Of Eyeliners & Egyptian Cotton

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

Kitty goes on a date with Lord Ashbourne, but the evening takes a turn she could not have foreseen. A Sequel to Of Milkshakes & Mythology.

Notes

This takes place after the event of Of Milkshakes & Mythology, but before the party that was mentioned in the twitter epilogue to that story.

Ash, Freddie, Annabelle, Harriet, Edwin and Max are all creations of the lovely Shem and are used with her permission.

Frederick Fitzwilliam (@lordfreddie): Mothers, lock up your daughters, Freddie is going to party!

Frederick Fitzwilliam (@lordfreddie): This is going to be wild!

Frederick Fitzwilliam (@lordfreddie): Better lock up your sons too. Tonight we'll party like there’s no tomorrow.

Lydia Benton (@lydiapartyqueen): @KittyCat OMG your big date tonight?? Are you excited?

Lydia Benton (@lydiapartyqueen): @KittyCat 3rd date right? And you know what that means *winkwink*

Lydia Benton (@lydiapartyqueen): @KittyCat try to take some pics or no one will ever believe
“Oh, please – a raccoon?”

“No, seriously, there are pictures if you doubt me -’

‘I did not say I doubted you, simply that I do not believe your brother -’

‘No, here, have a look for yourself and then you will understand I had no choice but
to act. My family’s honour – the little we have left of it – was at stake.’

‘No, really – oh my god, you were right. A raccoon.’

They had been too late for the theatre and so, after several furious telephone conferences during the cab ride, Ash had managed, as he triumphantly announced to her, to secure seats in one of the most popular restaurants in London. However, it was far too crowded for it to be comfortable, which Ash blamed on it being a Friday night and Kitty on the fact that it was, as he had said, the most popular in the West End. Ash, after seeing the menu, had been forced to admit that he had not actually eaten there before. He seemed almost distraught and entreated Kitty to tell him if she would rather eat dinner elsewhere.

‘I am not sure whether I can in good conscience allow you to eat here.’

‘Honestly, Ash, it will be fine. I’ve eaten in far worse places. You saw the dodgy pizza place next door to me.’

‘My dear, it’s not your stomach I’m concerned about – I think you fully capable of tolerating this. It’s my dignity that is at stake. How can I ever expect you to have dinner with me after this? I shall be forced to grovel and beg you, and that sort of thing just shatters a man’s pride.’

‘Has there ever been a time in your life when you were not silly?’

‘I think I was laid down with measles for a week or two when I was five – dear Lord, is that artfully distributed balsamico on the plates? Are you sure you want to eat here?’

In hindsight, of course, Ash had been right about the restaurant. They had fled after the main course of cold and dry ravioli with an unidentifiable filling, and gone to a small cafe around the corner for dessert. There, they had only narrowly avoided disaster when Ash had absent-mindedly ordered Banoffee pie, forcing Kitty to eat it all alone while he nursed a cup of coffee. (That, perhaps, had been one small indicator that the evening was destined to be a good one.)

‘Please stop looking at my food like that. It makes me feel guilty.’

‘Is it as good as it looks?’

‘It’s even better. Why don’t you go and get yourself some of that carrot cake? I’m sure there’s no banana in that.’

‘What, and admit defeat to the saleslady? She’ll think I let you steal my pie.’

‘Fine, be that way. I could care less. I have pie.’

‘Cruelty does not suit you, Helen.’

‘Must you call me that? It reminds me of our first date when I almost killed you.’

‘You and I are too wise to date peaceably, Helen.’

Ash had then suggested that they try to catch a movie to make up for the show they had missed, and while Kitty had nipped into the loo before they left, he had got her a cup of hot chocolate to go. She had thought this rather sweet, at least until they’d stepped into the street again and were
suddenly beleaguered by reporters. At first, she had feared they had come for Ash, but it soon turned out that there was better prey to be had. Nevertheless, finding a way through them was not easy.

‘Oh, right, yeah. I should have mentioned that.’

‘For heaven’s sake, do not be so cryptic, Ash – and what on earth did you have to do with this?’

‘It’s just – I know someone who might be partying tonight and could possibly draw the attention of these crowds.’

‘And you don’t want to say anything else about it because of your professional honour.’

‘What? No, I gave my brother my word.’

‘Your brother is partying with -’

‘Sh! Not so loud, Helen, they will hear you -’

‘No, I don’t think they will – what are they shouting?’

‘It sounds like Shoreditch, but that doesn’t really make sense, or is it some sort of juvenile slang I am unacquainted with?’

‘They’re shouting ‘he’s in Shoreditch’ and – oh, bugger that.’

‘Oh, dear, that’s -’

‘I swear, she came from nowhere and -’

Ash had done everything he could, but there was little that a couple of napkins could do to remedy the damage that a cup of hot chocolate could do on a pink dress. Kitty had insisted it was fine, although she had been cursing inwardly because that dress had been new and far too expensive and she really could only hope her mother would be able to work wonders or at least dye it navy. Ash, however, had muttered something about a certain stain remover and the nearness of his flat and had been so obviously and endearingly nervous, even if he tried his utmost not to show it. Kitty simply had had to take him up on that offer. Once in his flat, which sported much less chrome and black leather than Kitty had feared, after Ash had offered her one of his luxuriously soft dressing gowns and treated her gown with an almost surgical earnestness, the further turn of events had been almost inevitable and now, Kitty found herself slowly drifting off to sleep between those heavenly sheets. Ash, by the sound of his soft snores, had already succumbed to sleep. Kitty sighed and thought that after these unexpected developments, one might have thought she would feel embarrassed or ill at ease, but instead, she felt content as she had rarely before in her life. Little did she know that the excitements of the evening had barely begun.

She must have dozed off after all, because the next thing she remembered was Ash no longer curled up next to her, but sitting on the bed talking on the phone. She allowed herself a brief moment to admire what she could make out of his unclothed body in the semi-darkness before her attention was caught by the conversation he was having.

‘No, absolutely, I understand – no, quite right, you couldn’t – no, don’t worry, I can pick him up, I’m at home – no, I’m good to drive – can you text me the address?’
He had got up from the bed and reached for his boxers and khakis at the foot of the bed before he apparently realised Kitty was awake.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to go –’

Kitty sat up as well, clutching the sheets to her chest. She was unsure what to do; was there a protocol when dating a man who could be called from work at all times and had to leave?

‘D’you want me to –’ she asked and gestured in the direction of her own clothes, or at least the few that were not hanging in Ash’s bathroom to dry.

‘No,’ Ash said emphatically. ‘Goodness, no. Just stay here and go back to sleep. I should be back in an hour or two.’

He yawned and started buttoning his shirt.

‘Are you always on call?’ Kitty asked. ‘Do they never give you time off?’

Ash sounded almost embarrassed as he answered the question, but that might also have been because he was bending over to put on his socks.

‘Actually, this is not work,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to pick up my little brother.’

‘The raccoon?’ Kitty asked.

‘Yes,’ Ash said, straightening up again. ‘Seems the partying was a little too much fun for him.’

He walked over to Kitty’s side of the bed, bent over her and pressed a kiss to her hair.

‘I’ll be quick,’ he said, then yawned again and turned towards the door.

Kitty looked at him, crumpled shirt not yet completely tucked into the khakis, keys clutched in one hand while the other ruffled his unkempt hair as he yawned yet again and the words were out of her mouth before she had fully realised it.

‘I could come with you,’ she said. ‘If you want me to, I mean.’

Ash looked at her with an eyebrow raised in question.

‘I could make sure you stay awake while you’re driving,’ Kitty said. ‘Just give me a minute to get dressed – and if you maybe have something to wear –’

‘Helen, you’re an absolute angel,’ Ash said and handed her her knickers.

The car glided almost noiselessly through the dark streets and Kitty observed the man at her right. His hair, almost magically, looked much less ruffled than it had when they had left the bedroom, although she would swear he had not touched a brush since then; he was, however, in need of a shave and the shirt had clearly not been destined for another wear after the events of the previous night. He seemed determined and yet at ease, steering the large car through the night.

‘Where are we going?’ Kitty asked.

‘Some police station somewhere in the East End,’ Ash said. ‘I think.’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, handing it to her.
‘There should be a text with the address,’ he said. ‘Can you enter that into the GPS?’

Kitty stared at the phone. Ash’s lips rose in a faint smile.

‘You know how to operate my phone, don’t you, Helen?’ he said. ‘Why would you steal a phone that you did not know how to work?’

‘The screen is locked,’ Kitty managed to say. ‘And I didn’t steal your phone.’

‘Code’s 1813,’ Ash said. ‘What does the text say?’

‘Your brother got arrested?’ Kitty asked. ‘How – why – I mean, what did he -’

‘Solicitation, I should guess,’ Ash said. ‘Disturbance of the peace, probably, if his attempts at solicitation were successful.’

Kitty gaped. Ash looked away from the wheel for a second, saw her expression and laughed.

‘Calm down, Helen,’ he said. ‘Freddie didn’t get arrested. He was simply dropped off at the police station and they’re keeping him there for me.’

‘They just dropped him off?’ Kitty asked. She had to think of the countless times she had had to bring Lydia home and of the few times that Lydia had brought her home, and how grateful she’d been that Lydia had been there, had helped her up the stairs, held her hair up in the bathroom and tucked her into her bed afterwards.

‘They had no choice,’ Ash said. ‘My brother was, uhm, partying with a rather high-profile crowd tonight, and when he decided to call it a night, they did not want to bring him home amidst camera flashes, so one of the security detail arranged for his, uh, temporary kennelling and called me.’

Kitty remembered what Ash had told her earlier of his brother’s party plans, and decided she would not ask further questions. She did not want to put Ash on the spot after all; and she most certainly did not want him to compromise his integrity by telling her things he should not. Instead, she found the text he had mentioned and successfully programmed the address into the GPS.

‘You’re a good brother,’ she said. ‘It’s nice to see you care.’

Ash did not react to that. Instead, he stole another glance at her with an inscrutable expression in his eyes.

‘You do realise,’ he said after a while, ‘that it’s not many women I would have told the truth about where I was going tonight, and even fewer I would have taken with me?’

Kitty did not quite know what to say to that.

‘There’s something about you, Helen,’ Ash said, ‘that is just defying any attempts of mine to define it.’

Kitty decided to wait in the car while Ash collected his brother. She had a feeling the younger Fitzwilliam would appreciate it if a stranger did not witness all of his humiliation, and she figured that if it took longer, she might be able to nap a little. She had barely closed her eyes, however, when Ash opened the back door of the car, maneuvered a sleeping figure inside and buckled him up.

‘He’s rather out of it,’ he said as he got into his own seat. ‘Severely underestimated vodka tonic, I
Kitty turned around and observed the man sleeping on the backseat. He was really little more than a boy, with white blond hair being tousled around his face and mascara lines under his eyes, but apart from that, he seemed very little worse for the wear.

‘Don’t worry, he’ll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow morning,’ Ash said. ‘He has a disgustingly quick metabolism.’

‘Where are we taking him?’ Kitty asked.

‘My parents’,’ Ash said. ‘It’s closest, and his shared flat is a health hazard.’

On the backseat, Freddie Fitzwilliam was snoring loudly while outside the dark London streets passed by.

‘Poor thing,’ Ash said not without feeling. ‘He’d been looking forward to this party so much and now he missed most of it.’

‘They’re still partying?’ Kitty asked incredulously, looking at the clock. Even Lydia would consider this bedtime.

‘Trust me, you don’t want to know,’ Ash said and made a cough that sounded almost like ‘Vegas.’

‘I hope he’s grateful for all you’re doing for him,’ Kitty said. ‘You’re like this divorced dad who does all the cool stuff for his kid because he doesn’t see him often enough.’

Ash made a strange gargling noise but before Kitty could ask further there was a groan from the backseat. Freddie had woken up.

‘s not my bodyguard,’ he mumbled. ‘I’m just borrowing him ‘cause he’s so cuddly -’

He groaned again and tried to turn under his seat-belt.

‘We don’t want to know,’ Ash said firmly. ‘And we’re there anyway.’

They had pulled up in front of a Georgian townhouse.

‘All dark,’ Ash said. ‘They’re probably not in town anymore – the keys should be in the glove compartment, could you have a look?’

‘Or,’ Kitty said as she shoved away two pairs of aviator sunglasses in their cases, a comb, an electronic razor and a deo stick, ‘they’ve already gone to bed.’

‘Or that,’ Ash conceded. ‘Either way, we probably want the keys.’

Kitty managed to locate them just as Ash had unbuckled a still-snoring Freddie. He hefted Freddie’s arm over his shoulder and gripped his brother around the waist, dragging him out of the car, which finally woke Freddie up for good.

‘s fine, can walk on my own,’ he muttered, shaking off his brother’s hand and walking promptly into a lamppost.

Ash shrugged helplessly.

‘Train’s awfully fast though,’ Freddie said, brushing dirt off his stained jacket and holding a hand
out to the lamppost. ‘Sorry, mate.’

‘Let me get that,’ Ash said.

Freddie had begun swaying on the spot and was just about to fall down when Ash gripped his arm.

‘Horatio!’ Freddie suddenly exclaimed. ‘Didn’t know you were going to Glasgow too!’

‘Oh, I am,’ Ash said. ‘Why don’t I take you to my compartment?’

‘Scotland, eh?’ Freddie said. ‘’s going to be awesome, mate!’

‘It is,’ Ash agreed. ‘Kitty, could you get the door? It’s the large one, with the square -’

His explanations were cut short by Freddie’s bursting into a rendition of *O Flower of Scotland* at the top of his voice. Kitty had been right; Ash’s parents were at home. Lights had gone on in a room above the door and soon after in what appeared to be the hall. As Ash tried to quieten his brother, Kitty fumbled to find the right key, but before she could insert it, the door was opened from the inside. The middle-aged blonde in the striped pyjamas who had opened it looked to Kitty as if she tolerated no nonsense, and seemed to take in the situation in front of her in the blink of an eye, from Kitty in Ash’s tracksuit trousers and a baseball jumper, fumbling with the keys, to a rugged-looking Ash in what was obviously yesterday’s shirt, to the dishevelled, singing Freddie with the facial markings of a raccoon.

‘You must be Catherine,’ were her first words. ‘I guess you’d all better come in before you wake up the whole neighbourhood.’

Ash dragged his brother up the stairs and Kitty was unsure where to wait, but the woman whom she took to be Ash’s mother made a gesture that Kitty interpreted as an invitation to follow her. They went into the kitchen and Ash’s mother began heating milk.

‘Horlicks, dear?’ she asked.

‘No, thank you,’ Kitty said weakly.

‘Yes, makes you feel all of twelve, doesn’t it?’ Ash’s mother said. ‘But Edwin will need it when Freddie wakes him up.’

Upstairs, they could hear a loud bang followed by extensive cursing. Ash’s mother shook her head.

‘He never learns,’ she said. ‘I told him not to leave everything lying on the floor, but he just doesn’t listen.’

She opened the fridge again and got out a carton.

‘Orange juice?’ she said.

‘Yes, please,’ Kitty said.

The countess poured two glasses and handed one to Kitty.

‘Thank you, milady,’ Kitty said.

‘Oh, pish-posh,’ the countess said. ‘I’m Harriet.’
‘Thank you,’ Kitty said again.

She finally took the time to look around in the kitchen. One wall was dedicated almost entirely to photographs of what appeared to be the whole Fitzwilliam clan at all ages, second and third cousins included. She saw a younger Harriet holding what appeared to be baby Freddie, a lanky teenage Ash with a polo mallet, a very recent wedding photograph of Ash’s sister, Ash flying a kite with a young cousin, teenage Belle leading the same young cousin sitting on a pony, amongst dozens of pictures of people she did not know. Kitty was about to ask if she could take a closer look when they heard more cursing from above.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ Harriet said.

She took the milk from the stove and poured it into a mug which she had generously loaded with Horlicks. She stirred the milk and no sooner had she dropped the spoon in the sink than a bleary-eyed, middle-aged man appeared in the doorway. Without a word, Harriet pressed the mug into his hands and he drank half of it before he spoke.

‘I feel old,’ he groaned and sat down at the table, opposite Kitty, whom he did not seem to have noticed.

‘You are old,’ Harriet said. ‘Catherine, meet my husband.’

Only then did Ash’s father look up and take note of Kitty.

‘Good evening, my lord,’ Kitty said. ‘Morning, I mean.’

‘Ungodly hour,’ the Earl said. ‘And you are -’

‘Ash’s friend, Edwin,’ Harriet said. ‘And you can call him Edwin, Catherine.’

They heard steps on the stairs again and a panting Ash stepped into the kitchen.

‘He’s sleeping now,’ he said. ‘I put a bucket by his bed.’

‘Thank you, darling,’ Harriet said. ‘Horlicks?’

Ash grimaced. ‘No, we’re leaving again. Helen?’

Kitty set down her glass, thanked the Earl and the Countess for the hospitality in such an unusual situation, and when Ash had said his goodbyes, left the kitchen with him. As she walked down the hallway, she heard the Earl say, ‘didn’t you say her name was Catherine?’ but they were out of the house before she could hear the reply.

They did not speak as they climbed into the car again. Ash yawned heartily before starting it and only when they were down the street said, ‘Again, I’m sorry I pushed you into this.’

‘Is fine,’ Kitty said, stifling a yawn. ‘It’s nice to see you so responsible and all. like your parents. Your mother was very nice.’

‘Step-mother,’ Ash said. ‘Although Harriet has raised me since I was eight, so -’

Kitty did not know what to say.

‘Is your mother -’ she began tentatively.

‘In the States,’ Ash said. ‘They’re divorced.’
Kitty yawned again and leaned her head against the window.

‘That’s very far away,’ she muttered.

‘Yeah,’ Ash conceded. ‘My brother Richard and I used to go there every summer when we were younger – I still try to go quite often, as a matter of fact –’

Kitty’s eyes closed of their own accord. She dimly noticed Ash trying to tell her how he had flown to America on his own when he was just eighteen and Richard had broken his leg, but he stopped the story muttering something about better telling her another time and she dozed off. She woke when Ash lifted her out of the car. She weakly protested that she was not too tired to walk, but Ash hushed her and carried her up the stairs and back into the bedroom, and Kitty fell asleep again with a goofy grin on her face.

When Kitty woke the next morning, she felt surprisingly refreshed, considering how little sleep she had had the night before. She was not sure whether it was the man beside her or his very comfortable (and probably expensive) bed that had done the trick. She reached out a hand but apart from herself, the bed was empty. There was a note on the pillow next to hers. Kitty sighed. She supposed that this was a normal occurrence when one shared a bed with Ash, although she could not exactly ask anyone about it. She took the note.

The paper was thick and cream-coloured and Kitty was tickled to discover that even when he was in a hurry, Ash used a pen and ink and wrote in an elegant, even cursive.

‘Helen – the note read – I am ever so sorry, but I got called in for a couple of hours. I am afraid there is not much I can offer you in the way of food, but treat the place as if it were your own and help yourself to whatever you like. I shall be back by noon, hopefully.

Yours, most apologetically, Ash.’

Kitty frowned. Seeing the shirt Ash had unceremoniously discarded last night still lying at the foot of the bed, she got up and put it on. Coffee would be good now, she mused, and sure enough, when she got to the kitchen, there was a large mug standing next to the surprisingly normal looking coffee-maker, which was keeping some coffee warm for her. A little note-card leaned on the mug reading, ‘there is some milk left in the fridge if you take any.’

Kitty, who preferred her coffee black, poured some into the mug and took a sip. It was a little stale but still drinkable, especially if one was used to the coffee in her office. She opened the fridge. There was milk in it but little else. Kitty checked the clock on the microwave. It was not even ten yet. She could take a long, hot bath in Ash’s amazing tub in the bathroom that was probably larger than her entire flat, but then she would have to wear last night’s knickers again. She could also quickly dash home, shower and change, and get some bread and cheese and perhaps eggs and bacon on the way back. Her eyes fell on yet another note-card that leaned against a set of keys on the counter. ‘If you need to go out, use these.’

Kitty decided that this was a clear signal for the latter course of action. She quickly finished the rest of the coffee, nicked a bit of tooth-paste to finger-brush her teeth with, and put on the now dry, but wrinkled dress. She grabbed the keys from the counter and exited the flat. She wondered for a moment whether she should lock the door behind herself or if simply pulling it close would be enough, but as she did not know whether Ash was keeping anything sensitive in his flat, it was probably better to be safe than sorry. She turned the key in the lock as many times as she could, noticing that she had been given not only the key to the main lock, but also keys to the two
deadbolts.

Even though she had lived in London for several months now, its many streets and mews were still a riddle to her, but nevertheless, she found the next tube station with ease and was surprised to notice that she and Ash were actually on the same line.

That, Kitty concluded, was about the only similarity in their situations that she could find. Ash was – if not exactly twice her age, then still considerably older than her. He was working a high-profile job and living a jet-set life. Royalty had his phone number and probably his ear too, and there was simply no guessing to what sort of sensitive data he might have access. And still, his keys were resting in her handbag this very moment. He had given her free reign over his place and even told her how long it would be empty and if she wanted to, there was absolutely nothing that would prevent her from digging through his stuff, making note of anything that was sufficiently juicy or taking photographic proof of it. Pictures of his flat alone would probably guarantee her a much more permanent position at the news-rag. It was disgustingly easy to guess what the editor would say once he found out about Kitty’s connection to Ash. And she had not exactly been secretive about it, it was just because of her unimportance that she had flown under the radar so far.

A realisation hit Kitty with stunning force. If she wanted to continue seeing Ash, she would have to quit the internship at the newspaper at one point. It was too great a conflict of interest, and she did not want to get either Ash or herself in trouble with their employers. It was true, the internship was not exactly well-paid, and it was not really what Kitty wanted to be doing, but it was a foot in the door at least and how would it look on her CV if she quit it after a few weeks? And if she did get invited to another interview and was asked about it and had to admit she had done it because of a man?

And yet, Kitty could not imagine breaking off contact with Ash over this stupid internship, which was all that she loathed about journalism. She had dreamed of writing about fashion, that was where her love lay, not about the people who wore it and very definitely not about the contents of their trash cans and email accounts. She had her own little fashion blog but with its meagre hit counts, there was no way she would be able to live off the revenue of the ads. It would mean going back home, she supposed, and move in with her parents again, if she was not able to support herself in London. Even if Ash offered it, she could never accept any invitation to live in his flat or – even worse – support herself on his money. She was sure he would make just such an offer to her if he learnt of her situation, even if their relationship did not work out, because he would feel responsible for her just as he felt responsible for the rest of his family.

Kitty was pulled out of her whirlwind thoughts by the voice announcing her station. As she exited the train and climbed up the stairs, she resolved to put the matter out of her head for the moment. It was not a decision that had to be made this very moment, and as wonderful as the last night had been, there was no telling whether whatever it was that she had with Ash was going to last. Surely, Ash would soon have to realise that he and Kitty had nothing in common and then would gently break up with her to pursue a more advisable relationship with a public-schooled, horse-riding woman his own age called the Honourable Ophelia or similar. In the meantime, Kitty thought, it could not hurt to put out her feelers for a different job. Maybe the people at Vogue would change their minds and decide that Kitty was an ideal fit for their young, dynamic team, or maybe, if nothing else played out, Fran could tell her whether the Mansfield Bakery were hiring.

She was happy to find that Lizzy was not at home when she entered their flat. After the space and grandeur of Ash’s, it seemed even more tiny to her and she thought that Lizzy’s added presence would have made it feel unbearably crowded – but maybe that was just the part of her brain talking that did not want to talk about where she had come from and where she was going, just now.
She cursed their leaking shower head as she stood in the tiny bathtub with the chipped enamel and quickly washed her hair. In her head, she wondered what to wear. Had Ash planned anything for the rest of the day – and did it include her? In the end, she settled on her favourite pair of jeans and the cute, vaguely Slavic-looking folklore blouse she had discovered at Oxfam the other day. She was out of the flat again before she could overthink her choices too much, and down in the street again, which was so much more comfortable to walk now in her ballerinas than in last night’s heels. It seemed unthinkable, somehow, to buy breakfast for Ash at Asda’s, and so, remembering fondly the childhood trips to London with her mum when it was okay to get special treats, Kitty turned to M&S instead.

As one always did, she had bought far more than she had intended, but she had been hungry and Ash had not had any of the things she considered necessary for a nice lazy breakfast, so it was laden with bags that Kitty climbed up the stairs again to Ash’s flat. She knew she had made certain that both the main lock and the deadbolts were locked when she left, so it was a surprise to her to find them unlocked and the door merely pulled close. She could, however, hear the shower running and decided that it had to be Ash who had returned earlier than planned. She hoped that he had not been disappointed to find her gone, but the keys she had taken would have told him that she fully intended to return. Tempting though the idea was she decided not to disturb him in the shower. Instead, she started fresh coffee, heated the oven so she could warm up the croissants, and began chopping onions and red peppers for the omelet. She heard the shower stop and in spite of all she had been pondering previously, she could not prevent a smile from spreading over her face because all things said and done, she had begun to miss Ash already. She could not have been prepared any less for what happened next.

It was not Ash who strolled into the kitchen. This boy, who was not wearing anything but a tiny towel slung around his hips, and another around his shoulders, was considerably younger than Ash, was considerably younger than herself even. In fact, she would be surprised if he was eighteen already, which made this downright skeevy.

‘Oh good,’ he said, ‘you’re making breakfast, I’m starving. Oh, coffee, great –’

Without waiting for Kitty to say anything, he helped himself to a mug of coffee and nicked a slice of red pepper from her chopping board. Kitty was still too stunned to speak, but he seemed to notice her confusion.

‘Ah, I take it the old man forgot to mention my existence,’ he said. ‘Well, he didn’t know I was going to be here this weekend, so I guess he can be excused.’

‘I’m Max, by the way,’ he said, reaching out his hand. Kitty, still confused, but slowly coming to a realisation she did not want to have, took it gingerly.

‘You do understand our language, right?’ Max asked. ‘Because my Polish is pretty rotten, I’m afraid, and –’

Kitty could only nod.

‘Excellent,’ Max said. ‘Well, I’d better get dressed, the old man hates it when I lounge around like this every day – I guess he’s jealous, but anyway – call me when breakfast is ready, will you? Oh and maybe you could start in the bathroom when you’re done here, I’m afraid I’ve made quite a mess and he always gets so peskily annoyed when I do that –’

He had left the kitchen before Kitty had the chance to say anything, but after another thirty seconds, her brain began to work again and she quickly gathered her things, slammed Ash’s keys onto the marble counter with enough force to leave a dent, hopefully, and was out of the flat before Max the boytoy could reappear.
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