

Slippery When Wet

A VISIT WITH ADRIEN ENGLISH

He's swimming when we pull up in the driveway. Through the ornate iron fence we can see the pool in the little tiled courtyard ringed by rose bushes. The roses look tattered in the bright July sunlight. No one is living at the house now--the house he grew up in--and the gardeners are not quite as conscientious as they were when Lisa was there to critique their

performance. We can just make out the flash of a brown arm, brown shoulders, the top of his dark head as he cuts through the sparkling water. He's been swimming there nearly every day since his doctor pronounced him fit enough following his heart surgery. Swimming on his own--and I can see Jake tensing. His profile looks like stone.

He opens the car door and I follow him into the pool courtyard. Adrien has just completed a neat little flip turn off the far wall of the deep end and is swimming back toward us in smooth, long strokes. He hasn't seen us yet, didn't hear the clang of the gate closing after us. I can feel Jake's tension as he moves away from me, going to the edge of the pool.

Jake is also not saying anything--but he watches Adrien with a hungry intensity.

When Adrien turns around, though, his face gives nothing away. It's an expression perfected from years of negotiating boring or trying social occasions staged by Lisa. He's smiling and appears relaxed, although those blue eyes--as blue as the deep, shadowy end of the pool--are wary.

He and Jake stare at each other across the choppy blue expanse of pool...

"Don't start in on him about swimming by himself," I warn. "That's not going to go over well."

The words are so terse he nearly has to pry them out. "For a smart guy he makes a lot of dumb choices."

"Yeah, well I wouldn't bring that topic up either, if I were you."

The hazel eyes--surprisingly long-lashed--meet mine. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm not on anyone's side."

"Uh huh."

Something alerts Adrien. He raises his face from the water to snatch a breath of air, catches sight of us, and stops swimming.

He and Jake stare at each other across the choppy blue expanse of pool, and then he swims on to the shallow end. He walks up the stairs, catches the towel Jake tosses him. He holds it the folds in front of his chest; not pretty, the scars open heart surgery leaves. He turns his back, rubs down briskly, still not saying anything, and reaches for the shirt hanging on the back of the nearby chair, shrugs into it.

"I wasn't expecting you," he says, and he sounds friendly enough.

"Not my idea," Jake says curtly.

I see acknowledgment of that flicker in Adrien's eyes. But maybe things have changed because Jake sees it too. He says, "I promised to give you time and I'm doing that." He nods at me. "But Lanyon has some questions for you."

"Not again." Just for an instant their glances meet and hold in perfect, amused understanding.

“It won't take that long,” I assure them.

“You always say that,” Adrien says.

“Yes, and I'm usually right, aren't I?”

“No comment.” That's Jake.

I move over to the table beneath the flowered umbrella. Adrien's watch and some vials of heart meds are sitting there. That reminds me that there are still some things I need to check on. I pull out a chair and Jake pulls out a chair for Adrien who throws me a slightly bemused look and sits down. Jake pulls another chair, metal scraping cement. He angles it so that he's looking out over the pool--and can watch Adrien without his own expression giving him away.

“Okay,” I say. “We may as well just get down to it. Now that Jake has come out, where do you see the relationship going?”

They both seem to freeze. “You don't have to answer that,” Jake says to Adrien.

Adrien continues to stare at me as though Jake hasn't spoken. He says at last, “Well, that's the question, isn't it?”

“Er, yes.”

“The answer is...I don't know.”

Jake's profile hardens minutely. He still doesn't say anything.

Adrien throws him a quick look. “I'm glad Jake came out. For his sake.” He reaches his hand and Jake takes it immediately. They study each other over their clasped hands and there is such affection there. But maybe that's all that's all there is at this point? Not that that friendship wouldn't mean a lot--for both of them.

Slowly, carefully--he obviously does not wish to inflict pain--Adrien says, “I don't know if this will even make sense. For most of my adult life I thought I was...going to die young. My dad had a bad heart and he died when he was younger than I am now. I just accepted it and lived my life the best I could. But one side of that was...I didn't really think about some of the choices I made because I didn't ever think I'd have to live with them that long.”

He's smiling a funny sort of smile. Jake has turned his face so that I can't see his expression at all, but I see his throat move.

“But now, supposedly, I'm going to be pretty much okay. I mean...within limits, obviously. And it's...just...weird. Suddenly I'm not sure...”

I see Jake squeeze his hand, lightly, almost reassuringly, and then free his own.

“Okay, well let's leave that for now,” I say quickly. “Let's go back a bit. Remember Claude La Pierra?”

“Of course,” Adrien says. “I was thinking about him the other day. I had a dream about him when I was in the hospital. That he came to visit me and brought me chicken soup. I still miss him.”

“What about Robert Hersey?”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I won't forget Rob.”

Jake moves restively. “Is there a point to this--besides depressing him?”

Adrien shoots him a look that seems equal parts exasperation and affection. “I'm not depressed. I don't want to forget either of them. They were both a big part of my life. Rob in particular.”

“Okay, here's a question for Jake. What did you feel after you had broken things off with Adrien and you sat outside Cloak and Dagger Books and saw that he was with Guy?”

No hesitation. “I thought I'd made the biggest fucking mistake of my life.”

Adrien clenches his jaw and looks away.

“Will you keep in touch with Guy?” I ask him.

“Of course!” He sounds startled, his eyes returning to mine.

That's right, I remember. He stays friends with his exes.

“Is Angus coming back to the store?”

“No,” says Jake very definitely.

Adrien raises his eyebrows. “I get a postcard from him now and again. We’ll see.”

“Are you going to keep the cat?”

“What cat?” asks Jake.

“Would you like a cat?” Adrien inquires of him.

Jake says, “That’s pretty much theoretical. Why don’t you just ask the one about two cars starting off at the same point on a straight road facing opposite directions?”

Adrien laughs.

“What do you two think of each other’s taste in music?”

“We’re not a couple,” Jake says before Adrien can.

“If you were a couple, how do you think your families would take the news?”

Jake says nothing. Adrien bites his lip. I can’t tell if he’s trying not to laugh or is truly embarrassed. “I think it would take everybody some getting used to,” he says diplomatically.

“I didn't really think about some of the choices I made...I didn't ever think I'd have to live with them that long.”

“You have a cat?”

“No.”

“Yes,” I say.

Jake says, “I thought you always wanted a dog?”

“I do want a dog. I mean, if I lived in a place where I could have a dog. Which I don’t.”

“Well, speaking of that, say you two did move in together. What would you get for housewarming gifts and from whom?”

Adrien blinks.

“Hey,” Adrien says, “are you going to do us one of those play list thingies like you did the last time?”

“Maybe. You didn’t answer the question. Do you two have a song?”

They exchange looks. “Do we have a song?” Adrien asks.

Jake looks blank.

“What about couples counseling? Did you ever think of that?”

Jake snorts.

“If you were a couple, do you think you’d live together?”

“We’re not a couple,” Adrien points out shortly.

“True. Well, maybe you could just live together as friends. Like...um, the Odd Couple. Jake’s a pretty good cook, you know,” I tell Adrien. “And you don’t look you’ve gained much weight since your surgery.”

“I have to eat the right things. Watch my cholesterol now.”

“Well, maybe you should figure out what those things are so you could eat some of them,” Jake says.

“Funny.”

“You know, those Lean Cuisines are high in sodium. So's Tab.”

Adrien says to me, “Look what you started.”

“Sorry. Different question. What will you do if Murder, He Mimed is optioned for a screenplay?”

“Move to France.” He adds coolly, “I may move to France anyway.”

Jake gives him a long, narrow look which he meets straight on.

“Okaaay, Jake, maybe we should talk a little about your relationship with Paul.”

“Yes,” Adrien purrs. “Let's talk about that.”

“There's nothing to talk about. It was sex.”

Both Adrien and I start to respond to that, but Adrien stops himself and says brusquely, “Anyway, ancient history.”

Jake, watching him, opens his mouth, then closes it again. “If you want to know something, ask.” His tone isn't gentle, exactly, but it isn't as harsh as I'd expect.

“Not my business,” Adrien says curtly.

Uh oh. Not good. I go for a neutral topic.

“Will you go for another vacation at Pine Shadow ranch?”

“I don't know,” he says wearily. “There are a lot of memories...” He reaches for his watch and checks the time.

Jake meets my eyes. I begin to perceive the real problem here might actually be Adrien. I guess that would be a pleasant change.

Or not.

“Jake,” I say, “do you think you'll ever forgive yourself for almost getting Adrien killed?”

“No.” He sounds almost cordial. “Do you?”

“Uh...”

Adrien says impatiently, “Nothing that happened in that damned book--or this fucking series--was Jake's fault. I made my own choices and I knew what the risks were going in.”

“You do take a lot of risks.”

“Great. Now I'm being psychoanalyzed. Okay, you want the truth. I guess maybe I did push things sometimes. I know it's going to sound weird, but I always felt a little...invulnerable. I know that doesn't make sense given the fact that my health has never been the greatest, but dying isn't--wasn't--something that ever scared me. At least...I didn't want to die violently or

painfully, but quick always sounded pretty good to me.”

Jake is listening to this with great attention.

Adrien draws a deep breath. “So that's changed and it's one of the things that scares me sort of. For the first time I feel like...I feel...I don't know. Like I need to be very careful.” His voice sounds a little choky, but he pushes past it. “So don't give Jake a hard time over my own bad decisions.”

“Okay.” Given the look on Jake's face I figure he'll give himself enough of a hard time without my input.

Jake is staring at the pool like he's searching for sea monsters. Adrien's head is tipped back and he's staring up at the white clouds. His drying hair is starting to wave. It's longer than he usually wears it.

“Next question. Jake, how do you think you're going to be able to keep Adrien from assisting in your PI cases? Especially if you make an office in the newly remodeled book bookstore?”

“W-w-what?” That's from Adrien.

Jake asks alertly, “What makes you think I'm going to have an office in the bookstore?”

“Well, it's a pretty big building. It used to be an old hotel, right? And Adrien isn't going to be

using all of it. Plus...you don't have an office right now, do you?"

"No." He looks uncomfortable. "I'm using an answering machine and meeting clients at a coffee house."

"Getting a lot of clients?"

He's avoiding looking at Adrien who is watching him with a little frown. "Not a lot. Yet."

I can see him thinking this over. "He's not afraid of me," he says astonishingly.

"Are guys generally afraid of you?"

He's still thinking how he wants to phrase this. "Not exactly. I mean, my health was never an issue for him, for one thing. That meant a lot to me." That's for Jake, and Jake tips his head curtly in acceptance. "But also...he didn't find the fact that I had a brain or a sense of humor

says nothing. "Look, if I don't have a problem with it--"

"You've got a bad heart and he shoved you down."

"First off, he shoved me, but the fact that I fell was a fluke. He didn't punch me. He didn't kick me. He didn't keep hitting me. He shoved me. And I've shoved him other times. That's

“I really am... a lot harder and a lot tougher than a lot of people realize.”

"So how would you keep Adrien from getting involved in your cases?"

"I'm not getting involved in any more cases." Adrien absently rubs his chest. Jake's eyes narrow, watching him.

I try another tack, reading from my notebook, "Adrien, you once expressed that Jake was your 'equal' which allowed you to truly get what you wanted without holding back. Supposing that, recognizing a person as your equal happens very quickly and early on in relationship, what qualities of Jake did you perceive in making this decision?"

off-putting. He likes who I am. Who I really am, and who I really am is a lot harder and a lot tougher than a lot of people realize. That never scared him."

He looks at Jake for confirmation. Jake nods.

"I never had to pull my punches with him," Adrien says. "Or him with me."

"Yeah, well speaking of punches. How about that famous shove that he gave you in The Hell You Say."

"Oh my fucking God not that again." That's from Adrien. Jake draws a deep breath and

what I mean. He treated me like I treated him. Like I was normal."

"Jake, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I'm not making excuses for it. There isn't any."

"Why do you think it happened?"

"Oh, come on!" Adrien says, furiously. "It's obvious why."

"Jake?"

"What, are you supposed to be the fucking marriage counselor?"

Jake puts a hand on his shoulder. "Just calm down." For an instant his eyes are almost tender. To me he says, "You've asked me this before, and I've gone over that shove in my mind again and again. I didn't mean to knock him down. I felt sick when he hit the floor. When I saw his face."

His keeps his own face stern by effort. "There isn't an excuse, but the explanation is...everything was closing in on me. I know it was my own choice, my own decision, but I felt trapped with it, and then I saw--saw as clear as daylight--what was going to happen with him and Captain Crunch. It was right there and I had let it happen."

"I don't want to talk about this again," Adrien says tightly.

"Is Adrien your equal?" I ask Jake.

His grin is wry. "Oh yeah. In every way that counts he's the strongest guy I know."

I glance over my notes. I can see Adrien is not going to sit still for much longer, and Jake is clearly hoping to grab a private word with him.

"Adrien, are you tired of being loved for your mind?"

"All this time I thought it was for my money."

"It is," Jake assures him.

"Jake, What do you really think of Lisa?"

"I plead the Fifth."

"Do you think Jake is capable of monogamy, and if you were together, would you expect that of him?"

Adrien automatically looks at Jake. "Yes, yes, and that's a very big if."

"Jake?"

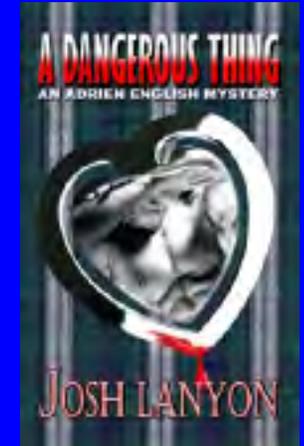
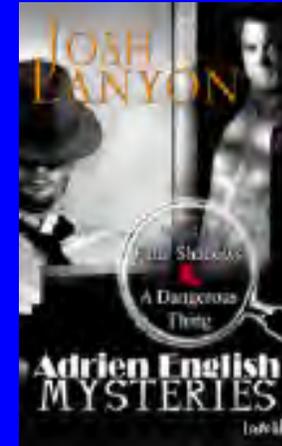
"What he said."

"Okay, gentlemen." I flip shut my notebook. "That's all I have. I expect the rest will be answered one way or the other in *The Dark Tide*. That's your final adventure. Any last words before it begins?"

Adrien turns to Jake. His mouth curves in a reluctant smile. "See you on the other side."

"I'll be waiting," Jake says. ●

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