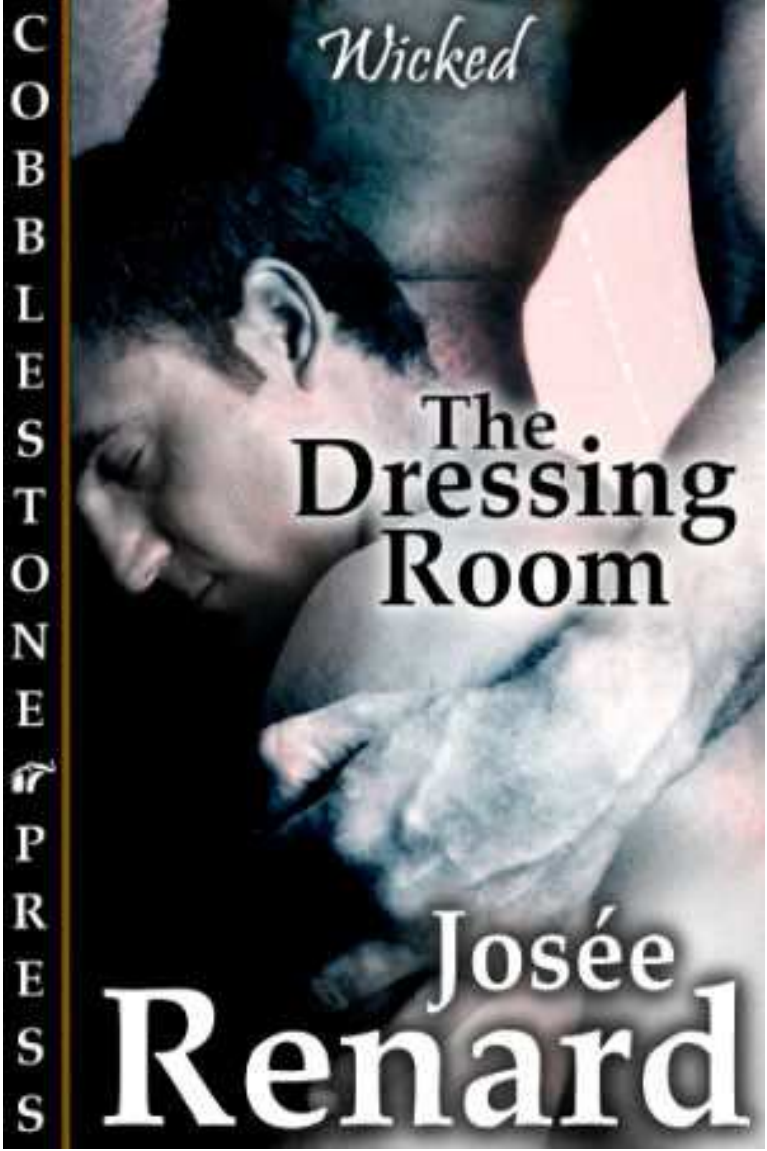


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The
**Dressing
Room**

Josée
Renard



The Dressing Room by Josée Renard

The Dressing Room

By

Josée Renard

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The Dressing Room

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Dedication

For Deanna Lee... Thanks for the suggestion.
I loved writing this book.

Chapter One

“No. We’re not going to Target. We’re going to Harry Martin’s.”

Celia’s voice grated in David’s ears, but he knew she was right. His usual jeans and T-shirt wouldn’t work for *this* wedding. He needed to look his very best.

David wasn’t vain, in fact, just the opposite. He never cared what he looked like, what he wore. All that mattered was that whatever he put on his body was clean and comfortable.

Today he wore a T-shirt his mom had brought him back from Niagara Falls almost ten years ago and one of his several—okay, many—pairs of Levi’s. And this pair wasn’t even faded yet. His hair, as always, needed a cut, and he was about three days away from a razor.

But enough people—both men and women—had come onto to him over the years that he knew, with Celia’s help and a pile of money, he could look even better. He could look irresistible.

And that was important.

The three of them, Celia, David and Terry, had grown up together. And both Celia and David had lived through the pangs and pain of unrequited love.

It wasn’t that Terry had been cruel. Rather, he’d been oblivious. David understood why Terry hadn’t seen *him*. Terry was a well-known pussy hound.

But Celia? Even in high school she’d been drop-dead gorgeous and built like a goddess. She’d trailed boys like a bitch in heat trailed dogs.

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Terry had never seen either of them as anything other than friends. And he'd been a good friend. He stood by David when he finally came out in senior year, helping deflect the scorn and anger and fear of the boys who'd once been friends.

Terry—the school leader, both on the field and off—didn't hesitate a moment before taking up fists or words on David's behalf. He was deeply loyal and completely confident in his sexuality. And why not? He could, and did, sleep his way through all the hot girls in school *and* without making any enemies.

Terry's support at a time when David's only other fan at school had been Celia made David want him even more, even though he knew better.

David knew, to his deep and continuing embarrassment, that Terry knew of his longing and chose—rather than dumping him as a friend—to believe nothing had changed between them.

They'd gotten over any awkwardness years ago. They played soccer, baseball, and the occasional game of tennis together. They had a regular Monday night pub date, and David knew Terry's marriage wouldn't change any of that.

David had plenty of friends, but Terry was, except for Celia, his closest. And David was Terry's closest friend.

Thus the unrefusable wedding invitation. And the co-ed bridal shower. And the stag and stagette. The glow of love—and lust—that shone around Terry like a halo at these events was almost unbearable.

But David had to go. As did Celia. If they didn't go, someone—not Terry, of course—would notice, and their nasty little secret love would be revealed. So they'd gone to every shower, every rehearsal, every party, and there'd been dozens of them.

They'd consoled each other in the cabs they'd taken to the events, and commiserated, a little worse for wear from the tequila shooters which were *de rigeur* at any party Terry attended, in the cabs on the way home.

David had worn his single suit to half a dozen parties, and Celia had finally put her foot down.

"You can't wear that suit one more time. You've had it since you graduated from high school, and I hate remembering how many years

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that's been. Every person we know recognizes that suit."

She was right. Even David was getting tired of it, but not quite tired enough to be happy to do any more shopping. His feet hurt, and his head ached just thinking about another day in the mall.

Celia had already dragged him along to hours of exploratory shopping on her own behalf. She never bought *anything* without research, though David wasn't normally part of the search process. But this wedding and her desire to buy the exact right thing made her compulsive shopping routine even more obsessed.

"I know it's mean to out-dress the bride, but I don't give a damn. I want Terry to have a *huge* pang of regret when he sees me."

David squeezed her hand in sympathy because that was exactly what he wanted. Though he admitted that he wanted way more than a simple pang. He wanted Terry to dump the bride, run down the aisle to David, grab him up in his strong arms, and race with him out of the church and into the waiting limo, where they'd have mad, passionate, exquisitely satisfying sex.

Although, he had to admit that fantasy wasn't really about Terry anymore. He just wanted... Well, he wanted what almost everyone he knew who was still single wanted, whether male or female, gay or straight. A partner. A lover. Permanence.

Celia laughed as if she knew exactly what David was thinking, though it was obvious by her response that she was a few degrees off. "Not that he's ever noticed either one of us before, but..."

David knew her fantasy because she'd told him. And it had for many years been the same as his. Terry would see him—or her. Finally and *completely* see him. He'd call off the wedding, and the two of them would ride off into the sunset after two or three weeks of mind-bending sex.

Wishful thinking on both our parts, he thought and returned to the shopping trips. He'd accompanied Celia to every store in town.

Nordstrom's. Macy's. Neiman Marcus. And that was only for the dress.

The jewelry? More hours. The handbag? Even more. And the

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shoes? Dozens of stores and many more hours.

David had spent more time shopping in the past two weeks than he'd spent in his entire life.

Now the wedding was three days away, and Celia's phone calls were increasingly frantic. She was ready, but David wasn't.

"You can't buy a suit off the rack. It needs to be tailored to your body. Besides, those rack suits are last year's model, and you need to be perfect. You need to be wearing the latest. Preferably Italian."

David cringed at the thought of how much that suit Celia had in mind would cost. He had the money. That wasn't the problem. But he seldom wore a suit, and he'd figured his high school graduation suit would probably see him through at least another decade. Celia didn't agree.

David nodded at the voice coming through his cell phone and said nothing. There was nothing to say. Celia was right. She was always right.

"I've called the store, and as long as we get there today, their tailor can make any alterations in time for the wedding. You'll have to pay extra but..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence. David knew it was his fault. He'd been in serious avoidance mode since the invitation landed in his mailbox.

It wasn't *really* about Terry. Or only a little bit. He'd gotten over that crush a long time ago. It was the reminder—at thirty-five—that he was not only single but without a prospect of any kind on the horizon.

And the whole sex thing? Only Celia knew the truth. David had been sex-less—except for self-help—for almost three years. And the last time had been distinctly unmemorable, a quickie vacation bang. David wanted love. And *then* he wanted sex.

How pathetic was it that his date for the wedding was Celia? How pathetic was it that her date was David? He loved her like the sister he'd never had. He looked after her, and she looked after him. But he needed a *man* in his life.

A man with big blue eyes and sculpted abs. A man with a tender heart and strong hands. A man with a cock that begged to be sucked. A

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man with an ass that begged to be fucked.

David shook his head to get that image out of it and tried to concentrate again on the importance of the suit. He took a quick shower—couldn't try on suits smelling of paint and turps—ran a comb through his hair, and was ready to go.

He straightened up the bathroom, then took a moment in the studio to scrutinize the piece he'd just finished, and wrote a reminder—the wedding and Celia had completely screwed up his usual routine—to varnish it and drop it off at the gallery. It would pay for the suit and next month's mortgage payment. He couldn't be late; Celia would be even more difficult if he wasn't on time. She hated making people wait, and he was pretty sure she'd somehow coerced the manager—of course Celia knew the manager—to stay late.

Harry Martin's was without question the best men's store in town and usually closed at six, but Celia had ordered him there at seven. So here he was, knocking on the locked front door and feeling like a fool.

Celia's face loomed in the glass, and he tried a smile. Her expression confirmed that it wasn't enough. He heard the click of the lock, and then her right hand grabbed his arm and pulled him inside the brightly lit store.

"Hurry up. We can't let anyone else know the store's open or the customers would expect the same service, and Flynn would *never* get an evening off."

She rushed him through the shirts, ties, and sports jackets at the front of the store. David thought she was a bit more frazzled than a simple—for her—suit buying expedition for *his* clothes warranted.

"I'll help you find the right suit...."

What she meant was that she didn't trust *him* to shell out the money for a good suit, and if she didn't pick the right one, he'd buy another cheap suit like the one he'd bought when he was eighteen. David grinned to himself. She was probably right.

"Once you've picked out the suit, you're on your own," she continued. "I've got a date," she whispered, blushing.

Celia blushing? David wasn't sure what to say.

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"No problem," he finally responded, quelling his curiosity. Celia *never* blushed and seldom mentioned the dates she did have. "I'm sure Flynn and I can handle the smaller details."

"You can't," Celia said, "but Flynn can. I've already briefed him."

David smiled again at the picture of diminutive Celia lecturing—because that's what it would have been—the tall, lean man walking their way.

She checked her watch, color heightening again, and patted David's arm. "You'll like him," she whispered. "I do."

Her date *couldn't* be with Flynn unless he was just the sales guy and the tailor waited in the back, but David didn't ask for confirmation. Celia was flustered, and that meant whoever the date was meant something to her. That was unusual enough for him to tread carefully.

"Have fun," he said, adding his customary, "be careful," while he waited for the introductions at which Celia excelled. She'd spill everything, David knew, and there was no way to stop her. He didn't even try.

"Flynn," she began, "this is my friend David. I know he's gorgeous, but he needs to look breathtaking for this wedding. The love of both our teenager lives is getting married on Saturday, and there's more than a little payback involved."

Flynn smiled. "I get it. Expensive for sure. But even more importantly..." His gaze ran over David's body, and it wasn't an impersonal perusal. David felt a tingle at the experience. "Hot, hot, hot."

"That's it exactly," Celia said.

Another look, more tingles for David, and a nod by Flynn. "Easy as pie."

"David, Flynn's a friend. I met him at the gym, and then I wrote a piece about him for the magazine. I know *everything* about him, and I know he's going to make you look fabulous. You can wear this suit for the *next* fifteen years."

David grinned and relaxed. This wouldn't be the ordeal he'd anticipated. He would spend his inner time while the two of them studied fabric and shape and whatever the hell else you could possibly look at in a

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suit with a little sexual fantasy about Flynn. *They* could find the perfect suit. He'd have perfect sex while they found the suit.

And shirt.

And tie.

And belt.

And shoes.

Though no suspenders. David would draw the line at suspenders. And underwear.

His black briefs were perfectly good. Like his Levi's, he bought new ones every six months. Unlike his Levi's, he discarded the old when he bought the new. So he always had—and wore—practically new briefs.

Get your mind out of the gutter, he scolded himself. *Celia will never let you forget it if she even senses your interest*. She'd be sending him back to the store for new shirts, for a consultation on the fit of his jacket, to buy his next Father's Day or Christmas or birthday gift. As if David's dad would wear anything from Harry Martin's. He'd be more likely to buy his clothes at the army surplus store.

Celia would casually dig out Flynn's schedule and then manage David into an *accidental* meeting. David cringed at the thought of Celia in matchmaker mode.

He was going to—stupid David—have to give up the fantasy and focus on the clothes. Flynn's tape measure and those tanned and supple fingers were going to be tempting if he was already locked in to some sexual fantasy. And Celia, not to mention Flynn, would notice.

Down, boy, he warned his cock. *This is business*.

His cock didn't listen, twitching its interest despite being securely locked behind his briefs and jeans. David looked back up, caught a flicker in Flynn's eyes, and his cock responded with a bang.

"Damn," he whispered. Talk about inappropriate behavior. But he forced himself to focus on the task at hand.

"Let's look at suits," he said, trying to distract not only himself but Celia. She had that Celia-look in her eyes, and he knew what that meant. She'd sensed something and was about to open her mouth and spill it if he didn't get her mind off whatever track it was on.

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Flynn nodded and headed for the racks of high-end suits on the far wall. "Blue, I think," he muttered. "Somewhere between navy and royal. Not too dark, but still majestic."

He turned and looked at David, who stared right back, green eyes honing in on blue. The two of them might have been crafted to be exact opposites, David thought. He was short and muscular, with curly blond hair, no body hair to speak of, and green eyes.

He knew he was good looking, but Flynn?

Flynn... David paused in his thinking. This probably wasn't going to help distract him, his cock, or Celia.

Flynn was tall and lean. His black Armani hung on him as if it was made for him. It probably was. Flynn had the kind of body menswear models were made of, bodies made to wear clothes. David had the kind of body that looked best in jeans and T-shirts, shorts, sneakers, skivvies.

Flynn's hair was dark and straight. His eyebrows were thick and dense over his brilliant blue eyes, eyes which were shuttered by lengthy black eyelashes. David finally figured out what the expression *Black Irish* meant. Flynn was the epitome of it.

He was gorgeous. He was the kind of man with the kind of body David had always lusted after, although he'd never really thought it out before. He'd imagined those bodies in bed with him, their legs and arms long enough to wrap him right up.

He'd thought of those long fingers touching his face, his nipples, his balls, and he'd practically explode at the thought of it alone. There was something about that lean strength that had always grabbed him.

And Flynn had something extra. Yeah, he had those Pierce Brosnan kind of looks and the faintest of accents, but it wasn't either of those things. It was the way he was so confident in himself. He wore clothes as if they didn't matter, as if they were only an expression of his inner self.

His white shirt shone light up onto his face, his grey on white tie added more luminescence on his skin. He looked, even at the end of a long day, as if a makeup artist had just artfully tousled his hair. He looked like an ad photographed by Annie Leibowitz.

And that black suit? David, who'd never once wanted a suit the

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way he always wanted his Levi's, lusted over that suit. The fabric moved against Flynn's body as if it were a second skin—a second skin that was built to caress.

Thinking of the fabric moving against Flynn's body made him hot. And hard. He wondered, fiercely, if Flynn shaved his body. He hoped not. He wanted to feel that hair against his chest, his cheeks, his lips. Most especially against his cock.

Focus, David. Get your mind on the suit and off the man wearing it.

"This might work," Flynn said. "I'm guessing a forty regular for the jacket and a..." He gave him a long look up from David's feet to his waist. "...Thirty-two inch waist?"

Celia's thoughts obviously weren't on the fitting because she didn't even react to the look or to the insinuation in the voice. "Thirty-two, thirty-four, who cares? Let's just get going."

David shrugged at Flynn and tried some damage control. "Celia." He grabbed her chin and forced her eyes up to his. "Go. Flynn can make sure I look fabulous without you."

She hesitated.

"Look at this suit. It's perfect, right?" He grabbed a handful of fabric. "And it's wrinkle-free."

She smiled and touched the sleeve. "This color will be perfect on you," she said. "The lighter stripe is almost the same color as your eyes. No one will notice it, but it'll make your eyes pop."

David bugged his eyes at her and made her laugh.

"Okay, okay. I can't concentrate." She pulled David aside. "I really like this guy, David. And I don't want to screw this up." She looked over at Flynn waiting patiently, his face discreetly turned away from them.

"He's really good at what he does. Trust him, okay? He'll get you exactly what you need."

David's mind seconded that statement. He was pretty sure Flynn could get him *exactly* what he needed, and that would happen a hell of a lot faster if Celia would just get going.

"Go, sweetie," he said. Part of his dismissal was selfish, but the bigger part was if Celia was this nervous about a date it meant something

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to her. And it was the first time in years that had happened.

“Call me in the morning,” she said. “I want to make sure everything’s ready to go.”

“I will,” David answered. “But where will you be?”

She smacked him and grinned. “None of your damn business. But call me on my cell. I’ll make sure it’s turned on.”

Flynn walked her to the door, locked it behind her, and then pulled the blinds down over the front windows.