

## Them

by Francesca Ryan

“It's always either money or sex.” He opened the curtains and peered out the window. From the side. Didn't want to be seen starkers, obviously.

The long summer was burning to a close, and Rupert had been staying (overstaying) his welcome at my little flat. The recent rich boyfriend had turfed him out, so here he was. Sofa surfing until something turned up. Bad enough to have to trip over all his bits and pieces on the way to the kitchen. Worse, he hated having the windows open at night. The smell from Ali's Kebabs down the road irritated him. Oh well. At least it didn't bother him whenever I drifted past in my knickers and vest. Didn't dance down my end of the ballroom. Besides, we'd been friends for far too long for anything like that to matter.

“So, which was it in this case Rupes?”

He winced. Disliked being called Rupes. I did it to tease him. Not always with affection, recently. I opened the windows and took a theatrically deep breath. “Smells like a tart's boudoir in here.”

Always liberal with the expensive French fragrance, was Rupert. Over the coffee he made with obsessive attention to detail (water off the boil, don't scald the grounds) he showed me Alberto's latest letter.

“No harm in going to see him, surely?” I gave my dark bitter cupful a generous slosh of milk. Rupert preferred cream, naturally.

“I hate the way they treat you before you go in.” He winced. “Searches. Even before I get anywhere near him in that horrid little room. All the others stinking it out.”

“Do the crime, pay the time, Rupes. Bit mean, not to letting you stay on at his place though.

I watched as he dunked his buttered pastry into the large white bowl. Very French in his tastes, was Rupert. “I mean he'll be out in a couple of weeks, won't he?”

He carefully scooped out a soggy piece and licked the spoon clean.

"If you really want to know, it was both. Sex and money, I mean. And I couldn't stay on at his, in any case. Because of them."

He would never say much more about the mysterious Them.

"I don't want to put you in any danger, Pebbles".

Touché. I hated that school nickname, even more than being called Ginger. I poured another cup and shook my head.

Them.

Everyone has a weakness, don't they. Small ones, large ones. Our own personal San Andreas Fault Lines. One of my own little weaknesses, is a fondness for conspiracy theories. To this day, I still half believe there is more to know about Princess Diana's accident. And as for Jeffrey Epstein's suicide? Oh please.

Dear old Rupert's Achilles Heel was sex. And money. He used to be a truly gorgeous young man. Made a good living out of it; sugar daddies. Some of them not so nice, by the look of the occasional bruising on him. But even Peter Pan grows up, and Rupert's erotic capital wasn't what it had been.

"When you say Them, Rupes, are you talking about the Albanians again?"

He'd owed a lot of money at one time, indulging in a bad habit. Dropped it, after a spell in a luxurious rehab. Alberto footed that particular bill, no doubt.

"No. That's all square. It's the ones in the black car that's been parked opposite for a few nights"

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

He shook his head. "Someone followed me home last night. I saw them duck into Ali's Kebabs"

"Not very good if you saw them," I laughed. He didn't.

His eyes filled with tears.

"I'm going to have to move on."

"Where to?"

Although I did want my space back, I suddenly felt really sad that he'd be going. And worried for him.

"What's this about, Rupert?"

He shook his head.

"It'll be in the papers soon. There'll be money. Enough to get a long way from here."

Now I really was worried.

“He was a good enough man, Penny. Even if he was a monster.”

He made a small noise in his throat as the door to my flat opened, with no noise at all. An uninvited stranger. A smile stretched with malice. My stomach lurched.

“So here you are, Mr Rupert. Let's do this the easy way shall we?”