

Colin Dereham



THE LOOKOUT

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The Lookout

by

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Chapter One

It's Wednesday, the first of October. An unseasonably hot day for this time of year. I've been working in my study all afternoon, trying to resist the temptation to turn on the aircon. I'm in denial, hoping my defiance might stave off what promises to be a sweltering Sydney summer.

I turn off my computer for the day and do a quick tidy-up of the living areas. I've put an ad on a gay house-sharing website and a few potential flatmates are coming to view the spare room. I'm nervous as hell. It's years since I've had to face this sort of thing. But since my best friend and flatmate of umpteen years got married and moved to Melbourne, my steep mortgage dictates I now need to share my beloved apartment with a stranger. Plus, a bit of company wouldn't go astray. The loss of my BFF Jools and her awesome now-husband Steve has left a gaping hole in my social life.

I glance up at the clock. Five-fifteen. Perfect, I have a quarter of an hour to relax. I walk out through the glass sliding doors to the balcony. It's long, running the length of the apartment. Down the opposite end, next to the other sliding doors that lead into my bedroom, I've set up a narrow table and chairs, ostensibly for my sinful habit. I take a seat and pull out my brand-new pack of cigarettes.

I know it's bad. The huge warning photos plastered all over the pack constantly remind me. But I love the whole experience. I love removing the pristine plastic, flipping the brand-new lid, breathing that fresh scent of tobacco tinged with faint metallic notes from the silver paper lining. I love the clink of a Zippo, the sound of the flint igniting. I love the feel of that first drag: how it's guaranteed to take whatever tension I'm feeling and throw it away, even just for a few minutes. As I said, I know it's bad for me. God knows, I go to the gym most mornings as penance. But it's a little reward I can't do without. OK... I *won't* do without.

The door buzzes at five-forty. I brace myself and go and press the intercom. "Hi, Patrick?" I ask.

"Uh, no. It's Tom."

Oh. Thought he was coming at six. "Sure Tom, come on up."

I open the door and my heart leaps in reflex. The man is bloody handsome. Dark Mediterranean looks with a layer of well-trimmed stubble. And tall—several inches taller than my five-foot-eleven. He's dressed in an impeccable suit, which hangs beautifully from his lanky frame. His skinny build is saved from scrawniness by a set of broad, masculine shoulders. I want to hug this greyhound of a man. I wonder if that would be polite before we've even said a word to each other.

"Um, sorry I'm a little early."

Tom snaps me out of my daydream. I can feel myself blush. His smile tells me he knows I was checking him out. The drool running down my chin may have been a red flag, too.

I jump to it. "Apologies, Tom. Come in." I take him through the lounge and dining areas.

"This is such a great location," says Tom, looking around as he follows me. "So close to the beach."

"Yeah, just a ten-minute walk."

"And car parking, too! This place must be worth a fortune."

"I guess so, but I bought it sixteen years ago for a bargain. There's no way I'd be able to afford anything in Bondi these days." I take him through to the small, poky kitchen. "Mortgage still costs a bomb, so I've always had flatmates, and I've never really had the money to renovate." I wave my arm around the dated cupboards. "Original seventies kitchen. Sorry, it's hardly a gourmet chef's dream. Do you cook?"

Tom gives a little laugh, a snort of amusement. "Just the bare essentials. Though mum taught me a couple of

Croatian dishes that I can do pretty well.”

Croatian. That would explain those dark good looks. That almost-black hair. Those piercing dark-brown eyes. My gaze drops to his large hands, then his crotch. Croatian guys have foreskins, don't they? *Fuck, Angus. Get a grip. You're ogling him again.* I force my eyes to move from his dick back up to his face. “Awesome. I'd love to try them. Come and I'll show you the bedrooms.”

I lead him out again, through the dining and living areas to the hall where the bedrooms are. We stop at the first one, the tiny kid's bedroom. “This is my study. I work from home, but I'm really quiet so you won't be bothered.”

“Oh? What is it you do?”

“I'm a writer and journalist. I do quite a bit of freelance work, but mostly I write... uh... gay romances these days.”

Tom seems surprised. “Wow. Impressive. Beats being a financial consultant.”

I look him up and down in his dashing suit. “Yeah, but I'm the one wearing flannies. You're the one wearing Zegna.”

He glances at his attire and chuckles. “It's Armani, actually. And only Emporio.” His eyes roam my body, causing tingles to run down my spine. “You don't look much like a romance writer, Gus.” There's a cheeky glint in his eye and a massive grin spreading across his face. Damn, if he doesn't look stunning with his pearly whites on show. I wonder what his lips taste like.

“Don't I? What *do* I look like, then?”

He eyes me up and down again. “Hmm. Thick ginger hair, bushranger beard, check shirt and sexy footy shorts. I'd say you're a bearish, rugby-playing tradie.”

I'm turning scarlet, but I'm glad he noticed the shorts. My thick, solid legs get me many compliments and if I'm being truthful, I wanted to show them off. “I guess you have a point. You'd expect a gay romance writer to be wearing crisp linen slacks and an alpaca jumper, curled up with a shih-tzu on a cream leather couch.”

He laughs out loud. “You’re right, but I’d much prefer they look like *this*.”

He nods towards me and it’s all I can do to stop myself pouncing on him. *Behave, Angus.*

Fortunately, Tom changes the subject. “What’s your last name?” he says. “I might have heard of you.”

It’s charming of him to ask. I’m not famous or anything. “MacRae. But I use Gus as my first name professionally. It sounds a bit more marketable than Angus.”

Tom doesn’t even need to ponder. “Gus MacRae. Yes, you write those books about gay men working as Jackeroos on cattle stations.”

I’m disproportionately thrilled that Tom knows this. “Yeah. The Aussie cowboy thing has proven to be pretty popular. People seem to like stories about lonely gay boys out in the country finding their soulmate.”

“Did you grow up on a farm, Gus?”

He used my pen name. That’s so cute. “Yeah. Family property’s a few hours’ drive from Sydney. I go back there a couple of times a year.”

Tom pauses and smiles at me again. “Well, *Gus*—can I call you that?” He’s so fucking gorgeous; I’m blushing again as I nod. “Tomorrow I’m gonna start reading your books.”

“Uh, really? Well, if you’re serious—” I dig out a copy of my latest novel. “Here.”

Tom takes the paperback and looks at it reverently. “Wow. Thanks!”

Things go quiet for a moment till I remember what we were actually meant to be doing. “Come and I’ll show you the spare room.”

Tom follows me along the hall and we arrive at a larger room. He takes a walk around, assessing the space. “This is perfect. A lot of my stuff’s in storage, but I can deck this out nicely.”

We walk past the bathroom, then into the end room. “This is my bedroom.”

“It’s huge,” says Tom, standing respectfully at the entrance. “And your bed is *enormous*.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, it’s a super-king. You should try buying sheets for the bloody thing.”

Our eyes meet and we share a look. It speaks volumes. Or is it my imagination? I check him out for the millionth time, all model-sharp in his Armani. “You wanna come sit outside?”

He follows me through the sliding glass door from the bedroom to the balcony and spots the table there. “Is that your smoking nook?”

Oh, shit. I didn’t think about that. “Uh, yeah, but I only—” I turn my head and see he already has a cigarette between his lips. “Gee, I like you even more now, Tom.”

He chuckles and we both pull up a chair. A surge of excitement goes through me. He’s beautiful, that’s undeniable. But, physical attractions aside, we could become awesome friends. I’m sure of it. “So, Tom, tell me—why’s all your stuff in storage?”

He ponders a moment, probably wondering how much to reveal. “I broke up with my partner a year ago. We only just got around to selling the house. I’ve been staying at my mum and stepdad’s for the last few weeks. I’m not really looking to buy again right now; the market isn’t too good.” He flashes me a hopeful smile. “That’s why this place would be perfect for me.”

I’m blushing again. A strange wave of nerves washes over me. “Well... I think it’d be great if you moved in.”

“I’d love to” He’s grinning from ear to ear. “But didn’t you have some other guy coming to look at the room, too? Um... Patrick, wasn’t it?”

I glance at my watch. “Nah, he’s not gonna show up. He was meant to be here ages ago.”

Right then, there’s a knock at the door. *Fuck. Is that him now? No. It wasn’t the intercom. Must be my neighbour.* I go and open the door to a muscle bear in a flight attendant’s

uniform. He's a little shorter than I am, with dark blond hair and designer facial scruff.

"Hey! Angus?" He doesn't wait for an answer; just steps right in, thrusting out his hand. "Patrick. Door was open downstairs so I just came on up. Sorry I'm late; our last flight was a little delayed." His grip is firm and his smile is bright. I notice a charming American accent. I'm a sucker for those. "This place looks awesome! You should see some of the dumps I've been to!" He's all vibrant and energetic, walking around the living and dining area. He spots my large balcony. "Oh, man—this is great! You must have some amazing parties. Are these the bedrooms down here?"

"Uh, yeah." I'm a little flustered, torn between my natural urge to be polite and the pressing need to tell him the room is taken.

He walks along the hall overlooking the balcony, poking his head into the various rooms and finding the empty one. "Perfect size." Coming back out, he spots Tom through the window and waves.

His enthusiasm is infectious and I don't have the heart to break the bad news. He heads out to the balcony and I follow like a meek little lamb. Fuck, I'm so piss-weak.

"Hey! I'm Patrick." Patrick shakes Tom's hand just as thoroughly as he did mine. "Are you a friend of Angus's?"

Tom looks a little uncertain, but smiles anyway. "Well, I hope to be. I'm here about the room, too."

"Oh." Patrick's face falls. "Oh, shit. Sorry. Has it been taken?"

I couldn't be more uncomfortable if I tried. I'm a squirming wimp. His disappointment is palpable. *Fuck, don't be stupid, Angus. You don't even know each other.* "God, sorry. I didn't think you were coming."

I watch Patrick's face as he makes a supreme effort to smile. "That's ok. My fault for being late! Early bird catches the worm, I guess." He glances at Tom, then at the table.

“Hey, would you mind if I sit a moment before I go? It’s been a long day.”

“Of course, please.” I’m still flustered. “Gee, where are my manners? Let me get you guys a drink. What’ll you have?”

“Beer’s fine with me, if you’ve got it.” Tom’s smile is still there, but I’m not a hundred percent sure he’s comfortable.

“I’m kinda partial to a nice G&T, but I’m happy with a beer.” Patrick’s sparkling energy seems to be back. I feel a little sad. It would have been fun having him around.

“Actually, gin and tonic I can definitely do, Patrick.” It’s a poor consolation, but I’ll make it a stiff one.

I can hear the two of them chatting away outside while I’m in the kitchen, and I have a brainwave. “Hey guys,” I call out as I ferry our drinks to the balcony. “This may be a lame suggestion, but there *is* a third bedroom.”

“Isn’t that your study?” says Tom.

“Yeah, but my bedroom’s massive. I can move my desk and stuff in there.” I look from Tom to Patrick. “It’s a small room, but you could squeeze a double bed in.”

“I’ll take it,” says Tom without hesitation. He beams at me; he seems genuinely happy. “I don’t need much space.”

Patrick sits up tall, looking at me like an eager child. “So, is it settled? Does that mean I can have the room?”

“Yeah. I’d really like you to move in, too.” Probably a little forward of me to say that, but I’m riding the general wave of excitement.

“Fuck! That’s awesome, man!” Patrick jumps up and flings his arms around me. He’s a muscly bugger; nearly squeezes me to death. “We gotta celebrate now. Why don’t I get us some alcohol delivered?” He pulls out his phone.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty,” I interject, as he taps away.

“No man, let me do this. What are you on? Bourbon?”

“Uh, Scotch. But I’ve got a bottle already—”

“And now you’re getting another one.”

I stand there sipping my drink, watching as he finishes his order.

Patrick plops his phone down with a sigh. "Man, it's great to finally find a place. And in such a perfect spot. I can't wait to hit the beach!"

"You been looking long?" asks Tom.

"Yeah. My lease is up and I'm practically out on my ass."

"Ass." Tom grins. "So, you're from the States? Canada?"

Patrick chuckles. "Yeah, I get Canada a lot. I'm from Texas, but we moved here when I was a teenager, so I lost a lot of my twang. I take it you guys are both Aussie?"

"Croatian," says Tom. "But yeah, I was born here in Sydney." He looks over at me. "And from your name, I'm guessing you're a Scot, Angus. Am I right?"

"Well, second generation. I'm not quite worthy of wearing a kilt."

Tom gives me a crafty look. I could swear he glances at my crotch.

Yes, Tom. I'd definitely be wearing nothing underneath it.

"Nice combination." Patrick eyes us both up and down. "Look at us. The blond, the redhead and the swarthy Mediterranean. We should film a porn scene."

We all laugh at his joke, but my cock is hardening at the thought. I really have no control over it.

Tom picks up his cigarettes and smiles at me. "Are you gonna join us?"

I realise I'm still loitering on the periphery, caught up in all the drama. Blushing again, I scurry round to my usual seat.

"Has anybody ever told you that smoking's bad for you?" Patrick says, with a playful eyebrow raise.

Tom looks up with wide-eyed innocence, cigarette in his lips and lighter poised. "No, really?"

"Don't worry, Patrick, evil smoking habits are confined to this table." I wink at him.

Patrick's mischievous smile seems permanently plastered to his handsome mug. "I'm not bothered. Puff away. I promise I won't give you guys a hard time."

I make several trips to the kitchen, refilling our glasses as we get a little merry acquainting ourselves. The heat of the day has stuck around and Patrick and Tom look sweaty in their work clothes.

"God, beginning of October and we're already getting heat like this," says Patrick. "It's gonna be an inferno by Christmas."

"Oh!" I suddenly remember something I'd left out of my ad on the website. "I never mentioned, there's a swimming pool."

"What? Here?" says Patrick. "You're kidding."

"Yeah. It's nothing special, just one of those old-fashioned rectangle swimming pools. Round the back of the complex."

"My God. We gotta go take a swim now!" Patrick is already up, undoing cuffs.

"Uh... I haven't got any bathers or anything," says Tom, sounding dubious.

"Neither do I! Come on guys, let's just swim in our underwear." Patrick's verve is contagious. Given we're nicely lubricated by the alcohol we've been swilling, it suddenly seems like the best idea in the world.

I look over at Tom. "I'm game if you are."

He grins and gives me a loaded wink. "Wouldn't miss it for anything."

Oh fuck, yeah.

When we reach the pool gate, we find the whole place deserted. It's a school night, so I guess everyone is in their apartments glued to reality TV.

"Man, there's nobody here!" Patrick laughs gleefully as he strips off. "Fuck it. Let's skinny dip!" And with that, he yanks his boxer briefs to his ankles. When he straightens up, we're treated to the sight of his sculpted, muscle-bear body.