

Ten Minute's Peace

Silas

The sun washed hallway of the house is a hive of activity when I walk in. A group of old ladies chatter like magpies as they surround June, the senior tour guide, while Susie on the desk processes payments and hands out guidebooks quicker than an usher at a royal wedding.

I edge past them trying to be inconspicuous but that plan is fouled as soon as June sees me. "Lord Ashworth," she calls. "Can we just have a moment of your time?" Her voice is soft but it seems to cut through the women's chatter like a knife through butter. All conversation is immediately suspended and they turn around as synchronized as a group of meerkats.

I hesitate, toying with the idea of making a run for it, but June's eyes have a gleam I don't trust so I don't bother. "That's me," I say heartily and immediately the ladies surround me getting out their mobile phones and starting to take selfies with me.

I'm posing with a broad and slightly nervous grin on my face when I hear a familiar chuckle from behind me.

Warmth runs through my body like the sunshine is reaching inside and I turn to face the man I came home early to see. He's standing leaning against the door to the Great Hall. He's wearing skinny black jeans with a grey shirt and his hair is shaggier than it's ever been. What with that and the bright blue polish on his nails he looks more like a rock star than someone who manages an old house. His muscles bunch as he holds onto the case of orange juice he's carrying.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, giving me that intimate and slightly wicked smile that he reserves for me.

I blink as a flash goes off in my face. The two old ladies wearing kagoules and trainers issue apologies and make way for another woman. It's like they're never-ending.

"I need a word with you," I say before he can get distracted. Believe me, it's necessary. There's so much demanding his attention around here that I'm surprised he even manages to breathe.

He smiles as an old woman puts an arm around my waist and pulls me more into the frame.

"It's a bit like going out with Fifty Cent," he muses as more flashes go off.

"More like loose change," I mutter, thinking of the latest gas bill.

He laughs before looking around at the old people who are now gathering back around June.

"I'd say Tom Jones looking at your fan base," he whispers.

I shake my head. "Have you got time to come with me?"

"Where?"

"Out for a drive. We can have a chat."

He straightens up. "I've got to take this case to the tea rooms. Can you walk and talk instead?"

"Oh." I falter. "I thought you'd be finished by now for the day."

I can't do this as part of a walk and talk to the tea rooms. It doesn't exactly make for a memorable moment. I've got a picnic basket in the boot of the car stuffed with food from the local deli that he loves. There's also a bottle of champagne in a bag of ice. I thought I'd whisk him off to the spot high up on the cliffs around Boscastle that he loves and I'd propose there.

I swallow hard. I'm ridiculously nervous. I know he loves me. I feel it in my heart every day. But I'm not sure what he'll think to marriage. He's never expressed a yearning for it and displays no interest either way. However, I know myself. I want to see the pretty ring I have in my pocket on his finger, where he can look at it every day and know how much I adore him.

He pauses. "You okay?" he asks with a note of concern in his voice.

"I'm fine, Pika," I say automatically. "I just need to talk to you. It's not urgent," I finish somewhat unconvincingly.

He stares at me for a second his keen gaze probably seeing right through me. Then he inclines his head. "Let me drop this off with Mrs Granger and we'll go out."

I shoot him a grateful smile and he winks and turns towards the back door that leads onto the gravel path to the tea rooms.

I follow him taking the time to properly appreciate the sight of his arse in his jeans. High and tight it's also perfectly rounded and it makes my mouth water. We have a lot of sex so it still takes me by surprise how he can make me hard at a glance from him or just catching the scent of ginger from his aftershave.

The tea rooms are a hive of activity as always. Megan on the counter is busily ringing up orders, while the two girls from the village scurry around delivering food. Mrs Granger has been a huge hit and the cakes and cream teas at *Chi an Mor* are becoming well known in the area. Oz employed a girl to help her and they make a great team. Then last year he added a chef with the remit that he make hearty homemade food. I always try to stop in when I know he's cooked cottage pie, and sometimes Oz will bring home dishes for me when I've been working late.

I follow Oz's lithe form as he edges his way adeptly through the crowd, exchanging smiles and chatter as he walks behind the counter and crouches down to start filling the fridge with the juice.

I crouch down to help him and he grins at me. "Busy today, eh?" he says, his eyes sparkling with delight. He rubs his hands. "Lots of money," he whispers.

I snort. "You're turning into Harry Enfield."

"That character would have been a hell of a lot louder if he'd had a bill to replace the windows in the East Wing too."

Once we're done he rises from his crouch and goes over to check with Megan that they have everything they need. Leaning against the counter I look around the room. I remember this as the stables and being full of horses when my grandfather was alive. The old bastard had died when a horse threw him, which Henry has always insisted was because the animal had got tired of our grandfather's personality.

Three tables have been pulled together and the members of the book club are finishing their meeting. I grin at them. "What's the book this week, Fred?"

Fred, the old librarian from the village, holds up a book on which two men are entwined together on the cover. I blink. "That doesn't look like it's from the Richard and Judy Book Club."

Philippa, the lady who runs the club laughs. "Oh, we don't read that shit. Far too tame."

I'm well aware of that. Oz is a member of the club and last week's book of the week was an erotic story which he'd read to me while we were lying naked in bed. I'd been lying on my front nestling my head into my arms while he lay with his head pillowed on my arse. His Irish accent had drifted through the bedroom spinning a spell of heat. I'm embarrassed to admit that we never even made it to page three. It was less erotic however when he picked it back up when we'd finished and used funny accents during the next sex scene.

Oz comes hurrying up to me and pulls me to one side. "Listen, they've got a backlog. Can you wait for a bit while I help?"

I sigh. "How long?"

He shoots me a surprised look because it isn't like me to whine.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I just really need some time with you."

He hugs me and steps back looking conflicted. "I can't leave them," he whispers. "They're snowed under."

"I'll help you," I say brightly. "If I do, we'll get done quicker and I can talk to you."

A look of humorous dismay crosses his face. "You're going to wait on tables?"

I shrug. "Yes, if it gets the fucking food out quicker."

He stares at me for a second and then laughs. "Okay then. At the very least I'll have loads to tell Henry when he rings." He gestures. "Follow me."

I trawl behind him and into the kitchen where Simon, the chef, is dishing up food quickly and adeptly. Plates are building up on the stainless steel counter. Oz picks up one of the tickets and gestures at two plates.

"Take those," he orders. "They're for table ten. Warn them that the plates are hot and don't forget to give them cutlery."

Simon looks utterly scandalized and I grin. "Okay," I say meekly.

I edge into the dining area carrying the plates carefully over to table ten where a middle-aged couple is hissing at each other. The man looks bored and the woman looks querulous.

"Good afternoon," I say heartily. "Two Boursin Chicken."

She nods and gestures at the table. "On here, please," she orders as if I was somehow contemplating putting them on the floor.

My mouth quirks and I put the plates down obediently. "Please don't touch the hot plates," I say quickly and stare in amazement as the man immediately stretches out his fingers and touches the plate.

"Ouch!" he shouts. "These plates are bloody hot."

"I did warn you," I say and feel someone at my back. It's Oz.

"Everything okay?" he asks smoothly.

"I burnt my finger on this plate. It's hot."

Oz looks at me and I shake my head. "I did tell you it was hot," I say patiently. "Yet you still reached out and grabbed it."

Oz's mouth quirks. "Your waiter will get you a bowl of cold water to put your hand in," he says in a very lordly manner, and I make sure he sees me shake my head at him before I move off to obey the small tyrant.

When I come back the woman is eating her food with a moue of disgust. "Is everything okay?" I ask alarmed. This is one of Simon's best dishes and it's delicious.

"It's chicken. I don't like chicken."

I pause and look at Oz for direction. He's biting his lips and obviously has none.

"Why did you order Boursin Chicken, then?" I ask politely.

"We were only trying to make life easy for you lot," her husband says crossly.

I open my mouth to try and find a tactful way of saying I couldn't care less what they eat as long as they enjoy it, but Oz elbows me and sends me on my way. I busy myself with trying to get the food out as quickly as I can and when I next look over they're laughing at something he's said.

He excuses himself and comes over with laughter brimming in his eyes.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I say crossly, and he snorts.

"I apologised for your fumbling ineptitude but he excused me because I shouldn't expect the apprentice to know how to serve food in a correct manner."

"*Apprentice*. Is that me?" I ask indignantly, and he grins.

"Yep. I told them it was your first day."

"First and last."

He laughs and looks around. "Wow! Are they all caught up?"

I nod and grab his arm to tow him out of the tea rooms. "Yes. Simon says they're fine so you're all mine for a bit."

He follows me laughing. "What's lit a fire up your arse? Can't you tell me what you want to talk about?" He looks around the empty courtyard. "We're all alone."

I shake my head stubbornly. My father would probably have approved of saving time while proposing, but then this was the man who tried to propose once in a solicitor's office while offering his potential bride a prenup to sign. He'd seen it as not having to waste time getting another appointment. The king of romance, he was not.

"No," I say firmly. "I want to be completely alone."

He looks at me and a gleam appears in his eyes. "Oh, I see now."

"Do you?" I ask nervously. "What do you see?"

He shakes his head and grabbing my hand he begins to tow me rather forcefully towards the house. Once we're inside he takes a quick look around and then pushes me towards the study.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he opens the door and pushes me through, following closely behind. I turn just in time to see him lock the door.

He grins lasciviously at me and starts to unzip his jeans.

"Oh," I say. "Oh. No, I didn't need you for that." I pause as he throws his polo shirt cavalierly over the sofa. "I don't know whether to be scandalized or turned on," I observe.

"Can you be both and quickly?" he mutters as his jeans follow his shirt, leaving him clad in tight red briefs. They cup his cock lovingly and make his pale skin glow.

"Okay, I'm caught up," I say quickly as he comes towards me. "I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"What does that even mean?" he says, pausing with the edges of my shirt in his hands. I look at him in confusion. "I mean, when in history has there ever been a horse who went around giving people presents. I'm sure I'd remember hearing about that at school."

I whip my shirt off myself as his hands have stopped moving while he's contemplating the meaning of the universe. "Isn't there a tour going on?" I ask, hoping to prod him into action.

It works as he shakes off his thoughts. "Yes, but I think we're fine. June does the Great Hall and the study first and then takes them upstairs."

"You think, or you're sure?" I ask dubiously and he grins, lifting up and dragging my face down to him so he can kiss me.

"About seventy percent sure," he whispers against my lips.

"It's the thirty percent that's causing me trouble."

He gives me a very dirty grin and reaches down and nimbly opens my jeans. He fists my cock.

"Not that much trouble, love. You seem to be rallying fast."

"That's me," I grunt, all my attention on his long fingers circling the ruddy length of my prick. "I'm a rallier."

He kisses me again and before I can give any thought to the fact that we're completely naked in a room that's part of a tour, I've backed him up against the wall and I'm kissing him as if it's been rationed for years while I strip off his briefs and throw them somewhere behind me. He winds his legs around my waist and groans into my mouth.

"Yes," he moans, pulling his head back for some much-needed air. "Fuck. I need you inside me. It's been too long."

I grunt as I rub against him feeling moisture bead my cock, and my head swims. I want to point out that it was actually this morning but my words have gone as the blood flows very fast away from my brain. I hold my fingers up to his mouth and he gives me a sultry look as he licks and sucks on them. I maneuver him slightly so I can reach his arse and he cries out as I rub my fingertip over his little hole. It's pale pink, the same colour as his nipples, and he grunts as I gently insert the tip of my finger.

"Do it," he gasps. "I need you so bad." The Irish lilt in his voice is heavy.

I shake my head. "I am not using spit for lube. It'll hurt."

"I don't mind a bit of pain."

I grin at him feeling love run through me suddenly. "During sex, you're fine, darling, but it's the after when you're the biggest baby that I've ever met."

He laughs and then smiles slowly. "Lube's in my jean pocket."

“Really? You’re like some sort of very strange scout.”

He shakes his head. “I was never very good at group activities.”

I put him down on the floor and dash over to his jeans, rifling through his pockets. I find what seems like twenty thousand lists and then exclaim in triumph when I find the gold packet.

“Ta-dah!”

He pretends to clap and I pace back to him feeling his gaze run over me hotly and fix on my cock which is standing straight up ready for action. I fist it and give myself a couple of strokes.

“You want it?”

He nods. “And now, so move quicker.”

I grin and pounce on him, taking him down on the sofa which has embroidered cushions that my great-grandmother stitched. I wonder whether I should be bothered by this but then remember how Henry and I were convinced that she was a witch and dismiss the thought in favour of spreading my lover’s legs and nestling between them.

I start to grind against him feeling my pre-come slick the way. He groans and seizes my face between his callused palms. “I love you,” he gasps kissing me feverishly.

“I love you too.” I open the sachet and coat my fingers and send them flirting over his hole. He throws his head back and moans when I slowly insert my index finger. But then we both freeze as the door handle jiggles.

“Oh, shit,” Oz whispers.

“I’m so sorry,” I hear June say. “I can’t imagine why this door is locked.”

“What the *fuck*?” I hiss. “I thought you were sure.”

“Seventy percent,” he says, and grins. “Don’t worry. The door’s locked. Come back down here.”

“Are you quite mental?” I ask pulling back. “There are approximately fourteen old ladies outside the door. I know they can’t get in but –”

“Not to worry,” June’s voice comes cheerily through the door. “I have a key here so I can let us in.”

“Shit!” Oz says and shoves me away so quickly that I land with a thump on the rug. We both freeze but all we can hear are the jingle of keys and June’s assurances that she’s sure that this is the key.

“Oh my God.” I jump to my feet. “Do something.”

The next second two things happen. June exclaims victoriously and we hear a key in the lock, and Oz grabs me and pushes me into the stationery cupboard. He’s only just in time because as the door closes we hear the study door open and the noise of excited OAP chatter.

“Phew!” Oz whispers grinning at me. “That was fucking close.”

“You think?” I stare at him. “Oz, what are we missing?” He stares at me so I elaborate in a whisper. “Are you a bit cold? What have we left outside?”

“Oh my God,” he says, looking like he’s trying not to laugh. “Our clothes are out there.”

“Yes. You’d better fucking pray that June doesn’t have a key for this door and no old lady has a burning fucking desire to see an Earl’s stationery.”

He sniggers and cups my package. “This is all mine. No one gets to see you when you’re stationary.”

I try not to laugh but fail as always with him. “You know very well what I meant.”

We both jump as a querulous voice comes from next to our hiding place. “Why are there clothes all over the room?”

There’s a pause and then June says hesitantly, “Well, the Earl does use all these rooms. You’re seeing them as they are when they’re in use.”

“Does he always have a pair of underpants hanging from the light fitting?”

Oz snorts which luckily I cover up with my hand over his fucking mouth. His merry eyes sparkle at me and I can’t help but smile back.

“Oh, erm,” June hesitates. “Young men,” she finally says in a tone of voice which contains condemnation and weary exasperation.

There’s a chorus of agreement and then she hurries them out of the room. When the door closes we both sag into each other and Oz starts to laugh. Normally, I love his laugh. It’s merry and intoxicating like him. Today I’d like to shove him out of the French windows.

“Oh my God, that’s killed my hard-on,” he groans.

“I’m glad we’ve found something that manages it,” I say primly. “I was beginning to wonder if you suffered from priapism.”

“Oh, shut up and pick up your underwear,” he grouses and shoves me out of the cupboard.

He pulls on his own underwear and pauses to watch me as I try to untangle my jeans. “What?” I ask.

He smiles affectionately. “If I forget to tell you later how happy you make me, will you remind me?”

I swallow hard. “I’ll remember.”

He nods simply and bends to find his shirt amongst the heap of clothing. I’ve learnt that about my Oz. He can level you with the simplicity and honesty of his love but he never drags it out. He

tells you plainly and moves on. It's a fresh and open way of loving that I've never experienced before.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to fuck," he says mournfully. "Especially as you came home early for it."

"I didn't come home early for that," I start to say and then jerk as the fire alarm shrills seemingly from beside my fucking ear.

"Oh, my God," Oz exclaims. "The house is on fire."

Worry seizes me. *The fucking house*. Then I look at Oz's face and breathe in.

"Don't panic," I say and then pause. "But maybe get dressed quickly."

He nods and flings his shirt on, rooting around for his shoes. I've just put one leg in my jeans when there's the sound of running footsteps and someone bangs loudly on the door.

"Get fucking dressed, you pair of degenerates," comes Niall's voice. It startles me and I miss putting my foot in the other leg. Caught off balance I teeter and crash to the floor. My head rebounds off a table and sparks ping across my vision.

"Fuck!" I groan.

Oz drops to his knees beside me. "Oh, my God. A ghrá geal. Are you okay, sweetheart?"

I shake my head, regretting it as pain crashes through my skull. "Oh God, that hurts."

He looks wildly around. "Come on," he urges. "We need to get outside. Let me help you."

I obey his urging and bring myself to my feet, adrenaline making me move. I zip my jeans and stamp into my shoes as he buttons my shirt for me. When I'm done he grabs my hand and pulls me out through the French windows.

I look around anxiously now that Oz is safe. "Come on," I urge. "We need to go round to the assembly point and make sure Boris and Chewwy are out."

Holding tight to his hand I pull him along, shepherding some stragglers who have paused in the knot garden to admire the lavender. All the while I'm frantically checking the house for any sign of smoke. I can't bear the idea of my home being damaged.

We round the corner and Niall comes rushing up. "Where are the dogs?" I ask anxiously but before he can speak a huge shape bangs into Oz, nearly knocking him over.

"Chewwy," he exclaims, bending so the dog can give him wet kisses.

I put out my hand to Boris who is dancing around me. "What's happening?" I demand.

Niall puts his hand up. "It's all fine," he says quickly.

"Where's the fire?" I say wildly, and he grabs my shoulders.

"There is no fire. An old lady lit a cigarette in the toilet and it set off the alarm."

Relief makes me sag slightly and Oz slides his arm around my back. Then he stiffens.

“Wait. Did you ring the fire brigade and tell them that it’s okay?”

Niall looks bewildered. “No. Why?”

Oz shakes his head. “Shit. You weren’t at the staff meeting when they rang and announced that the emergency link was up. If a fire alarm goes off, the fire engine and an ambulance will be here in –” An ambulance and a fire engine screech into the forecourt and he grimaces. “Five minutes,” he finishes lamely. “Shit!”

Niall nods. “Okay, I’ll go and tell them they’re not needed if you can get the people organised.”

I nod but then grunt as the pain spreads down the back of my skull.

“On second thoughts,” Oz says sharply. “Tell the ambulance to stay. Silas hit his head really hard. I want him checked out.”

“Oh no,” I protest. “God, that’s so embarrassing.”

“It’s either here or Casualty later on,” Oz says sternly. “Don’t fuck with me, Silas. Your head made a terrible sound.”

“Must have been his brains rattling around,” Niall says. “What with all that stripping off and fucking in a public area.”

“Who told you?” I groan.

“June,” he says cheerfully. “I must say, Silas, I wouldn’t want to be you when you have your little chat with her later on.” He laughs and strides off to intercept the fire engine.

Oz leans in. “Put it this way,” he whispers conspiratorially. “If you go and get in the ambulance June can’t talk to you there.”

I brighten. “*Really?*”

He nods. “As a gesture of my affection for you, I will talk to her instead.”

“You really love me?” I say wonderingly and then clutch my head as the headache flares.

“Into the ambulance,” he says quickly, worry clouding his eyes.

An hour later I sit on the bed in the ambulance watching the few people that are left in the forecourt. It’s twilight now and the lilac coloured sky provides a fitting accompaniment to the lights from the ambulance. Oz comes towards me from where he’s been filling in the paperwork from the fire brigade confirming that it was a false alarm.

He hops up next to me and hugs me. “How are you?” he asks anxiously. “You look a better colour, baby.”

The paramedic claps me gently on my shoulder. "He's fine," he says. "His vision is good and I can't see any signs of a concussion. He won't go to the hospital but he says the pain is less after he's had some tablets. I'll give you a list of what to look out for tonight if he won't go and get checked over by a doctor."

Oz opens his mouth and I shake my head gently, relieved that the pain has gone a little. "No," I say firmly. "I have plans tonight. *We* have plans."

"We do?" He looks unsure and the paramedic shakes his head.

"Not anything you're going to be doing for a bit. I want you to sit still while we pack up before we go." He climbs down and goes over to speak to his partner who's standing by the fire engine and silence falls.

Oz leans into me his weight familiar and warm, and his warm ginger aftershave weaves around me. I feel myself relax inside because the smell makes me feel peaceful and happy. A bat swoops over us and a breeze kicks up wafting the scent of lavender towards us. I inhale and look around.

"Chaos, eh?" he says and I can hear the smile in his voice. He sighs happily. "But even chaos with you is still good." He rests his head against my shoulder, the waves of his hair tickling my nose and I smile.

"I give up," I say softly and start to laugh. "I've tried the romantic route, but so far I've had to wait on tables and nearly had public sex in front of a group of octogenarians. I nearly knocked myself out getting back in my jeans. I just give up."

He looks bewildered but his lip twitches at my laughter and he starts to laugh himself. I grin at his animated face and turn to him.

"Oz Gallagher," I say formally and his laughter dies away. "Will you marry me?"

"*What?*"

I nod and grab his hand. "Will you marry me?" I look at him and bite my lip. "I love you," I say simply. "I want to spend my whole life with you coping with chaos, eating late meals, managing bills and eccentric members of staff."

"You could do all that without a ring," he says almost breathlessly and I feel love swamp me.

"I could," I say softly. "But I want to laugh with you, sleep with you and eat and talk late at night, and I want to do all that with rings on our fingers." I pause and then say steadily, "I want you protected, darling. If I die —"

"Oh, don't," he chokes out, but I shake my head and hug him tight

"If I died tomorrow I'd be happy because I've had you, but hopefully we have many more years together. But if it happens I want you looked after the way you look after me." I look at him

steadily. His pretty eyes are full of tears but his gaze is steadfast and my worries calm instantly because this is my Oz and he's perfect for me. "Well?" I say softly.

He wipes his fingers frantically under his eyes and shakes his head. "Of course I will," he says simply and I let out my breath slowly. "I never thought I'd get married but then I never knew you'd come along and I would love to be married to you. Not for security but because you make me so bloody happy, Silas. I never knew anyone could mean as much to me as you do."

"I'm sorry it isn't more romantic," I sigh but he shakes his head.

"I find with you that romance is relative to the people concerned. With you romance is being together, smelling your scent, hearing your voice and feeling your body against mine. It's false alarm fire engines and sitting in the lavender garden." His voice lowers. "It's sometimes fucking all night and sometimes making love and cuddling in the mornings."

Heedless of anyone watching I take his lips in a long slow kiss and when I close my eyes the darkness is lit with the lights from the fire engine and the ambulance.

When we separate I smile at him. "Reach in my back pocket."

"I suppose I can do that now," he says demurely. "We are engaged, after all."

He reaches in and finds the envelope. When he looks at me I nod. "Open it."

He slides his finger under the flap and upends it and two platinum rings fall out onto his palm. He looks up and swallows hard. "They're gorgeous."

"Look inside," I say hoarsely. "I had them engraved."

He turns them so he can read by the glare of the lights and I see a tear slip down his cheek.

"Fuck, Silas," he says and I grin.

"I am maybe the master of romance," I say smugly and he chuckles.

"I actually think you are." He traces the words and reads them aloud. "Wherever you are is my home."

He leans into my side and I cover his clenched fist holding the rings and bring it up to my lips to drop a kiss on it. "It's from *Jane Eyre*. I thought it was appropriate as that too had a house with mad people in it." He laughs and I kiss his head. "I actually had a romantic proposal planned," I confess, watching the fireman leave and nodding my thanks to the paramedics as they pack away. "I was going to whisk you over to the cliffs at Boscastle and propose over a picnic and champagne."

"What was in the picnic?"

"Bits from Lester Deli," I whisper and he groans.

“Is the champagne cold?” I nod and he grins. “Let’s eat it in bed. And if you’re good I’ll let you propose again.” He leans close. “I promise to put out.”

“Let’s lock the door first,” I say faintly, and when he laughs I glare at him. “And make sure no tourists are around.” He grins and I shake my head. “You think it’s funny. I think it’s scarred me.”

His laughter floats around us as we wander back to the house lit against the darkening sky. The dogs snuffle about and pad next to us and I draw him close. Romance might be relative but so is happiness, and right now at this moment I can’t believe that anyone could ever be happier than me.