

Bare Ben

By Gareth Walton and Rick Pollard

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Chapter One

He threw his rucksack on his bed, leant back against the bedroom door and took out his penis for the fourteenth time that day. The sight of it still hit him like a punch in the stomach. The unadulterated panic of the first few days had lessened, but he still couldn't completely accept that he was looking at a part of his own body. How could it be his? There was no foreskin on the penis that was lying across the palm of his hand.

He caught sight of himself reflected in mirror on the wardrobe door; a tall, dark-haired, good-looking young man. The white flesh of the long, thick manhood that hung out of the flies of his school trousers contrasted starkly with the black of the cloth. His penis had once been something to be proud of – that was something that he'd soon realised in the changing room for those first P.E. lesson at secondary school. Now, so completely and terrifyingly altered, it didn't occur to him that it might to be something to take pride in ever again. It certainly didn't look good now. He was resigned to the marred thing he had in his hand being a part of him that he would have to keep hidden away for the rest of his life.

Even from across the room, he could make out the bruising in the mirror. Above it was the red, raw line where the scalpel had done its terrible, permanent work. It was just impossible for him to accept that he was seeing his own, mutilated body. The young man that was reflected was so clearly circumcised. He just couldn't think of himself as circumcised. Not yet. Perhaps never.

In the mirror, he saw too the reversed image of the row of eighteenth birthday cards along the top of his book shelves too, now rarely noticed after being there for six days. Adulthood. That was something he had looked forward to. During the course of the last week that special status had been granted to him, yet something more precious had been taken away. Yes, he was a man now, but an incomplete one. Compared to his circumcision, Ben's coming of age now seemed totally inconsequential.

On his desk was a pile of papers that had arrived that morning, containing more details of the BSc in Metal Sciences at Nottingham University than he could possibly take in in his current state of mind. Of course, his college friends would assume that he'd always been the way he was when, in the gym, the pool, or in the gents in the Student Union bar, his new mates got to see each other's' genitals for the first time. It would never occur to them in that special moment of male bonding that he had been as complete as them until so recently. They would never think that he had spent almost all his life with an inch of loose foreskin extending past the head of his fine penis, not with the tightly stretched skin on his shaft behind his glans that they would see. They would never guess

that the scar line - far straighter than anything nature could create and set so far back behind his exposed mushroom head - was something that still shocked him every time he saw it and that he would try at all costs to hide from them. He'd be healed by then, of course – he realised that. He knew that bruising fades and hoped that, in a month or so, things might look a little less horrific than they did at that moment. Despite that small crumb of comfort, the thought of living the rest of his life with no covering on his glans did nothing but make him feel physically sick. He had no real idea of what a circumcised penis was meant to look like, let alone how it was supposed to fulfil its manly functions. He had and no one to ask either, and his guesses about what life with no foreskin might be like weren't ones on which he cared to dwell.

He'd so nearly made it, that was the galling thing. At eighteen, he could have said no. He would have done so too, and in no uncertain terms - Ben was sure of that. As a mere seventeen-year old, though, it was different. It was just done to him, his consent never sought. Five days before his birthday, so he had had no say at all. Not asked, not even given a hint about what was going to happen. Just five days – that was clever. That had taken some thinking about. It was admirable in a way, all the planning that had gone into it, that someone had taken so much trouble over it. It wasn't admirable though - far from it. He would never be able to prove anything, and he knew it. The torment of that hurt even more than the physical pain.

Very carefully, he tucked his penis back inside the type of underwear he hadn't worn in years, edged up his zip and hung his blazer up on the back of the door. Putting on a CD, he sat down cautiously at his desk in the window. Opening one of his school books, his mind had wandered back to his manhood before he got to the end of the first paragraph. Instinctively, he knew that it would take a very long time for his emotions to come to terms with what had been done to him. By force of will, he had made himself think only analytically about it all, and he could barely cope with even that. If he could come to understand the "how" of no longer having a foreskin, then perhaps he might one day be able to move on to get to grips with "why" it had been taken from him. Coming to terms with the reality of life without a foreskin was a very long way off yet, and he knew it.

Chapter Two

"Opportunity, Means and Motive" – Ben had been taught to analyse plots that way for his AS-Level English. Although the last of the three was a long way off in his understanding, he had at least gained some little comfort in being able to sort out the first two in his head. Ben was naturally trusting, and it had been hard for him to accept that the whole thing had been set up so carefully. Part of him longed to be able to believe that it had all been as innocent as it seemed on the surface, but he knew that if he did that then he would merely be choosing to accept a comforting fantasy rather than face the truth.

"Opportunity". That had been planned so long in advance. That plane ticket that had been his mother's wedding anniversary present. It had seemed a kind thought at the time, his stepfather making such a fuss over presenting her with it that evening in the restaurant two months back.

"I know how little you get to see your sister." "It will be lovely in Spain that time of year." "You deserve a break." "I've made sure you'll be back in good time for Ben's eighteenth." How genuine it had all sounded. Ben had even managed to feel pleased for his mum that her jerk of a second husband had managed a romantic gesture for once. It saddened him to realise now that Roger had just been getting her out of the way.

At first, Ben's mother Carol had been a bit concerned about being away during the run-up to his exams, but he had seen on her face how much she wanted to go and he had reassured her that it would be fine. That tormented him now. Deep down, he hadn't really wanted her to be away while he was revising for his A-levels, but it had seemed a bit immature to make a fuss about it. After all, he'd be away at university in a few months and he wouldn't have her to rely on then. Anyway, he realised now, even if she had said no to the trip, then Roger would probably have been smart enough to think of another way to get the job done. And smart Roger was too. Almost admirably smart. Almost.

"Means". It was that that really gave it away. Roger's plan had been clever. Ben had to admit that. Looking back, Ben realised that his stepfather had made sure that he was around to overhear before making the call to his mother after she had been in Spain for a couple of days. Even at the time, it had been a bit puke making - all that "I'm missing you so much" and "I don't know what to do with myself without you around" stuff. That out of the way, Roger had started feeding her his line. He told her he was passing the lonely evenings by sorting through the boxes of old papers that he'd brought with him when he had moved in with them, stuff that he hadn't looked at for years. He told her that he'd come across the policy for a private health insurance plan that he'd got as a perk at work a few years back, and that he hadn't realised before that his dependants were entitled to an annual health check up to the age of 18. Of course, he said, he'd found this out too late for it to be any good for his own two sons, but did Carol want him to fix one up for Ben while there was still time?

Looking back, it was hard for Ben to accept that he'd once believed that a man like Roger, who had found the TV licence in thirty seconds flat when the detector van had

called at the door, had any unsorted papers anywhere. His every bank statement, warranty card and receipt was filed neatly and instantly recoverable. Roger "Read-the-Small-Print" Turnbull not having known what his entitlements were? With hindsight, that was a laughable idea. Had it been Ben's father, well that would have been a different matter. He was the sort of man that could quite easily have forgotten that he'd ever had private health insurance in the first place – how many times had he gone out to buy some tool for a job around the house then discovered later that he already had one in the shed? His dad would most likely have discovered he'd had a policy like that a month or two after it had expired.

Ben had actually been OK about having a health check-up. It didn't seem a bad idea to get a once-over before heading off to university as it had been a while since he'd last had a medical at school. Ben smiled now with the irony of remembering how pleased he'd been that Roger seemed to be treating him like an adult at last when he had talked it through with him, consulting him about the best time for the appointment before calling the clinic one morning as they sat sharing breakfast. Even after fixing it all with the receptionist, Roger took care to double check the details with Ben, his hand over the receiver as he made sure the timing wouldn't interrupt his revision.

What Ben never knew was that as soon as he had gone upstairs to start revising, Roger had made a second call to the clinic. Using his mobile this time, and sitting outside in his car to be sure that Ben couldn't overhear this rather different conversation, Roger Turnbull rang back, pressing the keypad with a slightly shaking finger.

Expecting his nervousness, Roger had rehearsed in his head exactly what he was going to say in this vital second call. He'd asked if he could be put through to the consultant who was slated to see Ben the next day. Roger introduced himself to Dr. Argent, apologised for troubling him, and said he wanted a quiet word before his stepson's appointment.

Roger explained to the man that Ben had asked him to telephone on his behalf, it being rather a delicate matter. He was happy to do so, he said, as the lad was very shy and found the whole matter acutely embarrassing. Ben, he told the doctor, had long had concerns about "a matter of personal hygiene". The lad didn't want there to be any issues of a sort that might interfere with his - "how shall I put it" said Roger, adopting his most man-to-man voice, "well, let's just say, 'interfere with his social life' when he goes off to university."

"Ben", he told Dr. Argent, "has just had a rather bright idea – it occurred to him that perhaps it might be possible to book him in for a (Roger concentrated hard, as he knew he would have to say the word any second now).... circumcision straight after his health check."

Roger was pleased with himself. He had managed to say the word without stumbling over it.

“He has asked about getting circumcised so many times that I know he’s really sure about it, and it’s just struck him that it would save having to make a second trip if you could do it tomorrow after his check-up.”

Roger felt a little more confident now. His voice sounded like step-parental concern personified.

"He’s got a really long foreskin, and I know it’s meant he’s had a terrible time at school - kids can be so unkind, can’t they. I think he’s really had enough of the thing now, and just wants rid of it once and for all. I suspect that it’s because he’s just about to leave home and head off to college that he wants it sorted now - we all know what lads his age like to get up to!" said Roger, adopting his man-to-man tone again.

Roger tried to stop talking, but he found he couldn’t.

“He’s made his mind up that he needs it, and if he’s sure, then - well, I’ve certainly always thought it was cleaner and healthier, even when it isn’t as over-long as his is.”

Roger went on further still, knowing this was the part of the conversation where he was really going to have to start pushing his luck.

“Ben and I are really lucky that we’re close enough to be able to talk about this sort of thing but, he is painfully shy with strangers. He hates the thought of having to discuss any of this to you, so he asked me to tell you that he’d just like you to get on and do it when you see him tomorrow.”

Roger's fingers were crossed tight while he was force-fed on-hold Vivaldi. He knew there would be other options if this one failed and was ready to make an excuse and cancel the whole check-up if Dr Argent seemed dubious, but this would be such a tidy way to get the job done. The relief washed over him when Argent came back on the line, saying that he had checked his diary and there would be no problem scheduling Ben for a longer appointment so he could perform what he termed “the procedure”.

Roger was amazed how easy it was. He had made it plain that he realised that there would be an extra fee to pay, and that seemed to be that. He was pleasantly surprised that there didn’t seem to be any tricky questions to answer. In fact, it seemed almost wrong that you could just arrange for a young man to be so radically altered quite so easily.

"We've discussed the options and done a little research," said Roger, going into the last piece of the script that he'd rehearsed so many times in his head. "Ben would like to have what I believe is called a high and tight circumcision, with his banjo string taken out too."

Roger knew the word "frenulum" of course, but he had calculated that it might be

wise not to show too much expertise on the subject. Asking for a particular style of circumcision was risky enough, but he had to make sure the lad was properly and thoroughly flayed so it was a risk he'd had to take. Roger still found it hard to actually say those words out-loud. He was half surprised to hear them come out of his mouth so calmly and without his voice cracking. The only sign of a lack of calm, had anyone been there to notice it, was the tenting of his trousers as his penis hardened inside them.

"His stepbrothers and I are circumcised, so Ben has had a chance to work out what's what over the years. It's definitely a tight cut that he wants, and right back on the shaft so he looks the same as us." Roger knew he was sailing very close to the wind, but couldn't stop himself.

"Actually, I think he likes the idea that he will finally match the rest of the men in the family down there – I can see that it would be a relief to him not to be the odd one out any more. You know what kids can be like, not wanting to be different."

As Roger put down the phone, he dug a shaking hand into his trouser pocket. Strangely aroused, he put a thumb and finger round his glans and massaged it with his rapidly-moistening foreskin.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Roger was sitting outside the finance office of the Burden Park Clinic some time before it opened. The wait while receptionist hung up her coat and filled the kettle unsettled his nerves, and he realised he would have to make an effort to seem calm and relaxed when she was finally ready to deal with him. Ben's appointment wasn't until that afternoon, but Roger knew that he had to get everything settled now while there was still time to think of a plan B or, if things got really tricky, to get a message to Ben to stop him coming and abort the whole thing.

There was, of course, no medical insurance policy. Roger couldn't think of how anyone could find that out though. His company would keep details of employees' contracts confidential and, in five days' time on Ben's birthday, he could quite convincingly, Roger being Roger, say he had shredded the then redundant, non-existent policy document. He had signed up for a credit card that he knew he would only use once. Registered at his work address, it only had to get him through today and by tomorrow it would be cut in half. He had been setting aside cash to pay the bill at a bank where he wouldn't be known on his next business trip to Scotland. Once it was settled, that paperwork would be shredded too so that there would be no record of the transaction ever having happened. Roger didn't begrudge one penny of the £400 that the circumcision cost, but the wasted £300 for the needless check-up irrationally annoyed him, although he knew that the whole plan hinged on it.

When the clinic's receptionist finally called him over, she swallowed the story that Roger fed her without question. Seeing the way that his cleverness took her in gave him the familiar buzz he experienced whenever he saw that one of his little scams had worked. He told her that he might not be able to get away from work in time to bring Ben in for his check-up and, because of this, he wanted to do all the admin now in order to save any hassle for the lad later.

In reality, Roger could imagine nothing that would stop him collecting Ben and making sure that he kept his appointment. Seeing him walk through the doctor's door on the way to having his beautiful penis spoilt was a prize for which it would be worth keeping even the most important of his business clients waiting. To be there to see him emerge later, knowing that he no longer had any scrap of foreskin on his permanently-scarred penis, would even be worth the loss of a contract.

There was just one worrying moment with the paperwork. When Roger produced the document that gave him power of attorney over Ben, the receptionist wasn't sure that it was enough for him to give consent for surgery on a minor. It had lain unused in a drawer since his marriage to Ben's mother as, with Ben's dad Richard based on the other side of the world and away on tour so much, Carol had thought it a good idea to draw it up should anything unthinkable ever happen. Roger waited while the girl went off to consult the Registrar about it, only daring to uncross his fingers when she came back smiling.

Roger managed to sound casual as he asked her to double-check the details of Ben's appointment. He was surprised to find himself taken aback at the way she just said "I've got him down for a full medical check-up plus a circumcision". She sounded so blasé about it, as if the lad was having something as simple as getting a wart removed. Had she any idea what circumcision would mean to a young man and just how life changing it would be? How could she treat it so flippantly? It irritated him that someone like her could even use the C word without blushing, or at least somehow acknowledge the significance of what Ben was soon to go through.

Roger had wondered if he should check with her that the paperwork specified the removal of every bit of Ben's penis that it was possible to remove. In the event, he didn't trust himself to be able to ask in a calm voice or in a way that would raise no suspicions. In any case, he realised, perhaps the less there was on paper about the whole business the better. He would just have to hope that Dr. Argent had remembered his request for a high and tight with the frenulum removed but, whatever happened, a circumcision was a circumcision.

Roger couldn't help wondering if he would ever get to see the details of the surgeon's handy-work on Ben. Even if he didn't, and now the Saturday swimming trips with all three boys were a thing of the past, he knew that a fleeting glance in a pub toilet one day would be about the best that he could hope for. The main thing was that Roger would know it had actually been done, even if he never got to see the extent of the change he had wrought on the lad. He almost felt sorry for Ben, but it had to happen nevertheless. What was that saying? "The sins of the father...."?

Ten minutes later, Roger was back in the car. He took the receipt the receptionist had given him out of his jacket pocket and savoured being able to read it properly now. After all the months of planning, there was so much satisfaction in just seeing the words "Benjamin Cook" and "circumcision" together on one piece of paper. How much sweeter still would it have been if the name printed in the "patient" box had been Richard Cook instead of his son's, but that was something that someone even as cunning as Roger couldn't have organised. Nevertheless, the power of retribution at second hand was heady stuff. Making sure that the cars around him were empty, Roger couldn't help opening the fly of his suit trousers and reaching inside.

Another saying came to him as he looked at the foreskin that just about covered the glans of his short, stubby erection: "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king". For once, it didn't trouble him that his hood barely covered his helmet. Compared to the way Ben would soon look, the coverage and protection that his own short foreskin offered was positively luxuriant. Roger thought again about how Ben's penis was so like his father's – big and sculpted, with a long tube of skin carrying on ridiculously far past the end of the head. The uncanny similarity had given him a jolt that first time he had taken Ben and his own sons swimming. Seeing Ben naked for the first time had also made him uncomfortably aware that nature had been far from generous when endowing either of his own two offspring. He resented Ben's luck there when he saw him next to his own

sons in the shower, so assured in his nakedness and un-embarrassed by the extent of his endowment. Even through paternal rose-tinted spectacles, Roger could not pretend either of his two sons had much to brag about in that department, and, apart from the very noticeable differences in what they had between their legs, it had always galled him that Ben was so much better-looking and confident in his own body than his own two - he was obviously going to grow into a very good-looking young man.

At the time of that first visit to the pool, Ben was about the same age as his father and Roger had been when they had first become friends. Even as a teenager, Richard had never been shy about vaunting his rather generous manhood. That irritated Roger enough in itself, but Richard had never been even the least embarrassed, as Roger felt he should be, of what he called his “nozzle” either – he was downright cocky about it, in fact. The genes that had given him this “absurd”, as Roger viewed it, bit of extra flesh that hung from the end of his penis had clearly been passed on to Ben, along with, to use a phrase of Richard’s which Roger remembered now with distaste: “rather a large portion where it counts”. That stupid, vain and down-right tacky pride of Richard’s always irked Roger, even before the fateful day when their friendship had come to such an abrupt end. He was going to get the last laugh now though. It seemed to be a day for homilies: “All things come to those that wait.”

Roger had never forgotten the time in their teens when a still-horrified Richard had told him what had happened over the family dinner table the day before. His mother and father had sat him down and told him, completely out of the blue, that he thought it would be a good idea for him to be circumcised. Telling Roger the next day, Richard was clearly mortified. He had said how barbaric he thought circumcision was and how, as far as he was concerned, they might as well cut the whole thing off him if they were going to spoil it by taking his foreskin away. Roger had never given the matter of circumcision much thought until then, and he had been amazed at his friend’s strong reaction to his parents’ suggestion. Surely it was no big deal either way? He’d willingly taken part in teasing the two circumcised boys in their class after P.E. of course, but boys will be boys, and he had joined in with it, partly as it hoped it might deflect any potential teasing away from his own small size. OK, those boys’ penises did look weird and he was very glad he hadn’t been made to look like that too, but it was clear that the idea of circumcision was something that troubled Richard a lot more than it did him.

Richard’s parents had actually been rather taken aback by their son’s reaction too. Even as a baby, he had seemed to have rather a lot of foreskin, and they had been concerned that things didn’t seem to be “putting themselves right” as he progressed through boyhood. Despite worrying that it was something that, as a father, it was his duty to check on, Richard’s dad’s resolve had faltered many times over the years as it was such an awkward topic to raise. When, however, he had taken the opportunity to sneak a look when they were in a public toilet together, he was shocked to see just how long his foreskin had become and knew that the embarrassing conversation really couldn’t be avoided any longer. He had genuinely thought that his son would be relieved at the thought of getting rid of all the “extra”, but when Richard seemed really upset by the

suggestion, it was quietly dropped, parental duty having been done by at least making the offer.

Even though it was never again mentioned at home, the suggestion was a subject to which Richard had often returned with Roger. Roger could tell that something about the incident had really disturbed his friend, and he wished now he could somehow be able to see the look on Richard's face when he found out that his son had been spoiled by circumcision. For weeks, Roger had been enjoying imagining his newly-cut stepson coping with his new status, thinking of his discomfort when he next went to the gym with his friends. Roger would have loved to be able to tell Richard that his son's suffering was all Richard's fault - that Richard had brought it on Ben because of the wrong he had done all those years ago. Roger imagined the horror that would have been on Richard's face if, when they were both teenagers, Richard had looked down and found that not only had his skin extension gone but that every scrap of covering had been taken from him too. Having the head made totally exposed and vulnerable instead of languishing in its covering would have shut Richard up and stopped his immature bragging and flaunting for sure. That was beyond Roger's power now, but he was going to get the next best thing by inflicting it on Richard's only son.

Sitting in the car, Roger pulled his foreskin right back onto his shaft, so far back that it started to hurt. He tried with difficulty to imagine how awful it would be to be left like that the whole time, how weird it would feel for the head always to be exposed and rubbing mercilessly on your trousers, how rude and brazen it looks, how shameful must it be to have to let others see your most personal part completely on show with no way of keeping it modestly veiled like normal men who can choose to reveal it only in the most intimate of moments. He, Roger, was going to take that choice from Ben. That special power elated him and, rather to his surprise, aroused him too.

Suddenly, Roger surprised himself by feeling slightly ashamed. It passed as he grabbed for the best justification he could muster: "What it must be like to have all that extra skin in the way?" Richard's parents were right, he thought. As well as the ridiculous look of it, surely it must be a problem having to pee through an ugly snout all the time? He almost managed to convince himself that he was doing Ben a favour in saving him from that. Almost.

Roger hurriedly re-stowed his penis as he heard a car door slamming nearby. Putting the car in gear, he guiltily hoped that the Burden Park Clinic didn't have CCTV in its car park.

Chapter Four

Roger's desire to spoil Ben's penis had been coming on for a long time. Looking back, he could actually identify the exact moment when things escalated and he knew he would no longer be able to stop himself making it happen. It had been when Roger's younger son Matthew was invited to Gemma Whittington's eighteenth birthday party. She was one of Matthew and Ben's classmates, and Roger could see how delighted Matthew was by the invite. Ben had certainly noticed Gemma's rather obviously-stated charms from time to time, but Matthew had long been hopelessly in love with her but was too timid to make a move. For Matthew, going to her party was a very big deal in his life as it was the first time that any girl had even seemed to notice him. Matthew's pride and pleasure had, however, received a big dent when Gemma rang on the morning of the party to invite Ben as well.

That evening, Roger had turned up as planned to collect both the boys from the Whittington's at midnight. Turning into their driveway, his headlights caught two intertwined figures in the alleyway alongside the house. They rapidly disconnected their tongues and moved apart as they heard the car approach. Roger could see that one of them was Gemma. For an instant, he was delighted that things had clearly gone so well for Matthew. A second later, though, he felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. He saw the boy wasn't Matthew. It was Ben.

Roger chose to pretend he hadn't noticed them and rang the door-bell. He eventually found Matthew sitting in the back garden, very drunk and feeling very sorry for himself. Roger didn't say a word, but he was boiling inside. History was repeating itself. It awakened so much hurt in Roger, making him think back to when his then best friend Richard had betrayed him in such a similar way. It was when they had been starting their second year at university that Carol, Ben's mum-to-be, arrived as a first year. Both Richard and Roger had instantly fallen for her in a big way. At first, it had been a real bond between the two of them - both admiring her from afar as she had shown not the slightest interest in either of them. After a while, Roger began to think he was making progress, and a light-hearted rivalry over her had started up between the two suitors. Then came the end-of-term party that changed it all. Roger had gone out just before 11 to get some more wine before the off-licence closed. When he came back, he found Richard and Carol in a writhing clench on the settee.

The hurt of that betrayal went deep. Roger had been nurturing the injustice ever since. Eleven years later, he had been delighted when he heard on the grapevine that Richard and Carol's marriage had fallen apart and that Richard had taken a job with an orchestra in Australia. A couple of years later, it was by pure fluke that Roger, then divorced himself and looking after his two sons, saw Carol on "Friend's Reunited" He had risked sending her a chatty email, one thing had led to another and, to his great satisfaction, she had accepted when he finally asked her to marry him. He still had feelings for her, he was sure of that, but he knew that a big part of it was the huge satisfaction of finally triumphing over Richard. Not only could much of the burden of

looking after his boys be dumped on to someone else, but he had got both the girl and his way after all, and getting his way was something of which Roger was very fond indeed. Finding Matthew in such a similar situation with Ben and Gemma at the party brought the raw injustice of it all flooding back. Taking Carol from him wasn't all Richard had done to him all those years ago though; there was another score to be settled there too. That was something he had decided to do something about, even if it had to be done at second hand, with Ben paying the price for it in place of his father.

As it happened, Matthew had bounced back very quickly from his snub at Gemma's party and the coolness between him and Ben only lasted a few days. Gemma had dumped Ben pretty thoroughly by the end of the week and Matthew had struck up with a girl he saw at the bus stop on the way to school. In fact, being able to share complaining about Gemma's behaviour towards both of them had brought the boys closer together than they ever had been before, but Roger chose not to notice this - the damage was done in his mind, and the empathy he felt for his son as well as his own hurt from all those years ago made him determined to act.

At first, Roger had been stumped as to how to set his plan in motion, but as he left the clinic on the morning of Ben's appointment and turned on to the ring road, he couldn't help thinking how clever he had been to find a way to make things happen. Perhaps it was more than just luck though. Things had gone so well that fate seemed to have agreed that he was justified in what he was doing and had given him a helping hand. He thought back through the conversation he had engineered with Carol that had been so vital in making the whole plan happen, and how things had so unexpectedly turned his way and made everything so much easier to put in place.

It was during one of the occasional Saturday afternoon swimming trips with Ben and his own two boys that the plan had dawned on Roger. He knew he would have to play his cards right to make it work, but that was one thing at which Roger was expert. Later that evening, he started a well-thought-through conversation with Ben's mum. He'd told her he had noticed something about Ben that was worrying him. Preparing himself to lie to her, he told her that he'd seen over the last couple of trips to the pool that Ben's foreskin was looking as if it was getting rather tight.

"All three of them are growing into strapping lads," he went on, "and sometimes one bit of a strapping lad grows a bit out of sync with the rest of him. I think Ben should really get his foreskin checked out, just to be on the safe side."

Ben might indeed have been turning into a fine young man, but there was nothing whatsoever wrong with his foreskin, and Roger knew it. Ben's mum had looked a bit taken aback - this wasn't exactly the sort of conversation you usually had over a Saturday night glass of wine and DVD. He kept talking, carrying on before she could reply, and banked on his assumption that this was a topic on which she would hardly be an expert. Coming from a big family of girls, she was always a bit of a loss when it came to "men's stuff". It struck him again how ironic it was that her one child was a boy, and that she had inherited two as stepsons as well. Roger explained that teenagers' skins can sometimes

get tight as they grow up and cause problems. It was no fun, he said, if it was difficult for them to retract them, and sometimes, if the skin gets really tight, it can even get stuck back which can cause really serious complications. In a moment of sudden inspiration, he had added that if you can't retract properly to clean underneath, then hygiene was a real issue too. He knew he was on to one of her pet subjects when it came to cleanliness, and he realised he'd been clever to sow this seed early on.

“Mmm,” she said, “Actually, Richard always had to be really careful about keeping clean down there”. Roger always flinched inside when she mentioned her ex-husband, his ex-best friend. This time though, he was completely taken aback by the rest of her sentence: “I suppose that's why it's so much easier for you, being circumcised”, she said.

It took a second for Roger to register just what she meant. He was a quick thinker and he knew instantly that this was important, but it took a moment or two for him to realise exactly the significance of what Carol had just said. She had obviously made a huge assumption long ago, and assumed wrong. She thought Roger was circumcised! That was so good – it played right into his hands!

Ever the good Catholic girl, Carol had only slept with two men in her life – her two husbands - Richard and Roger. Richard had a lot of overhang, but Roger had none at all - his short skin barely covering his head even when he was completely soft. Richard's long overhang, she had assumed, was what all intact men. So Roger, she had assumed too, must have been circumcised to have no overhang at all.

Had he not been a consummate straight-faced con artist, Roger would have laughed out loud at the way things had turned so unexpectedly in his favour. He hadn't even had to lie this time- she had deceived herself without any help from him for once. He blessed Carol's naivety at that moment, realising that she had just seen so few penises in her life and probably none at all which had undergone the brutality of circumcision. He thought of his boys when he had last supervised their bath times when they had both still got little trunks of extra skin. Ben would surely have had that too - all boys of that age did. That bit of overhang, Carol must have assumed, grew in proportion with the rest of them as boys grew into manhood so that they all end up looking like Richard with his long, overhanging snout.

Thinking over it all later that night, Roger wondered how anyone could be so stupid as to think that anything as gross as Richard's foreskin was normal. Seconds later, the corollary of her error dawned on him, and this was a far less welcome thought. It annoyed him to realise that his new wife must always have thought of him as less than a complete man - a man that was less than perfect and who had been marred by having had part of his penis taken away. Despite that, it amused him to think of her shock had she ever been with a man who really had undergone the cruel act. What would she have made of seeing a penis so completely denuded of skin that every millimetre of the head was permanently uncovered, the mark of the surgeon's knife showing on the shaft where it had scarred that special flesh for the rest of its owners' life? Did she not realise that

circumcision was surgery, and surgery that left scars? Did she really think it was such a benign procedure that he could have undergone it and still look the way he did? Circumcision wasn't some minor tidying-up that left a man with the amount of modesty and protection that Roger had, it was the total removal of an intimate and sensitive part of the body that leaves him changed for ever. None of that seemed to matter to her though, but her stupidity had played straight into his hands and things had suddenly got a whole lot easier for him when that had happened. That was what really counted, and he couldn't believe his luck.

After Carol's mistaken assumption came to light, it was all going to be so much more straightforward. As Roger had hoped, she was reluctant to discuss Ben's "problem" with the boy herself as that would have been just too embarrassing for both of them, and she was more than happy when Roger made his kind offer to talk to the lad. "This sort of thing," he had told her "is always easier done man to man."

Roger had, of course, not the slightest intention of discussing anything with Ben. The medical plan idea was firming up his mind, so he would say just enough to the boy to cover his tracks, get him a complete, total and ruthless circumcision and leave him to deal with the consequences. It was a simple as that.

Chapter Five

Roger was quiet on the drive to the clinic with Ben. He was thinking hard, making sure that he'd said just enough to the lad to cover his tracks in case things turned nasty. Knowing Ben as he did, Roger was pretty sure that the boy was too trusting by nature to ask tricky questions. Even if he had suspicions, Roger was sure that Ben would just be too embarrassed by the nature of what was going on to make the situation worse by creating a fuss. Even so, Roger knew he just couldn't take any chances. He had thought very carefully before talking to the boy the night before, but he re-ran the conversation he'd had with Ben in his head just to double check that it had covered everything.

“Oh, by the way,” Roger had started, adopting his most casual voice as he scrubbed the potatoes for their evening meal, “it struck me that if anything shows up in your medical and Dr. Argent wants to do more tests and stuff - like an allergy test for your hay fever or something – then it might make sense if he just got on with it and did it all tomorrow. Then it can all go on the same bill and the insurance will cover it. Is that ok with you?”

Put that way, it sounded so reasonable that he wasn't surprised that Ben raised no objection.

“OK,” said Roger, “I'll sort it then. I didn't think you'd want to be to-ing and fro-ing to the doctors during your exams, and if we can go private while the policy lasts then all the better and it can all be done and dusted before the holiday starts. No point in hanging around ages for an NHS appointment if we can avoid it, is there.”

Roger had sense to shut up then. He knew that, uncharacteristically, he was starting to burble. Nevertheless, he admired his own cleverness once again. If he had been any more specific it might have scared the boy. He really didn't want that, let alone to raise any suspicions in his mind.

Roger had started setting Ben up for his plan weeks before. After one of their swimming trips, he had waited to catch Ben alone and, adopting his special parental voice, said he had something he wanted to ask him. Ben winced inside, hating these excruciating moments with his step-father. Roger kicked off with his usual “As your father isn't here to do it....”. This pre-cursor always got up Ben's nose because of its unspoken but very clearly implied subtext of “as he has abandoned you and selfishly bugged off to the other side of the world.” Ben never knew what was going to follow on from this grating intro, but it was seldom welcome. This time, though, it was worse than any of Roger's previous heavy-handed and double-edged bursts of man-to-man paternal moments:

“Listen,” Roger said, “this is a bit awkward, so I'll just be blunt. I couldn't help noticing earlier at the pool that you've got rather a lot of foreskin.”

Roger was working hard at the measured tone of his voice as he knew that this vital, trumped-up conversation was one which would stretch even his often-used skills of cunning.

“It’s just that lots of lads of your age develop problems down there as they get to your age and, well, I just didn’t want you to be suffering in silence.”

Ben was cringing inside and wanted to tell Roger to push off and mind his own business. That just never worked with Roger though - Ben knew that well from experience. He gritted his teeth, managed to throw back a smile of sorts and just said it was all fine.

“Are you sure?” came back Roger. “You really do seem to have more than is usual, and I would have expected that you ...”

Ben was saved. For once, he blessed his step brothers as they appeared noisily through the kitchen door, bang on cue. Roger was actually rather relieved too. He never broached the subject again. He knew that he didn’t have to. He had covered his tracks.

Ben was actually rather impressed by the Burden Park Clinic - it was all so smart in comparison to the family doctor’s rather tatty surgery. He had been collected from reception by cheery young black nurse with a cockney accent who seemed refreshingly at odds with the place’s staid ethos. He introduced himself as Mike, and he struck Ben at once as being genuinely friendly. As they chatted, they got on to the subject of Ben’s college plans. Discovering that Ben was going to university in Nottingham, Mike told him that that was where his girlfriend lived and that Ben was going to enjoy life there as it was a great city with lots of night life.

Ben was pleased to have someone kindly looking after him. Even so, he wasn’t too keen on medical gown into which Mike asked him to change. He hadn’t expected that as, at his last medical, the school nurse had done little more than open his shirt to run a cursory stethoscope over his chest. Although he knew that this check-up was likely to be more involved, he felt more than a bit vulnerable waiting in Dr. Argent’s consulting room in a gown which, without his Calvin Klein’s, was only just long enough to allow him to keep himself covered.

When he finally appeared, Dr Argent seemed pleasant enough. His slightly forbidding bedside manner didn’t lead Ben to expect that the appointment would be exactly a barrel of laughs, but he was pleased in a way, knowing that there probably wouldn’t be too much in the way of small talk to have to deal with.

Ben was surprised just how thorough the check-up was. Dr Argent asked him a whole string of questions between the various tests as he worked his way down several pages on a clipboard. Ben had been there about 40 minutes and was thinking that he must surely be almost through when Argent asked him something that took him totally unawares:

“Are you sexually active, Ben?”

Ben felt himself flush. He hadn't been expecting that one. The memory of those two amazing minutes in Gemma Whittington's front garden flashed into his mind - his tongue down her throat and her hand down his trousers. Did that count? He just didn't know.

Dr Argent had, however, half expected Ben's discomfort at his question. Remembering his step father's words about how shy and embarrassed the lad was, he moved quickly on after Ben's mumbled and inconclusive reply. He said he expected that they had covered sexual health in PHSE lessons at school and that, as he moved into adulthood and became sexually active, he hoped he would remember all the advice about safe sex and how important it was to protect himself and his partners.

Ben enjoyed the practical part of this section of the examination even less than the preliminary questions. The doctor asked him to open the gown. The school nurse hadn't done anything like this, and he was amazed that even a thorough check-up like this would venture into such personal territory. To Ben's mortification, Argent thoroughly examined his testicles, saying how important it was to check regularly for any changes as testicular cancer was one of the biggest killers amongst young men. That wasn't all Ben had to go through before he could cover up again. The next bit was even worse. Dr. Argent seemed surprisingly interested in his foreskin. He didn't ask Ben anything about it, but he spent quite some time manipulating it, pulling it forward then right back onto Ben's shaft and even feeling his frenulum. This was so embarrassing, so embarrassing in fact that Ben didn't have any worries about getting the erection he would have sprung within seconds if he had been manipulating himself in that way.

During those unwelcome minutes, Ben thought back to the one time ever his father had spoken to him about his foreskin. It was just a few weeks before he had gone to secondary school when Richard had asked Ben if he had worked out how to pull his foreskin back to keep clean under there. Ben, embarrassed to the core, had told him that he had. He hoped that this was the right answer and that it wasn't going to get him into any trouble. Just a couple of months before, Ben had made the awe-inspiring discovery that there was something inside the end of his willy. He had found out by pure chance when he had idly tried holding the sides of the long bud of foreskin that covered his glans apart a little as he peed. It fascinated him. Bit by bit, getting a little more daring every day, he had risked opening the skin a little wider, eventually working a finger inside the long tube to feel what might be in there. After a week, he had discovered the slit where his wee came out. Soon after, by running a finger-tip round inside, he found that his covering skin didn't seem to be attached to whatever it was that was underneath it, apart

from one little place at the bottom where there seemed to be something in the way. Growing bolder, he had tried tugging at the skin, discovering that the whole thing would go back as a unit to reveal a vividly purple-coloured part of him that he just hadn't known existed before. He just couldn't resist doing something so fascinating more and more, helped on by the fact it became easier to do it every time he tried and encouraged even more by the strangely pleasant feelings it gave him. Although he couldn't stop himself, Ben was a bit scared that he was doing harm. In fact, he wasn't at all sure that he should be able to do this at all and was genuinely concerned that something was wrong with him. After a week or so, Ben had taken to pulling back every time he could, enjoying the sight of the thing that always reminded him of a triceratops' head emerging from its fleshy covering when he did so. It fascinated him to hold the skin back as far as it would go and see how different he looked. Letting go again, he enjoyed seeing things return to normal as the skin rolled gradually forward by itself then, with an ever-fascinating acceleration, closed back over the end of his glans to form its familiar, neatly budded snout. In some ways it was like having a new toy, but Ben instinctively knew that there was something rather different about this new secret plaything that meant it was best enjoyed in private and not talked about with anyone else. At first, Ben had actually wondered about asking his dad about his new discovery. Apart from anything else, he really needed to know if it was supposed to happen or if there really was something wrong with him but he decided in the end that he just couldn't - afraid that he'd either be told off, told to stop or even rushed off to the doctor. Huge relief had come one afternoon in the school library when he was intently looking for a book on space travel but had become aware of giggling on the other side of the book stack. Intrigued, he'd peered through a gap between the encyclopaedias and seen Ewan Lamb and Hayley Jennings on the other side. Ben was amazed to see that Ewan had his penis, much smaller than his own, hanging out of the fly of his shorts. Ewan was demonstrating to a fascinated Hayley how he could cover and uncover the end of his willy. Relief washed over Ben - he wasn't a freak after all. In the conversation with his dad shortly after that, Richard told him that now he was growing up he would need to take special care and wash under his skin every day. Ben always did after that, pleased for the paternal confirmation that it was something he was allowed - even encouraged - to do.

Early in the appointment, Dr Argent had taken a blood sample. Roger had warned Ben that this might happen, knowing that he was far from keen on needles. Ben hadn't been too happy to see the first hypodermic in the man's hands but his heart sank when the doctor, finally abandoning Ben's genitals, came back with a second. Ben wasn't too sure what this was all about, and he wasn't much the wiser when the doctor just said that he was going to give him a shot for "the procedure" so that it could start to take effect while he finished off the physical examination. Ben wasn't exactly sure what a "procedure" was, but, over his school career, he had stoically endured tetanus and other boosters and guessed that the shot must be another one of those. Whilst Ben held a piece of cotton wool over the sore puncture mark, Dr Argent gave him a sight test, pronounced that his glasses were still fine for him and then asked him to go and relax on the trolley in a small, rather more spartan-looking annex just off the main consulting room.

Ben had had more than enough by now and had been hoping that the sight test was the last thing on the afternoon's menu. It was a hot afternoon and he was suddenly and surprisingly feeling rather tired, so the prospect of lying down wasn't actually too disagreeable. Even so, his surroundings in the side room suggested that this next test, whatever it was, might be something rather unpleasant. Unlike the consulting room, which could have passed for a study in grand house, this room looked a lot more like one you'd find in a hospital.

Ben was slightly surprised when Argent buzzed through to call Mike back in. Mike greeted him anew with a big smile and a wink but, although Ben would have welcomed the distraction of another reassuring friendly chat at this stage, he found that he just had to shut his eyes for a moment as his drowsiness increased. Ben could hear metallic-sounding noises as Mike got things out of drawers behind him, and he would have liked to turn around to see what was going on had he not felt more than a little groggy for a reason he couldn't understand. Ominously, he could see Dr. Argent scrubbing his hands at a sink in the corner and, rather concerned, Ben wanted to ask what was going to happen - this next test, whatever it turned out to be, was beginning to alarm him. Despite his concern, the effort of trying to speak seemed just to be too much. Dr. Argent and Mike came back to the couch as Ben's eyes closed again. Ben could feel Argent examining his foreskin again, annoyed that the man just couldn't seem to leave it alone. He felt him rolling back the skin again, stretching it as far back as it would go and then pulling it much further forward than Ben found comfortable, but somehow he didn't seem able to form the words to ask him to stop. Just before he finally succumbed to sleep, Ben heard Mike and Dr. Argent talking.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it to me," said Mike. "Seems a shame to take off a nice one like that."

"It's elective," replied the doctor. "He's old enough to know what he wants."

Ben was still trying to make sense of that as he fell into a troubled dream about his dad showing Gemma Whittington his willy in the school library."

Roger was at the counter of the Burden Park coffee bar whilst Dr Argent was stretching Ben's foreskin out to an extent that would have really alarmed its owner, had he been awake to see it happen. The distance it reached amazed Mike, who thought he had seen every shape and size of foreskin on the other lads he had seen out cold on that same table. He was wondering how the doctor was going to know where best to make the cut when there was just so much skin there, and he truly hoped for the best on its owner's behalf.

By the time Roger was sitting down with the Daily Telegraph and sipping what he called a “lartay” in the clinic’s cafe, Argent had a long-handled clamp carefully in position on Ben’s foreskin. Mike was squirming to see how much of the boy was on the “wrong” side of its jaws. Circumcised himself, he was always been a little uncomfortable seeing other men being made the same. When they didn’t have an obvious phimosis he sometimes couldn’t help wondering if they really understood what they were letting themselves in for. For him, foreskins were rather magical and mysterious things and, although he didn’t mind his own status, he had always rather wished he could have a chance as an adult to experience what it was like to have one. He often tried to imagine being able to slide something so moist and comforting over his glans, and the special texture of the severed hoods that ended up in a metal dish after Dr. Argent had finished his “procedures” was something Mike often couldn’t resist savouring. As he cleared away after them, he sometimes discretely slid a finger inside the dead openings of the skins that had come off in one piece and tried to imagine what it was like to be able to move something like that over your glans. The idea of lads actually opting to lose their foreskins when there was no compelling reason always intrigued him somehow. He remembered all too well the teasing he himself had had to put up with as the only circumcised boy in his class at school and, since then, how his sexual conquests had so often done a double take when they had first become intimate and had seen his bare-headed penis for the first time. Still, like the Doctor said, if that was what a bloke wanted...

Dr Argent’s feeling on circumcision was much less ambiguous than Mike’s. As a Muslim, for him it was just something that happened. He would not have had a second thought about wanting it for his sons, and he found it hard to understand why some patients who had presented with phimosis or balanitis had even questioned the need for the removal of their foreskins nor seen how the loss of such a small piece of skin could bother them as much as it often did. As a doctor, it was just an easy piece of minor day surgery for him, and that was that.

As Roger started on an almond croissant, the doctor was closing the handles of the clamp, waiting to sense the familiar feeling of squishy resistance as metal neared metal through flesh. By the time Roger was picking crumbs of his plate, the device had done its job and killed Ben’s foreskin. The doctor reached for the scalpel that Mike proffered and ran it across the bottom edge of its jaws, leaving a thin red line in its transforming wake.

By the time Roger had discovered that he had two fives in one of the boxes in his sudoku, Ben and his foreskin were no longer connected. His former prepuce was lying, limp and greying, on a metal dish, waiting for Mike to tip it into the yellow surgical waste box ready for the incinerator. Mike looked at it lying there, amazed at how much of it there was. “It’s half the length of the lad’s dick,” he thought, “and that’s saying something in his case.” He had been surprised how high the doctor had cut, knowing that he usually preferred to do low cuts with the scar line hidden neatly in the groove behind the head. When he had remarked on it, the doctor told him that this was a special request for a high and tight cut. As Argent set to work snipping out the boy’s thick frenum, Mike started to clear up, surprised that the lad had known enough to express such an informed preference.

Few lads that age had any idea that there was more to it than “just” getting a circumcision and that it could be done in different ways. He often wondered how many patients whose ignorance on the subject meant that they found they ended up looking rather different from the way they had imagined.

By the time the doctor was threading self-dissolving sutures through the red-raw edges of Ben’s inner skin, Roger was well into the easy clues of the crossword. He was impatient now for the call that the lad was in the recovery room. He looked at his watch, annoyed with Ben for causing all this hanging about. If Ben kept him waiting much longer, he was going to miss the start of that night’s quarter finals from Wimbledon.

Chapter Six

The third time he came round, Ben managed to stay awake. He lay dead still in his bed, the curtains closed against the strong sunlight as he weighed up the increasingly urgent need to pee against the nausea that washed over him. As his head cleared, Ben became aware that his penis felt uncomfortable. He cursed the doctor for messing about with his foreskin so much – it had been obvious to Ben that the mauling that Argent was giving it was going to leave him sore, and he just hadn't seen why it had been necessary in the first place. Ben pulled back the duvet to have a look. As he lifted up the waist band on his trunks, a bolt of shock hit him hard in the pit of his stomach. Most of his penis was covered in a tight, gauze bandage. Worse still, there was a small patch where some blood had oozed through.

Fighting back the nausea, Ben sat up in bed, instantly wide awake. It was worse than he thought. That fool Argent must have prodded him around so much that he'd done some damage. Ben reached down and took his penis in his hand. It was sore, in fact very sore indeed, and he winced. Trying to calm himself, Ben reached for his glasses to see the worst. The base of his shaft was uncovered, the bandage veiled the middle section and, rather surreally, they must have pulled his skin back before bandaging him up as his glans was exposed and sticking out of the other end of it. Ben felt carefully for the loose end of the gauze, needing to take it off to see what harm had been done. Argent must have been incredibly rough with it during that last test if he had drawn blood, thought Ben. He struggled to think what the test must have been for, and why he had needed to be knocked out for it. He made a tentative pull at the loose end of the bandage but the shock of pain it caused made him realise it would be too incredibly painful to take it off. He couldn't understand why the bare bell-end of his penis was showing like that – the doctor must have rolled his foreskin back and tucked it inside the bandage for some reason. It would never normally stay back by itself for more than a few seconds unless he had a very full erection, and that was one thing that he certainly didn't have at that moment. A new wave of nausea swept over him and he had to lie back on his bed. As he did so, he noticed the brown envelope on the bedside table. He vaguely remembered that Mike had put into his hand as he had unsteadily left the recovery room. He reached for it, slid his finger under the flap and took out a thin leaflet:

“The Burden Park Clinic.
Post-operative Care - Circumcision.”

Ben struggled to get a grip on things. He just couldn't make any sense of what this was all about. He must have been given the wrong envelope. He knew more or less what circumcision was – they had covered the topic briefly in a very giggly year 9 RE lesson on the rites of Judaism and Islam - but that was about it. He was a Catholic. None of that weird stuff was anything to do with him. He wouldn't have been circumcised - it wasn't done to boys like him.

In that RE class, Ben had been horrified at the thought of anything so awful being inflicted on anyone. “No religion is worth that,” he had thought. In the break after the

lesson there had been a lot of chat about it amongst his friends, everyone saying how glad they were it hadn't been done to them. To Ben, the Muslim idea of doing to boys at puberty had seemed down-right sick. At least if you were Jewish it was over with before you were old enough to know anything about it or, for that matter, before you had had a chance to realise what you were going to miss out on for the rest of your life. Ben was friends with a boy from Pakistan in one of the other classes in his year. Every time Ben saw him after that RE lesson it made him feel strange just to think that someone had taken a knife to his penis. It was even worse that his parents could have willingly let something so dreadful happen to him. Sorry though he was for the boy, Ben had wondered slightly guiltily if he and the boy would ever end up in the same sports set so he could see in the showers exactly what the result of a circumcision looked like as, other than a picture of the back view of a rabbi bending over a child with his family gathered round, the RE teacher had understandably brought no pictures to that lesson and Ben had found it hard to imagine what a penis with its foreskin cut off would look like. Ben had some awareness too that some boys needed to be circumcised for medical reasons, but he had been heartily relieved that it was nothing that he'd ever have to worry about as his foreskin had always so easy to retract and keep clean.

Now, in the cool of his bedroom, Ben couldn't quite manage the same confidence that circumcision was nothing to do with him. It couldn't have been inflicted on him, could it? Why would anyone have done that? At that moment, Dr Argent's words as Ben had given in to sleep on the couch in the clinic came back to him like a slap on the face:

“It's elective – he's old enough to know what he wants.”

There couldn't have been some terrible misunderstanding could there? With horrified realisation, Argent's in-depth examination of Ben's foreskin, the mysterious second needle and the gauze around his sore cock just make some sickening sort of sense. That idiot doctor couldn't have got his notes mixed up with some Muslim kid's, could he?

“Shit”, said Ben aloud. “Shit, shit, shit.”

As Ben was struggling to come to terms with things, Roger's son Matthew was downstairs and eavesdropping as his father spoke quietly to Carol on the phone.

“Yes, it all went fine,” Matthew heard him say. “Yes, I was right. The doctor thought that it was best to take it all off to be on the safe side.... Yes, he was fine about it..... Yes, he seems OK to me. He's resting – getting over the jab I reckon. They thought it best to give him a general...Yes, I'll check on him. By the way, I really wouldn't mention anything about it to him when you get back. I think he'd rather just keep quiet about it -it's all a bit embarrassing for him, and understandably so – a lad of his age, having something wrong down there. He'll talk if he wants. By the way, just send me a text when you land, and I'll wait for you on the road outside the arrivals hall.”

Matthew knew there would be nothing more of interest to hear and made sure he was innocently back in front of the television well before his father had hung up.

Carol was a bit concerned about Ben when she arrived back from her sisters. He seemed quiet and rather introspective, whereas she had thought he would be on a high because of his birthday the next day. She just put his strange mood down to the stress of his A-levels and too many late nights spent revising. It genuinely never occurred to her that his unusual mood was anything to do with his circumcision. Had she had ever thought about it - and she hadn't - Carol would have viewed a circumcision as being on a par with having a tooth out: it was a bit uncomfortable while it was being done, left you a bit sore for a while, but you were glad you'd had it fixed, and you'd get used to the feeling of something being missing after a day or two. It would never have occurred to her that it could be something life-changing, and she would have been genuinely astonished to find just how much it had affected her son.

Ben's birthday had taken on a new and depressing significance for him. He had read the leaflet from the clinic so many times that he knew its shocking contents almost by heart. He'd realised with a feeling of foreboding that the day when it said that he needed to soak off the bandage in a hot bath was going to be his 18th birthday. This wasn't the sort of unwrapping he had been looking forward to on that day at all, but he didn't know which was worse - seeing the awful truth under the bandage, or not knowing. He had to do it anyway, he knew that. He managed to get through the family's traditional birthday treat of a full fry-up breakfast with a semblance of light-heartedness but, as soon as he decently could, Ben locked himself in the bathroom and turned the taps on full.

He had reached a state of emotional detachment when he lowered himself into the tepid water. He went through the motions of washing, knowing full well that this was the last reason for this particular soak. The sensation of the water on his penis was both unfamiliar, uncomfortable and more than a little disconcerting. After a few minutes, Ben noticed that the end of the gauze dressing was starting to come adrift. The urge to rip it off almost overwhelmed him for a second before he convinced himself that that was not going to be a good idea. The waiting was becoming agony when Ben - finally - risked a gentle tug at the softening wrapping. Slowly, it started to unwind itself in the water.

Ben had had no real idea what he was going to look like underneath the dressing. He had imagined every possibility many times over so the reality was neither better nor worse than he had feared. He hadn't expected the bruising though. The puffy, inflamed flesh appalled him, even though he could see, despite his panic, that it wasn't going to be like that for ever. The obvious permanent damage that had been done to his penis really horrified him though. Every scrap of his foreskin was gone. In one way, it did still look a little like his penis, but in another it was as if someone else's had been grafted onto his crotch in place of his own. The triceratops head was now baldly exposed and, in its new context, it looked so different from when he had enjoyed exposing it by gradually rolling back his skin during one of his long, luxurious wanks. Now, there was nothing at all anywhere near the deep ridge of his helmet to soften its new, harsh and immodest outline. The damage higher up his shaft looked no less horrific. The line the scalpel had taken was a red-raw ridge right across his shaft. That was to be expected of course, but what Ben just couldn't fathom out was why the skin on the glans side of the scar looked so different than it had before, contrasting starkly now with what was on the other side of the line. The

texture was altered somehow too, but that was nothing compared to the fact that it seemed to have changed colour and now seemed to be a totally different tone than the skin higher up. Had there been anyone there to tell him, Ben probably wouldn't have believed it when they said that what covered shaft of his penis between the head and the scar line used to be the inside of his foreskin.

Back in his room, Ben found it so hard to analyse his feelings that he soon stopped trying. Anger, embarrassment, disbelief – they were all in there somewhere. Shame though - that was there too, and the hardest to understand. Why did he feel ashamed that such a thing had been done to him? It hadn't been his fault. Was he going to have to feel like this for the rest of his life? Would he always have to be ashamed that a part of him, a part of which he had always been rather proud, was now something so awful that it would have to be kept hidden away at all costs? Was he ashamed that he had let it happen, even though he had had no inkling that it was going to be done to him? Could he have stopped it somehow? It was hard to accept that he might have – he really had had no idea it was coming, hadn't he? Or was he ashamed that part of his body was so faulty that it had needed a doctor's knife to put things right? Ben thought he knew that that wasn't the case, or did he? He had no real way of being sure what a normal, healthy foreskin should be like, but he had never had cause to think there was anything wrong with his. Whichever way Ben came at the situation, there was just no answer.

Chapter Seven

For the first few days, every step was agony. Any careless movement jolted the scar, but the torment of the ceaseless and unwelcome stimulation of the glans as it rubbed on his clothes was worse. Whenever he could, Ben had his hand in his trouser pocket to keep the material well away from his newly-exposed head. At home, he could at least wear a loose tracksuit, but at school it was torture as his black uniform trousers were getting tight for him. Ben knew it would seem ridiculous to buy a new pair for his last couple of weeks of school, and the embarrassment of having to explain the reason for such a seemingly reckless purchase to his mother ruled it out completely. At nights, the torment of the bedclothes resting on his penis ago tortured him. Desperate for sleep, he soon resorted to propping up the sheets with a CD rack on one side of him and his French horn case on the other.

At school, Ben took great care to ensure that he was alone when he went to the toilet. He had never felt the least bit shy about urinating in public before, savouring the sensation of letting his long penis flop out of his fly and not caring much who saw. Now though, he took to using a cubicle as the barrier-free troughs in the school toilets offered no protection from prying eyes. He was relieved that he had so few school days left as it meant that there was a good chance that he could make it through to the end of term without anyone finding out his dreadful secret. The rest of his life was a different matter – he would have to face that in due course, but for now he could at least try to avoid the shame of any of his schoolmates seeing the awful thing that had been done to him.

In retrospect, Ben came to realise the irony that lay in the way his exams had distracted him from the depression that overcame him whenever he let himself dwell on the horror of living the rest of his life as a circumcised man and that that horror had meant that he had little mental space left to get too stressed about his A-levels. Luckily, Ben was both bright and well prepared for his exams in any case, and there were few nasty surprises in his first batch of papers. After two weeks of moving cautiously to avoid the pain of his circumcision rubbing on his trousers and then a week sitting at a cramped desk in the exam room, Ben's body was aching for exercise. He had a couple of free days and then a whole weekend before his last papers and, although going for a jog was still out of the question in even the tightest of underwear, the thought of going for a swim was becoming tempting. He was hesitant, as the thought of anyone seeing him appalled him, but the more he thought about it, the pool seemed a fairly safe option if he planned it well. Ben was longing to feel the sensation of his limbs stretching out in the water and, after thinking it through carefully, he reckoned that if he went midweek and in the quiet time between school parties leaving and the lunchtime rush of business men arriving, there was very little likelihood of anyone being around.

Ben knew that throwing a leg over his bike and sitting on the small racing saddle wasn't going to be wise, so it was a long, hot walk to the pool. Unusually for him, he chose to change in a cubicle rather than in the open area. Although he wouldn't have admitted it even to himself, he had always rather enjoyed the freedom of being naked in public up until then -although he was a quiet lad, this was one area where he really was his father's son.

As he changed, he took care not to look at his penis when he pulled down his pants. If he had done so, he would have seen one which still looked very raw and, to anyone who knew the signs, clearly still freshly cut - the bloated flesh, still bruised flesh around the scar line and the suture marks would have made it more than obvious.

Ben realised his first mistake when he came to pull on his Speedos. With all the events of the last couple of weeks, he had forgotten that they too were getting as small for him as well as his uniform trousers and that he had meant to buy a new pair before his next swimming trip. Very cautiously, he managed to ease them up over his genitals. Carefully arranging his battered penis inside, he was glad that the uncomfortable tightness of the material would at least offer some support and stop his manhood moving around painfully as he swam. Ben was relieved that he had been right about the locker room being empty. Stowing his rucksack in the locker he cursed when, as usual, he realised that, as usual, he had forgotten to take a 20p piece out of his track suit before folding it carefully away.

Ben's second mistake was not being prepared for the big full-length mirror by the showers. As he sluiced down before heading for the pool, he caught sight of himself and had one of the punch-in-the-stomach moments that had happened so often since his circumcision. His Speedos were verging on indecent tightness, and the eyes of anyone who appreciated seeing this fit, good-looking young man would instinctively be drawn down to his crotch to see if his contour there was as pleasing as the rest of him. It wasn't that that shocked Ben though, but that the bald, bare outline of the head of his penis showed so obviously through the taut material. He stood, transfixed for a moment, adjusting to the fact that it would be clear to anyone who cared to look that there was no foreskin covering the large glans that lay inside. He had occasionally seen other men with the same sort of shape in their trunks, but it was only now that he realised what it was that he had been seeing. The sharp ridge of his newly-bared glans was so obvious; the whole shape of the head brazenly visible, almost as if he was actually setting out to show the world that the head of his penis was denuded of any scrap of the covering skin that had once blurred the outline of his penis head. After the panic had subsided, Ben's first instinct was to get dressed again and head for home, but thought of having to go past the girl on the front desk again so soon after arriving embarrassed him. So, with a heavy heart, Ben went back to his locker and retrieved his towel. His plan was to carry it as casually as he could in front of him to the side of the pool, from where he could make a quick dash for the safe covering of the water.

As he dived in, the familiar shock of the cold water hit him. What was new was the sting of the chlorine on the still-raw wound on his penis. As he set out instinctively into his strong front crawl, he was all too aware of the new sensation of the water flowing over part of him which had, on every other time he had been swimming, been modestly veiled in its protective bag of skin. Ben usually alternated lengths of front crawl and back stroke, but he knew that until he got some new trunks (and he was sure that from now on he would be buying the sort of baggy Bermuda shorts he hated) that nothing would compel him to swim on his back. The risk of anyone seeing the obscene outline of his crotch was one he was just not going to take.

After thirty minutes of hard swimming, Ben felt his limbs regaining some of their usual suppleness. He was reluctant to leave the water, but had begun to worry about revising for his next physics paper. As well as that, the fact that it was getting dangerously close to lunchtime meant that he needed to be on his way before the rush of health-conscious business men arrived for their work-outs in the gym beside the pool as he certainly didn't want anyone seeing his penis in the changing room. He found it hard to imagine letting anyone look at it ever again, but it certainly wasn't fit to be seen in its current state. Ben hung around near the steps up out of the pool, eyeing the safety blanket of his towel on the bench by the side. He timed his departure with careful precision, the other swimmers at the far end of the pool and the lifeguard distracted filling in something on a clipboard.

This time, Ben made himself avoid looking in the mirror as he went past. His plan had been just to get dressed, go home and shower there, but it was so totally deserted in the changing room that he reconsidered. If he was very quick, laying everything out ready, he could be in and out of the shower in seconds and then be ready to start his revision as soon as he got home.

Having a shower had felt different since Ben had been circumcised. From being comfortable being nude in public, just being naked alone now troubled him. Even the sensation of the hot water flowing over his bare glans was new and disquieting. Before, Ben had had to roll back his long hood so he could carefully soap underneath it in the way his father had taught him. It had been no chore to soap his glans; the pleasant slippery feeling had always given him the beginnings of an erection, and letting go of the roll of bunched-up overhang and seeing it sedately slide back to its default setting of its own accord had always been strangely satisfying. It was all so different now. Ben just didn't have to give his penis any special attention anymore. It was a much less complicated piece of equipment in its new form, and reaching down and feeling its bare, blunt end in his hand was something he took care to avoid. Under the powerful showers at the leisure centre, Ben was struck by the fact that the arc of water made a different shape as it ran off his starkly re-modelled penis. Lulled slightly by the water which was always so much warmer and more plentiful than their rather miserable shower at home, Ben's mind wandered a little as he pondered this. With his impending physics exam in his mind, he was vaguely wondering about the scientific explanation for the different course the water now took when the sound of the door from the gym area banging and the loud voices that followed panicked him back to reality. He was suddenly aware again of how unaccustomedly vulnerable he felt, standing there more naked than he had ever before been in public, his most intimate part so obviously stripped of any covering.

In a second, he realised that things couldn't be much worse - it would have been bad enough if it had been a stranger coming in, but it wasn't. Two young men were right there in front of him, sweaty in shorts and vests after a work-out in the gym. Ben struggled to control his panic. With shock, he had realised that they were two boys from his year at school - George Carter and David Evans.

Unable to ignore them, Ben was surprised how casual he managed to sound as he said hello. He had never felt any discomfort at being naked in front of his peers before - he

had never had reason to feel awkward about being in that state, quite the opposite in fact. It was awful now to feel such shame about his own body. Ben managed to say something inane about how the exams would soon be over. He cursed that he had placed his glasses safely on top of his locker as he struggled to see where they were looking and to try and read the expressions on their faces - to try to judge if they had noticed what he dreaded them noticing. With adrenaline rushing, and with no foreskin to cover his most private part, Ben grabbed for the protective shield of his towel.

Chapter Eight

That afternoon, Ben had to make a super-human effort to concentrate on his revision. His mind kept going back to the changing room, searching for any sign in George and David's comments or demeanour that would show if they had noticed. Ben knew them quite well and drew comfort from the fact that they weren't the sort of boys who ever held back from passing personal remarks, however sensitive the issue. He was sure they would have said something -either mocking, enquiring, or perhaps even sympathetic - if they had noticed his penis and, overall, he was relieved to think that he had got away with it.

Ben was also thinking long and hard about tackling Roger over his circumcision. Part of him needed so badly to know why it had been done and, particularly, if it had all been some terrible mistake. He remembered agreeing with Roger that Dr. Argent should just go ahead and do what was needed if anything showed up in his medical, but Ben was sure that there hadn't been anything at all wrong with his penis. He thought again about his father's penis and how it looked pretty much like his own had until so recently. Richard certainly had a lot of foreskin but it didn't seem to cause him any problems. Ben had seen other lads at school with almost as much overhang as his, and none of those had ever come into school as drastically and suddenly changed as he now was. Asking Roger seemed to be the only way he would get the whole story, but that was assuming, of course, that Roger even knew why himself. Indeed, did Roger even know that he had been circumcised? He hadn't mentioned anything overtly, and Ben went through the things that his stepfather had said to him after it had happened; there was nothing he could pin down that conclusively showed that he knew. Even so, there was something intangibly different in the way that Roger had treated him since - he had made no comment on the occasions when Ben had very obviously winced when his scar caught him, and something just told Ben that Roger must know. Another powerful instinct told him that it was a case of the least said the better and not to ask him anything, especially as it involved the squirm-making embarrassment of broaching a subject like that with his stepfather.

After events at the pool, Ben knew that the following Saturday was going to be an even more difficult than he had previously thought. He was due to play his last cricket match for the school side, and his obvious concern was that he might well turn up to find out that he had been wrong - that George and David had noticed his circumcision after all. If they had then, knowing them as he did, it was very likely that word of his circumcision would already have spread like wildfire round the school. At first, he thought about making some excuse and getting out of the match altogether, but being on the team one last time meant a lot to him and he hated the idea of missing that last fixture before he left school. Sidestepping the changing room and the showers was going to be an issue, but there had to be a way round it - the idea of his whole school cricketing career being tainted by a last match where he was taunted for something so embarrassing and beyond his control was ghastly. Luckily, it was a home match, and that at least gave him a fighting chance of getting through it with his secret undiscovered.

As it was to be most of the rest of the team's last match too, they had long planned a celebration afterwards but Ben realised that he would probably have to forgo that now. He couldn't bring himself to head into town for the planned pizza in his cricket gear, and getting changed without showering would be bound to attract ribald comment from his mates so, he planned an excuse to duck out of the trip so he could make a dash for home straight after the match. Wearing his cricket whites on the bus to the playing field made Ben feel very conspicuous but, as he rationalised to himself, not nearly as conspicuous as he would have felt standing in the showers without his foreskin.

To his great relief, no one said anything unwelcome when Ben arrived at the pavilion. He did his best to enter into the slightly poignant end-of-an-era banter and managed to slip away into the toilets to ease his box over his genitals before the match started. Wearing that on the bus would have felt just too weird, even though no one apart from him would have known. Careful though he was, he winced as the plastic edge of the box snagged the still-raw scar line when he tucked it inside his pants. That, though, was nothing compared to the unpredicted discomfort of the match itself. Ben was in agony every time he ran to field the ball. His long penis slapped around inside the box and grated every time it hit the sides, rendering him almost useless as a team member for this significant match. At half time, he sneaked into the toilets and padded out his box, wrapping wads of toilet paper round his penis to try at least to stop it moving around so much. Was there was nothing, thought Ben angrily, that being circumcised wouldn't spoil?

Three days later, it was his last A-level. Many of Ben's year had already finished all their exams, and the rest of them just had Physics 3 or Biology 2 to get through before it was finally all over. Ben's usual policy was to stay in the exam room until the last minute, un-embarrassed to remain checking through his answers even after most of the other candidates had handed in their papers and headed off into the sunshine. His resolve weakened in this, his last paper. He was fed up with exams and felt confident that he had given his best answers in a paper that had let him play pleasingly to all his strengths. More than that though, he had unwisely come to school wearing the boxer shorts he much preferred to the old-fashioned, tight-fitting briefs that his circumcision had necessitated of late. He had forgotten for once to check his underwear draw the night before and, slightly late in getting up, he had found that boxers were all that were left. Within minutes of leaving home he realised his mistake when they had started to chafe on his shaft. In the exam room, they had settled uncomfortably and clung round his circumcision scar. However much he squirmed round in his desk, Ben couldn't get comfortable and, with clammy morning heat adding to the discomfort, he had been one of the first to hand in his paper and leave. With the exultation of post-exam freedom finally washing over him, Ben set out across the deserted mid-afternoon playground to the sixth form common room. Sticking his hand in his pocket, he savoured the relief of stretching the material of his boxers away from his scar.

Realising that this would be one of the last times he would do it, Ben let the door of the sixth form kitchen bang closed with its ever-satisfying crash. He stood on the stool that was, unless any member of staff was hovering, left permanently in place in front of the window and climbed out through it into “cough corner”. The name had been coined years ago for this small area of flat roof over the class room below that was totally shielded from view from anywhere else in the school and, therefore, the only place where a crafty, unobserved smoke was possible. Ben hated cigarettes, but he loved sitting out there as it was always a suntrap in the afternoons. The view out over the nearby countryside had always pleased him, and he looked at it now through the fresh eyes of someone who knew that this would probably be the last time he would take it in. Relaxing in the sun, Ben felt a sense of well-being that he hadn’t felt since he had had a foreskin.

After a few minutes of solitude, Ben was vaguely aware of hearing the kitchen door bang and hearing voices of unseen newcomers in the room a few feet below him. Chris Newsome, Ed Parker, Nathan Reed and Gemma Whittington - he recognised their voices as they discussed the Biology paper they had all just left and celebrated the fact that their A levels were now all over.

“You coming out tonight, Gemma?” said Chris. “A few of us are going up the King’s Head to celebrate with a few be vies.”

Since they had all turned 18, Ben’s cohort had had a wider range of place to go for a night out other than just Pizza Hut and Burger King. He had been looking forward to the still-new pleasure of being able to buy a pint or two with his mates in their favoured pub in High Street.

“Dunno,” Ben heard Gemma reply. “Depends who’s coming.”

“George, Emma, Will, and Ben,” replied Nathan.

“Which Ben is that?” asked Gemma. “Fat Ben, or Bare Ben?”

“Bare Ben,” said Nathan, without hesitation.

There was no comment or follow-up question. It was obvious that they were all used to the new nickname, and that they knew exactly to whom it applied. They moved on to discuss what time they were going to meet, but Ben had stopped listening.

“Shit”, thought Ben, burying his head in his hands as despair washed over him. “Shit, shit, shit”.

Had, by some strange means, Ben been able to know what Gemma Whittington was thinking that night as she sat on a stool at the bar in the King's Head sucking at her fifth Bacardi Breezer through a straw, it is hard to know what he might have felt. With no little trepidation, Ben had made himself face them all that evening and, to his great relief, nobody had made any unwelcome comment. Gemma had been eyeing Ben ever more closely as each drink went down and was rather regretting that he was wearing a loose-fitting track suit bottom instead of the usual rather un-fashionably snug jeans that she always enjoyed seeing on him in at out-of-school gatherings. Always a slyly observant young woman, Gemma had noticed how Ben was taking care to time his visits to the gents just as the other boys in the group had emerged from theirs. Twirling the cheap, wooden umbrella in her glass between her fingers, she looked for signs of bulk in the crotch of his trackies, remembering so clearly the feeling of his fascinatingly sizeable penis in her hand when she had finally managed to coax him outside on the night of her party. Excited to feel him stiffen so quickly as she pressed against him, she had needed to be unusually persistent before he had finally allowed her to get her hand inside his trousers. Remembering the experience of his thickness made her cross her legs tightly as she fantasised with pleasure over her plans for later that night - getting Ben alone in the pub car park and doing the same thing again - and more this time too.

She found it hard to imagine what his penis would be like now. She had experienced rather a strange new feeling when she had heard from George Carter and David Evans that the end of Ben's penis no longer had its covering of skin. Gemma had never seen a circumcised penis, let alone held one. The thought of what one might feel like in her hand excited her, and the idea of its head being so stark, brazen and instantly available to her touch was one she found truly erotic. She hadn't managed to work Ben's foreskin back before as there was just too much of it to manipulate in the confines of his trousers, but she loved the thought of it not being there and the head so instantly accessible. She wondered what had prompted him to have his skin removed, but the idea of reaching in and getting her hand straight round that big helmet and feeling its shape undisguised in her hand made her moist every time she thought about it. Rolling the neck of her empty Bacardi bottle in her hand, she wondered idly about the other things she would like to do with it too.

It may or may not have been a shame that Gemma's sixth Bacardi was one too many. If she hadn't stumbled when she tried to get off her stool and promptly been sick over Nathan's new trainers, then she wouldn't have had to go home early, and Ben might have been very distressed and confused when she made her move on him. On the other hand, if she had taken her chance and showed him how much pleasure she was getting from handling his penis, then he might just have felt something other than the anger, shame and frustration he was feeling as he lay on his bed that night, once again wondering if he dared try and masturbate - not that he was even sure if masturbation was something possible for a man who had no foreskin. It may or may not have been a shame too that, as Ben struggled to get to sleep, he was equally unaware of what was going on in a bedroom in the next road. There, David Evans was standing naked in front of the mirror on his wardrobe door. With some difficulty, he had rolled his tight foreskin as far back along his shaft as his short frenulum would allow. After looking at his reflection from every angle

and without allowing his head to cover over again, he began to stroke his bared glans. He savoured the image of Ben standing under the shower at the swimming pool that had been so clearly fixed in his mind's eye since the previous week, vowing again to himself for the fifth night running that the next day would be the one when he finally plucked up courage to ask Ben what it was like to be circumcised and, more importantly, to find out how he had managed to arrange to get his foreskin removed so he could ask for the same for himself.

Chapter 9

Three months later

For Ben, the biggest pleasure in leaving home and going to university was getting away from Roger. Although nothing had ever been said, their relationship had understandably been more than a little strained since Ben and his foreskin had been parted. Starting university and coming to terms with organising so many aspects of his own life proved to be a welcome distraction from the prospect of a future with no foreskin, as the long summer holiday had given him all too much time to brood. Ben had been at great pains not to let anyone see his penis since he had arrived in Nottingham. He was in no rush for anyone to discover his new status - just dealing with it for himself was enough of an ordeal. Ben's found his fellow students a likeable enough mixed bag, but the jury was still out on his room-mate, Christopher Hilton-Smith. He was one of a very particular species which Ben had always found rather intimidating. Public school educated and with all the confidence that went with it, Christopher ("and I prefer all three syllables by the way") had a pompous turn of phrase and an accent which made Ben feel like a yokel whenever he opened his mouth. Their first conversation hadn't exactly put Ben at ease when, after introducing himself, the first thing Christopher had said was that he wouldn't be living in halls for long, that he was disgusted that they hadn't found him a single room and that he certainly wasn't happy about sharing. With Ben put in his place as something of an irritation, Christopher went on to say that he had already rung his parents to ask if they would consider buying an investment "property" in town that he could move into as soon as possible.

Despite such an unpromising start, Christopher actually turned out to be a considerate room-mate. Although most of their interests seemed to be poles apart, they discovered that they at least had some common ground in music. Ben found Christopher's modern jazz almost as unbearable as Christopher found Ben's baroque concertos, but they discovered that they shared a passion for the symphonies of Sibelius and it was a relief for Ben to find they could at least connect at some level. Although he wasn't absolutely sure that it was true, he heard himself say one evening that it was his father playing the big cor anglais solo on Christopher's favourite Halle Orchestra recording of the 5th symphony. It could well have been him though, and Ben was very pleased that Christopher was so deeply impressed and that it somehow seemed to do a lot to bolster their slightly tenuous friendship.

The first few Saturday mornings at college felt strange to Ben. The rhythm of his school-boy life had always equated Saturday morning with sport, but a new dread of changing rooms had stopped him from signing up for any university teams or clubs. What did surprise him though was how much he enjoyed spending his Saturday afternoons in town, as being dragged round the shops in Spalding at the weekend had been Ben's biggest torture and the one thing that had been known to make him have a tantrum as a child. On the third Saturday of term, Mr and Mrs Hilton-Smith were expected, coming to Nottingham to view a few likely "properties" with Christopher. Ben had hoped to be off the scene before they arrived, but, as he looked out of the window as he finished dressing, Ben saw a Range

Rover parked on the double yellow line on the service road outside the halls of residence. The couple who emerged from it fitted Ben's image of Christopher's parents so closely that he sent a text to Christopher, who had gone down to the library, without it even occurring to him that the pair might belong to someone else. The knock on the door a couple of minutes later confirmed that he had been right.

The Hilton-Smith's accents matched their son's as they introduced themselves, with no suggestion that their Christian names be used. Ben explained that Christopher was on his way. He offered them coffee, catching the look that was exchanged as he opened a jar of a brand of instant that he considered a cut above the student norm. To Ben's relief, they hadn't quite exhausted the possibilities of a painfully stilted discussion of traffic problems on the M1 when Christopher arrived back. Ben was only slightly surprised to see father and son shake hands, but he could barely stop himself from laughing aloud when, to Christopher's obvious embarrassment, his mother pecked him on the cheek and addressed him as "Chrissy". So much for three syllables there, then! Within minutes they were gone, two cups of coffee remaining un-touched on "Chrissy's" desk.

Ben unchained his bike and set off into the city. He did his favourite rounds of the bookshops and record stores, enjoying the atmosphere and the freedom to do whatever he wanted at his own pace. Ben had arranged to meet a fellow student at 5:00 to see a film and follow it up with a pizza, but by 4 o'clock he was flagging and already hungry so he headed for MacDonald's and ordered a coffee and bag of chips to keep him going. It was busy, and Ben made a dive for the one empty seat. As he sat down, Ben caught the eye of the man on the next table. They both smiled the involuntarily smile of those that recognise the other without knowing why.

"I know you, don't I?" said the good-looking black man.

"Yes, I think so," replied Ben. "Not sure why though."

"Got it! Burden Park, a couple of months back. Yeah?"

It was Mike. The penny took a second or two to drop for Ben. Of all the people from his past life that he would have liked to run into, this was not one of them. Any reminder of his visit to the clinic that day was unwelcome, and the thought that this man, however pleasant, had taken part in his circumcision made this particular chance meeting about as bad as it could get.

"Yes, Hi," said Ben, coolly, not quite knowing how to snub someone who was so friendly and pleasant. He could hardly pretend he was just about to leave, and he was at a loss over how to get away from the situation.

It would have amazed Ben if he had known just how much Mike was wishing he could escape too as, seconds after he realised that he knew the younger man, came an uncomfortable flood of shame. As he fixed a smile and asked Ben how university life was suiting him, Mike fought to keep guilty images from his mind. On that day in July, Dr.

Argent had left quickly after finishing his work of modification on Ben to catch a train to his other practice in Bedford. Left alone, Mike had relaxed and reached for the iPod of which the doctor so thoroughly disapproved during surgery hours. Clearing up after Ben's "procedure", Mike eyed Ben's severed foreskin in the kidney dish. There was just so much of it. Unusually, it was all in one piece too. He tried hard to imagine what it would be like for a young man to suddenly lose so much of his body, especially something as special as part of his penis. He wondered once again about what it must be like to have the softness of skin covering your glans - a moist and protective living sleeve - and how special it must be to be able to reveal your helmet just when you chose to, rather than having it exposed all the time like his own. Again, he wondered just what would make someone like Ben choose that change for himself when there had so patently been no need for it. A familiar, guilty yearning came over him, disquieting but urgent. Checking that the door was locked, Mike unzipped his fly. As his penis began to harden, Mike slipped his bare glans into the opening of what had so recently been Ben's foreskin. He held it in place, lining the severed end up with his own rather jagged circumcision scar. He closed his eyes as, with his other hand, he savoured the exquisite sensation of pinching the bud of Ben's ex-overhang closed over the end of his glans. It was an ample fit - his penis was big, and few severed skins would have covered it so completely. He started massaging his helmet through Ben's skin, enjoying the luxury of a foreskin which, although it had been dead for half an hour, still had a vestige of the feeling of warm, living flesh about it. The sensation was so intense that he wanted to enjoy it for hours, but Mike knew that the piece of Ben that felt so much a part of him at that moment would soon become shrivelled and unable to offer the same sensation ever again. After just a few seconds, Mike made a small noise in the back of his throat. He felt his balls pull up tight to his body and drop again as he ejaculated powerfully into the kidney dish where Argent had so casually released Ben's foreskin from his forceps.

Mike pushed away the memory and, despite his discomfort, pulled himself together as Ben started to speak.

"Yes, I remember now," said Ben. "It's Mike isn't it? Your girlfriend lives here, doesn't she? You gave me some good tips on Nottingham nightlife."

Ben hadn't mentioned where and why they had met before. He remembered a lot of other things about their last meeting too, none of which were comfortable to recall.

"So, how's university life suiting you?" asked Mike, trying hard to sound casual.

Despite their initial unease, both men found again that they had rapport. As they chatted about life in Nottingham, Mike began to realise that he was going to have to ask Ben something. He didn't know exactly why it was so important for him to know, and that doing so would get him into potentially difficult territory, but he also realised that he wasn't going to be able to stop himself asking anyway:

"So, how are you finding your new open-top model then, Ben?" He had asked it. No going back now.

It took Ben a second to realise what he meant. Mike couldn't mistake the alarming look that passed over Ben's face as he did so and wished straight away that he had managed to bite his tongue. Ben was muttering something, and Mike could only cringe at obvious embarrassment he had caused.

“Shit, sorry mate,” said Mike. “I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's cool, don't worry if”

“I hate it,” Ben heard himself say.

That was the one thing Mike had not expected to hear. He was sure, knowing about Ben's request to be circumcised, that his reply would be positive. He had expected, almost hoped, to hear something along the lines of “It's awesome - it was the best thing I ever did.”

Mike was concerned now.

“Shit mate, I'm so sorry to hear that. That's really unusual. Argent usually gets really good results - he's done enough of them after all. If it's not right then you really need to go back and get him to sort it out; he wouldn't charge. What is it, not tight enough for you? We occasionally get blokes coming back for more off and....”

“No,” interrupted Ben. “It's not that. I just hate it. I hate everything about it. Everything about it is awful.”

“Blimey, mate, I mean - I thought you'd - well – as you wanted it done and all that, I thought, well....?”

Mike was struggling to know what to say.

“What?” interrupted Ben, rather too loudly, and with a vehemence that took both of them by surprise. “I didn't want it done – why on earth do you think that?”

Mike was puzzled now. He clearly remembered Dr. Argent saying that it was an elective circumcision. Circumcisions weren't that common at Burden Park, certainly not ones performed on young adults with perfect foreskins and at their own request, and because of that, Ben had stuck in Mike's mind as he had been intrigued by exactly what had made the lad want to alter what was such a fine penis.

Within five minutes, Mike had explained to Ben what Dr. Argent had told him that day and Ben, now feeling more furious than he had ever felt in his life, had had his worst suspicions and more about Roger confirmed.

“Shit mate,” said Mike again, “I'm really sorry about that. I mean, I did wonder why you wanted it done when there was nothing wrong with it. I thought you must have,”

well, that you'd just wanted it done because - well, just that you preferred to be that way. Some blokes just do, and that's cool, but.....”

“So,” said Ben, “there wasn't anything wrong with it? Well why did he cut it off then?”

Mike had no answer. It was what they had been told to do, and that was that. There had just been no reason to question the request. He felt even guiltier now about what he had done with Ben's severed remains, even more so that he had enjoyed the results of Ben's unwanted modification so much. What made it even worse for him was that he was becoming uncomfortably aware of a growing and urgent stirring inside his jeans. He hoped to God that Ben couldn't see the tent as he tried hard to will away his unwelcome and rather puzzling erection.

“Look mate, when I get back to Burden Park I'll see if I can blag a look at your medical notes and see what they say. Give us your mobile number and I'll text you. Listen, I've got to go now, but we'll be in touch, yeah?”

Mike was flustered, concerned, and had to get away from the situation. He had gone into the city intent on doing some research for his advanced nursing diploma but, after leaving Ben, he turned left instead of right towards the library. Walking towards the bus stop, he took care to hold his coat across his front to hide the erection that he just couldn't control. Twenty minutes later, his girlfriend was surprised to hear a key in the door. Two minutes later still, Mike was making love to her with a ferocity which took her by surprise. Thrusting hard and feeling a more urgent arousal than he could ever remember, Mike looked down as his jagged circumcision scar appeared and disappeared inside her. In his mind's eye, his thick black penis was covered with the perfect white skin of Ben's severed foreskin, its overhang remaining tight over the end of his glans as he pushed it hard into his lover. He imagined its former owner standing next to him and watching their love-making, holding up his long and very tightly circumcised penis so that Mike could see the empty groove from which Dr. Argent had so neatly and completely excised the thick frenum that had once filled it.

Chapter 10

It was a long film and, with his mind struggling with what he had just learned, Ben found it impossible to concentrate and was glad when it was over. It was nearly midnight before he was back in his room where, on Christopher's desk, was a very shiny and expensive looking cappuccino maker, the packaging it had come in strewn around on the floor. Ben was surprised to find that Christopher, normally irritatingly early into bed, was not already back but then remembered that he had been going to a Philosophy Society meeting that evening. Ben undressed, settled miserably under the duvet, took yet another look at the penis lying disquietingly exposed across his thigh and thought again just how apt his cruel school nickname had been. As he handled his penis, it began to erect and Ben was aware yet again of just how devastatingly horny he was. Since his circumcision, masturbation had been so difficult and uncomfortable that it had rarely been worth the effort or the discomfort it brought even to try. He hoped yet again that "real" sex, when it finally came along, might bring with it at least a little relief. He longed for the pleasurable nightly manipulations that his foreskin had once offered him, remembering how easy it was to coax exquisite sensations from his glans with the moist, enveloping skin that used to cover it. In those days, he had never even thought of rolling his skin back and exposing his head as he pleased himself - there was just no reason to do it and his glans was almost too sensitive to touch anyway. Now, the head looking so much drier and rougher-toned than it did when he had been able to choose when to expose it, he found it hard to believe there was just so little enjoyment to be had from his penis now. It puzzled him deeply as to why would anyone, as Mike had told him, would choose to get circumcised. Apart from the brazen look of it and the awful, constant exposure, it meant that you just couldn't have a decent wank. Once again, he tried working his stiff shaft, but the skin just didn't budge when he was hard. He couldn't begin to get any of it anywhere near his head, and rubbing his glans bare soon made it sore. The few times he had managed to coax a climax had taken what seemed like hours of hard work, working furiously on the base of his penis to get sensations which were just a shadow of those which had often made him shiver with pleasure when he had been a complete man. After ten minutes of awkward rubbing, Ben was still nowhere near orgasm. When he heard Christopher trying to get his key in the lock, he was almost relieved that he had to stop and cover himself over with the duvet.

Admittedly, it was quite tricky getting the key to go into the lock, but it did seem to be taking Christopher as very long time to let himself in. When he finally made it, Ben saw why. The Philosophy Society meeting had very clearly moved from seminar room to pub, and, to Ben's amazement, the normally very sober Christopher was more than a little the worse for wear.

"Hi Ben," he said, smiling vacantly. "You're well, I trust?"

Ben was even more amazed when Christopher let loose a long, expressive, and totally out of character belch - this was certainly a different side to his room-mate. There followed a long and rambling description of the evening's events, with a detailed run down of what had happened in the bar on what seemed to have been Christopher's first experience of what, to Ben, seemed to have been just a normal student night out. Ben rather warmed

to this new side to Christopher, although he was far from in the mood to share in his joviality. After a few minutes, without even pausing in his narrative, Christopher started to unbutton his shirt, dropping it casually on the floor as he explained that he was sure that one of the girls had been after him. Swaying slightly as he did so, he pulled off his jeans next, after a bit of struggle with the fly buttons. Ben was amazed that this was Mister “I prefer all three syllables” Hilton-Smith talking, standing there now in just his Y-fronts. He continued talking un-intelligibly as he cleaned his teeth, and Ben began to wonder how long all this would go on before he could get some sleep. Christopher disappeared behind the partition that separated his bed from the rest of the room, still filling Ben in on the evening that had clearly made such a deep impression. Ben was even more amazed when he reappeared, still telling him about the girl. His pyjamas were in his hand, but he was standing there totally naked as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Ben had been finding it hard to keep a straight face, but Christopher, as drunk as he was, must have caught the sudden change in his expression as he saw the angle of Ben’s gaze.

“Never seen a penis before then, Ben?” he asked laughing. “I’d rather assumed that you’d got one too!”

To Ben’s horror, Christopher attempted an unsteady gyration of his hips, causing his penis to flop around alarmingly.

What had caused Ben to stare was the realisation that the end of Christopher’s penis was as bare as his own. There was no mistaking the exposed acorn head. His circumcision was very different though – Ben took that in within seconds, amazed at how fast his mind was working. Christopher didn’t have the same tight sleekness of the skin on his shaft as he had himself, and there was a small, bunched fold of skin settled in the groove behind his head. Ben was taken aback. It was only then that he realised that it had never crossed his mind that anyone else he knew, certainly anyone as thoroughly English, Conservative and high church as Christopher, might be circumcised too. The realisation, mingled with something that might just have been relief, struck him forcefully.

Ben blushed bright red, acutely embarrassed. “Sorry! Sorry Christopher - it’s just that, well, you’re circumcised.”

Christopher howled with laughter.

“And proud to be too,” he said. “Are you?”

Ben was taken aback.

“No, I mean, well, yes.”

He’d said it. It was the first time he’d ever admitted to anyone that he didn’t have a foreskin - the first time he’d labelled himself as a circumcised man.

“You don’t seem to be too sure,” laughed Christopher. “I’d have thought you’d have worked that one out by now!”

“Well, yes, I am,” said Ben, slowly. “I am circumcised. But only recently.”

“Ah – you saw the light!” replied Christopher. Obviously, it’s the best way to be.” Page | 42

Ben, without thinking about it, sensed that this was a rare and vital opportunity that just had to be seized. He summoned up as much bravery as he could and braced himself to face severe embarrassment.

“Christopher, can I ask you something rather personal?” he said, squirming almost visibly as he spoke.

“My dear chap,” said Christopher, “ask away.”

Ben made himself say it. He knew he might never get another chance.

“How do you manage to ... masturbate. With no foreskin?”

Ben couldn’t believe he had actually managed to ask. To his surprise and slight relief, Christopher threw back his head and howled with laughter again. Ben hoped that he was actually going to answer though, and wouldn’t just think that something so important was some kind of a joke. Drunk as he was, Christopher had seen the look on Ben’s face though, and taken onboard the seriousness behind his question.

“My poor, dear fellow,” said Christopher. “You have obviously been missing out on something vital since you so wisely got yourself sorted out. Didn’t anyone think to tell you, you poor sod?”

Stumbling slightly as he reached across his desk, Christopher passed Ben the tube of cream that Ben had sometimes seen lying by his bed.

“Personal lubricant, otherwise known as ‘the bachelors’ friend’! Here, have this one on me. I’m sure a man of your obvious intelligence will work out the finer practicalities. Now, I’m going to get dressed again, go down to the Co-Op to buy some milk - which, by the way, is a task that I will make sure takes me at least twenty minutes to complete. When I get back, I’ll knock loudly on the door. Then you can tell me what you made of it while you make us some of your famous cheese and pickle sandwiches and I make you what I guarantee will be the best cappuccino you have tasted this side of Rome.”

As the door slammed and Ben unscrewed the cap of the tube, he couldn’t help smiling to himself as a thought hit him: “What a pair of room-mates – ‘Bare Ben and Cut Chrissy’.”

Chapter 11

The Manchester train was only two carriages long and already packed when it pulled into Nottingham, and Ben had to move fast to get a seat. He settled in to the journey, a book on metal alloys unread on his lap as he gazed out at the flat countryside. He had very mixed feelings about the weekend ahead. Of course, he was looking forward to spending time with his father after such a long separation, but the poignant feeling that he had been rendered so different since their last meeting was never far away. In spite of all the other big changes in his life over the last six months, none came close in significance to his circumcision – the one thing he hadn't shared with his father when they had spoken on the phone and the one thing he was certain he didn't want to share with him now. Ben went over it all again in his head. He had talked about it long and often with Chris, who had, rather to Ben's surprise, turned out to be a kind and sympathetic listener. Had exposing the end of his penis, in the way that Christopher had claimed over that late-night cappuccino, been an "upgrade" and made him into a real man? Or had taking part of it away on the brink of adulthood meant that he could never now have the status of being a complete man? Ben had quickly dismissed Christopher's opinion that Roger had done him a favour and had had his best interests at heart. Apart from anything else, if that was the case, then why had his own two sons been deprived of something so wonderful?

As usual, Ben could feel the unwelcome rubbing of his glans inside his underwear every time he moved, but thinking of being with his father made him feel more even more circumcised than he ever had before. Ben didn't really know why he felt it was so important, but he knew that he would do all he could to ensure that his father didn't find out about, let alone get to see, the awful thing that had happened to him. He felt truly ashamed that he was so permanently naked. Even though he knew it was illogical, it was as if he had somehow let his father down by allowing it happen to him, even though he had had no say in the matter at all. As the train pulled out of Lichfield, Ben wondered if he was somehow just trying to protect his father, perhaps preventing from feeling guilty that he had not been around to make sure it hadn't happened to his son. It was a disquieting thought. One good thing about his talk with Christopher had been the reassurance of knowing that he wasn't the only circumcised man in his world. Ben looked at the other men of his age in the packed carriage, knowing now that the chances were that at least one of them was bare too. He looked at their faces and the way that they were sitting, trying to work out who they might be and wondering what they made of it all.

Two hours later, Ben got off the tram outside the Bridgewater Hall and saw that the South Australian Chamber Orchestra's tour bus was unloading. As he crossed the road, he recognised his father from the back as he bent over to reach for his suitcase in the hold. When he stood up, Ben saw that his hair was a bit greyer than he remembered but that he had had it cut short and it suited him. Richard did a double take as he saw Ben and, beaming, he opened his arms wide to invite their usual unselfconscious hug. As his father squeezed him, Ben was surprised to find they were the same height now so that their groins were pressed alarmingly together in their embrace. As they held each other, Ben was uncomfortably aware of the unfamiliar pressure on the exposed helmet inside his jeans as

his father squeezed him tight. With their arms still around each other, Richard and Ben went into the Holiday Inn and joined the queue in front of the tour manager to collect a room key, Richard proudly introducing his son to his orchestral colleagues.

As usual when they met, two minutes of slight awkwardness in each other's company melted into their usual relaxed familiarity. Richard said that he had a full three-hour rehearsal call that afternoon - that night's concert was the first programme change of the tour and they needed to spend a lot of time on the new Haydn cello concerto. He had time for lunch though, and after dumping their bags in the room that Richard had arranged be upgraded to a twin, they side-stepped the other players and headed to an old-fashioned pub which Richard fondly remembered from his Halle Orchestra days. When it was time for him to head off to work, Richard told Ben that he'd be back in the room just after 6:00 - just time enough to grab a sandwich together before the concert. Ben said he'd go off into town and be back by then too.

A bit tired after his early start and the unfamiliar lunchtime pint, Ben set out along the canal towpath for the Museum of Technology. It was somewhere he had always enjoyed going as a kid but Ben missed his dad there with him like in the old days and found too that the museum wasn't now quite as exciting as he remembered. After an hour or so, he'd had enough and thought about heading in to the centre to see what the Arndale Centre was like since it's make-over. It looked a bit stormy as he left the museum and, after a couple of minutes, the rain started. Ben had no coat with him, the desolate street offered nowhere to shelter and, by the time he reached the end of the road, he was thoroughly soaked and very cold. Weighing up his options, Ben decided to cut his losses and head back to the hotel with the thought of a luxurious soak in a hotel bath suddenly seeming very inviting.

Back in the room, Ben turned the bath taps on full and eyed the pile of thick white towels, relishing the challenge of seeing how many of them he could get through. He stripped off, hanging his wet jeans and T-shirt on the radiator to dry. On his way back to the bath, Ben noticed Richard's Walkman lying on top of his suitcase and thought how like his father it not even to have upgraded to a portable CD player, let alone an iPod. Ben picked it up and carefully wrapped it in a towel by the side of the bath. As he slid into the water, he took care not to notice the bare acorn of his penis as it stuck up above the foam of the hotel bubble bath that he had lavished into the tub. Settling back, he put in the headphones.

As Ben was relaxing in the bath to the accompaniment of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade", things were a little fraught in the orchestra's rehearsal. The principal cellist had gone down with food poisoning and, after a few bars, it was obvious that was not going to be able to play that evening. The band was sent for an early break and negotiations were going on with the promoter about what to do about that evening's concert. By the time the players were called back, it had been decided to replace the new Haydn piece with the Mozart violin concerto that they had already played many times earlier in the tour. Although he was sorry for his colleague, Richard was rather pleased that it would mean an early finish to the session and thus more time to spend with Ben.

Ben felt a lot better after his soak. As he stood naked in front of the steamed-up mirror having a shave, he still had the headphones in and was singing loudly along to the Strauss Horn concerto when he started as he noticed a movement behind him in the mirror. Shocked, he turned around. Richard was standing there, looking at him. Ben caught the line of his gaze with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“My poor Ben. What happened to you?”

Seconds later, Ben found himself doing something he hadn't done for ten years. Putting his head on his father's shoulder, he howled as the tears flowed down his face.

Ben didn't take in much of the concert, and Richard found he had to fight hard to concentrate on his playing. They were both glad when it was finished and were able to talk properly over a sandwich and cup of coffee in the hotel foyer. Richard, grim faced as Ben told him all the details, was unconsciously shredding serviette after serviette as he listened. The relief Ben felt in being able to tell someone how he felt was enormous, but there was despair in his awareness that even his father could do or say nothing that would set things right and make him whole again.

Back in their room, Richard made a call. His oldest friend and best man at his wedding to Ben's mum was Domenic Knight, now a police super-intendant in Spalding. After a few pleasantries, Richard explained he was calling with a purpose.

“It's that bastard Turnbull – he's had Ben circumcised.”

Domenic guffawed out loud, not noticing that he had involuntarily crossed his legs.

“Shit, Domenic, it's no joke!” said Richard, angrily. “How would you feel if someone had done that to your Sam?”

Domenic took the point. Chastened, he now listened with concern and asked a few questions as Richard filled him in on the details. Domenic said that, as he understood it, there was nothing that could be done - Ben had been a minor at the time, and, because of the deed of attorney, Roger had been within his rights to authorise surgery on him. Richard wasn't altogether surprised, but having to add disappointment to his fury wasn't welcome. Domenic had said though that would see what he could do on the quiet and asked to be told if Mike came up with anything from Ben's medical records at the clinic.

It had been a long and upsetting day for both men and the bus was leaving early the next day for London for the next concert on the South Bank so just having an early night seemed the best plan. As they prepared for bed, Ben made a decision. When he started to undress, he did the one thing that he had resolved so firmly not to do, but things were different now. Turning towards the centre of the room, he took off his boxers and stood naked in front of his father. Richard was obviously not sure what to say, but Ben made the situation clear.

“So, what do you think, dad?” he asked. “Be honest. It’s really awful, isn’t it.”

It hadn’t been a question. Ben looked across at his father, naked too. He was in good shape, looking tanned and carrying a lot less weight than the last time Ben had seen him. Ben couldn’t help taking in Richard’s familiar penis, feeling a pang now as he saw on it the same sort of overhang that he, until so recently, had had himself.

“Ben,” Richard replied with a look on his face that his son had rarely seen, “I just can’t imagine what you’ve been through, and you can’t begin to imagine what I think about the man that did it to you. But it’s fine. Just fine. It’s not what I’d ever want for myself or what I’d have ever wanted for you either and, if I’m honest, I just don’t know how you cope with the end being bare all the time like that. But it’s a nice neat job, and it looks good and I’m sure you’ll get more used to it as time goes on, and at least now you’ll get to show off that nice, big Cook-family helmet to best advantage!”

Ben winced inside, but he knew his father was trying to be comforting.

“The main thing is, you’re still my son, and I love you just the same as ever - with a foreskin or without one. That’s all that matters. And if there is a tiny bit less of you than there used to be, well, that just means that there’s that bit more love to go round all the bits of you that are left.”

Chapter 12

The next morning, years of experience with orchestras led Richard to select seats on the tour bus with great care. A spot between the bridge-playing fanatics and two determined, if low-volume, iPod wearers seemed to be the best bet for some peace and quiet on the way. As it happened, Ben spent most of the journey to London sleeping, and Richard most of it just looking at his son. He noticed with a pang how Ben's hand had fallen protectively across his crotch as he slept. Seeing him asleep, it was hard for his father to decide if he really was a young man or still a child. Ben looked to Richard so alarmingly like he himself had at that age. He kept thinking of the photo that his mother had on top of the piano - round-collared shirt and flares aside, it could so easily have been Ben sitting there on the steps of the Royal College of Music and not Richard - they were just so alike. Except that they weren't now, not quite. Something about that upset Richard very deeply, knowing that his son was experiencing something he never had, nor could help him with. More than anything else, Richard hated the thought that he had not been there to save his son from that thing that now made them different.

The traffic on the bottom of the M1 was terrible. There was a groan when the tour manager announced that the bus would have to go straight to the Festival Hall for the rehearsal without stopping at the hotel first. She assured the players that she would go ahead and sort out the hotel room keys in advance and, true to her word, she handed them out in the interval of the concert. The orchestra's hotel was just around the corner from the South Bank as it was handy for their early Eurostar from Waterloo to Brussels the next morning but, after the inevitable post-concert reception with the Australian ambassador, it was late by the time they finally got there. Richard was worried about being able to get a pint so late at night until Ben reminded him that British licensing laws were a bit different nowadays. They found a pub nearby on Kennington Road, and Richard allowed Ben to buy the first round, finding it a slightly disconcerting new role reversal. Ben was more cheerful than the previous evening, but Richard was pre-occupied. He knew there was something he was going to have to tell his son before they went their separate ways. It wasn't until they were into their second pint that he felt ready.

“Ben, there's something I need to fill you in on - something about Roger.”

Richard caught the look on Ben's face and hated being the cause of seeing the anxiety he could read there. Anything to do with Roger was tricky territory for them both.

“I know,” said Richard, “but this is important. I have to tell you. It struck me on the journey down. It's the only thing I can think of that might explain, well, perhaps it might just explain some of all the stuff about your....”

Richard hesitated to say the word. “Well, about him getting you circumcised”.

“Go on,” said Ben, gravely. He hated that word being applied to him. It still didn't feel as if it actually could be.

“Well, you know all the history about your mum and Roger and me – that’s never been a secret. Well there’s one extra bit to the story which never seemed important before, but it just might be significant now.”

“Go on,” said Ben again.

“Well, Roger and I were the best of mates since school days, you know that. Then both of us were just mates with Carol as well when we ended up at university together, and it was all fine. But then it all got very sticky when your mum and I started going out. I realised Roger was very hurt, so I managed to stay low-profile and keep out of his way at first, but then I went down to play squash one evening and there he was. In the changing room. Just the two of us there. There was no way of avoiding him. Well, he just went ballistic – really ranting, saying just what he thought of me. Really nasty stuff. You know how good he is with words and, well, I just couldn’t think what to say back, especially as, I suppose, he was right about some of it in a way. I could see how he thought that I’d done the dirty on him, and I suppose I had. Except he twisted it all round and made it sound so cheap and nasty – cunning even, and it wasn’t like that at all, it really wasn’t. Your mum and me had just fallen for each other, big time. Well, there he was, standing bollock naked in front of me, bright red in the face, ranting- saying these vile things. I could take it when he was having a go at me – fair enough in a way – but then he started on your mum, and that got me mad. I just said the first thing that came into my head. In the heat of the moment. Unforgiveable really, but ... well, I didn’t know what else to say.”

“Go on,” said Ben again, wondering what was coming next.

“Well, I commented on his manhood.”

Ben sniggered involuntarily. That was one thing he hadn’t been expecting to hear. It sounded so childish - the sort of thing boys at school had done in the changing rooms, and not something you’d expect from a university student.

“Yes, not a nice thing to do, I agree. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen, but – well, he’s small down there. Not exactly minute but, well, you know you and I struck lucky in that department, so, compared to us.... Anyway, I reckon he’d always been a bit sensitive about his size, and I reckon he was jealous of me. You know what I’m like, for my sins - it’s not something I’m exactly shy about. So, when he started having a go at me, then all I could think of to say in the heat of the moment was that real cheap shot. I said I wasn’t surprised he couldn’t keep a woman happy, not with the tiny one he had. I could tell I’d hit home with that – the look on his face. Then, well, I wish I could remember now exactly what I did say but I remember more or less - I must admit I was quite proud of thinking of it afterwards. It was something like ‘with a foreskin like yours, it looks like they gave up halfway through circumcising you when they realised there’d be nothing left if they finished the job off’. Then I said something like ‘at least your cock might have had something noticeable about it if it had been circumcised, but it’s not even that - it’s just nothing’.”

There was a roar from the crowd in front of the match on the big TV screen. The two men sat in silence for a long moment. Ben didn't like that word "noticeable".

"One for the road?" said Ben, finally. He wasn't sure what else to say, and neither was Richard.

"Thanks, but I think I'd better unload the first two before we start on a third," said Richard, standing up.

Ben didn't really need to pee, but he followed his father to the gents. He made himself do it. It was a situation that would have to be faced sooner or later, and there would be no better time to do it and no better way to face it than with, quite literally, his father by his side. For Ben, there was a sort of child-like certainty that he hadn't felt in a long time that his dad would be there make sure everything was OK. So, for the first time since his circumcision, Ben stood at a urinal.

The last time they had been together, it would have been something totally routine; the two of them had never felt any awkwardness over standing side-by-side to pee, but this time, Richard instinctively sensed that things might feel different for Ben. He felt for his son and, unusually, took care to discretely retract his skin a little before he let his flow start instead of letting it out through the hose of his extra skin. It struck him too that, when he had finished, the normal extravagant and un-embarrassed milking of his overhang that Ben had learned to mimic while still a little boy, wouldn't - if his son happened to notice it - be exactly tactful. As they stood, Richard couldn't help looking across at his son's penis. He had always been secretly proud that Ben had inherited the genes that had given him one of which they could, both, be secretly, or not so secretly in Richard's case, proud. He was taken aback again by the way it was now so severely and mercilessly denuded. Anyone seeing it for the first time, long and heavy in Ben's hand, would have been struck by it, but now it looked so different from how it had before and from how his still did. Richard thought of the perfectly fitting, protective covering that it used to have, ending in just the right amount of overhang to look good without causing any problems for the owner, and the pleasure that, he assumed, Ben must have shared in being able to slide it back so easily to reveal, in intimate moments, the moist pink glans. That was all taken from Ben now. He noticed the greyer colour and rougher texture on the glans that now showed in front of his son's hand, the head brazenly, immodestly and permanently exposed, and he lamented Ben's loss.

To Ben's dismay, a young man had joined them at the stall shortly after they had arrived there, and he had instinctively angled himself away from the newcomer. One of the crowd of football watchers, his cropped hair, paint-stained clothing and tattoos gave him the air of a builder. Ben became aware of a slightly theatrical repeated cough coming from his father, but it took him a second or two to realise that he was trying to make him aware of something. Ben looked up at him and, as Richard winked and inclined his head slightly towards the man, he caught the intent of his father's gaze and twigged. The man was standing well back from the stall, engrossed in reading the glass-cased back page of yesterday's Daily Express on the wall in front of him. His left hand was by his side and he

was scratching his head vigorously with his right so his penis was just left to its own devices as his flow started. Ben took in the scar line and the tiny vestige of skin bunched behind the helmet - rather less of it than Christopher's. The big mushroom head had obviously been too large for his foreskin to cope with, and the man's penis had been made as irrevocably bare as Ben's own. The man belched as he let loose copiously and unconcerned, his stream direct and strong from a penis that clearly didn't need a helping hand with its aim.

They went back into the bar, arms on each other's shoulders and both laughing, although Ben wasn't quite sure why.

"Well, that was a neat trick!" said Richard. "I suppose that's one thing to be said for not having a foreskin – if I tried doing that I'd end up with wet socks for sure! I knew that circumcised men save time by not having to sort themselves out before and after, but I didn't know that they can multi-task too - so now you'll be able to save valuable seconds and text me while you're having a leak!"

Ben hoped the man hoped the man didn't hear their laughter, but with Richard's lame joke came the first moment of any levity over his circumcision, and it was a relief. For Richard, the relief that he felt in that moment was partly because, with something in his mind having dragged up a term from his schooldays that he hadn't heard in years, he had just stopped himself in time from referring to circumcised men as "roundheads". For Ben, the relief was that that a normal looking, blokey, bloke who was hardly any older than himself and certainly not someone who would have had Christopher's type of public-school confidence, obviously hadn't been one bit bothered about his blatantly modified penis being seen. It was a comforting thought, but Ben was very far from sure that he'd ever be able to let go of enough of his hurt and shame to feel that way himself.

Chapter 13

Two weeks later, although he knew it would do him little good in any official capacity, Domenic had a statement from Dr. Argent and a photocopy of Ben's paperwork from Burden Park. On his next afternoon off, he made the trip out to the Consolidated Holdings building on the edge of Spalding to pay an unofficial visit to Roger. He knew there was nothing he could charge him with and the best he could do would be to make the interview as uncomfortable as he could for the man and have the satisfaction of seeing him squirm. Domenic flashed his badge at reception, making sure that as many people as possible heard him ask for Roger Turnbull. The man on the desk told him that Roger, apparently, was out on the road that day. Disappointed, Domenic left his name and asked that Roger be told that he would be back soon to see him for his help with an enquiry.

It was a couple of days before Domenic could try again. The man on the desk recognised him, buzzed him through, and asked him to wait. When someone emerged from the lift, it wasn't Roger though. The grim-faced woman introduced herself as Roger's departmental head and invited him to follow her to her office.

She was keen to talk. Roger, she said wasn't available -in fact, he hadn't appeared at work for the last two days. She said that she wasn't totally surprised by a visit from the police, but asked Domenic exactly what it was that had brought him to Consolidated Holdings.

Domenic played for time, uncertain as to where this was leading. The woman was clearly being cautious, but he got her to say more. She said that they knew Roger had always been a bit "smart" with his expenses, but that recently they had had a few, rather more serious concerns about his business dealings. Roger, she said, had seemed a bit flustered when she had told him about Domenic's first visit. He had left work shortly afterwards, saying he'd just remembered an appointment. When he hadn't arrived for work the next day without explanation and with his mobile permanently turned off, they had started to dig a little deeper. The accounts department had spent some time going through his books, and they were now very concerned to find that there was "a very substantial amount indeed" of Roger's clients' money that could not now be traced.

An hour later, Domenic rang the doorbell of Ben's home. Carol was obviously already distraught when she answered, and giving her the extra shock of her seeing a policeman appear on the doorstep was something Domenic regretted. Ten minutes later, he had managed to re-assure her that he hadn't come to tell her that Roger was dead and had sat her down with a cup of strong tea. She had little to add, as she had neither seen nor heard from Roger for the last two days. Domenic asked her if she'd looked to see if his passport was there. Ten minutes later she came downstairs, white faced. Being Roger, he had always carefully kept his passport in the same drawer, but it wasn't there now. After finding it gone, she had gone on the internet and checked their bank accounts to see if there were any transactions. To her horror, she had found that their savings accounts had been emptied and closed. Roger had been considerate enough to leave her £50 in the current account.

Ben went home for a few days after Roger's disappearance. He and Carol talked endlessly about it all and how she was going to manage. Luckily, the mortgage had been paid off recently and she said that Richard had been great and arranged to transfer some cash to tide her over and that she had already managed to increase her hours at work. Ben was very relieved that she was content to leave any mention of Roger's part in his circumcision to a short, almost business-like statement. She just said that she knew the all details now, and was truly sorry for the way that Roger had gone about things. Ben chose to put out of his mind the slightly disquieting thought that she hadn't actually said she was sorry about the circumcision, only the way that it had been handled. He wondered if, even now, she had any idea that it hadn't been necessary and totally un-wanted, but it seemed unkind, with all she had to cope with, to add to her worries.

By the next afternoon, even though the biggest issue for Ben remained unspoken, there seemed to be nothing they could talk about that they hadn't already gone over countless times. Ben felt a little cabin fevered and wondered about going out for a bit. On a whim, he tried ringing a couple of his old school friends even though he doubted any of them would be around midweek during the university term. He struck lucky at the third call - David Evans was home. He told Ben that he'd decided after two weeks that he was on the wrong course at UMIST and was going to take a year off before re-applying elsewhere. He said he was at home, and invited Ben to come round as he'd just got some new stuff for his recording studio and could do with some help getting it all up and running.

Ben had been in David's attic studio many times. As kids, it had been a favourite Saturday afternoon haunt - a group of mates listening to music, recording each other and experimenting at the mixing desk. The only evidence of many school bands that had come on gone was the pile of disks in the corner of the room, all far too embarrassing to listen to now.

David made them cups of tea and they took them up into the loft. The mixing desk was surrounded by cardboard boxes and, as Ben settled onto the swivel chair in front of it, Dave sat on the floor and started opening the cartons and checking contents. They chatted and exchanged stories of going to university, Ben soon realising that there seemed very little chance of David actually making that repeat application.

Perhaps it was always the way when you had moved on in life and saw old friends, but Ben was aware that something was different between them. David seemed a bit pre-occupied - not exactly distant, but somehow not the same as Ben remembered him. He wasn't sure, but Ben wondered a little uncomfortably if Dave wasn't sometimes letting his gaze flick over Ben's crotch when he looked up from his work on the floor to talk to him. Ben knew Dave wasn't gay, but it seemed to be happening a bit more than by chance and it was puzzling. Ben knew that he had often shown a bit of a packet in the snug jeans he had liked to wear in the old days, but, since his circumcision, he had felt much more comfortable, both physically and mentally, in looser clothes so he doubted there was anything like that that might have attracted Dave's attention. Ben, a little ill at ease and suddenly anxious to break the mood, said he'd do something useful and wire up Dave's new speakers. As Ben slid off the chair and onto the floor, this time he definitely noticed

Dave follow his crotch as he moved. This was getting seriously weird. Ben picked up a reel of speaker cable, unwound a couple of feet and reached into the toolbox for a pen knife. Opening the blade, he ran it round the outer core of the flex about an inch from the end. Concentrating as he was, Ben hadn't noticed how quiet Dave had gone. When Ben used the knife to flick off the waste bit of plastic sleeve, he jumped as Dave threw his screwdriver onto the floor and swore.

“You OK?” asked Ben, more than a little bemused.

“Yes, sorry Ben. I'm fine, but ... shit, listen; can I ask you something? Something a bit awkward?”

Ben knew what was coming. Word of Roger's fraud must have leaked out already. He knew it would happen sooner or later, but this was a bit quick for news to have spread, even in a small town like Spalding. When David spoke, it was almost a relief for Ben to find it wasn't Roger he wanted to talk about. Almost.

“Sorry Ben, I've got to ask you this. How do I get a circumcision? I'm sorry to put this on you, but it's really worrying me and I've had no one to talk to about it.”

Ben was completely taken aback. He just didn't know what to do or say.

“Look, it'll just be easiest if I show you, OK?” said Dave.

Without waiting for a reply, he opened his fly and reached inside to hook out his penis. He took the end of it between thumb and forefinger and gingerly tried to retract the foreskin. Ben heard him wince. He could see the skin moving backwards a little over the glans, but the extreme tightness of the bud at the end of it didn't widen and seemed to be resolutely shut tight. Dave kept pulling, obviously in some pain. Finally, the opening stretched apart just enough to reveal the first half inch of a vividly red-looking glans.

“Nasty, isn't it?” said Dave, “I'm sure it's not supposed to be like that. What do you think? The skin sort of split a bit a while back. It wouldn't even go back this far before that happened.”

Ben could see the angry red line where the skin must have given under the tensions of Dave's manipulations and sincerely hoped that it wasn't going to do the same again now.

“It's not right, is it? I know it's not. And, well.....sorry mate, but I know you got yourself done when we were at school. And, well....”

He seemed to run out of steam for a split second. When he started speaking again, the words came out in a rush.

“Well, the thing is, I got a quick look at yours at the pool that day and, well, I just knew straightaway that that was how I wanted mine to be too.”

“Wanted,” not “needed,” Ben noticed. He said nothing, not even about Dave’s misapprehension that he had “got himself done.” In fact, he didn’t know what to say, so saying nothing was best. In any case, he had a feeling David had more to add.

“It’s just that, well, I know I’ve got a problem with mine, but yours looked so right when I saw it. It looked so good and, well I just got that glance for a second or two but.....”

Ben thought about it often afterwards; he never knew exactly why he did it. Standing up, he pulled open the buttons of his jeans and took out his penis. Just for a few seconds, he let it hang, his hands by his sides. He took it in, lying long and limp from the bottom of his fly, almost as if he were someone else seeing it. For the first time, he realised, he hadn’t had to steel himself to make himself look.

“Thanks mate. You’ve just helped me make up my mind,” said Dave.

“Best thing you can do is to ring a friend of mine,” said Ben, finally finding something to say. Tell him I told you to call him. His name’s Mike – he’s a nurse, and a good bloke. He’ll tell you what to do about it.”

The two young men were feet apart, their soft penises, so different in appearance, both just hanging from their flys. Just for an instant, Ben wondered what he would say or do if Dave asked if he could touch his. It would perhaps have been natural for a young man considering circumcision for himself to want to know something about how one felt. He didn’t though. He just looked. Eventually, David just put his penis away. Following his lead, Ben did so too. He was almost certain he was glad that the moment had passed. Almost.

Chapter 14

Two years later.

The heat hit the four of them as they got off the train from Barcelona. It was a relief to find that Tarragona station had left luggage lockers, as carrying heavy rucksacks around all day would have been torture. As they crossed the bridge over the careterra, Christopher saw Ben put his arm round Bekky and wished again that he had enough nerve to do the same with Mark.

They settled on a café in front of the cathedral and manoeuvred the big umbrella to offer maximum shade. With Ben and Mark engrossed in the Rough Guide, Christopher attempted to catch the waiter's eye. As he waited, he listened idly to the man's conversation with the woman on a distant table. He seemed shabby somehow; too old to be doing that job, and tired looking. There was something unusual about the way he spoke too – he was fluent, but there was no real attempt at a Spanish accent. He moved to the next table, finally acknowledged Christopher's gaze with a mouthed "una minute."

As Bekky asked Mark and Ben if they'd made a plan for the day yet, the waiter moved to another table. Christopher, still keeping an impatient track of the waiter's slow progress, registered that the party he was now talking to were speaking English. Satisfied to find that he had been right, he heard that the man had swapped to what was clearly his own native tongue:

"So, that's two diet cokes, one sparkling water, a zummo and a latte" said the waiter

Christopher caught the look on Ben's face as he looked up suddenly from the map, his back still to the waiter.

"Chris," said Ben (one of Mark's many beneficial influences on Christopher had been his insistence early on in their relationship on dropping two of the three syllables) "That waiter. Get your phone out and take a picture of him."

"Ooh, get you! On the turn, are we?" mocked Christopher, using his rarely deployed camp mode. "Does Bekky know about this? Well, of all the cute Spanish waiters we've seen this on this trip, this isn't one of them – he's no great beauty I can tell you. If you are so struck why don't you just ..."

"Please ... just do it, please," interrupted Ben, pulling his chair further in and huddling under the umbrella. "It's very important. And don't let him see what you are doing either. Make it look natural."

There was something in Ben's tone which made Christopher uncharacteristically willing to comply without further discussion. With a shrug, he picked up his phone and

made a show of looking as if he was photographing the cathedral portal. He passed the phone back to Ben, who struggled to see the image in the strong sunlight. He looked grave.

“Mark, I need you to come with me,” said Ben. “I’ve got to get to a police station, and I’ll need your help with the Spanish to explain. I knew when I heard him check their order. It was something about the way he said “lartay”. It’s Roger.”

Chapter 15

One year later

“Hi Ben. It’s Mike. How are you mate? Glad to catch you.”

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“Mike! Great to hear from you – it’s been ages, not since your wedding in fact. How’s married life suiting you then then? And the new job?”

Mike had finally managed to find work in Nottingham earlier in the year and, although working in a prison hospital wing wasn’t exactly his dream job, at least it had fulfilled Gina’s stipulation that she wasn’t going to marry anyone that she only got to see at weekends. Mike had flinched at the mention of his wedding. Much though he liked Ben, there had had a second layer of guilty unease concerning him since his wedding reception. Late in the evening, he had gone for a long-deferred and much-needed trip to the gents. He had been so focussed on his dire need of relief that it was only when he was well underway and starting to relax that he realised that the man standing just a couple of feet away from him at the long, open trough was Ben. As Mike became aware of him, Ben was already zipping up the fly of his hired morning suit.

“Looks like you needed that, Mike!” said Ben. “Great do, and thanks again for asking us.”

Then he was gone. If Mike had been one minute earlier, or perhaps even if he’d realised who it was next to him just a little sooner, then he might finally have got to see the penis he had so often thought about - the penis that Ben’s had become since he had played his role in taking part of it away. Mike never knew exactly what he felt about that missed chance and the reason why he needed so badly to see Ben’s penis. His reasons weren’t ones on which he cared not to dwell. He had so often thought about how perfect it looked in its last moments in its natural form when Ben was out cold on his circumciser’s table, then seeing it again, minutes later, looking so altered after so much of it had been severed. He had imagined many times what it might have looked like once the trauma of the surgery had settled, and how the work of such an expert circumciser might have made it look in its new form. Of all the times for this to happen, it had to be then - on his wedding day. That night of all nights, his love making was once again heavily imbued with images of what Ben’s penis might look like now, and how his own had looked covered in Ben’s dead foreskin. Pushing his thoughts away, Mike pulled himself together and concentrated on the reason for his call.

“I’m fine mate, all really sweet thanks. I’ll tell you all soon, but I can’t stay on long now. I’m at work and I’m not supposed to have a phone here on the ward, but I really wanted to check something out with you. It’s last week’s transfer of prisoners from the Scrubs. I’ve just seen the list, and there’s some bloke on it called Roger Turnbull. Is that your Roger by any chance?”

Ben winced inside at the idea of Roger being “his” in any way. It was indeed his Roger though - a quick, rare call to his stepbrother Matthew soon confirmed that. Ben phoned Mike back with the news that Roger was going to serve the rest of his sentence in Nottingham.

Mike was prepared to be patient, very patient if necessary. In the end, it took nearly three months of biding his time. Finally, things fell in to place very nicely when Roger arrived in the sick bay late one Friday evening after the doctor had finished his shift and complained of chest pains. He was good - Mike had to give him that - but not that good. Mike could see straight away that Roger was trying it on. Clever of him to wait until there was only a nurse on duty until Monday, but that was Roger for you. Mike played along. He ran a few cursory checks, looked concerned, said he'd give him a shot for the pain, and that he thought it best if Roger stayed in the sick bay over the weekend for observation.

Roger certainly felt no pain after the shot Mike gave him. In fact, it would have been enough to put a horse out cold for the night. No point in having to rush, Mike thought. When his shift ended, he started making preparations. He'd never done one before of course, but he'd seen enough to have a pretty good idea of what to do. In any case, he didn't think anyone, apart from Roger of course, would care much if the end result wasn't too expert. Lifting up the sheet, Mike pulled Roger's small foreskin back so hard that he would have winced, had he had been conscious. Thinking of what Ben had offered up for removal when he was out cold on the operating table that day, Mike mused that it was a shame there wasn't more to come off Roger. It was such an ugly penis that Mike hoped that he wouldn't end up actually doing the man a favour and make it look better, but he'd make sure that that didn't happen. One quick slice took out Roger's frenulum. Although that wasn't what you are supposed to do first, Mike knew it would make it easier for him to see what he was doing as he needed to find the best way to take as much off this particular patient as he could. Mike struggled to get as much skin as possible past the clamp's jaws, pleased to see the man's ugly scrotum starting to pull forward onto the base of his short penis as he stretched the shaft skin as tight as he could. He was none too careful as he ran the scalpel round. There was no point in making the scar line too even, was there? As a pleasing afterthought, Mike went back and took a little bit extra off one side, knowing that that would leave Roger uncomfortably lop-sided whenever he got an erection. Putting in the sutures didn't take him long as, for once, he didn't worry about taking his usual pride in his work. If there were a few lumps left when it had healed, well, who cared.

After he had cleared up, Mike looked at Roger's foreskin lying crumpled on the bedside tablet. He thought again of Ben's in the kidney dish that day. Chalk and cheese. Not that he'd even want to try it with this one, but it just wouldn't have gone even halfway round his own glans anyway. He picked it up with some forceps and dropped it in the medical waste bin, but then changed his mind. He retrieved it, slipped the grotesque thing

into a plastic bag and put it in his pocket. No point in wasting it. He was sure the foxes would enjoy it when he chucked it into the bushes on his way to the bus stop.

Gina was worried about Mike that evening. He was preoccupied, and it was because he knew he was going to have to act totally out of character when he got to work the next day. Although it took some nerve to get them past Security on the gate, he went into work with a couple of 200 pack cartons of cigarettes in his rucksack.

As Mike expected, his patient showed no sign of life until late on Saturday afternoon. As Roger began to roll his eyes, Mike called in one of the orderlies. Mike had been lucky – one of today’s crew was a prisoner with whom he knew it would be no problem to do business.

“If you’re interested, I’ve got a bit of a job for you to do on the quiet” said Mike, discretely showing the man the boxes of Silk Cut. I’m going to be very busy with the guy in the booth at the end of the corridor for the next half hour, and I’d like you to keep an eye on Turnbull while I’m gone. When he comes to, I’d like you to have a word with him for me. Just explain that I ran some tests last night while he was asleep and discovered exactly what treatment he needed. You could, if you take my meaning, make him aware that if he has any concerns about the cure that I chose for him, then he might perhaps not be too wise to voice them. Tell him that if he does, then he might find the next stage of the treatment I’d give him to be even less to his liking. If he needs some extra persuading, tell him that I think we might find that his medical record shows that he admitted himself on Friday evening with a case of rather serious bruising after a nasty fall in the showers, OK?”

Chapter 16

Two Years Later

“Look, I just don’t get it,” said Ben. “We’ve just had a bacon sandwich for breakfast, your favourite swear word is ‘Jesus’ and I’ve never known you get within fifty paces of a synagogue if it wasn’t for a wedding or a funeral, so where’s this come from all of a sudden? I just hate the thought of it so much.” Page | 60

“I know, I know, I know” said Bekky. “It must be hard for you to understand - I can see that. It’s just that it’s very important to me, ok? But it’s not just religion. My grandparents – well, it would feel like belittling them and everything they went through if we didn’t do it, and the older I get, well, the more important it becomes. So sorry Ben, but it’s the way I feel and my mind’s made up.

Ben didn’t know what more he could say. All he could hope for was that their child would be a girl.

“Anyway,” Bekky went on, suddenly angry, “Look at you talking! You’re hardly mister elephant’s trunk down there yourself, are you, and it’s never bothered you, has it, so what’s the fuss all about all of a sudden? Don’t you want him to be like you? Such a fuss over a tiny bit of skin!”

There were very few things that Ben knew he could never share with his wife, but this was something he just couldn’t begin to explain. He felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. It was something he just hadn’t seen coming and he cursed his naivety that it had never even occurred to him that it was something that she’d ever want. He put his head in his hands.