

'I heard the drawer.'

I come out. He looks. Takes his time about it, top to bottom, the audit I used to dream about getting from across a lecture theatre, and his face does the thing where it stays completely still except the eyes.

‘Right,’ he says. To himself, mostly. A man revising a budget.

He puts on chino shorts that have a crease in them. A *crease*. Ironed in. I’m going to Pride with ironed shorts. Then decent sunglasses, and then he stops. Goes to his side of the bed. Opens the drawer where he keeps the things he doesn’t talk about: passport, spare watch, his dad’s cufflinks.

Small box. Inside, a little enamel pin. Rainbow, the proper one. He turns it over once in his fingers.

‘Where’d you get that?’

‘Cambridge.’ He pins it to the shirt pocket, one go, no fuss. ‘I was twenty-four.’

I do the maths. I always do the maths, it’s a condition. Nine years in a drawer.

‘You never wore it.’

‘No.’

He picks up his keys, wallet, checks the window latch. The full pre-flight. I’m still stood there doing arithmetic with my mouth open.

‘Ewan.’ He holds the door. The pin catches the light when he moves, small and exact. ‘We’ll be late.’

It’s a street party. There is no late. I don’t say it. Some things you don’t iron flat.

Quick orientation, for anyone who joined the lecture partway through: I met Laurence Haldrey when he was my maths lecturer and I was a fresher with eyeliner and a plan.

The plan worked, is the short version. The long version cost him a job and me a year off my life expectancy, and it ends, or begins, with my name on the buzzer of a flat in Chorlton, under his, on a strip of paper he typed.

Typed. Times New Roman. I'd have used a bus ticket and a biro, and that, right there, is the whole relationship.

And to be clear, because people get this wrong: it wasn't the gay bit that had been the problem. It was me. Student-me, back-row-me, eighteen-and-making-it-worse me.

So this is our first Pride. Not mine. I've done London twice, sixteen and seventeen, glitter and cider and lying to my mum about whose house I was staying at. Never lied about the rest, mind. Came out at thirteen and never took it back. Thirteen-year-old me had many faults, but revision wasn't one of them.

His first, though. Thirty-three years old. First one.

And before anyone asks: I went last August. Three weeks after my boxes, with Femi, in the rain. Lost him at the gate inside ten minutes, danced with strangers all afternoon, came home soaked with a paper flag from a man dressed as a peach.

He stayed home that day. Nobody made it a thing; the scandal was still warm, and you don't take a man into a crowd of two hundred thousand people while he's still flinching at the sound of his own surname.

It took the year. The year did what years do.

The tram into town is rammed by Trafford Bar. Flags tied as capes, a bloke with a whistle already going, somebody's mum in a *Free Mum Hugs* tee with her sign rolled under her arm like a season ticket holder.

Laurence stands in the middle of it in his ironed linen with his hand around the rail, and at every stop more colour gets on, and he takes it in: still, level, no panic, running the numbers.

At St Peter's Square a kid gets on, fifteen maybe, flag round his shoulders, ears red, and the carriage shuffles round to make room. The kid checks every face the way you do at that age: the sweep, the threat assessment. I know that sweep. I retired it at sixteen. His eyes land on Laurence. Tall, ironed, sunglasses pushed up into his hair. The pin on the pocket.

Whatever the kid's face does next, it loosens.

Laurence nods at him. Tiny. The nod he does at department doors, equal to equal, no fuss.

I have to look out the window. The chain's warm against my neck.

Deansgate's closed at the barriers. You hear it before anything: drums coming off the buildings, a roar further up like the sea if the sea was pleased with itself, whistles, a sound system playing something with a heartbeat. Two hundred thousand people, supposedly. The theme's everywhere on the banners, strung over the road in letters a storey tall:

NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

We find a spot on the barrier by Whitworth Street, and we've been there ten minutes when a hand lands on my shoulder and a voice I'd know underwater says, 'Nah, see, I told Allan. I told him. Dr Haldrey irons for Pride.'

Femi. Bucket hat, Arsenal shirt with the sleeves rolled like he's taking the piss out of somebody specific, flag knotted at his throat. Allan behind him, calm as a lake, carrying a tote bag that turns out to contain sun cream, water, plasters and a phone charger, because Allan packs for Femi the way the RNLI packs for the sea.

'Femi.' Laurence shakes his hand. They do this now. It took the best part of a year and one very long dinner.

'Dr Haldrey,' Femi says, because some habits die with tenure and some apparently survive Pride. He glances once at the crease in the shorts and performs a level of restraint that deserves public funding. 'Happy Pride.'

'And to you.'

Then Femi hugs me hard enough to relocate a rib and whispers, with religious awe, 'Bro. *Bro*. He's ironed.'

We come apart.

'Leave him,' I say.

‘I’m not—I would never. It’s beautiful. It’s like seeing a heron at a foam party.’ He smells of sun cream already, Allan’s doing, and looks me over. ‘You look like a public health warning, by the way.’

‘Cheers.’

‘It’s a compliment. Allan, isn’t it a compliment.’

‘It’s a compliment,’ Allan says, like he’s signed off hundreds of them, and gives me sun cream for the back of my neck without being asked.

The parade comes in waves. Drag queens on a flatbed throwing sweets like it’s war rations. The NHS bloc, which gets the biggest cheer of the morning, because Manchester knows who held the door. Dykes on Bikes gunning their engines for the kids on shoulders. A youth group with a banner saying *We’re the Ones You Prayed For*, which makes me bark a laugh and Laurence go very still.

He doesn’t cheer. Not his instrument. He claps, proper claps, full hands, for the youth group, for the NHS, for an old fella marching alone in a leather vest with a sign that says *I Marched in ’88*. And somewhere around there I stop following the parade, because the parade is fine but it’s not the data set I care about.

His jaw’s working. The sunglasses are down now. Sun’s out, to be fair. It’s not the sun.

A bloke next to us, vest and glitter beard and shoulders like a fridge, leans across at the third flatbed and shouts over the bass, ‘Your fella always this gorgeous or is it special occasions?’

‘It’s constant,’ I shout back. ‘It’s a nightmare.’

The fridge laughs and produces a little pot of gold glitter out of nowhere like a magic trick. He taps some onto the back of my hand with one enormous careful finger. Femi materialises at my other side and offers his cheekbone, because Femi has never once in his life been left out of a ceremony.

Laurence takes my other hand. On the barrier, in the open, fingers laced, his thumb moving once across my knuckles. And this is the thing nobody tells you about getting the ending.

It's not the big stuff. It's a hand in public at three in the afternoon and nobody looks. *Nobody looks*. Not like a panel. Not like a corridor.

Not like a ruler laid across the years between us to find the weapon in the difference. Just a hand in a hand, boring as weather, and there was a year of my life when I'd have sold a kidney for boring.

'All right?' I say, up at him.

'Yes.' His voice is doing the thing. Lancashire creeping in at the vowels, the tell he can't iron. 'Yes.'

Three flatbeds later he says, to the road, not to me: 'I used to mark scripts on this weekend. Deliberately. Booked it solid every year.'

I don't say anything. I know how that maths went. I was there when it got rearranged.

The next float is the swimming club, Manchester's queer swim team in trunks and caps, holding a banner and visibly regretting the uniform decision despite the sun. Laurence watches them the whole way down the street. Pool three times a week, Cambridge habit, a body like the proof of it, and there's naked longing on his face, the kind he usually saves for second-hand bookshops.

'Join, then,' I say.

'Maybe.'

'That's a yes.'

'It's a maybe.'

It's a yes. By Christmas he'll have the kit bag. Goggles in a case. Towel folded. Club cap rinsed and drying over the bath. I'd put my rent on it, if I paid rent, which is a separate negotiation we're not having today.

The Village in the afternoon is a different physics. Canal Street packed wall to water, plastic pints, every doorway breathing music into the street, the smell of sun cream and lager and someone's vape like a fruit salad gone wrong.

We get drinks at The Molly House first, where it's civilised, where Allan and Laurence discover a shared position on cask ale and hold a small summit about it.

Then the street swallows us, and civilised stops being on the menu.

A girl on a milk crate outside Via has a brush and a palette and a handwritten sign: *Glitter, Pay What You Can, Be Gay Do Crime*. I pay what I can. She does my cheekbones in gold and silver, tilts my chin with two fingers like a sculptor, says ‘oh, you’re going to cause *problems*’ with deep professional satisfaction.

She looks at Laurence. Raises the brush. Raises an eyebrow.

‘No, thank you,’ he says.

‘He’s load-bearing,’ I tell her. ‘You decorate him, the whole street comes down.’

She does one stripe on the back of his hand anyway, quick, before he can move. Small, gold, like a stamp at a club he never went to. He examines it. Doesn’t wipe it off.

Femi pays what he can, which is apparently a five-minute bit that ends with the girl crying laughing and doing his whole forehead for free. Allan declines with the same words Laurence used, and the two of them stand on the kerb with their pints, near enough undecorated, while me and Femi get worse.

After that the day goes loose at the seams, in the good way. We dance. I dance, Femi dances, Allan sways with his pint like a buoy in a harbour, and Laurence stands in my orbit and moves the minimum number of joints required by law, which on him looks like choreography and is, objectively, better than what I’m doing.

Every time the crowd shoves me into him he catches my hip, steadies me, lets go half a second late. By the third song I’m engineering the shoves.

Somebody’s boa ends up round my neck, pink, moulting like it’s nervous. A hen do adopts me for one song and returns me undamaged. Femi gets up on a bollard to conduct the street through the chorus of a song I hated until exactly today, falls off the bollard, is caught by three strangers and Allan, and calls it the best moment of his year.

At some point I'm up on a bench going full Lewisham to the remix, boa airborne, and I catch Laurence watching me from the railing with his warm beer and his creased shorts, and his face—

The face is the one from the flat. Still everywhere except the eyes.

Don't look. I look. He looks. The boa's lost a third of itself, I'm wearing the evidence of a crime against soft furnishings, and this man is looking at me like I'm the only theorem worth his time.

A pretty lad in a crop top, twenty-something, grabs my wrist as I climb down off the bench and writes his number on my forearm in biro, fast and neat. 'In case the boyfriend doesn't work out,' he says, and he's gone.

I find Laurence and hold up the arm. Full disclosure, exhibit A.

He reads it. Tilts his head.

'His sevens are crossed,' he says. 'Continental. Interesting.'

'That's it? That's the whole reaction?'

'It's a tidy hand.' He takes my arm, examines the number like coursework, then kisses the inside of my wrist, just below the biro, unhurried, in the middle of Canal Street. 'He'll do well.'

There's no jealousy in him. Anywhere. I've run the diagnostics on the man for two years. He just doesn't do ownership. He does *choice*. He chose me with the whole bill itemised on the table in front of him. After that, what's a biro.

It used to scare me. Now it's the floor under the flat.

Femi and Allan peel off at six: Allan's sister's barbecue, a standing engagement, non-negotiable even today. Femi hugs Laurence goodbye, which Laurence has learned to see coming, and points at me over Laurence's shoulder.

'Vigil Monday?'

'Yeah.'

'Bring him.' He means Laurence. He says it softer than the rest of the day. Then they're gone into the crowd, Allan's tote swinging, and it's the two of us and the long gold evening.

We get chips. Obviously we get chips. There's a queue out the door and a man behind the fryer working like a one-man rescue operation, and we carry them to the lock and sit on the warm cobbles with our feet over the water, passing the tray between us.

The canal's doing its usual impression of tea left out overnight. Music from three doorways at once, none of it agreeing. A couple of lads are sat further down with a flag draped over both their shoulders, asleep on each other, sunburnt, done.

Laurence eats chips the way he reads. Selects. Considers. Commits.

'The pin,' I say, because it's been sat in my head all day, ticking. 'Twenty-four. What happened?'

He's quiet long enough that I think he's going to file it under the things we don't open. Then: 'There was a stall on King's Parade. Pride weekend. I was queueing for coffee before the library and the parade came down the street, and I stood there with my coffee and watched the whole thing go past.' A chip. Consideration. 'A man I knew from the faculty was marching. He saw me. Waved me in.'

'And?'

'And I checked my watch,' he says. 'I remember doing it. I had a supervision at two.' His thumb finds the gold stripe on the back of his hand again, like it's the page he's keeping. 'I bought the pin on the way home instead. Which I then didn't wear for nine years. So you may judge for yourself how the cost-benefit analysis was running.'

'You bought it, though.'

'I bought it.'

'Filed under MISC.'

The look he gives me is the one from across seminar tables, the one that says *you've read ahead*. 'Topology,' he says. 'Technically. The study of what survives deformation.'

I'm twenty and I've got glitter in my eyelashes and half a stolen boa in my pocket, and this man can still take the air out of me with a maths joke. Nobody warns you about that. There should be a leaflet.

'You waved back?' I ask. 'At the faculty bloke?'

'I nodded.'

'Course you did.'

'It was a very expressive nod.'

I lean into his shoulder. He redistributes the chips so I don't have to reach far, which in Haldrey is a sonnet. Down the water the two lads with the flag have woken up and are arguing softly about whose phone died first, and the sun's going down the colour of the inside of a peach, and I think about a man standing on a kerb in Cambridge with a coffee going cold, checking his watch while the whole loud truth of him went past in the road.

Nine years. From the kerb to the barrier.

'Hey.' I knock my knee against his. 'You're in the parade now.'

He doesn't answer that. He looks at the canal for a bit. Then he puts the last chip in front of me, folded in the paper, the way you'd hand someone the proof and let them check the final line themselves.

Sackville Gardens, late on. We drift in because the street's gone shoulder-to-shoulder and my ears need a minute. It's quieter under the trees. Families on the grass, the community stage winding down, and there on his bench is Alan Turing.

Bronze, sitting, holding his apple, flowers and flags piled at his feet from the whole weekend. Somebody's left a can of pineapple fizz. Somebody's left a maths exercise book, open, biro on the fold.

Laurence stops.

I've seen him in front of whiteboards, in front of my brother, in front of a panel that had his career on the table between the water glasses. I've never seen this exact stillness. He reads the plaque he's definitely already memorised. The statue looks past us all, holding its apple.

'They gave him a choice,' Laurence says. Even, lecture-clean, except the accent's slipped its leash entirely. 'Prison, or the injections. He kept working through it. Morphogenesis. Patterns in nature: why the

leopard has spots.’ His thumb moves over the gold stripe on the back of his hand. ‘He was forty-one.’

Eight years older than Laurence. He doesn’t say it. We both run the same arithmetic in the same silence; I can hear his carriage return.

I step in and put my hand flat on his back, between the shoulder blades, where the breathing happens. He doesn’t look away from the statue. He leans. Two degrees, maybe three. On Laurence that’s a collapse. I take the weight.

‘You’d have liked him,’ I say.

‘I’d have been terrified of him.’ A breath that’s nearly a laugh. ‘Then yes.’

The kid from the tram goes past behind us with three new friends and half a flag of glitter on his face, shrieking at something on a phone. Alive and loud and fifteen, in public, in daylight.

Laurence tracks him across the gardens. Then he takes my hand. Second time today in the open air: he’s making a habit of the impossible. His fingers are not steady, and neither of us files a report about it.

‘Home?’ I say.

‘Home.’

The tram home is full of the day: sunburn, flat lager, glitter migrating from face to face like a rumour. We stand even though there are seats.

His hand finds the rail above mine, then my waist, then stays, thumb under the hem of the mesh, one centimetre of skin, nothing anyone could prosecute.

I watch the pulse in his throat instead of the window. Two stops out from ours the thumb moves. Once. Slow. I stop pretending to read the tram map.

He doesn’t run. Laurence has never run anywhere. But the walk from the stop has pace to it, and when I drop the keys at the door he picks them up, hands them back, and watches my mouth while I sort the right one. The man queues for everything. Apparently not this.

We get through the front door in the normal way and then we don't.

His mouth's on mine before my keys hit the bowl. *He* started it, for the record and the archive: the man who irons linen for a street party pinned me to our own hallway wall with a forearm and a thigh and a sound low in his chest like a struck line of bass.

He tastes of warm lager and the day. The glitter's coming off my face onto his jaw, and I'd tell him, I will tell him, it's just that my mouth is busy and the information doesn't feel that important.

'Been watching you all day,' he says, biting into my neck. The Lancashire's fully out now, flat and broad and filthy on him. 'With that ridiculous—'

'Boa.'

'—*boa*,' like the word's personally assaulted him, and his hands drop to my thighs and he lifts me, against the wall, like I weigh what the *boa* weighs, and the noise I make is not dignified. Today was never about dignified. We divided the labour this morning: he had the crease, I had the cheek. The division holds.

He holds me there with hips and one forearm, which leaves a hand free, and the hand knows the building code: under the mesh, flat on my spine, dragging me against him so I can feel exactly how unbothered he isn't.

He's hard. I roll against it because I'm twenty and suicidal, and the sound he makes into my throat is one the neighbours have never had at this hour.

My head goes back against the wall. His mouth takes the invitation: jaw, throat, the spot under my ear that shorts the circuit, working down to where the necklaces sit, and he pulls the beads aside with his teeth to get at the skin underneath.

Festival tat. Three quid. Best three quid I've ever spent.

I'm not standing for it. Literally I'm not standing for anything, he's got all my weight, but in principle. I get both hands in his hair and drag

his mouth back up where I can bite it, and I do bite it, and the sound that buys me goes straight to my cock.

Then I work a hand between us and palm him through the chinos, slow, mean, and the crease dies the death it deserves.

I get one move ahead: shirt untucked, my hands flat on his stomach, the muscle jumping under them. Then he slows everything down.

He does this. It's policy. I run at one speed, always have, fast-forward with the cover off, and Laurence takes hold of the rhythm like an instrument he studied.

Walks me backwards to the bedroom. Strips me with a methodology: mesh, shorts, beads, the bracelets one by one. The chain stays. *The chain stays*, his one piece of sentiment. Then he lays me out on our bed, and looks.

'You're covered in glitter,' he says.

'It's pay-what-you-can. You were there.'

'It's in the bed now.'

'It's in everything now. That's how glitter works. It's basically a tenant.' His mouth lands below my ear, stubble first, and tracks down, and my sentence loses its footing. 'It'll outlive—*Christ*—it'll outlive us both—'

'Stop talking,' he says, against my sternum, with no hope whatsoever of being obeyed.

He takes me apart the way he marks proofs: thorough, line by line, refusing to skip steps even when the result's not in doubt. Mouth on my chest, my stomach, the crease of my hip: everywhere except where I'm hardest, which is a pedagogical choice and he knows it.

I'm leaking against my own stomach by the time he relents. He looks at my cock the way he looks at an elegant solution, which does things to me I'll need years to unpack, and then his fist closes round it, slow, a grip calibrated over two years of peer review: firm at the base, loose at the head, a twist on the upstroke that he'd file under thoroughness.

I push up into it. He lets me. Generous, today.

‘Laurence—’

‘Mm.’

And then, when I’ve stopped being clever, his mouth. Heat and wet and the flat of his tongue, taking me in by degrees like we have the room till morning, one hand pinning my hip to the mattress because he knows me, and when he’s got me deep he hums, contented and devastating, the sound of a proof agreeing with itself, and the vibration goes up through me like a struck string.

I grab the headboard with one hand and his hair with the other and announce my findings to the ceiling.

I make myself look down, because not watching this would be a waste of a short life: Laurence Haldrey on his elbows, shirt open, mouth full, unhurried, like it’s music.

I put my thumb at the hinge of his jaw to feel it work. He lets me. The eyes open, dark and amused and knowing exactly what they’re doing, and hold mine while he takes me further in, and that’s me done for sentences.

He works me with mouth and fist together, patient, wet, obscene, the stubble grazing the inside of my thigh on every slow bob, and the noises, his and mine and the wet ones, would end my academic career if anyone ever taped them.

He pulls off before the data gets conclusive. Sits back on his heels and unbuttons the linen shirt one-handed, watching me watch him, and the gold stripe on his hand catches the lamp.

Except his fingers miss the second button. Twice. I lie still and let it happen, because in two years I’ve built a complete catalogue of this man’s hands: chalk, chips, the iron, me. They don’t miss.

He breathes in through his nose. Slow. Counted; you can see the counting. The breath snags at the top, and he covers it by frowning at the button like it’s a student who’s turned up without the problem sheet.

‘Take your time,’ I say.

‘Quiet.’

Third attempt. The button gives. He doesn’t hurry the rest, won’t, but there’s a fraction of a wobble in each movement now, and I did that. Me. Glitter and a parade. The most composed man in the North West, undoing his own shirt like an exam he didn’t revise for.

‘You’re keeping that,’ I say. ‘The glitter. It suits you.’

‘It’s permanent, apparently. Someone told me it’s a tenant.’

A man makes one joke back at you, mid-sex, after a day like today. That’s it. That’s how they get you.

The shirt goes. Finally. And I get the full argument: the shoulders, the chest with its dark scatter of hair, the stomach the pool keeps honest, and his cock, hard, flushed dark, curving up against his belly, entirely ignored by its owner because patience is a competitive sport and he’s club champion.

I’m not patient. I sit up and get a hand round him and watch his whole abdomen tighten, watch the jaw slip a notch, and when I lean in and lick the head, salt and skin and him, the sound he makes is short and punched-out and completely unbudgeted.

‘Ewan.’

‘Present.’

He gives me a minute because he’s weak for this, my mouth on him, my hand working what doesn’t fit, his fingers light in my hair like he’s afraid to steer. Then the fingers tighten and he pulls me off, careful, firm, thumb dragging across my bottom lip on the way past.

‘Not how tonight goes,’ he says.

‘Bold claim.’

‘Lie back.’

I lie back. I’m not a fool.

Not obedience, mind. We alternate. Half the time it’s him on his back and me taking the register; the rota’s the only timetable he’s ever let me set. Tonight I know exactly what I want, and it’s this.

Lube's in the bedside drawer, where it lives now. Our drawer, our flat, no bag packed by the door, no bus home after. He opens me up slow: one finger, the cold spike then the warmth, his other hand splayed flat on my stomach to feel it from both sides.

Then two, patient past all decency, unhurried, crooking *forward*, dragging across the place that whites my vision out. He found that angle our third night and never lost the page. My heels dig into the mattress and I'm pushing down onto his hand, shameless, and the slang's coming out of me unfiltered, *please* and *proper* and his name with the syllables in the wrong order.

Three is when I stop being a person with a vocabulary. Three is thick and full and almost, and he keeps it right there, just under enough, watching my face like it's data he's been waiting to collect.

He used to go still when the Lewisham came out of me. First months, every time, like he'd been handed something he hadn't paid for. Now he just works me through it and collects.

'There?' he says. Like he doesn't know. He wrote the map.

'You know—*there*—you smug—'

No condom. We retired those last October: two clinic appointments and a results text apiece, the least romantic paperwork I've ever been part of, and I'd frame it.

Then he's got both my knees pushed up towards my chest, folded like a deckchair, and he lines up and tilts. The angle, always the angle with him, never brute force; the man does geometry on instinct. He pushes in slow while I breathe down around the stretch of him, the long burn that settles into full.

He waits. Forehead on mine. Shaking with the cost of waiting.

'All right?'

'Move, or I'm reporting you to the council.'

He laughs. Inside me, I feel the laugh happen, which never stops being mad. And he moves.

Slow first. Criminally slow. Long pulls, nearly all the way out, the drag of him making my toes curl, then back in on the tilt, exact, unbearable. I try to hurry him with my heels in the small of his back; he takes my wrists instead, pins them to the pillow one-handed, and keeps the tempo his. 'Greedy,' he says, conversational, ruined. The word lands somewhere that isn't my ears. I clench round him out of spite and watch the conversation leave his face.

'Do that again,' he says.

I do that again.

After that the tempo stops being his.

I get my wrists back and he doesn't argue, because it turns out he likes my hands on him better: one in his hair, one full of his arse, pulling him into me on every stroke, and the linen slides off one shoulder and I get skin, salt, the muscle working under it.

He's a different man like this. Louder. Less ironed. I tell him so, against his mouth. He says something that is not a denial.

It builds the way the day built. Slow waves first, the tilt of his hips finding the front wall on every stroke until I'm noise and grip, and the headboard's keeping its own time against the plaster. The neighbours have data on us; one more point won't move the average.

Sweat and gold glitter all over both of us, transferred and re-transferred like evidence at a crime scene. His shirt's still half on, one shoulder, ruined; ironed this morning for nothing, and I'd tell him that too, but my hand's on my cock by then and his closes over it, the two of us in one rhythm, and his mouth lands on the chain at my throat, and the part of me that makes jokes finally shuts the door on its way out.

'I love you,' he says. Lancashire, wrecked, an inch from my face.

He tilts. I come first (house rules: his generosity has a kill count) all over our fists and my stomach, his name doing something embarrassing on the way out of me, and he follows inside a dozen strokes, jaw gone slack, that one broken sound he makes.

My favourite sound in the spoken language. Low and undone and mine, and I get all of it now, the pulse of him, nothing between us but the time we earned.

After: weight. His full collapse, considerate even ruined, and the slow withdrawal that leaves me wet with him, and the unhurried house-keeping he never skips: flannel, warm water, my stomach and the back of my thigh wiped down like I'm worth maintaining.

He gets it wrong once, drags the flannel through glitter and spreads it, frowns at the gold across my hip like it's entropy winning on his own whiteboard.

'Tenant,' I tell him. The ceiling's still on the move. 'Told you.'

He gives up. Goes to the bathroom, comes back naked. I watch him cross the room. I came four minutes ago, hard enough to forget my middle name, and the body still puts a flag up at the sight of him. Biology has no administration.

He lies down. Pulls me in, my back to his chest, skin the whole length of us, his arm heavy across me, his mouth at the top of my spine. Neither of us reaches for anything to wear; we stopped doing that months ago. The flat goes quiet in that way it gets when even Manchester takes a breath.

'Happy Pride,' I say.

A pause. His arm tightens, one notch.

'Yes,' he says, into my neck. Past the irony, under it, where we keep the true things. 'It was.'

Monday evening we go back.

The festival closes with a vigil in Sackville Gardens. Dusk, the gardens full and hushed, Femi and Allan already there holding four candles because of course they are.

A candle each, passed hand to hand down the crowd until the whole green is a low field of small flames. The Beacon of Hope up the path with flowers banked round it.

Turing on his bench with his apple, lit from below, looking like what he is. A saint of patterns.

They read names. People the virus took, people the stigma took, people who never got a weekend like this one. The crowd holds its candles and holds still, thousands of us, and the silence afterwards has weight and warmth both, like a hand on the back of the neck.

Laurence stands beside me with his candle steady and his face wet. He doesn't hide it and he doesn't perform it. He cries the way he does everything: precisely, completely, without spilling a drop of wax.

I hold his free hand. His thumb crosses my knuckles. Once.

Two years ago I sat in the back row of a lecture theatre and wanted to ruin a man's concentration. That was the whole plan. Eyeliner, sight lines, see what the hands could do.

Nobody told me the proof would run this long, or cost what it cost, or that it would land me here: twenty years old, gold under my fingernails, holding a candle in a garden full of the family you get given when you tell the truth in public.

The banner from the parade is still up over the gate when we file out, sagging a bit now, one corner come loose.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

Laurence sees me reading it. He doesn't say anything. He takes the dead candle out of my hand, laces our fingers, and walks me to the tram.

Hands steady. Not letting go.

Q.E.D.

Thank You

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You made it to the end. That means you already know what this is. This one is a gift for the people on my list. If someone forwarded it to you, the list is open, and the next story goes there first:



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About the Author

•

Alex W. Wells (they/them) writes contemporary queer romance. Slow burn, open door, and characters better at observing than asking for what they want.

Their books follow people figuring things out, late, badly, and with more precision than necessary. Academics, bricklayers, commuters. Very specific food. Tea that means something it shouldn't.

A literary background that shows in the sentence structure, not the subject matter.

They say very little about the rest.

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