

THE HUSBAND'S TALE

By M.J. Edwards

I roll my wheelchair nervously toward the wall of windows, hands aching from how tightly I clench the rims of the narrow tires.

The Boston apartment I share with my wife Alethia is easy to navigate, even in my chair. The designer she hired adapted it for me before we moved in, so there's plenty of room to move around. We placed furniture so I can join people in the living room or at the dining table. The halls are extra-wide to let me turn without having to back up into a room first. The bathroom has all kinds of accommodations so I can shower without an aide.

But what I love most of all is the view of downtown splayed out before my eyes. When I come to a stop at the window wall, I don't bother setting the brake. Shifting in my chair to avoid sores, I lean on one elbow and admire the city of my birth. Boston has always felt more manageable to me than, say, New York or Tokyo. The tall buildings gleam in the night, modern and exciting, yet enough historic architecture remains to honor the past. Cars wind their way along the busy streets, and the sidewalks teem with people walking home or to a club.

What I wouldn't give to be able to walk with them.

I glance at my wristwatch and mentally start the count down. Fifteen minutes until the end of the world. Well, the end of my world at least. Or, will it be the *beginning* of the end...?

No, I suppose the true beginning was eighteen months ago, when I took a fall while rock climbing. Can you believe I threw everything away across the country, in California's Joshua Tree National Park?

It shouldn't have even been a major challenge. I'd stood at the top of climbs in Acadia, Yosemite, the Cascades. Been up Mont Blanc in the Alps, for fuck's sake. Hung on the side of mountains, so cold I wasn't sure how to keep going, and yet found the strength to do it. I learned I had the drive to plan and accomplish incredible feats, overcome obstacles, and push past my own limits when I needed to inspire my climbing buddies who were ready to give up and turn back.

And then Joshua Tree happened. That climb was supposed to be a minor distraction during a vacation with friends, nothing that required months of training like the Alps. I was confident and strong as we worked our way up the split face of the rock we'd chosen. The alien shapes of Joshua trees stretched across the desert floor under a cloudless sky, looking like something out of a Doctor Seuss book. Distracted and already anticipating the view from the top, I remember storing memories to share with my wife when we all got back to the resort in La Quinta that evening.

I didn't see the raptor's nest until the bird I had disturbed screeched. It flew out of a crack in the rock, right into my face, talons coming for my eyes. Like a noob I panicked and jerked, turning wrong. The rope went slack as it pulled free of the cliff. I knew a moment of weightlessness, then heart-stopping terror when gravity took me.

I crashed to Earth like a falling star.

The ledge twenty feet below saved my life and destroyed it at the same time. Stunned, gasping, in excruciating pain from my waist up to the back of my head from the landing, I think I knew instantly what had happened. Why I felt no pain in the legs. The fall had severed my spinal cord, ending my life as I knew it. *Our* life, Ali's and mine together.

I barely remember the horror on my climbing buddies' faces as they worked their way down to me. The agonizing wait for rescue as the sun beat down. The airlift, the mutters of the surgeons.

My injury left me unable to feel anything below my waist. I can't walk, or control my urine, or move my bowels. My legs might as well be dead. I can't feel anything in my dick, though for some reason I still get erections from seeing or thinking about stimulating things.

My wife Alethia — Ali — was there when I woke in the hospital, and ever since. Even though I can no longer make love to Ali, she's never shown me a moment of doubt. She is my shelter from the storm, the pillar I hold onto when despair threatens to blow me away. If what happens tonight makes her realize how much I've held her back...

Nope, I can't think about it anymore. Despite my fears, this has to happen, for Alethia's sake. We've been in stasis for far too long, and we agreed we have to do something to break through, to move ahead. Even if Ali's path forward ultimately takes her away from me, we have to try.

My heart thumps painfully in my chest at the thought of losing Ali, but I love her too much to keep her trapped like this, caring for a man in a wheelchair.

No, I'm not even a man. I can't give her what every other man gives to his woman.

Thank God we made love that morning, before I left our villa. I wish I'd taken more time with her, treasured the sensation of sliding into her warmth. If only we'd drawn out the pleasure for hours, savoring the connection, the fire between us. But my buddies were waiting to leave for Joshua Tree park, and I had no idea it would be the last time.

My eyes flick to the clock on the stove. It's teal-blue numbers shine in the shadowed kitchen, telling me I have ten minutes to go. Ten minutes until everything changes. Ten minutes until *he* arrives.

In the glass, the reflection of Ali approaches me cautiously. She's wearing a blue dress that I love. It brings out the olive tone in her skin, and makes her hazel eyes look almost silver. Did she choose it for me? Or for him?

She stops right behind my chair, the perfume she favors surrounding me with the essence of orange blossom. Our eyes meet in the glass as she runs her fingers through my

hair, combing it with her nails.

Her voice is soft, full of love and concern. “Darling, it isn’t too late to cancel if you don’t want to go through with this.”

The lifeline she offers makes me close my eyes. But how can I call it off now, when it was all my idea?

After the accident, we lived through months of rehabilitation. Physical and occupational therapy taught us how to care for my bodily needs and navigate the world from a chair. Couples counseling helped with my guilt over what I’d done to our marriage, to Ali. Sex therapists tried to convince us there were ways we could still enjoy each other physically.

But no one could teach me how to make love to my wife the way she deserves.

From mere days after we met, Ali and I were insatiable for each other. She had—*has*—the strongest libido I’ve encountered in any woman. Almost every day, for more than four years, we had sex. Often it was more than once a day. We had it soft and tender, hard and driving, in more positions than I think even the *Kama Sutra* knows. Unapologetically, Ali just loves to get fucked.

After Joshua Tree, though, it ended. Oh, we’ve tried the things the therapists advised. Worked out positions where I can give her oral sex even though I can’t move my lower body. Experimented with fingers and toys. Even had her try riding my cock on the rare times I spring an erection. Ali always tells me she’s satisfied, that she just wants to be close to me and it doesn’t matter what we actually do.

I don’t believe her.

It eats me up, to know that sex is one more thing I took away from Ali with my selfishness over rock climbing. I pushed and pushed Ali to find a man who could give her what I can’t. She steadfastly refused, for months. Then one day she came home from lunch with her godmother with a proposition. She told me she would do as I ask – bring another man in for sex – but only if I agree to be there. To be a part of it.

I was shocked, embarrassed and, strangely, intrigued. The idea of a threesome with another man or woman never came up in all our years of loving. Yet when Ali mentioned it, I had a searing mental flash of how hot she would look, spreading her thighs for a stranger, eyes locked with mine as he takes her. Still I resisted, unsure of how it could work, afraid that as soon as she remembers how much she needs sex, she’ll leave my sorry, frozen ass behind.

Ali pressed me to talk about it, though, and to explain my fears. Finally we agreed we should try, and that hiring a professional escort was the best approach. That way, we wouldn’t involve any friends. No one needs to know. Plus, the odds of Ali getting emotionally attached to a prostitute we see for one night are low enough that even my irrational fears are calmed.

And so Ali went out and hired a lover. He’s due to arrive in, shit, two minutes. I know

she needs this, but I have to be strong or she'll never see it through.

Why do I have to be in the room with them, though? I mean, I guess I understand her reasoning. Kind of. She can't bear the idea of walking away from me with another man, leaving me to imagine what they're doing to each other. What *pleasure* some man is giving my wife that I can no longer provide. I understand that intellectually, and I can even appreciate how thoughtful Alethia is about the whole thing.

But it's still going to rip my guts apart to see a man put his hands on my wife.

Ali is waiting to hear from me, about whether I want to cancel. I steel myself and say, as lightly as I'm able, "I'll be fine. He's probably almost here anyway."

As if on cue, the building intercom buzzes. "I'll get it," I say, rolling away from my wife and the windows and the fantasy of walking. "Yes?" I say into the intercom.

The concierge on duty tonight says, "Mr. Ballantine? It's Tommy at the front desk. I have a Mr. Pierce here to see you."

"Thanks, Tommy. Send him up, please." I resist the urge to ask what the man looks like, what he's wearing, how tall he is. I don't even know why any of that matters.

A few moments later, Alethia opens the door to our apartment and steps into the hall to welcome the man she's hired to make love to her.

No. To *fuck* her. There's a huge difference. Even if I can't perform all of the acts with Ali that I used to, I'm still the one who makes love to her with my fingers and my tongue. This man will give something to her that I can't, but he won't touch her heart. That's just for me.

I have to believe that.

And now *my* heart is aching as I position my chair to face the door. I try to summon up the confidence I learned in business school and then as a stockbroker, the self-possession that allowed me to walk into a room and command it. In my head, I'm still that six foot four, broad-chested, powerful man in charge. The guy everyone looks to for inspiration and leadership. The man leading the conversation, pushing the risky strategy, buying the first round in the bar afterward to celebrate the victory.

Maybe that's why I hate the moment when someone sees me in my wheelchair for the first time. As soon as they see my condition, the pity and condescension follow right after. Once I see it in their eyes, I can no longer keep pretending I'm *that guy*.

Fuck that, I order myself sternly. I have to forget my self-pitying shit and set the tone as soon as this JD Pierce enters our home. If I don't do this right, Ali will never go through with it.

It helps that, at JD's suggestion, he and I talked for a few minutes on the phone last night. His voice was calm, soothing, and respectful. As nervous as I was, he got me to open up about how I see this evening taking shape. What I want for Alethia. How she likes to be held, and touched. Whether he should kiss her, or go down on her...

As we talked, JD admitted that he was getting hard. The surprising comment forced

my own truthful response: I confessed I was as well. That small honesty felt huge, for some reason. Like, JD was going out of his way to let me know that we were sharing the same reaction to talking about my wife.

As a prelude to him *actually* sharing my wife.

I take a deep breath when I hear Ali greet this stranger who is about to take her to bed. I listen for her tone. Is she nervous? Afraid? Excited?

I can't tell. Her simple welcome is steady, casual and friendly. He murmurs something to her as she brings him into the apartment.

And there he stands. JD Pierce, escort.

The man we've engaged to service Alethia.

JD is a little shy of six feet tall at a guess. Slender, blond, with an open, kind expression on his face, he wears a light blue shirt under a nice sport coat, and blue jeans. It's a pulled-together look that I could never be bothered with, to Ali's mild disappointment. She loves clothes, and for years she's tried to get me more interested in my wardrobe. I like to keep it simple, though. I'm wearing a black polo, jeans, and loafers on my useless feet, just like always.

JD is looking around the apartment and then at the view from our window. He hasn't spotted me yet, I think, so I take the time to study him more. He looks impressed at our place, but not intimidated. The way he stands suggests someone at ease in his skin, and confident that he can handle himself. His gaze is frank and open, not at all the sleazy leer I'd conjured up for a male prostitute.

Ali walks over to me and rests a hand on my shoulder so that we're facing JD together. A united front. I make a quick resolution. This man is just what Ali needs, but if she's going to see this through, I'll have to put aside every bit of my fear, my doubt, my jealousy.

I have to be the husband that Alethia deserves.

With all the courage I used to apply to climbing a sheer wall of rock, I stick out my hand. "Hello, JD. I'm Nick Ballantine."

JD meets my eyes, and I see something warm and strange flare in his gaze. Does the chair surprise him? No, it shouldn't, because he knows that's why he's here. I also see no pity, which is a marvel. If anything, I'd say he looks...impressed.

A flash of pink draws my eyes to his upper lip, which he's just wetted nervously with a flick of his tongue. I like that gesture, actually, because it shows that he's feeling some tension about this fucked-up situation. Almost unconsciously, I puff up my chest and square my shoulders.

JD shakes with me, and I realize that his pupils are dilated, his grip warm and firm. A little shiver communicates from his hand to mine, then runs up my arm to my neck. The hairs stand up along the way, as if an electric charge were near.

"Hi Nick. I'm glad to meet you," he says earnestly, in a normal volume. You

wouldn't believe how many people look at my chair and decide I'm hard of hearing, or intellectually challenged. Not this guy. No trace of condescension appears in his tone. He looks at me and talks to me like I'm a man, not a project or a tragic figure. After those years in boardrooms, I know the sincerity I hear in JD's voice isn't faked.

Reminding myself of the need to set a good tone for Alethia's sake, I say to her, "You were right, babe. He's good looking."

JD blushes slightly at the comment and drops his eyes. Wait...did he drop his eyes to *my chest*?

Then I remember what Alethia told me about our new employee: JD is bisexual, and specializes in couples. I'm an idiot, I guess, because I've been focused solely on the situation with my wife. I haven't realized until this exact moment that he might be into Alethia *and* me.

Huh.

I don't have time to process how that makes me feel before Alethia offers JD a drink. Soon, he and I are sipping bourbon while Ali enjoys a glass of her favorite white wine. I'm listening with just one ear as Ali tells him about our apartment and makes small talk, because I'm still thinking about the way JD looked at me.

I've had plenty of college acquaintances and work colleagues along the LGBTQ spectrum. I've been hit on before by guys, usually by someone drunk who was easy to ignore or to brush off gently as a kidder. Ali's father had a male friend for years who always made me wonder about his orientation. No doubt there were gay or bi guys in my fraternity; I just never knew about it.

Well, there were one or two frat brothers I suspected of getting it on with each other, I guess, though I never talked about it with them.

Why not? Was I afraid of where the conversation might lead?

I shove that aside to think about later, and talk more with JD about the bourbon we're drinking. It's a small-batch, 17-year-old, 90 proof Eagle Rare, an expensive gift from my father-in-law. We chat as we sip our drinks, about random shit. It's surprisingly easy to be with JD, given the reason he's come to our place. I realize pretty soon that, if we'd met some other way, the three of us could be friends. He's funny, charming, and easy on the eyes.

I correct myself quickly: *Ali* must think he's easy on the eyes. Then I wonder why I did that. Jesus, am I homophobic? I don't think so, but why else am I so concerned with what JD may or may not have been thinking about me when he took my hand?

Or...oh shit, am I hiding from what *I* felt when I took his hand?

I realize I've only been giving half my attention to the discussion of Boston's notorious Combat Zone when JD says the word, "Prostitution." That snaps me back completely.

Ali looks as surprised as I probably do at the term. I was almost ready to forget it all

and just enjoy a friendly evening. That's probably why JD deliberately said that, to remind us what this is all about.

It's weird, given all our conversations about hiring an escort, but the term suddenly makes what we're doing seem...real. Sordid.

Arousing?

I glance at Alethia and see that her surprise has begun to give way to a slow smolder. Her eyes lock with JD's, and I can feel the chemistry between them as a tangible thing. She's attracted to JD, with good reason, and now that the moment is approaching, she's ready for it.

I swallow nervously. I'm the one who's suddenly panicking, no longer sure I'm strong enough to see Alethia touch JD. To kiss him, hold him, take the things from him that I can no longer give her. JD glances at me, and the flash of fire in his eyes quickly changes to concern.

Ali looks over too, and I watch her physically withdraw from JD. I'm fucking this up for her, but I don't know what to do. My hearth thumps painfully. This was a terrible idea, and I'm a terrible husband for putting her in this position. For holding out hope that she'd have a man fuck her like she hasn't been fucked in eighteen months.

JD rises from the sofa, then crouches again to rest a hand on Ali's knee. My pulse pounds until I hear blood rush in my ears. This is it. He's touching my wife, and my face flushes with heat. I grip the wheels of my chair, jealousy and fear shaking me to my soul.

And then quiet descends like the first snowfall of winter. Heart rate slowing, my eyes drift to my right wrist. JD has reached out and wrapped his fingers firmly around me there. The warmth and strength of his grip soothe me into forgetting my nerves. I glance up and realize that the three of us now form a circuit, JD connecting me with my wife in a new and unlikely configuration. His touch drains away my fear and leaves behind it calm.

Underneath that, I feel a low thrum of anticipation.

"I know this is new to you," JD says softly, looking between Ali and me. "And what's new can be a little frightening. But I'm here for you. For both of you. You've talked about this, and you've decided this is an experience you need to try. Together. Right?" Ali nods, and JD stares into my eyes. "Right?" he prompts.

I swallow hard around the lump that tries to reappear in my throat, but I make myself nod. He's right; we need to try. In the end, it's just an experience. If we don't like it, then we don't repeat it. Simple as that.

"Good," JD says. "I want to make something clear. I have no expectations. I'm here for the two of you. We go as far as you are comfortable, and no further. Maybe we do nothing but kiss."

I look at Ali, and our eyes hold. I hear everything that she's telling me with her silvery gaze. She loves me. She's attracted to JD. She wants to see this through, but she won't go forward if I'm not sure. We can find another solution, or try this one again some

other time. With some other man, who doesn't raise unsettling questions in my head, and who doesn't make Ali so excited.

No. Ali's ready to try. I started this with my fall, with my ruined spine, with my insistence that she let another man give her what I can't. JD's hand on my wrist gives me the courage to nod at her.

We're Nick and Alethia Ballantine, badass husband and wife. We'll see the next step of our path through together.

JD's grip on me relaxes slightly, and I see a smile glimmer in his blue eyes. Somehow I think he knows what Ali and I just said to each other with an exchange of glances. I like to think he's happy at our decision.

The escort rises to his feet. "Why don't we go into the bedroom, and see what happens?"

If you're intrigued and want to know more about my sexy couple and the man they've hired, follow the buy link or learn more about *The Escort's Tale* at my [website](#).