

# Just Friends

Bradley Stoke



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# Chapter One

“I’m sorry. I just don’t believe you. And if I can’t believe you, why should I trust you? How can I commit to you in a relationship?”

Sophie had to admit that Malcolm had a point, but one far too dangerous to concede. She sipped from her glass of Argentinean white and placed it on the bench in front of her just inside the shadow cast by the sunshade. She pursed her lips and glanced around at the other couples enjoying the late evening sun on the patio of the Black Swan. Were their conversations as tense as those between Malcolm and she?

“It was only the once, Malcolm,” Sophie pleaded. “I needed the money. It was very tempting.”

“You see, I don’t think it was just the once,” Malcolm continued.

“Why do you say that? Surely once would be enough? I told you about *Cum Babes International*. Why should there be any more?”

“I just don’t believe you. It just doesn’t hang together. All those years between when you dropped out of college and when you did your Accountancy course at Kingston, it sounds like there was more than just odd-jobs and dingy bedsits.”

“What do you mean?” Sophie asked, knowing full well from previous conversations exactly what he meant.

“There’s the lifestyle you managed to afford. The drugs and clothes and nights out. There’s the fact that I don’t believe you’d necessarily have done just the one video. And then,” and here Malcolm lowered his voice, so that no eavesdropper could hear him, “there’s what you’re like in bed.”

“In bed? I thought you loved me there best of all. You said I was the best.”

Malcolm sipped his glass of wine. He was clearly flustered. “You are *so* much better than any of my other girlfriends, and admittedly there were not that many before you, that you’re in a league of your own. Some of the things you do!” Malcolm lowered his voice still further “Your skill at, you know, fellatio and anal and fisting and all that. The orgasms you get. And how loud you shriek when you come! It’s just not natural.”

“It’s because I like sex that I was tempted into making that video,” Sophie protested.

“I don’t believe that your boyfriends at the time, or the ones you’ve told me about, were likely to give you the aptitude you’ve got.”

“I’m a natural. I don’t need training.”

“I’m not stupid, Sophie,” Malcolm said with a frown. “I’ve seen a few pornos. I’m not totally ignorant. I can see what you could have got up to. And when we’re together in bed, it’s not like I’m with someone who once, from innocence and greed, was tempted to give the odd blowjob in front of the camera. It’s like I’m with someone who’s done it all and knows all that she ever needs to know.”

Sophie gripped Malcolm’s hand tightly in her own. “It was only the once. You have to believe me.”

Malcolm frowned again. He was breathing quite heavily. The tension from this conversation was upsetting him. “We’re not living together. Yet. We’re not committed to getting married. Yet. But if we do make the next step...”

“I do *so* want us to, Malcolm,” said Sophie with urgency in her voice and eyes.

“...if we do, we need more trust. We need to be honest with one another. And I’m

not sure we have that.”

“Oh, Malcolm. It just takes time!”

“We’ve been seeing each other for nearly six months now. I’ve never ever had such an intense relationship with anyone as I’ve had with you. Yet I feel I scarcely know you at all. You only begrudgingly tell me anything about your life before I met you. If I hadn’t seen the cover of the video in that second-hand store, would you ever have told me about *Cum Babes International Number 12*? How am I to know you weren’t in all previous eleven titles?”

Malcolm was shaking. His wine was mostly untouched and his gaze was wholly unfocused.

“Why does it upset you so much?” Sophie asked, squeezing his hand.

Malcolm shook his head. “It just does. It’s the trust thing. I *so* want it to work for us. You’re the best thing in my life. You mean more than the accountancy firm, the house in Richmond and everything else. I don’t want to lose you, but I sometimes think there’s no choice.”

“Don’t upset yourself so much. Finish your drink. We can go for a meal at that Italian restaurant. Or the Thai one. Come on, love!”

“It’s no good!” said Malcolm standing up. He slipped his jacket back on. “I’m too upset. It’s not working this evening. It’s best I leave you. I’ll phone you tomorrow.”

“You sure?” asked Sophie anxiously, gazing up at Malcolm as he straightened his tie and slung the bag holding his laptop over his shoulder.

“I will. Don’t worry. It’s just, I don’t know, anxiety and everything. I’ll ring tomorrow morning.”

Almost distractedly, Malcolm pecked Sophie on the cheek, avoiding the attractions of her slightly opened mouth, her tongue twitching between the deep red lips and her perfect white teeth. He then strode off, not even turning his head back, out of the patio towards the pub car park where his BMW company car was parked.

Sophie watched him go with a sigh. She decided against running after him. He needed to calm down and her previous attempts at comforting him in these situations had not always been successful. Anyway, she rather relished the opportunity of sitting alone with her own thoughts and reflections.

Malcolm would phone back tomorrow. There was no doubt about it. Sophie understood Malcolm too well after all these months to have any doubts.

Sophie picked up her glass of wine, regretting at that moment she'd given up smoking and therefore had no cigarette to light up to calm her nerves. She sipped her wine while scanning the other drinkers in the pub patio. She was glad that her eyes were hidden under the sunshade. Most of the people here were like Malcolm and her: couples or groups of men and women, mostly in their late twenties or early thirties, still in their work clothes after having finished a day in the office. Ties were pulled down, sleeves rolled up and jackets laid to one side in concession to the English summer. Just ahead was a bend of the River Thames, too narrow in this part of London to carry more than a few barges and tourist boats. A few swans paddled by under the shelter of the decorative shrubs planted at the river's edge.

Then, ambling into the patio, and not seen for so many years, was Justin, still with Ashley, around whose bare waist he wrapped a protective arm. The couple was recognisably the same, despite the intervening years. Justin was rather less the rake-like

figure she once knew. Clearly, he was eating better than he used to. Perhaps this was Ashley's influence. She had also filled out a bit. Rounder shoulders, a fuller waist, but still nothing to be ashamed of, and a dimple on each elbow.

The first time Sophie met Justin, all those years ago, his cheeks were much more accentuated and his eyes betrayed a kind of naked vulnerability. It was in a coffee shop, one of the countless coffee shops in Wimbledon where she lived at the time, one where the coffees had Italian names and the service was painfully slow. She had just been in the loo as a result of a false alarm. She washed her hands but, despite all the fruitless straining and struggling, she still felt the nagging need for a shit.

She looked at her eyes in the loo mirror. The pupils were still quite tiny and her face had a fatigued expression, as well it ought since she'd not slept for such a long time. The drugs were taking ages to wear off. Even though she was no longer feeling high as such, they hadn't yet subsided enough for her to need sleep.

It wasn't as if she hadn't been in bed though. It hadn't taken long for the informal post-shoot party at Lance's flat to disintegrate into an unplanned orgy. After all, Heinrich, Natasha, Juanita and the others were all fully acquainted with each other on the set. After a few drinks, lines, snorts, spliffs and, in Natasha's case, a surgically-clean hypo, it seemed the natural way to end the day. So. Plenty of bed but not a lot of sleep. And didn't she know it! And her arse knew it most of all.

Sophie knew that when she did finally recover, she'd sleep for well over her apportioned eight hours. Anyway, there wasn't another shoot for several days and that would be a cinch compared to the rim and ring epic in which she'd been performing the last few days. It would be nothing but facials. It might leave a nasty taste in the mouth

and the possibility of a stomach ache, but at least her anus would have time to recover.

When she emerged from the loo, she saw that someone else was sitting at the table where her mocha was waiting. She tottered over unsteadily on the impossibly high heels she still wore and lowered herself into her seat. The heels added several significant inches to her height, but didn't disguise the fact that Sophie, like most women in her line of work, was actually rather short. In her case, only just over five foot tall. Shortness had the advantage of enhancing her apparent breast-size. It also made the attributes of any male co-star seem that much more splendid than they already were.

Sophie composed herself opposite the man at her table. He was, of course, the same Justin now looking for a place to sit in the Black Swan. She reflected that she was rather overdressed for a coffee shop on a Thursday morning. She'd dressed for the shoot in a leather jacket, a tight micro-skirt, and a revealing blouse that was designed to accentuate her already prominent bosom. Her long blonde-streaked hair was tied back in an untidy mess of clips and bows. Huge hoop-like earrings brushed her shoulders whenever she turned her head.

"Who're you?" she asked Justin in a voice as unsteady as her posture. "What d'you do?"

Justin nervously introduced himself and explained that he worked in a technical capacity at a City-based financial company. He worked shifts, including weekends, which was why he happened to be off work on a Thursday.

"I'm new to London," he said apologetically, with a diffident smile that stretched the tight skin of his thin face. "I don't know that many people."

Sophie nodded her head. She'd not really listened to Justin with that much



attention while scooping yet more sugar into her already very sweet mocha.

“I bet you can’t guess what I do?” she slurred.

“Er... prostitute?” Justin asked, with an apologetic smile.

“Prostitute?” echoed Sophie with alarm.

Fuck! Is that what she looked like? Of course, she’d never stoop as low as that, although she’d been tempted before she was sure how much she could make in the porno business. In those early days, she’d not quite judged how low she needed to go to subsidise her studies at the University. That was when she was still a student, of course.

“No fucking way am I a pro!” Sophie said when she’d recovered her composure. “I don’t know how pissed off I should be at you for making that suggestion.”

“I’m sorry,” said Justin, his face reddening from embarrassment but a warm smile still on his face. “Not that I’d think any the less of you if you were.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just a job, isn’t it? Prostitution. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, is it?”

“Yeah, well,” said Sophie, sipping her mocha. “I’m in films, I am. I’m a fucking film star.”

Justin was impressed. “Wow! What films have you been in?”

“You probably haven’t heard of them,” said Sophie.

“I don’t know. Films are one of my biggest interests. I go to the cinema two, three times a week. There’s not much I don’t know about the movies.”

“Oh yeah,” sneered Sophie, with a wicked grin. “I bet you don’t go to the cinema to watch *Fellowship of the Rimming*, *Cunts & Quims Volume Three* or *The Sex Fiends*.”

“Er... No. Are they the sort of films you appear in?”

“Straight to video. No general release. Never likely to make either the National Film Theatre or the Odeon. You know the kind of stuff?”

Justin nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“You seen much of it?”

“Not that much. Some. Not a lot. And never in a cinema.”

“So, what d’you think, Film Buff Barry? Are they the kind of movie you’d rate? What d’you think Jonathan Ross would make of them, eh?”

“Not very high production standards,” Justin mused. “At least, not the ones I’ve seen. Not very complex plots. Acting’s not up to much. But that’s all shit, isn’t it? That’s not what the films are about. You can’t talk about porno in the same way as other films, can you? It’d be as stupid as having a go at *Teletubbies* for being repetitive. Or complaining about the special effects in *South Park*.”

Despite herself, Sophie was actually rather enjoying her chat with Justin. He was trying so hard to be non-judgmental about what she did for a living. It was quite sweet, really. And he was a change from the people she usually hung around with, who were sometimes not really that bright. It was also good to talk about sex films with someone who wasn’t in the industry. However, her interest increased when the conversation strayed away from films to the challenges of living in London and finding an affordable place to stay.

“Well, money ain’t a problem for me,” sniffed Sophie, pulling a cigarette out of its packet. Although this wasn’t the first cigarette she’d had since meeting Justin, she only now remembered her manners. “Here, you want one?”

Justin hesitated, but then nodded and took the proffered cigarette.

“You smoke?” Sophie asked as she lit the cigarettes.

“Not really,” Justin replied. “Well, not tobacco.”

“Dope?”

“Well, yeah. A bit. Not a lot. Sometimes.”

“Got any on you now?”

Justin looked around the place with slightly frightened eyes. He looked down at his now empty cup of Grande Americano and nodded his head. “Some hash. Only a couple of grams.”

“Well, that’s enough, isn’t it?” Sophie said with a smile. “Hey, let’s go to the park and roll up. A spliff would set me up well.”

“Would it?” wondered Justin.

And indeed it did.

After an hour chatting on a park bench where the conversation became mysteriously more amusing as the influence of the morning spliff took affect, Sophie’s whole day became preoccupied in entertaining her innocent companion. Sophie was actually rather enjoying the fact that Justin was someone who didn’t work in the industry and with whom she could talk about other things than drugs, porno and money. She imagined that if she had a brother then this would be what it’d be like to spend a day with him in South West London.

Sophie and Justin wandered around central Wimbledon sampling the record shops, the department stores, the clothes and coffee shops, pleased to discover so many areas of mutual interest. They both liked Radiohead and the Chemical Brothers. They both thought *The Godfather* was the greatest film ever made and that *Return of the King*

was utter wank. They both enjoyed *The Sopranos* and *Alan Partridge*, but couldn't get a grip on *Friends* or *Frasier*. And neither of them had been to Ibiza, although they'd both wanted to.

It seemed natural for the day to stretch into the evening, and, after a meal at Pizza Express and a few pints in the pub, to wander into a nightclub that Sophie was able to get in for free. Sophie was rather reluctant to admit to Justin that this privilege was a result of sexual favours that, together with Lara and Carol, she'd once granted the nightclub manager. She wasn't sure where the reluctance came from. She was open about what she did for a living, and enjoyed entertaining Justin with accounts of the embarrassing and amusing incidents of a porn star's life. What was the difference between discussing the mess resulting from loose bowels and anal sex, and admitting that she sometimes used sex to gain entry into generally exclusive areas? Perhaps it was because she'd have to admit that her rise through the porn industry involved sexual promiscuity that did not have the excuse of providing masturbatory entertainment.

"This is fucking great!" yelled Justin, through the noise and flashing lights of the nightclub, at Sophie who was dancing opposite him. "This place is awesome!"

Sophie smiled, as she swivelled on her bare feet. She'd left her shoes along with her handbag and coat in the cloakroom. This wasn't the first time that Justin admitted that his experience of nightclubs hadn't really been anywhere near the top of the market. And the lines of speed they shared were helping them enjoy the music and atmosphere that much more. Sophie wished she had some E, but she wasn't in the mood for hunting out dealers.

Soon, Sophie and Justin were standing outside the nightclub. It was a little chilly,

but at least it wasn't raining. Justin had a broad smile on his face.

"Wow! That was a fucking great day!" he enthused. "I didn't expect anything like this when I went into Costa Fiorenze this morning. Thanks. I've really enjoyed it."

"It doesn't have to end now, you know," said Sophie with a smile.

"Well, I've got your number. I can phone you. We can meet up again some day."

"Don't be fucking soft! I mean we can go back to my place. I don't live far from here. Just a couple of streets away."

"For coffee?"

"If you like," said Sophie, with a grin. "But you don't have to talk fucking euphemisms with me. I'm a fucking porno film star. I sucked ten men off at once in *Cum Babes International Volume Three*. Your cock'll be so fucking sore you'll have to bandage it for a month."

Justin blushed. At first Sophie thought it was just a trick of the street lamps. Did people really blush like that? It actually *did* change the colour of his skin.

"I don't think I can. Or more to the point, I don't think I want to."

Sophie was annoyed. "What the fuck you on about? It's a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Are you a virgin? Or are you some kind of homo?"

"No, I'm not gay. And I'm not a virgin, either. Though compared to you, I almost feel I am. No, it's not that. It's that I *do* want to see you again, but I don't think it'd work if I... if I... if I made love to you. I think I'd prefer it if we were just friends."

"Just friends?"

"Yes. Just friends."

"Have it your own way, then," said Sophie, who was more annoyed at this sexual

rejection than she'd imagined possible. After all, it wasn't as if Justin was such a great catch. What could be seen of him wasn't exactly competition for the male porn stars Sophie was accustomed to. Gangly, awkward, skinny. Nothing that would get him past the first audition.

She spun round on her heels and strode off towards her apartment without turning back her head. The impotent arsehole didn't know what he was missing. Anyway, the sleep that Sophie had been denying herself so long was catching up with her and its prospect was very appealing.

Nevertheless, Sophie was actually rather pleased when the phone rang a couple of days later and she heard Justin's voice. She hadn't quite forgotten him and an evening with Sylvia and her husband, Geoff, had more than made up for the missed opportunity of sex. She had rather enjoyed her day with Justin. Perhaps this was what was lacking in her life: knowing someone who she didn't fuck or with whom she'd never fucked. Perhaps there was something in the idea of being just friends with someone.

Sophie was reflecting on the oddness of the situation when she met Justin at a pub near the cinema where they were going to see the Cohen Brothers film he'd enthused about. When was the last time she'd ever met anyone a second time without having had sex with them? It didn't matter whether the person was a man or a woman, all her relationships were predicated on sex. And it didn't matter whether that sex was in the bedroom or under the harsh glare of studio lights. It was always sex.

In fact, Sophie was quite pleased at the end of the evening when she agreed to meet Justin another day and no mention at all was made of the two of them spending the night together. How weird! Perhaps that was what friendships were meant to be like.

There weren't many men she'd spent an evening with and not had sex with. And most of those were in the days before she had a film career. These days even her female friends were also her lovers.

A few weeks later, Sophie felt much more comfortable with her relationship with Justin. They would chat about everything. They reminisced on childhood. They shared jokes and observations. Sophie even let Justin tease her, which was something she was normally very guarded about, although he teased her more on her size than on her source of income. Sometimes, however, Sophie couldn't help wondering whether Justin was gay and that was why it was possible for them to maintain a non-sexual friendship.

Except, of course, that he wasn't gay.

This Sophie was partly convinced of after talking to male porn stars who also worked in gay movies. Not all of them did so merely because the money was better. Some men had a definite preference for male company.

But the real clincher was Ashley.

And here was Ashley, still with Justin all those years later. It was Ashley, in fact, who spotted Sophie sitting alone on the patio under the sun, rather hoping that she'd not be noticed.

"My God! It isn't! It is! Look, Justin! It's Sophie!"

"Goodness me!" said Justin, adjusting his eyes to the gloom of the shade.

"Sophie! How *are* you? It's been ages!"

"I'm fine. D'you want to join me, you two?"

"Well, sure, Sophie," said Justin with a smile. "But aren't you with someone?"

"I was. But not now. Come on! I could do with the company."

The three of them sat together and exchanged life histories. Ashley and Justin had both gained promotion and more responsibility in their own careers and were very impressed by the huge turn-about in Sophie's career.

"Don't you miss the money and excitement?" Justin asked.

"Not really. It's not something I'd have been able to keep up forever. I'm over thirty now, after all."

"Bloody hell!" said Justin, still grinning with evident pleasure at meeting his old friend again. "So, you are! Over thirty! Grim, isn't it? Growing old and everything!" He stood up. "Look, your glass is empty. What do you want to drink?"

Sophie was then left alone with Ashley while Justin made his way to the bar. She was relieved that Ashley seemed genuinely excited to meet her, which was in such acute contrast to the first time they met all those years ago. Surprisingly, it was Ashley who was the most enthusiastic of the couple, eager to fill Sophie in on the lives of people whom Sophie had never really known that well and on the benefits of the life of domestic bliss she and Justin were enjoying. She was especially happy that Sophie was herself looking forward to settling down with Malcolm.

It was so different in the Star and Garter when they first met. Indeed, when she arrived, late as usual, she didn't expect to see Justin sitting with anyone. Normally when Sophie met Justin he would be patiently working his way through a newspaper crossword or playing solitaire on his PDA. He'd got resigned to Sophie's unreliability, which was just as well as there were times when Sophie didn't make the appointment at all.

Today, however, Justin was sitting next to someone else and a woman at that. Compared to the buxom, peroxidized, heavily made-up women of Sophie's normal



acquaintance, this woman was decidedly plain. Her hair was short, her clothes were rather ordinary and functional, and she even wore glasses. She wasn't unattractive, though. It was just that nothing proclaimed her beauty in an obvious way.

"This is Ashley," said Justin, who was squeezing the girl's hand. "We've been seeing each other for about a week now. And when I said I was going to the pub, she asked if she could come along. You don't mind, do you, Sophie?"

"Of course not," said Sophie with a barely contained snarl. "Why should I?"

She sat down on the seat opposite Ashley and glowered at her while Justin stood up to buy the drinks with the twenty pound note Sophie forced into his hand.

Ashley was nervous. She smiled shyly.

"So you're Sophie? Justin's friend. He's told me about you," she said. "Not a lot, but he said you work in the media."

Sophie pulled a cigarette out of a packet and lit it. There was nothing about her casual clothes that announced which aspect of the media she was associated with, but Sophie didn't intend to leave Ashley uninformed for long.

"Media? Yeah, that's right. Media."

"That must be really exciting."

"It is," agreed Sophie, blowing smoke out of her mouth and not caring that it got in Ashley's eyes. "Especially if you like fucking as much as I do."

Ashley swallowed and ruffled her brow. "Sorry? Did you say...?"

"Fucking. That's what I do. Fucking! I'm a fucking porn star. The real fucking deal. Didn't Justin sweetie tell you? I fuck for a living and get paid for being filmed doing it. And you know what?"

“No?” asked Ashley in a low voice.

“I fucking love it! It’s fucking great! And Justin didn’t say a word?”

Ashley shook her head and looked distinctly uncomfortable. Her eyes flew all around the place, partly towards Sophie and partly towards Justin at the bar. This was not a situation she wanted to be in.

“Justin didn’t say anything?” Sophie persisted.

“He just said the media,” said Ashley in a low voice.

“Yeah. I star in porn films. The type you see in basements in Soho. *Busty Babes Eat Each Other. Anal Excursions. Blow Job Honeys*. You ever seen any of them?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“It’s not simulated. It’s the real deal. Two cocks front and back. Spunk all over the face. And most of all, I like doing girls.”

“Girls?” wondered Ashley, looking at alarm at Justin, who was returning with glasses of beer and wine.

It was Sophie who spoke to Justin as he sat down, clearly aware from Ashley’s face that the conversation wasn’t exactly going well.

“Shame on you, Just,” said Sophie. “You never told your little sweetheart what I do for a living.”

Justin bit his lower lip. “I wasn’t sure that you’d want me to.”

“Why should I be bothered? It’s what I do. And fucking with girls is what I like doing most. Strap-ons and dildos, fisting and fingers, I love it. Do you like it, Ashley? Is that what you’d want to do?”

Ashley looked down nervously at her drink. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Y’ought to try it, sweetie,” sniffed Sophie. “I can give you a lesson if you like.”

“Lesson?”

“You know. Bit of girl-on-girl. That appeal to you? I won’t charge you.”

“Sophie!” Justin blurted. “What’s going on? You’re not usually like this! What’s got into you?”

“Don’t be soft, Just,” Sophie continued, blowing out smoke through her mouth.

“Bit of fun never hurt anyone. What d’you think, Just? You wanna join in?”

“I thought we were friends, Sophie. If I’d known you were gonna be like this, I’d never...”

“Never what?” Sophie asked with a sneer.

“Never, you know, never have come out to see you this evening with Ashley.”

“What? Would you keep me your dirty little secret, lover boy?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... it’s just...”

“Oh! Don’t mind me, Justin. Don’t fucking mind me. What about you, Ashley? What do you think, eh?”

Ashley gripped Justin’s hand in hers and glared back at Sophie. This act of proprietary ownership troubled Sophie, but she pretended to ignore it.

“What do you mean?” Ashley asked.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. She looked at Justin, who was distinctly uneasy but gripped her hand rather more tightly than before.

The conversation continued in this vein. Sophie taunted Justin for his reluctance in telling Ashley what she did for a living, fantasized what it would be like for Ashley to

have sex with her, and made some unkind comments about Justin's sexuality.

"In all the time I've known him he's been like some poof. Is he like that with you, sweetie? Or perhaps he's got no prick to speak of. Have you and Justin fucked together?"

"What a question!" said Ashley angrily.

"Don't be a prude! You haven't, have you? He's fucking impotent, isn't he?"

"Well, actually..." began Ashley tentatively, and then she thought better of what she was about to say. "Look, Sophie. It's obvious you don't like me. What I do or what I've done with Justin is really not your business."

"Well, really!" said Sophie affronted.

"Come on, Justin!" Ashley commanded, standing up with her glass of wine still mostly untouched. "This is not what I was hoping for when I agreed to come out with you."

"But I..." said Justin, still holding his pint of beer.

"Leave it!" Ashley commanded. "We'll go to another pub if it's a beer you want."

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" asked Sophie in mock sympathy. "Don't you want to know what Justin's friends are like?"

"That's not it," said Ashley aggressively as she sidled out of her seat and buttoned up her jacket. "It's not what Justin's friends are like. It's what you're like. I wasn't expecting anything like this at all. Justin told me that you and he were just friends."

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## Chapter Two

To begin with, Sophie's decision not to see Justin again gave her a warm sense of vengeful satisfaction. After all, if she was such an embarrassment to him and his prissy girlfriend, why should she waste her time? She didn't return Justin's calls and the one time he spoke to her on the phone she made a feeble excuse as to why they couldn't meet.

Despite herself, however, it was with increasing fondness that she remembered Justin and their innocent nights out at the cinema and the pub. She rather missed his friendship.

It wasn't as if she had no active social life without him. A girl like her could fill every minute of every day with some kind of fun. She somehow missed those innocent goodbye kisses where there was no expectation that her vagina or anus should take more punishment in addition to what it had already received as part of her normal working day. It didn't matter if she was socialising with a man, a woman, several men or mixed company, the evenings always ended the same way. A few lines, a few spliffs, perhaps something stronger, and, when sufficiently relaxed, on the bed, on the fireside rug, in the kitchen, penis, dildo, fist or fingers thrusting in her orifices. And then the familiar scent of semen, vaginal juice or urine, dripping down her thighs, her face or her breasts. In many ways so rewarding, but also curiously empty and predictable. Here was the love and affection she craved, but where was the companionship and friendship she also needed?

It was during a shoot for *Bang Busters Volume Four* that she exhausted the final crumb of satisfaction she'd got from terminating her friendship with Justin. She'd already

spent an hour or so on the film set, in which time she'd fellated two men and had both of them ejaculate onto her face, along with a third man who'd previously been fucking Lara. Perhaps it was the sour taste of semen. Perhaps it was the slightly fetid taste of raw genitalia. Perhaps it was the soreness in her anus that was much more pronounced after being fucked face-on while sitting on her co-star's lap. It couldn't have helped that at the same time her mouth was gobbling an erect penis and her hand was pumping a third penis.

Then suddenly she lost all heart for it.

She wasn't sure whether the film director noticed this sudden collapse of enthusiasm, but it was obvious Doug did, as he thrust into her from below. And Michael hastened his ejaculation as he also detected Sophie's waning excitement.

But when Sophie unexpectedly burst into tears and awkwardly disengaged herself from the amorous company with whom she shared the film set, it was clear to everyone that something had snapped.

Sophie staggered over to the sofa where, only moments ago, Julia had been fucked by Doug and Angelo. The camera trailed her, perhaps uncertain whether Sophie's tears were worth recording, but the director was more sensitive and bade the filming stop.

"What's wrong, Sophie?" he asked her, putting a comforting arm around Sophie's bare shoulders, which heaved with her sobs.

"I don't know!" she wailed. "I don't know! I just sorta lost it!"

"You're not the only one who's lost it!" moaned Doug, as he stroked his shrivelling, but still glistening, penis.

"Come on, Sophie," cajoled the director. "We've got everyone in place. It'd be a

shame not to finish the scene.”

Sophie looked over at her three male co-stars who were tugging and pulling at their semi-erect penises in the hope of them retaining something of their past glory. They smiled at her, clearly eager to resume their amatory activity from where it had been interrupted. Michael, with whom Sophie had spent the previous night, waved at her with the fingers of his right hand.

“I’m not sure I can,” Sophie moaned. “It’s not like me! I’ve lost it! I’m just not enjoying it!”

“Well, you don’t have to enjoy it to finish the scene, love,” the director continued. “I won’t be able to pay you full whack otherwise.”

“I know. I know,” Sophie moaned. “Can’t you edit it a bit? Use more of Lara and Julia and less of me?”

“Yes, of course we can, love. But that means we’ll pay more to Lara and Julia and less to you. Do you want that?”

Sophie hesitated. She’d always told herself that she only ever did it for the money. Each filmed action, often identical ones to those she’d do for free with the same co-stars away from the camera, was worth money. It was foolish not to perform when just a little bit of anal or urine made such dramatic differences to her pay packet, and took such little time to film. But the very thought of putting Michael’s penis back into her mouth, where the taste on her tongue was still so vivid, was enough to make Sophie retch. Her chest heaved involuntarily, shaking her well-proportioned breasts, while a dribble of creamy sperm regurgitated into the back of her throat.

Sophie coughed.

“Are you feeling OK?” the director asked. “Are you well?”

“I had my check-up last week,” said Sophie automatically, before recognizing that the query was occasioned by her current discomfort. “Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine. I guess I’ll just have to forget the bonus, won’t I?”

“’Fraid so, love,” said the director sadly. “If we paid it you whatever happened, it wouldn’t be worth anything, would it? ’Course we could make it up for you if you join Lara with the woodmen in the afternoon shoot. What do you think?”

Sophie considered this with a frown. She shook her head. “No. Can’t do it. I’m just not in the mood. The idea’s making me feel a bit sick, actually. It’s really weird. Maybe it’s something I ate.”

“I didn’t know my spunk was as bad as that!” joked Michael rather sweetly.

Sophie smiled. Michael and Doug were good sorts. It wasn’t them that was the problem. It was something else. It was something to do with the aching hollowness that was opening up in her like a void. Something like how the previous night she couldn’t be bothered when George suggested he join Michael and she to make an amorous threesome. Instead of agreeing like she normally would, she simply said that Michael was all the man she needed, which wasn’t strictly true but certainly added extra passion to his lovemaking.

After leaving the film set, Sophie wandered aimlessly to the grounds of a nearby church, where she sat on a bench with a cigarette and her thoughts. What was wrong with her? Now she was so distant from the sight of cock and camera, her earlier aversion seemed ridiculous.

She picked up her mobile phone. She needed someone to speak to. And the person



whose saved number she chose was Justin.

The same Justin, of course, who was now returning from the bar of the Black Swan carrying three glasses of wine for Ashley, Sophie and himself. Justin laid out the drinks and sat down with a grin.

“Isn’t it wonderful,” said Ashley to Justin, “Sophie getting into accountancy and everything?”

“It’s really quite unexpected,” agreed Justin. “We had no idea what had happened to you. I thought you’d gone to California where they make most of those porno movies. You know, where you can be filmed outdoors in the nude all year long.”

Sophie shook her head. “No chance. The weather’s tempting. And the money, too! But I just didn’t have the spirit. And you? What’re you doing these days? Still systems admin?”

“Well, more admin than systems, really,” Justin chuckled. “Promotion to management makes all jobs seem just the same. But I’m still working for the same firm.”

The same firm, in fact, where Justin was working when Sophie phoned him up on her mobile phone outside the church.

“Sophie!” he said with surprise on recognising her voice. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear from you again. After that time with Ash, I thought, well, I don’t know what I thought, but anyway... How are you?”

“Fine. Fine,” said Sophie automatically. And then remembering herself. “Well, actually not fine at all. D’you wanna meet up this evening?”

“This evening?” Justin wondered. “Well, I told Ash...”

“I’d really like to see you, Justin.”

“Oh. All right! But you won’t mind, will you, if I don’t tell Ashley. She got real upset that last time. In fact, she often mentions you. And not in a nice way either, I’m afraid. And I don’t think it’s just ’cause you’re a porn star and everything.”

“Whatever!” said Sophie. “I just want to talk.”

And what Sophie most wanted to talk about, and this wasn’t what she’d expected before she met Justin, was Ashley.

Justin sat opposite Sophie in the Queen’s Head and nursed his pint in his hands. Sophie was dressed modestly in sweater and jeans and looked rather less like a porn star than the barmaid who served them. She puffed away at her cigarette and drank her vodka and lime rather too quickly.

“Why all these questions about Ash, Sophie?” Justin asked. “You only met her the one time. And you didn’t get on that well, either, if you remember. What’s the reason for this?”

Sophie looked down at her manicured nails sadly. “I dunno. I don’t know at all.”

“If you’re so keen on finding out about Ash, why don’t you speak to her yourself?”

“Do you think she’d want me to?”

“No,” said Justin thoughtfully. “I don’t think she would at all. But it might be better than asking me all these questions.”

Sophie nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right there.”

And so it was the following evening that Sophie pressed the buzzer for Ashley’s flat in the huge Victorian house in Fulham. It was obvious even through the crackle of the intercom speaker that Ashley neither expected nor welcomed the sound of Sophie’s

voice.

“What do you want?” Ashley asked, not unreasonably, when she’d established for sure who it was that was visiting her.

Sophie wasn’t sure what to say. She just somehow wanted to make it up with Ashley so that she and Justin could return to the same status of friendship they’d known before, but that would sound feeble.

“Just to visit, you know. Chat and that. Can I come up?”

“Well, since you’re here...” Ashley conceded with a sigh.

Sophie heard the low whine of the door’s catch as it was released. She pushed the heavy door open and headed for the staircase and Ashley’s flat on the second floor. She knew she was on the right floor, sure enough, as Ashley was standing outside the door to her flat in a tee-shirt and shorts, with espadrilles on her bare feet.

“So, this is where you live?” asked Sophie as she followed Ashley through the open door.

It was a smaller flat than hers. Only one bedroom. The furniture was more modest and well-worn. The television and stereo were functional at best and certainly not the best money could buy. And although the flat had the homely untidiness of a place where visitors were not anticipated, it had none of the sheer recklessness with which Sophie abandoned ashtrays, clothes and bed sheets in her more luxurious and select apartment.

“It mightn’t be much, but the mortgage is crippling!” Ashley remarked sadly.

She wandered over to an armchair that faced the television and gestured to Sophie to sit on either the sofa or the other armchair. Sophie sprawled onto the sofa, pulling her sandaled feet off the ground. Like Ashley, she was dressed rather plainly in a tee-shirt

and shorts, but her clothing was designer label and conspicuously expensive.

“Now you’re here, would you like some tea or coffee?” Ashley asked.

“Coffee. White. Two sugars,” said Sophie, as Ashley retreated into the kitchenette that made up one third of her living room.

The two women chatted amiably for a few minutes, with Ashley directing the conversation and Sophie colluding with her in keeping the topics innocent and unthreatening. It was just the sort of chat two work colleagues or two neighbours might have. However, it served its function of helping the two women relax in each other’s company. Sophie could see that Ashley was slowly revising her opinion of her as she plied the charm that had served so well in furthering her career in adult entertainment. Sophie was more than just a woman who fucked for her pay cheques.

“I’ve seen that film with Kevin Spacey, too. I thought it was crap, though,” said Ashley. “I suppose you saw it with Justin, did you?”

“Yes,” Sophie admitted, aware that conversation was beginning to steer away from more trivial matters.

“Was that before or after I started seeing Justin?” Ashley asked.

“Before,” said Sophie. “I’ve only seen Justin the once since I met you that time. And that was to find out where you live.”

“And is it true what Justin said that you and he haven’t ever...?”

“Not once.”

“You know, I just don’t understand that. I mean, him and me, well, we do it... you know... we do it all the time. How can someone like you who, you know, who does it with everyone...how...?”

“What don’t you understand?”

“I just don’t think it’s possible.”

“What?”

“For you and he to be just friends. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not?”

Ashley sipped at her coffee and crossed and uncrossed her long bare legs.

“Before I met you,” she said, “when Justin mentioned you, I kind of suspected you were his ex or something. I mean, it’s not unknown for people to be just friends, but it doesn’t usually last for long if they’re both, you know, the opposite sex or sexually compatible or whatever. It’s quite nice for people to be friends and everything, but you kind of expect that.... But, anyway, I was quite touched by it. Justin’s a fairly straight kind of guy, in both senses. If anyone could have women friends who were just that, you know, just friends, well, he’d be the one most likely...”

“Yes?” Sophie asked, as she glanced at her handbag where she stored her cigarettes and wondered whether it would be too rude to light one up.

“So, I thought maybe you’d be a bit like Justin, you know. Perhaps you were someone not interested in sex with men. Maybe you were a bit, you know, sexually reserved. But I didn’t expect you to be some kind of sex film actress. I knew such women existed, but I never expected to meet one in real life. And it just doesn’t make sense. How can someone whose career is having sex with men be just friends with my Justin? It’s not as if he’s not interested in women or anything.”

Ashley looked towards Sophie expectantly, as if expecting her to have an answer. Sophie was struggling between her need for the consolation of nicotine and her

uncertainty as to why she was even here. What was she expecting to achieve? Did she even know why she'd come all this way to Fulham?

"I guess it's because we were just friends that I've come all this way to see him," said Sophie. "It's not something I've got a lot of, you know, friends who're just friends. In my line of work, there's not a clear dividing line between sex and friendship. Or between sex for love and sex for money. It all gets a bit mixed up and screwy. And I guess what I liked about my friendship with Justin, and I don't think I really appreciated it as much as I should, is that is exactly what it was. Friendship. And the fact that he's a bloke and I'm a woman is sort of not the issue in my circles. It'd be almost the same if he'd been a woman, you know. After a while, you get so used to having sex with different people you sort of don't think about people in any other way."

Ashley frowned. She looked compassionately at Sophie's shaking hands. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Nothing a ciggie wouldn't help," Sophie said.

"I've got an ashtray. I don't smoke myself. Well, not cigarettes, but sometimes, Justin and me, we share a spliff."

Ashley got up, opened the window even wider than it already was and placed an ashtray on the glass-topped table in front of the sofa. Sophie felt much calmer with the first infusion of nicotine and blew out a cloud of blue-grey smoke while flicking the end of the cigarette in the ashtray.

Ashley sat on the sofa next to Sophie and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

"I'm not a prude, Sophie," said Ashley. "At least I hope I'm not. People have to

make a living and some people make a living from the sex industry. It's a livelihood and I guess people choose the career they're best suited to. You've made your career by starring in sex films. I guess you must be very good at it, you know, having sex with different men..."

"...and women," Sophie reminded her.

"...and women," Ashley conceded. "But I still don't really understand this thing about just being friends with someone. I mean, I'm friends with Justin as well as being his... as well, you know... It's not like it's incompatible, friendship and sex, you know."

"Not incompatible so much," admitted Sophie, "but it's different for you. All your friends are just friends and nothing else except for Justin, whereas for me only one of my friends was just a friend..."

"And you miss that?" asked Ashley.

Sophie puffed at her cigarette again. She didn't actually want to say yes, (that would sound soft), but she nodded her head.

"And is that why you were so, you know, so rude when we met in the pub?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Were you kind of jealous of me for taking Justin away from you, was that it?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd say 'jealous' exactly."

"Whatever," Ashley said conciliatorily.

The two women sat silently on the sofa, Sophie puffing away at the last inch of her cigarette and Ashley massaging her forehead agitatedly.

At last, Ashley lifted her head up.

"So, Sophie, is the only reason you came to see me because you want to make it

up with Justin and be just friends again? That doesn't really make much sense. Why d'you bother seeing me, alone, like this? Is something else bothering you?"

Sophie stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and pushed it forward an inch or so. She turned her head round and looked Ashley in the face. What should she say? What was bothering her? She decided to mention the time she'd lost her enthusiasm for sex at work and just couldn't carry on, when suddenly the whole exercise seemed repulsive to her, and how it still remained repulsive. She spoke to Ashley, because she knew no one else, no one anywhere, who she could talk to about how she had somehow lost the stomach and inclination to have sex under the gaze of a film camera.

"Well, there is something else..." she began, thinking that she'd somehow be able to say all she wanted to in a few sentences.

But she was wrong. She was still talking an hour later, Ashley only interjecting occasionally, as Sophie described her life in the adult industry. She described the film shoots where she'd drunk urine. The occasions she'd fellated more than a dozen men who then proceeded, one by one, to ejaculate over her face. The dildos that had penetrated her anus. The strap-ons she'd used to inflict similar punishment on both female and male co-stars. The often wilder group sex she'd had with her co-stars off camera and the pot pourri of drugs she enjoyed in their company. And as she described and enumerated these occasions, she wasn't sure whether she was boasting, to say to Ashley, look what I've done, wouldn't you like to have the same problems as me?

Sophie looked up, her eyes streaming with a thin trickle of tears just as a similarly thin sliver of snot trailed out of her nose. Ashley had a confused expression on her face, as she supported Sophie with an arm around the shoulders and held ready a paper tissue



in her free hand. Her eyes burned with a strange excitement, while her face also expressed compassion and something that was neither envy nor pity, but an unsettled mixture of the two.

Ashley was quite pretty really. Not porno-pretty, but pretty in a kind of normal, non-porno way. She had bright brown eyes, which sparkled quite endearingly now she'd taken off her glasses. She had a broad face that filled out like hamster-cheeks when she smiled. She had lips that were naturally thick, with no collagen enhancement, and her tongue licked across the top of her teeth seductively as she moistened her lips.

So, it was quite natural for Sophie to return Ashley's friendly supportive arm with a friendly cuddle of her own. Just as it was natural for Sophie to place a hand on Ashley's bare knee and to pull her face towards hers. And just as it was in the normal and expected course of things for Sophie's open mouth to lock against Ashley's and for the two of them to join tongues and lips in passionate kissing. And, as the rhythm of Sophie's sobs were replaced by a rhythm of a different kind as her passion built up, there was nothing unnatural at all as both she and Ashley divested one another of their clothes and gave each other much more vigorous and erotic comfort.

Sophie had made love to women many times in her life, and for her Ashley wasn't very special. She was clearly uncertain and gauche with regards to making love with another woman, although it also excited her much more than it upset her. But Ashley wasn't the first woman Sophie had introduced to Sapphic love. She'd even done so on a film set, which must surely be the least romantic place imaginable for this to happen. Nor was Ashley especially accomplished as a lover. Practice in sex, especially with those who were themselves well-practiced, could never be matched by enthusiasm, however great.

And Ashley's enthusiasm was certainly considerable, although more was expressed through her excited eyes than by anything she said.

"I didn't believe that making love with a woman could be as rough and physical as this!" exclaimed Ashley at last, as she lay on her back with Sophie's teeth still nibbling her clitoris.

Sophie could only nod.

There was much that Ashley could learn about sex with women, and it was obvious that she wanted to find out more, but Sophie decided that whoever it was who would be her future teacher and guide in the ways of lesbian love, it wasn't going to be her.

As they lay on Ashley's double bed, the moonlight shining through the thin cotton curtains, Sophie swore softly to herself. Shit! Whatever it was that she'd intended to achieve when she decided to meet Ashley it hadn't been this. Again, just as she always did, she'd let sex determine how she behaved. She was incorrigible and there was no hope for her.

She looked at Ashley's naked body nestled against her, the lips curled in contented sleep and a slight bruise just coming up on the inside of her left thigh. Ashley was a dear, and in the normal course of events Sophie could imagine seeing her again. But Sophie had no need for more lovers in her life.

That wasn't what she wanted.

So it was then that she decided to change her career. At the time she had no idea that this meant enrolling for a course in accountancy. In fact, her thoughts focused no further than moving to a smaller cheaper flat so she could survive for a while before she

found a new direction for her life. She knew she'd have to break loose from her friends and acquaintances otherwise she'd just be dragged back into making sex films, and this was what she decided she didn't want to do.

And now, several years later, here she was, every link with her previous life severed. She'd successfully made the change. At first, she still saw some of her old friends in the porn industry for the companionship they offered, both sexual and otherwise. She even occasionally relented and let herself be filmed in a porno, but she did so reluctantly and only for the money that was so easily earned. And she did see more of Ashley and Justin. She even agreed to collude in Ashley's game of deceit, which was to never tell Justin just how affectionate the two women had been that evening. But the deceit wearied her, so when she rented the flat in Wood Green she used that as an excuse never to make the trek across to South West London. In any case, it troubled her that on the one hand the couple was talking about marriage, whilst on the other Ashley expressed in the odd thoughtful smile or overlong stare that she still hoped for a reprise of their evening together.

"It's *so* weird seeing you again!" exclaimed Justin, shaking his head as if this might throw off his incredulity.

"Yeah, it is," said Sophie. "And did you get married in the end? Are you married now?"

"Yes!" said Ashley, holding up her ring finger, which Sophie had, of course, already noticed was properly adorned. "We sent you an invite to your old address, but it must have not got to you."

"And you're getting married too?" Justin asked.

“Yes, I think so,” said Sophie. “Malcolm. He works in the City. It’ll be strange committing to someone like this. It sort of puts a line under everything else.”

“It needn’t, of course,” said Justin.

“It needn’t what?”

“Things don’t have to stop just because you’re married,” Ashley agreed. “You can be committed to your partner and still have a fuller sex life than with just one person.”

Sophie blinked. What was Ashley saying exactly? “I’m sorry. I don’t quite understand.”

Justin smiled. “Of course you do, Sophie. You understand better than anyone. Ash and you. Ash and me. The only thing missing was the three of us together. I don’t know what I was thinking about in those days, but since you and Ash got it together, she always talked about being a bit more adventurous...”

“Yes,” agreed Ashley. “It took a bit of courage at first, but it’s easy for couples to meet other like-minded couples on the internet. Justin didn’t want to at first.”

“Yeah,” Justin continued, squeezing Ashley’s hand. “It’s one thing you and Ash doing it together. I sort of half-expected it anyway, so I wasn’t that surprised when she told me. It’s another to do it regularly. You know, have a polyamorous lifestyle.”

“Polyamorous?” Sophie asked.

“Yeah,” said Justin. “You know what it means?”

“Of course,” said Sophie. “But you and Ashley, I just never thought.”

“We’ve been doing it for years now,” Ashley said with an enthusiastic smile. “There are a lot of us. And there’s always space for more!”

“I had no idea you led a lifestyle like that. It’s a total surprise to me!” said Sophie

truthfully.

“So,” Justin said, leaning forward over the bench, clasping Ashley’s hand tightly in his own, “when we saw you, we were so excited. Now, we have a much more open lifestyle, a bit like yours used to be when you made all those porn videos, it seems a perfect opportunity for us all to get to know each other again, only this time a lot better and more intimately.”

Sophie looked across the table at Ashley and Justin, whose faces were expressing hope and anticipation. Sophie could see behind them the other people in the patio, people who’d been working in the office all day and enjoying the evening sun. There came a sudden rush and thunder of wings as a swan launched itself into the air along the flowing River Thames.

Sophie smiled. “So, you’d like me to come back with you so we can have sex together, only the three of us?”

“Yes!” said Ashley. “Please say yes! I’ve so wanted to make love to you again after all these years.”

“Is this what you want, Justin?” Sophie asked.

“Of course,” he said, not a hint of doubt in his voice. “That’s what I should have done all those years ago. I just don’t know what was wrong with me.”

“So, what do you say, Sophie?” asked Ashley. “It’s only a short distance to our flat...”

Sophie coughed. She looked at Justin. She looked back at Ashley. She smiled at them, warmly and affectionately. Her mind was made up.

“I don’t think so,” she said at last. “I think I’d much prefer it if we stayed just

friends.”