

Only Room Left

by Lenora Vale

One king bed. Two people who absolutely shouldn't share it.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Only Room Left

Dear Editor,

I realise that "I never thought this would happen to me" is exactly what everyone says, and I promise I used to roll my eyes at it too. But I genuinely did not see this coming. I want that on record before I tell you the rest.

His name is Cal Mercer. He is a structural engineer from Edinburgh, he takes his coffee black, he is mildly allergic to cats, and he has forearms that I spent approximately three months pointedly not thinking about before the Inverness incident.

We work for the same firm. Different departments — he's in infrastructure, I'm in commercial design — which means our paths cross roughly four times a year in interdisciplinary reviews where he sits across the table from me with his sleeves rolled up and makes extremely well-reasoned objections to my load-bearing proposals. I make equally well-reasoned objections to his, and we are both professional about it, and I go home afterwards and stare at my ceiling.

His name had been in my mouth in ways I had no business thinking about for a long time. I had not done anything about it because I am a functional adult and he had never given me a clear signal and rejection is embarrassing.

Then there was the Inverness conference.

It was a two-day structural sustainability symposium that we were both attending, which I only found out the week before when the attendee list was circulated. I spent a professional amount of time being fine about this and a slightly less professional amount of time deciding which earrings to wear on day one.

The conference hotel was a converted Victorian townhouse forty minutes outside the city. Beautiful, atmospheric, a hundred and twelve years old, and — as we discovered when we arrived at the same time (we'd been on

Only Room Left

by Lenora Vale

the same train from Edinburgh, which I had not known, which he handled with more equanimity than I did) — wildly overbooked due to a system error.

The woman at the desk was very apologetic. There had been a double-booking. Several rooms had been allocated twice. Most guests had already sorted alternatives. There was, she explained, a delightful king room with a garden view still available.

One room.

I looked at Cal. He looked at me.

"We can find something else," he said.

"The next closest hotel is forty minutes away," the desk clerk said. "And I've just checked — they're also full. There's a regional golf tournament."

Golf. Of course.

"We're colleagues," I said, to no one in particular.

"The room has a sofa," the clerk offered.

The room did have a sofa. It was a loveseat. It was designed for approximately one medium-sized adult or a very optimistic pair. Cal looked at it and then at me, and to his credit his expression was completely neutral, which I found both reassuring and, irrationally, a little bit annoying.

"I'll take the sofa," he said.

"You're six feet tall."

"I've slept in worse."

"When?"

He paused. "University field trips."

"That was probably twenty years ago."

"Fifteen," he said, which I filed away without meaning to.

We were polite about it all. Unpacked in shifts. Did the thing where you use the bathroom and come out in pyjamas and stare slightly too hard at a neutral point in the middle distance. I had not packed deliberately attractive sleepwear because I am not that person, so I was in an oversized university t-shirt and shorts, and he was in grey sweatpants and no shirt, and I would like to state for the record that this was not my fault.

He had the kind of body that structural engineers apparently have — not showy, just built, the kind that comes from actual physical work rather than a gym aesthetic. I noticed this the way you notice weather. Peripheral. Unavoidable.

"I'll read for a bit," I said, which was a lie. I was going to stare at my book until I went to sleep.

"Fine," he said, and folded himself onto the loveseat with the resigned competence of a man who had committed to a bad plan and was seeing it through.

I woke up at 2 AM.

The room was dark. I could hear him breathing from the sofa — or not breathing, actually, because the breathing had stopped and been replaced by a very quiet string of words that I recognised as the precursor to someone acknowledging that they'd made a terrible decision about a piece of furniture.

"Cal."

A pause. "I'm fine."

"You've been awake for an hour."

Another pause, longer. "Forty minutes."

I sat up. I could see the shape of him in the dark, bent slightly at an angle the human spine is not meant to sustain. "Get in the bed."

Silence.

"It's a king," I said. "There's a full foot of space between us and a pillow wall if you want one."

"Mara." Just my name, careful and low.

"We're adults," I said. "You have a seven AM session on cantilever load assessment. Come and sleep."

He came. I don't know what else to tell you — he was quiet about it, settled on the far side of the bed with about fourteen inches of space between us, and I lay on my side facing the window with my heart going at twice its normal rate for reasons that were entirely my own problem.

We didn't speak. The room breathed. I could feel the warmth of him at my back without touching, like standing close to a radiator that was also an engineering problem I had been avoiding for six months.

"Mara," he said, very quietly, to the dark.

"Yes."

"I argued with your load-bearing assessment last March because Davies told me to. Not because I thought you were wrong."

I stared at the window. "I know you didn't think I was wrong."

"I should have said so at the time."

"Yes."

Silence. Then: "I'm saying it now."

I turned over. We were in the dark looking at each other, close enough that I could see the outline of his expression and it was the expression I had not quite seen him use before — open, and a little bit undone, and very direct.

"Cal," I said.

"Yes."

"I've been thinking about kissing you since the February review."

He didn't say anything. He moved instead — one hand finding my jaw in the dark with a sureness that made my breath catch — and kissed me slowly and deliberately, the way he did everything, like he'd considered it properly first and arrived at a conclusion.

I could write to you about what followed in very general terms and maintain a professional tone, but you print letters in a magazine called *After Dark Confessions*, so I'll trust you to hold the detail.

What I can tell you is this: Cal Mercer is as thorough in a hotel bed at two in the morning as he is in a project review, which is to say absolutely and completely. He doesn't rush. He pays attention. He asked what I wanted with the same focused curiosity he brings to structural assessments, and then he delivered it with the same unhurried precision, and I said his name into the pillow three times and he made a sound against my shoulder that I am going to be keeping for a long time.

Afterwards, the room was very quiet and the pillow wall was somewhere on the floor.

"Your load-bearing assessment was correct," he said, into my hair.

I laughed so hard I had to press my face into his chest to muffle it.

That was eight months ago. He is currently asleep in my flat in Edinburgh with my cat on his feet, which he is managing better than expected for someone with a mild allergy. We presented jointly at the October review and Davies looked at us both very carefully and said nothing, which I consider a victory.

I still take the window seat on the train. He still takes his coffee black. I have started buying the good beans.

I did not see this coming. I am very glad about the golf tournament.

Only Room Left

by Lenora Vale

— *M.B., Edinburgh*

P.S. The loveseat in room nine of the Drumnadrochit House Hotel is structurally inadequate for adult use. Someone should probably look into that.