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ASK ANYONE

by Caleb

CHAPTER 4

Ricky looked absolutely splendid as he stood by the door and checked the invitations of the guests to the quilt exhibition. He was inordinately proud of his new suit, confessing that he had never had a suit before. Where Aunt Prue had found it, I had no idea, but his presence in a strange way lent a certain distinction to the proceedings – a doorman with the subtle implication of being a bouncer/guard as well. The quilts were expensive, it was true, but it was highly unlikely that the well-heeled silver-tails from Toorak, Kew, Camberwell and environs beyond, would suddenly snatch a valuable quilt from the display racks and make a dash for a getaway car.

He wore new black polished shoes also. He told me that because he had big feet (fractional fitting 26 Q - my estimate), Aunt Prue had given him money to go and buy some new shoes, impressing upon him they had to be plain black leather. Every now and then he would surreptitiously polish the tips on the back of his trouser legs. I caught him doing it at one stage, and he grinned at me like a mischievous over-grown schoolboy.

I was doing duty standing by the bar and overseeing the waiters as they moved through the thronging guests with champagne and exquisite things to nibble on. I had dressed with particular care, wearing my black suit and a new grass green silk shirt. I saw, with a jolt, that Michael Boynton was present. Our eyes met, and he grinned sardonically and sauntered over to me, sipping casually from a champagne flute.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I had long since stifled my disappointment in him, but I was not yet ready to let bygones be bygones.

He stood beside me with an unruffled demeanor, and answered serenely, “Your aunt was kind enough to invite me.”

I gave a humorless laugh. “Know a lot about quilts, do you?”

He smiled. "Almost nothing," he replied, "but I know quality when I see it." He waved the champagne flute gently around, in an all-encompassing gesture.

I just grunted. We stood side by side gazing at the milling guests. He took a sip of his drink. "So tell me," he said, "what's the prize of the collection? What's the one they all want – the one they're too terrified to show too much interest in, in case they draw someone else's attention to it?"

I smirked. "You're standing in front of it," I said. He turned slowly and stepped back, sipping his drink as he examined it. He said at length, "The colours are a bit dark."

"It's the style," I said. "It's an Amish quilt. The colours are very characteristic. This one dates from about 1860. It's extremely rare to find a pieced Amish quilt from this date, especially one in such near perfect condition. And see..." I pointed to one of the blocks within the pattern of the quilt. "The imperfect block. That's almost a stamp of authenticity."

He was still looking at the quilt. "How so?" he asked. "The women who made these quilts were very religious. Pieced quilts were a sign of frugality – no scrap of fabric was wasted. They strived to reach a level of exquisite perfection in their stitchery as a prayer to God, yet at the same time they realized that only God is perfect and that a truly perfect quilt was presumption – an affront to God. Hence the imperfect block – a deliberate mistake."

He gave me an elliptical look. "You know a lot about it." I shrugged. "If I could have any quilt in this gallery, this would be the one I would choose."

He said, with a smile, "Then ask your aunt to withdraw it from sale and give it to you. I'm sure she would."

I laughed. "Yeah, right. I'm not sure I'd have the balls to ask her to sacrifice a very fat profit. I would estimate she expects this one to go for about ten thousand dollars."

His eyes opened wide and he breathed, "Fuckin' hell!"

And I continued cynically, "And I'll bet there are many here who would be willing to pay it."

He looked over the assembly, and said, with wonder in his voice, "Who would have thought it...?"

"Old money," I murmured, "Family money ... Establishment money ..." I looked at him sideways. "Out of your league, Mr. Boynton?" I soon as I said it, I regretted it. Even to my ears it sounded snide and supercilious.

He looked me full in the eyes and said quietly, "Yes, it is. But I'm getting there..." And he drained his glass, set it down carefully on the bar, and moved away from me and was lost in the crowd.

I was furious with myself. I knew that, in some indefinable way, I had hurt him. I had stomped on his soul as before I had stomped on his foot, but there

was nothing I could say in reparation. I watched the crowds milling through the gallery and suddenly there he was again, this time with Aunt Prue in tow. He was smiling at her charmingly and she looked as though she were under some sort of spell. They moved up beside me, but were concentrating on the quilt.

I heard him say to her, "This one, Miss Cunningham."
Aunt Prue replied instantly. "It's a lovely quilt, Mr. Boynton. It's Amish, you know."

He nodded and said with a slight laugh, "Yes, I know and it looks like it dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. That's what attracted me to it. I don't think I've seen a finer example, and it's so rare to see a pieced Amish quilt from that period."

I nearly gasped at his audacity. He knew perfectly well that I could hear every word he was saying.

Aunt Prue gave a little coo of delighted surprise. "Well. You certainly know quilts, Mr. Boynton. So unusual in one so young – especially a man."

He inclined his head graciously to acknowledge her compliment. "I think it was the imperfect block that sold me. One could almost call it a stamp of authenticity."

Aunt Prue gave a trill of laughter, and then said, as though it were of no consequence, "It is *rather* expensive, you know."

He shrugged and smiled winningly at her, "Well, with that provenance, I should guess about ... nine ... or ten thousand at the most."

Aunt Prue gave a little gasp and said, "I'll go and find Marigold. She will know the exact price." She looked around and saw me and said, "Oh, Simon dear. Please get Mr. Boynton a glass of champagne while I find Marigold." She bustled off, leaving me seething with outrage at his sheer nerve.

Here was I prepared to eat humble pie and apologize to him, but I'd be damned if I'd do it while he ate proud pie in front of me.

With a stony face I handed him a flute of champagne which he accepted with a smug smile.

I couldn't restrain myself. "What the fuck do you think you are doing?" I hissed at him.

"What does it look like?" he answered calmly. "I'm buying a quilt, and I have it on very good authority this one is the pick of the exhibition."

"What do you want with a quilt?" I sneered.
He tasted his champagne. "It will look very well hanging in the conference room of *Michael/Angelo*." He fixed me with a satirical look. "Of course," he continued, "I'll have to pay for it with dirty vulgar new money, but – hey, it seems that even dirty vulgar new money is acceptable in this hallowed place."

His eyes were like agates.

I looked away, ashamed of my shabby snobbery. I muttered, "M-my apologies, Mr. Boynton. What I said was uncalled-for and out of place."

He took another sip and said with a perfectly straight face, "Yes, it was." I cast him a fulminating look, but had to choke down my retort as Aunt Prue and Marigold came sweeping up to us. He turned to them and his face lit up with a dazzling smile. I sidled away. I wanted to be elsewhere: I could not bear to witness the smarmy way he ingratiated himself with the two middle-aged women.

It was hurtful somehow. He didn't bother to waste his charm on me. What was it about me? The way I handled my personal relationships seemed to be forever cack-handed. Those I liked always ended up despising me. That realization was a melancholy thought. I seemed to be having a lot of those lately.

I did not see him again that afternoon. Around eight o'clock, the last of the buyers finally left and Ricky shut the front door. As I was helping the waiters stack up the champagne glasses at the bar, Aunt Prue came up to the quilt and carefully placed a red spot on the ticket next to it.

"Don't tell me he bought it," I exclaimed.

"Who, dear?" she said cheerfully.

"Michael Boynton," I answered, practically daring her to confirm it.

She gave me a wide smile. "Yes dear. You never told me he was so knowledgeable about Amish quilts."

"I don't know that he is," I answered drily. I couldn't bring myself to betray him.

She stepped back and admired the quilt. "And you didn't tell me what an absolutely charming man he is. And he thinks so very highly of you. He told me you are a delight to have around the office."

I strongly suspected that his praise reeked of irony, and it was all I could do to stop snorting with derision, so I just smiled and nodded.

She gave me a fond look, and patted me on the arm. "You could do very much worse, dear," she said, dropping her voice confidentially. "I approve wholeheartedly."

It took a couple of beats for me to realize what she was on about.

"Aunt Prue," I protested, "there is absolutely nothing like that between us." She just nodded with a self-satisfied smirk.

"No, really." I said more strenuously. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Again the smirk. "If you say so dear. In any event, I shall look forward to meeting him again on Saturday night."

A stab of alarm. "Saturday night?"

She nodded. "Yes. I invited him to our little party."

"He's married," I said forcefully.

She gave me a startled look. "Really? I had no idea. Oh dear. It seems I've dropped a brick. Well, no matter. I'll ring him at work tomorrow and invite his wife too." She gave me a sharp look. "Are you sure he's married?"

"I'm fairly sure he is," I replied, "He wears a wedding ring."

She pursed her lips. "That may not mean anything," she mused, "still " She gave me a worried look. "You will be careful Simon. I mean, after" She was stopped by the look I gave her.

I ground out, "There is nothing going on between us."
I think my vehemence confounded her a little.

Determined to change the subject, I asked, "How did the first day go?" She smiled. "Just over half the quilts already sold. That is so much better than we had expected or even hoped."

I cast a shrewd look at her. "Already in profit?"
"I'm not sure of the exact figures, but, yes, I think so. Marigold will know for certain."

"Well done," I smiled, "Very well done. How long do you intend to continue this exhibition?"

"About a week, I think. Then we shall have to give the quilts to their new owners."

A thought struck me. "Who'll be taking the money to the bank?"

She gave me a surprised look. "Why, I shall."
"Don't go alone," I said. "Take Ricky with you. Even though it will probably be only cheques and no cash, it's better to err on the side of caution."

She opened her eyes wide. "That's a very good idea. I'll have him meet me here first thing tomorrow. In fact, I'll keep him on until the end of the exhibition, if he agrees. He has been very helpful in these last few days, you know. It may seem a silly thing to say but there's something very comforting about a big man. One feels so safe. I'll go and talk to him now."

I watched her retreating back as she went in search of him. In her fluffy-minded way, she was right. Ricky was a natural bodyguard – a really threatening appearance coupled with endless good humour. I'd always had a deep-seated worry about Aunt Prue's safety. The shadow of street crime was creeping closer and closer to even these suburban bastions of gentility. With Ricky at her back, that worry was gone.

While I did battle with the morning crossword, Aunt Prue picked over the excitement of the day before. She was very good at this. She had a surgeon's eye for detail and nothing escaped her.

"...And Nell Aimes... did you see what she was wearing? It looked like it came from the St Vincent de Paul although when Joan mentioned the price she paid for that ghastly outfit, it quite took my breath away. The same with Mary Farquah. They say she practically lives on the beach like some peroxidized Yahoo. She can't be over fifty yet her skin has the texture and colour of old wallets. And she insists on wearing those loosely crocheted skimpy mini things. I suppose she imagines those white string bags flatter her mahogany skin. Someone should tell her. And Bea Davies .. those diamonds... most unsuitable! When she sat in the corner, she looked like a fallen chandelier. Still, one has to

feel sorry for her... apparently her husband is barely one step ahead of the police... trading inside – whatever that is..”

“Insider trading...” I murmured absently.

“Yes, that's the one.” She agreed without missing a beat. “And the poor thing really wanted to buy something, but the quilt she had her eye on was snapped up before she could open her cheque-book. Just as well, perhaps.”

She paused to help herself largely to marmalade.

“I was pleased to see that Amish quilt go. I was a little worried that Marigold might have made a mistake in buying it. Still, I need not have worried. Your Mr. Boynton was most generous and obliging.”

Irritated, I lowered the newspaper. “He's not *my* Mr. Boynton, Aunt Prue.” Her juggernaut was unstoppable. “If you say so, dear. Which reminds me... I must phone him and invite his wife to our party. Will he be at work now?”

I glanced at my watch. “It's just gone nine. He should be there.”

“Good,” she said briskly, touching a napkin to her lips, “I'll do it now. Excuse me, my dear.”

She rose from the breakfast table and made a beeline for the telephone in the other room.

Even though I was trying to concentrate on the crossword (“Charge of the Light Brigade – 11,4”) I could hear her bending the ear of my boss. At long last, I heard her hang up. I looked up as she returned to the table.

“What a utterly charming man,” she gushed.

“Is his wife coming too?” I asked, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Yes. Yes, she is. He was quite surprised when I included her in the invitation, but he was happy to accept on her behalf.” She was lost in reverie. “I suppose he keeps his work life separate from his private life. That would account for his surprise.” She smiled suddenly at me.

“What are your plans for today?” she asked as she poured herself another cup of tea.

I threw the crossword aside. “The cleaners are coming today. The dining table will have to be moved so they can get at the Axminster. If it's alright with you, Aunt Prue, I might commandeer Ricky after he's been to the bank with you. It will take the four of us to move that big lump of red cedar, and then it'll have to be put back in place when they have finished, so he might be here for the rest of the day. We'll definitely need him. Henry is getting a bit old, and though Tran is strong, I'm a real wuss as far as lifting things are concerned. And there will be other furniture to move around in the morning room.”

“Of course dear,” she nodded. “I think it's a good idea. I'll put him in a taxi after we've been to the bank.”

When she had finally gone to the gallery, I wandered over to the big house to open up and prepare the rooms for the cleaners. I started with a bit of strategic removal of bric-a-brac. There wasn't much to move. Most of the moveable items and all of the valuable ones had long since been put into storage before we started renting out the place. After about half an hour, Li bustled in, loaded down with brooms and mops and cleaning paraphernalia, and announced

that she was going to attack the kitchen in preparation for the caterers who would be arriving tomorrow (Saturday). I tried to protest, saying that cleaners had been booked and they would be arriving today.

She snorted in derision. "Cleaners no good. Cannot clean. I do much better job."

So I shrugged and let her get on with it, but I lost interest in what I was doing.

Time seemed to hang heavy on my hands so I wandered around the rooms in the downstairs part of the house. I really loved this house. I remembered my disappointment when Aunt Prue had decided that she and I would move into the chauffeur's cottage. Long before he died, my grandfather had let the chauffeur go and the cottage had been standing empty for several years. As I wandered through the rooms – the morning room, the big and small reception rooms, the music room and the formal drawing room, I felt the tug of nostalgia as I was reminded of the happy childhood I had spent in this house. This house was my home, more so than the tiny cottage we lived in. I had always intended that I would move back into it one day when circumstances changed when I earned more money, or when Aunt Prue became tired on living cheek-by-jowl with me. I sighed. I was full of vague, unresolved plans for my life.

I wondered idly whether Angelo Pucino would like the house. My very, very secret dream was that he and I would fall in love, and move into the big house together, and live happily ever after – entertaining in the grand spaces of the house, and wandering the gardens together, hand in hand in peace and harmony. This was my consolation, my dream – one I had never shared with anyone. Even when I reflected on it in my solitude, I laughed at myself for wallowing in the sheer tacky Mills-and-Boon sentimentality of it.

My reverie was interrupted by the crunch of car tyres on the gravel of the front drive. I went out to the verandah and saw Ricky extricate himself from a taxi. He saw me and waved cheerily and called out "Yo, bro'!"

I grinned and replied in kind. "Yo!"

He looked around at the house and gardens. "Cool house, bro'."

"Thanks for coming, Ricky. There's a bit of lifting work to be done. I hope you don't mind my taking you away from Aunt Prue."

"Ricky's the name and lifting's my game," he said with a laugh and lifted both arms in a bicep-flexing pose.

I laughed along with him, and said, "Just wait here for a moment while I get the other guys who are going to help with the moving." Ricky nodded and I dashed off to find Tran and Henry.

When I returned with both the men in tow, Ricky was occupying himself with throwing gravel at a group of noisy miners that were screaming at him from the branches of a beech tree. He was very accurate and hit one of them that resulted in an outraged squawk and a flurry of excited flapping and flying about.

Once I had marshaled the troops, with much grunting and shouting of contradictory orders, we moved the heavy dining table through the French doors and left it on the verandah until we had to move it back again.

Tran piped up. "Mister Simon. Table must be covered. Might rain."
I nodded. "Good idea."

Tran said, "Tarpaulin in garage. We get." He pointed to Ricky. "You come."

Ricky shrugged and good-naturedly ambled after the smaller man. While they were gone, Henry and I moved the dining chairs and small occasional tables. After much discussion, we decided to leave the two massive marble topped sideboards where they were, reasoning that they hadn't been moved since they were originally placed there and the cleaners could clean around them. With the room all but empty, the true shabbiness of the carpet was exposed. I sighed. *Moth and rust doth corrupt!*

Nothing stands still, and the carpet was getting old. As were we all.

Loud thumpings on the verandah told us that Ricky and Tran had returned. They were manhandling the heavy tarp and Ricky seemed strangely excited.

"Bro'," he exclaimed, "You got a Rolls!"

I laughed at his excitement. "A very old Rolls," I said.

His eyes were sparkling. "It's a Phantom IV – 1950 model, I reckon."

I was stunned. "You know about Rolls Royces?"

He nodded eagerly. "Best cars ever made. How long you had it?"

"My grandfather bought it – long ago in a galaxy far, far away."

"Buy it new, did he?"

I shrugged. "I suppose so. I wasn't around at the time.. Aunt Prue would be able to tell you all about it."

At Tran's urging we set about covering the dining table with the tarp. I saw that Ricky was looking thoughtful and a little wistful. A germ of an idea was planted.

"Can you drive, Ricky?"

He flashed a smile at me. "Sure. I'm pretty good, even if I say it myself. I burned up the road back home in Napier."

"Napier?"

"My home town. It's ..."

"On the east coast of the North Island," I finished his sentence for him.

"Yes, I know. It's the Art Deco city, isn't it?" He looked a bit puzzled. "But I thought you came from a place called ... um ... Why-kick-a-moo-cow?"

He looked very embarrassed and laughed slightly. "No such place, bro'. Sort of like the ozzie Woop Woop."

I said, "Ah," and the light dawned and I laughed at my own naivety.

He continued, "I had an old V-8 that I built myself. Ran like a rocket, but o' course, nothing like the Rolls in your garage."

I asked him, "Do you think you could drive it? The Rolls?"

His face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Fuckin' A!"

I smirked. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

Feigning uninterest, I asked, "Do you have an Australian licence?"

His face fell and he just grunted. Obviously not.

"How long do you intend to stay in Australia?" I asked out of curiosity.

He just shrugged and didn't say anything. I said as casually as I could. "It's just that ... if you intend to stay here a while, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to get an Australian licence ... could help you get a better job."

He nodded vaguely and mumbled "S'pose."

There was crunch on the gravel driveway and a beeping of a van horn. The carpet cleaners had arrived. We offered to help them but were ignored as they, with great efficiency, unloaded all their equipment and hooked up all their hoses. I showed the supervisor round the rooms, indicating the extent of the work required, steam cleaning the carpets and the upholstered furniture. Since Li had been cleaning the kitchen, the professional cleaners had only two rooms to concentrate on. As they prepared to start, I asked Li if she would make coffee for my little gang of movers. She was way ahead of me and we all trooped into the kitchen while a roar and hiss was a fanfare for the cleaners starting up.

My reflection stared back at me from the large mahogany framed toilet mirror. For some reason I was deferring getting dressed for the party, though the time was getting perilously close when I would have to stand by Aunt Prue's side and greet our guests.

Who was it I was dreading to meet? It surely couldn't be Michael Boynton. No. I was perfectly at ease with him, even though we had some sort of unspoken pact of armed neutrality. Was it his wife – that mysterious woman who was beginning to find a place in my dealings with him? I didn't think so. Even though I was "as queer as a quince" (to borrow Jack Malloy's colourful phrase) I had no trouble relating to women. My only feelings about the mystic Mrs. Boynton were those of rampant curiosity.

"Let's not kid ourselves," my reflection spoke back to me. "It's Warren you're afraid to meet. In spite of trying to bury your feelings for him, you dread a face-to-face meeting. You've never really got over him."

I hadn't seen him for nearly four years. All my feelings and misgivings about him came flooding back as I slowly dressed, although they were strangely muted by my present obsession with Angelo Pucino and, and, although I was loath to admit it, with my feelings for the man who was beginning to loom large in my life – Michael Boynton.